The Parliamentary Debates

The Parliamentary History contains all that can be collected of the Legislative History of this country from the Conquest to the close of the XVIIIth Century (1803). 36 vols. The chief sources whence these Debates are derived are the Constitutional History, 24 vols.; Sir Simonds D’Ewes’ Journal; Debates of the Commons in 1620 and 1621; Chandler and Timberland’s Debates, 22 vols.; Grey’s Debates of the Commons, from 1667 to 1694, 10 vols.; Almons Debates, 24 vols.; Debrett’s Debates, 63 vols.; The Hardwicke Papers; Debates in Parliament by Dr. Johnson, &c. &c.

THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES commenced with the year 1803, and the contents are set forth in the following Chronological Table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HISTORY</th>
<th>CONQUEST TO 34 GEO. II.—1066 to 1760</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vol. 1 to 15.</td>
<td>Will. I to 34 Geo. II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(FIRST PARLIAMENT)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vol. 16 to 34.</td>
<td>Geo. II—1760</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1066-1760</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| REIGN OF GEO. III.—1760 to 1820 |
|---|---|
| Vol. 15 to 35. Geo. III to 40 Geo. III. |
| 1760—1800 |

### PARLIAMENTS OF UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND

| (FIRST PARLIAMENT) |
|---|---|
| Vol. 35....... | Geo. III. ......1801 |
| — 36....... | 1802 |
| (SECOND PARLIAMENT) |
| Vol. 36....... | Geo. III. ......1802-3 |

### DEBATES

**First Series**

| (SECOND PARLIAMENT—cont.) |
|---|---|
| Vol. 1 & 2....... | Geo. III. ......1803-4 |
| — 3 to 5....... | 1805 |
| — 6 & 7....... | 1806 |
| (THIRD PARLIAMENT) |
| Vol. 8 & 9....... | Geo. III. ......1806-7 |

| (FOURTH PARLIAMENT) |
|---|---|
| Vol. 9 to 11....... | Geo. III. ......1807-8 |
| — 12—14....... | 1809 |
| — 15—17....... | 1810 |
| — 18—20....... | 1810-11 |
| — 21—23....... | 1812 |
| (FIFTH PARLIAMENT) |
| Vol. 24 to 26....... | Geo. III. ......1812-13 |
| — 27 & 28....... | 1813-14 |
| — 29—31....... | 1814-15 |
| — 32—34....... | 1816 |
| — 35 & 36....... | 1817 |
| — 37—38....... | 1818 |
| (SIXTH PARLIAMENT) |
| Vol. 39 & 40....... | Geo. III. ......1819 |
| — 41....... | 1819-20 |

**Second Series**

| (SEVENTH PARLIAMENT) |
|---|---|
| Vol. 1 to 3....... | Geo. IV. ......1820 |
| — 4 & 5....... | 1821 |
| — 6—7....... | 1822 |
| — 8—9....... | 1823 |
| — 10—11....... | 1824 |
| — 12—13....... | 1825-6 |
| — 14—15....... | 1826 |

### (Eighth Parliament)

| Vol. 16........ | Geo. IV. ......1826 |
| — 17........ | — 1827 |
| — 18 & 19........ | — 1828 |
| — 20—21........ | — 1829 |
| — 22 to 25........ | — 1830 |

| Third Series |
|---|---|
| (Ninth Parliament) |
| Vol. 1 to 3....... | Will. IV. ......1830-1 |

| (TENTH PARLIAMENT) |
|---|---|
| Vol. 4 to 8....... | Will. IV. ......1831 |
| — 9—14....... | 1832 |
| (ELEVENTH PARLIAMENT) |
| Vol. 15 to 20....... | Will. IV. ......1833 |
| — 21—25....... | 1834 |

| (Twelfth Parliament) |
|---|---|
| Vol. 26 to 30....... | Will. IV. ......1835 |
| — 31—35....... | 1836 |
| — 36—38....... | 1837 |

### REIGN OF WILLIAM IV.—1830 to 1837

| (Thirteenth Parliament) |
|---|---|
| Vol. 39 to 44....... | Victoria ......1838 |
| — 45—50....... | 1839 |
| — 51—55....... | 1840 |
| — 56—58....... | (a)1841 |

| (Fourteenth Parliament) |
|---|---|
| Vol. 59....... | Victoria ......(b)1841 |
| — 60 to 65....... | — 1842 |
| — 66—71....... | 1843 |
| — 72—76....... | 1844 |
| — 77—82....... | 1845 |
| — 83—88....... | 1846 |
| — 89—94....... | (a)1847 |

| (Fifteenth Parliament) |
|---|---|
| Vol. 95....... | Victoria ......(b)1847 |
| — 96—101....... | — 1848 |
| — 102—107....... | 1849 |
| — 108—113....... | 1850 |
| — 114—118....... | 1851 |
| — 119—122....... | (a)1852 |

| (Sixteenth Parliament) |
|---|---|
| Vol. 123....... | Victoria ......(b)1852 |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Second Series</th>
<th>REIGN OF GEO. IV.—1837 to 1901</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(SEVENTH PARLIAMENT)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vol. 1 to 3.......</td>
<td>Geo. IV. ......1820</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— 4 &amp; 5.......</td>
<td>1821</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— 6—7.......</td>
<td>1822</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— 8—9.......</td>
<td>1823</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— 10—11.......</td>
<td>1824</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— 12—13.......</td>
<td>1825-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— 14—15.......</td>
<td>1826</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| (Eightheenth Parliament) |
|---|---|
| Vol. 123........ | Geo. IV. ......1852 |
| — 124 to 129....... | 1853 |
| — 130—135....... | 1854 |
| — 136—139....... | 1855 |
| — 140—143....... | 1856 |
| — 144....... | (a)1857 |
### CHRONOLOGY OF THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES—cont.

#### (Seventeenth Parliament)

Vol. 145 to 147 .......... 20 Victoria ..........(b) 1857
- 148—151 .......... 21 — — 1858
- 152 & 153 ..........(a) 1859
- 156 to 160 .......... 23 — — 1860
- 161—164 .......... 24 — — 1861
- 165—168 .......... 25 — — 1862
- 169—172 .......... 26 — — 1863
- 173—176 .......... 27 — — 1864
- 177—180 .......... 28 — — 1865

#### (Eighteenth Parliament)

Vol. 154 & 155 .......... 22 Victoria ..........(b) 1859
- 156 to 160 .......... 23 — — 1860
- 161—164 .......... 24 — — 1861
- 165—168 .......... 25 — — 1862
- 169—172 .......... 26 — — 1863
- 173—176 .......... 27 — — 1864
- 177—180 .......... 28 — — 1865

#### (Nineteenth Parliament)

Vol. 181 to 184 .......... 29 Victoria ..........(b) 1866
- 185—189 .......... 30 — — 1867
- 190—193 .......... 31 — — 1867-8

#### (Twentieth Parliament)

Vol. 194 to 198 .......... 32 Victoria ..........(b) 1868-9
- 199—203 .......... 33 — — 1870
- 204—208 .......... 34 — — 1871
- 209—213 .......... 35 — — 1872
- 214—217 .......... 36 — — 1873

#### (Twenty-First Parliament)

Vol. 218 to 221 .......... 37 Victoria .......... 1874
- 222—226 .......... 38 — — 1875
- 227—231 .......... 39 — — 1876
- 232—236 .......... 40 — — 1877
- 237—243 .......... 41 — — 1878
- 242—249 .......... 42 — — 1878-9
- 250 & 251 ..........(a) 1880

#### (Twenty-Second Parliament)

Vol. 252 to 256 .......... 43 Victoria ..........(b) 1880
- 257—265 .......... 44 — — 1881
- 266—273 .......... 45 — — 1882
- 274 & 275 ..........(b) 1882
- 276 to 283 .......... 46 — — 1883
- 284—292 .......... 47 — — 1884
- 293—301 ..........(a) 1884-5

#### (Twenty-Third Parliament)

Vol. 302 to 307 .......... 49 Victoria .......... 1886
- 308 & 309 .......... 50 — — 1887
- 310—312 .......... 51 — — 1888
- 322—332 .......... 52 — — 1889
- 333—340 .......... 53 — — 1890
- 341—348 .......... 54 — — 1890-1

#### (Twenty-Fourth Parliament)

Vol. 308 & 309 .......... 49 Victoria ..........(b) 1886
- 310 to 321 .......... 50 — — 1887
- 322—332 .......... 51 — — 1888
- 333—340 .......... 52 — — 1889
- 341—348 .......... 53 — — 1890
- 349—356 .......... 54 — — 1890-1

#### Fourth Series

Vol. 1 to 6 .......... 55 Victoria .......... 1892

#### (Twenty-Fifth Parliament)

Vol. 7 .......... 56 Victoria .......... 1892
- 8 to 21 .......... 57 — — 1893-4
- 22—29 .......... 57 — — 1894
- 30—35 .......... 58 — — 1895

#### (Twenty-Sixth Parliament)

Vol. 36 .......... 59 Victoria .......... 1895
- 37 to 44 .......... 59 — — 1895-6
- 45—52 .......... 60 — — 1897
- 53—65 .......... 61 — — 1898
- 66—76 .......... 62 — — 1899
- 77 .......... 63 — — 1899
- 78—83 .......... 63 — — 1900
- 84 .......... 63 & 64 — — 1900
- 85—87 .......... 64 — — 1900

#### (Twenty-Seventh Parliament)

Vol. 88 .......... 65 Victoria .......... 1900

#### Fifth Series—Official Report

### Lords Debates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Volume</th>
<th>Series</th>
<th>Parliament</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 to 4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Edward VII</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 &amp; 6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Edward VII</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Commons Debates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Volume</th>
<th>Series</th>
<th>Parliament</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 to 13</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Edward VII</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 to 20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Edward VII</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### REIGN OF GEORGE V.—1910 to 1936

#### Lords Debates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Volume</th>
<th>Series</th>
<th>Parliament</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7 to 10</td>
<td>1 &amp; 2</td>
<td>Geo. V.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Commons Debates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Volume</th>
<th>Series</th>
<th>Parliament</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21 to 33</td>
<td>1 &amp; 2</td>
<td>Geo. V.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### REIGN OF EDWARD VII.—1901 to 1910

#### Lords Debates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Volume</th>
<th>Series</th>
<th>Parliament</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>89</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Edward VII</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Commons Debates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Volume</th>
<th>Series</th>
<th>Parliament</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>90 to 100</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Edward VII</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101</td>
<td>1 &amp; 2</td>
<td>Edward VII</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### REIGN OF GEORGE V.—1910 to 1936

#### Lords Debates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Volume</th>
<th>Series</th>
<th>Parliament</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>113</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Geo. V.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Commons Debates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Volume</th>
<th>Series</th>
<th>Parliament</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>123</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Geo. V.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### PARLIAMENT OF UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND

#### THIRTY-FIRST PARLIAMENT

| Vol. 33 to 38 | 9 & 10 GEO. V. | 1919 |
| 39—43 | 10—11 | 1920 |
| 44—47 | 11—12 | 1921 |
| 48 (2nd Session) | 12 | 1921 |
| 49—51 | 12—13 | 1922 |

#### THIRTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT

| Vol. 52 (2nd Session) | 13 GEO. V. | 1922 |
| 53—55 | 13—14 | 1923 |

#### THIRTY-THIRD PARLIAMENT

| Vol. 56 to 59 | 14 & 15 GEO. V. | 1924 |

#### THIRTY-FOURTH PARLIAMENT

| Vol. 60 to 62 | 15 & 16 GEO. V. | 1924—25 |
| 63—65 | 16—17 | 1926 |
| 66—69 | 17—18 | 1927 |
| 70 & 71 | 18—19 | 1928 |
| 72 to 74 | 19—29 | 1928—29 |

#### THIRTY-FIFTH PARLIAMENT

| Vol. 75 to 78 | 20 & 21 GEO. V. | 1929—30 |
| 79—82 | 20—22 | 1930—31 |

#### THIRTY-SIXTH PARLIAMENT

| Vol. 83 to 85 | 22 & 23 GEO. V. | 1931—32 |
| 86—89 | 23—24 | 1932—33 |
| 90—94 | 24—25 | 1933—34 |
| 95—98 | 25—26 | 1934—35 |

#### THIRTY-SEVENTH PARLIAMENT

| Vol. 99 | 26 GEO. V. and EDWARD VIII. | 1935—36 |
| Vol. 307 | 26 GEO. V. | 1935—36 |

#### REIGN OF EDWARD VIII.—1936

| Lords Debates | Commons Debates |
| Vol. 99 to 103 | EDWARD VIII. | 1936—37 |
| 104 to 106 | 1 GEO. VI. | 1936—37 |
| 107—110 | 1 & 2 | 1936—38 |
| 111—114 | 2—3 | 1938—39 |
| 115—117 | 3—4 | 1939—40 |
| 118—120 | 4—5 | 1940—41 |
| 121—124 | 5—6 | 1941—42 |
| 125—129 | 6—7 | 1942—43 |
| 130—133 | 7—8 | 1943—44 |
| 134—136 | 8—9 | 1944—45 |

#### REIGN OF GEORGE VI.—1936 to 1952

| Lords Debates | Commons Debates |
| Vol. 137 to 140 | 9 & 10 GEO. VI. | 1946—47 |
| 141—144 | 11—12 | 1947—48 |
| 145—148 | 13—14 | 1948—49 |

| Vol. 166 to 168 | 14 GEO. VI. | 1950 |
| 169—173 | 14 & 15 | 1950—51 |

| Vol. 174 | 15 & 16 GEO. VI. and 1 ELIZ. II. | 1951—52 |
| Vol. 493 | 15 & 16 GEO. VI. and 1 ELIZ. II. | 1951—52 |
### Lords Debates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Volume</th>
<th>Days</th>
<th>Years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>174 to 178</td>
<td>1 &amp; 2</td>
<td>1952</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>193 to 199</td>
<td>4 &amp; 5</td>
<td>1955</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>219 to 225</td>
<td>8 &amp; 9</td>
<td>1959</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>354 to 365</td>
<td>23 &amp; 24</td>
<td>1974</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>443 to 456</td>
<td>32 &amp; 33</td>
<td>1983</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>488 to 501</td>
<td>36 &amp; 37</td>
<td>1987</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>537 to 549</td>
<td>41 &amp; 42</td>
<td>1992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>574—579</td>
<td>45—46</td>
<td>1996</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Commons Debates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Volume</th>
<th>Days</th>
<th>Years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>495 to 506</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1952</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>542 to 559</td>
<td>4 &amp; 5</td>
<td>1955</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>612 to 628</td>
<td>8 &amp; 9</td>
<td>1959</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>727 to 752</td>
<td>15 &amp; 16</td>
<td>1966</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>803 to 824</td>
<td>19 &amp; 20</td>
<td>1970</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>967 to 993</td>
<td>28 &amp; 29</td>
<td>1979</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1096 to 1109</td>
<td>30 &amp; 31</td>
<td>1980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1105</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>1982</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1188</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>1984</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1265</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>1986</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1344</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>1988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1420</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>1990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1496</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>1992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1572</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1648</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>1996</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Fiftieth Parliament

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Volume</th>
<th>Days</th>
<th>Years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>118 to 141</td>
<td>23 &amp; 24</td>
<td>1974</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>188 to 211</td>
<td>36 &amp; 37</td>
<td>1977</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>238 to 261</td>
<td>39 &amp; 40</td>
<td>1979</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>313 to 336</td>
<td>42 &amp; 43</td>
<td>1981</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>367 to 390</td>
<td>45 &amp; 46</td>
<td>1983</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Sixtieth Series

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Volume</th>
<th>Days</th>
<th>Years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 to 12</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 to 30</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>1981</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 to 43</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>1982</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Fifty-First Parliament

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Volume</th>
<th>Days</th>
<th>Years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>207 to 232</td>
<td>41 &amp; 42</td>
<td>1992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>233 to 256</td>
<td>44 &amp; 45</td>
<td>1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>257 to 280</td>
<td>46 &amp; 47</td>
<td>1995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>281 to 304</td>
<td>48 &amp; 49</td>
<td>1996</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Fiftieth Parliament—cont.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Volume</th>
<th>Days</th>
<th>Years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>179—183</td>
<td>1 &amp; 2</td>
<td>1952</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>184—189</td>
<td>2—3</td>
<td>1953</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>190—192</td>
<td>3—4</td>
<td>1954</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200—205</td>
<td>5—6</td>
<td>1956</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>206—211</td>
<td>6—7</td>
<td>1957</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>212—218</td>
<td>7—8</td>
<td>1958</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>226—234</td>
<td>9—10</td>
<td>1960</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>235—243</td>
<td>10—11</td>
<td>1961</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>244—252</td>
<td>11—12</td>
<td>1962</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>253—260</td>
<td>12—13</td>
<td>1963</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>266—683</td>
<td>11—12</td>
<td>1962-63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>270—700</td>
<td>12—13</td>
<td>1963-64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>753—771</td>
<td>16—17</td>
<td>1967</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>772—789</td>
<td>17—18</td>
<td>1968</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>790—802</td>
<td>18—19</td>
<td>1969</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>825—844</td>
<td>20—21</td>
<td>1971</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>845—862</td>
<td>21—22</td>
<td>1971-72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>863—869</td>
<td>22—23</td>
<td>1973</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>994—1000</td>
<td>29 &amp; 30</td>
<td>1980-81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>67—85</td>
<td>33 &amp; 34</td>
<td>1984</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>86—104</td>
<td>34 &amp; 35</td>
<td>1985</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>105—117</td>
<td>35 &amp; 36</td>
<td>1986</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Fifty-Second Parliament

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Volume</th>
<th>Days</th>
<th>Years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>457—467</td>
<td>33 &amp; 34</td>
<td>1984</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>468—481</td>
<td>34 &amp; 35</td>
<td>1985</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>482—487</td>
<td>35 &amp; 36</td>
<td>1986</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Sixty-First Series

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Volume</th>
<th>Days</th>
<th>Years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>507—519</td>
<td>1 &amp; 2</td>
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### Fiftieth Parliament—cont.

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### Fifty-Fourth Parliament

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## REIGN OF ELIZABETH II.—1952 to

### Lords Debates

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### Commons Debates

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# House of Commons

## Alphabetical List of Members

[ Returned at the General Election, 8 June 2017 ]

### A

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Alphabetical List of Members

Coaker, Vernon Rodney (Gedling)
Coffey, Margaret Ann Wishart (Stockport)
Coffey, Thérèse Anne (Suffolk Coastal)
Collins, Damian Noel Thomas (Folkestone and Hythe)
Cooper, Julie Elizabeth (Burnley)
Cooper, Rosemary Elizabeth (West Lancashire)
Cooper, Rt Hon. Yvette (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford)
Corbyn, Rt Hon. Jeremy Bernard (Islington North)
Costa, Alberto Castrenze (South Lichfield)
Courts, Robert Alexander (Witney)
Cowan, Ronnie (Inverclyde)
Cox, Charles Geoffrey (Torridge and West Devon)
Coyle, Neil (Bermontsey and Old Southwark)
Crabb, Rt Hon. Stephen (Presles Pembrokeshire)
Crusby, David Anthony (Bolton North East)
Crawley, Angela (Lanark and Hamilton East)
Creagh, Mary Helen (Wakefield)
Creasy, Stella Judith (Walthamstow)
Crouch, Tracey Elizabeth Anne (Chatham and Aylesford)
Cruda, Jonathan (Dagenham and Rainham)
Cryer, John Robert (Leyton and Wanstead)
Cummins, Judith Mary (Bradford South)
Cunningham, Alex (Stockton North)
Cunningham, James Dolan (Coventry South)

D

Dakin, Nicholas (Scunthorpe)
Davey, Rt Hon. Edward Jonathon (Kingston and Surbiton)
David, Wayne (Caerphilly)
Davies, Christopher Paul (Brecon and Radnorshire)
Davies, David Thomas Charles (Monmouth)
Davies, Edward Glyn (Montgomeryshire)
Davies, Geraint Richard (Swansea West)
Davies, Miriam Jane Alice (Eastleigh)
Davies, Philip Andrew (Shipley)
Davis, Rt Hon. David Michael (Haltemprice and Howden)
Day, Martyn (Linlithgow and East Falkirk)
De Cordova, Marsha Chantal (Battersea)
De Piero, Gloria (Sunderland Central)
Efford, Tobias Martin (Bournemouth East)
Elphicke, Charlie Brett Anthony (Dover)
Ellwood, Tishias Anthony (Namur and Lonsdale)
Elwy, John Jones (Berechurch and Otford)
Elwyn-Jones, Stephen (Cardiff South and Penarth)

E

Eagle, Angela (Wallasey)
Eagle, Maria (Garston and Halewood)
Edwards, David Jonathan (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr)
Efford, Clive Stanley (Eltham)
Elliott, Julie (Sunderland Central)
Ellis, Michael Tyrone (Northamton North)
Ellman, Louise Joyce (Liverpool, Riverside)
Ellwood, Rt Hon. Tobias Martin (Bournemough East)
Elmore, Christopher Philip (Ogmore)
Evans, Nigel Martin (Ribble Valley)
Evevett, Rt Hon. David Anthony (Bexleyheath and Crayford)

F

Fabricant, Michael Louis David (Lichfield)
Fallon, Rt Hon. Michael (Sevenoaks)
Farrell, Paul (Newcastle-under-Lyme)
Farrarm, Timothy James (Westmorland and Lonsdale)
Fellowes, Marion (Motherwell and Wishaw)
Fernandes, Sue-Elle Cassiana (Fareham)
Field, Rt Hon. Frank (Birkenhead)
Field, Rt Hon. Mark Christopher (Cities of London and Westminster)
Fitzpatrick, James (Poplar and Limehouse)
Fletcher, Colleen Margaret (Coventry North East)
Flint, Rt Hon. Caroline Louise (Don Valley)
Flynn, Paul Phillip (Newport West)
Ford, Vicky (Chelmsford)
Foster, Kevin John (Torbay)
Fovargue, Yvonne Helen (Makredshare)
Fox, Rt Hon. Liam (North Somerset)
Foxcroft, Victoria Jane (Lewis, Wyonds)
Francois, Pte. Mark Gino (Rayleigh and Wickford)
Frazer, Lucy (South East Cambridgeshire)
Freeman, George William (Mid Norfolk)
Freer, Mike (Finshley and Golders Green)
Frit, James Richard (Bury North)
Furniss, Gillian (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough)
Fysh, Marcus John Hudson (Yeovil)

G

Gaffney, Hugh Lawrence (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill)
Gale, Roger James (North Thanet)
Gapes, Michael John (Ilford South)
Gardiner, Barry Strachan (Brent North)
Garnier, Mark Robert Timothy (Wyre Forest)
Gauke, Rt Hon. David Michael (South West Hertfordshire)
George, Ruth Stephanie Nicole (High Peak)
Gethins, Stephen Patrick (North East Fife)
Ghani, Nusrat (Wealden)
Gibb, Rt Hon. Nicholas John (Bogans Regis and Littlehampton)
Gibson, Patricia (North Ayrshire and Arran)
Gildersnew, Michelle (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Gill, Preet (Birmingham, Edgbaston)
Gillan, Rt Hon. Cheryl Elise Kendall (Chesham and Amersham)
Girvan, Paul (South Antrim)
Glen, John Philip (Salisbury)
Glindon, Mary Theresa (North Tyneside)
Godsiff, Roger Duncan (Birmingham, Hall Green)
Goldsmith, Zac (Richmond Park)
Goodman, Helen Catherine (Bishop Auckland)
Goodwill, Robert (Scarborough and Whitby)
Gove, Rt Hon. Michael Andrew (Surrey Heath)
Grady, Patrick John (Glasgow North)
Graham, Luke Patrick (Ochil and South Perthshire)
Graham, Richard (Gloucester)
Grant, Bill (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock)
Grant, Helen (Maidstone and The Weald)
Grant, Peter (Glennes)
Gray, James Whiteside (North Wiltshire)
Gray, Neil Charles (Airdrie and Shotts)
Grayling, Rt Hon. Christopher Stephen (Epsom and Ewell)
Green, Chris (Bolton West)
Green, Rt Hon. Damian Howard (Ashford)
Green, Katherine Anne (Stretford and Urmston)
Greening, Rt Hon. Justine (Putney)
Greenwood, Lilian (Nottingham South)
Greenwood, Margaret (Wirral West)
Grieve, Rt Hon. Dominic Charles Roberts (Beaconsfield)
Griffith, Nia Rhiannon (Llanelli)
Griffiths, Andrew James (Burton)
Grogan, John Timothy (Keighley)
Gwynne, Andrew John (Denton and Reddish)
Gyimah, Samuel Phillip (East Surrey)

H

Haigh, Louise Margaret (Sheffield, Heeley)
Hair, Kirstene Janette (Angus)
Halfon, Rt Hon. Robert Henry (Harlow)
Hall, Luke Anthony (Thornbury and Yate)
Hamilton, Fabian (Leeds North East)
Hammond, Rt Hon. Philip (Runnymede and Weybridge)
Hammond, Stephen William (Wimbledon)
Hancock, Rt Hon. Matthew John David (West Suffolk)
Hands, Rt Hon. Gregory William (Chelsea and Fulham)
Hanson, Rt Hon. David George (Delyn)
Hardy, Emma Ann (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle)
Harman, Rt Hon. Harriet (Camberwell and Peckham)
Harper, Rt Hon. Mark James (Forest of Dean)
Harrington, Richard Irwin (Watford)
Harris, Carolyn (Swansea East)
Harris, Elizabeth Rebecca Scott (Castle Point)
Harrison, Trudy Lynne (Copeland)
Hart, Simon (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire)
Hayes, Helen Elizabeth (Dulwich and Norwood)
Hayes, Rt Hon. John Henry (South Holland and The Deepings)
Hayman, Susan Mary (Workington)
Hazzard, Chris (South Down)
Heald, Rt Hon. Oliver (North East Hertfordshire)
Healey, Rt Hon. John (Wentworth and Dearne)
Heappey, James Stephen (Wells)
Heat'on-Harris, Christopher (Daventry)
Heat'on-Jones, Peter (North Devon)
Henderson, Gordon (Sittingbourne and Sheppey)
Hendrick, Mark Phillip (Preston)

Hendry, Andrew Egan Henderson (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey)
Hepburn, Stephen (Jarrow)
Herbert, Rt Hon. Nick (Arundel and South Downs)
Hermon, Sylvia Eileen (North Down)
Hill, Mike (Hartlepool)
Hillier, Meg (Hackney South and Shoreditch)
Hinds, Damian Patrick George (East Hampshire)
Hoare, Simon James (North Dorset)
Hobhouse, Wera Beneficta (Bath)
Hodge, Rt Hon. Margaret Eve (Barking)
Hodgson, Sharon (Washington and Sunderland West)
Hoey, Kate (Vauxhall)
Hollern, Catherine Malloy (Blackburn)
Hollingbery, George Michael Edward (Meon Valley)
Hollinrake, Kevin Paul (Thirsk and Malton)
Hollonbole, Philip Thomas (Kettering)
Holloway, Adam James Harold (Gravesham)
Hopkins, Kelvin Peter (Luton North)
Hosie, Stewart (Dundee East)
Howarth, Rt Hon. George Edward (Knowsley)
Howell, John Michael (Henley)
Hoyle, Rt Hon. Lindsay Harvey (Chorley)
Huddleston, Nigel Paul (Mid Worcestershire)
Hughes, Eddie (Walsall North)
Hunt, Rt Hon. Jeremy Richard Streynsham (South West Surrey)
Huq, Rupa Asha (Ealing Central and Acton)
Hurd, Nicholas Richard (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner)
Hussain, Imran (Bradford East)

J

Jack, Alister (Dumfries and Galloway)
James, Margot Cathleen (Stourbridge)
Jardine, Christine Anne (Edinburgh West)
Jarvis, Dan (Barnsley Central)
Javid, Rt Hon. Sajid (Bromsgrove)
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Jenkin, Bernard Christison (Harwich and North Essex)
Jenkyns, Andrea Marie (Morley and Outwood)
Jenrick, Robert Edward (Newark)
Johnson, Rt Hon. Alexander Boris de Pfeffel (Uxbridge and South Ruislip)
Johnson, Caroline Elizabeth (Sleaford and North Hykeham)
Johnson, Diana Ruth (Kingston upon Hull North)
Johnson, Gareth Alan (Dartford)
Johnson, Joseph Edmund (Orpington)
Jones, Andrew Hanson (Harrogate and Knaresborough)
Jones, Darren Paul (Bristol North West)
Jones, Rt Hon. David Ian (Clwyd West)
Jones, Gerald (Merton Tydfil and Rhymney)
Jones, Graham Peter (Hyndburn)
Jones, Helen Mary (Warrington North)
Jones, Kevan David (North Durham)
Jones, Marcus Charles (Nuneaton)
Jones, Sarah (Croydon Central)
Jones, Susan Elan (Clwyd South)

K

Kane, Michael Joseph Patrick (Wythenshawe and Sale East)
Kawczynski, Daniel Robert (Shrewsbury and Atcham)
Keegan, Gillian (Chichester)
Keeley, Barbara Mary (Wrexham and Eccles South)
Kendall, Elizabeth Louise (Leicester West)
Kennedy, Seema Louise Ghissi (South Ribble)
Kerr, Stephen Charles (Stirling)
Khan, Aftab Mohammed (Manchester, Gorton)
Killen, Gerard (Rutherglen and Hamilton West)
Kinnock, Stephen Nathan (Aberavon)
Knight, Rt Hon. Gregory (East Yorkshire)
Knight, Julian (Solihull)
Kwarteng, Kwasi Alfred Addo (Spelthorne)
Kyle, Peter John (Hove)

L

Laing, Eleanor Fulton (Epping Forest)
Laird, Lesley (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath)
Lake, Ben Morgan (Ceredigion)
Lamb, Rt Hon. Norman Peter (North Norfolk)
Lammy, Rt Hon. David Lindon (Tottenham)
Lamont, John (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk)
Lancaster, John Mark (Milton Keynes North)
Latham, Pauline Elizabeth (Mid Derbyshire)
Lavery, Ian (Wansbeck)
Law, Christopher Murray Alexander (Dundee West)
Leadsom, Rt Hon. Andrea (South Northamptonshire)
Lee, Karen Elizabeth (Lincoln)
Lee, Philip James (Bracknell)
Lefroy, Jeremy John Elton (Stafford)
Leigh, Edward Julian Egerton (Gainsborough)
Leslie, Christopher Michael (Nottingham East)
Letwin, Rt Hon. Oliver (West Dorset)
Lewell-Buck, Emma Louise (South Shields)
Lewer, Andrew Iain (Northampton South)
Lewis, Rt Hon. Brandon Kenneth (Mid Suffolk)
Lewis, Clive Anthony (Norwich South)
Lewis, Ivan (Bury South)
Lewis, Rt Hon. Julian Murray (New Forest East)
Liddell-Grainger, Ian Richard Peregrine (Bridgewater and West Somerset)
Lidington, Rt Hon. David Roy (Aylesbury)
Linden, David (Glasgow East)
Little Pengelly, Emma (Belfast South)
Lloyd, Anthony Joseph (Rochdale)
Lloyd, Stephen (Eastbourne)
Long Bailey, Rebecca (Salford and Eccles)
Lopresti, Giacomo (Filton and Bradley Stoke)
Lord, Jonathan George Caladine (Woking)
Loughton, Timothy Paul (East Worthing and Shoreham)
Lucas, Caroline Patricia (Brighton, Pavilion)
Lucas, Ian Colin (Wrexham)
Lynch, Holly Jamie (Halifax)

M

McCabe, Stephen James (Birmingham, Selly Oak)
McCallion, Elisha (Fylde)
McCarthy, Kerry Gillian (Bristol East)
McDonagh, Siobhain Ann (Mitcham and Morden)
McDonald, Andrew Joseph (Middlesbrough)
McDonald, Stewart (Glasgow South)
McDonald, Stuart Campbell (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East)
McDonnell, Rt Hon. John Martin (Hayes and Harlington)
McElduff, Barry (West Tyrone)
McFadden, Rt Hon. Patrick Bosco (Wolverhampton South East)
McGinn, Conor Patrick (St Helens North)
McGovern, Alison (Wirral South)
McInnes, Elizabeth Anne (Heywood and Middleton)
MacKinlay, Craig (South Thanet)
McKinnell, Catherine (Newcastle upon Tyne North)
Maclean, Rachel Helen (Redditch)
McLoughlin, Rt Hon. Patrick Allen (Derbyshire Dales)
McMahon, Jim (Oldham West and Royton)
McMorris, Anna Rhiannon (Cardiff North)
Mc Nally, John (Falkirk)
MacNeil, Angus Brendan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar)
McPartland, Stephen Anthony (Stevenage)
McVey, Rt Hon. Esther (Tatton)
Madders, Justin (Ellesmere Port and Neston)
Mahmood, Khalid (Birmingham, Perry Barr)
Mahmood, Shabana (Birmingham, Ladywood)
Main, Anne Margaret (St Albans)
Mak, Alan (Havant)
Malhotra, Seema (Feltham and Heston)
Malthouse, Christopher Laurie (North West Hampshire)
Mann, John (Bassetlaw)
Mann, Scott Leslie (North Cornwall)
Marsden, Gordon (Blackpool South)
Martin, Sandy ( Ipswich)
Maskell, Rachael Helen (York Central)
Maskey, Paul John (Belfast West)
Masterton, Paul (East Renfrewshire)
Matheson, Chris (City of Chester)
May, Rt Hon. Theresa Mary (Maidenhead)
Maynard, Paul Christopher (Blackpool North and Cleveleys)
Mears, James Ian (Gateshead)
Menzies, Mark Andrew (Fylde)
Mercer, John Luther (Plymouth, Moor View)
Merriman, Huw William (Bexhill and Battle)
Metalfe, Stephen James (South Basildon and East Thurrock)
Miliband, Rt Hon. Ed (Doncaster North)
Miller, Rt Hon. Maria Frances Lewis (Basingstoke)
Milling, Amanda Anne (Cannock Chase)
Mills, Nigel John (Amber Valley)
Milton, Rt Hon. Anne Frances (Guildford)
Mitchell, Rt Hon. Andrew John Bower (Sutton Coldfield)
Milloy, Francis Joseph (Mid Ulster)
Monaghan, Carol (Glasgow North West)
Moon, Madeleine (Bridgend)
Moore, Damien (Southport)
Moran, Layla Michelle (Oxford West and Abingdon)
Mordaunt, Penny Mary (Portsmouth North)
Morden, Jessica Elizabeth (Newport East)
Morgan, Rt Hon. Nicola Ann (Loughborough)
Morgan, Stephen James (Portsmouth South)
Morris, Anne Marie (Newton Abbot)
Morris, David Thomas (Morecambe and Lunesdale)
Morris, Grahame Mark (East Fife)
Morris, James George (Halesowen and Rowley Regis)
Morton, Wendy (Aldridge-Brownhills)
Mundell, Rt Hon. David Gordon (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale)
Murray, Ian (Edinburgh South)
Murray, Sheryll (South East Cornwall)
Murrison, Andrew William (South West Wiltshire)

N

Nandy, Lisa Eva (Wigan)
Neill, Robert James Macgillivray (Bromley and Chislehurst)
Newlands, Gavin Andrew Stuart (Paisley and Renfrewshire North)
Newton, Sarah (Tuzo and Falmouth)
Nokes, Caroline Fiona Ellen (Romsey and Southampton North)
Norman, Alexander Jesse (Hereford and South Herefordshire)
Norris, Alex (Nottingham North)

O

O’Brien, Neil John (Harborough)
Offord, Matthew James (Hendon)
O’Hara, Brendan (Argyll and Bute)
O’Mara, Jared (Sheffield, Hallam)
Onasanya, Fiona Oluyinka (Peterborough)
Onn, Melanie (Great Grimsby)
Onwrurah, Chi (Newcastle upon Tyne Central)
Opperman, Guy (Hexham)
Osamor, Kate Ofunne (Edmonton)
Owen, Albert (Ynys Môn)

P

Paisley, Ian Richard Kyle (North Antrim)
Parish, Neil Quentin Gordon (Tiverton and Honiton)
Patel, Rt Hon. Priti Sushil (Witham)
Paterson, Rt Hon. Owen William (North Shropshire)
Pawsey, Mark Julian Francis (Rugby)
Peacock, Stephanie Louise (Barnsley East)
Pearce, Teresa (Erith and Thamesmead)
Penning, Rt Hon. Michael Alan (Hemel Hempstead)
Pennycook, Matthew Thomas (Greenwich and Woolwich)
Penrose, John David (Weston-super-Mare)
Percy, Andrew Theakstone (Brigg and Goole)
Perkins, Matthew Toby (Chesterfield)
Perry, Claire Louise (Devizes)
Phillips, Jessica Rose (Birmingham, Yardley)
Phillipson, Bridget Mave (Houghton and Sunderland South)
Philp, Chris Ian Brian Mynitt (Croydon South)
Piddock, Laura (North West Durham)
Pincher, Christopher John (Tamworth)
Platt, Joanne Marie (Leigh)
Pollard, Luke (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport)
Poulter, Daniel Leonard James (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich)
Pound, Stephen Pelham (Ealing North)
Pow, Rebecca Faye (Taunton Deane)
Powell, Lucy Maria (Manchester Central)
Prentis, Victoria Mary Boswell (Banbury)
Prisk, Mark Michael (Hertford and Stortford)
Pritchard, Mark Andrew (The Wrekin)
Pursglove, Thomas Christopher John (Corby)

Q

Quin, Jeremy Mark (Horsham)
Quince, William James (Colchester)
Qureshi, Yasmin (Bolton South East)

R

Raab, Dominic Rennie (Esher and Walton)
Rashid, Faisal (Warrington South)
Rayner, Angela (Ashton-under-Lyne)
Redwood, Rt Hon. John Alan (Wokingham)
Reed, Steven Mark Ward (Croydon North)
Rees, Christina Elizabeth (Neath)
Rees-Mogg, Jacob William (North East Somerset)
Reeves, Ellie (Lewisham West and Penge)
Reeves, Rachel Jane (Leeds West)
Reynolds, Emma Elizabeth (Wolverhampton North East)
Reynolds, Jonathan Neil (Stalybridge and Hyde)
Rimmer, Marie Elizabeth (St Helens South and Whiston)
Robertson, Laurence Anthony (Tewkesbury)
Robinson, Gavin James (Belfast East)
Robinson, Geoffrey (Coventry North West)
Robinson, Mary Josephine (Cheadle)
Rodda, Matt (Reading East)
Rosindell, Andrew Richard (Romford)
Ross, Douglas (Moray)
Rowley, Danielle (Midlothian)
Rowley, Lee Benjamin (North East Derbyshire)
Ruane, Christopher Shaun (Vale of Clwyd)
Rudd, Rt Hon. Amber (Hastings and Rye)
Russell-莫利, Lloyd (Brighton, Kemptown)
Rutley, David Henry (Macclesfield)
Ryan, Rt Hon. Joan Marie (Enfield North)
Sandbach, Antoinette (Eddisbury)
Saville Roberts, Liz (Dwyfor Meirionnydd)
Scully, Paul Stuart (Sutton and Cheam)
Seely, Bob (Isle of Wight)
Selous, Andrew Edmund Armstrong (South West Bedfordshire)
Shah, Naseem Akhter (Bradford West)
Shannon, Richard James (Strangford)
Shapps, Rt Hon. Grant (Welwyn Hatfield)
Sharma, Alok Kumar (Reading West)
Sharma, Virendra Kumar (Ealing, Southall)
Sheerman, Barry John (Huddersfield)
Shelbrooke, Alec (Elmet and Rothwell)
Sheppard, Thomas (Edinburgh East)
Sheriff, Paula Michelle (Dewsbury)
Shuker, Gavin (Luton South)
Siddiq, Tulip (Hampstead and Kilburn)
Simpson, Rt Hon. Keith Robert (Broadland)
Simpson, Thomas David (Upper Bann)
Skidmore, Christopher James (Kingswood)
Skinner, Dennis Edward (Bolsover)
Slaughter, Andrew Francis (Hammersmith)
Smeth, Ruth Lauren (Stoke-on-Trent North)
Smith, Angela Christine (Penistone and Stocksbridge)
Smith, Catherine Jane (Lancaster and Fleetwood)
Smith, Chloe Rebecca (Norwich North)
Smith, Eleanor Patricia (Wolverhampton South West)
Smith, Henry Edward Millar (Crawley)
Smith, Jeffrey (Manchester, Withington)
Smith, Julian Richard (Skipton and Ripon)
Smith, Laura (Crewe and Nantwich)
Smith, Nicholas Desmond John (Blaenau Gwent)
Smith, Owen (Pontypridd)
Smith, Royston Matthew (Southampton, Itchen)
Smyth, Karin (Bristol South)
Snell, Gareth (Stoke-on-Trent Central)
Soames, Rt Hon. Nicholas (Mid Sussex)
Sobel, Alex (Leeds North West)
Soubry, Rt Hon. Anna Mary (Broxtowe)
Spellar, Rt Hon. John Francis (Warley)
Spelman, Rt Hon. Caroline (Meriden)
Spencer, Mark Steven (Sherwood)
Starmer, Keir (Holborn and St Pancras)
Stephens, Christopher (Glasgow South West)
Stephenson, Andrew George (Pendle)
Stevens, Joanna Meriel (Cardiff Central)
Stevenson, Andrew John (Carlisle)
Stewart, Iain Aitken (Milton Keynes South)
Stewart, Robert Alexander (Beckenham)
Stewart, Roderick James Nugent (Penrith and The Border)
Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross)
Street, Gary Nicholas (South West Devon)
Streeting, Wesley Paul William (Ilford North)
Stride, Rt Hon. Mervyn John (Central Devon)
Stringer, Graham Eric (Blackley and Broughton)
Stuart, Graham (Beverley and Holderness)
Sturdy, Julian Charles (York Outer)
Sunak, Rishi (Richmond (Yorkshire))
Swayne, Rt Hon. Desmond Angus (New Forest West)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow North East)
Swinson, Jo (East Dunbartonshire)
Swire, Rt Hon. Hugo George William (East Devon)
Syms, Robert Andrew Raymond (Poole)

T
Tami, Mark Richard (Alyn and Deeside)
Thewliss, Alison Emily (Glasgow Central)
Thomas, Derek Gordon (St Ives)
Thomas, Gareth (Harrow West)
Thomas-Symonds, Nicklaus (Torbay)
Thomson, Ross (Aberdeen South)
Thornberry, Rt Hon. Emily (Islington South and Finsbury)
Throup, Margaret Ann (Erewash)
Timms, Rt Hon. Stephen Creswell (East Ham)
Tolhurst, Kelly Jane (Rochester and Strood)
Tomlinson, Justin Paul (North Swindon)
Tomlinson, Michael James (Mid Dorset and North Poole)
Tracey, Craig Paul (North Warwickshire)
Tredinnick, David Arthur Stephen (Bosworth)
Trevelyan, Anne-Marie Belinda (Berwick-upon-Tweed)
Trickett, Jon Hedley (Hemsworth)
Truss, Rt Hon. Elizabeth Mary (South West Norfolk)
Tugendhat, Thomas Georg John (Tonbridge and Malling)
Turley, Anna Catherine (Redcar)
Turner, Karl (Kingston upon Hull East)
Twigg, John (Halton)
Twigg, Stephen (Liverpool, West Derby)
Twist, Liz (Blaydon)

U
Umunna, Chuka Harrison (Streatham)

V
Vaz, Rt Hon. Keith Anthony (Leicester East)
Vaz, Valerie Carol Marian (Walsall South)
Vickers, Martin John (Cleethorpes)
Villiers, Rt Hon. Theresa (Chipping Barnet)

W
Walker, Charles Ashley Rupert (Broxbourne)
Walker, Robin (Worcester)
Walker, Thelma Doris (Colne Valley)
Wallace, Robert Ben Lobban (Wyre and Preston North)
Warburton, David John (Somerton and Frome)
Warman, Matthew (Boston and Skegness)
Watling, Giles Francis (Clacton)
Watson, Thomas Anthony (West Bromwich East)
West, Catherine Elizabeth (Hornsey and Wood Green)
Western, Matt (Warwick and Leamington)
Whatley, Helen Olivia Bicknell (Faversham and Mid Kent)
Wheeler, Heather Kay (South Derbyshire)
Whitehead, Alan Patrick Vincent (Southampton, Test)
Whitfield, Martin (East Lothian)
Whitford, Philippa (Central Ayrshire)
Whittaker, Craig (Calder Valley)
Whittingdale, Rt Hon. John Flashby Lawrence (Maldon)
Wiggin, William David (North Herefordshire)
Williams, Hywel (Arfon)
Williams, Paul Daniel (Stockton South)
Williamson, Chris (Derby North)
Williamson, Rt Hon. Gavin Alexander (South Staffordshire)
Wilson, Philip (Sedgefield)
Wilson, Samuel (East Antrim)
Winterton, Rt Hon. Rosie (Doncaster Central)
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Wollaston, Sarah (Totnes)
Wood, Michael Jon (Dudley South)
Woodcock, John Zak (Barrow and Furness)
Wragg, William Peter (Hazel Grove)
Wright, Rt Hon. Jeremy Paul (Kenilworth and Southam)

Y
Yasin, Mohammad (Bedford)

Z
Zahawi, Nadhim (Stratford-on-Avon)
Zeichner, Daniel Stephen (Cambridge)
HER MAJESTY’S GOVERNMENT

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(FORMED BY THE RT HON. THERESA MAY, MP, JUNE 2017)

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Richard Harrington, MP
Lord Prior of Brampton

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MINISTER OF STATE—Alok Sharma, MP

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Jake Berry, MP
Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth §

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John Glen, MP
Lord Ashton of Hyde
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The Rt Hon. Earl Howe §
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The Rt Hon. Tobias Ellwood, MP

Education—
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MINISTERS OF STATE—
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Joseph Johnson, MP (Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation) §
The Rt Hon. Anne Milton, MP
Robert Goodwill, MP
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MINISTER OF STATE—George Eustice, MP
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Lord Gardiner of Kimble

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MINISTER OF STATE—
The Rt Hon. Baroness Anelay of St Johns
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Steve Baker, MP
Robin Walker, MP

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The Rt Hon. Alistair Burt, MP (Minister for the Middle East) §
The Rt Hon. Mark Field, MP (Minister for Asia and the Pacific)
Rory Stewart, MP (Minister for Africa) §
Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon (Minister for the Commonwealth and the UN)

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MINISTER OF STATE—Philip Dunne, MP
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Steve Brine, MP
Jackie Doyle-Price, MP
Lord O’Shaughnessy

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Rory Stewart, MP §
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21 June 2017
The House met at half-past Two o’clock

The House met on the first day of this Parliament, pursuant to Proclamation. DAVID NATZLER, Clerk of the House of Commons; JOHN BENGER, Clerk Assistant; and PHILOMENA HUMPHREYS, Principal Clerk of the Table Office, attended in the House, and the other Clerks attended, according to their duty.

CERI KING, Deputy Clerk of the Crown in Chancery in Great Britain, delivered to the said JOHN BENGER a book containing a list of the Members returned to serve in this Parliament.

MR KENNETH CLARKE, the Member for Rushcliffe, took the Chair (Standing Order No. 1).

MESSAGE TO ATTEND THE LORDS COMMISSIONERS

Message to attend the Lords Commissioners delivered by the Gentleman Usher of the Black Rod.

The House went up to hear the Commission for opening and holding the Parliament, and the Lords Commissioners directed the House to proceed to the Election of a Speaker and to present the Speaker-Elect in the House of Peers for the Royal Approbation.

The House returned.

Election of Speaker

Mr Kenneth Clarke (in the Chair): Under the provisions of Standing Order No. 1A, I am now required to ascertain whether John Bercow is willing to be chosen as Speaker. I call Mr John Bercow.

2.48 pm

John Bercow (Buckingham) (Ind): Thank you, Mr Clarke. What a pleasure it is to welcome you back to this place, as you add the accolade of Father of the House to the many achievements of your long and distinguished career. Next Sunday you will mark 47 years’ continuous service to your constituency of Rushcliffe, to this Chamber and to our country as a whole. You are held in great affection and esteem on both sides of the House, and I am sure that I speak for all colleagues in wishing you well in your new role.

If the House so permits, I shall be honoured to serve as Speaker in this Parliament, which, thankfully, across the parties is more richly diverse and representative of modern Britain than any of its predecessors. I will strive to ensure that all parts of the House are heard fully and fairly, and, as always, I will champion the right of Back Benchers to question, to probe, to scrutinise and to hold to account the Government of the day.

Finally, Mr Clarke, I referred admiringly to your 47-year tenure. It may come as a relief to colleagues to know that I have no pretensions to seek to serve for anything like so long, either as a parliamentarian or, indeed, in the Chair as Speaker. That said, we appear to be destined for testing times, and I offer myself to the House as a tested Speaker.

Mr Clarke: I thank you, Mr Bercow, for those kind and flattering remarks, and particularly for referring, as you repeatedly did, to my longevity, which is about the only non-controversial fact that you can assert about my parliamentary career.

I call upon Mrs Cheryl Gillan to move the motion.
2.51 pm

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I beg to move, That the right hon. John Simon Bercow do take the Chair of this House as Speaker.

I start by adding my belated congratulations to the Father of the House. He took over earlier this year, when we sadly lost another member of the 1970 intake, the very well respected Sir Gerald Kaufman, of whom the Leader of the Opposition said:

“He loved life and politics.”

I can honestly say that that can be said of you, too, Mr Clarke. As Mr Bercow said, you have served in virtually all the Departments of State and the great offices throughout your long and distinguished career, and it is a tribute to your record of public service and to your resilience that you preside over the opening proceedings of our Parliament today and over the election of a new Speaker.

While I welcome all my colleagues who are returning to the House—they are naturally familiar with the Speaker’s role—we are all pleased to welcome the new Members on both sides of the House. They might not realise that the Speaker’s Office, under that name, goes back a mere 640 years. The Speaker was then the agent of the King, and was afforded little protection. If the agent of the King offered bad news, he suffered the monarch’s wrath, and no fewer than seven Speakers were beheaded between 1394 and 1535—[HON. MEMBERS: “More!”—[INTERUPTION.]

Let that be a warning to you! Fortunately, the job description has changed since then, and our modern Speaker protects us and our rights as Back Benchers without fear of losing his head—except, I have to say, when Members misbehave in the Chamber.

Compared with the Father of the House, with his 47 years of experience, I am just a youngster in this place. However, I have seen many changes over the 25 years I have served in Parliament. The wigs have gone, except for the one that I see being worn for a state occasion—[INTERUPTION.] Sorry, the wigs have gone except for one or two. The hours have changed, the Committees have increased, the technology has advanced, the media never sleep, and the challenges of the job of the Speaker continue to multiply.

As the right hon. Member for Buckingham (John Bercow) has been our Speaker since 22 June 2009, I have seen him rise to those challenges and grow in this job. He “has shown himself to be utterly impartial and fearless in defending the House of Commons from all comers whether it be over mighty Ministers or a raucous media.”

He is “a determined champion of opening up our democracy”, bringing in reforms that have made Parliament accessible to over 100,000 schoolchildren each year. He is an “effective Speaker...who has used his office to reach out to people across our country”; and

“an energetic ambassador for Parliament throughout the UK and around the world, and is also a devoted and hard-working champion for his constituents in Buckingham.”

Those are not my words, but endorsements from my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), the Leader of the Opposition and the Prime Minister, but my favourite endorsement is from the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), who is standing by the Chair, who said, on the Speaker’s reappointment in 2015:

“He may be small in stature, but make no mistake: in this office, he is a giant.”—[OFFICIAL REPORT, 18 May 2015; VOL. 596, C. 6.]

Perhaps it is true that good things come in small packages.

Let me say in proposing the right hon. Gentleman for Speaker that, for my part, I have always found him to be scrupulously fair; he never allows his views to compromise his impartiality, although I think that Members in all parts of the House can agree that he is no stranger to controversy. I think he annoys Members on all Front Benches from time to time, which is probably testament to his even-handedness. He fosters a sense of community among those who work in the precincts, and applies himself with vigour to all the many and varied tasks that fall to the role. He also has qualities that many of us wonder at. There is his ability to recall obscure information on Members, which I warn new Members about; his loquaciousness and command of the English language; and, in particular—please note, Father of the House—his ability to remain in the Chair for inordinate lengths of time, the record being an 11 hour and 24 minute uninterrupted stint during the Syria debate, which caused much admiring comment about the strength of his bladder.

Camel-like qualities aside, the right hon. Gentleman’s performance in the Chamber is matched by his record outside it. He has hosted over 1,000 events for charities in Speaker’s House, and presides over the administration of this place with great patience and good humour, to which I can attest.

This Parliament, like all that have gone before, will have its own character and present its own challenges. Over the next few years, our country will go through the great changes that peoples’ democratic votes have presented to us in this House. At the same time, we face very real threats to freedom, democracy and our precious way of life. That has been brought starkly into focus with the cyber-attack on our NHS, the two unspeakable acts of violence during the election campaign, the death of PC Keith Palmer, and, of course, the loss of our colleague Jo Cox, who was taken from us all a year ago this week.

As Speaker, the right hon. Gentleman has always acted swiftly to join others with words and acts of reassurance, and I was proud to see him in Manchester, standing shoulder to shoulder with the community who had come under such lethal attack. In times like this, and in all our deliberations in the House, we need the experience, maturity and commitment to our Parliament that I believe is shown by the right hon. Gentleman. His devotion to this House and this country cannot be disputed. He has served this House, and us as Members, with strength and fortitude, and I have great pleasure in commending him to the House to serve as our next Speaker.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 14), That John Bercow do take the Chair of this House as Speaker.

Question agreed to.

Mr Kenneth Clarke left the Chair, and John Bercow was conducted to the Chair by Sir Peter Bottomley, Mrs Helen Grant and Alison McGovern.
Mr Speaker-Elect (standing on the upper step): Colleagues, before I take the Chair as Speaker-Elect, I wish to thank the House for the honour it has again bestowed upon me. I am aware that it is the greatest honour it can give to any of its Members. I pray that I shall justify its continuing confidence and I propose to do all within my power to preserve and cherish its best traditions.

I want, if I may, to say two other things. First—yes, it is a repetition, but I think it is a justified repetition—is it not marvellous to see the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) as Father of the House, and back here in rude health?

Secondly, in welcoming the presence of all colleagues, and congratulating all those in all parties who have been re-elected, I hope that experienced Members will understand if I pay particular tribute to the 87 Members, I believe, who are newly elected for the first time. Whatever else you have done or will do in the course of your career, there will be no greater honour than that which you have just attained as elected Members of Parliament. I am sure that each and every one of you will be very conscious of your responsibility to your constituents. Rest assured: the Speaker will look out for you and be very keen, sooner rather than later, and more frequently rather than less frequently, to hear from you.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May) rose—
The Speaker-Elect sat down in the Chair and the Mace was placed upon the Table.

Mr Speaker-Elect: It is not the Prime Minister’s fault—I gave her the nod.

3.3 pm

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): I was going to say, Mr Speaker-Elect, to all those who are new Members, that you can be in the House for 20 years and still not always know what the protocol is going to be.

Mr Speaker-Elect, on behalf of the whole House, may I congratulate you on your re-election? At least someone got a landslide. May I also congratulate you on becoming the first Speaker since the second world war to be re-elected three times? In your tenure so far, you have been a great champion of Back Benchers, ensuring that every Member of this House has the opportunity to speak and to be heard in representing the people they serve. This is such an important part of the way our democracy is upheld in the House, and I know that you will continue this vital role in the future, just as you have in the past.

Let me also thank my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) for assuming the Chair for this election and welcome his return as the Father of the House. As you and others have said, Mr Speaker-Elect, he has had a long and distinguished career in his service to his constituents and to this country. It is very good to see him back here, where he belongs.

It may not surprise my right hon. and learned Friend that I intend to be difficult today and break with tradition by welcoming not only him as the Father of the House, but the returning Mother of the House. The right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) has been a great advocate for increasing the number of women in Parliament. I am sure she will join me in celebrating the fact that there are now more women MPs than ever before.

As we welcome new Members on both sides of the House, we should also celebrate the fact that we now have a record number of MPs from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, including the first ever female Sikh MP, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Gill). We also have more disabled MPs and more LGBT MPs, and I hope that together we will continue to build on the progress we have made in previous Parliaments to fight against discrimination in all its forms and to make our politics more representative of all the people we serve. Although there is further to go, if there is one outcome from this election that we can all welcome, it is surely this: today we have the most diverse and representative Parliament in our history.

Members across the House will also want to pay tribute to their predecessors. We will all miss former Members not returned to this House, but we welcome our new colleagues. Being a Member of this House is a great privilege that requires dedication and often personal sacrifice, and everyone in this Chamber does it because they want to serve the public.

Whatever the result, general elections are above all an exercise in democracy and our values—the very democracy and values that the recent terror attacks sought to undermine. This is the first opportunity that Parliament has had to reflect on the despicable terrorist attacks in Manchester and at London Bridge. I am sure that Members on both sides will want to join me in sending our deepest condolences to the families and loved ones of all those who lost their lives in the attacks. I know that the House will also want to express admiration for the extraordinary work of all our police and emergency services, whose courage and speed of response saved many lives.

As we begin this new Parliament, it is clear that our country faces some of the greatest challenges of our time: the challenge of keeping our nation safe, including by defeating the perverted ideology of Islamist extremism; the challenge of securing the best possible Brexit deal and delivering the will of the British people in taking the United Kingdom out of the European Union; and the challenge of spreading opportunity and prosperity to every part of our United Kingdom, so that no one and no community is left behind.

In meeting these challenges, what we have seen from the election is that parts of our country remain divided—divided between young and old, rich and poor, and those for whom the future offers a sense of opportunity and those for whom it brings worry and concern. Some people blame politics for these divisions or say there is too much politics. But politics can be an incredible force for good. Conducted in the right way, it can be how we resolve our differences, how we deal with injustices, and how we take, not shirk, the big decisions. It is not always glamorous or exciting but, at its best, the duty we share as politicians—to serve others in confronting these challenges—is a truly noble calling for us all.

The test for all of us is whether we choose to reflect divisions or to help the country overcome them. So let us choose in this Parliament to conduct ourselves in a manner fitting to this moment—to debate, to disagree, but in doing so to recognise that we all want to see a Britain that is stronger, fairer and safe and secure for our children and grandchildren; and that our shared values, interests and ambitions can, and must, bring us together.
As we face difficult challenges ahead, let us come together in a spirit of national unity to keep our country safe, and build a stronger, fairer and more prosperous future for everyone in every part of our United Kingdom.

3.9 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I follow the Prime Minister in her remarks about the importance of the work we all have to do in this Parliament, and I will come back to that in a moment.

First, I congratulate the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) on becoming Father of the House. To me, he seemed a very well-established MP when I entered the House 34 years ago. I have never quite forgotten the image of him in the Tea Room wearing Hush Puppies, eating bacon sandwiches, drinking super-strength lager and carrying a cigar while taking a break from a debate on healthy living. He has had a very long and distinguished career in the House, punctuated this year by his speech in the Brexit debate during which he lamented that his party had become “mildly anti-immigrant”. How new a development that might be is open to debate, but I am sorry to note that the party is also at best—to put it generously—mildly anti-worker, anti-disabled people, anti-pensioner and anti-young people. I am sorry to be so divisive today. It is all right.

It is customary on these occasions to congratulate the returning Prime Minister and I absolutely do so. I am sure she will agree with me that democracy is a wondrous thing and can throw up some very unexpected results. I am sure that we all look forward to welcoming the Queen’s Speech just as soon as the coalition of chaos has been negotiated. I will just let the House and the rest of the nation know that, if that is not possible, the Labour party stands ready to offer strong and stable leadership in the national interest.

I warmly welcome all new Members to this House. As you and other Members have said, Mr Speaker-Elect, there is no greater honour than being elected here. It is an amazing day for Members when they first come to take their seat here. It is an honour to represent our constituents and take decisions that will help people’s lives. That is why we are elected here: to represent those who have put us here to try to make their lives better. As you and the Prime Minister quite rightly pointed out, Mr Speaker-Elect, we now have over 200 women MPs—more than ever before in the history of this Parliament. That is excellent. I join the Prime Minister in congratulating my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) on all that she has done to promote women in Parliament and women’s careers in general.

This weekend marked the anniversary of the election of four black MPs to the House of Commons 30 years ago—the first black MPs for more than 60 years in the British Parliament. In particular, I welcome my right hon. Friends the Members for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) and for Leicester East (Keith Vaz). They were two of the four elected in 1987, and they are now Members of the most diverse House of Commons ever. They paved the way and I have to say that they have put up with an awful lot as pioneers in taking their seats in 1987. It is vital for our democracy that all voices are heard and represented.

In the 30 years I have been here, Mr Speaker-Elect, there can have been no better Speaker than you for always ensuring that Back-Bench voices are heard, and for the way in which you have presided over our Chamber at all times—the good, the bad and the difficult—particularly after the horrors of what happened on Westminster bridge. Those horrors came almost to the door of Parliament. Parliament has obviously not been in session for the past few weeks, but we also remember the awfulness of what happened in Manchester and at London Bridge. We have to stand together as communities, strong and united against those who would seek to divide and destroy the democracy in our society. I also congratulate you on the way in which you have conducted yourself and on the inclusive debates with which you have made sure that Back Benchers are fully involved over the years that you have been Speaker.

We have at least two things in common, Mr Speaker-Elect. First—this is very divisive—is our love for Arsenal football club. [Hon. Members: “Shame!”] I realised that that would bring that sort of comment, but I can cope; it is all right. Secondly, we both came to this place having been local councillors. Serving communities on local authorities is very important, and I am delighted at the number of former or serving councillors who were elected to this House on Thursday night, because they bring a special expertise and knowledge to this House.

We have to speak up for our constituents—that is why we are here—and I know that you, Mr Speaker-Elect, will make sure that those voices are heard. I want to thank you, in your role as Speaker, for facilitating exhibitions in this House—I took part in one commemorating the end of the slave trade—and for the many receptions you have held for charities in Speaker’s House. I thank you also for travelling around the country, reaching out and spreading the whole idea of democracy, in schools and colleges; these places were not necessarily famous or well known, but you have reached out to people in a way that has never been done before, and we should all be very grateful to you for that.

You will not be troubled by party politics, because you are in the Chair, but it is a great tradition—and you stand in that tradition—that a Speaker stands up for democracy. In Speaker’s House, there is a commemoration of Speaker Lenthall and many other Speakers. Your job—like his—is to protect democracy and rise above party debate. I hope we can have that real debate in the future—whenever those on the Government Benches are in a position to take part in it.

We look forward to this Parliament—however short it might be—and to being the voice for change in our society. More people—particularly young people—than ever before took part in the recent general election. They took part because they wanted to see things done differently in our society; they wanted our Parliament to represent them and to deliver change for them. I am looking forward to this Parliament, like no other Parliament ever before, challenging things and, hopefully, bringing about that change.

3.16 pm

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): I associate myself with the words of the Prime Minister in her condolences to those who lost their lives in Manchester and London.
I also pay tribute to the emergency speaker services. It is right that we do that, as our democratic process was affected twice in a short campaign.

We will miss many of those from all parts of the House who have lost their seats, but we welcome all the new Members from all the parties. Some big beasts have gone, and I suspect we will miss them all sooner rather than later.

I agree with the Prime Minister on one other thing she said: politics is not divisive, and that is important. We may take a different view on the constitution, Brexit, social policy, or tax and spend, but those are simply the different opinions of political opponents, not of enemies. If we can reflect a little more respect across all the parties, that would do this House and politics a great deal of good.

Mr Speaker-Elect, may I congratulate you? We in the SNP have always seen you as a champion, ensuring that all the voices across, and indeed within, the parties are properly heard. I can also say, having sat and worked with you on the House of Commons Commission, that you have shown yourself to be incredibly diligent, with an attention to detail, when it comes to the way this building and this House of Commons are run outwith the Chamber. I am sure that those who join you on that Commission in this Parliament will find exactly the same thing.

In congratulating you—and we do—may I make one final comment? The Leader of the Opposition referred to a coalition that is as yet undefined and a programme for government that appears to be as yet unwritten. Given that there is no absolute majority in this House, we are in for interesting times, so with my congratulations, Mr Speaker-Elect, I also wish you all the very best of luck.

3.18 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Many congratulations to you, Mr Speaker-Elect. I associate myself with the remarks that have been made so far, especially in the light of the outrages that took place in Manchester and London during the general election campaign. Those outrages were meant to divide us, and our response is to be united and to show love and respect as well as immense gratitude to those who came to our aid, who came to help those who were stricken and who keep us safe. We were attacked in this place a few months earlier and saw the death of Keith Palmer, and we are reminded in the most utterly visceral way of how safe our police and our security services keep us. We are immensely grateful to them.

Let me associate myself with the generous remarks made, correctly so, about the right hon. and learned Members for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) and for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), and with the remarks made by the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan), who did make one mistake—she said that there are 12 of us now—a 50% increase? [Interruption.] Thank you very much. [Interruption.] Come on—I’m here all week! [Interruption.] Actually, if you are quiet, I will take about 90 seconds.

Mr Speaker-Elect, congratulations on your re-election, which is of course utterly well deserved. You had the privilege of serving and presiding over one of the most interesting Parliaments in recent years. I think you are the first Speaker, certainly in any modern times, to preside over not one but now two balanced Parliaments. Between you and me, we really have to do something about the chaos and the absolute instability caused by the first Past-the-post electoral system. We have every right to expect, and every confidence, that you will continue with characteristic good grace and humour to preside over this place. You are known for your fairness and willingness to ensure that voices right across this place, from every corner of the United Kingdom and from every party, are heard.

I am sure that my colleagues returned here in greater numbers will look forward to speaking up very clearly for their constituents, particularly as we embark on the critical Brexit negotiations. After this recent divisive period, it will be our intention to seek unity in the national interest and common purpose across this House, and where we disagree with other parties, to seek to disagree well and with grace. We shall also speak out in favour of restored investment in schools, health and social care, and our police force, believing that a Parliament that does not invest in those public services is no servant of its people.

Once again, Mr Speaker-Elect, many congratulations from me and all of my colleagues.

3.21 pm

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I begin by congratulating you, Mr Speaker-Elect, on your re-election. I wish you very, very well indeed for the post that you now reoccupy. You have always been highly assiduous in ensuring that those in smaller parties, the regional parties, and those with little influence in this House have had their voice heard. While some things may have changed, it is good that you remain in place and that some things have not changed.

We look forward to this Parliament. I commiserate with all those from all parties who failed to be re-elected or who left us, and congratulate all Members who have joined us. I particularly pay tribute to those from Northern Ireland from other parties who have not been re-elected. I thank them for their service. We bear a heavy responsibility now in this House, along with the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), the Independent Member, as the only representatives from Northern Ireland, and we intend to carry out that responsibility very carefully indeed. We hope, of course, for the restoration as soon as possible of our devolved Assembly and Executive in Northern Ireland, where everybody can play a part in the government of Northern Ireland.

So, Mr Speaker-Elect, we have interesting times ahead. I look forward to playing a full role in the proceedings of this Parliament over the course of the next five years, and I wish you well in your office during that time.

3.23 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): May I begin by associating myself with the Prime Minister’s remarks and the remarks of others about the outrages in Manchester and in London? These sorts of horrible acts have absolutely no place in our democracy, and we all join together to condemn them.

You will forgive me, Mr Speaker-Elect, if I begin by welcoming my new hon. Friend the Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake). The good people of Ceredigion will be represented by a Plaid Cymru Member once again, and we look forward to his contributions.
On behalf of my hon. Friends, I would of course like to congratulate both you, Mr Speaker-Elect, and the Father of the House. I am sure that right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House look forward to the incisive, knowledgeable and supremely confident interventions of the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) during what is likely to be one of the most lively and important Parliaments of recent years—not least because the main matter before us, the UK's place in Europe, has been one of his central political concerns for so long.

I congratulate you, Mr Speaker-Elect, and hope that you will continue in your positive attitudes towards the working of this place, the modernisation of that working and the rights of Back Benchers, and in the very fair treatment that you have always provided to the smaller parties.

3.25 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): May I associate myself and my party with the comments made by the Prime Minister and others about the atrocities in Manchester and London Bridge? Our hearts go out to all those who were affected by them.

I am delighted to congratulate you, Mr Speaker-Elect, on your well-deserved re-election. When you were last re-elected in May 2015, you said that you would like to be immortalised on your tombstone as the Back Bencher's champion. As the Member of this House with perhaps the least chance of ever becoming a Front Bencher, I think I can say that you have that ambition safely in the bag. May I say that you are also a champion of the smaller parties in this House, for which we are very grateful, and a pioneer when it comes to the urgent issue of parliamentary reform? That, too, is much appreciated.

I congratulate the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) on becoming Father of the House, and I echo the well said words about the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) in her role as Mother of the House, and particularly her role in getting more women elected. I echo the comments of others about the pleasure that we have in seeing a record number of women represented in this place. At the same time, I note that 32% remains some way off 50%. Slow progress is better than no progress, but we still think there is some way to go. Who knows, perhaps we will not have to wait a full five years before having a chance to improve on 32% of the House being women and on our still shameful rating of 38th in the world when it comes to women in Parliament. I look forward to improvements in diversity right across the House.

ADJOURNMENT

Resolved, That this House do now adjourn until tomorrow at twenty minutes to Three o'clock. —(Guy Opperman.)

3.27 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Wednesday 14 June 2017
The House met at twenty minutes to Three o’clock
The Speaker-Elect took the Chair.

MESSAGE TO ATTEND THE LORDS COMMISSIONERS

Message to attend the Lords Commissioners delivered by the Gentleman Usher of the Black Rod.

The Speaker-Elect, with the House, went up to be presented to the Lords Commissioners for Her Majesty’s Royal Approbation; and returned.

Mr Speaker: I have to report that this House has been in the House of Lords where Her Majesty, by Her Royal Commissioners, has been pleased to approve the choice made of myself for the Office of Speaker. I have, in your name and on your behalf, made claim by humble petition to Her Majesty to all your ancient and undoubted rights and privileges, particularly to freedom of speech in debate, freedom from arrest, and freedom of access to Her Majesty whenever occasion shall require, and that the most favourable construction shall be put upon all proceedings. All these Her Majesty, by Her Commissioners, has been pleased to confirm in as ample a manner as they have ever been granted or confirmed by Herself or by any of Her Royal Predecessors.

My first duty to the House is to report my respectful acknowledgement and grateful thanks for the great honour you have conferred upon me in placing me in the Chair.

Members Sworn

Mr Speaker: I must now call on the Members of the House, according to the usual custom, to take the Oath of Allegiance or to affirm at the Table of the House, first doing so myself.

The Speaker first, alone, standing on the upper step of the Chair, made and subscribed the Affirmation required by law.

Mr Speaker: I should remind hon. Members that until they take the Oath or affirm, they must not sit during any debate or vote in any Division of the House, and will not receive any salary.

The arrangements for swearing in are set out in the Chamber information sheet, and a guidance note is also available from the Table and Vote Offices.

I propose to call first the Father of the House, then members of the Cabinet, then members of the shadow Cabinet, then all Privy Counsellors not included in those two groups, wherever they may be sitting, and then other Ministers. Thereafter, I shall call other hon. Members according to the Parliament of their first entry, or, for those with broken service, that of most recent entry. The first batch will be those who have been Members since before the 2010 general election. Thereafter I shall proceed to call Members by successive Parliaments. I do not expect to call new Members until tomorrow.

I propose to remain in the Chair until 5 pm today, and then to return at 5.30 pm and continue until 7.30 pm or later, as necessary. The House will sit again tomorrow at 9.30 am. I propose to be in the Chair for swearing in tomorrow from 9.30 am until 11.30 am, to return at 12 noon until 1.30 pm, and then again, if required, from 2.30 pm until 4.30 pm. I hope that by the end of tomorrow afternoon we will have made sufficient progress to enable all Members to swear in who wish to do so. However, if required, we will sit for swearing in at 2 pm on the day of the Queen’s Speech. [Interruption.] I am not in a position to divulge any further information on that matter. I hope that Members will come forward in an orderly manner.

I remind Members that the swearing in, as a proceeding of the House, is recorded by the television cameras, and that anything said or done by Members may appear on television or be picked up by microphones. It will assist the broadcasters if new Members state their name and constituency when they come to the Dispatch Box. Progress will depend, of course, on the number of Members wishing to swear in at any particular time. I advise Members to watch the Annunciators to establish progress, and to speak to their Whips.

In a moment, we will begin this process, as I indicated a few moments ago, with the Father of the House, but before we do so I want to make a very short statement.

All of us will be aware of, and horrified by, the tragic fire that engulfed the vast majority of an enormous block of flats in London in the early hours of this morning. Colleagues, it is not possible to treat of that matter in the way that we otherwise, I am sure, would wish to do in the Chamber today. The Government are very sensitive to the concern that exists on this subject and my very clear understanding is that arrangements are in hand for a meeting with the relevant Minister to take place within the precincts of the Palace of Westminster.
That meeting can be attended by colleagues gravely concerned about this matter, and no doubt questions can be put to the Minister and answers, such as he or she is able to give, can be provided. It will not be a proceeding of Parliament, and that would not be possible under our Standing Orders. Nor is it possible, after I have spoken, for anybody else to say anything. I just want, I am sure on behalf of each and every one of you in this Chamber, to offer our condolences to the families and friends of the victims of this unimaginable and horrific disaster. I want also, I am sure with your concurrence, to offer the warmest and most effusive thanks to our magnificent emergency services for coping as best they can in this horrendous situation. I hope colleagues will understand that we have to leave it there for now. Thank you.

Let us now begin, and we do so, appropriately, with the Father of the House, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe.

The following Members took and subscribed the Oath, or made and subscribed the Affirmation required by law:

Right honourable Kenneth Harry Clarke, for Rushcliffe
Right honourable Theresa Mary May, Maidenhead
Right honourable Damian Howard Green, Ashford
Right honourable Philip Hammond, Runnymede and Weybridge
Right honourable Amber Rudd, Hastings and Rye
Right honourable Justine Greening, Putney
Right honourable Jeremy Richard Streynsham Hunt, South West Surrey
Right honourable David Roy Lidington, Aylesbury
Right honourable Andrea Jacqueline Leadsom, South Northamptonshire
Right honourable Gavin Alexander Williamson, South Staffordshire
Right honourable Sajid Javid, Bromsgrove
Right honourable Priti Sushil Patel, Witham
Right honourable Christopher Stephen Grayling, Epsom and Ewell
Right honourable Gregory David Clark, Tunbridge Wells
Right honourable Sir Patrick Allen McLoughlin, Derbyshire Dales
Right honourable Elizabeth Mary Truss, South West Norfolk
Right honourable Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson, Uxbridge and South Ruislip
Right honourable James Peter Brokenshire, Old Bexley and Sidcup
Right honourable Brandon Kenneth Lewis, Great Yarmouth
Right honourable Michael Andrew Gove, Surrey Heath
Right honourable David Michael Davis, Haltemprice and Howden
Right honourable David Gordon Mundell, Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale
Right honourable Alun Hugh Cairns, Vale of Glamorgan
Right honourable David Michael Gauke, South West Hertfordshire
Right honourable Karen Anne Bradley, Staffordshire Moorlands
Right honourable Jeremy Paul Wright, Kenilworth and Southam
Right honourable Jeremy Bernard Corbyn, Islington North
Right honourable Nicholas Hugh Brown, Newcastle upon Tyne East
Right honourable Emily Thornberry, Islington South and Finsbury
Right honourable John Martin McDonnell, Hayes and Harlington
Right honourable Diane Julie Abbott, Hackney North and Stoke Newington
Valerie Carol Marian Vaz, Walsall South
Right honourable John Healey, Wentworth and Dearne
Andrew John Gwynne, Denton and Reddish
Ian Lavery, Wansbeck
Barry Strachan Gardiner, Brent North
Richard Burgon, Leeds East
Angela Rayner, Ashton-under-Lyne
Jon Hedley Trickett, Hemsworth
Andrew Joseph McDonald, Middlesbrough
Jonathan Michael Graham Ashworth, Leicester South
Catherine Jane Smith, Lancaster and Fleetwood
Kate Ofunne Osamor, Edmonton
Rebecca Long Bailey, Salford and Eccles
Barbara Mary Keeley, Worsley and Eccles South
Susan Mary Hayman, Workington
Deborah Angela Elspeth Marie Abrahams, Oldham East and Saddleworth
Christina Elizabeth Rees, Neath
Nia Rhiannon Griffith, Llanelli
Keir Starmer, Holborn and St Pancras
Peter Christopher Dowd, Bootle
Right honourable Margaret Mary Beckett, Derby South
Right honourable Frank Field, Birkenhead
Right honourable Cheryl Elise Kendall Gillan, Chesham and Amersham
Right honourable Sir Alan James Carter Duncan, Rutland and Melton
Right honourable David Anthony Evernett, Bexleyheath and Crayford
Right honourable John Alan Redwood, Wokingham
Paul Phillip Flynn, Newport West
Right honourable Matthew John David Hancock, West Suffolk
Right honourable Sir Desmond Angus Swayne, New Forest West
Right honourable Dame Caroline Alice Spelman, Meriden
Right honourable Anne Frances Milton, Guildford
Right honourable Sir Oliver Heald, North East Hertfordshire
Right honourable Dame Margaret Eve Hodge, Barking
Right honourable Sir Kevin John Barron, Rother Valley
Right honourable Robert Henry Halfon, Harlow
Right honourable John Francis Spellar, Warley
Right honourable Nigel Alexander Dodds, Belfast North
John Michael Howell, Henley
Angela Eagle, Wallasey
Helen Mary Jones, Warrington North
Fiona Claire Bruce, Congleton
Gloria De Piero, Ashfield
Right honourable Harriet Ruth Harman, Camberwell and Peckham
Heidi Alexander, Lewisham East
Catherine McKinnell, Newcastle upon Tyne North
Robert James Buckland, South Swindon
Paul Christopher Maynard, Blackpool North and Cleveleys
Eleanor Fulton Laing, Epping Forest
Karl Turner, Kingston upon Hull East
Ian Richard Kyle Paisley, North Antrim
Sir David Anthony Andrew Amess, Southend West
Thomas David Simpson, Upper Bann
Gavin James Robinson, Belfast East
Samuel Wilson, East Antrim
Michael John Gapes, Ilford South
Kevan David Jones, North Durham
John Robert Cryer, Leyton and Wanstead
Virendra Kumar Sharma, Ealing, Southall
Adrian Edward Bailey, West Bromwich West
Stephen Hepburn, Jarrow
Kelvin Peter Hopkins, Luton North
Nadine Vanessa Dorries, Mid Bedfordshire
Fabian Hamilton, Leeds North East
Right honourable Stephen Creswell Timms, East Ham
Lisa Eva Nandy, Wigan
Alan Patrick Vincent Whitehead, Southampton, Test
Clive Stanley Efford, Eltham
Ivan Lewis, Bury South
Sir David Anthony Crausby, Bolton North East
Michael Joseph Patrick Kane, Wythenshawe and Sale East
Anthony Joseph Lloyd, Rochdale
James Dolan Cunningham, Coventry South
Seema Malhotra, Feltham and Heston
Christopher John Bryant, Rhondda
Ian Richard Peregrine Liddell-Grainger, Bridgwater and West Somerset
Timothy James Farron, Westmorland and Lonsdale
Lilian Rachel Greenwood, Nottingham South
William Roffen Esterson, Sefton Central
Right honourable Norman Peter Lamb, North Norfolk
Right honourable Owen William Paterson, North Shropshire
Robin Caspar Walker, Worcester
Geraint Davies, Swansea West
Chloe Rebecca Smith, Norwich North
William David Wiggin, North Herefordshire
Nicklaus Thomas-Symonds, Torfaen
Ian Colin Lucas, Wrexham
Graham Eric Stringer, Blackley and Broughton
Gordon Marsden, Blackpool South
Caroline Fiona Ellen Nokes, Romsey and Southampton North
Right honourable George Iain Duncan Smith, Chingford and Woodford Green
Right honourable Esther Louise McVey, Tatton
Mark Robert Timothy Garnier, Wyre Forest
John Derek Twigg, Halton
John Mark Lancaster, Milton Keynes North
Crispin Jeremy Rupert Blunt, Reigate
Charles George Eustice, Camborne and Redruth
Sarah Louise Newton, Truro and Falmouth
Lucy Maria Powell, Manchester Central
James McMahon, Oldham West and Royton
Right honourable David Lindon Lammy, Tottenham
Madeleine Moon, Bridgend
Jessica Elizabeth Morden, Newport East
Margaret Olivia Hillier, Hackney South and Shoreditch
James Whiteside Gray, North Wiltshire
James Ian Mearns, Gateshead
Dominic Rennie Raab, Esher and Walton
Sir Alexander Paul Beresford, Mole Valley
Mark Phillip Hendrick, Preston
Laurence Anthony Robertson, Tewkesbury
Maria Eagle, Garston and Halewood
Anne Margaret Main, St Albans
Julie Elliott, Sunderland Central
Bridget Maeve Phillipson, Houghton and Sunderland South
Charles Ashley Rupert Walker, Broxbourne
Graham Stuart Brady, Altrincham and Sale West
Conor Burns, Bournemouth West
Kevin John Foster, Torbay
Stewart Hosie, Dundee East
Angus Brendan MacNeil, Na h-Eileanan an Iar
Andrew James Griffiths, Burton
Right honourable Yvette Cooper, Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford
Christopher Philip James Elmore, Ogmore
Marie Elizabeth Rimmer, St Helens South and Whiston
Yvonne Helen Fovargue, Makerfield
Naseem Akhtar Shah, Bradford West
Atta-Ur-Rehman Chishti, Gillingham and Rainham
Andrew William Murray, South West Wiltshire
Right honourable John Flashby Lawrence Whittingdale, Maldon
Simon James Hoare, North Dorset
Richard Haines Burden, Birmingham, Northfield
Louise Joyce Ellman, Liverpool, Riverside
Wayne David, Caerphilly
Matthew Robert Warman, Boston and Skegness
Caroline Elizabeth Johnson, Sleaford and North Hykeham
Vernon Coaker, Gedling
Philip Wilson, Sedgefield
Matthew Toby Perkins, Chesterfield
Alison McGovern, Wirral South
Emma Louise Lewell-Buck, South Shields
Catherine Malloy Hollern, Blackburn
Khalid Mahmood, Birmingham, Perry Barr
Angela Christine Smith, Penistone and Stocksbridge
Right honourable Patrick Bosco McFadden, Wolverhampton South East
Christopher Paul Farrelly, Newcastle-under-Lyme
Grahame Mark Morris, Easington
Joanna Meriel Stevens, Cardiff Central
James Morris, Halesowen and Rowley Regis
Michael Mark Prisk, Hertford and Stortford
Thangam Elizabeth Rachel Debbonaire, Bristol West
Julie Elizabeth Cooper, Burnley
Gordon Leonard Henderson, Sittingbourne and Sheppey
Neil Parish, Tiverton and Honiton
Rebecca Faye Pow, Taunton Deane
Scott Leslie Mann, North Cornwall
Mian Faisal Rashid, Warrington South
Stephen Twigg, Liverpool, West Derby
Right honourable Edward Samuel Miliband, Doncaster North
Caroline Julia Dinenage, Gosport
Lyn Carol Brown, West Ham
Robert Edward Jenrick, Newark
Michael James Tomlinson, Mid Dorset and North Poole
Clive James Charles Betts, Sheffield South East
Peter Wishart, Perth and North Perthshire
Christopher Michael Leslie, Nottingham East
Nigel John Mills, Amber Valley
Sylvia Eileen Hermon, North Down
Sheryll Murray, South East Cornwall
Damian Patrick George Hinds, East Hampshire
Jonathan Simon Djanogly, Huntingdon
Sir Edward Julian Egerton Leigh, Gainsborough
John Mann, Bassetlaw
David Thomas Morris, Morecambe and Lunesdale
James Jacob Gilchrist Berry, Rossendale and Darwen
Andrew Edmund Armstrong Selous, South West Bedfordshire
William Peter Wragg, Hazel Grove
Stuart James Andrew, Pudsey
Robert Alexander Stewart, Beckenham
Chi Susan Onwurah, Newcastle upon Tyne Central
Nicholas Desmond John Smith, Blaenau Gwent
Rosena Chantelle Allin-Khan, Tooting
Right honourable Mark Gino Francois, Rayleigh and Wickford
Sharon Hodgson, Washington and Sunderland West
Peter Heaton-Jones, North Devon
Jonathan Cruddas, Dagenham and Rainham
John Charles Baron, Basildon and Billericay
Imran Hussain, Bradford East
Mr Speaker: Order. The sitting is suspended until 6 pm. The bells will be rung five minutes before the sitting resumes. Any Member elected up to and including the 2015 Parliament—but by definition not including the 2017 Parliament—may join the queue.

5.33 pm
Sitting suspended.

6 pm
On resuming—

The following Members took and subscribed the Oath, or made and subscribed the Affirmation required by law:
Heather Kay Wheeler, for South Derbyshire
Alberto Castrenze Costa, South Leicestershire
Victoria Mary Boswell Prentis, Banbury
Nigel Paul Huddleston, Mid Worcestershire
Margaret Ann Throup, Erewash
Maria Colette Caulfield, Lewes
Paul Stuart Scully, Sutton and Cheam
Kevin Paul Hollinrake, Thirsk and Malton
Craig Paul Tracey, North Warwickshire
Anne-Marie Belinda Trevelyan, Berwick-upon-Tweed
Kelly Jane Tolhurst, Rochester and Strood
Miriam Jane Alice Davies, Eastleigh
Caroline Lucas, Brighton, Pavilion
Mark Julian Francis Pawsey, Rugby
David Thomas Charles Davies, Monmouth
Geoffrey Robert Clifton-Brown, The Cotswolds
Marcus John Hudson Fysh, Yeovil
John McNally, Falkirk
Wendy Morton, Aldridge-Brownhills
Mary Helen Creagh, Wakefield
Andrew Hanson Jones, Harrogate and Knaresborough
Judith Mary Cummins, Bradford South
Graham Charles Stuart, Beverley and Holderness
Victoria Foxcroft, Lewisham, Deptford
Christopher James Green, Bolton West
Jennifer Chapman, Darlington
Paul Christopher Blomfield, Sheffield Central
Nicholas Dakin, Scunthorpe
John Eugene Joseph Dromey, Birmingham, Erdington
Karín Marguerite Smyth, Bristol South
Geoffrey Robinson, Coventry North West
Martyn Day, Linlithgow and East Falkirk
Philippa Whitford, Central Ayrshire
Mhairi Black, Paisley and Renfrewshire South
Angela Crawley, Lanark and Hamilton East
Douglas Chapman, Dunfermline and West Fife
Alan Brown, Kilmarnock and Loudoun
Antoinette Geraldine Sandbach, Eddisbury
Johnny Mercer, Plymouth, Moor View
Helen Olivia Bicknell Whately, Faversham and Mid Kent
Jacqueline Doyle-Price, Thurrock
Mark Richard Tami, Alyn and Deeside
Drew Hendry, Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey
Joanna Catherine Cherry, Edinburgh South West
Gavin Andrew Stuart Newlands, Paisley and Renfrewshire North
Gillian Furniss, Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough
Colleen Margaret Fletcher, Coventry North East
Patricia Gibson, North Ayrshire and Arran
Martin John Docherty-Hughes, West Dunbartonshire
Christian John Patrick Matheson, City of Chester
Martin John Vickers, Cleethorpes
Julian Charles Sturdy, York Outer
Patrick John Grady, Glasgow North
Ronald Jack Cowan, Inverclyde
Marion Fellows, Motherwell and Wishaw
Neil Gray, Airdrie and Shotts
Diana Ruth Johnson, Kingston upon Hull North
Rachael Maskell, York Central
Carol Frances Monaghan, Glasgow North West
Alison Emily Thewliis, Glasgow Central
Right honourable Liam Dominic Byrne, Birmingham, Hodge Hill
Jessica Rose Phillips, Birmingham, Yardley
Shabana Mahmood, Birmingham, Ladywood
Rushanara Ali, Bethnal Green and Bow
Stephen John Doughty, Cardiff South and Penarth
Andrew Richard Rosindell, Romford
Lucy Allan, Telford
Sir Henry Campbell Bellingham, North West Norfolk
Margaret Greenwood, Wirral West
Fiona Oluyinka Onasanya, Peterborough
Dawn Petula Butler, Brent Central
Brendan O’Hara, Argyll and Bute
Stewart McDonald, Glasgow South
Hannah Mary Bardell, Livingston
Kirsty Ann Blackman, Aberdeen North
Deidre Leanne Brock, Edinburgh North and Leith
Stephen Patrick Gethins, North East Fife
Christopher Murray Alexander Law, Dundee West
Mary Theresa Glindon, North Tyneside
Alexander Cunningham, Stockton North
Harriett Mary Morison Baldwin, West Worcestershire
Daniel Leonard James Poulter, Central Suffolk and North Ipswich
Edward John Comport Argar, Charnwood
James Roger Cartidge, South Suffolk
Justin Paul Tomlinson, North Swindon
Robert James MacGillivray Neill, Bromley and Chislehurst
Susan Elan Jones, Clwyd South
Gerald Jones, Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney
Gareth Alan Johnson, Dartford
Craig Whittaker, Calder Valley
Lucy Claire Frazer, South East Cambridgeshire
Ian Austin, Dudley North
Chuka Harrison Umunna, Streatham
Resolved, That this House do now adjourn.—(Heather Wheeler.)

7.31 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Thursday 15 June 2017

The House met at half-past Nine o’clock

PRAYERS

Mr Speaker in the Chair

Members Sworn

Mr Speaker: I remind the House that I expect to be in the Chair today until about 11.30 am, to return at 12 noon until 1.30 pm, and then, if required, to be here from 2.30 pm to 4.30 pm. If required, we will sit for swearing in at 2 pm on the day of the Queen’s Speech. Will Members wishing to take their seats please come to the Table?

The following Members took and subscribed the Oath, or made and subscribed the Affirmation required by law:

Right honourable Ann Clwyd, for Cynon Valley
Right honourable Liam Fox, North Somerset
Nigel Martin Evans, Ribble Valley
Kevin Denis Brennan, Cardiff West
Christopher Shaun Ruane, Vale of Clwyd
Stephen William Hammond, Wimbledon
Clive Anthony Lewis, Norwich South
Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi, Slough
Mohammed Afzal Khan, Manchester, Gorton
Luke Pollard, Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport
Tracy Lynn Brabin, Batley and Spen
Alexander James Jorden Norris, Nottingham North
Richard Irwin Harrington, Watford
Right honourable Hilary James Benn, Leeds Central
Alister William Jack, Dumfries and Galloway
Kirstene Janette Hair, Angus
Andrew Bowie, West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine
William Grant, Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock
Colin James Clark, Gordon
Paul Masterton, East Renfrewshire
Christopher Robert Chope, Christchurch
Jeremy John Elton Lefroy, Stafford
Eleanor Patricia Smith, Wolverhampton South West
Marsha Chantol De Cordova, Battersea
Matthew Raymond Western, Warwick and Leamington
Wera Benedicta Hobhouse, Bath
Joanne Marie Platt, Leigh
Antonia Louise Antoniazzi, Gower
Stephen Anthony Christopher Lloyd, Eastbourne
Jamie Stone, Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross
Penelope Mary Mordaunt, Portsmouth North
Laura Smith, Crewe and Nantwich
Michael Lee Amesbury, Weaver Vale
Christine Anne Jardine, Edinburgh West

David Melvyn Linden, Glasgow East
Liz Saville Roberts, Dwyfor Meirionnydd
Hywel Williams, Arfon
Ben Morgan Lake, Ceredigion
David Jonathan Edwards, Carmarthen East and Dinefwr
Alexander Gordon Martin, Ipswich
Anneliese Jane Dodds, Oxford East
Mohammad Yasin, Bedford
Alexander David Sobel, Leeds North West
Emma Ann Hardy, Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle
Thelma Doris Walker, Colne Valley
William Paul Girvan, South Antrim
Right honourable Mark Christopher Field, Cities of London and Westminster
Rishi Sunak, Richmond (Yorks)
Ranil Malcolm Jayawardena, North East Hampshire
Marcus Charles Jones, Nuneaton
Stephen James Metcalfe, South Basildon and East Thurrock
Barry John Sheerman, Huddersfield
Darren Paul Jones, Bristol North West
Helen Elizabeth Hayes, Dulwich and West Norwood
George Michael Edward Hollingbery, Meon Valley
Victoria Atkins, Louth and Horncastle
John Philip Glen, Salisbury
Rosemary Elizabeth Cooper, West Lancashire
Michael Robert Hill, Hartlepool
Nigel Adams, Selby and Ainsty
John Lamont, Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk
Douglas Ross, Moray
Luke Patrick Graham, Ochil and South Perthshire
Stephen Charles Kerr, Stirling
Ross Thomson, Aberdeen South
David James Duguid, Banff and Buchan
Alec Shelbrooke, Elmet and Rothwell
David John Warburton, Somerton and Frome
Right honourable Sir Nicholas Soames, Mid Sussex
Julian Carlton Knight, Solihull
Stephen Anthony McPartland, Stevenage
Stephen Barclay, North East Cambridgeshire
Mark Andrew Pritchard, The Wrekin
Charalambos Charalambous, Enfield, Southgate
Helen Catherine Goodman, Bishop Auckland
Ruth Stephanie Nicole George, High Peak
Elizabeth Anne McInnes, Heywood and Middleton
Thomas Georg John Tugendhat, Tonbridge and Malling
Royston Matthew Smith, Southampton, Itchen
Justin Piers Richard Madders, Ellesmere Port and Neston
Samuel Phillip Gyimah, East Surrey
Matthew Thomas Pennycook, Greenwich and Woolwich
Oliver James Dowden, Hertsmere
Luke Anthony Hall, Thornbury and Yate
Andrea Marie Jenkyns, Morley and Outwood
Giacomo Lopresti, Filton and Bradley Stoke
Lauri Pidcock, North West Durham
Mr Speaker: The sitting will be suspended until 11.30 am. The bells will be rung five minutes before the sitting resumes.

11.5 am

Sitting suspended.

11.30 am

On resuming—

The following Members took and subscribed the Oath, or made and subscribed the Affirmation required by law:

Joseph Edmund Johnson, for Orpington
Amanda Anne Milling, Cannock Chase
Steven John Baker, Wycombe
Robert William Henry Seely, Isle of Wight
Charles Geoffrey Cox, Torridge and West Devon
Alexander Chalk, Cheltenham
James Spencer Cleverly, Braintree
Seema Louise Ghiassi Kennedy, South Ribble
Damian Noel Thomas Collins, Folkestone and Hythe
Right honourable Michael Penning, Hemel Hempstead
Stephen James Morgan, Portsmouth South
Nadhim Zahawi, Stratford-on-Avon
Katherine Anne Green, Stretford and Urmston
John David Penrose, Weston-super-Mare
Anna Rhiannon McMorrin, Cardiff North
Preet Gill, Birmingham, Edgbaston
Rupa Asha Huq, Ealing Central and Acton
Elizabeth Louise Kendall, Leicester West
John Timothy Grogan, Keighley
Lesley Margaret Langan Laird, Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath
Gerard Killen, Rutherglen and Hamilton West
Martin David Whitfield, East Lothian
Danielle Rowley, Midlothian
Hugh Lawrence Gaffney, Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill
Paul John Sweeney, Glasgow North East
Benjamin David Bradley, Mansfield
Ruth Margaret Cadbury, Brentford and Isleworth
James Richard Frith, Bury North
Stella Judith Creasy, Walthamstow
Mathew Richard Allen Rodda, Reading East
David Drew, Stroud
Jared O’Mara, Sheffield, Hallam
Steven Mark Ward Reed, Croydon North
Olukemi Badenoch, Saffron Walden
Layla Michelle Moran, Oxford West and Abingdon
Daniel Robert Kawczynski, Shrewsbury and Atcham
Carolyn Harris, Swansea East
Owen Smith, Pontypridd
Peter William Bone, Wellingborough
James Fitzpatrick, Poplar and Limehouse
Karen Elizabeth Lee, Lincoln
Sue-Ellen Cassiana Fernandes, Fareham

Daniel Joseph Carden, Liverpool, Walton
Louise Haigh, Sheffield, Heeley
Eleanor Claire Reeves, Lewisham West and Penge
Stephanie Louise Peacock, Barnsley East
Robert Alexander Courts, Witney
Kwasi Alfred Addo Kwarteng, Spelthorne
Christopher Laurie Malthouse, North West Hampshire
Julian Richard Smith, Skipton and Ripon
Frank Zacharias Robin Goldsmith, Richmond Park
Rachel Jane Reeves, Leeds West
Mary Elizabeth Twist, Blaydon
Robert Carol Blackman-Woods, City of Durham
Alan Mak, Havant
Right honourable Tobias Martin Ellwood, Bournemouth East
Simon Anthony Hart, Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire
Christopher James Skidmore, Kingswood
Roderick James Nugent Stewart, Penrith and The Border
Christopher Williamson, Derby North
Leo Docherty, Aldershot
Abimbola Afolami, Hitchin and Harpenden
Emma Little Pengelly, Belfast South
Neil John O’Brien, Harborough
Michael Alex Burghart, Brentwood and Ongar
Jack Edgar Breerton, Stoke-on-Trent South
Michael Jon Wood, Dudley South
Craig Mackinlay, South Thanet
Edward Glyn Davies, Montgomeryshire
Rachel Helen Maclean, Redditch
Victoria Grace Ford, Chelmsford
Julia Louise Dockerrill, Hornchurch and Upminster
Simon Richard Clarke, Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland
Gillian Keegan, Chichester
Lee Benjamin Rowley, North East Derbyshire
Andrew Iain Lewer, Northampton South
Alok Kumar Sharma, Reading West
Robert Andrew Raymond Symms, Poole
Ruth Lauren Smeeth, Stoke-on-Trent North
Wesley Paul William Streeting, Ilford North
Peter John Kyle, Hove
Gareth Craig Snell, Stoke-on-Trent Central
Edmund Francis Hughes, Walsall North
Conor Patrick McGinn, St Helens North
Iain Aitken Stewart, Milton Keynes South
Thomas Christopher John Pursglove, Corby
Holly Jamie Lynch, Halifax
Jonathan Neil Reynolds, Stalybridge and Hyde
Trudy Lynne Harrison, Copeland
Giles Francis Watling, Clacton
Damien Moore, Southport
William James Quince, Colchester
Mr Speaker: Order. The sitting is suspended until 2 pm. We will resume then and sit no later than 3 pm, and five minutes before the intended resumption at 2 pm the bells will ring.

12.41 pm
Sitting suspended.

2 pm
On resuming—

The following Members took and subscribed the Oath, or made and subscribed the Affirmation required by law:
Roger Duncan Godsiff, for Birmingham, Hall Green
Daniel Zeichner, Cambridge
Teresa Pearce, Erith and Thamesmead
Henry Edward Millar Smith, Crawley
Catherine Elizabeth West, Hornsey and Wood Green
Phillip James Lee, Bracknell
Neil Coyle, Bermondsey and Old Southwark
Gareth Thomas, Harrow West
Right honourable Melvyn John Stride, Central Devon
Right honourable Grant Shapps, Welwyn Hatfield
Sarah Ann Jones, Croydon Central
Right honourable Joan Marie Ryan, Enfield North
Shailesh Lakhman Vara, North West Cambridgeshire
George William Freeman, Mid Norfolk
Right honourable Andrew Mitchell, Sutton Coldfield
Luciana Clare Berger, Liverpool, Wavertree
Andrew Francis Slaughter, Hammersmith
Rosemary Clare Duffield, Canterbury
Nusrat Munir Ghani, Wealden
Heidi-Suzanne Allen, South Cambridgeshire
Chris Ian Brian Mynott Philp, Croydon South
Karen Patricia Buck, Westminster North
Lloyd Russell-Moyle, Brighton, Kemptown
Nicholas Richard Hurd, Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner

ADJOURNMENT

Resolved, That this House do now adjourn.—(Nigel Adams.)

3.13 pm
House adjourned.
House of Commons

Wednesday 21 June 2017

The House met at twenty-five minutes past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

MESSAGE TO ATTEND HER MAJESTY

Message to attend Her Majesty delivered by the Gentleman Usher of the Black Rod.

The Speaker, with the House, went up to attend Her Majesty; on their return, the Speaker suspended the sitting.

Members Sworn

1.45 pm

The following Members took and subscribed the Oath, or made and subscribed the Affirmation required by law:

- Right honourable Sir Michael Fallon, for Sevenoaks
- Right honourable Keith Robert Simpson, Broadland
- Gary Nicholas Streeter, South West Devon
- Stephen Daniel Double, St Austell and Newquay
- Right honourable Gregory William Hands, Chelsea and Fulham
- Pauline Elizabeth Latham, Mid Derbyshire
- Matthew James Offord, Hendon
- Gavin Shuker, Luton South
- Paula Michelle Sherriff, Dewsbury
- Melanie Onn, Great Grimsby
- Stephen James McCabe, Birmingham, Selly Oak
- Helen Grant, Maidstone and The Weald
- Right honourable Sir Michael Fallon, for Sevenoaks
- Right honourable Keith Robert Simpson, Broadland
- Gary Nicholas Streeter, South West Devon
- Stephen Daniel Double, St Austell and Newquay
- Right honourable Gregory William Hands, Chelsea and Fulham
- Pauline Elizabeth Latham, Mid Derbyshire
- Matthew James Offord, Hendon
- Gavin Shuker, Luton South
- Paula Michelle Sherriff, Dewsbury
- Melanie Onn, Great Grimsby
- Stephen James McCabe, Birmingham, Selly Oak
- Helen Grant, Maidstone and The Weald

2.11 pm

Sitting suspended.

Speaker’s Statement

2.30 pm

Mr Speaker: Colleagues, let us begin by standing for a minute of silence as we remember the terrible events that have occurred in Manchester, and at London Bridge, Grenfell Tower and Finsbury Park.

The House observed a minute’s silence.

Mr Speaker: The House has directed the Speaker to make a statement at the beginning of each Session about the duties and responsibilities of Members of this House.

I begin by reminding Members of our duty to observe the code of conduct agreed by the House, and to behave with civility and fairness in all their dealings. In our proceedings, every Member should be heard courteously, whatever their views. The House asserts its privilege of freedom of speech so that we can represent our constituents without fear or favour. We must exercise that privilege responsibly. It applies only to our work in this House; as private individuals we are equal under the law with those whom we represent.

Parliament must be open to those whom it represents, and we must continue to make our constituents welcome here. The security of this building and of those who work and visit here depends upon all of us. We have a duty to be vigilant, and to assist those whose job it is to maintain this place as a safe place to work. I ask you all to wear your passes wherever you are on the parliamentary estate, and I remind you that you should not use your mobile phones or any other device to film or take photographs in or around the Chamber.

Before moving to the first business of the new Parliament, I would like to express my very best wishes for the forthcoming Session to all Members—both new and returning—and all those who work here. I also send best wishes to those former Members not returned at the election, and thank them for their service to this House and to our democratic process—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] Finally, I remind Members that the coat of arms of our departed friend and colleague, Jo Cox, will be unveiled this Saturday, 24 June. If you would like to attend and have not yet so indicated, please get in touch with my office.
OUTLAWS BILL

A Bill for the more effectual preventing Clandestine Outlawries was read the First time, and ordered to be read a Second time.

Deputy Speakers

Ordered,

That the Speaker may nominate no more than three Members as Deputy Speakers to serve until the House has elected Deputy Speakers in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 2A; and that the Members so nominated shall exercise all the powers vested in the Chairman of Ways and Means as Deputy Speaker.—(Andrea Leadsom.)

Queen’s Speech

Mr Speaker: I have to acquaint the House, that this House has this day attended Her Majesty in the House of Peers, and that Her Majesty was pleased to make a most gracious speech from the Throne to both Houses of Parliament, of which I have, for greater accuracy, obtained a copy. I shall direct that the terms of the speech be printed in the Votes and Proceedings. Copies are available in the Vote Office.

The Gracious Speech was as follows:

My Lords and Members of the House of Commons

My Government’s priority is to secure the best possible deal as the country leaves the European Union. My Ministers are committed to working with Parliament, the devolved administrations, business and others to build the widest possible consensus on the country’s future outside the European Union.

A bill will be introduced to repeal the European Communities Act and provide certainty for individuals and businesses. This will be complemented by legislation to ensure that the United Kingdom makes a success of Brexit, establishing new national policies on immigration, international sanctions, nuclear safeguards, agriculture, and fisheries.

My Government will seek to maintain a deep and special partnership with European allies and to forge new trading relationships across the globe. New bills on trade and customs will help to implement an independent trade policy, and support will be given to help British businesses export to markets around the world.

My Ministers will strengthen the economy so that it supports the creation of jobs and generates the tax revenues needed to invest in the National Health Service, schools, and other public services.

My Government will continue to improve the public finances, while keeping taxes low. It will spread prosperity and opportunity across the country through a new modern, industrial strategy.

My Government will work to attract investment in infrastructure to support economic growth. Legislation will be introduced to ensure the United Kingdom remains a world leader in new industries, including electric cars and commercial satellites. A new bill will also be brought forward to deliver the next phase of high-speed rail.

My Government will continue to work to ensure that every child has the opportunity to attend a good school and that all schools are fairly funded. My Ministers will work to ensure people have the skills they need for the high-skilled, high-wage jobs of the future, including through a major reform of technical education.

The National Living Wage will be increased so that people who are on the lowest pay benefit from the same improvements in earnings as higher paid workers. My Ministers will seek to enhance rights and protections in the modern workplace.

My Government will make further progress to tackle the gender pay gap and discrimination against people on the basis of their race, faith, gender, disability or sexual orientation.

Legislation will be brought forward to protect the victims of domestic violence and abuse.
My Government will reform mental health legislation and ensure that mental health is prioritised in the National Health Service in England.

Proposals will be brought forward to ban unfair tenant fees, promote fairness and transparency in the housing market, and help ensure more homes are built.

My Ministers will work to improve social care and will bring forward proposals for consultation.

My Government will ensure fairer markets for consumers, this will include bringing forward measures to help tackle unfair practices in the energy market to help reduce energy bills.

A priority will be to build a more united country, strengthening the social, economic and cultural bonds between England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

My Government will work in cooperation with the devolved administrations and it will work with all of the parties in Northern Ireland to support the return of devolved government.

A new law will ensure that the United Kingdom retains its world-class regime protecting personal data, and proposals for a new digital charter will be brought forward to ensure that the United Kingdom is the safest place to be online.

Legislation will also be introduced to modernise the courts system and to help reduce motor insurance premiums.

My Government will initiate a full public inquiry into the tragic fire at Grenfell Tower to ascertain the causes, and ensure that the appropriate lessons are learnt.

To support victims, my Government will take forward measures to introduce an independent public advocate, who will act for bereaved families after a public disaster and support them at public inquests.

My Ministers will continue to invest in our gallant Armed Forces, meeting the NATO commitment to spend at least two per cent of national income on defence, and delivering on the Armed Forces Covenant across the United Kingdom.

My Government will bring forward proposals to ensure that critical national infrastructure is protected to safeguard national security.

A commission for countering extremism will be established to support the Government in stamping out extremist ideology in all its forms, both across society and on the internet, so it is denied a safe space to spread.

In the light of the terrorist attacks in Manchester and London, my Government’s counter-terrorism strategy will be reviewed to ensure that the police and security services have all the powers they need, and that the length of custodial sentences for terrorism-related offences are sufficient to keep the population safe.

My Ministers will ensure that the United Kingdom’s leading role on the world stage is maintained and enhanced as it leaves the European Union.

As a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, committed to spending zero point seven per cent of national income on international development, my Government will continue to drive international efforts that increase global security and project British values around the world.

My Government will work to find sustainable political solutions to conflicts across the Middle East. It will work to tackle the threat of terrorism at source by continuing the United Kingdom’s leading role in international military action to destroy Daesh in Iraq and Syria. It will also lead efforts to reform the international system to improve the United Kingdom’s ability to tackle mass migration, alleviate poverty, and end modern slavery.

My Government will continue to support international action against climate change, including the implementation of the Paris Agreement.

Prince Philip and I look forward to welcoming Their Majesties King Felipe and Queen Letizia of Spain on a State Visit in July.

My Government will host the Commonwealth Summit in April of next year to cement its relevance to this, and future generations.

Members of the House of Commons
Estimates for the public services will be laid before you.

My Lords and Members of the House of Commons
Other measures will be laid before you.

I pray that the blessing of Almighty God may rest upon your counsels.
Debate on the Address

[1st Day]

Mr Speaker: Before I call the mover and seconder, I want to announce the proposed pattern of debate during the remaining days on the Loyal Address: Thursday 22 June—housing and social security; Monday 26 June—Brexit and foreign affairs; Tuesday 27 June—education and local services; Wednesday 28 June—health, social care and security; Thursday 29 June—economy and jobs.

2.36 pm

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): I beg to move,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, as follows:

Most Gracious Sovereign,

We, Your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.

It is an honour to have been asked to move the Loyal Address, but it is first important to recognise that we meet in the shadow of some of the most terrible tragedies of modern times. Nothing we say can undo what has happened in north Kensington or, for that matter, on the streets of London or Manchester. What we in this House can do is to join our sovereign in leading the nation in mourning the dead, caring for the injured and the bereaved, and uniting in an absolute determination to prevent any such tragedies and outrages from happening again.

Our tone in this debate and debates in the coming days and weeks must reflect the nation's horror and sadness at such awful tragedies. The country expects our debates and arguments to be robust, but there is room for consensus too. At times like this, we should reflect on Jo Cox's words about there being more that unites us than divides us.

I am not the first Richard Benyon to have been asked to move the Loyal Address. My great-great-grandfather was the MP for Berkshire between 1860 and 1876. Although he was a great man in many ways, there is no record of him ever troubling the House of Commons. The only other Member for Newbury to have moved the Loyal Address was William Mount in 1905. A year later, he lost his seat, due to a combination of negative campaigning by the Liberal candidate—[Hon. Members: "Shame!"] I know that that is hard to imagine in this day and age—and, crucially, his not being a champion of free trade, the latter a fact not lost on a particular champion of free trade: his great-grandson, David Cameron.

The area I now represent is by all measures a prosperous area—someone once said to me that deprivation in West Berkshire is when Waitrose runs out of balsamic vinegar; they were totally wrong—but we all know, in all our constituencies, areas of need, although not on the scale of deprivation and poverty that I witnessed in my years as a soldier in Belfast in my early 20s. That memory still has a great impact on my political beliefs today. In all constituencies there are areas of humanity that have missed out on the prosperity of the fifth largest economy in the world. A rising tide of economic prosperity should lift all boats in the harbour, but that is not happening everywhere. This Queen's Speech has at its heart the words of the Prime Minister on the steps of No. 10 a year ago, when she spoke of social justice and equality of opportunity.

The part of England that I represent combines so much of what makes me positive about Britain's future. Sitting alongside some of the most breathtaking countryside exists an economy of extraordinary excitement and dynamism. In 1985, a small group of people started working on mobile telecommunications in a one-room office above a curry restaurant in Newbury. That company, Vodafone—still based in Newbury—employs 108,000 people worldwide and is worth £59 billion. West Berkshire remains one of the most exciting places to start or grow a business. It attracts companies and investment from around the world, and it is a model for the kind of outward-looking, engaged, modern society that works for Britain today.

Businesses are not just entities or institutions separate from real lives; they are first and foremost about the people who work in them and those families who in turn depend on them. As we tackle the big challenge of this Parliament, let us remember what really matters to our constituents. Too often, this place, and those who report on it, are obsessed with the politics of Brexit; our constituents are concerned with the realities of Brexit. That means the reality for the companies in West Berkshire, and in all our constituencies, that are part of a new generation of creative entrepreneurs in manufacturing, tech, life sciences and the service sector. They need to be able to sell their goods, services and expertise in Europe and around the world, and they need to be able to recruit the best people to keep them competitive.
Like the majority in my constituency, I voted to remain in the EU, but, like the majority of people I represent and most people in this House, I recognise the result of the referendum.

I want to be positive about the future. I want to look back at this time and say that I was part of a Parliament that rose to the challenge and, with a great unity of purpose, helped to ensure that Britain successfully reset its relationship with its European neighbours, successfully negotiated access to key markets for its businesses and, while controlling immigration, still allowed people to come to Britain to study and to contribute to our economy and our society. The referendum was in part about parliamentary sovereignty, so we in Parliament can reflect that by immersing ourselves in the detail of what we can all agree is a great national endeavour.

Let our eyes be not only on Europe. As the United States takes a particular route on the environment and climate change, we should grasp the opportunity to ensure that the UK becomes the leader in clean tech, green innovation and resource efficiency. I welcome, for example, legislation announced in this speech that will ensure that we build the cars of the future, maintain our strength in motor manufacturing and make our towns and cities better places in which to live and work.

At times, the problems we face seem massive and there are times when we might let ourselves think that it is all too difficult. Just when all seems bleak, we as Members of Parliament have a means of keeping ourselves grounded in the realities of life. In our constituencies, we can visit a charity, a school or a business that inspires us. We can have a quiet conversation, as I had recently, with a veteran coping with life-changing injuries. These experiences lift our eyes to the extraordinary humanity and strength that exists in this country, never more so than in these most sombre times.

It is the quiet but determined doers—whether they are individuals, in our public services, in industry or in voluntary organisations—whom we meet almost daily who make me optimistic for Britain’s future. Twenty-seven voluntary organisations—whom we meet almost daily—announce access to key markets for its businesses and, while controlling immigration, still allowed people to come to Britain to study and to contribute to our economy and our society. The referendum was in part about parliamentary sovereignty, so we in Parliament can reflect that by immersing ourselves in the detail of what we can all agree is a great national endeavour.

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It is the quiet but determined doers—whether they are individuals, in our public services, in industry or in voluntary organisations—whom we meet almost daily who make me optimistic for Britain’s future. Twenty-seven years ago, John Major spoke of his desire to build a nation at ease with itself. It was a phrase that resonated with me. A nation at ease with itself would present its population with the same opportunities whatever part of the country or whatever background they came from. Such a society would enjoy greater prosperity, its citizens would enjoy longer and more satisfied lives, and inequality between the richest and the poorest would be narrowing. By every independently produced statistic, we live at, or at the threshold of, such a time.

Those measured indicators are steadily, if too slowly, being achieved, but none of us can claim that our United Kingdom is a nation at ease with itself. Last year’s referendum and the recent election have shown that divisions remain wide and potentially harmful. The Gracious Speech holds firm to the Prime Minister’s deeply held belief in having an economy and society that work for everyone. These are values that matter to her, they matter to me and I know that they matter to every single Member of this House.

Those we represent deserve to live in a country at ease with itself and with the world. I commend the motion to the House.
One of my recent predecessors, Sir Humphrey Atkins, was Chief Whip, then Northern Ireland Secretary in turbulent times.

These days, my constituency is very much a place of business, with a range of enterprises, from small start-ups to global companies such as Shepperton Studios and BP Spelthorne has a thriving business community, which of course is greatly helped by our location, with excellent links to London and Heathrow airport. There is also a great innovative spirit in my constituency; as recently as 2015, a study concluded that Staines-upon-Thames was the No.1 town in the country in which to start a new business, with three times as many start-ups every year as the UK average.

Despite changes in the way we do business and the technology that we use, the traditions of the House have withstood the onslaught of time. You, Mr Speaker, uphold the great traditions of this House and our parliamentary system. These institutions have evolved, and they remain—I wondered how I could put this; I was at a loss for words and was thinking of a phrase. Of course: “strong and stable”.

I am delighted that the Government’s programme is ambitious. We have Brexit, and when we look at the great repeal Bill, we have to consider what a great and significant piece of legislation it will be. The original European Communities Act was passed in 1972. Feelings were so strong at that time that it took 300 hours of parliamentary debate before the Bill was passed. Feelings are no less strong today, because the future of the country is at stake. The complexities of the great repeal Bill will be debated extensively in the next two years. It will be a great landmark in the parliamentary and constitutional history of this country. A new Immigration Bill will seek, rightly, to reduce migration to sustainable levels. Once passed, both these Acts will shape Britain very considerably in the years ahead.

In conclusion, Mr Speaker—[HON. MEMBERS: “More!”]—the last few months have been, by any standards, horrific. I never thought I would live to see barriers erected on Westminster bridge. The attacks on innocent people—even within the parliamentary estate or, most recently, at the Finsbury Park mosque—have rightly disturbed the overwhelming majority of decent people in this country. Neither did I think that I would see a tower, with 500 people sleeping in their homes, go up in flames. The appalling scenes of devastation in west London last week can never be forgotten.

We can talk of tradition and history, but at a time like the present we must be mindful of human suffering. It is at times like last week that we in this House are reminded of the solemn duties and grave responsibilities that we have been called on by our constituents, and the whole country, to discharge. The recent terrible events remind us of the awe-inspiring trust with which we have been endowed. It is in this rather sombre and reflective mood that I commend the Gracious Speech to the House.

2.58 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): By tradition, at the beginning of each parliamentary Session we commemorate the Members we have lost in the previous year. Sadly, this year must also mark the passing of those we have lost in horrific events in recent days and weeks. The fire at Grenfell Tower in west London has killed at least 79 people. What makes it both a tragedy and an outrage is that every single one of those deaths could have been avoided. Something has gone horrifically wrong. The north Kensington community is demanding answers, and it is entitled to those answers. Thousands of people living in tower blocks around the country need urgent reassurance, and the emergency services—especially, in this case, the fire and rescue services—deserve our deepest respect and support.

I also want to pay a very warm tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad), who in recent days has demonstrated so clearly why her local community put their faith in her. Her determination to ensure that every family is rehoused locally is an exemplary work of a dedicated Member of Parliament, and we welcome her to this House. Lessons must be learned in the public inquiry, and a disaster that never should have happened must never happen again.

The terrorist attacks in Manchester, London Bridge and Finsbury Park took innocent lives, causing dozens of injuries, and traumatised hundreds of people, with wilful and callous disregard for human life. The attack in the early hours of Monday morning in my own constituency is a reminder to us all that hate has no creed, that violence has no religion, and that we must stand up to hatred—whoever the target—and stand together against those who would drive us apart. Last night, hundreds of people assembled alongside Finsbury Park mosque to give just that message—from all communities and all faiths.

Our communities and our country are strongest when we are united. As our late colleague Jo Cox said, “we…have far more in common than that which divides us.”—[Official Report, 3 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 675.]

It is just over a year ago that Jo was taken from us by someone driven by hatred. Jo was driven by love and by an infectious energy. It was in the spirit of that energy and passion for people, life and justice that so many events were held in her memory around the country last weekend, including one in Muslim Welfare House in my constituency, near the site of the vile attack that happened a day later. They held a great get-together at the weekend. I hope we should remember Jo, love her, and make sure these great get-together events do continue year in, year out to unite our local communities.

Earlier this year, we also lost the Father of the House, Sir Gerald Kaufman, who had served his constituents for nearly 47 years, and previously worked for Harold Wilson in Downing Street. Gerald was an iconic and irascible figure in the Labour party. He came from a proud Jewish background and campaigned to bring peace to the middle east throughout his life. It was my pleasure to travel with him in that quest to many countries in the region, and I loved the very many lengthy conversations I had with him—in fact, nobody ever had a short conversation with Sir Gerald. Gerald and Jo will be fondly remembered by all who knew them and worked with them.

I want to congratulate the mover and the seconder of the Queen’s Speech. First, I congratulate the right hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) on his speech. My mother told me of the joy of Greenham Common—she was there, and I went to visit her—and I hope that he will understand the deep love of humanity that motivated all those women and others to go to Greenham Common during those days.
I would like to thank the right hon. Gentleman for taking time out from his considerable responsibilities—looking after his extensive property portfolio and tending to his directorship of UK Water Partnership. I hope a Labour Government may soon be able to come to the aid of his Newbury constituents by taking water back into public ownership, and to the aid of his tenants by ensuring there is a responsibility on landlords to ensure that all homes are fit for human habitation.

I know the right hon. Gentleman will also continue diligently to pursue his other interests in Parliament—his interests in defence, Africa and rural affairs. I do agree with part of what he said, when he spoke of the need for us as a country to adhere to all the agreements on climate change issues around the world, and I thank him for that part of his speech.

I turn now to the secondor of today’s Loyal Address, the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng), whose speech was typically articulate and very erudite—after all, he is a former winner of “University Challenge”, so he would be able to make such a speech. He mentioned Benjamin Disraeli, and I welcome that, because Benjamin Disraeli once said, “If I want to read a book, I write one.” It seems that the hon. Gentleman has taken that maxim to new levels, writing or co-writing six books during the seven years he has been a Member of this House. I have been looking through the back catalogue of his books, and one book absolutely stands out—it is a must-read. It is absolutely apposite to our times, and I hope it is reprinted. It came out in 2011, and it was called “After the Coalition”. I do not want to cut across any of his present literary representations, but perhaps a sequel may be in the offing—although I understand that the latest coalition may already be in some chaos.

Nothing could emphasise that chaos more than the Queen’s Speech we have just heard: a threadbare legislative programme from a Government who have lost their majority and apparently run out of ideas altogether. This would be a thin legislative programme even if it was for one year, but for two years—two years? There is not enough in it to fill up one year.

It is therefore appropriate to start by welcoming what is not in the speech. First, there is no mention of scrapping the winter fuel allowance for millions of pensioners through means-testing. Can the Prime Minister assure us that that Conservative plan has now been withdrawn? Mercifully, neither is there any mention of ditching the triple lock. Pensioners across Britain will be grateful to know whether the Tory election commitment on that has also been binned.

Older people and their families might also be keen for some clarity around the Government’s policy on social care—whether it is still what was originally set out in the Conservative manifesto, whether it is what it was later amended to, or whether it is now something else entirely. I am sure it is just a matter of historical record, but on looking at the Conservative website today, the manifesto has been taken down in its entirety. It apparently no longer exists. The Prime Minister might also like to confirm that food is not, after all, going to be taken from the mouths of infants and that younger primary school children will continue to receive universal free school meals. On the subject of schools, there was nothing about grammar schools in the Gracious Speech. Does the Prime Minister now agree with her predecessor that “it is delusional to think that a policy of expanding” the “number of grammar schools is either a good idea, a sellable idea or even the right idea”?

The good news may even extend to our furry friends, if the Prime Minister can guarantee that the barbaric practice of fox hunting will remain banned in this country.

The Government have recently embarked on what are likely to be very difficult negotiations concerning Brexit, which the whole House will want to scrutinise. Unfortunately, there have been some leaks, with the other side in the process expressing dismay at the weakness of the Government’s negotiating skills—but that is enough about coalitions of chaos with the Democratic Unionist party; we must get on to the even more crucial issue of Brexit. Labour accepted from the beginning that the decision of the referendum has been taken—we are leaving the European Union. The question is how and on what terms. The Government could have begun negotiations on a far better footing had Ministers accepted the will of the House in July last year and granted full rights to European Union nationals living in this country. I hope now that this minority Government will indeed listen to the wisdom of this House a bit more and work in partnership with our European neighbours.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): During the election campaign, the right hon. Gentleman repeatedly refused to rule out a second referendum on our EU membership. Given that Brexit negotiations have now commenced, will he take this opportunity to rule out a second referendum now?

Jeremy Corbyn: I am not sure the hon. Gentleman was listening very carefully to any of my many speeches in the general election campaign. I made it clear that we would negotiate sensibly and fairly with the European Union and bring the results of those negotiations back to this House.

It is in all our interests that we get a Brexit deal that puts jobs and the economy first. No deal is not better than a bad deal: it is a bad deal and not viable for this country. We need full access to the single market and a customs arrangement that provide Britain, as the Brexit Secretary has pledged, with the “exact same benefits” as now. Neither must arbitrary targets for immigration be prioritised over the jobs and living standards of the people of this country. Let us decide our immigration policy on the basis of the needs of our communities and our economy, not to the tune of the dog-whistle cynicism of Lynton Crosby or the hate campaigns of some sections of our press, whose idea of patriotism is to base themselves in an overseas tax haven.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm the contradiction in his own plans? He plans not to reduce immigration numbers, but he also plans to stop employers recruiting overseas. Is it not the right hon. Gentleman who is a bit wobbly?

Jeremy Corbyn: Throughout the election campaign and before, we made it very clear that employers who unscrupulously recruit low-paid workers from overseas exploit them in this country and run away with the profits, at the same time as creating community discord. They are wrong; they are making money out of poverty and grossly exploiting very vulnerable people on both sides of the channel.
Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The Tory position on the single market and the customs union is clear: we are out of both. What is the Labour position on the single market and the customs union?

Jeremy Corbyn: Again, our position has been absolutely clear. Our position is that we need tariff-free access to the European market to protect industries and jobs in this country. Let us have a little bit less from Conservative Members on the dangerous threat to turn Britain into a tax haven, which would threaten jobs and public services here far more than in mainland Europe.

We do not yet know the official title of the Government’s much-trumpeted great repeal Bill, but if we are talking about taking back control, Parliament must be able to scrutinise legislation. Thankfully, the thin gruel of this Gracious Speech allows plenty of time for longer debates and greater scrutiny. That must include ensuring that the Human Rights Act and our commitment to the European convention on human rights and the human rights of everyone in this country remain completely and totally intact. We will ensure that they do.

It is our determination that by working with devolved Administrations, responsibilities such as agriculture and fisheries will be devolved to those Administrations and not hoarded in Whitehall. On the subject of devolved Administrations, may I also wish the Prime Minister every success in reconvening talks with all parties to restore the Stormont Assembly in Belfast as soon as possible? We also very much hope that any done deal restoration of the Good Friday agreement to maintain peace in Northern Ireland.

A state visit from the Spanish Head of State was announced for July, but can the Prime Minister update the House on whether she can still expect the United States’ Head of State to visit any time this year, or any time in the future? It is just a question.

As I said earlier, public service workers, such as fire service, police and NHS staff, receive huge praise when this country is thanked for what we do. That’s why we serve the public the way we do.” We do. That’s why we serve the public the way we do. “Because we’re firefighters. That’s what we’re trained to do.”

Jeremy Corbyn: My hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) is very prescient and forward-sighted. I thank him very much. The changes would only have moved funding between rural and urban forces, when the real issue is the £2.3 billion cut to police budgets in the past five years.

Our firefighters did an outstanding job at the Grenfell Tower fire, but they worked incredibly long shifts, in part because there are 600 fewer firefighters and 10 fewer fire stations in London—cuts and closures that were forced through by the previous Mayor of London. Talking to those firefighters, exhausted from their work, who went into a burning building to save people, I asked, “Why do you do it? Why do you go in when you know it’s so difficult and so dangerous?” They said, “Because we’re firefighters. That’s what we’re trained to do. That’s why we serve the public the way we do.”

I welcome the fact that there is a public inquiry into Grenfell, but can we take action now? I pay tribute to councils such as Croydon Council, which has committed this week to installing sprinklers in all tower blocks of 10 storeys or more. However, such minimal fire safety standards cannot be left to a postcode lottery, so will the Government make available emergency funds for councils to check cladding and install sprinklers?

The Government should also have committed themselves to passing a public safety Bill to implement the recommendations of the 2013 inquiry into the fire at Lakanal House, and to reversing their guidance that removed the requirement to install sprinklers in new school buildings. They could still do so and they would have our support. That could happen in addition to any recommendations of the Grenfell Tower inquiry.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for what he has said about sprinkler systems for high-rise flats. There are 116 blocks of high-rise flats in my city of Leeds, 26 of which are in my constituency. Only eight—those that are sheltered accommodation—have sprinklers. It would cost £30 million to have sprinklers in all those flats. Will he join me in urging the Government to provide the money for all local authorities to put sprinklers in their high-rises?

Jeremy Corbyn: I absolutely thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention. Indeed, during the discussion we held in Westminster Hall about this matter last week, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) raised a similar point about the number of tower blocks.

I do not suppose that many Members of this House live in tower blocks, but just think for a moment of the sense of fear that so many people would have had when they saw the Lakanal House fire—people living on the 15th, 16th or 17th floor, knowing that there is no fire ladder that can reach them and no helicopter that can land. They are reliant on being able to get out or the fire being contained. We need to give everyone that assurance. Local authorities that have seen massive cuts in their budgets over the past years need the resources now to install the necessary sprinkler and fire prevention systems.
We cannot use the excuse that the money is not there; the money has got to be there to ensure that we save lives in the future. We will support the Government if they are able to bring that forward.

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

Jeremy Corbyn: I will give way for the last time, then I must move on.

Andy Slaughter: On behalf of my hon. Friends the Members for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) and for Westminster North (Ms Buck) and myself, may I thank my right hon. Friend for visiting the area and making this issue an absolute priority? Will he and the Government ensure that disaster relief in north Kensington and pursuing the issue of the safety of people in tower blocks are made the absolute No. 1 priority?

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank my hon. Friend for that, and for the support that he has given my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington in the work that has been done. What happened in Grenfell Tower is terrifying for all those in the area, and the problems that have ensued since indicate just what happens when local authority spending is cut to the bone and local authorities cannot cope as a result. We need properly funded, good-quality public services in this country.

The Prime Minister says that legal support will be made available to the families affected by the Grenfell Tower fire, but they should have had access to legal aid beforehand. When they were raising their desperate concerns about fire safety, they were ignored by a Conservative-controlled local authority. The lessons of the failed austerity programme must urgently be learned. We cannot have council housing—social housing—on the cheap, and we cannot have public services on the cheap. We have to invest in them. So will the Prime Minister now halt the cuts to the police—cuts that the former Metropolitan Police Commissioner this week called “an absurdity”? Those cuts have affected our prisons, too. Her Majesty’s chief inspector of prisons has expressed concerns about fire safety, they were ignored by a Conservative-controlled local authority. The lessons of the failed austerity programme must urgently be learned. We cannot have council housing—social housing—on the cheap, and we cannot have public services on the cheap. We have to invest in them. So will the Prime Minister now halt the cuts to the police—cuts that the former Metropolitan Police Commissioner this week called “an absurdity”? Those cuts have affected our prisons, too. Her Majesty’s chief inspector of prisons has expressed his concern at the lack of a prisons and courts reform Bill, which could have implemented our election manifesto promise to employ another 3,000 prison officers.

Our children’s schools are facing budget cuts. Can the Prime Minister confirm whether cuts to per-pupil funding are going ahead, and can she clarify for the House the status of the national funding formula? Headteachers and teachers are going through incredible stress, with oversized classes and the difficulty of maintaining teachers in employment.

The Gracious Speech mentioned legislation to protect victims of domestic violence, but does that include restoring legal aid in such cases or restoring the funding needed to reopen the many refuges that have been closed?

We welcome the reform of mental health legislation to give it greater priority, and we would welcome an assurance that no mental health trust will see its budget cut this year, as 40% of them did last year.

Will the Prime Minister call time on the public sector pay cap, which means that our nurses are 14% worse off today than they were seven years ago? As she is aware, some nurses and other public service workers have been forced to resort to using food banks, alongside more than 1 million other people in this country. Rising inflation, the effects of low pay and falling real incomes are going to hit even more families—the 6 million workers earning less than the living wage, the millions of people in insecure work, those subject to the benefit freeze and 5.5 million public servants. We owe them a much better deal than they have been given by this Government in the past seven years.

My party, Labour, won almost 13 million votes at the election, and that was because we offered hope and opportunity for all and a real change to our country. The Prime Minister began the election campaign saying: “If I lose just six seats I will lose this election”.

When it came to it, she lost more than four times that many seats to Labour alone. From Cardiff to Canterbury, from Stockton to Kensington, people chose hope over fear, and they sent an unequivocal message that austerity must be brought to an end. Seven years of Conservative rule has left wages falling, inflation rising, the pound falling, personal debt rising and the economy slowing. By no stretch of the imagination could any of that be described as strong or stable.

Several hon. Members rose—

Jeremy Corbyn: I have given way to three Members on the Government Benches and three Members on the Opposition Benches, so I will continue and conclude my speech. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] Thank you.

If we want to boost pay, the most effective means is through strong and independent trade unions—workers collectively defending and improving their pay and conditions—so we would repeal the Trade Union Act 2016 and strengthen collective bargaining.

Across Britain, people have shown that they believe there is a better way. In recent years, this Government have thrown away tens of billions of pounds in tax giveaways to the very richest and to big business, at the very same time as closing Sure Start centres and libraries, and tipping social care into crisis and our national health service into record deficit. Under Conservative rule, school budgets have been cut and college courses have been closed, students have been saddled with a lifetime of debt, and per-patient funding in the NHS is set to fall for the first time in history.

Our manifesto—for the many, not the few—and its popular policies set out a very different path, which caught the imagination of millions, and a way for the public really to take back control, so that our key utilities and our railways are taken into public ownership and run in the interests of the many, and not to pay the dividends of the few. We would end austerity by making very different choices; by asking the highest 5% of earners to pay a little bit more while keeping the top 10 percentage points lower than it was for most of Margaret Thatcher’s time in office; and by asking big business to pay a little more in tax, while retaining a lower corporation tax rate than any other G7 country.

Austerity and inequality are choices. They are not necessities. They are not unfortunate outcomes. They are a choice to make life worse for the many to maintain the privilege of a few. If the Government reject austerity, if they challenge inequality, invest to expand and rebalance our economy, they will have our support, but if they continue down this path of deliberately making people
worse off, of deepening division, and of neglecting communities that deserve support and respect, we will oppose them every step of the way.

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

Jeremy Corbyn: No. I will continue my speech.

This is a Government without a majority, without a mandate and without a serious legislative programme, led by a Prime Minister who has lost her political authority, and who is struggling even today to stitch together a deal to stay in office.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I hope it is a point of order. I am not going to prejudice it. Let’s hear the attempted point of order.

Mrs Miller: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am simply seeking your advice. I have been in the House for 12 years. Government Members can be somewhat disappointed that the Leader of the Opposition is not in a position to answer our questions. Perhaps you can advise on the usual format in these cases.

Mr Speaker: All I will say to the right hon. Lady is this: I am much touched by her faith in my abilities or her assessment of the extent of my powers. Disappointment may be very regrettable, but it is not a matter for the Chair.

Jeremy Corbyn: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am deeply sorry that—

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. The right hon. Gentleman, the Leader of the Opposition, said about 10 minutes ago, “In conclusion.” I fear, as time has passed, that he may be in danger of inadvertently having misled the House, and I thought you might want to take the opportunity to set this right.

Mr Speaker: No. Some people may think that the hon. Gentleman is fastidious and others may conclude that he is pedantic. You pay your money and you take your choice, but there is no disorder here, although if people persist in raising what they know not to be points of order, that would itself be disorderly, and I know that the hon. Gentleman of all people would not want to stray into such misdemeanour.

Jeremy Corbyn: Just for the record, I have given way six times in this debate and there are six days of debate, so hon. Members will all have plenty of time to make their points during the debate. We will use every opportunity to vote down Government policies that have failed to win public support. We will use every opportunity to win support for our programme. Labour is not merely an Opposition; we are a Government in waiting, with a policy programme that enthused and engaged millions of people in this election, many for the first time in their political lives. We are ready to offer real strong and stable leadership in the interests of the many, not the few. We will test this Government’s Brexit strategy and the legislation that comes forward against that standard.

This election engaged more people than for a generation—a tribute to our democracy. In the election, Labour set out a vision of what this country could be. It could be more equal. It could be more prosperous. It could have opportunities for all. That is what we on this side of the House will be putting forward in this Parliament—what we will be fighting for in this Parliament; what we will be demanding in this Parliament. The people of this country deserve something better than this thin piece of very little, when they have so many problems they want and demand answers to from this Parliament. We will engage fully and make the case for a prosperous, more stable and more cohesive society in Britain.

3.32 pm

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in sending our very best wishes to His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh, following the news that he has been admitted to hospital. Our thoughts are with Her Majesty the Queen and the whole royal family, and we wish him a full and speedy recovery.

Let me also join the Leader of the Opposition in condemning the appalling terrorist attack in his constituency earlier this week. I pay tribute to the work he did through the night with his constituents on Sunday. I know that the thoughts and prayers of the whole House are with the family and friends of the victim who died and all those who were injured. I am sure that the House will want to pay tribute to the police and the emergency services for once again responding with the extraordinary professionalism and courage that makes our whole country so proud of them. This was the fourth terrorist attack on our country in three months, following the attacks here in Westminster, in Manchester and at London Bridge. This time it was an attack on British Muslims as they left their place of worship at a sacred time of year.

It was a brutal and sickening reminder that terrorism, and the attacks here in Westminster, in Manchester and at London Bridge. This time it was an attack on British Muslims as they left their place of worship at a sacred time of year. It was a brutal and sickening reminder that terrorism, extremism and hatred can take many forms, and that our determination to tackle them must be the same whoever is responsible. This Queen’s Speech takes important steps in helping us to do so.

We will review our counter-terrorism strategy to ensure that the police and security services have all the powers that they need, and that the lengths of custodial sentences for terrorism-related offences are sufficient to keep people safe. We will work to reach international agreements that regulate cyberspace to prevent the spread of extremism and terrorist planning, and encourage tech companies to do more to remove harmful content from their networks. We will establish a new commission for countering extremism as a statutory body to help to fight hatred and extremism in the same way as we have fought racism, because this extremism is every bit as insidious and destructive to our families, and we will stop at nothing to defeat it.

I hope that, whatever our disagreements, we can all at least welcome the focus in the Queen’s Speech on stamping out extremist and hateful ideology of any kind, including Islamophobia. Like all terrorism in whatever form, Monday’s attack sought to drive us apart and to break
the precious bonds of solidarity and citizenship that we share in this country. Our response must be to stand together more strongly than ever to show that hatred and evil of this kind will never succeed, and that our values and our way of life will always prevail.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I think that the whole House will agree with what the Prime Minister has said. Does she agree with me that we need to work and engage with communities—all communities—and that they should play a leadership role in ensuring that we reject, once and for all, terrorism?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. When I visited Finsbury Park on Monday, I was struck by the interfaith way in which the various faith communities were coming together. I saw representatives of the Muslim faith, the Jewish community and the Christian community all coming together with one ambition: to drive extremism and hatred out of our society.

Nadhim Zahawi (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con): This is the first time we have come together since Manchester, London Bridge and, of course, Finsbury Park. Countering extremism and terrorism of all kinds must be a priority for the Government. Will my right hon. Friend join me in calling on all Members to give our security agencies the tools for which they have asked through the Gracious Speech, so that they can do their job properly?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon for his intervention. Given that I believe there is a desire throughout the House for us to deal with terrorism, and to drive out terrorism and extremism of all kinds, I hope that all Members will feel able to support the Government when we introduce measures in order to do just that.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): When she was Home Secretary, the Prime Minister made a decision to weaken the surveillance powers of the police and intelligence services by abolishing control orders. Will she now accept that that decision was a mistake? Will she review it, and will she strengthen the powers of the police and intelligence services as they do their very difficult task of monitoring suspects who may have the intention of doing harm, but have not yet committed a crime?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman refers to control orders. What was happening with the control orders, which were introduced by a previous Labour Government, was that they were increasingly being knocked down in the courts. We introduced terrorism prevention and investigation measures, and we have subsequently enhanced those measures. Through the Investigatory Powers Act 2016, which we introduced when I was Home Secretary, we have also ensured that our police and our intelligence and security agencies have the powers that they need. What we have seen is an increase in the tempo of attack planning. We have seen the terrible terrorist attacks that have taken place, and we should remember that over the same period, five other plots have been foiled by our police and security services. That shows the increasing scale and tempo, and it is in that context that we need to look to ensure that our security services and our police have the powers that they need in the future. I look forward to the right hon. Gentleman joining us and ensuring that we give those powers to our agencies.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister will be aware that concerns have been raised across the country about the cuts in policing that were made in the last Parliament and the impact that they have had on the connection between the police and our communities. Will she now confirm that she will seek to reverse those cuts to ensure that we have such a connection when there are greater demands on police time and we need much more reassurance about the return of that connection with our communities?

The Prime Minister: As I am sure the hon. Lady is aware, we have protected counter-terrorism policing. We are providing funding for an uplift in armed policing, but we are also protecting police budgets, which of course is a different approach from the view that was put forward by the former shadow Home Secretary—he is now the Mayor of Manchester—who said that the police could take 10% cuts in their budget. We did not listen to that; we protected them.

I would also like to say a few words about the disaster at Grenfell Tower. The whole country was heartbroken by the horrific loss of life and the utter devastation that we have seen. I am sure that the whole House will join me in sending our deepest condolences to the friends and families of all those who lost loved ones. Today, we also think of those who survived but lost everything. One lady I met ran from the fire wearing no more than a T-shirt and a pair of knickers. She had lost absolutely everything.

Let me be absolutely clear. The support on the ground for families in the initial hours was not good enough. People were left without belongings, without a roof over their heads, and without even basic information about what had happened, what they should do and where they could seek help. That was a failure of the state—local and national—to help people when they needed it most. As Prime Minister, I apologise for that failure and, as Prime Minister, I have taken responsibility for doing what we can to put things right. That is why each family whose home was destroyed is receiving a down payment from the emergency fund so that they can buy food, clothes and other essentials, and all those who have lost their homes will be rehoused within three weeks.

There will also be an independent public inquiry, chaired by a judge, to get to the truth about what happened and who was responsible, and to provide justice for the victims and their families who suffered so terribly. All those with an interest, including survivors and victims’ families, will be consulted about the terms of reference, and those affected will have their legal costs paid. Because it is clear that the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea has not been able to cope with the scale of the tragedy, we will also develop a new strategy for resilience in major disasters, which could include a new civil disaster response taskforce that can help at times of emergency. We must learn some of the lessons of this and previous disasters when bereaved families have not had the support they need.
Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): An estimated 8% of London’s population live in tower blocks—the same point has been made in respect of other cities. Inner-London authorities such as Westminster have lost 45% of their funding in recent years—that includes funding for environmental health responsibilities—and for Kensington the figure is 38%. Will the Prime Minister today guarantee that local authorities will be fully funded for an urgent review of tower block safety and all remedial action that is necessary, including the installation of sprinklers when appropriate, so that they can proceed in a matter of days with that comfort? Does she agree that regulation is a necessary element of a safe society, not a burden, and will she legislate swiftly when necessary to ensure that all high-rise residents are safe?

The Prime Minister: All of us across the House share a desire to ensure that people are safe and can have the confidence of being safe in their homes. Work was started immediately by the Department for Communities and Local Government, encouraging local authorities, and they have been working with the fire service to look at the issues in their tower blocks and to assess those tower blocks.

We do not yet know the absolute cause of the fire in Grenfell Tower. Work on that is ongoing, and we will take what action is necessary, including by learning the lessons that come out of it. The hon. Lady speaks about regulation. Of course, rigorous fire regulation is in place. If requirements to change that come out of the investigation that is taking place, we will of course act and do so swiftly.

Just so that right hon. and hon. Members are aware, there are of course a number of investigations. The police have opened a criminal investigation. The fire service and the Building Research Establishment are investigating as quickly as possible the exact cause of the fire so that any action that is required as a result of that work can be taken. Of course, there is also the public inquiry that I have announced.

We must learn some of the lessons of this and previous disasters when bereaved families have not had the support they need, so we will also introduce an independent public advocate for public disasters. That will be a strong independent voice for victims, acting on behalf of bereaved families and supporting them at public inquests and inquiries.

Let me join the Leader of the Opposition in paying tribute to the two Members of Parliament whom we lost in the course of the last year. Gerald Kaufman was an outstanding parliamentarian who served this House and his constituents in Manchester for an incredible 46 years. We did not agree on everything but, as Father of the House, he was an invaluable source of wisdom and experience for Members on both sides, and he will be greatly missed.

The despicable murder of Jo Cox shocked and devastated this House and the country. Jo was an inspirational MP, a campaigner and a humanitarian whose mission in life was defined by hope and love. Her killer sought instead to spread hate and division, but last weekend, as part of ‘the Great Get Together’, I and many hundreds of thousands of others—including, I am sure, Members of this House—in her honour came together, stood together and pulled together all across the country to unite against that hatred and to prove, in Jo’s own words, that we have far more in common than that which divides us.

I am sure the whole House will join me in paying tribute to Jo’s husband, Brendan, for the extraordinary courage and strength that he has shown in dealing with such personal tragedy and for honouring Jo’s memory in such an inspiring way. Whatever our disagreements in this House, may we all honour Jo’s memory and show that in our United Kingdom hope will always triumph over hate.

The House will know that the first part of a successful Queen’s Speech is finding someone to propose the address. That is, of course, intended to be a witty speech, as indeed the speech of my right hon. Friend for Newbury (Richard Benyon) was today—from my point of view a little too witty, as he took all the jokes I had written in my speech. I have to say—[Interruption.] Wait for it. Over the years that my right hon. Friend has been the Member for Newbury and in the years when he was fighting to take the seat, he has shown a great commitment not only to his constituents, but to the important task of government and building a stronger economy and a fairer society. I know, for example, as a fellow Berkshire MP, the work he has done to raise awareness of an issue that I am particularly concerned about: mental health. He also made a significant contribution during his time as a Minister, I understand that once, as fisheries Minister, he mixed up his cod and his skate, but I am sure that, like the rest of us, he will not fail to welcome the absence in this House today of Salmond.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I wonder if the Prime Minister’s reason for not welcoming the former right hon. Member is that he scares her.

The Prime Minister: I have to say to the hon. Lady that the reason why I am not welcoming the former right hon. Member to this House is because he was beaten by a Conservative in the election.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury showed great skill and tenacity over his three years of negotiations on the common fisheries policy. The process started with the UK as a minority of one, and ended with the EU unanimously supporting a reform agenda, the principles of which will be at the heart of the fisheries Bill in this Queen’s Speech. He was also the Minister who secured cross-party support for moving our canals and waterways from the public to the charitable sector, creating the Canal & River Trust, one of the biggest and best endowed charities in this country. He made an excellent speech today in the finest traditions of this House.

The motion was brilliantly seconded by my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng). He is a distinguished political historian and a prolific writer, as the Leader of the Opposition pointed out. I understand that my hon. Friend has a particular interest in female Prime Ministers. Indeed, Members may know that his most recent book profiled the most testing six months for our country’s first female Prime Minister. It ran to 272 pages; I fear his next book could be somewhat longer.

My hon. Friend is also widely regarded for his good looks. In fact, The Sunday Telegraph once described him as a Tory “heart-throb”, and during his time on “University Challenge”, I gather he even made it to page 3 of The Sun. Perhaps most significantly, he is confounding
the *Daily Mail*, which cited the 1995 “University Challenge” winning team of which my hon. Friend was a member when arguing that “all too often the brainy winners of the BBC’s flagship programme sink without trace after their moment in the spotlight.”

I could not disagree more. The House has today seen his talents on full display. He gave a tremendous speech with flair, substance and wit. He brings an historian’s wisdom to the challenges and opportunities that our country faces, and I have no doubt that he will make a major contribution in the years ahead.

Let me welcome the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) as the new leader of the SNP. I am of course, particularly pleased to welcome to the Conservative Benches my 13 Scottish Conservative colleagues. It is good that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland will not have to put up with any more jokes about pandas.

Turnout at the election was higher than in 2015, including many more younger people. While those of us on this side of the House would have preferred more of them to vote for us, more young people going to the ballot box is something that we should all welcome.

Let me also welcome the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) back to his place as the Leader of the Opposition. He fought a spirited campaign and he came a good second, which was better than the Leader of the Opposition. He brought an historian’s wisdom to the challenges and opportunities that our country faces, and I have no doubt that he will make a major contribution in the years ahead.

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The election also showed that, as we face the big challenges of our future, our country is divided: red versus blue; young versus old; leave versus remain.

As I said here last week, the test for all of us is whether we choose to reflect divisions or help the country overcome them. With humility and resolve, this Government will seek to do the latter. We will do what is in the national interest, and we will work with anyone, in any party, that is prepared to do the same.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for her commitment to tackling social injustice. Will she say a little more about what we can do to stop people being discriminated against on the grounds of race?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Member for raising that. This will reflect the outcome of the very important racial disparity audit, which we introduced virtually as soon as I became Prime Minister last year. I think it is important that we test what is happening in relation to our public services. As Home Secretary, I was struck by the examples I saw: I took action on stop and search—that had never been done by a Labour Government—because I thought it was important that nobody was stopped on the streets of our country because of the colour of their skin. There were other issues that we addressed in government previously. Our racial disparity audit will show us what is happening in our public services, and we will be able to act on the back of that to ensure truly that the approach we are taking is fair and that there is not that discrimination—

Several hon. Members rose—

The Prime Minister: I am going to make a little progress before I give way again.

We will work every day to earn the trust and confidence of the British people, and we will make their priorities our priorities, dealing head-on with the major challenges that our country faces—that is what this Queen’s Speech is all about.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con) rose—

The Prime Minister: I am going to make a little progress and then I will give way again.

This Queen’s Speech is about recognising and grasping the opportunities for every community in our country to benefit as we leave the European Union; it is about delivering the will of the British people with a Brexit deal that works for all parts of our United Kingdom
and that commands the greatest possible public support; it is about building a new, deep and special partnership with our European friends and neighbours—because we are leaving the European Union but we are not leaving Europe; and it is about seizing this moment of national change to deliver a plan for a stronger, fairer Britain by strengthening our economy, tackling injustice, and promoting opportunity and aspiration for all. Because, as I have said many times before, the referendum vote was not just a vote to leave the European Union; it was a profound and justified expression that our country often does not work the way it should for millions of ordinary families. This Queen’s Speech begins to change that, by putting fairness at the heart of our agenda.

James Morris: My right hon. Friend knows that I have been a long-standing campaigner on improving mental health care in this country. The truth is that many people across our country today are not getting the care they need, including many children who, in very traumatised states, are spending too long in queues to get appropriate treatment. What is she going to do to convert the warm words of the Government on parity of esteem into actual action on mental health?

The Prime Minister: May I commend my hon. Friend, who, as he said, has, while in this House and before, been a champion for mental health and has done important work on it? There are a number of strands to what the Government want to do, one of which is putting in place a new mental health Act, but we will of course consult widely on that. I also want to ensure that every school—every primary and secondary—has a member of staff who is trained to identify mental health problems and knows how to deal with those issues. When I met the charity YoungMinds a few weeks ago, I was very struck by the issue of raising awareness of mental health problems, particularly among young people: the earlier we can address these issues, the better we can deal with them and the better life we can ensure for the people with these mental health problems. Those are some of the things we will be putting in place, but I look forward to working with him on ensuring that what we are doing addresses the issues we need to address.

Several hon. Members rose—

The Prime Minister: I will give way to the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas).

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for giving way. It is good to see her here facing the other parties—she has actually turned up, which was not always the case during the election campaign.

The Gracious Speech contained eight Brexit Bills but not one of them covered the environment. Is her failure to propose a Brexit Bill on the greatest challenge that we face because she simply does not care about the environment and climate change, or is it because she has been influenced by the DUP dinosaurs, who sit beside me and who do not want to take that kind of leadership in the future?

The Prime Minister: I am very conscious of the significant amount of legislation from Europe that affects environmental matters. Those issues are being—

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Members of my party were elected by the people of Northern Ireland to represent the constituents who elected us to the House. Is it in order for the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) to describe us in the unparliamentary terms in which she did, and which I regret? She does not understand my party’s policy on the environment—she should go and read our manifesto—but we have the right to speak for the people of Northern Ireland, and in this Parliament we will.

Mr Speaker: Let me say two things in response to the, I am sure, sincere point of order from the right hon. Gentleman. First, the use of the word in question is not unparliamentary; it is a matter of taste as to its desirability or otherwise. Secondly, I know how robust a character the right hon. Gentleman is, and I would simply say that the word in question refers to a species that survived for many, many millions of years.

The Prime Minister: As I said, the Queen’s Speech is about putting fairness at the heart of our agenda. That is about building a stronger economy by delivering a modern industrial strategy so that all parts of our country and all parts of our society share in the benefits of economic growth, and by investing in the world-leading infrastructure that can unlock growth in our economy and improve the quality of people’s lives across the whole country. It is about building a fairer society by increasing the national living wage so that people who are on the lowest pay see their wages go up as the economy strengthens, and by ensuring that every child has access to a good school place.

Several hon. Members rose—

The Prime Minister: I am going to make a little more progress before I give way again.

It is about creating a world-class system of technical education, so that all young people have the vital skills they need to do the jobs of the future. It is about acting to make markets fairer by tackling unfair practices wherever they are found.

Kevin Hollinrake: The Prime Minister mentions opportunity; does she agree that one way we must deliver opportunities is by allowing more young people to get on the housing ladder? Will she reinforce her previous commitment to increase house building to 250,000 homes a year, which is a much bolder and more ambitious commitment than the Labour party has made?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is incredibly prescient, because my very next sentence was going to be about tackling the housing crisis that locks so many young people out of the housing market. We do indeed recognise the significance of the housing problem in this country. It is about not only building more houses but keeping going schemes that help people to get on the housing ladder and ensuring greater diversity in the housing market. With rent to buy and shared ownership, there is a variety of opportunities for young people.

We will be tackling discrimination on the basis of mental health, sexuality, faith, disability, gender or race.
Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): How is the interim Prime Minister going to convince the country that she can negotiate a successful Brexit with 27 other EU countries within the time limit, when she has not even been able to negotiate a deal with 10 Democratic Unionist Members of this House in the time between the election and the Queen’s Speech?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me the opportunity to welcome the work that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union has undertaken in preparing our negotiations and starting the formal negotiations on Monday this week. I will be in Brussels for the EU Council later this week to take that work further forward.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): I am grateful that the Brexit talks have now started. The ability of those people who have come from the other 27 countries to live and work in the UK, and the status of the UK citizens living and working in the other 27 countries, is going to be a vital part of those talks. They will be waiting to learn of their future. Will the Prime Minister guarantee to this House that she will come here as quickly as possible, without waiting until the discussions have finished, to assure them that they will be able to live and remain in the countries where they have decided to live and work?

The Prime Minister: We have always said, from the beginning of this process, that we want to address that issue at an early stage of the negotiations. Indeed, that is the agreement that has been reached: it is one of the very first issues that will be addressed in the negotiations. I will make every effort, and I guarantee to my hon. Friend that I expect to be able to come to the House to show the opportunities that the United Kingdom will be setting out for those EU citizens who live here in the UK. Of course, we want to see UK citizens in the European Union being treated fairly as well, but we will soon be setting out our offer as regards EU citizens living here in the United Kingdom.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I am grateful to the Prime Minister for giving way. The fact is that the Gracious Speech has been made today and the Prime Minister still cannot tell us how her Government will be composed and how it will be supported. Given that she asked for a very personal mandate during the general election campaign and did not get one, the only question is: why is she still here?

The Prime Minister: Let me just point out a few facts to the hon. Gentleman. Which party got the highest percentage share of the vote, Labour or Conservative? Conservative. Which party got more votes—800,000 more—than the other party, Labour or Conservative? Conservative—[Interruption.] Which party got 56 more seats than the Labour party—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I will not have the Prime Minister, or the Leader of the Opposition, or any Member of this House shouted down—[Interruption.] Order. Mr Campbell, I’m sure you mean well—[Interruption.] Order. You are wittering away from a sedentary position to no obvious benefit or purpose. I am sure you mean well, but I do not require your assistance at this time.

The Prime Minister: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I was merely pointing out that the Conservative party got 56 more seats than the Labour party. We are doing what is in the national interest, forming a Government to address the challenges that face this country. It is a critical time and it is important that we have a Government committed to the national interest.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): The Prime Minister just mentioned making markets work better and for everybody. She knows that the energy price cap had wide cross-party support from both sides of this House, so I was delighted to see energy price protection and pro-consumer switching and transparency measures in the Queen’s Speech. Will she confirm that those measures mean the price cap to deliver 17 million customers the £100 savings we promised in our manifesto, rather than the narrower or more anti-competitive counter-proposals from the big six energy firms?

The Prime Minister: I can confirm to my hon. Friend that we do indeed intend to take action on this issue. We recognise the problem in relation to energy bills and we want to ensure that we get the best measure in place to deliver what we all want, which is to see people no longer being ripped off by high energy tariffs.

Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): The Prime Minister has talked about the national interest and the need for cross-party support. Does she agree that for her excellent proposal of a commissioner for extremism to work it requires the engagement not just of Government Members but of Opposition Members, if we are to stamp out the evil ideology of extremism that drives terrorism in this country?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have spoken a lot about the need to deal with terrorism. Of course we need to look at the powers we have to deal with terrorists, but we also need to ensure that we deal with the extremism and hatred that fuel that terrorism. That is why the commission for countering extremism is so important, and I hope, as I said earlier, that it is a measure that can be supported in all parts of the House. It is important if we are to ensure that we drive this extremism and hatred out of our society.

Several hon. Members rose—

The Prime Minister: I have already taken three times as many interventions as the Leader of the Opposition, so I will make some progress.

We also want to build a more secure United Kingdom, investing in our defence and national security and enhancing our leading role on the world stage, strengthening the social, economic and cultural bonds between England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, delivering on our commitment to devolution by working in co-operation with all the devolved Administrations, and working with all the parties of Northern Ireland to support the return of devolved government. Building a country that is stronger, safer, fairer, and more secure for all our children and grandchildren, a country that works for everyone: that is our ambition, and that is what this Queen’s Speech will help to deliver.
The first part of this Queen’s Speech is of course about Brexit—a Brexit deal that works for every part of the country and commands the greatest possible public support. Over 80% of the electorate backed the two major parties, both of which campaigned on manifestos that said that we should honour the democratic decision of the British people, so this Government will respect the will of the British people and see Brexit through. We will seek to build a wide consensus as we do this and as we take Bills through the House, including a trade Bill, a repeal Bill, and an immigration Bill, as has been referred to, and also a Bill to deal with control of access to our waters for fishermen and a new Bill on agriculture to give greater stability to farmers.

Several hon. Members rose—

The Prime Minister: I will make a little more progress, then take some more interventions.

If we are going to grasp opportunities as we leave the European Union we need to build a stronger economy. That is right: we have always understood, as Conservatives, that sound money and fiscal credibility are the foundation for everything else. That is why it was right to take the tough decisions we did after the financial crash, and it has paid off. The deficit is down by three quarters; employment is up by 2.9 million; and because of policies like the national living wage and taking 4 million of the lowest paid out of income tax altogether, inequality has been reduced to its lowest level for 30 years.

In this Queen’s Speech we will continue to improve the public finances and work towards getting our country back to living within its means. We will also invest in the world-leading digital infrastructure that we need to benefit from the opportunities of new technology, and we will encourage businesses to grow and create jobs by continuing to cut corporation tax, because that is how to raise more money, not less.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Does the Prime Minister recognise that the economy is evolving and changing? If so, will she confirm that the Government are absolutely committed to securing the rights of people in the gig economy who are on different types of contracts from what has been the case historically?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have asked Matthew Taylor to produce a report on the changing workplace and the changing structure of employment, particularly, as my hon. Friend has mentioned, with reference to the gig economy. When the report is published, we will look at the steps that the Government need to take to support people with their rights. As I have said in the past few weeks, we will enhance workers’ rights. We believe in protecting those rights and enhancing them.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend ensure that legislation such as measures providing for the next phase of the high-speed rail project and other infrastructure investment mean that we can rebalance the economy to make sure that the whole country benefits from the economic progress to which she referred?

The Prime Minister: It is good to see my hon. Friend in his place, and to have seen him out on the campaign trail during the general election. I can absolutely confirm that we will put the legislation through for the next stage of HS2, and we will also ensure that we continue to invest, as my right hon. Friend the Chancellor set out in the autumn statement last year, in infrastructure projects around the country. I want a country that works for everyone and every part of the United Kingdom, and infrastructure is an important way of helping to deliver that.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): May I take the Prime Minister back to what she said about making Brexit work for the entire United Kingdom? Will she tell the House whether a legislative consent motion will be required in the Scottish Parliament for the great repeal Bill?

The Prime Minister: That matter is currently being considered both here and in Scotland. There is a possibility that a legislative consent motion may be required in the Scottish Parliament, but that matter is being considered between the Westminster and Scottish Governments.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister give way?

The Prime Minister: No, I am not going to do so. I am conscious that I have taken a significant number of interventions, and I shall make progress so that other Members can rise to speak.

I have said that we will protect rights and protect people at work as we leave the European Union—and, indeed, as we see changes in the employment structure in our economy. What we will not do is follow the economic prescriptions of the Labour party. There is absolutely nothing fair about punitive tax rates that lead to fewer jobs, lower wages and higher prices for ordinary working families. There is nothing fair about racking up debts for our children and grandchildren to pay. The only Government people can trust to build a stronger and fairer economy is a Conservative Government.

I have mentioned a fairer society. I want Britain to be a genuine great meritocracy, where everyone has a fair chance to go as far as their talent and hard work will take them. That is about ensuring that everybody plays by the same rules, that every child has access to a good school place, and that the right technical education is there. The measures in the Queen’s Speech will help to do that, but they will also deal with some of the injustices in our society.

The draft domestic violence and abuse legislation will provide a statutory definition of this heinous crime and ensure that robust protective orders are available and that victims get the justice they deserve. I hope that this measure will be able to command support across the whole House. Many in this House have for many years championed the cause of dealing with domestic violence, and I hope that they will be able to join us in supporting this legislation.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): As the Prime Minister is very aware, victims of domestic violence are the direct victims but also the oft-forgotten indirect victims such as children. Can she reassure us that steps will be taken to support those indirect victims too?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes a very fair point. One of the problems over the years has been that all too often people have looked at the immediate
looking at that issue.

Several hon. Members rose—

The Prime Minister: I will give way one more time—to the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen).

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): The House rightly praised the Prime Minister for the Hillsborough inquiry. Today I met victims of contaminated blood. Will she take this opportunity to ensure that there is a full public inquiry for those affected and their families?

The Prime Minister: I note the point that the hon. Gentleman has made about contaminated blood and I will speak to the Secretary of State for Health. I think this has already been looked at, and other ways of dealing with this issue have already been introduced and addressed.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister give way?

The Prime Minister: No. Mr Speaker, we are building opportunity and aspiration. We will also deliver a more secure United Kingdom because of the choices that we are making to prioritise our defence and national security. Our armed forces Bill will give those who put their lives on the line in the service of our country the proper respect that they deserve, with more security in the way they live and work. Our commitment to renew Trident means that this country maintains its continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent as the ultimate guarantee of our safety, and with a Prime Minister who is prepared to use it. We will continue to play a leading role in international efforts to tackle mass migration and climate change, to alleviate poverty and to end modern slavery. We have always looked beyond Europe to the wider world and we will continue to do so.

In conclusion, this has been a difficult time for our country. I know that there are many parents who worry about the kind of world that their children are growing up in. I recognise that and understand it. It has been an unsettling time that has tested the spirit of our country, but we are a resilient country. Our response to disaster and acts of terror that take the lives of innocent people must be this: compassion, unity, resolve. We are a great nation and a great people. We have been through and survived the toughest of times before, and we thrilled. Once again we can and will grow stronger from the challenges that we face today.

The Queen’s Speech on its own will not solve every challenge that our country faces—not every problem can be solved by an Act of Parliament—but it is a step forward to building a more compassionate, united and confident nation. That is what this Government will aim to achieve and what this Queen’s Speech will deliver. I commend the Queen’s Speech to the House.

4.20 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): May I begin by echoing the tributes of the Leader of the Opposition and the Prime Minister to Members who have passed away—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. May I say two things? First, if Members leaving the Chamber did so quickly and quietly, it would be greatly appreciated. [Interruption.] Order. I do not require any assistance from the hon. Gentleman—I do know a thing or two about this place. Secondly, it is a very considerable discourtesy for a Member to walk out of the Chamber by walking straight past the Member who has the Floor. It is so obviously a discourtesy that I am surprised it is necessary to point it out.

Ian Blackford: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

May I begin by echoing the tributes of the Leader of the Opposition and the Prime Minister to Members who have passed away in the last year? I pay tribute to my predecessor, the former right hon. Member for Moray, and thank him for his long service to this House and to the people of his constituency. I am sure right hon. and hon. Members will agree that, in the previous Parliament, Angus Robertson firmly established himself as a true statesman. Although we will miss his contribution to this place, I hope he continues to contribute to public life at a time when, more than ever, our national debate needs considered and rational voices. I also thank him for the leadership he demonstrated for the SNP at Westminster. We on the SNP Benches will miss a good friend.

I must say to the Prime Minister that she made a rather cheap gibe at the previous First Minister of Scotland. Let me point out that, unlike the Prime Minister, Alex Salmond at least won a majority in an election in Scotland. She may have made a rather cheap gibe at Alex Salmond, but she still has a Sturgeon that is very much going to be a thorn in her side.

This is the first time the House has met since the terrible events of this summer. On behalf of SNP Members, I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the professionalism, dedication and sacrifice of our emergency services, who have led the response to the awful events of this summer, and to whom we all owe a tremendous debt of gratitude.

The loss of life at Grenfell Tower was tragic and unnecessary. Family and friends of the victims will be heartbroken and grief-stricken, but many will be angry, too, that this tragedy could and should have been avoided. I speak on behalf of SNP Members when I commit our support to working with all parties in the Chamber to get those families and the country the answers they need and deserve.

Our summer was also marred by the cowardice and reckless violence of terrorism. The whole country is united in grief at the outrage of the attacks in Manchester, at London Bridge and, only this week, at the Finsbury Park mosque. In this place, we must all be united in showing leadership to all our citizens. Despite the despicable efforts of a small minority of misguided individuals, our communities and our society will not be divided. We stand firm against terrorists who attack Muslims, just as we stand against those who wrongly claim to act in the name of Islam.

It is customary to commend the mover and the seconder in proceedings on the Queen’s Speech. I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon), whose interest in, and knowledge of, agriculture and fisheries issues will be important in the coming months and years, as those two important sectors will be impacted by the kind of Brexit deal that is achieved.
I am told that the seconder, the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng), is a rising star of the right wing of the Conservative party.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: It’s the only wing.

Ian Blackford: Well, indeed.

In that regard, the hon. Gentleman is a useful political compass for SNP Members, because if we are in doubt about our position on any issue, we need only position ourselves to be diametrically opposed to the view of the hon. Gentleman.

Although I may be a relative newcomer to this place, I was always under the impression that the Queen’s Speech was intended to be an event that brought stability to the Government and to the country—an event where the Government set out what they intend to do and how they intend to govern. On this occasion, I cannot imagine that many in the country are feeling a sense of stability. To many, these may feel like the most uncertain and unstable of times facing the country. With rising inflation and low wage growth, working families will certainly not be feeling stability—they will feel uncertainty and a threat to their living standards. With a Conservative and low wage growth, working families will certainly not face, and those in other constituencies in Glasgow.

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I congratulate the hon. Gentleman for his remarks. The Conservatives have still got to realise that we have a stable Government in Scotland concentrating on the day job. If anyone wants an example of strong and stable, look to what has happened in Edinburgh. One cannot get away from the fact that there are 59 parliamentary seats in Scotland and 35 of us who will stand up for Scotland in this Parliament. When it comes to defending the rights and the interests of the people of Scotland, I want to see every single SNP MP following the lead that we in the Scottish National party will give.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Does my hon. Friend think that the Government must give an early signal of what they intend to do with regard to the closure of eight of Glasgow’s 16 jobcentres? They should take that off the table right away.

Ian Blackford: I fully agree. This matter was much debated in the previous Parliament. It has demonstrated the hardship that many of my hon. Friend’s constituents will face, and those in other constituencies in Glasgow. It would be an act of compassion by the Conservative Government if they were to do the right thing and remove the threat of closures to the Glasgow jobcentres.

With the threat of a hard Brexit and the loss of access to our most important markets, our exporting businesses will not be feeling stability and certainty. “Strong and stable” is what the Prime Minister offered the country, but “uncertain and unstable” is what she has delivered. Nothing in the Queen’s Speech changes that.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I would like to congratulate the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng), is a rising star of the right wing of the Conservative party. I have always been under the impression that the Queen’s Speech was intended to be an event that brought stability to the Government and to the country—an event where the Government set out what they intend to do and how they intend to govern. On this occasion, I cannot imagine that many in the country are feeling a sense of stability. To many, these may feel like the most uncertain and unstable of times facing the country. With rising inflation and low wage growth, working families will certainly not be feeling stability—they will feel uncertainty and a threat to their living standards. With a Conservative and low wage growth, working families will certainly not face, and those in other constituencies in Glasgow.

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Nigel Huddleston: I, too, congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his new role. He does, indeed, command respect in all parts of the House. He mentioned that we would have to rely on the DUP to get legislation through, but surely there is something in the Gracious Speech—perhaps the proposals concerning domestic abuse—that he would support. We would like to get the support of some in his party for many of our proposed pieces of legislation.

Ian Blackford: Let me make absolutely clear the role that the Scottish National party will play in this Parliament. We will be a force for progressive politics. I commend my very dear friend the previous hon. Member for Banff and Buchan, who was responsible for pushing through the private Member’s Bill on the Istanbul convention. I will certainly commend to the Scottish National party the idea of supporting the Government on any reasonable moves in that regard. I want to work for us so that we can get the best deal for the people of Scotland, particularly when it comes to Brexit.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on being elected the leader of his party. Has he noticed, as I have, that in the Queen’s Speech there are no measures to deal with austerity? That suggests that the Government have learned nothing, particularly when it comes to the plight of WASPI women.

Ian Blackford: I thank my friend for that intervention, and I agree with him. There is unfinished business, certainly for me, having been the pensions spokesman for the SNP in the last Parliament. We will not leave the WASPI women without a voice. It is utterly disgraceful that some of the worst-affected women were given 14 months’ written notice of an increase in their pensionable age. I have said before that, in this ridiculous situation, a woman born in February 1953 would have retired in January 2016 just shy of her 63rd birthday, but a woman born in February 1964 will not retire until July 2019, when she will be 65 and a half.
Quite simply, a two-and-a-half-year increase in a woman’s pensionable age over a one-year period is unacceptable. Cridland identified in his review of the state pension age that we should not be looking at an increase in pensionable age of more than one year in every 10 years. As I have often pointed out to the Government, there is a very easy solution, which is to reverse the Pensions Act 2011. The cost of doing so would be £8 billion, which is easily affordable given that there is a surplus of £30 billion in the national insurance fund.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): The hon. Gentleman knows full well that the policy he has set out was shot to pieces when the permanent secretary of the Department for Work and Pensions confirmed that it is not even physically possible to use the surplus; and that in many years, the fund is in deficit. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that?

Ian Blackford: I think the WASPI women are due an apology from the hon. Gentleman, because we cannot get away from the fact that the Government Actuary’s Department has indicated that the surplus this year is £30 billion. For goodness’ sake, let us use the surplus in that fund to introduce mitigation for the WASPI women. It is the right thing to do.

I assure the Prime Minister that this issue will not go away. Let me commend Members from across the House, including Conservative Members, who want action to be taken. We cannot defend the fact that women were given only 14 months’ notice, in some cases. That was a failure of communication, and the rise in pensionable age was far too swift. We must address the issue in this Parliament. I confirm that the SNP will not lose sight of the issue; we will stand foursquare behind the WASPI women in the months to come.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con) rose—

Ian Blackford: I want to make some progress, but I will happily take interventions later.

The Prime Minister’s gamble backfired. She has desperately clung to power—at least for now—and stumbled into the Brexit negotiations on Monday morning regardless, with an almost all-male team equipped with no credible plan, no mandate and, seemingly, no functional Government. I can see that the Prime Minister is floundering. Where is the stable government that she promised us? It is not here.

It is worth reflecting on the fact that last year’s Queen’s Speech was delivered just one month before the nations of the United Kingdom voted on whether to remain a member of the European Union. In that referendum, Scotland voted clearly and decisively to remain in the European Union. Northern Ireland, too, voted to remain in the European Union. England and Wales, of course, voted to leave. There was a democratic divergence across the UK.

I had hoped that a compromise might be found that would work for all nations of the United Kingdom. Indeed, the Prime Minister herself said that article 50 would not be triggered until there was a UK approach and that she was willing to listen to all options. That is why last year the Scottish Government, in good faith and in a spirit of compromise, published proposals in “Scotland’s Place in Europe”. Those are credible proposals that would mitigate the worst impacts of a hard Brexit. They would maintain the UK’s membership of the single market while it leaves the EU or, failing that, maintain Scotland’s membership of the single market within the United Kingdom.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his new role. Will he set a new tone for his party by recognising that when a referendum has settled the matter that Scotland will remain in the UK and the UK has had a referendum that settles another matter, perhaps it would be good to stand up for democracy? Can we hear something new from his party?

Ian Blackford: Of course we in the Scottish National party have always accepted the result of the referendum in 2014. That is not in question. I say to Government Members that we were promised that if we voted to stay within the United Kingdom, our future in Europe would be protected.

When we went to the country last year, the Scottish National party stood on a manifesto commitment that if Scotland was dragged out of the European Union against its will, we would reserve the right to give the people of Scotland an insurance policy, whereby at the end of the Brexit process they would be able to have their say. I say to the Conservatives, who are chuntering from a sedentary position, that we won that election to the Scottish Parliament. A vote took place in the Scottish Parliament in which 69 Members of that Parliament voted to enact a referendum if the circumstances were right and 59 Members voted against. That is democracy. The people of Scotland have spoken and it is about time the Conservatives respected the sovereignty of the Scottish people.

The Government’s executive summary to the Queen’s Speech, which was published today, says that powers repatriated from the EU will be held at UK level until the UK negotiates with the devolved Governments. It states that the repeal Bill will “replicate the common UK frameworks created by EU law in UK law, and maintain the scope of devolved decision-making powers immediately after exit.” It clarifies that the Government will centralise fisheries and agriculture matters through specific Bills on each.

Page 22 tells us:

“Aspects of the Bill will extend to the UK, as international matters are not devolved. We will consult widely with the devolved administrations on the appropriate extent of any legislation.”

This is the great power grab in action.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I wish the hon. Gentleman all the best in his new position as leader of the Scottish National party in this place. Does he accept that some MPs—good and honourable Members—lost their seats because of their position on Brexit, Europe and fisheries? It is important that the Scottish National party Members who are here commit themselves to the policy that we will take in this House to ensure that fisheries across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland are preserved, along with people’s jobs.

Ian Blackford: The important point is that fisheries and agriculture are devolved. We will not sit back and watch this land grab from Westminster. Powers over
Ian Blackford:

fisheries and agriculture must remain with the Scottish Parliament. There is a real question for Scottish Conservative Members: whose side will they be on? Will they be on the side of London or on the side of the people of Scotland? Let me tell them that if they do not stand up for Scotland, they will pay a price at the ballot box in future elections. [Interruption.] I know that many Conservatives from Scotland are here for the first time, but may I respectfully suggest to them that if they want to make an intervention, it is perhaps better to rise than to shout from a sedentary position? That is not the way we tend to behave in this Parliament.

John Redwood:

Will the SNP representative tell us what measures in this Queen’s Speech, if any, his party supports, or should we tell the UK public that SNP Members want to block everything and are negative about every progressive proposal in our Queen’s Speech?

Ian Blackford: My goodness! I think I have demonstrated in my remarks so far that we will of course support progressive policies such as taking action on abuse, domestic violence and so on. If there are measures that are in the interests of the people of Scotland, we will support them.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that the Scotland Office Minister who will be dealing with agriculture and fisheries will be a member of the House of Lords, and therefore not open to scrutiny by this House? Does he agree that it is a shame that the Prime Minister does not think the new Tories are of sufficient calibre to hold such a position?

Ian Blackford: My hon. and learned Friend makes an extremely important point. I cannot imagine what some of the new Conservatives must make of it—they win an election, and then a colleague who could not unseat my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) is elevated to the House of Lords. Democracy in the United Kingdom—you lose an election, but you still end up in government. Not only that, but we also find—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I apologise to the hon. Gentleman for having to interrupt him, but Members should not chunter from a sedentary position, which is unparliamentary. [Interruption.] Order. Mr Jayawardena, calm yourself and try to restore your equilibrium. If you are calmer, it will be of benefit to you, probably to Hampshire and certainly to the House. There is quite a lot of eccentric gesticulation with hands taking place, not least among new Members. I hope they will be cured of this malady before long.

Ian Blackford: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I hope that new Members will appreciate your sage advice.

There is an important point here. A failed Conservative candidate is being elevated to the House of Lords and standing down from his position in the European Parliament, and the Conservatives seem to want to appoint to the European Parliament someone who was fifth on their list. [Hon. Members: “They’re getting sued.”] They are getting sued by one of their own members. It is a very strange approach to democracy from the Scottish Conservatives.

Membership of the single market could not be more important for Scotland. It contains eight of our top 12 export destinations, supports 300,000 jobs in Scotland and contributes more than £11 billion to our economy. A hard Brexit would severely damage Scotland’s economic, social and cultural interests and hit jobs and living standards deeply and permanently. That is why we are determined to avoid it—and that is true for the United Kingdom as well.

The Prime Minister must now reflect on the fact that her party stood on a platform of a hard Brexit that has been roundly rejected by the electorate. There is no mandate for a hard Brexit. It is the Scottish Government’s compromise approach that has been endorsed by the Scottish Parliament and now by the people of Scotland as a manifesto commitment at the general election. My message to the Prime Minister is simple: it is time to listen. It is time to get back around the table with the devolved Governments of the United Kingdom and work out a compromise that works for all in the United Kingdom and avoids the devastating damage that a hard Brexit would cause.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: My hon. Friend will of course know that the Prime Minister is famous for her U-turns. She currently wants out of the single market and the customs union, but does he expect her to U-turn any time soon, before she takes the UK over a cliff edge? Scotland, of course, has its parachute for safety from the carnage that the Prime Minister is bringing.

Ian Blackford: I encourage the Prime Minister to listen. It is important that she reflects on what happened in the election. If she is prepared to do that, I would see it not as a U-turn, but as a Prime Minister beginning to show strong and stable leadership.

At the heart of the compromise must be continued membership of the single market. I gently suggest that Labour Members reflect on their position. Voters in Scotland will have sat aghast at the sight of a Labour shadow Secretary of State for Scotland, who is not in her place, who could not say whether she supported Scotland’s voice being heard in the Brexit negotiations. To capitulate to the Conservatives on the single market would be to sell out working families whose wages and prospects will be ultimately damaged by a hard Brexit. My challenge to Labour is to join the Scottish National party in seeking to get the single market back on the table as the best option—the only option—for protecting jobs, the economy and living standards.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): I agree with the hon. Gentleman’s position on unfettered access to the single market, but would he like to comment on what the Prime Minister has said? She said that no deal is better than a bad deal, but the Chancellor has said that no deal is very bad. Both cannot be true—otherwise, a very bad deal would be better than a bad deal. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we need to get a deal in which we maximise jobs and access to the marketplace?

Ian Blackford: The hon. Gentleman has to speak to his Labour colleagues. If they want to stand up for the people of this country, they have to join the SNP in demanding that we remain members of the single market. That is the salient point.
The Queen’s Speech fails not only on minimising the impact of Brexit. It fails even harder on reversing the damage caused by almost a decade of austerity. For this Tory Government, austerity cuts are not simply a policy response to a particular economic situation. They are an ideology and a political choice. [ Interruption. ] I hear somebody shouting “nonsense”. Let me say politely to the Government that, in 2009, we embarked on a policy of quantitative easing. I suspect that all hon. Members supported the need to take monetary policy action in 2009. The situation now is that there has been £430 billion-worth of intervention in the markets. The point is that we have not taken the fiscal measures to deliver sustainable economic growth that had to sit hand in hand with the monetary policy action. We have underpinned the financial markets as a direct consequence of quantitative easing. Those with assets have done well. The financial markets have increased by more than 70% over those years. The tragedy is that real wages have declined. The responsibility for economic management rests with the Government. We have not looked after the working people of this country but have ensured that those with financial assets have done very well. That is the specific charge, and why the Government can and must change course.

That political choice has put certain groups of people in the crosshairs, including working families, those on low incomes just managing to get by, and the disabled and vulnerable who rely on support from social security. I use that phrase for a clear purpose. In Scotland, we talk about social security, but the Government in London talk about welfare. That is why they have a problem. They do not realise that it is about the importance of that safety net. Our society is simply as strong as its weakest link.

**Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that those who are most under pressure will find it even worse if the Government continue their shambolic roll-out of the universal credit full service, which is ahead of schedule in the highlands and is hurting people deeply every day—those seeking work, the disabled and those who are working?

**Ian Blackford:** I commend my hon. Friend for his work in this area. I know that many constituents have come to him who are enormously affected by the changes. It is important that the Government reflect on the impact of the changes and that they change course.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Ian Blackford:** I need to make some progress; I apologise.

We know that a decade of austerity will see the highest inequality since the Conservative Government under Margaret Thatcher. While Tory Members might proclaim cuts to Government spending, they mean real pain and hardship for people across the country. The SNP has consistently opposed austerity and we are offering a credible alternative. Our approach to the public finances would balance the UK budget for day-to-day spending by the end of the Parliament. It would set debt on a downward path and, crucially, free up an additional £118 billion of public investment over the Parliament to grow the economy, safeguarding public services and protecting household incomes—a clear alternative to five more years of Tory austerity; investment and hope, not more destructive cuts.

Those on low incomes who rely on in-work social security, and the vulnerable and the disabled, face a further £9 billion of additional social security cuts from this Tory Government. There is an alternative. Where Labour has only pledged to reverse less than a quarter of those cuts, SNP MPs will stand against all the further planned cuts to social security. Our pensioners, too, now face real pain from Tory austerity. The Government’s intention to remove the triple lock and raid the winter fuel allowance will hit pensioners hard, at a time when their budgets are hard pressed. In the highlands of Scotland, 77% of pensioners are in fuel poverty. Until we have driven fuel poverty out of our society, we need to make sure that we are standing up for the rights of our pensioners.

**Sir William Cash** (Stone) (Con): I just wonder whether the hon. Gentleman has factored the Barnett formula into the description that he has given of the finances in Scotland. Given that there is such a catastrophe in the Scottish finances at the moment, is the SNP still insisting that the Barnett formula has to be applied?

**Ian Blackford:** I find that quite extraordinary, because the real-terms cut to the Scottish budget over the last 10 years has been about £2.9 billion and it is simply because of Tory austerity. Yes, we support the Barnett formula, because it is applied on a needs basis. It is interesting that others have wanted to take it away. It is not the SNP who are a threat to the public finances in Scotland; it is those who want to attack the Barnett formula, because it is applied on a needs basis. It is interesting that others have wanted to take it away. It is not the SNP who are a threat to the public finances in Scotland; it is those who want to attack the Barnett formula. Let me make it absolutely clear: in any back-door deal that is done with the DUP, if there is any increase in spending in Northern Ireland, which we would of course welcome, that must be reflected in the Barnett formula. Scotland must be protected by any deal that the Conservatives do.

SNP MPs will oppose the removal of the triple lock, so that our pensioners still see the pension that they worked for rise, and we will continue to support the WASPI women in their campaign to secure fairness. The Government must act with speed to address the WASPI issue. The Prime Minister and her Government must reflect on the circumstances that the WASPI women are in and put in place mitigation.

The most startling impact of austerity is the effect it has on children in working families. The incomes of the poorest third of working-age households will fall by 10% over the next four years, driving a further 1 million children across the United Kingdom into poverty. It was no wonder that in the last Parliament the previous Secretary of State for Work and Pensions wanted to redefine child poverty, because the numbers are quite simply eye-watering and shameful. By 2021, more than 5 million children across the UK—a number equivalent to the total population of Scotland—could be living in poverty, in one of the richest countries in the world. Above all, austerity erodes our public services, at a time when we need more than ever to ensure that our public services are well funded and delivering for people in our communities. In this Parliament, SNP MPs will champion our public services.
Over the past 10 years, the SNP Scottish Government have prioritised the health service and we will continue to do so. Our NHS, like health services across the world, faces real challenges. However, in Scotland, patient satisfaction is at record levels. Our hospital A&Es are the best performing in the United Kingdom. Many nurses in Scotland are better paid than in the rest of the UK. Our health service in Scotland will be £2 billion better off by the end of this Parliament. However, we want to go further. If the UK Government chose to increase health spending per head of population in England to the current Scottish level, which is 7% higher, that would mean more money for the NHS, not just in Scotland but across the UK. It would increase the health budget in England by £11 billion more than inflation by 2022, and it would deliver funds to support up to £1 billion of additional investment in Scotland’s NHS.

Ensuring that everyone has a safe, warm and affordable home is central to the SNP Scottish Government’s drive to make this country fairer and more prosperous. Over the last parliamentary term, the SNP Government invested more than £1.7 billion in affordable housing. We are delivering more than 30,000 new affordable homes, and our target is 50,000 affordable homes by the end of this Parliament.

High-quality and well-funded public services, a growing economy with investment in business, and a fairer and more equal country are the alternatives to austerity. Given that they were denied their majority by the public, I had hoped that this Queen’s Speech might signal a Government who were more willing to listen and compromise, but I see scant evidence of that today.

In the last Parliament, the SNP was a real and effective opposition. It was the SNP that led the challenge to the proposed cuts in working tax credits which led to a coalition, here and elsewhere, that forced the Government to change course. It was my friend and colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), who championed the campaign against the changes in tax credits for families with more than two children—what became known as the rape clause. We asked the Government again to revisit that issue.

Alison Thewliss: I thank my hon. Friend for mentioning the campaign against the rape clause. Does he agree that there is a great contrast between the Scottish Government’s launch today of a social security system that describes social security as a human right and the fact that the rape clause breaches women’s and children’s human rights?

Ian Blackford: I absolutely agree. I see that the Prime Minister is present. I hope that she has listened very carefully to what my hon. Friend has said, and that the Government will reflect on the issue and deal with it in short order.

In conclusion—[Hon. Members: “Hurray!”] I could happily go on.

Faced with a right-wing Tory Government pursuing an austerity agenda that they have little mandate to implement, the SNP will table its own amendment to the Queen’s Speech, which will seek a change of direction towards the progressive policies that our public services and the economy need. In this Parliament of minorities, the SNP will take every opportunity to further Scotland’s interests. SNP Members will be prepared to work with parties throughout the House to deliver more progressive, fairer policies that will serve the interests of the people of this country. In this Parliament, SNP MPs will ensure that Scotland’s voice is heard louder and clearer than ever before.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House, Mr Kenneth Clarke.

4.57 pm

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford). I congratulate him on his elevation to the leadership of his somewhat diminished party, and congratulate him particularly on his fortitude in the face of the rather clear setback that his party suffered in the recent general election. I think I share some of his feelings, as my party has also lost some good colleagues. Scotland seemed to have a slightly different election campaign. I took the results in Scotland as a serious rebuff to the Scottish National party’s one central cause of holding another referendum in an attempt to break up the Union of the United Kingdom, and I hope that it is terminal on this occasion. I assure my very welcome new friends from Scotland on this side of the House—[Interruption.] They are secure in my support. I assure them, and our friends in the Democratic Unionist party, that I am a stalwart supporter of the Union, and that, whatever happens in this Parliament, I shall certainly be unwavering in that support.

In England, however, this was a Brexit election. In fact, the public are slightly losing interest in the political bubble’s debate about Brexit, and lots of other issues came into the election, but it was designed as a Brexit election, and I think that history will see it, and this Parliament, as such.

As I am entitled to somewhat less of the House’s time than the leaders of the political parties—quite rightly—I shall confine my speech to the issue of Brexit. I should have liked more time in which to welcome the aspects of the speech made by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister that reflected, yet again, the liberal social conscience which I know she has, and her deep feeling for those who have not prospered enough during the periods of prosperity that we have experienced in this country recently. She recaptured the spirit of her Downing Street address.

I would also like to debate the national economy. I welcomed the sound principles—in my opinion the only possible principles—that she set out in describing how to tackle and get through the present uncertainties and get back to proper growth in a modern and competitive economy. However, I propose to confine my remarks to what history will regard, whatever happens in this Parliament, as the great, lasting work of this Parliament: what kind of deal we achieve as we leave the European Union.

In case anyone immediately starts to disagree with me on the basis that I am challenging the referendum, I point out that I never accepted that a referendum was a sensible way to proceed on such a huge and complex question. I regard the idea of having a second referendum, in case my side might win on this occasion, as a particularly foolish proposal. I thought this was a parliamentary
matter. I spoke and voted against the invocation of article 50. I accept that the majority in favour of invoking it was overwhelming on both sides of the House. For this Parliament, I accept that the matter is settled: we are definitely going to leave the European Union.

We now have to debate what we all agree in principle is the best deal we can obtain for the future special partnership with Europe and our new relationships—political and economic—with the rest of the world. The subject that we will have to consider as the Parliament proceeds was scarcely debated in any sensible way by the national leadership of either side in the referendum, as reported in the national media. Nor, I regret to say, was any particular debate in the general election devoted in any sensible way to the content of a new arrangement.

I could make a very long speech if I addressed every question—again, I have to be selective. We are right to concentrate at this moment, as the debate is beginning to do, on our economic relationships with the European Union, and the prospects for trade, investment and jobs. That is obviously most compelling. We must leave for a later stage the dozens of important questions that will arise on security, international crime, environmental standards and so on. At this moment, we are interested in how we will trade with Europe and what the relationships will be.

It is important that we do that because Brexit is already, through its short-term effects, making many people in this country, particularly the less well off, considerably poorer. The immediate effect of the vote was to cause a significant devaluation of sterling. International investors decided that the attractiveness of sterling assets was much less and that the prospects of the British economy were seriously damaged. The pound has fallen and stayed low, and that is feeding its way into inflation, which is exceeding the low wage growth in the economy. Investment is also stalling, so we are seeing a serious slowdown in growth and a drop in living standards, particularly among vulnerable communities. If there are those who believe that eventually we can get a deal that can reverse those things, the sooner we reach a sensible agreement on that and my right hon. Friend the Brexit Secretary pursues and achieves it, the better.

Sir William Cash: I just wondered, in the light of the extremely sensible remarks that my right hon. and learned Friend has made so far, whether he would follow up what he said on television at the weekend about not really seeing any reason why we should not follow up what he said on television at the weekend extremely sensible remarks that my right hon. and learned Friend. We have debated these matters for a very long time, and I think he and I will eventually have to reach some sort of compromise—only when that is achieved will we be able to put the votes of the Democratic Unionist party and the Government very far in the same direction. I will certainly bring him up to date with my views on the single market and the customs union, as that is precisely what I intend to go on to.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Clarke: I will give way to the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins), but then I will not give way again unless somebody is particularly pressing, if hon. Members will forgive me.

Toby Perkins: I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for giving way. He is absolutely right that the economy should be a priority. He has mentioned some of the things that might have to wait until further down the line, but he did not talk about immigration. Having spent a lot of time speaking to people in Chesterfield over the last few weeks, I know that if we end up with some kind of deal whereby we leave the EU but nothing changes in terms of immigration, many of the Brexit voters will feel that their vote for leaving the EU was very much given under false pretences.

Mr Clarke: I understand the political background to which the hon. Gentleman refers, but I get concerned that more and more Labour Members—perfectly reasonable ones—who represent constituencies in the north of England or the north midlands are now suddenly finding reasons for sounding rather anti-immigrant and putting forward that interpretation. We have a problem with immigration—I will address it—but we should not start feeding nonsense like the idea that EU nationals have lowered our living standards or are taking our jobs. The political temptation to start sounding a bit like the erstwhile UKIP opponent should be resisted, particularly by people in what used to be safe Labour seats in the north of England.

Let me turn to the question of the single market and the customs union. We are going to have to seek some compromise, so I start from the proposition that, as far as I am aware, there is not a single protectionist Member of Parliament sitting in this House. Everybody here declares their fervent belief in free trade. It was never always thus in this House. The only real protectionist on my side of the House was the late Alan Clark, which was rather odd as he was Minister for Trade at the beginning of the Uruguay round, although he was exceptional in many matters. The left wing of the Labour party in the days of Michael Foot was ferociously protectionist, as it was ferociously Europhobic—it was united with the old imperialist right in our party in opposing the European project.

I am never quite sure where the present Leader of the Opposition has gone to, because he and I have rather consistently stuck to the sort of views we both had when we entered this House many years ago—he a little later than me, but not much. He was one of the stoutest Bennite Europhobes in the House of Commons—it was a capitalist plot in those days. He has not exactly had a Pauline conversion. It is not bad, but I kept finding that he was speaking on the same side as me in the recent referendum, although he only seemed able to find arguments about resisting obscure threats to workers’ rights, which I could not see were remotely an issue in the referendum we were holding. But I will accept what he says and his party’s position, so I think that now he probably is in favour of free trade.

Particularly in the referendum, both sides in the campaign were united on the principles of free trade and open trading links with the rest of the EU. I think that everyone would agree that the leave side was led
very robustly by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary. He in particular was very anxious to dismiss the suggestion that the future of our trading relationships was remotely going to be affected by our leaving the EU—it was said that that was the politics of fear and scaremongering. He repeatedly explained that, as the Germans needed to sell us their Mercedes cars and as the Italians needed to sell us their Prosecco, our trading relationships were obviously going to remain completely unchanged. Indeed, at times, he and one or two others in the leave campaign seemed to imply that we did not really need trade agreements in order to trade in the modern world, as we would simply go out there and sell things. However, if we leave the European Union with no deal and we do not have all the EU trade deals that we have helped to negotiate over the years, we will for a time be the only country in the developed world that has absolutely no trade agreements with any other country. My right hon. Friend, with his usual breezy insouciance, seemed quite undisturbed by that spectacle, but I do not think that that is where we are now.

Let me begin by dealing precisely with the key issue that my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) raised. I hope that I can take it as a given starting point across the House that we will seek to achieve no new customs barriers, regulatory barriers or tariffs between ourselves and the rest of the European Union. Tariffs are important, but they are not as important as the other two for quite a lot of aspects of a modern economy. I take it that all sides agree that we shall not seek to put any obstacles of that kind in the way of future relationships.

In the present circumstances, I am anxious to demonstrate my agreement with our friends in the Democratic Unionist party. I share all their fervour that we should have an open border in Ireland. It would be an absolute catastrophe if we found ourselves closing that border again, with all the threats to the stability of Ulster and the Irish Republic that that would entail. Given that no one would argue in principle with what I have just said about no new tariffs, regulatory barriers or customs barriers, I find it odd that those on the two Front Benches are ostensibly agreed that we are going to leave the single market—that is difficult to understand in the case of Labour—and perhaps the customs union as well. I can only assume that either that is mere semantics, or that we are going to see considerable ingenuity in how we achieve what is to people of common sense on both sides of the channel a desirable goal, while at the same time withdrawing from the single market and the customs union.

I repeat that when we received our instructions from the people—to use the kind of phrase that the Eurosceptics are fond of—in the referendum, I do not recall the question of leaving the single market and the customs union being even remotely seriously raised. Certainly in the rather good debates that I had with intelligent Eurosceptics in village halls and so on, none of them ever suggested that we would do that. This is in line with my experience throughout my time in this House, during which every Euro sceptic has argued that there is nothing wrong with the common market. Every right-wing Tory has always been totally in favour of having close and open trading relations with the rest of Europe. The sole basis of their opposition was the politics of Europe, or their version of what they thought that was.

Mr Clarke: I shall give way to my right hon. Friend, with whom I shall also have to seek compromise, as I am sure the Whips will tell us at some time during these debates.

John Redwood: The remain and leave campaigns agreed that we could not stay in the single market or the customs union, for a variety of good reasons. The first is that we want to have free trade agreements with other countries around the world, and we could not do that if we were in the single market or the customs union. Secondly, it was made very clear that we would have to make budget contributions and accept freedom of movement, which we have no intention of doing. That was one of the few things that the two campaigns agreed about, and we all told the British public that we would be leaving the single market and the customs union. That was repeated in the article 50 letter, and it was appreciated by the EU. It was also voted on and approved overwhelmingly by the House of Commons in the last Parliament. What part of that does my right hon. and learned Friend not understand?

Mr Clarke: Members in the Chamber will begin to think that, for the first time in my career here, there is collusion between myself and my hon. Friend for Stone, and between myself and my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), because my right hon. Friend anticipates precisely my next point: the only reasons I have so far been given for the proposition—the European Union is bewildered by our approach—that we leave the single market and the customs union. The reason for leaving the customs union is, apparently, that we are desperately anxious to reach agreements with the wider world—[Interruption.] I am delighted to see my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, with whom I have always had the most amiable discussions about European issues, taking his place in the Chamber.

Everybody in the Conservative party has been advocating greater trade and better trading relationships with the wider world for as long as I have been here. The British Governments were widely recognised over the past 40 years as being the Government in the EU who were the most fervent advocates of liberal economics and an open trading policy. British Governments played a very large part in instigating the many trade deals that the EU has entered into with partners around the world and in pressing the other member states to make progress on them—with considerable success. Of course, if you negotiate as the EU, you have considerable negotiating clout—we would have less on our own.

The last time I held office, towards the end of the coalition Government—I am taking a break in my political career at the moment—I was asked to lead for us on the EU-US Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership deal, which, sadly, was a very difficult one to get. There was no more fervent advocate of the desirability of an EU TTIP deal than the then British Government, who were led by the Conservatives and in which most of my right hon. and hon. Friends who are now on the Front Bench served. That was our approach, and it is why in recent times we have achieved some extremely valuable free trade deals. The South Korea
deal is a spectacular one, and we have even opened negotiations with Japan, which is extremely important. Those deals will go when we leave the EU, unless we reinstate them, yet apparently we will be leaving the customs union to add to those deals. The only quick way in which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Trade will be able to achieve that—this is the first thing I would recommend—will be by suggesting to the other parties to our current deals that we could continue them on the basis that, as far as they are concerned, we are still in the customs union. We would therefore be asking the Koreans to accept that we would sign up to the terms that we had before, and that we would conduct ourselves as bound by the rules and subject to international arbitration—all the things that are essential to have any agreement with anybody. Otherwise, it will be a nightmare trying to reopen them all—

John Redwood: May I help my right hon. and learned Friend?

Mr Clarke: Ever helpful, I am sure.

John Redwood: I just want to reassure my right hon. and learned Friend that when partners split up and there are extant treaties, they novate to both sides so we will be able to inherit the treaty, as well as the rest of the EU will, unless the other side objects. I know of no other country that is going to object—they would want to keep the free trade agreement with the UK.

Mr Clarke: I am very reassured by that, because it means that in this global future, with all the new deals we wish to make—on the horizon that beckons before us of where we are going to go—in more than 50 countries we are going to continue on exactly the same footing as we are on now, taking on all the obligations of the existing EU trade deal and deriving all the benefits. I find that extremely reassuring, and my right hon. Friend and I should make an unlikely delegation to the Prime Minister to urge that upon her as the next step to take. I think the idea is—I will entirely welcome it, of course, when we are out of the EU—that we look forward to new trade deals negotiated with other countries, but I think we grossly underestimate the difficulty of doing that.

For example, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Trade visited the Philippines. He assured President Duterte how much we shared his values, which I found rather startling, but he was on a worthwhile mission of which I wholly approved, trying to pave the way for a proper free trade deal with the Philippines. It so happens that I have been to the Philippines several times: I have made political, ministerial and business visits, most of which have had, as part of their agenda, trying to promote trade and investment in the Philippines. It is not an easy market. The idea that we are going to make rapid progress in the Philippines should not take hold too strongly with my right hon. Friend and his colleagues. If he can make any worthwhile advances in less than a few years, it will be a quite remarkable achievement.

We might be able to get somewhere with New Zealand, and, when they have finished with TTIP, we might be able to get somewhere with President Trump’s United States, but there will be difficulties even there. We must have an agreement with the New Zealanders. They are our best friends in the world on this kind of subject, they run a very well-governed country, they are very well disposed to us, and they share our views on free trade. Nevertheless, their first demand will have to be the lifting of quotas and tariffs on lamb. That will pose problems for our troubled agricultural sector, so we had better prepare to handle that carefully.

The first demand of any American Administration—assuming we even get anywhere with the protectionist and isolationist current Administration—will be that we open up to their beef. Personally, I do not have any hang-ups about hormone-treated beef, but there will have to be some quite hard negotiations about exactly how far we are going to open up our market to the Americans, who are always anxious to get rid of their heavily subsidised agricultural produce. They will not regard us as strong bargaining partners in the situation we have put ourselves in. I shall not go on, but the whole idea of leaving the customs union has its limitations.

Similarly, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham chose to raise the question of our paying a financial contribution. Everybody is having to come to terms with that. I wish my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union well in the main negotiations at the moment and hope that he comes back with the best deal he can get, but he is not going to start the negotiations with the European Union on the basis that we repudiate all the legal, financial and treaty obligations that we have already signed up to, or without a proper, reasonable, objective division of assets and so on. I wish him well in getting a modest figure.

If we wish to have totally unfettered access to the market in the rest of the European Union, which I do, we are completely wasting our time if we turn up saying we are not going to make any contribution to the regional grants that are made to the less developed economies of, for example, eastern and central Europe, which is the basis on which those economies are prepared to enter into free trade with developed economies such as ours. No other country has an agreement with the EU that does not involve a contribution of that kind.

The reason usually given is that we wish to have more control of our borders and deal with the free movement of labour—the point made by the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins). I quite accept that we have a political problem in this country on the subject of immigration; we need to accept that in a serious, professional and civilised manner. I do not have personal hang-ups about immigration—it is certainly no question of culture, race, or anything of that kind, as far as I am concerned. I think British society is very much stronger, healthier and more interesting nowadays than it was in my childhood. I now live very contentedly in a multi-ethnic, multicultural, international society, and I think that is the way the 21st century is going to go in every developed country in the world.

The problem is the numbers of people coming here, but the problem is not, in my opinion, the numbers of other EU nationals in particular. That was not the surge that lay behind a lot of the votes in the referendum. There are people who do not like foreign languages being spoken on the bus, but I think that they are outnumbered.

It is undoubtedly the case—it is a fairly easy case to make—that EU nationals of all the ethnic groups in this country are the most likely to be in productive and
valuable work and the least likely to be claiming benefit, and they are allowed here on the basis that they will take work. Since the referendum, there has been more serious discussion about the devastating effect it would have on various sectors of our economy and key public services if we started, with new rigorous controls, excluding EU nationals from coming here.

I have just had for the first time in my life first-hand experience of the best of the national health service, and the multinational teams who dealt with me at every level contained a very high proportion of EU nationals. The public do not actually get upset about German academics or Romanian nurses or Polish building workers; it is the sheer numbers of other immigrants who come here. UKIP, in its dog-whistle campaigning, always campaigned with posters showing brown or black people trying to enter this country. They never explained that for the huge numbers of people wanting to come here from Africa, the middle east, Afghanistan and so on it was an entirely sovereign decision for the United Kingdom whether they were given legal status to live here and nothing whatever to do with our membership of the European Union, which does not make the faintest difference.

I am quite clear that this country should behave in a civilised and responsible way towards the world’s poor, that we should certainly honour our international law commitments on this subject—on the law of asylum and so on—but we have to reassure people who decided to vote leave because they saw all those pictures of people on the beaches of Libya, and thought our borders had been lost and that it had something to do with the EU that so many of them were trying to come here. In fact, I think, a lot of the problem is not caused by the EU; it is a problem we share with the other nations of northern Europe in particular. Lots and lots of young men take the family savings and risk their lives paying people smugglers, and they mainly head for Germany, Sweden or the United Kingdom. We have been co-operating, and we should continue to do so, with the other member states on issues such as tackling the problem of crossing the Mediterranean, and sealing the outer European border but controlling it in a way that lets in people whom we need or to whom we have an obligation, moral, legal or otherwise. The idea that leaving the European Union means that people will stop trying to get across from Calais or Ostend is an illusion.

More importantly, our big problem, which is normally shoved under the carpet but has been mentioned several times in the media recently, is the huge number of undocumented illegal immigrants in this country. Nobody knows how many there are, but estimates vary between 400,000 and 1 million. Not surprisingly, following the recent horrific tragedy quite a number of them turned out to be living in this tower in north Kensington where we saw such appalling, heart-rending scenes.

All over the country, they are there. They are camping out near the channel ports. British people smugglers are bringing them in. There are people who have been refused asylum but have never left, people who have overstayed their visas. That is the real problem, but how do we deal with it in a way that is not merely cruel and inhuman? It is a tremendously difficult problem. We cannot just deport people who are probably using a false name, who are probably not giving their genuine nationality. We have to try to persuade some country to take them back because we want to deport them, but that country will deny that they want these people or that they are anything to do with them.

To start concentrating on freedom of movement of labour and trying to put in unnecessary barriers to people who, as every study shows, have been making a positive contribution to the economy of this country for most of the past few decades, is a substitute for facing up to the enormous problems of reassuring our public that we are not sacrificing our humanitarian values but we do understand that we cannot take the world’s poor and that we need some system to address that.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I am very grateful to my right hon. and learned Friend for giving way. I join him in congratulating all the medical staff in Nottingham, essentially for putting him back together again and making sure that his health is even better than it was before, as we can see in all the rigour of his arguments. May I say how much I agree with everything that he says? Does he agree that one of the great tragedies of recent events, in terms of the politics that we face, is that none of those arguments has been made, not only outside the House but in the Chamber? I do not know for how many years we have failed to have an honest debate about immigration. If we had started here, then had the debate out in our communities, we might not find ourselves in the unfortunate situation that we are clearly in.

Mr Clarke: I agree entirely with my right hon. Friend. We live in a celebrity culture where the referendum was essentially the Boris and Dave show, with very little serious content. The general election had a lot of slogans, and billions of pounds were going to be spent on everything that emerged as a problem, but it was remarkably bereft of policy discussion in the media—that approach is seen not just in Parliament—and in debate. That is a wider issue: in the politics of Nottinghamshire we try to keep up standards, but in the House we need to return to treating these things seriously.

Briefly, because I have taken far longer than I intended, we have to approach this on a cross-party basis. Both the major parties are hopelessly split on the issue. We have just demonstrated that, and the Labour party is equally split. The idea that we will continue in power by getting my right hon. Friends and me to agree on some compromise, subject to a veto on every significant vote to be exercised by the Democratic Unionists, which will give us a small majority in the House, is not the way to have a strong mandate for the Brexit negotiations that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was seeking in the election.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis) rose—

Mr Clarke: As I wish my right hon. Friend to have a strong mandate, I will break with what I just said and, for the last time, give way.

Mr Davis: I want to take my right hon. and learned Friend back to his comments on migration. He described the referendum as the Boris and Dave show. It certainly was not the Ken and David show. Neither of us spoke much about immigration in the referendum campaign, but the simple truth is that if we look back over the 20 years since the growth in migration from the east—the
then Labour Government did not have a transitional arrangement—the concern of the public at large, not just small groups or people who are bigots, about migration generally went from next to nothing to 80%. It is a little wider, I think, than he has described. There are real problems and issues that require us to behave in a civilised manner, but I think that we should treat that respectfully. We are trying to get a resolution that respects that and delivers an economic outcome that we deserve.

Mr Clarke: I agree with my right hon. Friend. I always credit him with consistently sound principles. I have the same respect for him that I have for the two right hon. Friends who have interrupted me. [Interruption] No—I mean that genuinely, as they have not been on all sides at various times. They have argued consistently, in a principled way, with knowledge of the European Union all the way through. There is always an element in politics—we have to have this—where some people change, quite rapidly sometimes, according to the latest headline or the prospect of promotion or whatever it might be. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union cannot be accused of that, and neither can I. I credit him, too, for not using any of the daft arguments during the referendum. I do not remember him saying that 70 million Turks were coming to molest our womenfolk and take our jobs. He did not say that there would be £350 million a week to spend on the national health service—the two big arguments of the national leaders—and I did not use the daft ones on our side either. The result was that we hardly got reported—nobody took any notice, because the national media were not remotely interested.

It is obvious that we are going to have to have some cross-party appeal now, and there are important reasons for that. The Labour party will be tempted by another election. So many Labour Members I know are still pinching themselves at the fact that they are still in the House. I quite accept that the Leader of the Opposition had a personal triumph, but I point out that Labour is still miles from forming a Government. It has 50 fewer seats than the Conservative party, and its chances of forming a coalition with the Democratic Unionist party, the Liberals or the Scottish Nationalist party on the kind of platform it stood on are absolutely nil.

I also think that another general election would be an appalling risk. The public do not like any party. I have never known such—ill-founded, I think—adolescent cynicism to be so widespread among the electorate, who treat the political class with growing contempt. Are we going to start playing party games and have another election when they are so volatile? About 20% of the population changed their minds in the last fortnight of the campaign. It was not with deep conviction: most of them were reassured that they could cast a protest vote for the Labour party without any risk of its winning and taking power. Another election would be a bigger gamble than the last one, with no certain outcome.

We in this House have to prove that occasionally our headlines or the prospect of promotion or whatever it might be. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union cannot be accused of that, and neither can I. I credit him, too, for not using any of the daft arguments during the referendum. I do not remember him saying that 70 million Turks were coming to molest our womenfolk and take our jobs. He did not say that there would be £350 million a week to spend on the national health service—the two big arguments of the national leaders—and I did not use the daft ones on our side either. The result was that we hardly got reported—nobody took any notice, because the national media were not remotely interested.

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We in this House have to prove that occasionally our tribalism can subside and that we are capable of putting the national interest above the short-term knockabout of discredited party politics. The French have been saved by President Macron. They have got rid of both their long-established parties—they cannot stand either of them. A new, hopeful person has emerged from the centre or centre-left. Heaven knows whether he can succeed, although I very much hope that he does. We went in the opposite direction. The two parties surged in support—the electorate went back to the old two parties, but I do not think that they were deeply convinced by the arguments that either was using during the election. Heaven knows what they would do if this Parliament failed or collapsed or some stupid party vote took place and there was another general election. That would be a lottery from which we might all lose.

Let us show that we can rise above things. I am glad to know that channels are already open to the Liberals and the Labour party—as well as the Scottish nationalist party, I am sure. We do not really know the basis on which we are negotiating Brexit at the moment; I think it will have to be carried by what I think would be an extremely sensible cross-party majority that the House could easily command if we were able to put in place some processes to achieve it.

5.37 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is an honour to follow a wise speech, and in my shorter contribution I may reflect on some of the points made in it.

I should also like to pay my respects to two colleagues who departed in the past 12 months. The losses of Gerald Kaufman and Jo Cox were deeply and strongly felt. Both people made huge contributions to this place, their constituencies and that wider community. Gerald Kaufman’s career in this place lasted as long as I have been alive. We do not just reflect on his great contribution to the Labour party and our national public life but contrast that with the single, solitary year that Jo Cox spent in this place; in so many ways, she made as big an impact. It is right that we celebrated her life and values in the recent Great Get Together. I hope that that will continue for many years to come as we stand by her, her family and her legacy.

I should also refer to some of the appalling events that have taken place in this country in the past few weeks.

The Grenfell Tower tragedy left many of us utterly speechless. The sense of appalling tragedy, the horror that those people had to go through, and the immense personal loss—the loss of loved ones, the loss of everything—is something we can barely imagine. But there is something very different about this tragedy, in that it is a source—I feel it myself, if I am honest—of great anger. Whatever we say and whatever we do, the implications of what happened—the loss of dozens and dozens of lives—is something that lives in our society are apparently worth less than others. That is how that outrage came to take place, and we must learn from it and take action to demonstrate we have learned from it.

We have all spoken at length about the three terrorist incidents—Finsbury Park just recently, London Bridge and Manchester—and about our horror and outrage at what happened. But let us remember what terrorists seek to do: they seek to divide us, and our response must be to be united. I went to the Muslim welfare centre next to Finsbury Park mosque last night, and among the people I met I had the honour of meeting Mohammed, the young imam, whose dignity shone out on the night of the attack, and who actually protected the assailant from a very dangerous situation. That is a
reminder that, when we speak about the different communities in our country, we must do so with care, with love and with inclusion.

It is not just us in politics who should use language in that way, as the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) rightly pointed out. Dare I say gently that our friends in the media must also be immensely careful about how they report such incidents and, indeed, all matters to do with community relations in this country? If a person living in a non-diverse part of the United Kingdom gets their information about community relations, terrorism and risks only from certain newspapers, they will end up believing that there are problems that, perhaps, there are not, and demonise others when there is absolutely no place for that. We have to work incredibly hard, in uniting our communities, to use language that is right and inclusive, and to make sure we do not allow those who seek to damage and divide us to actually win.

Mr Nigel Evans: The hon. Gentleman started his speech by paying tribute to Jo Cox and Gerald Kaufman. I hope he does not mind if I also mention Paul Keetch. Paul, who was a comrade of ours, was a Member of Parliament for many years. He retired through ill health and, sadly, died just before the general election. He is somebody we will miss greatly.

Tim Farron: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that. Paul stepped down from the House in 2010, but he was a friend and colleague of mine. I am bound to say that, among his many other achievements, he was the defence spokesperson for the Liberal Democrats during the Iraq war. People will remember—wrongly—that the Liberal Democrats took the popular side in opposing the Iraq war, but we did not: we took the unpopular side. Sometimes it is important to do right, and Paul Keetch sat on the Front Bench, next to the equally late and great Charles Kennedy, making that case at that very difficult time for our country.

Sir Peter Bottomley ( Worthing West) (Con): May I reinforce the hon. Gentleman for raising that. Paul stepped down from the House in 2010, but he was a friend and colleague of mine. I am bound to say that, among his many other achievements, he was the defence spokesperson for the Liberal Democrats during the Iraq war. People will remember—wrongly—that the Liberal Democrats took the popular side in opposing the Iraq war, but we did not: we took the unpopular side. Sometimes it is important to do right, and Paul Keetch sat on the Front Bench, next to the equally late and great Charles Kennedy, making that case at that very difficult time for our country.

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Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I very much agree with what my hon. Friend is saying. He mentioned that there is no extra funding for health. The Queen’s Speech makes reference to prioritising mental health within the NHS. Does he share my horror at the gap between the rhetoric and the reality? The reality is that the constraints that NHS England is putting on many areas of the country mean that mental health is losing out here and now, not being prioritised as the Queen’s Speech claims.

Tim Farron: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right; he speaks with immense experience and capability, and a record in this area. This is a reminder that warm words from the Government are not sufficient when hard cash is not present. During the election, my party offered the British people the opportunity, which of course they did not take, to place a penny on income tax in order to pay for real investment in health and social care, including, as a priority, mental health. I say that because somebody needs to be honest with the British people that if we want the best health and social care in the world, then we will have to pay for it.

John Redwood: I guess we ought to explain to those listening to this debate that Her Majesty never gives public spending statements. I think there will be more money for health and education, and that will be announced at another time by the Chancellor of the Exchequer. This is a list of laws we are going to pass. Does the hon. Gentleman not see how significant the Brexit law is?

Tim Farron: I will come to that in a moment. The Gracious Speech is nevertheless a statement of the Government’s priorities. Given the conversation that we rightly have about our security as a country, the fact that the Government are not seeking to do something
to strengthen in number our police force—the most obvious way of making sure we are all kept safe—beggars belief.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I hate to rain on the hon. Gentleman’s parade, but will he remind us whether, when he was in coalition with the Conservative Government, he raised any of the points around, for example, the cuts in police funding, or objected to, for example, the non-prioritisation of mental health and other spending?

Tim Farron: The short and blindingly obvious answer is yes. The fact that no savings were made in the security services’ funding whatsoever is testament to that, as is the fact that we have in my right hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) the person who has done most in living memory to advance mental health in this country from a Government Bench.

As is very clear from recent statements and from the Gracious Speech, the Prime Minister has sought to pursue, and continues to seek to pursue, an extreme version of Brexit, having failed to gain any mandate to do so. There is, as the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe mentioned, no plan to keep Britain in the single market or the customs union. We will therefore seek to amend the Queen’s Speech to add membership of the single market and the customs union. We are pleased to hear that 50 colleagues from the Labour party take a similar view, believing that we should be members of the single market. Access to the single market is a nonsense; many countries around the world have access to the single market. I could be wrong, but I think North Korea has access to the single market. The issue is: are we members of that market?

The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe pointed out earlier that apparently we all believe in free trade now. Do not believe what people say; believe what they do. People may say, “We are in favour of free trade now,” but if they vote in these Lobbies in the coming weeks and months for us not to be members of the single market—and therefore not just to rip up our biggest free trade deal, which is with the largest and most valuable economy on the planet, but, as a consequence, to rip up the deals that we have at second hand with North Korea and the rest of it—they are not free traders.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I have a genuine inquiry for the hon. Gentleman. If we were to retain membership of the single market and the customs union, what, in his view, would be different about that arrangement in comparison with being a member of the European Union?

Tim Farron: I think I am right in saying that the hon. Gentleman and I both indicated during the referendum campaign that, according to those who cited Norway as a model, in such a situation we would get the economic benefits of being in the European Union, but none of the political ones. We would not get decision-making powers, and all the rest of it. Norway was always the least-dreadful option on the menu if we were to leave the European Union, and it remains so. I am all in favour of the least-dreadful option, if we cannot have absolutely the best one.

It is fair to say that the lack of clarity over the version of Brexit that the Government are pressing for and pursuing is alarming. What does success look like? What does a bad deal look like? Nobody knows, because the Government’s plan is as clear as mud, and the only details we have had are empty platitudes. The Government today have presented us with a number of so-called Brexit Bills on immigration, customs and agriculture, but how on earth can we be expected to support these things when we have no idea what the end goal is? The majority of people in this country did not put their faith in the Government at the ballot box, and it would be dangerous for any Member of this House to put blind faith in these Brexit Bills without full details of what they will mean for our borders, our trade, our security and our jobs.

As the Brexit Secretary begins the horse-trading and concession-making with politicians in Brussels, the fact is that we are no closer to knowing what Brexit will look like. Those who have expressed concern about this House and the people of this country having insufficient sovereignty over the law of this country must, surely, see the irony in our children’s and grandchildren’s future being stitched up in vape-filled rooms in Brussels and imposed on the British people, without a single inhabitant of this country—outside this House—having any say whatsoever. And yet the Prime Minister still refuses to give the people the final say on that deal, with the right to reject it and remain if they do not think that it is a good deal.

The Prime Minister may pretend that it is business as usual, but clearly that is not the case. She wanted a landslide, but the people said no. She wanted a mandate for her plans for an extreme version of Brexit, but the people rejected that, too. She promised strong and stable leadership, but no Government have ever looked weaker or less in control. The Prime Minister has gone cap in hand to the DUP and tried to stitch up a deal to keep her in power, and now it is making her look like a fool as well.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): The hon. Gentleman criticises our approach to the DUP. His party has long advocated coalitions, but now that it thinks them not politically expedient it has abandoned faith in them altogether. For how long will the Liberal Democrats’ moratorium on coalitions last?

Tim Farron: We are a party that believes in pluralism. We simply reflect on the appalling nature of first past the post, which gives such unstable and unbalanced electoral outcomes. Perhaps we should change the system.

There have been many things said about the DUP. I will make one observation, which I hope people will consider to be neutral and honest. Peace in Northern Ireland was incredibly hard-won, at great cost. All active politicians in Northern Ireland, including those who are sitting behind me now, are owed great credit for that achievement. The difficulty is simply this: the current minority Government will be perceived to have taken sides for the first time in decades. That is a responsibility that the Government, the Prime Minister and the DUP will need to deal with as we seek to maintain that hard-won peace.
To return to the point that was made a moment ago, I made it clear throughout the election campaign that my party would do no deals and form no coalitions, and that we would support a Queen’s Speech only if we felt that it was in the interests of the country.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman’s argument has been employed by a wide range of people. Does he accept, however, that as a party elected to this national Parliament to represent the people of Northern Ireland, we have every right to play as full a part as we choose? Whether we decide that that means supporting the Conservative party or sitting on these Benches, that is our right, and that is what we were elected to do.

Tim Farron: For what it is worth, I absolutely accept all that. However, DUP Members do not need me to tell them how sensitive perceptions are. The reality is one thing, but perceptions might as well be reality. My concern is how this will be viewed, and what it means for this most sensitive time in the history of Northern Ireland and, in fact, of the island of Ireland. We all ought to be concerned about that. I do not say that to make a partisan point, or to deny DUP Members the right to represent their constituents or, should they choose to do so, to form some kind of arrangement with the current Government.

We, as Liberal Democrats, could have supported a Queen’s Speech that set out a Brexit negotiating position that would keep us in the single market and the customs union, with a referendum on the final deal once all matters were negotiated. A cross-party approach to the negotiations should have been pursued in the first place. I have called in recent days for a joint Cabinet Committee, to be chaired and led by the Prime Minister and to include Labour Members, Liberal Democrats and nationalists into the bargain, so that a deal could be negotiated on behalf of us all. We would have voted for a Queen’s Speech that set out a real-terms increase in schools funding, gave a cash injection to the NHS and social care and invested an extra £300 million in police officers to keep us safe, as we had argued for. We would have voted for a Queen’s Speech that set out real action on climate change and air pollution and supported renewable energy. But that is not the Queen’s Speech that the Prime Minister has set out, and so my party will not support it.

Mr Speaker: The opening speeches—although they were, of course, of undiluted magnificence—have taken a little longer than I might reasonably have expected, and therefore it might become necessary before long to impose a formal time limit. There are, I ask the House to accept, good reasons why I do not wish to impose a formal time limit. I immediately tried to identify areas of disagreement to a key issue for our wellbeing and our future.

The Government were absolutely right to highlight at the start of the Queen’s Speech that the priority has to be the careful management of Brexit because, contrary to the views expressed by a few of my colleagues to whom I have spoken since the election, it seems to me that Brexit was, without the slightest doubt, the single key issue in how the election was conducted, the reasons behind it and, indeed, the inconclusive outcome, which was in one sense unsatisfactory. It is the elephant in the room; it is the man on the stair who wasn’t there. Even when people sought to discuss other issues, in truth it all came back to the anxieties and concerns, whether in the business community or for individuals, about our collective future precipitated by this single revolutionary act.

I appreciate that revolutionary acts can be conducted by people who believe profoundly that they are acting in the name of traditional values, but revolutionary it undoubtedly is. One only has to look at the Queen’s Speech and see that by the third paragraph we are into the lawyerly detail that will have to be crunched through to achieve even the legal formalities of departure to appreciate the mammoth task we have taken on. Lurking behind it is the key issue of whether our economic wellbeing survives the process and whether the promises that have been made by some in this House of a better tomorrow because of the liberation it will give us are capable of being delivered. Nearly 12 months since Brexit was voted on, I am afraid that I have no greater confidence that we will achieve such a satisfactory outcome than I had at the time the referendum took place. Indeed, on the economic indicators that are developing, which are the direct result of Brexit, it seems to me, speaking bluntly, that the omens are not particularly good.

All of us in this House have a responsibility—it is one of the reasons I was elected—to provide quiet government. Obviously, quiet government does not mean rolling
over and doing nothing in the face of challenge. There may be times when we ought to ask people to make sacrifices. However, it troubles me that the one thing that came out of this election was the unquiet state of the country and the extent to which politics generally, including the electorate’s participation in it, had clearly failed to deliver outcomes over the course of the past 12 months that were satisfactory to people, whether it was the young turning out in force to vote at the last minute as a protest because they had not bothered to vote at all in the referendum last year, according to the available evidence, or the willingness to embrace radical policies and solutions that, frankly, do not stand close scrutiny.

The economic package offered by the Labour party in this election was economically illiterate and would have faced this country with financial ruin. Its attractiveness, in my view, was the direct result of the fact that people could no longer see that there was any plan to end austerity and bring a better future to this country, because we compromised that by landing ourselves with massive problems as a result of the way we voted in the referendum last year.

How, then, do we get ourselves out of that problem? First, to agree entirely with my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe, I accept the verdict of the electorate—it cannot be undone. As I have said consistently in this place, we have to implement Brexit. However, what we do will determine whether our economic wellbeing is maintained and, with it, our ability to deal with all those other legitimate subjects of debate, such as whether we can provide better public services. Our public services have undoubtedly been under massive pressure for a very long time, precisely because this country finds great difficulty in paying its way—a conundrum that no political party has ever succeeded in resolving.

When I look at all this, it is not the starting point of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister’s Lancaster House speech that I question. If she can achieve the Lancaster House speech and if my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union can succeed in the negotiations and bring about the package that was identified, we will all have good occasion to rejoice. However, the fact of the matter is that at some point in the next two years, this House will have to start thinking about what happens if we cannot achieve that package. In the lovely way that we do in this country, we push that issue further and further down the road and hope it will go away, but it will not. I am not optimistic that the entirety of the package is obtainable. In fact, I think much less than the totality of it will be available because of the way in which the EU works and because the preservation of its identity means that it cannot give us the special status that we are asking for.

Then, Mr Speaker, we will have to make choices. In that matter, particularly in view of the inconclusive result of the election, the totality of opinion in this House will start to matter very much. We will have to determine whether, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe said, it is better to maintain the best free trade arrangement we can have with our closest partners, on whom we are economically massively interdependent, or to sacrifice that for potentially attractive restorations of control that, in my view, amount to very little indeed when subjected to rational analysis. Even if they are successful, we will still need migrants if we are economically successful. The separate issue of global population increase and our ability to grapple on that front internationally is the key question. I think that we could have lovely trade agreements with large numbers of countries, but they would not be a substitute for losing the trade agreements with the countries with which we are most intimately associated.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Given that the right hon. and learned Gentleman feels that there is a risk that the package will not deliver in any substantial way, why is he holding out against the idea that the people might want to have a second say on whether to proceed with such a bad package?

Mr Grieve: As I have said before, I see no sign that public opinion on Brexit has changed. I have no idea whether it will change in the future, but we have to proceed on the basis that we have to honour the commitment to take ourselves out of the EU. I am committed to supporting the Government in doing that. The question is how we go about it and how, within this House, we succeed in co-operating with each other—or not—to bring it about.

In my view, everything else in politics is subordinate to this issue, because most of the other legitimate issues that are being aired in this Queen’s Speech debate, whether it be social policy, housing, health and safety issues—a subject I know a bit about because I used to prosecute for the Health and Safety Executive—and what may be going wrong in that domain, whether it is fire regulations or anything else, are incapable of being fully addressed until we sort out this key matter. Ultimately, it will be toxic to our political system if we do not come up with the right answers. What I picked up in the election was how the mounting frustration with politics and politicians as a class continues to grow, precisely because we cannot produce that coherent response.

I am sorry to have to say this to those on the Labour Front Bench, but I listened to the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) talking about rage. People are entitled to be angry about lots of things, but I thought that one of the things that we were, in part, deriving from the murder of Jo Cox was that anger followed by rage is usually the precondition to violence. That is something we have seen in this country not just in her murder but in other incidents. Yet we are now reduced to a position where Labour Front Benchers apparently see rage as a key thing to introduce to politics. How will we reach consensual agreements on key subjects concerning this country’s future if we are mired in that sort of rhetoric?

I do not want to take up more of the House’s time, but I simply want to say that I wish the Government well in what they are trying to do on Brexit. I will give them my support—not unqualified, but I will try as a Back Bencher to be helpfully critical. I appreciate that we are going, and I want to work with other Members to try to achieve a sensible outcome that does not damage our economic wellbeing and national security, both of which are at risk. I then want us to be able to start focusing on the issues that matter very much to people in how their daily lives are shaped. We are blessed in this country in that the whole, despite our mistakes, we succeed in managing fairly competent government—that
applies as much to Members on the Opposition Benches as to ourselves. Frankly, if we do not get this right, we will be in very serious trouble. The question is how Parliament goes about ensuring that we come to the right outcome.

6.11 pm

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): As ever, it is a pleasure to follow the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve). I thank him for his thoughtful contribution and want to pick up on a couple of the points that he made.

Overall, this is a very thin Queen’s Speech. It avoids big issues, some of which I want to talk about, particularly education, housing and health. I will come to those, but Brexit is clearly the dominant issue for this Parliament, and it is notable that the speeches preceding mine have focused almost entirely on it.

Before I talk about Brexit, though, I think it is right that I thank the voters of Hackney South and Shoreditch for returning me for the fourth time as a Labour and Co-operative MP. I was returned with 79% of the popular vote—a sign not of my personal popularity, but of people’s great impatience with austerity. There was no light at the end of the austerity tunnel for many of my constituents. While many people describe my area as achingly cool, in many parts it is still achingly poor.

People were pleased to see the Labour manifesto offering a glimmer of hope, but they were mightily concerned about Brexit as well. Some 78% of them voted to remain in the European Union last year, but now they do not even know what the Government are proposing in the negotiations on leaving. That approach risks a Brexit that will damage the British economy, jobs and living standards. We already see the pound 50% lower against the dollar and 10% down against the euro since the decision was made a year ago, and in April inflation rose to 2.6%, its highest rate for three and a half years. Constituents on the doorsteps said that they were noticing their shopping being more expensive, and that is just the beginning of the impact. It is vital that the Government set out a clear agenda for what they want to achieve.

There are two issues that I think are absolutely essential, one of which is the single market. I would prefer us to maintain membership, but at the very least we need access to it, for all the reasons that the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) eruditely explained, which I do not need to repeat. The other is EU citizens in my constituency, who still greet me on the doorstep in tears, a year later, because of the Government’s woeful delay in deciding their future. It is heartening that there are press reports that there might be some fast-track measure, but there was nothing about that in the Queen’s Speech.

The right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield picked up a point about the great repeal Bill, and we need to be careful about that. The Queen’s Speech identified a few items that the Government will particularly focus on, but this is the Government who promised to reduce quangos, and the Bill runs the risk of creating more as we transpose many regulations from European law to British law. The Queen’s Speech referred to nuclear, but we could also talk about medicines or animal rights. All those issues will have to be transposed. Frankly, if there is another general election and hon. Members lose their seat, I suggest that they go for a public appointment, because many bodies will have to be created in order to deliver that law. That, however, gives no comfort to my constituents who are worried about the cost of living.

The issue of costs and budgets brings me to education. The Government promise in the Queen’s Speech that they will “work to ensure that every child has the opportunity to attend a good school”.

All children in my constituency attend a good or outstanding school, but my constituents are very angry about education. I have now fought four general elections in my constituency, and several elections prior to that in other places, and I have never seen such a groundswell of anger from parents, teachers and pupils—so much so that there were seven assemblies in Hackney one Friday during the election campaign. The people there were ordinary parents, not political activists—not that there is anything wrong with political activists—who were galvanised into action by the threat to our children’s future.

During the work that we have done in the Public Accounts Committee, which I had the privilege of chairing in the last Parliament and hope to chair again, the Government have kept telling us that the overall schools budget in England is going up and has been protected in real terms. However, they have not provided for an increase in funding per pupil in line with inflation. On average, that will rise from just over £5,440 in 2015-16 to £5,519 in 2019-20, which is a real-terms reduction.

Added to that, there is the proposal to change the funding formula—there has been some indication that that might be changing but, again, no details. The change would mean that schools in my borough of Hackney would lose 2.8% of their funding—the highest percentage cut in the country alongside that to two or three other London boroughs—which would be more than £5 million a year. Our schools are among the best in the country, thanks to the investment of previous Governments, and it would be short-sighted and frankly bonkers to cut that away now.

We can add to that the existing efficiency savings that schools are being expected to make, which the Public Accounts Committee looked at only a few months ago. That £3 billion of savings, which needs to be found by 2020, includes £1.7 billion through the more efficient use of staff—we know that that already means that teachers and classroom assistants are losing their jobs—and £1.3 billion through more efficient procurement. I am all for efficiencies and for spending every tax pound as efficiently as possible, because we can then spend what we save on other things, but these are often false economies. One headteacher in my constituency is looking at four-and-a-half-day weeks, while others are seriously considering whether they can maintain the full secondary curriculum or if they will have to cut it.

Then there is capital funding for schools. There was no real mention in the Queen’s Speech of changes to the schools agenda—including on grammar schools, so we assume that that proposal has bitten the dust. We need nearly £7 billion of capital funding just to bring existing buildings across the country up to scratch, yet we have seen a free schools programme that is expected to cost £9.7 billion by 2020. In London alone, four sites have been bought for £30 million or more each, and only recently I heard
of a school in Hertfordshire in an old office block with no sports facilities or playground. The children do their PE in a public car park. Members of all parties have raised with me their concerns about similar examples. We need to invest in our children for this country’s long-term future. Our hope for the future, especially with Brexit looming, is that our children will get the best possible education and start in life. Whatever happens, we face choppy waters on immigration with the potential abolition of free movement.

There was also nothing about housing in the Queen’s Speech, except the banning of unfair tenant fees. I draw Members’ attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests as someone who lets a property. I will personally support that ban, as I hope that my party’s Front Benchers will. However, it is an important but small element. The last Government promised to build 1 million homes in the Parliament to 2020, and I wonder whether that is still a target. What we need to see is not the Government talking about “fairness and transparency in the housing market” and helping to “ensure more homes are built”, but real numbers and real targets. I look forward to the estimates debates, when we can ensure that we attach money to those words.

Housing is one of the biggest crises in my borough. Education is in crisis at the moment, having been very good, but housing has been a dripping problem for some considerable time. There are problems with home ownership, with prices having risen by 83% since April 2011. Since that year, private sector rents have increased by 27%. In January, the median rent for a three-bedroom property in Hackney was £550 a week, or just shy of £2,500 a calendar month. That is just the median, so many are more expensive. Most people have no hope of getting on the housing ladder in Hackney.

There are also huge issues with social housing. Many households that I see are doubling up, with one family living in the living room and another in the bedroom. That is a real tragedy, because without a stable home, children cannot have a good start in life. If we could sort out housing in Hackney and stop the cuts to education, we would give our children great hope. We have 500 new out housing in Hackney and stop the cuts to education, and our hope for the future, especially with Brexit looming, is that our children will get the best possible education and start in life. Whatever happens, we face choppy waters on immigration with the potential abolition of free movement.

That is not a good start in life, and it is happening at the same time as we are spending £21 billion per annum on housing benefit. We have got it wrong and we need far more action.

I will not go into detail about the NHS, suffice it to say that the Public Accounts Committee under my chairmanship produced more than 20 reports on that in the last Parliament. The details of our cross-party concerns are on record. It is time that the House and the Government started looking at longer-term solutions to NHS funding. It is no good throwing money at a problem when it arises; we need a longer-term solution.

This Queen’s Speech heralds no hope for my constituents. This Government and the preceding one knocked out the rungs of the ladder of opportunity for so many of my constituents. The reach to the first rung is very high. For instance, it is very difficult to get into further education without a loan, or into nursing without the nursing bursary, and we lost the education maintenance allowance six or seven years ago.

Some things will not happen because of the election result—there will be no grammar schools, no badly worked-up proposals on social care, and no scrapping of free school meals for infants—but, after the next election, we need a Government who will look at those who are aspirant and give them the opportunity to succeed. This Government and this Queen’s Speech do not do that.
Those who say that the Queen’s Speech is thin clearly have not understood it. This is perhaps the most important Queen’s Speech I have seen in my time as a Member of Parliament. There is fundamental legislation to give this Parliament back, on behalf of the people, powers over all our lawmaking. Parliament will then be invited to go on to make substantial amendments to how we run agriculture and fishing, how we conduct international trade, and how we carry out many of our arrangements. The purpose of the legislation will be to amend and improve on European schemes that we are currently unable to amend, or able to amend only with the agreement of all 28 member states, which is very unlikely.

I campaigned in the election on a different slogan from the one recommended by Conservative Front Benchers. My slogan was “prosperity not austerity”. I did that deliberately, because I believe we have had enough austerity, and I want to see the promotion of higher living standards and better family incomes as our main purpose. I am conscious that schools and social care in my area need more public money support. That is true of many of my hon. Friends in English constituencies. The good news is that the Government are coming to the same conclusion, and I look forward to the public spending statements and Budget statements that will make more money available for our priorities. We will clearly need more money for the health service—the Government have promised substantial new sums—and we will need to commit to substantial sums for our healthcare over the years ahead.

The Brexit issue is relevant. It was not misleading in the Brexit referendum for the leave side to say that there will be money to spend when we cancel our contributions. I look forward to our negotiators making it very clear to our friends in the European Union that we will pay our contributions up to the point when we leave, but that we do not owe them any great bill, and we certainly will not be paying contributions once we have left. That money is then available for this Parliament, on the advice of the Government, to decide how to spend. I would be happy if we began to spend a bit of it even before March 2019 when we come to the end of our contributions, because there is a need now and our borrowing is under very good control. As we have heard, borrowing is down by three quarters since the Brexit referendum for the leave side to say that there was a need then and our borrowing is under very good control.

Sir Peter Bottomley: Does my right hon. Friend also agree that employment taxation is far too high? If we take the total cost to an employer of employing somebody and see what the employee is left afterwards, the gap is enormous—there is not even a single word to cover it, although some would call it a wedge. The gap is enormous and we ought to bring it down.

John Redwood: I quite agree. I have always believed that lower tax rates are the answer, and I think there are areas where we could lower the tax rates and get in more revenue, which is exactly what we need to do. We need more money for the public services, but we need more incentives, we need people to be able to retain more of what they earn and we need employers to be able to afford the extra employees, so that is very important.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

John Redwood: I am not allowed very long and I wish others to join in the debate.

My last point is that when we look at our massive balance of payments deficit—£70 billion on trade account with the EU last year—we see how much scope there is when we are allowed to run, for example, our own fishing and farming policy, to substitute home production and home supply for imported supply. That will create jobs, reduce food miles and make a much better contribution to our economy, because a big part of the £70 billion trade deficit last year was in food and drink and fishing.
It is almost unbelievable that the country with far and away the richest fishing ground in the whole EU, and which used to be a major exporter of fish before we joined the European Economic Community, is now a net importer of fish and has so few active fishing boats. I am quite sure that this House, on a multi-party basis, can sit down and design a much better fishing policy than the one we have struggled under for 40 years or more in the EEC and the EU, one that will create more jobs, more capacity, more investment and more home fishing. As I put it, we can have a policy that is kinder to the fish and kinder to the fishermen and women, and it is our task to design it.

Of course we are going to have lots of political disagreements, and I am never shy of political argument, as colleagues will know, but we also have a unique opportunity to show that where it matters—on jobs, prosperity, home ownership and promoting better opportunities for our young people—there are huge opportunities in Brexit. Let us, for example, start with a fishing policy and an agricultural policy that are better for Britain and better for all of them.

6.33 pm

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood). I agree with him entirely about the importance of this Queen’s Speech and this Parliament. There is an enormous amount that the Queen’s Speech portends for this Parliament. The work that has now been given to us is far reaching and so important that it will necessarily dominate much of our time and consideration in the months and years ahead.

I join others who have spoken in paying tribute to the Members who sadly passed away in the past year; Gerald Kaufman and Jo Cox. I remember speaking just over a year ago from the Bench below on behalf of all the Northern Ireland Members of Parliament—nationalist, Unionist and independent—and at their request, and voicing our united and heartfelt horror at that terrible event, repeating what so many people have said today about the need to draw good out of such evil and about the tremendous example shown by Jo Cox’s family. Many of those good colleagues from Northern Ireland are no longer with us. They were in other parties, and I have already paid tribute to their contribution in this House. It is now the sad reality that those Members who were elected to represent the nationalist community in Northern Ireland do not take their seats. We disagree fundamentally on many issues, but no matter what their views may be, it is sad for the electorate that they do not take their seats and speak up for their constituents in this House. We are very conscious of that.

I want to welcome the two new Members to our Benches, my hon. Friends the Members for South Antrim (Paul Girvan) and for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly). They have joined us after an election that saw the DUP perhaps uniquely among all the parties in this House, win not only a majority in the area in which it stood, but with the greatest share of the vote ever in its history and with the greatest number of Members of Parliament.

However, the House meets under the shadow of terrible events—lives lost, families destroyed and communities devastated. Our hearts go out to all those who have been bereaved in recent incidents, to the injured and to all who have suffered and are suffering so terribly. Just before the election, many of us were here in the Chamber on 22 March, the day on which four innocent people were killed on Westminster Bridge and PC Keith Palmer was murdered just yards from where we sit. He died to defend freedom and democracy. Little did we think then that terrorism would so soon again inflict such horror across the country. We had the awful Manchester Arena attack on 22 May, followed by the attack on London Bridge and Borough market on 3 June, the horrific fire in Grenfell Tower in the early hours of last Wednesday morning, which has been seared into the consciousness of everyone everywhere, and now another man murdered by the despicable terrorist attack near Finsbury Park mosque.

These are indeed dark times for our nation, yet in the midst of such darkness, terror, pain and death, we have seen the love and sheer humanity of hundreds and thousands of people—family, friends, neighbours and communities coming together simply to help in any way they can. We have witnessed the bravery and selfless courage of our emergency services, stretched beyond belief but dedicated to rescuing and helping others. What examples of love and compassion we have seen in recent days.

The terrible fire at Grenfell Tower must make us absolutely determined to do what is right by the families affected and to take whatever steps are needed as soon as possible to ensure that such a thing can never happen again and to bring reassurance to people who live in such tower blocks.

The acts of terrorism highlight the threats that we face from a variety of sources, each with their own version of hate-filled ideology. United, we can and will defeat the terrorists, just as in Northern Ireland, united, we have defeated the scourge of terrorism to a large extent. There are of course still challenges there, but we have shown a way forward.

Combating the threats posed to innocent life and to our way of life by terrorism must be at the very top of the new Government’s agenda. There is no greater responsibility of Government than the protection of the lives of its citizens and the security and defence of the kingdom. We on the DUP Benches will of course be clear in our support for measures that make people safer and our United Kingdom more secure, and we must always do right by the brave men and women of our security forces, who put their lives on the line to protect and defend us. That is why the commitment to implement the armed forces covenant throughout the United Kingdom, as mentioned in the Gracious Speech today, is so important. We look forward to working with the Government to make that a reality across our land, particularly in Northern Ireland, where there have been problems implementing the armed forces covenant and where there remains a great tradition of service in Her Majesty’s forces. We are of course a Unionist party, as is the Conservative and Unionist party, and I believe that the Labour party—the vast bulk of its members and those who vote for it—are patriotic believers in the United Kingdom as well.

I welcome very warmly these words in the Gracious Speech:

“A priority will be to build a more united country, strengthening the social, economic and cultural bonds between England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.”
[Nigel Dodds]

Strengthening the Union—our precious Union, as the Prime Minister has rightly called it—must be the overarching aim of this Government. The case for the Union is a positive one. It is one that finds increasing favour in Northern Ireland, across the community divide, as has been illustrated by recent opinion polls and surveys. We will work with Ministers to advance and deepen the ties that bind our constituent countries and regions together. That approach will be needed as we face the greatest political and constitutional challenge of this Parliament, of which other right hon. and hon. Members have, of course, spoken at great length—Brexit.

The country as a whole has voted for Brexit, and this Parliament must now deliver it. Attempts to undermine or subvert the democratic decision made in the referendum would be catastrophic. We must get on with carrying out the people’s wishes. I welcome the priority that has been given by both the United Kingdom Government and European Union negotiators to finding sensible outcomes to the challenges that face Northern Ireland, particularly the issue of the land frontier with the Irish Republic. That shows, I believe, that despite all the rhetoric, people are up for finding sensible and pragmatic solutions.

We have, of course, heard some debate today about membership of the single market and the customs union, and we have heard talk about special status for Northern Ireland within the European Union. Let me make this very clear. I believe that when people voted, in the European Union referendum, to leave the European Union, they voted to leave the single market and the customs union, and I believe that Northern Ireland, along with the rest of the United Kingdom, must do likewise. We must not find ourselves allowing borders to be erected between the island of Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom; that would be totally unacceptable. We must be imaginative, flexible and pragmatic in ensuring that there is an open border, as frictionless as possible, between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. There are ways—sensible ways that have already been discussed—of ensuring that that can be made to happen, and it is in the interests of the Irish Republic and the European Union, as well as those of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland, to make it happen.

The great advantage with which we start is that everyone is saying that—apart from, I have to say, Sinn Féin, which is calling for special status within the EU for Northern Ireland. That has not been adopted or accepted by the new Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, by any of the parties in the Irish Republic, or by the EU negotiators. Everyone accepts that Northern Ireland’s priorities in relation to the land frontier must also be at the top of the negotiating priorities.

Ian Paisley: I agree wholeheartedly that the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic must be frictionless, but does my right hon. Friend accept that security considerations must not be set aside in that context? Is he alarmed, as I have been, by recent reports from security analysts, who say that there is now a worrying number of radicalised individuals in the Republic of Ireland and that that poses challenges for our border?

Nigel Dodds: That is a very important point. One thing that has been very welcome in recent years is the strong security and working relationship between the Garda Síochána in the Irish Republic and the Police Service of Northern Ireland. That co-operation is very strong, and it will continue. Indeed, the PSNI Chief Constable recently made some remarks about how it would continue once we had left the European Union. Again, a pragmatic, sensible solution will be found to allow jurisdictional and other issues to proceed.

In meeting the challenge of Brexit, how much stronger Northern Ireland would be if we were able to get the Northern Ireland Executive up and running as quickly as possible. If we cannot restore the Executive, we will ensure in the House of Commons, working closely with Ministers, that Northern Ireland’s voice is heard and our interests are protected. What we want is the return of an inclusive Government with everyone involved in drawing up what should happen, together. That makes sense. That is the positive, sensible way forward. It makes no sense for people to say, “We are not going to take our seats at Westminster; we have brought down the Executive, and we are not going to get it up and running again”, and then to complain about what is happening. That is simply not logical.

At a time of unprecedented change and challenge, it is vital for Northern Ireland to have an Assembly and Executive that work properly. We did not collapse the Executive, and we did not walk out of the Assembly. We could have done so last year, when Sinn Féin and the IRA were associated with the murder of a man in the Markets area in Belfast. The Ulster Unionists walked out, but we did not. We stuck in there. We worked together to try to continue to make the devolved institutions work.

We want to make sure that the Assembly is up and running, and we have set no red lines or preconditions. We believe that the challenges of Brexit—the issues of health, education, the delivery of public services and the economy—are far more important than the issues that divide us. They are the people’s priorities, and they should be the politicians’ priorities as well.

The economic outlook for Northern Ireland would, of course, be much easier to predict if there were stable government in Belfast, and that doubtless applies here as well. The electorate sent politicians a very clear message about austerity, and since the election it has become clear that they must listen to what the people have said. I must say that I was very taken with the election slogan adopted by the right hon. Member for Wokingham: “Prosperity, not austerity”, and I was glad to hear from the Chancellor at the weekend that he was not deaf to what had been said. For our part, we will again work with the Government over this Parliament to ensure that we deliver prosperity, that we deliver greater spending on health and education, and that we see an end to the dark tunnel of austerity.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Nigel Dodds: I am about to end my speech, and I know that others want to speak.

We are about strengthening the Union, delivering Brexit, defending our country from threats of terrorism at home and abroad, creating prosperity, and ensuring that Northern Ireland continues to move forward. It is in the furtherance of those objectives that we will act and vote in this Parliament over the next five years.

Several hon. Members rose—
Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr George Howarth): Order. I am afraid that, so that as many Members as possible can be accommodated during the rest of today, I shall have to impose a time limit of 10 minutes.

6.47 pm

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): It is a delight to follow the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds), who made a very thoughtful and sensitive speech. Indeed, he expressed the sentiments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), who said that, overwhelmingly, the country had delivered the parties that had promised to deliver Brexit. Only one party tried to offer some form of second referendum, and believe me, its members spent a lot of time stamping around my constituency. It is no secret that I was a leading Brexit Member of Parliament, and that 63% of my constituents had voted to remain. Even so—despite the onslaught on my constituency—the good people of St Albans returned me to Parliament for the fourth time, and I am very grateful for that.

Other Members have said today that they are not deaf to austerity and the problems that face our schools. I, too, am not deaf to the concerns that were raised in my constituency, and never intended to be. I think it behoves us all, whichever side of the argument we were on, to recognise that, overwhelmingly, the country voted to proceed with its decision to leave the European Union. They will not thank a single one of us who seeks to play political games with that, and they will not thank a single one of us who chooses to try to make a Government fall, fail, look stupid, or become mired in a business that would mean that nothing else happened and nothing got through.

I want to refer to other aspects of the Queen’s Speech, but I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham that it is probably the most weighty Queen’s Speech with which we have ever had to deal. I sincerely hope that we shall scrutinise it closely in all the months that lie ahead. It is a shame that the Liberal Democrats never seem to stay around to listen to the debates as they go on. I remember attending, with my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), a debate about a takeover of the London stock exchange by Deutsche Bourse. My hon. Friend was extremely concerned about the issue, but only five Members of Parliament turned up to scrutinise it. Eventually, it did not happen, but the point is that we all have a duty to ensure, as difficult issues arise, that we do not take a fixed, intransigent view, but try to adopt the flexible and pragmatic approach to which the right hon. Member for Belfast North referred.

I want to touch on some other things in the Queen’s Speech, because I know that we will have many nights of debate on Brexit. I am pleased to hear that the Government will work with BRE. People were trapped in Grenfell Tower. We do not know the reasons behind it all yet. People are saying that potentially it was the cladding, or it was to do with the stairwells. All of us have tower blocks in our constituencies that have been retro-fitted, amended or upgraded for insulation purposes, for example. In my constituency, and I am sure in others, there are blocks that are part privately and part publicly owned. It is only when something happens that the flaws are exposed. I have already written to my local authority—I am sure many Members have written to theirs—to ask it to evaluate the amendments that have been made to buildings of which they have a share or control. I hope that in the coming months guidance will be provided by the Government to local authorities on that matter because all sorts of things have happened to many buildings over the years and it is important that we understand what the impact has been on their safety standards.

I am delighted that the Queen’s Speech mentions helping to reduce motor insurance premiums. I and many other Members took part in a debate on that. The issue is affecting our young people, who are finding it impossible to learn to drive and to get their car insured.

Mr Kevan Jones: In the last few years, the big driver of increases in insurance premiums has been the increase in stealth taxes, for which the hon. Lady and her Government voted.

Mrs Main: There was me hoping for unity. I could say that it was also because the European Union decided to have equalisation and it pushed up the premiums for young women. I want to focus on my speech—other Members want to get in—and on the fact that many young people find it impossible to get affordable insurance on their cars without the bank of mum and dad. It is becoming a mobility issue for them. It is denying some of them the ability to get to work, to job opportunities or to university. I am pleased that we will look at that matter. It is long overdue.

I would also like us to look at extremism in universities and people being fearful for their personal safety because of their creed, colour, faith or gender. I am concerned about the rise of BDS—Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions—at universities. I went to a synagogue hustings; I am sure many colleagues did. I am appalled at the rise of anti-Semitism that is going on at our universities. I wish to highlight that as much as the anti-Muslim sentiment that has been expressed. I am pleased that the Charity Commission is looking into the matter. We should look at what is happening at some of our universities to ensure that no student feels that they cannot take up an opportunity at any campus in the UK because they feel they are unwelcome because of their faith. I said to the synagogues in my constituency that I thought the issue was a priority and I hope that we include that in the things we look at.

I know time is short but, on the upgrades to transport, the Government are consulting on their new independent commission on civil aviation noise. We are expanding airports, including Luton, and they are increasingly causing noise problems for residents. Luton airport uses the RNAV system, which is being reviewed. RNAV is concentrating the noise and the impact on a number of people, who now find it intolerable to live under the flight path. There has been a 150% increase in complaints as a result of the rapid expansion of Luton airport. If we are to expand Heathrow and those flights also stack over St Albans, it is vital that we look at the impact of that and at the noise nuisance that is cumulatively affecting residents in my constituency. During the campaign, a lot of people complained about the increased traffic over their homes and the constant irritation. Therefore, I encourage the Government to bring forward the independent commission on civil aviation noise. I know that many other constituencies will have problems if we ask our airports to expand.
I want to touch briefly on trains. It is no secret to anyone in the House who has heard me witter on for years that consent has been granted for a rail freight site in my constituency that I would rather did not happen. The application was made in 2006, yet 11 years later, I cannot get any facts or figures that show that that freight site is deliverable in terms of access on to rail. Since then, the Thameslink project has come in and it is being implemented—the biggest Government infrastructure upgrade in supporting passenger services. How can we allow permission to be granted on the basis of Network Rail’s blithe assurances that access to the paths can be delivered? It still cannot provide any timetables. It is amazing that we keep being passed from pillar to post. If the country is going to increase the number of rail freight sites, surely it is imperative that it can be shown that there is access to rail, without disruption to passenger services.

At the moment, Thameslink’s public performance has gone from 60% to 85%, but that is still below the national average of 91%. Despite having one of the most connected constituencies, and having commuters whose lifeblood and family life depend on getting in and out of the city in an effective manner, they still cannot get on a reliable train service. I make a plea to the Minister: while we are looking at infrastructure upgrades, bring in Network Rail. It has been responsible for 54% of the delays on passenger services, and 42% of the delays on Thameslink. I cannot understand how the opaque Network Rail system, where no one seems to be held accountable for anything, can be so disruptive, so inefficient and so ineffective in getting things to work properly, yet it is still regarded as the expert by successive Governments in terms of rail infrastructure upgrades. Therefore, please can Ministers, at the earliest possible opportunity, look into the Network Rail system? Do not rely on Network Rail’s assurances when other infrastructure projects come along. I am talking about the upgrade of HS2 and further access to high-speed rail. In my view, Network Rail cannot in its current state deliver accurate information to Ministers.

The Campaign for Better Transport has said that “the London Mayor needs to safeguard more rail freight sites in its strategy”.

That is fine, but when freight sites such as the one in my constituency have been granted but no paths on to rail have been agreed, it says to me that we will have a lorry park in the green belt. The potential upgrades in respect of airport, freight and rail expansion need to come with intense scrutiny of what is going on behind the scenes. At the moment, there is not that scrutiny. I know that other colleagues will also say that Network Rail hides behind this opaque system of responsibility. When something goes wrong, the franchise company gets the blame, but often it is Network Rail behind the scenes, with delayed trains and overruns on upgrades and proposed improvements.

I do not want any other constituency blithely to grant planning permissions thinking that these things can be delivered when they cannot. I do not want other residents to have an RNAV and planes coming over their houses making their lives intolerable. Luton airport at the moment does not seem to be able to get its act together with the Heathrow airport expansion and flight stackings. These things are all interlinked and it is important that we come together as a House and ensure that major infrastructure projects are not developed haphazardly. Each one has to be looked at in terms of the knock-on effect on neighbouring constituencies. Each one has to be looked at in terms of the capacity that is already in place. Without line upgrades, we cannot have the increased movement of freight. Without proper noise monitoring, we cannot ascertain how injurious new flight paths will be.

I will end on that point. There is a lot to consider in the Queen’s Speech and I look forward to us doing so.
harmony, apart from a small disorder last Sunday: after Pakistan beat India there was much activity on the Belgrave Road, but I hope very much that that was a one-off. Normally, however, all communities work very well and closely together.

In the context of counter-terrorism, it is important to raise the issue of policing. The threat to policing mentioned by the head of counter-terrorism, Mark Rowley, in his letter to the Home Secretary today is an important point. It is right that the Government have protected the counter-terrorism budget over the past few years but, as we all know, information is gathered at a local level and it is vital that the Government publish the police funding formula, for which we have been waiting for over a year.

In Leicestershire, we have lost 547 police officers since 2009—that is a reduction of 23%. In 2006, there was one police officer for every 430 people; now we have one for every 599 people. Despite the excellent work of the chief constable and his team, the police and crime commissioner, Willy Bach, and his deputy Kirk Master, they are still awaiting the formula, but without that formula, they simply cannot plan.

I join other Members in recognising the tragedy of the Grenfell flats fire and the fact that that obviously has an implication for all our constituencies in which we have high-rise accommodation. The Government must act quickly to deal with these issues so that people can be reassured that something is being done to protect them. I join the Leader of the Opposition and others in commending my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) on the work that she has done.

Brexit will, of course, dominate proceedings over the next two years. I hope that, as a matter of urgency, we will clarify the position of EU citizens. Some 3 million EU citizens live in the United Kingdom. My constituency has 10,000 people who have come from the EU—the majority hold Portuguese passports—and they are very anxious about whether they will be allowed to remain in the United Kingdom. Of course the Government have said they want them to stay, but unless we get that in writing, it will not satisfy them.

There are practical difficulties, too. I am glad to see the former Immigration Minister, the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill), on the Front Bench, because this was raised by the Home Affairs Committee in the last Parliament. Some EU citizens have arrived with identity cards but without passports, while others have passports. When they make their applications for indefinite leave, it will be important that the practicalities are taken into consideration. We in this place have suggested that the registration should perhaps be done at a local level through local authorities, rather than through a process of writing to the Home Office because, as we know, it takes a great deal of time for it to reply.

This issue of registration is very important to many of my constituents. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is time that the Government came up with more detail on this, and looked at how the process can be fast-tracked so that people do not have to go through multi-page documents for every time they have left the country? People who have been here for a long time and have proof of that should be able just to be fast-tracked.

Keith Vaz: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about what happens when people have to try to fill in those forms and then submit them to the Home Office, where there is a backlog of 400,000 cases, as those of us who do immigration work will know. They simply do not get a reply, so simplifying the application process, and perhaps moving it to a local level, would be the way to move forward.

There is no health Bill in the Gracious Speech. I know of your interest in diabetes, Mr Deputy Speaker, and your regular attendance at the all-party group on diabetes, which I chaired in the last Parliament. I declare an interest as someone who has type 2 diabetes. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), whose 30th anniversary celebration I will be attending tonight, recently found out that she has type 2 diabetes. What I would like to see, and what I think the House would like to see—this is certainly what the group has talked about many times—is a recognition of the need for individuals to be tested so that they know whether they have diabetes. More than that, once people are tested for diabetes, they need to be given compulsory education. There must be structured education for those with diabetes with regard to diet and lifestyle. Far too often, all the GPs do is prescribe tablets for individuals with type 2 diabetes, or inject type 1 diabetics with insulin. It is very important that we pass some legislation on structured education.

As we know, 3.5 million people—6% of the population—have been diagnosed with diabetes in the United Kingdom, and that figure is likely to rise to 5 million by 2025, representing almost 10% of the population. As we also know, treatment accounts for 10% of the national health service budget, so prevention is extremely important, and I am disappointed that we do not have a Bill on this subject.

I know it is not fashionable to do so, but I want to thank George Osborne, who has left this House, for his sugar tax, which he introduced before he left and I hope is still on track. Of course, Mr Osborne has not gone to the other place, as others have done; he has gone to a higher place—the editorship of the Evening Standard—but his legacy on the sugar tax is something that we all celebrate.

I have two final points, the first of which is on Yemen. There are others in this House who have been here for longer than me—the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) came into the House with me 30 years ago—but I cannot remember a Queen’s Speech debate in which the Prime Minister did not refer to foreign policy. I know that the Prime Minister talked about Brexit, but we heard no mention of foreign policy. I would have liked to have heard something about Yemen. Yemen is of course a country that is very close to my heart—I was born there and I chair the all-party group on Yemen. Ten thousand people have
been killed in the civil war in Yemen so far, 3.2 million people have been internally displaced, and 14.1 million people—half the population—have none of their basic healthcare needs met.

I pay tribute to Flick Drummond for the work that she did in this House, to Angus Robertson for the number of times he led on Yemen during Prime Minister’s questions, and to Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh for what she did when she was in this House. All of them made a huge contribution. I also thank the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) for his outstanding work as Minister. He always engaged with the all-party group and we will miss him. We know that he has been replaced by the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), but he was an outstanding Minister as far as Yemen was concerned.

My final point concerns one of my youngest constituents, who died during the election campaign. All of us will have read about the case of Evha Jannath, the 11-year-old girl who died at Drayton Manor park on 9 May 2017. The inquest is pending, and Staffordshire police and the Health and Safety Executive are conducting inquiries. I thank both organisations for the work they have done, but serious questions remain about the rides that young people take at theme parks such as Drayton Manor. We will need a full inquiry into what happened so that we can understand how it happened and prevent such a thing from happening to young children in the future.

This will be a rollercoaster two years. I know that our attention will be not only on Westminster but on Belfast, because of the role that the Democratic Unionist party will play. I think that its Members have already returned to Belfast to begin their work. I hope that we can be constructive, that we can create lasting legislation and that we do not just spend all our time talking about Brexit. There is important work to be done, and I know that Members—especially the newer ones—all want to participate in it.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), who always speaks a good deal of sense on these occasions. I draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, and I should like to thank my constituents for so generously returning me to represent them in this place for a fifth time.

This is clearly going to be an unusual Parliament, as the Gracious Speech demonstrates. In a hung Parliament, political power tends to pass from the Cabinet Room to the Floor of this House, and I hope that there are issues on which we can work together across the House. I hope that we can lift our eyes from the obvious party political domestic preoccupations. We did so over Syria in the last Parliament, when I had the great good fortune to work closely with Jo Cox. We were co-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group on Syria. Syria remains the defining catastrophe of our age, with 11 million Syrians—half the population—displaced from their homes. I am glad that the Gracious Speech supports an intensification of Britain’s efforts in the middle east. There is international consensus on the need to defeat and destroy ISIL, and this should be prosecuted with much greater vigour. However, defeating ISIL militarily is just a small part of our task. The much greater part is to defeat a nihilist death cult that has attracted young people to its cause.

We need to address Britain’s role in the world after Brexit. Britain stands for certain values—not so much British values as international values. We are the fourth largest military power, and one of the very few countries that can undertake expeditionary military activity. We have one of only three diplomatic services that span the world, and it is deeply respected, not least at the United Nations. Our international development work is saving millions of lives and transforms the way in which millions of the world’s poorest live. This British leadership is respected throughout the world, if not in certain quarters of the British press. I urge Ministers to stand up for the brilliant work being done by Britain, and not to cower under the table in the face of the onslaught of the Daily Mail. Of course Britain does not give bilateral money to North Korea, but as part of the United Nations we do try to stop North Korean children starving to death.

There is some concern in the development community about the apparent double-hatting of Foreign Office Ministers to cover the Department for International Development. If I may use a swashbuckling analogy that might appeal to the Foreign Secretary, there is some fear that his eye has alighted on a plump galleon loaded with bullion and that he wishes to board that galleon and plunder her cargo. The rules governing the spending of British aid are clearly laid down by the OECD development assistance committee. I think that those rules can be improved, but I do not believe that this House would agree to their being unilaterally abandoned by the United Kingdom.

Similarly, the Government have a duty to address the terrorist acts that horrified us all during the election. The whole House will also condemn the dreadful anti-Muslim hate crime that surfaced after the appalling atrocities in Manchester and London. Getting the balance right between collective security and individual liberty will not be easy, but many of us in the House are wary of tampering with ancient liberties and of giving additional power to the state unless it is absolutely necessary. If the terrorists alter our way of life, they win.

I am glad that the ill-advised idea of leaving the ECHR has been dropped. It would never have got through the House anyway. It might be possible to improve the Human Rights Act 1998, but we should not seek to repeal it just because it was drafted by Tony Blair. That brings me to the central issue in British politics today: our departure from the EU. I sometimes think that, when it comes to Europe, my party is the victim of a biblical curse. I hear the arguments eloquently put, by friends and colleagues I greatly respect, in favour of both a soft and a hard Brexit, but what virtually all my constituents want is the best possible deal. They care deeply not only about their living standards and quality of life but about those of their children and grandchildren. They want the best possible deal for Britain.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): Would my right hon. Friend like to reflect on the utility of the terms “soft Brexit” and “hard Brexit”? I do not consider them to be of very much use in this discussion. They serve to confuse rather than to enlighten.
Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend has got that absolutely right. Indeed, that is very much the point I am trying to make. My suggestion to my right hon. and hon. Friends is that we let our negotiator get on with this task without undue noises off. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union clearly has the skills and experience to deliver the best deal. I am sure that we should try to work across the political parties on this and perhaps also widen the scope for business to contribute its expertise more broadly as part of the negotiations, but let us let my right hon. Friend get on with it. I want to warn my right hon. Friends that we as a party own this process. If it goes wrong and is seen to be an economic cost to Britain, the eyes of the electorate will narrow, regardless of how our constituents voted in the referendum, and the revenge that will be wrought on our party at the subsequent polls will be hideous to behold.

Finally, I want to make a party political point. I suspect that I was not alone in being deeply dismayed, during the election campaign, by the almost total failure to contest Labour’s assertion that austerity was somehow a voluntary measure and the infliction by the Conservative Government of some sort of Tory vice. It is a myth that we can abandon austerity and infinitely run a significant annual deficit and ballooning debt. We have been able to maintain the deficit only because the markets have trusted Conservative Ministers to deliver fiscal discipline. In Britain today, we have a serious intergenerational problem. Far from helping young people, failure to address the deficit would be a betrayal of the young because they will have to pay in due course for the overspending of their parents’ generation. As it happens, I do not think I know any young people who voted Conservative at this election, although my own two daughters assured me that they would have done so, had they voted in Sutton Coldfield.

This message of fiscal discipline—fiscal reality, as it seems to me—needs to be explained and amplified once again. Our generation cannot go on spending money we do not have and have not earned. We can resile from hard spending decisions but it is our children and grandchildren who will pay. We need to explain once again how sky-high tax levels bring in less revenue and how raising corporation tax costs jobs, deters business and drives investment away. I am appalled at how little the economy during the election, yet unemployment in Britain is lower today than at any time since I was at school. We need to engage with and revisit these vital arguments.

There are other issues on which we can work together across the parties. The issue of how we fund and organise the NHS and social care is urgently in need of a full-scale review. My personal view is that the extent of the problems in the NHS has been marked by the extremely skilful handling of this matter by the Health Secretary. However, we simply cannot go on with this sticking plaster approach. This nettle must be grasped, and if the concept had not been so discredited by the television programme “Yes, Minister”, I would have thought that some sort of royal commission structure would be appropriate. Some mechanism for inclusive national debate about the way forward must be found. We cannot continue to coax a quart out of a pint pot. Staff morale has been stretched to its limits. We all know that that is true and we must therefore do something about it. I am particularly pleased to see the announcement of a consultation on mental health services in the Gracious Speech.

Alex Chalk: Has my right hon. Friend had the experience I have had in my constituency of speaking to doctors and other medical professionals and hearing that they are crying out for a cross-party approach that will take the political heat out of these matters, which affect their lives and their patients’ lives? They want to see the politics taken out of something that is so very important for our society.

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend is making, with great eloquence, the point I am trying to make: we need to have a national debate. We cannot continue with this sticking plaster approach on all these matters.

Let me conclude my remarks, so that others can get in, by ending on a consensual note. It would be churlish of this House not to recognise the effective election campaign waged by the Leader of the Opposition, with whom I have had many dealings during our long period together in this House. The whole House will want to pay a special tribute to him in this respect: we salute his extraordinary qualities of mercy and forgiveness as those in his party who have bad-mouthed him in public and in private over the two years since he became leader now flock back to his standard and slink back into his shadow Administration.

This is a good Queen’s Speech and I look forward to supporting it in the Lobby.
Meg Hillier: Does my right hon. Friend agree that giving our young people the right to roam on the streets to which they live is such an important issue, that they should not live in fear and that their voices need to be heard in this debate as well?

Joan Ryan: I agree absolutely, which is why we need police in our community, building community relationships. For those, mostly teenagers and young men, who are stabbing each other—or being stabbed—we have a duty to protect them from themselves. We have failed somewhere along the line. The Government cannot wash their hands of responsibility for any increase in crime, given that they have made such swinging cuts to our safer neighbourhoods teams. It is no coincidence that the 70% rise in violent crime in Enfield has come at exactly the same time as 188 police officers and police community support officers have been removed from our streets. Nor is it a coincidence that violent crime has increased so sharply at exactly the same time as it became harder for our police to carry out “stop and search” of youths suspected of carrying knives. Since 2012, stop and search in London has fallen by 70%, and last year we saw a 24% rise in the number of knife crime offences across the capital. Parents from all sections of the community in Enfield are crying out for a new, workable, responsible stop and search policy, because teenagers are being stabbed to death every few weeks. I know there was a problem with stop and search, but I think that could be sorted. Despite the best efforts of our police service in Enfield, it is nigh on impossible for them to maintain a highly visible police presence on our streets when we now have only about 550 police officers attempting to protect a population of 330,000 people.

Meg Hillier: One area of police funding that we on the Public Accounts Committee examined as long ago as 2015 was the impact on police services of cuts in other public services, whereby the police became the responder of first and last resort, for example, on mental health. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that is an additional pressure, which is clearly causing pressures in her borough, too?

Joan Ryan: Absolutely. Various studies show that upwards of 70% of police call-outs involve some kind of mental health issue, which many police do not feel able to deal with. Enfield is a growing borough. It is London’s fifth largest borough and over the next decade is set to become the fourth biggest, so spreading resources this thinly is unfair, both to the public and to the police. There has been no way of getting the Prime Minister, either now or when she was Home Secretary, to face up to the effect of her law and order policies on people’s lives. When the current Home Secretary came to Enfield North during the election campaign, after a young man was stabbed to death, she said nothing about the loss of almost 200 uniformed police officers and PCSOs locally, and 20,000 police officers nationally, over the past seven years. I notice nothing in the Gracious Speech that indicates any plan to increase police numbers. The Home Secretary called for longer prison sentences for carrying a knife, which many people would support, but that is completely ineffective if we have not got the police on the streets in the first place. If we cannot catch them, we cannot sentence them.

The policy response has to be about prevention, education and more visible policing. Working with the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, I am pleased that Enfield will have 21 more local, ward-based officers in place by the end of this year to help fight crime. Unfortunately, the Government are taking entirely the opposite approach. The Met has already seen £600 million stripped from its central Government grant since 2010; another £400 million cut is planned by 2020; and as much as £700 million on top of that could be cut due to changes in the police funding formula—we have yet to hear the details. At a time when the Met Commissioner is saying that the police are “very stretched”, cuts on this scale would spell disaster. They will put the safety of our communities at risk. I urge the Government to provide the Mayor of London and the Met police with the resources they need to ensure proper levels of policing in Enfield and throughout the capital.

Let me turn to the issue of local health services in Enfield. I recall standing in this place in 2015 for that year’s Gracious Speech, when I spoke about the “shocking decline in acute care and primary care provision”—[Official Report, 2 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 504]—under this Government. Chase Farm hospital has lost its accident and emergency and maternity unit, and seen its in-patient beds reduced in number from 500 to 48. The closure of those facilities heaped huge pressure on local GP practices and the A&E department at the North Middlesex hospital. Last year, the North Mid was tipped into crisis, partly as a result of those pressures, and the A&E department was saved from partial closure only by a public outcry, the launch of a community campaign and the concerted lobbying of health Ministers by myself and other north London MPs. However, just yesterday we learned of a leaked NHS report which, according to the Royal College of Surgeons, threatens “devastating” cuts to local health services in north London. Those would impact on the quality of care provided to patients and, potentially, close further A&E and maternity units, affecting residents throughout Enfield, Camden, Islington, Haringey and Barnet. During the general election, I pledged to do all I can to protect our NHS from these cuts—I reaffirm that pledge today—and to work with residents and fellow MPs in Enfield and across North London to oppose these proposed cuts with all means at our disposal.

I had hoped to move on to a positive note on education, but, sadly, that cannot be the case. The third aspect of public services that came up so frequently on the doorstep during the election campaign was concern about the future of our children’s education. A good education is vital investment in our country’s future, at a time when we need to build the best skilled workforce possible. I am therefore dismayed, as are so many parents, headteachers, teachers and others in Enfield, that our primary and secondary schools are facing the largest real-terms cuts to their budgets in a generation.

Before the election, Enfield faced the prospect of a further £27 million cut to school funding by 2020 under a Conservative Government. The Conservative party’s panicked manifesto commitments on education, which have served only to mislead the public: the scale of the impending cuts less transparent, will result in all schools in Enfield losing out in real terms. Schools are having to consider further reductions to their staffing levels, support services
and curriculums, which could seriously compromise standards and affect every child’s ability to achieve their very best. However long this Parliament may last, I will be fighting for our children’s education and for a fair funding deal for Enfield’s schools.

To turn away from domestic issues for a moment, the top of the last page of the Gracious Speech states: “My Government will work to find sustainable political solutions to conflicts across the Middle East.”

It is no secret in the House that I have a long-standing commitment to a two-state solution between Israel and Palestine. I remind the House, and particularly the Department for International Development, of the value of building peace at the grassroots by supporting co-existence projects that bring Israelis and Palestinians together—projects that build a constituency for peace and of which there are many good examples. There is undoubtedly an international consensus in support of a renewed focus on the importance of the civil society dimension to advancing a two-state solution.

I agree almost without exception with the remarks of the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) on Brexit. Interestingly, the subject came up very little on the doorstep during the election campaign, but it is an underlying concern and anxiety for our constituents. As strapped for cash as public services are now, if the Government come back with no deal, a bad deal, or the worst possible deal, we could see our public services absolutely collapse through lack of funding. People in Enfield, and up and down the country, are aware that Brexit is a significant threat to their standard of living and to public services. We all have to try to work constructively, as far as we possibly can, to get the best deal, but the onus is on the Government to ensure that Opposition Members are able to work with them. If not, I fear for the outcome for my constituents. I seek reassurances from Ministers that my constituents will be given the resources they need so that they have the decent public services that mean so much to their way of life, safety, health, education and future.

7.33 pm

Sir William Cash: That is a terrific question to which I shall return emphatically in a few minutes. The basis of my hon. Friend’s argument is completely wrong, as I shall explain in a moment.

The reckless spending alternative—the false alchemy of the Labour manifesto—would, in contrast with the Government’s economic success, simply bankrupt us and wipe out our success, as the Institute for Fiscal Studies made clear the other day. The Chancellor was right to say that stronger growth is the means by which reasonable taxation can be raised to deliver better public services and better living standards. We need sound money to go with that growth.

The Chancellor mentioned the European Investment Bank, in which we have a massive 16% shareholding, worth more than €10.2 billion. He and others should bear in mind very carefully indeed the fact that the EIB was set up under articles 307 and 308 of the European Union treaty, along with article 28 of protocol 5 on the statute of the EIB. That demonstrates that, as far as I can judge, the EIB is within the jurisdiction of the European Court. I am convinced that that is the case. We should find an answer to the question without surrendering our commitment to insisting on our own Westminster jurisdiction and not that of the European Court. We are going to have to think through this matter very carefully.
The Chancellor discussed the importance of free trade and how the Prime Minister’s Lancaster House speech made clear we would seek a comprehensive free trade agreement. He also confirmed—I repeat: confirmed—that we were leaving the customs union, for which there is a good and fundamental reason. I shall now address the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman). When we leave the EU, our independent trade policy will be made by our Government, elected at Westminster, not by the unelected European Commission and by majority vote, which, as with all decisions taken under the European Communities Act 1972—as the European Scrutiny Committee made clear in its report in May last year—is made by consensus behind closed doors, with nobody knowing how the decision is arrived at. There is no public record, as we have in Westminster. It is all far removed from the democratic, transparent accountability of our procedures, our *Hansard* and our parliamentary system, in which people know who is deciding what. Furthermore, most EU business is done through the aegis of covert decision making in unsmoke-filled rooms. The EU is intrinsically undemocratic, as the recent Malta declaration of the 27 clearly indicated. I note that the Chancellor stated that as regards our trading policy he believes that we must negotiate “mutually beneficial transitional arrangements to avoid unnecessary disruption and dangerous cliff edges.”

This mirrors, I think, what has been said by the CBI, the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, the manufacturers’ group EEF and a number of other trade bodies, some apparently and some actually seeking to keep us in the single market and the customs union for up to five years, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe indicated and with which I disagree.

The Chancellor also emphasised that we need an implementation period and frictionless customs arrangements, albeit, he said, outside the customs union. That poses a serious problem. Against this background, we need to understand where we are with the customs union and the single market and why it is important we leave both on leaving the EU, on which the Labour party is completely confused.

I want to draw attention to our trading within the single market, and ask our friends who are still at heart remainers to please take note of what I am saying. The Office for National Statistics and the House of Commons Library tell us that last year we ran a trade deficit with the 27 member states of £71.8 billion, up £9 billion in that year alone. In the same year, Germany ran a trade surplus with EU countries of £98.9 billion, up £16 billion in that year. Yet we enjoy a trade surplus with the rest of the world of £34.4 billion, which is accelerating rapidly. Yes, 44% of our trade is with the EU, and our trade with it will continue if we leave the single market and the customs union, but our global trade is where our successful economic future lies as soon as we leave the European Union and we have to get real about that.

Furthermore, although many describe leaving the customs union as a cliff edge, if done wisely it will be a launch pad for new and greater opportunities for growth and prosperity, providing trade deals with other countries, improving our regulatory environment, achieving a free trade agreement with the EU with zero-for-zero tariff deals, dealing with rules of origin, mutual recognition of goods, including agricultural products, and allowing expedited customs arrangements based on new technologies.

**Sir Peter Bottomley:** My hon. Friend might find it easier to speak less fast once this intervention has given him a few more seconds.

**Sir William Cash:** I am most grateful to my hon. Friend; I am determined to get through what I have here.

In the context of the City and financial services, there is so much for us to learn from the experience of the European Free Trade Association and its jurisdictional relationships with the European Court of Justice. These provide guidelines and lessons to be learned in achieving mutual respect while retaining our sovereignty and unshackling ourselves from the European Commission’s exclusive jurisdiction over external trade policy, which does not work for us even though it does specifically for Germany.

We are fortunate to have Mr Crawford Falconer as our chief trade negotiation adviser and a strong team to deliver a first-class trade policy with major countries such as the USA, Canada and Australia. A few days ago, the Secretary of State for International Trade had an extremely good meeting with the US Commerce Secretary, Wilbur Ross. We have had similar reactions from the other countries I have mentioned. These provide the launch pad for us to enable the growth that will accelerate us towards a global prosperity zone for the United Kingdom. This is a massive new opportunity for the United Kingdom to resume its 300-year-old role in international trade in goods and services, in which we have always delivered throughout our commercial history.

To give some flavour of that, the House of Commons Library tells us that in the last year alone we had a trade surplus of £39.6 billion with the USA, of £1.3 billion with Canada, and in 2015, the most recent year for which data are available, a trade surplus of £3.7 billion with Australia. They have already said that they want to trade bilaterally with us, and we would be crazy not to do it. Out of the customs union, we will build on this—even if it cannot—and our economic growth and prosperity will expand exponentially, and there will be the means of providing security and stability, and, with that, the provision of good and effective public services mentioned by the right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan).

I believe that leaving the EU while achieving acceptable jurisdictional answers to our financial services and other regulatory arrangements, which are currently with the EU, is eminently achievable. An overly narrow view of the potential jurisdictional difficulties is wrongly pessimistic, particularly as regards our potential trading relationships with the rest of the world and our recognition that the single market does not deliver for us.

I was glad that the Chancellor did not refer to the words “soft” and “hard” Brexit in his speech. The words “soft” and “hard” Brexit, so favoured by the BBC and others in the media, are an exercise in casuistry, a weapon of propaganda intended to create a fog when we need above all else clear lines and meanings. This applies
equally to the expression “transitional arrangements”. Where do we draw the lines? What does it mean? Under what jurisdiction?

Leaving the EU is in the national interest and it is our duty, which we are obliged to deliver. I refer now simply to the exchange between Humpty Dumpty and Alice in “Through the Looking Glass”:

“‘When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.’ ‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you can make words mean so many different things.’ ‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master—that’s all.’”

No longer will our master be the European Union and its political puppet masters. They sought to absorb us into a political union, now on the cards as Angela Merkel has demonstrated this week as regards the new financial arrangements—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir David Amess): Order. In order to accommodate the 16 Members who have notified me that they wish to speak, the time limit has now dropped to nine minutes.

7.45 pm

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): It is probably fitting that I am following the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) as I have promised myself that in this Parliament I will become for remain what he has been for leave during his parliamentary career.

This is the first Queen’s Speech debate in which I have participated since 2010, the year I was elected. If I am honest, I have tended to find the speech itself and the political debate that follows somewhat formulaic. Now we cannot say that that is the case. Events in the past year have hit the British people with a speed and ferocity that is unprecedented in my lifetime: the murder of our beautiful colleague Jo Cox; the referendum; the terrorist horrific fire because such a long supply chain was appalling and acute housing crisis, and there is no prospect of quick answers about responsibility for that No longer will our master be the European Union and its political puppet masters. They sought to absorb us into a political union, now on the cards as Angela Merkel has demonstrated this week as regards the new financial arrangements—

Heidi Alexander: I agree with my right hon. Friend. The fact that some people will not sleep easily in their beds tonight is proof that the Government have failed.

Alex Chalk: I commend the hon. Lady on rightly pointing out the enormity of the tragedy, but does she agree that it does no service to the victims or their families to seek to politicise this before we even know the cause of this dreadful fire? We have to take the process in stages: find out the cause and then take the necessary action. To politicise this in advance serves no one and does not serve justice.

Heidi Alexander: I do not believe that I am politicking this. I am expressing the views of a significant number of my constituents and people who live in London.

On the day on which the election was called, I was stopped by a constituent at Lewisham station. He simply said to me, “We have to stop the damage Theresa May is doing to our country.” I put that statement on every one of my election leaflets. His concern was about Brexit, about his job in central London, and about his ability in the future to pay for his home and look after his kids. The fact that some people will not sleep easily in their beds tonight is proof that the Government have failed.

The process might, for example, include repealing the European Economic Area Act 1993, which underpins our place in the single market. I see no circumstances in which I could vote for us to leave the single market. The Prime Minister might want us to think that the EU and the single market are the same thing, but they are not—the lie has to be nailed. I want to stay in the EU, but if Parliament is engaged in a damage limitation exercise, we must stay in the single market and in the customs union. I am not prepared to risk the queue of lorries at Dover and the queue of people outside Lewisham job centre that is associated with the alternatives.

The UK should be a country in which businesses want to invest, not a country that businesses want to leave. We need to maintain the case with which British businesses trade with their European counterparts and sell to European consumers. We have seen the list of companies setting up operations overseas and considering
their next move. In London, firms such as Deutsche Bank, Goldman Sachs and Lloyds of London are moving jobs to France and Germany. Yes, those are City firms, but we should also think of all the other jobs linked to our capital’s status as one of the world’s financial centres: in retail, hospitality and events management; and those of the couriers, cleaners and caterers who are up at the crack of dawn and sit on buses running through my constituency to keep this incredible city running.

Services account for nearly 80% of our economy. The single market is essential if we are to continue to trade freely and easily. If we do not put the economy first in the single market is essential if we are to continue to trade running.

In the meantime we tread water. As a country, we control immigration from countries that represent 90% of the world’s population. We have the more relaxed system of freedom of movement for the 10% who live in the countries closest to us, which by and large enjoy a standard of living that is either comparable to or approaching our own, but even within that more relaxed system, we could have had—and could still have—greater controls within the overall framework: the need to have a job, for example, or to be self-sustaining after three months of being here. We have the laxest approach to freedom of movement. We have chosen not to place conditions on people coming here, but then blamed the Government cannot draft an immigration Bill, a customs Bill or a trade Bill until negotiations have advanced and they know what to put in them.

We now have a revolt against that and all that it entails. The truth is that we already see people not wanting to come here. They do not feel welcome and the value of their earnings has dropped because of the devalued pound. Our hospital wards, care homes, building sites, farms and restaurants will be left scrabbling around for staff while the Government work out what on earth to do. We need immigration in this country. In 1949, the year my mother was born, more than 730,000 babies were born. Average life expectancy stood at 68. Fast forward to 1975, the year of my birth, and the number of babies born was down to just over 600,000. Nearly 30% of births today are to non-UK-born mothers and average life expectancy stands at 81. Our workforce of tomorrow—the people who will start businesses, work in public services and pay taxes—is partly dependent on immigration. We should be honest about that.

When we talk in Parliament about the causes of and solutions to our housing shortage, and about the pressures on our national health service, we should spend as much time focusing on our ageing population as we do on immigration. It is not a queue of migrants that I see at the doors of A&E; it is a queue of frail, disorientated older people. When I go door to door, even in a relatively young part of the country such as Lewisham, I am amazed by the number of older people living alone, barely moving out of one room. A failure to have an honest debate about that, and a failure to look at the evidence and come up with real solutions, will mean we spend the next few years focusing on completely the wrong priorities. That is my fear with the Queen’s Speech. It is my fear about how the Brexit debate dominates everything else, and it is the responsibility of our politics, irrespective of party lines, to find some answers.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): There is a habit of some in the Labour party of making personal attacks on Conservative Prime Ministers. They did it with Ted Heath, they did it with Margaret Thatcher, and some tried to do it with our current Prime Minister. I think she has the common sense, resilience and sense of humour not to worry too much about that. It is far better that we understand that the leadership of the party can be tested by what people do in action, and during her years as Home Secretary, the Prime Minister had no hesitation in coming to the House, picking up the most difficult issues, and finding ways forward that were supported across the House. I am pleased to back her in what she is trying to do with our Government.

On the Brexit theme—I do not usually discuss that as much as my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash)—I think it will take twice as much effort to make a success of leaving as it would have taken to make a success of staying, but the people made the decision that we should go, so the responsibility of someone in my position is to give the Government the support that I can while trying to make sure that problems are recognised and solved as far as possible.

May I wish the new leader of the SNP in the House good luck? His predecessor, Angus Robertson, will be missed, especially in the all-party group on Austria. I hope that as he is no longer in the House he will regard himself as an honorary member of the group. Much of what he has done is much appreciated by successive Austrian ambassadors, and I hope that his input will continue.

I think that the departing leader of the Liberal Democrats was treated unfairly. It is crazy that one answer to one question can come back to haunt someone. The question of someone’s view of other people’s behaviour, as long as it is held privately, does not really matter. We ought not to say that someone’s orientation or their answer to questions about what other people do should be a test of their political ability or leadership. I wish the Liberal Democrats well in finding a new leader.

To those who are arguing too much about the possible understanding between the Democratic Unionist party and the Conservatives, I remember saying a week ago on Monday, when the question first arose, and when 38 Degrees got everyone on its mailing list to write in saying that that was a frightful thing, that the alternative Government arrangement would be the Labour party trying to introduce an understanding with the SNP, the DUP, the Lib Dems and the Green party. The DUP would have to take part in that arrangement as well; without it, Labour Members could not be in government, so there is no point their pretending there could be an alternative Government by shaking their heads at the DUP. I hope that the DUP will read my description of
the shaking heads on the Opposition side who want nothing to do with them. We are clear that the Government will come from this side and my party.

I mentioned 38 Degrees. I deplore how it pretends to be progressive but not partisan. At some other stage, I will refer the activities of 38 Degrees to the Electoral Commission and the Information Commissioner. I cannot say that it has committed an offence, but I cannot say that it is in the clear. On the last day of the election, it put out something inviting people to see which party was closest to them. If all someone’s answers were closest to the Conservatives, as the majority of voters were at the last election, there were then more questions trying to dissuade the person from thinking that they were what they thought they were. That is wrong. At present, the organisation is running its third campaign in a week and a half: there have been the DUP issue and fire regulations, which clearly will have to be reviewed following that terrible fire in Grenfell Tower, and today it is asking people to sign a petition about national health service spending. Such activity means that that it should be considered as a political organisation, and should meet the same requirements as political parties.

On housing, one of the big issues is leasehold properties. Up to 6 million residential leaseholders are exposed, by accident or design, to mistreatment by managing agents, some freeholders and, sadly, by some property tribunals and courts; I thank the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander) for her interest and help in this matter. If courts and property tribunals feel that they have to make a judgment that is clearly unfair but goes along with precedent or the argument of some clever lawyer, they should say in their judgment, “We find for this party, but we declare that this is an unjust decision.”

Mr Barry Weir, or his company, is the landlord of a park home site in my constituency who has used judgments and expensive lawyers to—in my terms—bully and intimidate. People spend £50,000 to buy a so-called mobile home on the basis that it is residential. It turns out to be for holiday use, and when Mr Weir or his companies get permission for it to be for residential use, he starts to claim another £1,000 a year. He takes people to court and they lose their £50,000. In my view, that is depriving people of assets that they ought to be able to keep. Through this House, I invite Mr Barry Weir to meet me so that we can sort things out person to person. If there is still a dispute, we will go to some outside tribunal and see whether the way he is treating people is right or fair.

The same applies to a freeholder called Martin Paine, who has given people extended leases but written the clause in such a way that even good solicitors fail to find the fact that he is doubling ground rents back to the start of a lease, not to the point at which they were extended. That would not be allowed as part of a formal extension of a lease; again, such behaviour needs exposing in public, and MPs can do that.

I return for a moment to the tragedy in Kensington. I first went to Golborne ward in the early 1970s, when I was setting up the second neighbourhood council in the country; the first was in Golborne. I have seen what has happened in some tenant management organisations. The question of responsibility is important, also in respect of the first reaction to the fire and how it was treated. The fire service will have lessons to learn and it will be happy to learn them. I think the tenant management organisations will do the same. Clearly, the building regulations are wrong: it should not be possible to put up that kind of cladding in that material. However, people should not regard cladding as just aesthetic. In my first constituency 25 years ago, people were spending £30 a week to be cold in a tower block; after the cladding was fitted, they were spending £5 a week to be warm. That £25 a week and the fact of being warm made a big difference to people. We have lessons to learn, we will learn them and I say to 38 Degrees that it should stop trying to wind people up.

There is a side of the Labour party that I admire. I used to meet Bill Hamling, my first Labour opponent when I stood for Parliament in 1974—he was Harold Wilson’s Parliamentary Private Secretary—at lunchtime on Saturdays. We would buy each other a drink and declare hostilities over until the Monday. He appears in many political plays, including “This House”. I ask the people behind that play to revise how they portray Bill Hamling: he was not a foul-mouthed person. They should also revise their portrayal of Carol Mather, a gallant gentleman and officer and my wife’s Whip—she was the first woman in his regiment. He is also portrayed a foul-mouthed, but he was not. People who knew them are still alive and do not need that kind of dramatic effect.

I will campaign in my constituency for funds for a proper A27 that gives protection to local residents but makes it possible for people to move through without traffic jams. With other West Sussex MPs, I will continue to fight for fairer funding for schools. If we had anything like the funding for schools in London, we would not have half the problems we have. I will work with anybody—parents and others—to try to make things right.

The job of those of us in political and public service is to try to reduce avoidable disadvantage, distress and handicap and improve wellbeing through a mixture of wealth and welfare. We can do it together. We should not have so many disagreements, and I commit myself to doing my bit.

8.5 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I begin by thanking the electors of North Durham for returning me to the House, which is both a privilege and a humbling experience. Again, I give them the commitment that I gave when first elected in 2001: to do my utmost to represent them in this place. I wish briefly to address three issues in the Gracious Speech: defence and security, Europe, and mental health.

The events of the past few weeks have shown that we live in deeply troubling and dark times, both at home and abroad. The first job of any Government is the safety and security of their citizens, and that takes two forms: defence through our armed forces and through the work of the domestic security services and the police. The threats that we now face are international and global; we cannot withdraw from the world and hide away. It is vital that we continue to engage with our international partners—and yes, on occasion, if we have to use force against those that threaten us, we will, to protect our way of life and that of our allies. My party has a strong tradition of internationalism, and it is important that we continue to be an outward-looking and engaging part of the world. NATO was one of the defining achievements of the radical 1945 Labour
Government. I was pleased by the continued commitment in the Queen’s Speech to NATO and to the spending of 2% of national income on defence.

However, as is often the case, we need to look at what the Government do in practice rather than just at what they say. Years of squeezed budgets have resulted in the hollowing out of the UK’s military capabilities; the Army is smaller now than at any time since the Napoleonic wars. The Navy faces a manning crisis, and the number of new warships being ordered is at an all-time low. Some of the operations that it should be doing can no longer be done. We are proud of the work done by the Royal Marines for the sake of this country, but the numbers of Royal Marines are to be cut to fill the manning gaps at the Royal Navy.

Morale among our armed forces is at an all-time low. Since 2010, they have been subject to a below-inflation 1% cap on wage increases; if I had suggested such a thing when I was the Defence Minister responsible for pay, those on the Government Benches would have been in open revolt. We can add to that the crisis in armed forces accommodation. The recent National Audit Office report says that the poor condition of the estate is affecting our defence capability. The Prime Minister has continued her predecessor’s short-sighted approach to defence. The Ministry of Defence faces a multi-billion pound black hole in its budget. If it is not faced up to shortly, it will affect the way in which this country can protect itself.

The Government have also flatly refused to pursue a defence industrial strategy over the last seven years. They have gradually decoupled our defence procurement from our leading-edge defence and aerospace sector. Again, imagine the response if we had done that when we were in government. We now have uncertainty, with jobs and defence contracts being exported abroad. There is no regard to jobs in the UK or to the leading technologies this country is reliant on.

In the last few weeks, we have seen the dedication, bravery and commitment of our emergency services. However, after six years of austerity, we all know the pressures they are under, whether it is cuts in numbers or below-inflation wage increases. Rightly, there has been a debate in the last few weeks about police numbers in London, but we also need to have that argument about cuts in regional forces, especially in Durham, which has lost 325 officers in the last five years. All that the Government say about protecting police budgets—the Prime Minister repeated it again today—is complete nonsense. We have a flat-cash increase at the moment, which will mean another cut in future.

I was one of many who argued for Britain to remain in the EU. I have always been very passionate about that, and I argued for us to remain on the basis that it would be in the best interests not only of my constituents in the north-east but of the country. The decision was taken that we should come out of the EU, and I accept that, but it is vital that, whatever we do with our new relationship with Europe, we protect access to the single market, particularly for regions such as the north-east, which depends on exports to the EU and exports £7 billion of goods to it each year—58% of all exports from the north-east. It is not just the large manufacturers such as Komatsu, Nissan and Hitachi that will be affected; it will also be their supply chains—companies big and small—throughout the north-east. If we get this wrong, it will affect not just those corporations, but the livelihoods of our constituents—hard-working families who are dedicated to their local communities.

We also need an early resolution on EU citizens’ rights in this country, because the issue is damaging our economy. It is a strange thing to say, but one of the driving forces of the north-east economy is our regional universities, and they depend on EU nationals. If we get that issue wrong, it will affect the north-east.

I was pleased that mental health was raised in the Gracious Speech. We have made great progress in the last few years in raising the effects of mental health, but if we are to turn the slogan “parity of esteem” into action, we need increased spending, and it needs to be ring-fenced. Clinical commissioning groups are cutting their spending, and last year’s King’s Fund report stated that just under half of CCGs were uncertain or concerned about whether they would be able to pass on increases in mental health funding. If we get that wrong, all the warm words in the world will not bring about what we need on the frontline.

We also need to change the way in which we deliver mental health services. We should cut the large national contracts, because they exclude the voluntary and community sectors, which are so important. We also need to tackle the stigma around mental health and the scandal of our sky-high rates of suicide in society as a whole, but also in prisons. It is an absolute shame on this country that we have the highest suicide rates in our prisons. Is that down to the fact that these things just happen? No, it is not. I have talked to prison officers in my constituency, and these things are a direct result of the austerity in our Prison Service and the pressure people are under. That is making prisons unsafe for not only inmates but the people who work so hard in our prisons.

This parliamentary Session will be dominated by Brexit. If we get that wrong, it will affect all our constituencies. My constituents, and many others throughout this nation, want some hope. They need a change of direction in not only getting Brexit right but making sure we get investment and hope for future generations. I see nothing in this Gracious Speech that gives them that hope.

8.14 pm

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), one of my colleagues from the north-east for whom I have the greatest respect. He was more than helpful in the last Parliament in helping me to find my feet.

It is an honour to be invited to speak in this great Chamber on the first day of our new Parliament. I would like first to put on record my thanks and admiration to our exceptional police force in the north-east and across the country. They were on duty and on high alert, keeping us all safe as we fought our elections. Alongside all our emergency services and our armed forces, they provided such extraordinary resilience throughout the truly horrific terrorist attacks in recent weeks and the Grenfell Tower tragedy.
It is a great honour and a responsibility, having been returned by my constituents in north Northumberland, to ensure that the legislative process, which has begun today with the Gracious Speech, and which is required to take the United Kingdom out of the EU, is met in full. At almost every door I knocked on across the north-east, the message was the same from leavers and remainers alike: “Please deliver Brexit properly, and get on with it!”

I am therefore proud to support this Government’s plans to deliver Brexit, using the repeal Bill to bring all existing EU law into UK law. The Gracious Speech is rightly clear that Brexit will be this Government’s absolute priority and that, as a strong union of four nations, we shall build new frameworks to continue our deep and special partnership with all our long-standing European allies; have the opportunity to create new trade deals with countries across the globe, supporting jobs across the UK; and have the flexibility outside the EU to support economic growth in developing countries. Free trade has been the greatest tool in reducing poverty for centuries, and I look forward to our great nations leading the way on that once again.

As an MP from the north-east of England—from the most northern point of the north-east of England—I am aware that its economic growth has remained behind that of other regions for too long. We are now seeing increasing export markets, as entrepreneurs look globally for new customers in leading-edge technologies. The opportunity for the UK Government to develop regional investment policy is most welcome. There will be no more EU funds—our money sent to Brussels, only to be partially returned to us with endless strings attached. We will be directly connected to the decision makers when it comes to how we get that regional support.

As the MP for the most beautiful constituency—I am happy to challenge all comers on that one—I have a large number of small farm businesses and fishing communities in Berwick, Seahouses and Amble. It is therefore pleasing that the Government will be introducing legislation on agriculture and fisheries as we leave the common agricultural and fisheries policies, and that we will determine our own long-term and sustainable plans in these important areas.

I look forward to clarification from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on how and when we will take back control over the UK’s exclusive economic zone, which I understand is 200 miles from the shore, or the midline between shores—otherwise we would be halfway into France before we started. Our fishermen need that clarity as soon as possible. My sheep farmers are also particularly keen to learn how the new trade deals with the EU and nations around the globe will ensure that their export markets can thrive and grow in the new global Britain.

As a result of Brexit, my constituents will now have a direct link to Government on all the laws we make and impose on them. At present, 60% of our laws are made by the EU, and we can only rubber-stamp them without amending authority. After Brexit is completed, and once we have left the single market and the EU’s customs union, the British people will know that, at last, their vote really can, and does, make a difference to how their country is run.

I for one am so proud of the British people for voting to get back control of their country and to take up once again the full mantle of responsibility for their country’s future direction. This is an exciting time indeed to be in the privileged position of serving as the Member of Parliament for Berwick-upon-Tweed.

I am also delighted that the Gracious Speech has confirmed that we will continue to meet our NATO commitment to spend at least 2% of national income on defence, though it is safe to say that, as a member in the last Parliament of the Public Accounts Committee, which focused on all matters defence—from the equipment plan to the reconfiguration of our defence estates and, most importantly, the continued and right support for serving personnel, veterans and their families—I shall be raising questions about whether that 2% is really enough and following in the footsteps of the former Member for Aldershot.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I gently remind my hon. Friend that the 2% is the result of low management of expectations. As late as 1995-96—long after the end of the cold war—we were spending no less than 3% of GDP on defence, and many of us think we ought to do that in future.

Mrs Trevelyan: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention. We are at one on that. We can and perhaps should be doing much more to ensure that the Treasury can support the Ministry of Defence in the work it has to do.

If, in this Year of the Navy, we are to ensure that we can afford to build the ships we need to protect our nation’s interests in conflict and in peace, we must be honest about what it will take to do so. As HMS Queen Elizabeth prepares to leave Rosyth and start her long service as a beacon for our country’s commitment to NATO, she will need to be supported by many other ships, submarines and aircraft, and the brightest and best young men and women committed to serving their nation. It is therefore excellent to see that the Government will continue to invest in our gallant armed forces and deliver the armed forces covenant across the United Kingdom.

Alan Brown: Given that this is the Year of the Navy, and given the desire for an increase in military spend, does the hon. Lady agree that the MOD should go back to the original commitment on the number of ships it promised to build on the Clyde instead of the reduced number it has pulled back to?

Mrs Trevelyan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. We need to look at this in the round. I hope that the shipbuilding strategy that we are expecting to come out from the Department very shortly will set forward that vision. We need to make sure that we here in Parliament are supporting the Department in ensuring that it can get the funding it needs—long-term, stable funding for that shipbuilding programme.

For this to become a reality, we have much yet to do. Most of the work on the armed forces covenant is not the Government’s job but the job of all of us as leaders, businesses, as community groups and charities. We must, as a nation, really commit to our covenant to the men and women who choose to serve in our armed forces. It is for all of us to make clear our respect and
gratitude, not only, though importantly, by buying a poppy or two for remembrance, but by learning to value the exceptional skill sets that these people have—self-discipline and resilience, technical expertise, and ability to cope under pressure—and recognising that military spouses and children also have extraordinary strength of character. It can never be possible to really understand what it must be like to be a nuclear submariner’s spouse or child, their partner or parent away for three months or more, completely out of contact, with absolutely no idea where they are on the planet. These military families, whose devotion sustains our serving personnel in the Army, the Navy, our great Royal Marines, and the RAF are extraordinary people.

Our armed forces, and indeed all those across our emergency services who put their lives on the line every day for all of us, deserve our respect and gratitude. They should know that our commitment to the covenant is not just words but a determination across every Government Department, a commitment in every business across the UK, and a demonstration of our belief in it, as citizens of this great country of ours. They should know that they can rely on us to support them when their service lives need it, and that all veterans and their families, from every corner of our four nations, are able to lead fulfilling lives as civilians after they have served. I shall encourage the Government to consider creating, as we are doing in the draft domestic violence and abuse Bill, an armed forces covenant commissioner to give the oversight and encouragement to achieve these goals.

There is much to do to deliver Brexit and to deliver on our commitment to the armed forces covenant. I am very proud to be able to offer my service, as my constituents have so clearly asked me to do, in the months and years ahead.

8.23 pm

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): It is with honour, and humility, that I rise to respond to the Queen’s Speech today as the three-times-elected Member of Parliament for the Stalybridge and Hyde constituency. I would like to record my sincerest thanks to all those who showed their faith in me, and to the steadfast people of Greater Manchester for their solidarity and defiance in the face of the terror attack we experienced during the campaign.

This was not an election that was needed; it was an election that was, initially at least, not really wanted. It was an election called in the partisan interests of the Prime Minister rather than the national interest. Frankly, who could blame her given the poll lead she enjoyed on the eve of that election? But as is so often the case, the British public took a rather dim view of someone who appeared to put their own needs before theirs. It now seems inconceivable that this Prime Minister will stay in office for the full term of this Parliament. She has gone from honeymoon to lame duck, with nothing in between.

As ever, analysis of the Queen’s Speech should begin with a focus on the national interest. As yet, this Queen’s Speech has no majority in the House of Commons and so will require the support of the Democratic Unionist party in order to pass. I strongly disagree with the remarks of the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), because I find it unconscionable that any
that we are leaving, and the conversation has to be about the bespoke relationship we now need to negotiate. My constituents, in the main, tell me two things. First, they want the immigration system reformed to end freedom of movement as it is currently constituted. That does not mean that they are anti-immigration—it just means that they want to see greater control of immigration. Members of this House may disagree with that view and cite the underlying economic data, but that is the genuine view from my constituency in the north of England. I recognise that there are those who are motivated strongly by resolutely anti-immigrant sentiment, but I do not believe that the majority of leave voters in my constituency could be described in such a way.

Secondly, I believe that many people want the UK to have the ability to negotiate our own trade deals with the rest of the world. That is a difficult issue, because there is no doubt that the customs union has created significant benefits, especially in cross-border supply chains, which play a particular role in the automotive industry. It is a paradox; at times, I find the EU to be too protectionist, too bureaucratic and too unresponsive in how it allows ordinary citizens to express a view and change the impact of its policies. The Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee looked at the matter briefly while I was a member, and I was—even as a remain voter—fairly shocked at some of the genuine case studies brought to us by British business.

I would like the UK to negotiate a close relationship with the single market, particularly to avoid the loss of any jobs in financial services as a result of regulatory changes, but with a new immigration system and the ability to negotiate a more open and freer trading relationship with the rest of the world. That, to me, would implement the result of the referendum, bring new benefits to the UK and protect the best of what we have now.

Of course, some sort of interim deal and interim arrangement simply must be put in place as soon as possible while we negotiate this rather complex deal. An interim arrangement is no use if British businesses are only told about it several months or years down the line. They have to know now, so that they have the certainty that will enable them to plan how to deal with the next few years.

Given the fact that, based on what we have heard today, the Government have almost nothing else to negotiate apart from the Brexit deal, they should get serious and drop the platitudes. We should not be hearing about a red, white and blue Brexit, because that is not a serious response to a huge moment in British history. Instead, the Government should take responsibility for delivering a new deal for Britain, and they should work with all Members of this House to deliver it.

8.30 pm

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): Since the House prorogued, the nation has experienced some deeply shocking events: the appalling terrorist atrocities in London and Manchester, and the terrible tragedy at Grenfell Tower. I want to take this opportunity to send my condolences to all who were affected and to salute the extraordinary bravery and courage of our emergency services.

As we gather around the anniversary of the brutal murder of Jo Cox, her inspiring message that we have—and must celebrate the fact that we have—“more in common” has never seemed more relevant. As we seek to tackle the extremism in our society, the fact that this Parliament is the most diverse ever—with more women, more ethnic minorities and more Members with disabilities than ever before—is a good thing. We are, indeed, a House that has “more in common” with the people we serve, and that can only strengthen our ability to speak for them.

I think it is an understatement to say that this election result was inconvenient for all of us who wanted to be given a clear, loud and unambiguous mandate to get on and do all the things that we wanted to do. The truth is that the mandate is now in this House. It is in Parliament. We should not be afraid of that, and we should not seek to hide from it. The Prime Minister is absolutely right to have set about forming a Government, given that she leads the party that has the largest number of seats and that won an enormous 42% of the vote, which would in any normal election have been an overwhelming result.

It is also clear to me that we must listen to the grievances so brilliantly and, if I may say so, mischievously harnessed by Comrade Corbyn in his campaign. Above all, we have to listen to this message: the British people want us, as my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) pointed out, to get on with it, but also to listen and to lead. There is no appetite in this country for another referendum, another election or, dare I say it, a change of leadership. Nobody will thank us for indulging in partisan politics or parlour politics when the country is calling out for leadership. I strongly support the Prime Minister in seeking to provide it in very difficult times.

I welcome the signals that the Prime Minister has given that she is listening, and I thank her for them. She is taking personal responsibility for the events of this nation, as we all should in public office. She has shown humility and contrition—not easy for the leader of a nation—and she has shown phenomenal personal resilience and duty to nation. Those are qualities that will stand her and us in good stead in the negotiations ahead. I welcome strongly her appointment of a First Secretary of State and a parliamentary chief of staff.

I welcome the fact that in the Queen’s Speech the Prime Minister revisited—oh, if only we had stayed on message during the election campaign!—the inspiring message of one nation compassionate conservatism that so electrified the electorate last summer, not even 11 months ago. I welcome that message loud and clear today. I particularly welcome the measures in the Queen’s Speech concerning industrial strategy—investing in the jobs, businesses and companies of tomorrow, and in skills and education—which will spread opportunity to those who have felt, hitherto, as though we were building an economy that did not work for them.

It is clear to me that we need to do more to tackle the grievances that were so loudly aired during the election campaign and harnessed by the Opposition. There are three that we need to address. The first is that the youth of this country, who were awoken from their political slumber by the EU referendum, are confronted by personal debts and an intergenerational debt transfer—they have inherited from us £1.7 trillion of debt—and they are struggling to buy houses. That has become almost the
sole model in this country for building up equity and wealth, and they are largely excluded from it. They were casually assumed not to vote. Well, they did vote, and they are demanding that we listen to them. This party and this Parliament must do so.

Secondly, we heard a very loud message about an exhaustion with a particular model of public service austerity. I bow to nobody in my support for the conviction we showed in tackling the horrendous public finances we inherited from the Labour party, and I will never stop reminding people that Labour thought it was funny. Its Chief Secretary to the Treasury left a note saying, “There is no money. Ha, ha! Good luck.” Well, it was not funny; it was a moral outrage and I am proud that we tackled it.

However, it is clear that after seven years of a particular model of austerity, we have heard a loud roar from public service professionals—the doctors, the teachers, the consultants—that they have tightened their belts and they need a different model. I think that we need to set one out and that it needs to be based more on supporting innovation, on leadership, on rewarding public sector leaders who deliver more for less, instead of punishing them, and on unleashing public sector growth. The public sector could do a lot more to support inward investment and jobs. We must ensure that we skill and train our public sector leaders to take part in a 21st-century economy.

Thirdly, in an election that explicitly sought a mandate for Brexit, there was a clear and strong message from many, including from the young and from business, that they reject the shrill and divisive tone in which Brexit has been presented—the sort of “come on if you think you’re hard enough” approach to Europe. They reject the suggestion from some, particularly those on the extreme of the Brexit debate, that there is some magic trade deal tree, in the same way that some on the Labour Benches suggest there is a magic money tree. I think that the people of this country are reconciled to Brexit. Like me, many people in this country who voted for remain want us to get on with it, but they want us to be hard-headed, hard-nosed and soft-tongued. I think that we need to focus more on the life chances and prosperity of the people we serve.

What do we need to do? On the youth, I think that we need to look at a new deal for the next generation. It is clear to me that we need to look at tuition fees, the rate of interest and the structure of the loan book. We need to look at speeding up their access to rented housing. We need to look at a new model of saving for a generation who will not benefit from the post-war model of national insurance. We cannot duck the deep issues; we need to address them on a cross-party basis in this Parliament.

On public services, we need to embrace a new model to replace austerity 1.0 with innovation and efficiency 2.0. We must embrace a whole series of reforms to drive the innovation we need in our public sector.

On Brexit, we need to be more business-like. I am delighted to hear the Chancellor say that the electorate did not vote to be poorer. We need to stop treating those who voted for remain as though they remain as though there is some badge of shame. We need to respect the concerns they have aired. We need to engage this Parliament. Far from hiding the issue from Parliament, I would immerse this Parliament in the detail of Brexit—every Select Committee, every Committee, every Member should be immersed in it. The Government do not need to be bound by everything this House asks for—they seldom are—but it would help to make sure that every Member of this House is fully aware of the issues we are dealing with. In the end, it will come down to three Ms: money, markets and movement.

As a former Minister for life science, a former entrepreneur and somebody who has been proud to work with great entrepreneurs in this country, creating businesses, jobs and prosperity, it is that constituency and the prosperity of my constituents in the relatively poor, rural backwater of Mid Norfolk that I am focused on through this process.

If we are to make this work as MPs, as a Parliament and as a Government, we need to approach it not in the spirit of ideological, partisan or nostalgic, backward-looking yearning for some ideal form of sovereignty, but by being quite hard-nosed about this country. In the best traditions of our foreign policy, we must put British interests first. I am reconciled to that. I think that a Brexit driven in the best interests of this country internationally could be a proud and wonderful moment. Is this the moment we turn in on ourselves, turn our backs on Europe, turn our backs on our allies and our great trading partners, or is it a moment when we respect their project and negotiate a new relationship as their best friend, their nearest neighbour and their biggest trading partner, while allowing ourselves to go off and access the emerging markets? Get it right and we will be thanked by the generations to come, but get it wrong and this party, this House and this Parliament will pay the price. If this becomes a narrow cultural cul-de-sac that appears to a younger generation to have shut off their access to the opportunities of the world, of globalisation and of the new economy, we will not be thanked.

In the end, it is up to this party, this Government and this House to unify this nation, and we can only unify a nation if we are unified ourselves. I hope that you will allow me, Mr Speaker, the indulgence of reminding the House that Abraham Lincoln’s family came from my constituency. He famously said: “A house divided against itself cannot stand.”

The same is true of a Government and a party.

8.39 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in today’s debate. I start by thanking the people of Feltham and Heston for re-electing me, and for the trust that they have placed in me to be their Member of Parliament.

We were lucky to have a Queen’s Speech at all this year, following a snap election that did not go according to plan and a coalition that has not yet gone according to plan. It is a Queen’s Speech that the Queen had not planned for, and that today saw 13 commitments from the Tory manifesto go unmentioned. We could be forgiven for thinking that the contents of this shortened Queen’s Speech will not last the two years that the Government intend. With the Queen’s Speech being as wafer-thin as the Prime Minister’s majority, there is a lot more to come in the next two years.
With the challenges that we face, it was more important than ever for the Queen’s Speech to tackle the issues facing this country and leave a legacy for our nation. It should have been a Queen’s Speech that gave hope to our nation and tackled the issues that we heard our constituents talking about at the election: a better future for our NHS; an increase in community police officers, with greater powers to tackle drugs and antisocial behaviour; more funding for our schools, which are now grappling with the impact of the estimated 8% cuts to pupils’ education; the cost of education for young people going to university; more affordable housing for our families; and a Brexit that puts jobs first, that seeks the closest possible economic relationship with our neighbours, and that delivers the improvements in quality of life that people want.

After a difficult year, we have a nation that wants to believe that better is possible. The London mayoral campaign last year showed the Government driving the language and politics of division, and Sadiq Khan’s victory was as much a victory for Sadiq and Labour in London as it was a victory for Londoners, and for the values of respect and inclusion that this country stands for.

We remember our friend Jo Cox and her inspirational life of love and of passion, so tragically cut short by hate. We think about the EU referendum, the rise in hate crime and Islamophobia and, more recently, the attack in Westminster, Manchester, London Bridge and Finsbury Park, and the devastating fire at Grenfell Tower. They are all part of a growing sombre mood, but one that goes beyond terrorism to much that is of our times. They are all part of a growing sombre mood, but one that goes beyond terrorism to much that is of our times.

Some of the challenges are made clear in the 2017 social progress index, published in the past couple of days, which shows the UK ranking 12th in factors relating to basic needs, wellbeing and opportunity. Social progress has not increased in the past four years, and we are going backwards on key measures. The report’s results also show how widespread the impact of austerity has become. There is disillusionment about the affordability of housing, rising crime, growing intolerance and poor health outcomes. Far from our seeing quality of life improving, things show every prospect of going backwards. Is it not devastating that we, as a developed country, risk creating a homeless generation with people being unable to get on to the housing ladder or living in cramped accommodation where they work? Our children and our families deserve better.

Destitution in the UK is on the rise. A report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation a year ago highlighted some key facts. The general public consider people to be destitute when they cannot afford to buy the essentials to eat, stay warm and dry, and keep clean. About 1.25 million people, including 300,000 children, were in that situation at some point a year ago.

After seven years of austerity, it is becoming increasingly apparent that there are those in this country who are suffering deeply due to the Government’s policies. People are struggling to make ends meet. We live in a country where nurses are having to go to food banks, where last summer almost 10% of tenants in the UK fell behind with their rent payments, and where the percentage of council tenants on universal credit in rent arrears has increased to a critically high 86%.

The Chancellor said in his Mansion House speech this week that we need a stronger economy to generate tax receipts that we can invest in our public services. Let us put aside for a minute the £20 billion that the Conservatives’ corporation tax cuts have cost this country; on his basic point, the Chancellor is right. The problem is the backdrop of an underperforming economy. We see GDP growth slowing in the first quarter of this year, wage growth slowing—the Governor of the Bank of England, Mark Carney, has called it “anaemic”—and proof with every step that the Government have taken that we cannot cut our way to prosperity.

Prices are rising and wages are stagnating. We need much more thought about how we Brexit, about transitional arrangements to stop a cliff-edge of tariffs and non-tariff barriers, about remaining part of the customs union and of a reformed single market, about protecting the rights of our young people, and about ensuring that we as a nation are not worse off.

If we want a proper growth plan, we need a wider economic plan for the future—and one for the long term. On the productivity crisis, UK productivity lags way behind that of other countries. We also invest far less than the OECD average in research and development. Improvements in UK living standards are much needed, and to achieve that we need wages to grow. Our future income will depend on increasing output per hour.

I welcome the Government’s proposed new modern industrial strategy, which the Labour Opposition have called for. There is much that we share with the Government regarding how we move forward, but we can go much further. I would have liked a productivity Bill in the Queen’s Speech to address the issues that we need to face to deal with our productivity challenge. The Government have made positive moves—the productivity plan and the national productivity investment fund—but, as the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee has said, the productivity plan was “more of an assortment of largely existing policies” than a new plan. The London School of Economics has said that although there are individually sensible policies, it is difficult to discern a clear growth strategy emerging from the plan. Without such a vision, it is likely that a short-term fix will dominate. We need a new vision, a renewed and much more centralised plan that takes a holistic approach to the many ways in which we can drive up our productivity. We are looking for proper and solid partnership between business and Government, a much more thoughtful sense of how our wider net of tax reliefs can make a contribution, and new strategies for entrepreneurship that include women and business.

We need much more thought about how social and economic progress for all our communities go hand in hand. In the light of the growing uncertainty we face as a nation, and the need for us to consider much more thoughtfully the turning point we face, we need a strategy for how we go forwards and not backwards as a nation.

The Queen’s Speech lacked a positive vision for our country’s future. It should have had a vision for an end to unemployment and underemployment, with food banks becoming a thing of the past; a vision for children growing up without mental health issues; a vision for a nation that is proud, confident and prosperous; and a vision of a nation happy, with diverse communities living side by side with mutual respect. A vision of a better society was what our country needed, and I am sorry to say that this Queen’s Speech did not deliver it.
8.48 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): It is a huge honour to be elected to represent the people of Chelmsford and to make my maiden speech in this debate on the Queen’s Speech. In the diamond jubilee year, Her Majesty chose Chelmsford to be a new city, and we are deeply grateful to the Queen. On behalf of the people of Chelmsford, I should like to offer her our sincerest thanks.

Chelmsford is a brilliant city. Our city centre is full of stunning new shops and restaurants. We have many excellent new homes and many outstanding schools. In Chelmsford, we are very proud of our local hospital—it is just over the constituency boundary in Broomfield—and its burns unit is recognised for its excellence across the world. Our 24-hour A&E is a vital local service. I am pleased that the Queen’s Speech referred to the need to invest in our NHS and education, but also recognised that we need a strong economy to generate the income to pay for these services.

It is innovation that drives a modern economy. It is vital for competitiveness, and it delivers jobs and growth.

Chelmsford has a strong tradition of innovation. We are a radio city. This is where Marconi chose to make his first radios and that heritage continues today, with the many local experts in wireless technology, including at e2v. Every time we see a photograph of our planet taken from outer space, the chances are that that picture was taken with a camera made in Chelmsford. We make the equipment that sends our digital communications from earth to the satellites in the sky and the same equipment that brings those messages back. Satellite technology is the fastest-growing sector in the global economy and the Queen’s Speech sets out our commitment to underpin its future in Britain.

I am glad that the Government will also propose new measures to unlock investment in infrastructure. People in Chelmsford spend too much time in traffic jams and on delayed trains. It is a waste of our personal time and it hampers the country’s productivity. A modern infrastructure is required for a modern economy.

Chelmsford was the birthplace of Sir Nicholas Conyngham Tindal. As Chief Justice in the 1840s, he first introduced a legal defence for those suffering from mental illness. I welcome the fact that the Queen’s Speech calls for further action to support those with mental health issues.

My predecessor, Sir Simon Burns, represented the people of Chelmsford for 30 years. He is deeply loved by many people locally. He chose to make his maiden speech in a debate on the topic of young people, opportunities and skills. Sir Simon would take great pride in the fact that, in the past seven years, over 4,700 people in Chelmsford have started apprenticeships and that in this Queen’s Speech we plan to introduce new T-levels for those who would prefer to follow technical, rather than academic, qualifications. In Chelmsford, we support both of these. The excellent Anglia Ruskin University celebrated its 25th birthday just last week. It wins awards for innovation, it is building a new medical school and planning a new biomedical cluster, and it leads collaborative research projects with many overseas.

The next two years are vital for the future of our country. Chelmsford voted 53:47 in the referendum and it is important that the terms of exit work for all.

Chelmsford’s railway station is one of the busiest in the country. We are just 30 minutes from Liverpool Street and many of my constituents work in financial services. It is vital for them that our ongoing trade with Europe continues to be in services as well as in goods.

Other key 21st-century sectors, such as medical innovation, the tech sector and advanced manufacturing, also prioritise access to the single market. Such access must be underpinned by the principles of mutual recognition, based on trust and co-operation. Those sectors also need continued exchanges of skills and talent, and ongoing co-operation in science and research.

A British Member of the European Parliament has chaired the Internal Market Committee in the European Parliament ever since it was first established, right up to the night of my election to this House. As the most recent person to hold that post, I fully recognise that, since Britain voted to leave the EU, we must also establish a new and different relationship with the single market. There is a vast amount of support from pragmatic and practical politicians across the continent who wish to help us to find a deep and positive long-term partnership. The talks will be complex. The trading relationship between the UK and the EU is not that of Norway, Switzerland or Canada’s relationship, and we cannot take an on-the-shelf model and cut and paste it into the UK-EU relationship, as economies on both sides of the channel would suffer.

There is a huge amount of detail to be agreed, not only on the terms of the exit, but on the long-term agreement and a transition that supports businesses and consumers in the interim. While we have many political friends, there are others who wish to disrupt these negotiations for their own political gain.

In Chelmsford, at the top of the High Street, near our beautiful cathedral, is the statue of the late Sir Nicholas Conyngham Tindal. The inscription tells us that his administration of English law was

“Directed by serene wisdom,
Animated by purest love of justice,
Endeared by unwearied kindness”.

May we all be graced by serene wisdom in these serious years ahead.

8.54 pm

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) on being so quick off the mark, and being the first Member to make a maiden speech in this Parliament. She made a passionate case for Chelmsford, and she is clearly not one for messing around. It is an honour to follow her.

We live in extremely challenging times, and the past year has certainly tested the resilience of Britain and its diverse communities more than any time in my adult life. I offer my heartfelt condolences to everyone affected by the absolutely appalling events at Grenfell Tower last week. Like millions across the country, many of my constituents have been deeply shocked by what happened. Like me, they want to know that the Government are doing everything in their power to ensure not just that the community and those affected have all the support that is available, but that every possible lesson is urgently learned, and changes are made so that such a sickening event, and avoidable tragedy, is never repeated.
We have also faced horrifying and senseless violence in both London and Manchester, and, again, I offer my sincere and deepest condolences to all those affected by the terror attacks. On the evening of the most recent incident, at Finsbury Park, alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah), I had the privilege of joining a multi-faith community iftar hosted by Newcastle’s United Hebrew Congregation synagogue as part of the Great Get Together initiative in memory of our dearly loved and missed colleague Jo Cox. For me, that event—and all the moving Great Get Together events held across the country last weekend—could not have provided a clearer demonstration of Britain’s determination that hate and intolerance will not divide us.

What has also been made exceptionally clear over the last few months is the incredible professionalism, dedication and bravery of those in our emergency services. I express my deepest gratitude to them as well, knowing how tirelessly they work to keep us safe, not just during the horrific moments that we have experienced recently but all year round. As I was leaving the Great Get Together event in Newcastle, I stood at the gate with a local police officer, and together we looked back at the scene. Inside the hall, people of many faiths and none were enjoying a buffet, some breaking fast together, while outside a number of Muslims prayed together on the grass just by the entrance to the synagogue. It was a very powerful scene.

I am greatly honoured to be able to stand in the Chamber again today as the MP for Newcastle upon Tyne North, and I thank my constituents for re-electing me with an increased majority—which was particularly kind, given that 8 June was my birthday. I am also proud to be part of the most diverse British Parliament in history, which contains more female, BME, LGBT and disabled MPs than any before, but make no mistake: there is always more work to do. What I am perhaps most heartened by, however, is the fact that my constituents re-elected me after we had championed a positive Labour message of hope and a better future for our local area and our country, as opposed to one of fear, negativity and division.

Newcastle upon Tyne North rejected a Conservative manifesto devoid of any vision, which, inexplicably, held that removing free school meals from infant school pupils and reintroducing foxhunting via a Government Bill in Government time were the sort of policies and priorities that the nation was crying out for. The Government have been forced to drop some of their worst plans, given that the outcome of the election has left their hands tied. However, I still worry that the content of the Gracious Speech shows that they are still not listening to what the public are saying about the urgent need for the economy, and the way in which the country operates, to work for the many and not just the few, so on behalf of my constituents I shall use the time available to me to set out a few of their many concerns.

This week, the Chancellor informed the nation that the Government are apparently “not deaf” to the message that they were sent at the general election, and that he has finally accepted that “people are weary of the long slog” of public spending cuts. Well, I can tell him that people in Newcastle upon Tyne North are way beyond weary when it comes to that issue. I look forward to hearing what the Chancellor’s damascene conversion will actually mean for public services in our area, including those provided by Newcastle city council and Northumbria police, which have had to make hundreds of millions of pounds worth of cuts since 2010, thus hitting people’s quality of life. There has been a seven-year assault on local services as a result of the choices made by both the coalition and Conservative Governments: my city and its communities deserve better than that.

There was no clearer message delivered during the election campaign than the growing alarm people are feeling about the Conservatives’ mismanagement and underfunding of our NHS and social care services. Anyone working on the frontline of our health service knows that it is at breaking point. Patients know it because waiting times are up—for surgery, treatment at A&E, an ambulance, mental health support, or to see a GP—while services and medicines are being rationed across England. Hard-working, demoralised NHS staff are increasingly being asked to do more with less, which is unfair, and unsafe, for them and their patients. Scandalously, in the sixth largest economy in the world, we now have nurses turning to food banks after years of NHS pay freezes, which I again urge the Government to bring to an overdue end.

Of course, the pressures on the NHS are being exacerbated by seven years of punitive cuts to social care budgets that have left the system in crisis and far too many older and vulnerable people without the vital care and support that they need. Meanwhile, 1,000 EU staff working in the NHS in the north-east remain in an unnecessary and unacceptable state of uncertainty about their future in this country. Our NHS, its staff and the people who use it deserve better than that.

There is anger that, as a result of the Conservatives’ funding plans, schools in my constituency will lose up to £800 per pupil by 2021-22. The situation is placing intolerable pressure on local schools, which now face the stark reality of bigger class sizes, losing teachers, cutting subjects and axing vital resources, and all at a time when the Government have been determined to press ahead with their totally baffling obsession with diverting funds towards free schools and grammar schools; I sincerely hope the latter are now dead in the water. Instead, I want to know what the Government are going to do about the 5,000 children living in poverty in my constituency and the 3,300 living in families with problem debt.

One of the biggest issues for thousands of my constituents remains their plight after enduring unfair changes to their pension age, with little or no notification. Their totally unacceptable treatment at the hands of this Government, after seven decades of hard work, national insurance contributions, caring responsibilities and often a lifetime of discrimination, is a burning injustice that I will never stop fighting for the Government to rectify. My constituents deserve much better than that.

As I have mentioned, one of the most critical concerns for Newcastle and the north-east is the creation of a fairer economy that works for everyone. We know that far too many people remain trapped in precarious, irregular and low-paid work. Of the new jobs created since 2011, one in nine is insecure. The people of the north-east deserve better than that, and it requires the creation of long-term, good, skilled jobs.
I welcome the announcement in the Gracious Speech on growing Britain’s burgeoning space sector and on allowing satellites to be launched from the UK, but I will continue to press the Government to ensure that that will support businesses based in the UK, such as Spincraft in my constituency, to create and grow those good jobs of the future. I also remain concerned about Nestlé’s decision to offshore 165 jobs, including 110 from its Fawdon plant in my constituency, and particularly about the Government’s refusal to work with me, other hon. Members and the GMB union to work out how we can keep those jobs here.

It is unacceptable that Newcastle International airport, the single largest employment site in my constituency, still has no certainty about how the Government intend to mitigate the impact of devolving air passenger duty to Scotland in just over 10 months’ time. Nor do we know whether any deal with the DUP to prop up the Prime Minister’s Government will see APD in Northern Ireland on the table.

Mr Kevan Jones: Does my hon. Friend agree that the decision on APD will affect not just her constituency but the north-east economy? Newcastle International airport employs 3,000 people directly, but it sustains some 18,000 jobs throughout the north-east. It is an economic catalyst in the north-east and any effect on that airport will have an impact on the north-east economy.

Catherine McKinnell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right and comes to the heart of what the Government need to do. The Brexit negotiations have finally commenced. It is impossible to reiterate enough how important getting the right deal for the north-east and its people will be, because my region possibly has the most to lose from a bad one. Almost 60% of the north-east’s exports currently go to the EU. I believe it is imperative for the UK to remain within the single market. Taking the single market and customs union off the table before negotiations had begun was a categorical misjudgment on the Prime Minister’s part.

I understand that ad hoc meetings may have taken place, but there is still no commitment from the Government on how they will properly engage with the north-east on its priorities for the Brexit negotiations throughout this historic process. Nor is there any clear means or a forum for that to take place. Alongside all the other pledges I made to my constituents during this election campaign, I will continue to fight for a Brexit that puts jobs and living standards first, because the people and businesses of the north-east deserve much, much better than this.

9.4 pm

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell). I was particularly delighted to hear that she had a birthday on election day, because so did my son, and cake was all over the Rees-Mogg household on that day, as I hope was the case in Newcastle upon Tyne North. I particularly want to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) on her absolutely brilliant maiden speech, and on being the first new Member to make a maiden speech in this Parliament, which shows a wonderful courage. As it happens, the Chelmsford seat is the one I know from my earliest days politically, because my godfather, the late Norman St John-Stevas, represented it—and got down to a majority of about 300 in his last election. I am glad to say that my hon. Friend has done a good deal better in her election. I listened to her speech, and her affection for her constituency, and her note at the end that it puts up statues to its most distinguished denizens, and I am sure that one in due course will appear to her. We are also very lucky to have somebody joining our House at this time who so thoroughly understands European politicians.

I now want to move on to the tragedies that have affected this nation in recent months: the terrorist outrages. We must never assume them to be routine. They have happened with increasing frequency—four of them in such a short time—but we must not allow their repetition to lessen our horror or our determination to win through.

Then there was Grenfell Tower, which I happen to think is an even greater tragedy as it seems to me that it was preventable. There is such deep sadness and horror at what happened there, and all of us in public life must ensure we work out how that can never happen again. Although it is often said that something should never happen again, it is not always within the power of man to ensure that that is the case, but with Grenfell Tower it ought to be possible to ensure that something of that kind never happens again.

I am sorry for that long preamble, Mr Speaker, but I thought it was important in these circumstances, before I move on to the Queen’s Speech in the context of the general election.

We basically fought the general election in the way Stanley Baldwin fought the 1929 general election. He ran on the slogan “Safety first”, and we ran on the slogan “Strong and stable”. I think the two are the same, and they are both deeply unappealing. He lost in 1929, and we underperformed in 2017—I use the word “underperformed” for the sake of accuracy rather than as an effort at spin.

We have to ask ourselves why the safety first approach underperforms. I think the answer is that the voters do not feel that we are on their side; they feel instead that it is business as normal. Yet we know from the Brexit vote and the vote at the last election here—not to mention the United States and what has gone on on the continent—that voters are fed up with business as normal.

We must look to the Queen’s Speech to decide how business is going to be changed: what are we going to do to make people’s lives better? One of the titles of the Pope is “servus servorum Dei”: the servant of the servants of God. That is how we should view our role—as the servants of the people of the United Kingdom, whom I happen to think are also the people of God. We must work to ensure that we can help them lead better, more prosperous lives.

Brexit presents a great opportunity, and one that we are not talking about enough. The lessons of free trade are that we produce better standards of living for people because they can buy goods more cheaply. The biggest burdens that the EU imposes are on food, where the tariffs are so high that we cannot really import any, and the biggest generators of revenue in this country are clothing and footwear. Therefore, what is attacked by the protection in the single market and the customs
union are the things that are the most important part of the basket of goods bought by the poorest in the land. We want to get rid of that, so that they can keep more income in their pockets to spend on the things that they want, or to save, with all the concomitant economic advantages that that leads to. People can then buy other goods or deposit money. Money can be invested and business can grow. If we move away from this protectionist European approach, people will have a higher standard of living. That is essential.

This is not about having bad regulations and a free for all. Many countries in the world that we trade with have higher standards than we do. The United States has different standards but it does not poison its people, and the Australians do not poison their people, but the goods that we buy from them would be cheaper, and that will help the poorest in our country.

We need to look specifically at some of the things in the Queen’s Speech, and to stand up for those who have big business weighing down on them. I am not anti-business. I have been in business all my life—I am pro-business—but I note the statement that Her Majesty graciously read to us about tackling “unfair practices in the energy market”.

Even I had Scottish Power writing to me to say that it would send in the bailiffs when it had sent me a bill that was nearly 15 times what it was meant to be. Frankly, it is all right for me as I am quite capable of writing back to the company and making sure it does not send the bailiffs round, but when such companies do that to our constituents, those people do not necessarily have that easy ability to get in touch with the right person and stop that sort of nonsense happening. Some of these companies are aggressive and skew the contracts in their favour. That does not mean that I want to see a price cap, but I do want to see fairness and to see us being on the side of our voters.

I want to finish on the subject of housing. Grenfell Tower has really brought this home to all of us. The problem with Grenfell Tower is a very deep-seated one. It goes back to the point at which it was popular to put up tower blocks as an exercise in social engineering. There are opinion surveys going back to the 1940s, and when people are asked what type of property they want to live in, 80% of them say houses; only 2% or 3% say tower blocks. But what did the politicians and the bureaucrats give to the people? We gave them tower blocks that they did not want, and there are now 4,000 of them blighting our landscape. We then decided that those tower blocks should be refurbished, and that refurbishment was very expensive. Hardly a penny seems to have been spared, except on safety. Those buildings might now be more environmentally friendly and they might look a little prettier than they did before, but although £8 million was spent on refurbishment, the £5,000 to make the panels fire-secure and the £200,000 for sprinklers was not spent.

This is the worst type of bureaucratic imposition, and we should be saying to any family that goes to sleep in a tower block tonight frightened because the building has the same cladding and whose children are having nightmares that, whatever the difficulty, we will find somewhere else for them to live. The numbers may be great and the problem may be vast, but we must show that we are on people’s side. Then, we must recognise that people want houses, not tower blocks. We must build them houses and get rid of the tower blocks, and then we must allow them, as Margaret Thatcher did, to become homeowners. If we do that, we will be on people’s side. We will support our electors, and we will be, like the Holy Father, servus servorum Dei.

9.14 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg). I pretty much agreed with the first four minutes of his speech, and with the final two minutes of it. In all honesty, that is six minutes more than I usually agree with him for.

It is a real honour and I am really proud to have been re-elected to serve the constituency of Kilmarnock and Loudoun, and I pledge to work as hard as I can for the next six months or five years, whatever length of term this is going to be.

I am also pleased to be elected to the most diverse Parliament yet—that is good; it was said earlier that there is more work to do, but at least this is progress in the right direction. I also have to observe that for the most part today we have seen the same old faces—or the lack of faces—filling the Benches. If we are to appear a more diverse Parliament, I hope that we will see more people filling the Benches and participating in future.

Perhaps the lack of participation or lack of occupancy of the Benches today is a reflection of the lack of content or quality in the Queen’s Speech—I hope it is not because people knew I was on the list of speakers. Some of tonight’s contributions have been really good. Those were contributions on terrorism, the victims, the language of division and the Grenfell disaster—things most of us in the House can agree on and work on, cross-party and consensually. I hope that is something that will be good in this parliamentary term.

We also heard more vacuous contributions—those saying that everything is going to be okay on Brexit, that the UK will get what it wants out of the negotiations, and that it will continue free trade deals to suit itself with the EU and free trade around the world, picking deals at random. That just does not add up. I have news for people: the days of the British empire are over, we live in a different world and it is time some people reflected that.

This was supposed to be the Queen’s Speech that gave the Prime Minister carte blanche to do what she wanted, but instead, as has been said, we have a near empty Queen’s speech. Given that the Tory manifesto was completely uncosted and ill thought through, it is probably not a bad thing that we are not getting too much from it. Such was the Prime Minister’s arrogance that she thought she could duck out of debates and announce what she wanted, attacking pensioners with regard to the triple lock, the dementia tax and the winter fuel allowance. For me, that was proof that she still leads the nasty party. As she said herself, she needed a big majority to strengthen her negotiating position with the EU, but clearly all she has done is strengthen the hand of her Back Benchers and the DUP.

That brings us nicely to “no deal being better than a bad deal”. The Prime Minister has shown that she cannot even negotiate a deal with her “friends and allies” from the DUP—worse, she did not even realise
that at first. On 10 June, we heard an announcement, “We’ve got a deal with the DUP.” Then we heard, “We don’t have a deal with the DUP.” The Queen’s Speech was put back two days to allow the deal to be formulated, yet here we are and there is still no deal with the DUP. So how can we trust that Prime Minister to lead a minority Government and get a better deal with the other 27 member states of the EU? That does not add up.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is vital that the Conservative Government work not just across this House, but across the UK and start to re-engage with the devolved Administrations, particularly through the Joint Ministerial Committee being set up as a matter of urgency to take forward Brexit discussions?

Alan Brown: I thank my hon. Friend for that contribution. I wholeheartedly agree that it is imperative that all voices of the UK are heard, especially as Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU. Our different voice must therefore be heard at the negotiating table.

I thought it ironic that one pre-election tactic was for the Conservatives to turn attention to the Liberal Democrat leader’s views on homosexuality, yet post-election the Conservatives are teaming up with the DUP, a confirmed anti-gay-marriage party that lobbied the Scottish Government to try to prevent people from Northern Ireland travelling to Scotland for a gay marriage. Again, the hypocrisy is rank.

The Prime Minister is now stuck with her team and her Cabinet, whereas before she was making it clear that she wanted a reshuffle. She is stuck with a team she does not want and she has lost her majority—that is strong and stable for you! Recent tensions are clear, given that the Chancellor and the Brexit Secretary now disagree about the need to be in the customs union. Again, where does that leave the UK in the negotiations? Apparently, the new Scottish Tory intake is so poor that I was able to get cross-party support for a private Member’s Bill on the issue in the previous Parliament. I even had support from the DUP, so perhaps it really is something that should be brought to the table. If we want to increase productivity and have more efficient infrastructure, it really would be an easy start.

Needless to say, infrastructure was also lacking in the Queen’s Speech. We heard about HS2 being extended to Crewe, but we really need to see more infrastructure investment.

Another issue that could be tackled quite easily is section 75 of the Pensions Act 1995, which is causing misery and possible bankruptcy for Scottish plumbing companies. These are guys who signed up their employees for a decent pension but are now at risk of bankruptcy due to hypothetical debts arising from the regulations on multi-employer schemes. The Government held a consultation before the general election, but it was of course held up. We now have another new Minister, who is going to have to look at the issue and go through the whole process again. That really sums up the farce of it all.

I cannot mention pensions without mentioning the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign. This really is our last chance to reverse the Pensions Act 2011. It is time for the Government Members who joined the cross-party group, and who spoke in this Chamber to express their concerns on behalf of the WASPI women, to stand up and be counted. With the Government’s wafer-thin majority, it would not take many of those Members to join with Opposition Members so that we can get justice for the WASPI women. It was telling that today the Prime Minister was still quite happy to talk about her corporation tax giveaway. Surely we should be looking not at a tax giveaway to big corporations but at helping the WASPI women who need justice.

I bet Government Members really wish that the Prime Minister had got on with her day job and not called a general election; I know that a lot of people in my constituency agree wholeheartedly with that sentiment.
The fact is that that has all been stripped out—but it cost us an election. I am delighted that some of the people involved in putting those things in the manifesto are no longer working at 10 Downing Street and that there is now a change in style of governance. It did not start with the current Prime Minister, but with Tony Blair and Alastair Campbell, and probably people before them, and it has just built up. I am delighted that Cabinet governance is back in this country, alive and well. At least this has all served one purpose. The fact is that, yes, we now have to rely on the votes of other people in this House to get the legislative programme through.

I am a Brexiteer, and I am delighted that we are going to leave the European Union, but we must ensure that the new opportunities of trade are realised, whether that is with the United States of America or, indeed, with the European Union. When we import £80 billion more than we export, the European side has clear interests in trading with us. Getting controls on immigration means that we cannot be in the customs union. We cannot be a member of the single market, but we will trade with it. All of that has to happen, and—this is something for me—Parliament will be the Parliament of an independent country where we govern ourselves with our legislation.

It is a mistake to go down from 650 to 600 Members of Parliament. We should look again at 650 Members of Parliament on equal boundaries, because when the legislation comes back from Brussels we will have a lot of work to do. People do not realise how much work there is. I have seen the workload disappear since 1992 when I was first elected. It is all coming back. Brace yourselves, everyone, because we will have to do a lot of work. I am grateful for the Gracious Speech today.

9.30 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I am honoured to have been re-elected to represent the Brentford and Isleworth constituency. I congratulate the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), who is no longer in the Chamber, on her maiden speech. She clearly has a deep love for her constituency. In respect of the four terrible events that have taken place since Dissolution, I share the sympathy expressed by hon. Members to people who have been bereaved and injured, gratitude to the emergency services, and concern that these outrages must not happen again.

During the election campaign, the voters of Chiswick, Brentford, Isleworth, Osterley and Hounslow made it clear to me that they were voting for hope and for change. Many people voted Labour for the first time, and my majority increased from 465 two years ago to 12,148. They voted against a hard Brexit and against the ongoing austerity policies of the Government. Many people in my constituency work in London’s enormous finance and services sector. Many of my constituents are EU citizens, or are married to EU citizens, or work alongside EU citizens, or live near EU citizens, so they know directly and personally what leaving the single market will mean. They know that the single market is important to retain their jobs; to be assured that their employers can remain in London; to protect and build the UK economy; and to ensure that their EU spouses, neighbours and work colleagues have some security and the promise of a future. There is nothing in the Queen’s Speech that gives comfort on those issues.
Many of my constituents told me that they wanted an end to austerity, because the NHS is going backwards, and there are still plans to cut major services at Charing Cross hospital. They can see how local services provided by Hounslow council and the local voluntary sector have been devastated in the past seven years of cuts, so that Hounslow council has lost 40% of its income in that period. My constituents want an end to austerity because they see how cuts to community policing have decimated the neighbourhood police teams that make them feel safe in these challenging times. They want an end to austerity because they have been denied adequate care services for themselves or for a loved one because of these cuts. People still working in the public sector want an end to austerity because after endless rounds of job cuts they are failing to do properly the work of the three or four posts that they are trying to cover. We need an end to austerity, which is a discredited ideology in all equivalent countries that not only decimates the public sector but exacerbates inequality and, incidentally, weakens the economy.

During the election, young people told me that they wanted an end to tuition fees that are saddling them with massive debts at the start of their working lives. They wanted an end to exploitative zero-hours contracts, which are usually the only jobs they can get for years, whether they are graduates or not. It is not surprising that there is nothing in the Queen’s Speech for young people, given that we know from an article in The Economist that Conservative party central office apparently told local campaigners in my constituency, and presumably most others, not to worry about seeking young people’s votes because “They are not on the data set”.

Parents and sixth formers told me that they wanted their good and excellent schools to continue to thrive, so mention of fair funding in the Queen’s Speech gives them no comfort that the planned future cuts, entitled “fairer funding”, are not going to go ahead.

Those on average and low incomes told me about their problems in trying to find a home that they could afford to rent, let alone buy. There is nothing in the Queen’s Speech for people who need truly affordable housing. Those living or walking near our busy roads told me that they want robust legislation that addresses our appalling air quality that is so damaging to their health and that of their children—nothing about that in the Queen’s Speech either.

People who will live under the inevitable approach path to Heathrow’s runway 3 and those living under the approach paths to existing runways, where respite periods will be cut, are all hoping that runway 3 will not go ahead, but the Queen’s Speech was surprisingly silent on Heathrow. There is nothing for the escalating number of people forced to rely on food banks caused by the cuts to the housing allowance and by housing benefit cuts and sanctions. In the last year, the number of users at Hounslow Community FoodBox has tripled as a result of the roll-out of universal credit by the Department for Work and Pensions across the borough of Hounslow. In my view, that is a legalised form of enforced destitution.

I now want to address something that was in the Queen’s Speech: the supposed commitment to end the “burning injustice”, as the Prime Minister called it, of the treatment of people with mental health conditions. That very worthy aim is completely worthless if no additional funding is available in the NHS. It is hypocritical to promise specialist staff support in schools when this year heads have had to cut welfare support, counselling services and teaching assistants—the very people who were providing essential support to troubled children in our schools but whose posts are currently being whittled away under the current funding cuts.

Concern for mental health in the Queen’s Speech, and from the Prime Minister, is worse than useless given that we read that the DWP has been forced to reveal today that 200,000 people with chronic mental health conditions are set to lose their employment support allowance. Now we know that “parity of esteem” for mental and physical health actually means equality of austerity for all.

Although my constituents will be pleased that there is no further mention of means-testing winter fuel payments, of boosting fracking, of reviving foxhunting, of the ending of infants’ free school meals or of the roll-out of grammar schools, there is much that they would like to have seen. The Prime Minister said today that she has put fairness at the heart of the Government’s programme, but the Queen’s Speech has done nothing of the sort. Today, the pageantry was scaled down, and so was the Queen’s Speech. I now hope, for the sake of my constituents, that the five-year term of this Government is also scaled right back.

9.37 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and it was wonderful to hear the maiden speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) a few moments ago.

I should start by saying that 8 June was an interesting day for me. The calling of the election came as quite a surprise, given that Hazel and I had already arranged to get married on the Saturday. Out of the window went the stag and hen nights; the stag night became an election count. Our marriage attracted quite a bit of publicity, as a result of Mr Macron’s election as President of France. Our marriages were not the only thing we had in common: my 53% of the vote was not quite his 60%, but it meant that we were similar in two ways rather than just the obvious one that the media were so interested in.

This will be a significant Parliament, given the challenge of Brexit and the result of the referendum this time last year. The whole House will need to rise to the challenge. There will be difficult negotiations and we will need to look carefully at what is offered. We will need also to act maturely and responsibly, because the decisions made in this Parliament will be as significant as those between 1970 and 1974—the decisions that took us into Europe. I hope that we can have a genuinely mature and sensible cross-party debate. Sometimes such expectations are dashed, but I hope that on this occasion we can all see that the issue is not about scoring a cheap point for tomorrow’s headlines or a few votes at the next general election, whenever that is, but about decisions that will affect the next generation. I hope that that will be the focus of our deliberations.

On my reaction to what we saw at Grenfell Tower, some may have seen that I was with some of the survivors earlier tonight on a Channel 4 programme.
I saw a man’s eyes well up as he talked about five members of his family having been lost. I heard the frustration and anger of residents who had raised questions again and again about safety in their homes, and I heard about the issues that had been raised post the refurbishment. There is clearly a need for answers and for people to be held accountable for what has gone on. It is inconceivable that an £8.7 million revamp of a tower block does not include money for non-flammable cladding and a basic sprinkler system. The decision-making process at the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation needs to be looked at closely.

I hope that we as a Parliament will be given the opportunity to debate fully and openly the outcomes of the public inquiry that will report in due course, but I also hope that we see an interim report that tells us the likely cause. As was touched on in other contributions, people will be wondering whether there is a similar block or a similar risk in their area, and that is why we need an interim report about the likely cause, followed by a full public inquiry.

I hope that the Government, in setting the terms of reference and consulting on the inquiry, will be conscious of the need to get to a result slightly more quickly than we have seen with some other public inquiries. We do not want this to become like a tale of “War and Peace”, when we could be getting on with debating these things in the House. I certainly hope that those on the Treasury Bench will make sure we have proper time in due course to debate the outcome and to look at legislation. It is also important that any such legislation is enforced, and I suspect that that will also come out of the ongoing inquiries.

Let me return to the Queen’s Speech and to my constituency. I am, of course, pleased to hear direct reference to delivering fairer funding for schools. For many years, for reasons now lost to history, Torbay schools have been some of the lowest funded per pupil in the whole country, and that desperately needs to be addressed. There are certainly inequalities issues in Torbay, and we are not just a leafy retirement area. We have real challenges, and our schools deserve to be fairly funded. That is why I am pleased to again hear a commitment on that issue. Yes, there will be a need to work through how the funding formula works correctly for all, but concerns cannot be used as a reason to stick with the current formula, which so disadvantages many children in my constituency.

Ours is a coastal area, and we have a fishing industry, so it was interesting to see a direct reference to fishing in the Queen’s Speech. I think there will be some real opportunities from bringing fisheries back under UK control, and I hope we can have a strong debate about how we manage our fisheries for the future, because it is in everyone’s interests to have sustainable fisheries. It is in no one’s interests to go back to the idea that we could somehow go out, fill the boats up and come back in each day. There will need to be a system of management, and there will need to be agreements with the European Union and with our traditional allies, such as Norway and Iceland, about how the fisheries are managed. However, I certainly welcome the fact that there is a clear mention of the issue in the Queen’s Speech.

It would be remiss of me as an MP representing a constituency west of the Dawlish coastal railway not to mention our hope not only that we have specific debates about the future of High Speed 2 and its extension, but that we have strong opportunities, and the Government bring forward strong plans, to make sure that the south-west has the resilient railway it desperately needs. We cannot have a repeat of 2014, and we cannot continue to have a system where the tide times and the shipping forecast affect whether there is a train heading out of the region from my constituency, from Plymouth or from Cornwall. A solution has to be put forward so that we can make a permanent difference.

Finally, I was pleased to hear the references to technical education. South Devon College does a superb job, but it can only do so much. We need to enhance the status of technical education, and I hope we see a drive to deliver new institutes of technology or new universities. That is something that is very much on a technical agenda, because those institutes will provide the skills that are so desperately needed. If we want to grow our manufacturing base, we need people with the skills who are able to take the jobs.

As my time comes to a close, I remember my maiden speech two years ago, in which I talked about what my mother used to say to me—sadly, she has been departed for a few years. She always said, “Kevin, whatever you do, do your best.” That is what I hope I have done over the last two years, and it is what I hope to do over the rest of this Parliament as well.

9.44 pm

Rachael Maskill (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): There are so many challenges facing our country at this time, yet today we heard a Queen’s Speech that is trying to save a Government in crisis but does not address the crises facing our nation, nor those of my constituents as they face them day by day.

This is a time for listening and reflecting on the challenges that we see as a nation, and of course we have been stopped in our tracks to do so. Lives have been completely shattered by the Grenfell Tower tragedy and the terrorist attacks, not least those of a lovely family in my constituency, when Angelika and Marcin Klis were taken from their children as they just went out in Manchester to enjoy an evening together. All who loved and cared for those people should not have to face such real hardship. It must make us reflect and change our ways, too.

The past few days have been particularly devastating. I think about Mr Omar al-Haj Ali, who described his brother Mohammad’s final moments—my heart broke with his. As I saw the faces of the victims and those missing, many who were just little children, there was only word in my mind that would fit: “Why?” Firefighters were confronted with dangers and scenes that no one should have to bear. Paramedics and surgeons fought for lives, as ever, and the community rose up to show every aspect of humanity, selflessly serving all those in need. It is all so numbing.

As a politician, I want to have answers. I want the “because” that follows that “why?”

Three things have stood out for me. First, people knew. The concerns over fire safety had been raised by residents and by chief fire officers. They were raised at every level. After all, eight years ago, at Lakanal House in Camberwell, there was also a tragedy and lives were lost. Investigations had been made and reports were written, but then, as always seems to happen, the implementation was woeful. The plea from residents was ignored. Experts in fire safety were rebuffed and
pushed away. Politicians voted against measures to create tenants’ rights. There were other priorities—a driven ideology to cut red tape, no matter the cost. There was not enough money in the right places, so corners were cut, but of course mainly for the poor. In one of the richest communities in the country, no one had the capacity and time to listen to one of the poorest. While they were clearly proved to be right, the price they have had to pay is all too costly.

While I welcome the announcement of a full public inquiry in today’s Queen’s Speech and the independent public advocate to act on behalf of the bereaved, the Government should have introduced legislation to replace the current failed system, deal with gaps in safety, and provide a capacity for redress when those in a position of trust fail in their duty. When politicians fail the public, we need an independent centre for whistleblowing where concerns can be raised. We can no longer have a public advocate to act on behalf of the bereaved, the tenants’ rights. There were other priorities—a driven ideology to cut red tape, no matter the cost. There was not enough money in the right places, so corners were cut, but of course mainly for the poor. In one of the richest communities in the country, no one had the capacity and time to listen to one of the poorest. While they were clearly proved to be right, the price they have had to pay is all too costly.

Thirdly, we have to ask what politicians in this Parliament are doing. In my two years here, I have had to chase, chase and chase again on the issues that impact on my constituents. I had to wait four months to get a debate on the closure of Bootham Park hospital, which closed in just three days. That closure left the mental health community in York in crisis, and it has been in crisis ever since. I have chased Ministers down corridors and lobby them just before Dissolution. The Prime Minister could only point those workers to the job centre, rather than fighting for our future economy.

Yes, the system seems so broken. It is the poor, the sick and those who face the greatest challenges who are really struggling at this time. We have to stop the games and the name-calling—they must end. The questions must be answered and the Government must now respond.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I thank all the voters of the Chesterfield constituency who, for the third time, have done me the honour of sending me back to this place. As the final speaker in today’s debate on the Queen’s Speech, it comes as little surprise to me that today we have learned that the Prime Minister’s head of policy is the latest adviser to leave the sinking ship. Not only did today’s Queen’s Speech tell us that this is a Government in search of a programme, but it was the first ever Queen’s Speech that was more noted for what was not in it than for what was.

Never before have we seen a more charmless and negative prescription from any party than the one that we saw in the most recent election, and today we see what is left: a Prime Minister who is in office but not in power, and a Government without a majority or much of a plan for what they want to do with the power they cling to. They are neither strong nor stable, nor particularly able, and they are not certain of whether they even have a partner with which to complete their programme.

I was intending to spend a little time talking about some of the measures that all those votes for Labour MPs have prevented, but the passion and lucidity with which the Conservative programme was savaged by the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans), who stood on it, suggested to me that if we cannot take apart the Tories’ manifesto as passionately as they can, perhaps we should just leave that part of the equation where it is. It is true to say that a strong and stable Tory Government implementing the manifesto that they stood on would have taken money from pensioners, would have taken school meals from infants, would have taken homes from bereaved families and would have further weakened our public services, so today we celebrate the Labour victories, because although they left us short of the victory that we wanted, they have made a real difference to the programme that is in front of us.

Although the Queen’s Speech lacks ambition and detail, it is a Queen’s Speech that has the shadow of Brexit looming large over it. There will be considerable debate about the shape of Britain’s post-Brexit future. It is right that this should be an opportunity for the Government to stop and think about how they can deliver a Brexit that works for the 48% as well as for the 52%.
I know that colleagues on both sides of the House—many of them Labour Members—are keen to try to maintain Britain’s place in the single market as the key priority, but I have to say that it would be premature for us to go down that route. We may well find in a year’s time that the Norway option is the best solution, but we have not yet started the negotiations in any meaningful way. If all we can say to those who voted leave is that they have to accept that we will continue to have freedom of movement throughout the EU, they will absolutely believe that they have been misled about what they voted for in the referendum.

We need to proceed with tremendous caution. Let us see whether the Foreign Secretary can deliver the kind of Brexit that he promised in advance of the referendum. If he cannot, he will have to come back and explain why that cannot be achieved, and we will then have to ask whether the single market is indeed the best option for us to pursue.

There is no doubt in my mind that if there had been no prospect of our immigration rules being changed, there would have been no victory for Brexit in the referendum. It is important that the Government confess to and admit that. Yes, there were people in Chesterfield who recognised the massive benefits that immigrants have brought to our country. I was disappointed that the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) said that any talk about immigration made somebody anti-immigrant. I am not remotely anti-immigrant. Many of the people in my constituency who voted leave want the German anaesthetist here, the Kenyan heart surgeon here and the Singaporean nurse here, but they also want us to have some controls on that immigration. If, as has happened all the way through, anyone who raises the question of immigration is automatically said to be against the immigrants who have made such a great contribution to our society, we should not be surprised when the voters think we are not listening to them. I was therefore disappointed when the right hon. and learned Gentleman said that in his speech today.

I recognise the extent to which a better educated, more highly skilled, more diverse and more outward-looking country has been the result of the immigration we have had, and so would many people in my constituency. I regret that all of us in this place have not done more to discuss the economic benefits that immigration has brought to our country. I speak to pensioners who say, “I’ve worked all my life. I’ve paid into my pension.” I respond, “No, you’ve worked all your life and you’ve paid your mum and dad’s pension. Now someone has to pay yours.” Immigrants come at working age, when they are young and healthy, and make an important contribution.

I hope that the immigration Bill that the Government bring forward will enable us to conduct a full and detailed analysis of the economic and social implications of future immigration policy. If, as a result of cutting immigration—the Government have spoken about that over a long period of time, but have not achieved it—we will be poorer, it is incredibly important that we make people aware that that is what we are saying. The truth is that the immigration policy for those outside the EU has failed to achieve the immigration target that the Government have set, so we need to be candid about what faces us. I will welcome the new immigration Bill, but only if it allows our country to have the discussion we should have had long, long ago. The vast majority of my constituents welcome skilled labour in the workplace, recognise that hard-working, young, fit and skilled employees offer a financial benefit to our country, and want Britain to send out the message that we still want to attract such people so that we have a chance of competing in the 21st-century race.

Voters in Chesterfield who voted to leave expect us to continue trading, to control who comes into the country, and to stop contributing to an institution that we are no longer a part of. That was the promise they were made by the Foreign Secretary and others during the campaign. If that promise can be delivered, the mandate for Britain to leave the EU is clear. However, if it cannot be delivered—if the Government are going to make it more difficult for British businesses to compete in the global marketplace, if they are not going to have the controls on immigration that they promised and if the post-Brexit Britain they promised was a cruel illusion—there will be no mandate for the Government to carry on with a programme that fails to keep the promises they made.

The Government will shambles on, with or without a DUP deal, until the end comes. If the Government were a horse, they would be on their way to the glue factory. There is important work ahead for all of us. I urge the Government to adopt a cross-party approach to Brexit. Most of all, I say to the Government that if they run out of ideas, they should get out of the way and hand over to a party that has not.

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman, the last contributor to our debate, for saying so explicitly to the House what he really thinks.

Ordered, That the debate be now adjourned.—(Chris Heaton-Harris.)

Debate to be resumed tomorrow.

Mr Speaker: That has been done with seamless efficiency. Those of us in the know will recognise the desirability of preventing an unnecessary interruption of the speech to be made in a moment by the person who has the Adjournment, for which respite I feel sure he will be extremely grateful.
Telephone Calls to the DWP

Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—(Chris Heaton-Harris.)

10 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in your place, Mr Speaker. Congratulations to you on your re-election, Sir.

I would first like to thank the voters of Glasgow South West for sending me back to Parliament. They have re-elected a left-wing anti-austerity Member of Parliament, which is what I pledged to be during the election campaign.

There are many divisions in the House of Commons—literal Divisions when we troop through the voting Lobbies, party divisions both between and within, and differences in age, gender, ethnicity and education. However, I am now coming to the view that one of the biggest differences is between those of us who view social security as a right that should be administered with the utmost care for human dignity and those who view it as a privilege that can and should be denied or strictly limited.

I believe that there are two types of MP—those who view “I, Daniel Blake” and see the reality of their casework reflected in the film, and those who refuse to believe that the social security system is rigged and is actively pushing working people into poverty and punishing the most vulnerable in society. I am not suggesting that the only way an MP can gain insight into the failings of the social security service is by dealing with hundreds of Department for Work and Pensions cases, but surely anyone with an ounce of empathy would know that the system is deeply flawed, even if they have had only a handful of distressed people at their surgeries.

In the opening scene of “I, Daniel Blake”, the character is on the phone for more than an hour. I am sure I am not the only Member of Parliament who has had constituents telling them about similar cases. Here are just some of mine: a jobseeker’s allowance claimant who has told me of a phone call that cost £9; an employment and support allowance claimant who has told me of a phone call that cost them £16; and a constituent pursuing a disability living allowance claim on behalf of his daughter who has told me of a phone call that cost him £18. I ask the Minister and the House, is it right that a JSA claimant receiving £73.10 a week needs to make a phone call costing £16 to receive their entitlement? Is it right that an ESA claimant receiving £73.10 a week needs to make a phone call costing £16 to receive their entitlement? Is it right that a DLA claimant receiving a weekly entitlement of £76.90 has to make a phone call costing £18?

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): My hon. Friend is talking about the injustice of the amount of money that people have to pay. Does he agree that many people have no money because of broken promises on their payments, which is driving them to food banks as their last resort?

Chris Stephens: I do agree. In fact, I would say that food banks have probably been the only growth industry in the United Kingdom in the past seven years, as many Members of Parliament can see.

I believe the answer to the questions that I have just asked the Minister is no. The reason I continue to campaign on this telephone tax is that it adds insult to injury. It is just one more financial kick in the teeth when people are paying for access to information and support. When every penny counts, call charges hit hard, and the lack of clarity as to which lines are free and which ones come with a cost does not help. The Government’s own website states that some telephone calls can cost 55p a minute. Can the Minister confirm whether the gov.uk website provides accurate information on charges for calls to the DWP?

Call charges do not just eat into people’s benefits; I suggest that they actively deter people from calling because they fear incurring charges either from the lines themselves or from a mobile phone provider. As I look deeper into the issue and ask more questions, more disturbing information comes to light. There are serious flaws in the digital-by-design model. Exclusion is built into the system. A written question I tabled just before Dissolution revealed that, in the whole of the Glasgow South West constituency, there are only 16 PCs for thousands of claimants. I am sure the Minister will be happy to know that a few follow-up questions are on the way to him, but today he could answer these: what are the Government going to do to increase computer literacy and access in DWP offices; and does the Department for Work and Pensions agree that those who have received a financial penalty—a sanction—or who have been paid late should have to pay for a telephone call to the DWP to chase up their entitlement?

I am calling for free phone calls to access every aspect of the Department for Work and Pensions, but especially for those who have been sanctioned or hit by late payments. Someone paid late should not have to access a chargeable phone line to chase up money they are owed by the state.

Incredibly, there are no telephone lines at all for universal credit claims or inquiries—it is a completely digital service. What about those with no digital access, or who are not computer-literate or even literate? I accept that that is a whole other issue, but we need to recognise that basic literacy skills are not universal, and nor is English everyone’s first language. Will the Government consider a special telephone line for universal credit claimants?

I have already said there are issues with mobiles and price plans. I am calling for the Government to work with mobile and landline providers to improve that. A price plan can determine what someone pays in reality, but if they go over and above those limits, they incur penalty charges and costs increase. Since April, penalty charges on non-inclusive calls have increased dramatically, meaning that someone on a lengthy call to the Department for Work and Pensions will see the cost escalate.

The Government promised a review following the 2016 Social Security Advisory Committee report, which criticised the Government and asked for free phone lines to be put in place. The Government stated that that would cost £7 million, but they also made a number of recommendations, including having a call-back system. Like many a frustrated claimant, we are still waiting. When can we expect the review to be published, and will it include working with mobile and landline providers to reduce, and as far as possible eliminate, costs for DWP claimants? Is £7 million not a small amount of
the overall Government budget to ensure that the most vulnerable and those in need do not pay for telephone calls that they cannot afford?

It is bad enough that official helplines hit callers with added costs, but on top of everything else, there is a thriving business in ripping off the vulnerable—the so-called call connection websites, which advertise Government services phone numbers and claim to provide a service. In essence, they are fake premium-rate connection numbers. The Government have described them in a ministerial response to me as unethical but not illegal.

What action is the Department for Work and Pensions taking to eliminate advertised call connection numbers, which are charging premium rates to the most vulnerable in society? Is it not time that we stopped those scammers? The Fair Telecoms campaign has done good work on exposing those scams, and has called for Ofcom and the Phone-paid Services Authority to take the necessary action. However, I would suggest that the Government need to take a lead and work with the authorities to stamp out that practice. Will the Minister commit to doing that and meet the relevant parties to take action?

Failure to act on the concerns raised by me and those who campaign against the telephone tax would indicate that this is not a priority for the Government, and that fairness and social justice do not feature high on their agenda. My concern is that Brexit will skew Government time and attention away from addressing these issues, but I intend to use as much parliamentary time as is available to me to keep this front and centre. Financial penalties and hardship are being inflicted on people every day because the inquiry lines and support services are not fit for purpose.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): My hon. Friend talks about services that are not fit for purpose and mentioned the need for people to access computers in places such as jobcentres. Does he agree that we urgently need clarity on the future of Glasgow’s jobcentres? Precisely for the reasons he outlines, they need to be saved.

Chris Stephens: I thank my hon. Friend for that excellent intervention. He is correct. It is unacceptable that Glasgow has been asked to close half its jobcentres. Half of these, I understand, are under threat in some of the most deprived communities in our city. I hope the Government will reflect what we are told is today’s compassionate conservatism and take a step back from that proposal.

The Government’s own estimate is that there are £292 million of unclaimed pension credits and unclaimed state benefits. I pledged in my election address to work with pensioner groups to improve take-up of these benefits, not a Government charity handout to be granted to those deemed sufficiently worthy. I also pledge, along with my SNP colleagues, to fight for justice for the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign. I strongly believe that, far from enforcing a brutal sanctions scheme, Department for Work and Pensions staff could be more usefully deployed helping people to claim what they are entitled to, instead of hounding the vulnerable.

The impact that has on claimants’ mental health should not be underestimated. I am also acutely aware that staff vacancies are unfilled in the Department for Work and Pensions, whether through budget pressures or high turnover.

In conclusion, I must bring it to House’s attention that today is a highly significant day, and I do not mean because of the delivery of a threadbare Queen’s Speech, devoid of vision. Today, legislation was tabled in Scotland’s Parliament—the Social Security (Scotland) Bill—that will give Ministers the power to deliver 11 benefits, including disability living allowance, personal independence payment, carer’s allowance and winter fuel payments.

Jeane Freeman, the Minister for Social Security, said today:

“Dignity and respect is at the heart of our social security policy—a marked contrast to the approach that the current UK Government is taking as their unjust welfare cuts continue to cause misery,”

and

“push more people into poverty”.

The Scottish Government will remove the private sector from disability benefit assessments—a clear demonstration of the fact that when powers are devolved, we use them to bring fairness and tackle injustice. I could wish that all powers were available to enable us to shape Scotland’s future, but where we can, we will act. Indeed, I am happy to confirm an exclusive: under the Scottish Government’s approach to telephone calls, there will be no rigid script but a more holistic approach to those seeking advice and entitlement, and, most important of all, all calls to the Scottish Government’s social security service will be free to those seeking entitlement. That shows once again what is possible if there is the political will. I look forward to the Minister’s response to my many questions.

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) on securing this debate on the cost of calling the Department for Work and Pensions. I also thank him for his continued interest in these important matters.

At the DWP we seek to ensure the correct balance between delivering high levels of customer service and experience and balancing the demands on the public purse and therefore protecting the taxpayer. The DWP’s policy is that calls to claim benefit should be free, so it uses 0800 telephone numbers for such calls. The Department uses 0345 telephone numbers where customers call for other reasons. These are calls that typically take less time to resolve. The exception to this is universal credit, as the service is designed to be accessed online and telephony services are used as a fall-back.

Drew Hendry: The Minister says that those services are supposed to be online. Does he realise that accessing them online is not always an option for people in rural areas? That is why phone calls are so important for people in rural constituencies, as well as others who cannot access them online.

Damian Hinds: Yes, of course I recognise that. I represent a rural constituency myself, and it is important to have other options available where necessary. It is also the case that when we are dealing with people seeking work, for example, being able to get online is vital for that purpose. That is one of the reasons why we also ensure IT provision inside jobcentres.
[Damian Hinds]

It would not be an effective use of public money to build universal credit around a freephone telephone number, but where customers need to call DWP regarding their claim, it is through an 0345 number. The costs of calling an 0345 telephone number are set by individual providers, but they are never more than the cost of calling geographic numbers, which have 01 and 02 dialling codes. Calls to 0345 telephone numbers are typically included in any free or inclusive minutes in a caller’s landline or mobile telephone contract. Although there are a multitude of service providers and tariffs, I can confirm that calls to 0345 telephone numbers are included in bundled minutes for mobile services by the biggest providers—EE, 02 and Vodafone—as well as most of the others.

I know that in the past the hon. Gentleman has raised the use of more expensive 0845 telephone numbers. I am pleased to be able to confirm that the DWP does not use 0845 telephone numbers in any of its communication channels. We replaced 0845 numbers with 0345 numbers during 2014 and 2015. That process was completed before the Ofcom changes in call charges came into effect in 2015, making calls to 0845 numbers more expensive. After the DWP 0345 numbers were introduced, customers calling an old DWP 0845 telephone number would receive a recorded message informing them that they should dial the correct 0345 number. There was no charge for the call to the old 0845 telephone number.

I appreciate, of course, that some of the most vulnerable people in society have to contact DWP services, which is why, if callers express concern about the cost of a call, we offer to call them back. The Department provides controlled access to telephones for claimants in jobcentres, when required, to help with any benefit inquiries. It has also expanded its “once and done” service centre approach across its working-age, disability and specialist sites, so that it can meet a claimant’s needs during the first call whenever possible. It continues to review and identify opportunities for integrating telephony and benefit-processing activity further to improve the service it delivers.

The Department is proactive in considering how further to reduce any potential cost impact on customers when they need to transact business. As Members will know, in delivering welfare reform, universal credit is designed to be accessed online, with telephony services used as a back-up. The universal credit experience is delivering an effective channel shift away from the use of telephony, with over 90% of new claims made through digital interfaces and away from the telephone.

Chris Stephens: Will the Minister give way?

Damian Hinds: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, we will see how the time goes.

A telephony option is always available to people who may not have internet access, or who are experiencing difficulties in accessing the service online.

The DWP is also seeking to exploit new and emerging technology to keep in touch with claimants. We have introduced SMS text messaging for a number of service lines to confirm to customers receipt of their claims, information or documents, or to let them know when they can expect an outcome. Those changes reduce contact from claimants chasing updates, while increasing the overall customer service experience. The service operates for new claims for employment and support allowance and jobseeker’s allowance, and was introduced more recently to acknowledge receipt of fit notes.

The Department is developing a strategy across all the services it delivers, which will allow us to carry out a safe transition of our key telephony platforms and consider how to make best use of new technologies and contact channels. Given the complexity of the services that the Department delivers and the range of customers with whom we interact, it is vital to ensure that we really understand the range of services that citizens need in order to interact with us. I am sure Members appreciate that a “one size fits all” approach would not be successful. The Department has to strike the right balance between the cost to callers and the cost to taxpayers, which is why a mixture of freephone and paid—but never premium—telephone numbers is available to citizens. As the hon. Gentleman said, if the 0800 numbering range were extended to all service lines, it would cost the taxpayer an additional £7 million per year.

Chris Stephens: According to the gov.uk website, telephone calls to 0345 numbers can cost up to 55p a minute. Can the Minister confirm that that information is correct?

Damian Hinds: I have here the print-out of that page. It lists a number of different telephone number prefixes. Members will be aware that these days there are more telephone number prefixes than when we were growing up. The service on the Government website is to help people to understand what it means if they see an 03, an 0845, or an 07 number. It lists a range of costs for geographic numbers—the numbers we have for our homes; the 01 and 02 numbers—and a range for 03 numbers, which is the same as the range for the geographic numbers. That is what the tariff reflects. I am happy to confirm to the hon. Gentleman that we have been through that information today. There are a couple of minor points on the gov.uk information site that need to be updated, but they do not relate to any of the number prefixes that are in use at present by the DWP.

Chris Stephens: We will take that as a yes, so may I ask the Minister the following? He talked about a range of services and using different telephone lines and numbers for those services. Will he seriously consider setting up a free phone line for those who have received benefit late—for example, someone who should have had money on the Friday and who had to chase that up on the Monday?

Damian Hinds: Obviously, we want the system to be as accurate as possible. We want to reduce the requirement for people to be in touch with the Department for those reasons. When they have to, we want that to be done as quickly and as efficiently as possible. I have outlined the Department’s policy. There is a range of 0800 numbers. The rest are 0345 numbers, which are equivalent to a normal, geographic land call. Typically, in a mobile phone contract or bundles on pay as you go, that would be included in the minutes that one has. We think that that is a fair and reasonable approach. There is still the option to request a call-back, too.
I want to come on to some of the other issues that the hon. Gentleman raised. He alluded to the fact that he and I have exchanged correspondence on the issue of third parties seeking to make a profit out of calls to the DWP. As he rightly mentioned, that can happen with other services, too. I would like to take the opportunity of this debate to update Members on that important issue.

I can confirm that my Department does not make any revenue out of calls to our publicised telephone numbers. We know that there is a small number of companies that seek to make money by providing an alternative, and usually more expensive, telephone number that then routes callers through to the Government helplines. Although that practice may be considered unethical, it is not illegal, provided the company does not pretend to be the Government and does not state that it is officially affiliated. The DWP is aware of a small number of sites that advertise that type of service, primarily owned by the same individual.

I strongly encourage internet search-engine providers actively to police and manage advertisers and subscribers who may look to profit from some vulnerable members of our society by advertising expensive or premium rate telephone lines as a route to access DWP services that are accessible directly through either freephone 0800 or local rate 0345 telephone numbers. The specific activity known as vishing, where a voicemail is left for the citizen to call back an unofficial number, is generally not widespread within the DWP—only one occurrence has been identified.

The DWP does everything it can to stop customers being caught out and, in that instance, the same number was identified as appearing as an “infobox” on a search engine for universal credit alongside the genuine UC number. The DWP complained to that search-engine provider and the incorrect entry was removed.

We have covered the question of the gov.uk tariff ranges. The hon. Gentleman also asked about steps being taken to improve access to, and people’s capability and confidence in using, IT equipment. As he will know from his visits to our jobcentres, we provide lobby equipment and encourage people to use it. There is often facility for people to bring their own device and be helped to use that, because we do absolutely see digital capability—digital empowerment—as being vital, not just in the claiming of benefits, but in applying for work, and, of course, when getting into work, as there are few jobs these days that do not require some level of IT literacy.

In conclusion, let me reassure hon. Members that the Department is absolutely committed to ensuring that costs for customers are kept to a minimum and that safeguards are in place for those who need them. The Department is in the process of transforming the way in which citizens interact with us, which I am sure hon. Members can appreciate will take us some time to deliver, given the range of services the Department delivers and the number of people we transact with every day. The hon. Gentleman asked about the Social Security Advisory Committee’s recommendation. These things are technology-dependent. The review of our systems is current and we are committed to looking at that closely.

Our telephony policy will be kept under review throughout this process and the Department will continue to seek to strike the right balance between the cost to citizens and the cost to the taxpayer.

Question put and agreed to.

10.26 pm

House adjourned.
The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on the disaster at Grenfell Tower. I apologise to the Leader of the Opposition for the short notice he has had of this statement. In the hour before making it, I received an important update, which I felt was essential to bring to the attention of the House this morning.

What happened in the early hours of last Wednesday morning was one of the most unimaginable tragedies that our country has seen in many years. As of this morning, 79 people have been confirmed dead or listed as missing presumed dead, and with work still ongoing to recover the bodies, sadly the death toll may rise further.

We already know that many children are among the dead and that in some cases whole families perished. Those who survived have lost loved ones, friends, neighbours and, in many cases, everything they own. It should never have happened. In a few moments, I shall say how we will discover why it did, but, as I said yesterday, that initial failure was then compounded by the fact that the support on the ground in the initial hours was not good enough. As Prime Minister, I have apologised for that second failure and taken responsibility for doing what we can to put it right.

On my first visit to north Kensington, I met the emergency services. These extraordinary men and women put their lives on the line in an effort to save others, and my first responsibility was to check that they had all the resources they needed. I then visited Chelsea and Westminster hospital, where I met some of the most seriously injured survivors—it was from that experience that I decided to have an emergency fund. I also met a group of residents in Kensington whom I then invited to Downing Street last weekend. I returned to Kensington again last night to hear directly from them about the progress that we are making. What became clear very quickly was that the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea could not cope, and it is right that the chief executive officer has now resigned. It is also why I set up the Grenfell Tower recovery taskforce, which I have been chairing personally.

This is about not just the steps that we take in the first few weeks, but a lasting commitment that we make to supporting the affected families, long after the television cameras have gone. Let me set out in detail the steps that we are taking to support the victims and to rehouse those who have lost their homes.

On Friday morning, the Government established a central command centre under the leadership of John Barradell, the chief executive of the City of London and former lead for London local government on resilience, and Eleanor Kelly, chief executive of the London borough of Southwark. On behalf of the whole House I thank John and his team for all the work that they are doing.

I also pay tribute to the London boroughs for their fantastic response, including a number of chief executives who are currently working at the command centre, as well as the Mayor of London and leading figures from a number of councils from outside London. I thank the army of volunteers who stepped in to provide shelter, sustenance, comfort and practical support. I also thank
the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government and the Ministers for Housing and Planning, for London and for Policing and the Fire Service for the work that they have been doing.

Currently, there are around 600 people working on the site and in the immediate area to provide support to the victims. The Westway sports centre has been transformed into an emergency community hub, staffed by 40 officials from six Government Departments. Those officials are making sure that people have essential documents such as driving licences and passports, which are fundamental to them carrying on with their lives. They have also been joined by experts from organisations such as Transport for London, Citizens Advice and the Red Cross, NHS mental health staff, nurses, care managers, and a GP. Anyone affected by the blaze can walk in and access the support they need, and so far there have been almost 700 visits to the centre.

The centre’s on-the-ground work is supplemented by the victim support unit, whose emergency helpline provides a single point of contact for victims who need to deal with multiple Government services in the wake of the disaster. Each family whose home was destroyed is receiving a £5,000 down payment from the emergency fund so they can buy food, clothes and other essentials, and outreach workers are seeking to make sure everyone gets the money they are entitled to. We are also paying all additional adults over 16 in these households £500 in cash. Other cash payments are being paid out by the council on a discretionary basis, for example to those whose home has been severely impacted but not permanently destroyed. As of midday on Wednesday we had made payments of more than £700,000.

It is absolutely essential that people understand they can keep the money they receive; these grants are not loans and they will not be expected to repay a single penny. Neither are they waiving any legal rights as a result of accepting this financial help. The payments will be disregarded for means-tested welfare payments, so no one in receipt of benefits will see their benefits cut if they accept emergency support. I would like to reassure people that we will not use this tragic incident as a reason to carry out immigration checks on those involved or on those providing vital information to identify victims or those assisting with the criminal investigation. We will make sure that all victims, irrespective of their immigration status, can access the services they need, including healthcare and accommodation.

In terms of local schools, Kensington Aldridge Academy, the school right next door to the tower, remains closed. However, all its pupils have already been accommodated at other schools in the area. The Department for Education is working with Ofqual to ensure that children who are sitting their GCSEs receive an appropriate exam dispensation, and specialist counselling has been offered to local schoolchildren and also to teachers affected by the fire.

Turning to re-housing, 151 homes were destroyed in the fire, most in the tower itself but also several in the immediate vicinity. All those who have lost their homes have been offered emergency hotel accommodation, and all will be offered rehousing within three weeks. Already, 164 suitable properties have been identified and they are being checked and made ready for people to move into. In the longer term, everyone whose home was destroyed will be guaranteed a new home on the same terms as the one they lost. Sixty-eight of those will be in a brand-new low-rise block that has just been built by Berkeley Homes. The developer has generously offered to turn over the entire block at cost price. Contractors are on site now, working 24/7 to speed up fit-out so that the first families can move in this summer.

Within the wider cordon area, many more homes were damaged by smoke or water or have lost gas, heating and hot water. Emergency hotel accommodation is available for anyone who does not want to remain in a damaged property and more than 100 hotel rooms have already been provided. We are also putting in place practical support to help to accelerate necessary repairs and yesterday drew on expertise from the Army to assist with this.

Some survivors have said that they want to leave the local area, and we will of course support that and help them find a home elsewhere. But I want to be absolutely clear: nobody is being forced to move somewhere they do not want to go, and if any hon. Member thinks they know of anyone being treated in this way they should contact my office in Downing Street with the details.

As the scale of the tragedy became clear we quickly decided there had to be an independent public inquiry. As I said to the House yesterday, it will be chaired by a judge to get to the truth about what happened and who was responsible, and to provide justice for the victims and their families who suffered so terribly. All those with an interest—including survivors and victims’ families—will be consulted about the terms of reference, and we will pay for legal representation for those affected. Listening to survivors last night, it also became clear that they want support to come together as a group to have their voices heard, and the Government will play our part in helping them to do so.

For too long residents have been overlooked and ignored. We will ensure that they are involved in every step of this process. No stone will be left unturned in this inquiry, and there will be nowhere for any guilty parties to hide. I am clear that we cannot wait for ages to learn the immediate lessons, so I expect that the chair of the inquiry will want to produce an interim report as early as possible.

I know that many others living in tall residential buildings will have concerns about their safety after what happened at Grenfell. All social landlords have been instructed to carry out additional fire safety checks on tower blocks, and to ensure that the appropriate safety and response measures are in place. This is being done in co-operation with local fire and rescue services. We have also taken steps to make private landlords aware and have made our checking facilities available to them for free.

The House should of course be careful when it comes to speculating about what caused the fire, but the Government have arranged to test cladding in all relevant tower blocks as a precaution. Shortly before I came to the Chamber, I was informed that a number of these tests have come back as combustible. The relevant local authorities and local fire services have been informed. As I speak, they are taking all possible steps to ensure that buildings are safe and to inform affected residents. Immediately after this statement, the Department for Communities and Local Government will contact any MPs whose constituents are affected, and the Communities Secretary will provide a further update later today.
We can test more than 100 buildings a day, and the results come within hours. I urge any landlord who owns a building of this kind to send samples for testing as soon as possible. Any results will be communicated immediately to local authorities and local fire services. Landlords have a legal obligation to provide safe buildings. Where they cannot do that, we expect alternative accommodation to be provided. We cannot and will not ask people to live in unsafe homes.

It is clear that the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea was not able to cope with the scale of the tragedy, so we will develop a new strategy for resilience in major disasters, which could include a new civil disaster response taskforce that can help at times of emergency.

Finally, we must learn some of the lessons of this and previous disasters where bereaved families have not had the support they need, so we will introduce an independent public advocate for public disasters—a strong independent voice for victims, acting on behalf of bereaved families and supporting them at public inquests and inquiries.

In the past week, a lot of remarkable people have gone above and beyond to help to deal with the fire and its aftermath. First and foremost, of course, are the incredible men and women of the emergency services who did so much to save so many lives. I cannot imagine the kind of bravery it takes to run into a burning building and head upstairs when any normal person would be heading for the exits. We have also seen sterling work from people across the public sector including teachers, nurses, staff from various local authorities and civil servants, who are doing all they can to help. We have seen incredible acts of generosity from private businesses, and we have seen the people of this great city and this great country stepping up to help in any way they can: donating money, clothes, toys and food, volunteering their time and so much more.

Above all, I pay tribute to the people of Kensington. They have opened their hearts and homes to people affected by the fire, coming together and showing what a real community looks like. The selfless actions of local people and the courage and resilience of the survivors should give us all pause for thought.

Right now, our focus is on supporting the victims, finding homes for those made homeless and making sure that the country’s housing stock is as safe as possible. But as we move forwards, we must also recognise that for too long in our country, under Governments of both colours, we simply have not given enough attention to social housing, and that this is actually a symptom of an even more fundamental issue.

It should not take a disaster of this kind for us to remember that there are people in Britain today living lives that are so far removed from those that many here in Westminster enjoy. In this tower—just a few miles from the Houses of Parliament and in the heart of our great city—people live a fundamentally different life, do not feel the state works for them and are therefore mistrustful of it. So, long after the TV cameras have gone and the world has moved on, let the legacy of this awful tragedy be that we resolve never to forget these people and instead to gear our policies and our thinking towards making their lives better and bringing them into the political process. It is our job as a Government and as a Parliament to show that we are listening and that we will stand up for them. That is what I am determined we should do. I commend this statement to the House.

9.49 am

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I acknowledge the Prime Minister’s apologies for the very late arrival of her statement to my office, and I understand the reasons for it.

I met the survivors at Grenfell Tower, as have a number of colleagues in the House, as I did the very inspiring volunteers co-ordinating so much of the relief effort for families who had lost so much. There is grief, there is anger, and there is also great solidarity in that community. I hope the whole House will join with me in commending the community spirit and public support which helped so many traumatised families, and the amazing response of so many local people and faith groups who rushed to the scene to give clothing, to give food, to give help, and to provide a sort of online restaurant for just about anybody who was helping with the disaster relief. Our love, our condolences and our solidarity go out to those families again today, and in what will be the very difficult days and weeks ahead; many of them will be reliving the trauma of that dreadful night for a lifetime. They were, as the Prime Minister said yesterday, let down, both in the immediate aftermath and so cruelly beforehand, and the public inquiry must establish the extent and by whom.

At least 79 people are dead. It is both a tragedy and an outrage, because every single one of those deaths could and should have been avoided. The Grenfell Tower residents themselves had raised concerns about the lack of fire safety in the block. The Grenfell Action Group had warned:

“It is a truly terrifying thought but the Grenfell Action Group firmly believe that only a catastrophic event will expose the ineptitude and incompetence of our landlord,”

the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation. The Prime Minister said that it is right that the CEO of Kensington and Chelsea Council has now resigned. It may be right, but why are the political leaders not taking responsibility as well for this whole dreadful event? From Hillsborough, to the child sex abuse scandal, to Grenfell Tower, the pattern is consistent: working-class people’s voices are ignored, their concerns dismissed, by those in power.

The Grenfell Tower residents and the north Kensington community deserve answers, and thousands and thousands of people living in tower blocks around the country need very urgent reassurance. Our very brave firefighters must never have to deal with such a horrific incident again. The Prime Minister is right when she talks about the bravery of firefighters running into a burning building; I have spoken to firefighters on many occasions. But they are overstretched and they are traumatised—traumatised by dealing with London Bridge, traumatised by Grenfell Tower—yet they carry on doing it, overstretched and understaffed. We need to look at the whole issue of the security of our fire service.

Those of us with over 30 years’ experience in this House would have struggled as constituency MPs under the pressure generated by an incident of this scale. As I said yesterday, my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) deserves praise for the tireless and...
removing and recladding blocks that are found to have known to residents. A huge cost is obviously involved in installing sprinklers. The timetable for that must be made for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) raised yesterday, so that available emergency funds, as my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) has suggested, and whether it should be banned entirely; and what wider changes must be urgently made to building regulations. As the Prime Minister indicated in her statement, this is obviously being urgently addressed. The inquiry also needs to address the fire prevention regulations, including the frequency and the enforcement of fire safety checks, because my suspicion is that many local authorities—strapped for cash after seven years of cuts—have cut back on fire testing and cut back on inspections because they simply have not got the staff to do it anymore.

The inquiry must address whether tenant management organisations are responsive enough to their tenants, and what greater powers tenants need, both in council or social housing and in the private sector, to ensure their own safety. It must address whether survivors and people evacuated from adjacent properties were rehoused promptly and adequately. The Prime Minister has addressed some of those matters, but I would be interested in her response to those living nearby who are equally traumatised by the event. Those people should of course be rehoused within the borough, and I hope there will be no increase in their rent.

The inquiry must also address the resources available to the fire and rescue service, and whether response times and capacity are adequate for all areas of the country, since the number of wards in which response time targets are not being met has increased tenfold since 2011. Lessons must be learned in the public inquiry, and a disaster that should never have happened must never happen again. The Government must delay no longer, and must now implement the recommendations of the 2013 inquiry report into the Lakanal House fire. The public inquiry into Grenfell Tower must also establish whether lives could have been saved if those recommendations had been implemented in full, and if the recommendations of the all-party group on fire safety and rescue had been heeded by the Government.

Fire safety measures cannot be left to a postcode lottery, and I therefore ask the Government to make available emergency funds, as my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) raised yesterday, so that councils can carry out immediate fire safety checks and install sprinklers. The timetable for that must be made known to residents. A huge cost is obviously involved in removing and recladding blocks that are found to have flammable materials in them, but the resources—the money—must be made available immediately, because it is a huge job of work. The Prime Minister says that those people who are in danger must be moved out of their properties, but this is a massive undertaking and it will require a huge focus of Government resources.

Will the Prime Minister ensure that the counselling and mental health services that she said are now being provided at the Westway sports centre are made available to all the residents of both Grenfell Tower and the areas around it, such as those who witnessed the fire unfold on the Lancaster West estate, and to those in the emergency services who have been through such trauma during the last few days? Counselling and mental health services are important in the days and weeks after a tragedy, but they have to go on for a very long time, because the trauma does not end after a few days afterwards.

The public inquiry must report as soon as possible, and changes that can and should have been made must now be made without delay. We must be aware that this has been a wake-up call to the whole country: the fire at Grenfell Tower has taken the lives of people who should be with us and alive and happy today, and residents of tower blocks all over the country are concerned, worried and frightened for their own safety. We need a step change in our attitude towards housing in this country to deal with the permanent housing crisis that so many of our constituents and residents face. We need Government intervention to support local authorities in bringing about safe solutions to the housing crisis so that this tragedy can at least change our attitudes and we can at least say that we as a country will seriously address the housing situation that so many people face. People have died and they will never come back. We have to learn the lessons to make sure that this tragedy is a turning point in our whole attitude, and that never again people die needlessly in a towering inferno, while living in poverty surrounded by a sea of prosperity.

The Prime Minister: May I first join the Leader of the Opposition in commending the work of his new hon. Friend, the hon. Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad)? I am sure we all remember getting to grips with our first few days as a Member of Parliament, and having to deal with a disaster and tragedy of this sort in her constituency so early on must have been very difficult. I commend her for the work that she has done.

The right hon. Gentleman raised a number of issues, many of which will be matters for the inquiry to get to grips with. I would expect the inquiry to address the responsibility for this issue and the advice given by the fire service. As I said in my statement, we want to ensure that we are able to provide justice to the victims and survivors of this terrible tragedy. I expect the chair of the inquiry to produce an interim report so that we see early lessons. It is important that we know anything that needs to be learned and addressed as soon as possible and that we take action as soon as possible.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to the Lakanal House coroner’s report in 2013. All the coroner’s recommendations from the Lakanal House inquiry have been acted on. It is important to recognise that the coroner did not propose any changes to the building regulations. There were issues with the guidance to the building regulations and other issues were raised, and all of those have been acted on.
We will offer rehousing in the borough or in neighbouring boroughs. As I said, a significant number of properties—164 properties—have been identified and are being looked at. A significant number of people have been assessed for their housing needs and some have already been offered housing. It is, of course, up to them whether they accept it or whether other properties need to be offered to them. That process is in hand and I have set the commitment that people will be rehoused within three weeks.

The issue of the tenant management organisation, which the Leader of the Opposition mentioned, has come across loud and clear to me from my conversations with local residents. One of the first acts of the new chief executive of Kensington and Chelsea council will be to look at the tenant management organisation and any action that needs to be taken.

The Leader of the Opposition also referred to Hillsborough and the child sexual abuse inquiry. I was pleased to work with the families from Hillsborough. They should have had justice at a far earlier stage. The issues are ongoing, with the Crown Prosecution Service looking at potential criminal charges, but we have provided an opportunity for the Hillsborough families to know the truth of what happened to their loved ones and for the public to know the truth of Hillsborough.

I was also pleased to set up the child sexual abuse inquiry because, as I said when I did so, I agree that for too long, people have made assumptions about certain people in our society and how they should be treated, and those assumptions are wrong. We need to dig into that and find out why it has happened, and we need to change it.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am keen to accommodate the level of interest in this extraordinarily important and grave subject. May I appeal to colleagues to help me to help them? There is a premium upon brevity, which I feel sure will be brilliantly exemplified by Mr Iain Duncan Smith.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister’s statement and the actions she said she and the Government will take. Our hearts and prayers go out to all those who have suffered so terribly and who will continue to suffer in the days to come.

I ask the Prime Minister to add one further remit to the public inquiry: to look at whether the whole process of retrofitting old tower blocks is viable at all and at whether there is a better way to house and support tenants in these areas without the use of the many incredibly badly designed and very faulty tower blocks. Will she ask the public inquiry to look carefully at whether it is feasible to bring some of the blocks down and provide more family friendly housing?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his remarks. He suggests that the inquiry should go a great deal further than looking into this particular instance. We will ensure that the survivors and local residents have an input into the terms of reference of the inquiry so that they can have confidence in it and know that it will produce the results and justice that they need. I will reflect on my right hon. Friend’s comments, but it is important, primarily, that the local residents have confidence in the terms of reference of the inquiry and feel that it will get to the truth as they need it.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): All of us in the House and, I am sure, throughout the entire United Kingdom, welcome the opportunity provided by the Prime Minister’s statement this morning. We can all reflect on the scenes that we woke up to last week: the horror, suffering and pain that those who were living in the tower block must have gone through and the agony of seeing the fire spread through that building. I thank the members of the emergency services for putting their lives on the line, in this case and other instances that we have seen over the course of the past few weeks. We owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to them.

We in the Scottish National party want to work with the Government on these matters. I think the incident last week is a defining moment in the evolution of our society. However, I respectfully say to the Prime Minister that, although she apologised to the Leader of the Opposition for the short notice of her statement, the third party and all parties represented in the House should receive adequate notice. In her statement, the Prime Minister said that the initial failure was compounded by the fact that the support on the ground in the initial hours was not good enough. If the public inquiry makes recommendations on changes that have to be made, I ask that the Government accept those.

If the £5 million that has been put into the initial emergency fund is not sufficient, will the Government commit to doing what they need to in order to make sure that the appropriate financial resources are available? I welcome the Prime Minister’s saying that the new housing block that has been built by Berkeley Homes will be made available to some of the families. She talked of families moving in over the summer, but can she be more specific as to when that will happen? Can we make sure that families who wish to live in the local area will have that commitment that housing will be made available? That should be done on the basis that there will be consultation, and that if the first offer is not acceptable, alternatives will be put in place.

Does the Prime Minister agree that the public inquiry should be empowered to consider all the steps that were not taken leading up and contributing to this incident? All those with a legitimate interest must be able to participate. That has to include bereaved families and survivors as well as individuals and organisations with an interest, such as the residents’ campaign and local representative organisations. This needs to be about Parliament recognising the significance of what has happened. We should never be in this position again as a country.

I welcome the Prime Minister’s remarks about social housing. Let us make sure that we invest in social housing. I grew up in social housing and I fondly remember my childhood. I want people to have the same opportunities that we had to live in social housing of which we can all be proud.

The Prime Minister: I take this opportunity to make clear that the testing facilities that I referred to are open to the devolved Administrations as well. I obviously
encourage anybody in the devolved Administrations to send in samples of such buildings so that they can be tested.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the £5 million fund. If necessary, more money will be made available. As I said, something like £700,000 has already been paid out, and further moneys will be paid out, but we will look at that sum over time.

The planning conditions attached to the Berkeley Homes development have been relaxed to enable work to take place over longer hours, so that the work can be speeded up. The current expectation is that the homes could be available by the end of July, but that is caveat-ed, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman and others will recognise. It is dependent on the work being completed.

The hon. Gentleman also asked about the inquiry. It is absolutely crucial that the inquiry looks at how this happened, and part of that will be looking at what led up to the fire, the immediate response to the fire and the aftermath. We need to know why this happened and who was responsible for it. The judge who will chair the inquiry will have a role in determining how the inquiry is handled, in terms of the witnesses that he wishes to take and so forth. As I said, I am clear that we need to ensure that people can have full confidence in this inquiry, which is why I want to see residents involved in setting the terms of reference, so that they know that it is an inquiry that will meet their needs.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Will the Prime Minister encourage local authorities to follow the lead that Barnet Council showed, with an immediate re-inspection of its high-rise blocks and the announcement of a programme of investment in new safety measures to be guided by the fire service, and to include sprinklers where they are needed?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for drawing that to the House’s attention and I commend Barnet Council for its action. The Department for Communities and Local Government has asked every local authority to undertake those tests, ensuring the safety of the properties in which they accommodate people.

Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for her kind words—words that must be followed by deeds. I speak on behalf of a traumatised and frightened community, who have little trust in authority. Early reports suggest that there may have been issues with the fire safety audits and that fire regulations were not sufficiently robust. While we wait for the results of the inquiry—I hope it will not be too long—I want the Prime Minister to commit to providing adequate funds to enable emergency services, particularly the London fire brigade, to be fully funded to carry out their work, and reverse the cuts to the funding of fire services that have made their lives so difficult? Those people have, quite literally, our lives in their hands. In short, where is the funding?

The Prime Minister: When I spoke to the emergency services on my first visit to Kensington, one of the challenges I gave them was whether they had the resources they needed to do the job that they were doing. They assured me that they did. Obviously, as I have said, the inquiry will have to look at the whole question of how it was possible for this to happen. I am sure that it will look at the adequacy of the tests that took place on the tower, and the adequacy of any response to the issues. I want the inquiry to find those things out as soon as possible because that could have implications for other local authorities and other blocks around the country, and we want to ensure people’s safety.

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for her statement. The news she has given the House today—that the cladding was indeed combustible, as testing showed—is chilling, and will be horrifying confirmation of what we all saw on our television screens; but it will be even more frightening for others. There are 58 tower blocks in my constituency, and there are thousands all around the country.

May I suggest that the Prime Minister get a grip on this personally, right away, and that what she does—I am just going to make a suggestion, if I may. I suggest that the Prime Minister uses Cobra to call together all local authorities and require them, within a certain timeframe, to check the cladding on every one of their tower blocks. If she has done so
already, I look forward to hearing that, and to hearing
about the timescale. She should also give authorities the
resources that will enable them to conduct their inspections
within a certain timescale, and commit resources that
will enable the cladding to be replaced within a certain
timescale when others find that it is combustible. That is
exactly what Cobra should be used for. It is not good
enough just to congratulate or encourage other councils;
the Prime Minister must get a grip on this personally.

The Prime Minister said that the Lakanal House
coroner’s inquest findings had been acted on, but I can
tell her that they have not. In 2013, the coroner said that
those deaths had been avoidable, that there should have
been sprinklers, that there should have been a change in
the fire instructions, and that there should be greater
supervision of contracts and fire inspections. The Prime
Minister said that this was an “unimaginable” tragedy,
and that those deaths should not have happened. They
would not have happened if the Government had acted
on the Lakanal House coroner’s inquest rulings.

The Prime Minister: First, let me clarify what I said in
my statement. I said that local authorities had been
invited to send in samples of cladding on similar buildings:
they have done so, and some of the samples have been
found to be combustible. It was in relation to that
testing that I used the term “combustible”. I think it
important that I clarify that. As the right hon. and
learned Lady suggested, we immediately took the
precautionary measure of asking all local authorities to
go out, identify blocks with similar cladding, and take
measures, together with their local fire and rescue services,
to ensure that people in those buildings were safe. Part
of that process has involved the testing. As I have said,
we stand ready to continue to test for all local authorities
that wish to send in samples.

As for the right hon. and learned Lady’s description
of the coroner’s report on Lakanal House, the coroner
did not, as I understand it, say that there should be
sprinklers in every property of this type. What is important,
and what underpinned what she said, is the necessity of
ensuring that people living in similar blocks are able to
feel reassured about their safety. We have taken the
steps: local authorities have been working with fire and
rescue services. Once the tests on the cladding have been
given to local authorities, they are acting immediately
to ensure the safety of people within. There are a
number of steps that they can undertake, and we expect
them to do what is necessary.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): In recent
years, London has seen many high-quality high rises
being built, often financed with hot foreign money,
and then left empty for years, sometimes with their kitchens
clingfilm and pristine. We all understand that a landlord
will need to leave an apartment empty from time to
time, but does the Prime Minister think that when
brand-new properties are left empty for many years it is
right that she discuss with her right hon. Friend the
Chancellor of the Exchequer changing the taxation
regime so that, as happens in New York City, such
people face punitive taxes?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an interesting
point. During his time in the House, he has taken a long
interest in issues related to housing. I understand that
the number of empty homes is currently low, but, of
course, we always look to see what we can do. We want
to ensure that people are housed, and that properties
are being used for the purpose for which they were built.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): If the
building regulations are fit for purpose, all of us, whether
rich or poor, should be protected from fire in our own
homes. What assurance can the Prime Minister give
that the review of building regulations and Approved
Document B, as recommended by the Lakanal House
coroner, will be carried out as urgently as possible, and
that the Building Regulations Advisory Committee,
which has historically undertaken this work, will be
recalled as a matter of urgency? That could be done in																		
tandem with the public inquiry; it would not be necessary
to wait until the end of it.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman, given his
background, has a particular interest in these issues.
The coroner’s recommendation was in relation not to
changing the regulations but to the guidance that followed
the regulations. That work is indeed in hand. My
understanding is that the fire regulations have not been
changed since 2006. Obviously, that will be one of the
issues that the public inquiry will want to look at.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): The
amount of remedial work that may need to be
carried out on a limited timescale will possibly mean
that great pressures will fall on the workforce that are
capable of carrying out that remedial work. Will the
Prime Minister ensure that her colleagues in government
will make all the necessary funds and resources available
if we need to recruit or train further personnel to carry
out remedial work on those blocks that fail the test?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend raises an
important point. We need to ensure that the resources
are there in every sense for the remedial work that is
necessary. We are looking at a variety of ways in which
we can ensure that that is indeed the case.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): All Members,
cross the House, will have mentored and employed
young people and want to see them flourish. My wife,
principally, and I mentored, employed and encouraged
a young woman called Khadija Saye, who, with her
mother, lost her life on the 20th floor of Grenfell Tower.
I spoke to her father on Tuesday and he described, with
anguish, obviously, losing his only daughter. We had a
discussion about how he would cope in going to the
mortuary to visit his daughter in the state that she is
clearly in. On their behalf, and on behalf of all the
people who died, I urge the Prime Minister to say
something more about the criminal investigation that
was announced last week. She has talked about the
public inquiry, but she understands that most people
see this as a crime and they know that rich and powerful
organisations get away with crime. Can she say what
resources have been brought to bear for the Metropolitan	police? How big are the teams, and why is it that we
have not had any commentary about charges, arrests or
the seizure of documents?

The Prime Minister: May I first say how sorry I am to
hear that the right hon. Gentleman lost a friend in this
terrible tragedy? There are obviously many people in
that position, but it brings it home to this House and
right into the Chamber.
The right hon. Gentleman mentioned the issue of bereavement. A family bereavement centre has opened, which provides a suitable place in which people can be counselled. A great deal of thought and care is being undertaken in relation to those families who will, obviously, want to see the bodies of those who died in the fire. This is a very sensitive and difficult matter, as I am sure Members will recognise, and every action is being taken to do this as sensitively and thoughtfully as possible, in consideration of those who have lost loved ones.

A criminal investigation has been opened by the Metropolitan police. The right hon. Gentleman invites me to comment on that in a variety of ways. As he will know, this is an operational matter for the Metropolitan police. It is for them to determine any point at which they have evidence that could lead to charges or prosecutions. We must let the Metropolitan police do their job. They are doing it carefully and properly. I assure him and others that they will get to the truth and leave no stone unturned. If there are charges and prosecutions to be made, they will be.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I attended an understandably heated group discussion with local residents in the shadow of Grenfell Tower last evening. There seemed to be confusion about the coroner’s recommendations on the retrofitting of sprinklers. I think that the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) is also unclear on that. The coroner recommended that we should encourage housing providers to retrofit. Despite the fact that the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea carried out an £8.7 million refurbishment, it did not retrofit sprinklers. Does the Prime Minister agree that perhaps now is the time to provide incentives for local authorities to retrofit when they carry out such refurbishments?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has rightly identified the recommendation that the coroner made, which was that encouragement be given to landlords to retrofit sprinklers, but I would just say to Members that the situation is not as easy as it would perhaps appear, in that the retrofitting of sprinklers will not be the thing that makes the difference in all cases. There is a whole variety of reasons why that may be the case. Some work has been undertaken on testing the retrofitting of sprinklers in a number of tower blocks in different parts of the country. As I say, it is not just a case of assuming that you can go in and do it and that it is automatically going to work and do the job that is necessary. This is an issue that is being looked at, and it continues to be looked at, but it needs to be done carefully to ensure that any work that is required is genuinely going to operate in a way that will help to keep people safe.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I should like to express my condolences and that of my party to those affected by this disaster, and our praise for the local community and the emergency services, who stepped up in the immediate aftermath when, unfortunately, the local and national authorities failed to do so. I also thank the Prime Minister for this statement today and for setting up the public inquiry. Can she confirm when the work on the guidance on building regulations and fire safety will be completed? Can she also confirm that as much focus will be put on private blocks—perhaps particularly those that have been converted from office blocks into residential blocks—will be being put on to local authority and housing association blocks? Can she confirm that the Government will immediately ban the use of combustible materials to ensure that such a tragedy cannot happen again?

The Prime Minister: The building regulations set out the materials that are compliant and those that are non-compliant. As we go through this process of looking at the materials that have been used in various blocks, the question of whether they comply with building regulations will need to be looked at. That issue will need to be looked at in relation to the public inquiry.

Work on the guidance for the building regulations is ongoing and, I would expect, imminent—it is not just a question of producing something; various organisations need to be consulted. We need to ensure that when the fire services and police have done their investigation, any action that is necessary immediately as a result of the identification of the cause of the fire and the reason it took such hold—the issue of particular concern—should be taken, and will be taken.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): My right hon. Friend mentioned the issue of cladding. A great deal of thought and care is being undertaken in relation to the retrofitting of sprinklers—yes or no?

The Prime Minister: The question of whether they comply with building regulations will need to be looked at. That issue will need to be looked at in relation to the public inquiry.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): While many of the questions that those affected by this disaster want answers to will have to await the outcome of the inquiry, it is surely possible to answer one factual question now. Was cladding of the type used in Grenfell Tower compliant with the fire safety and building regulations applicable when the refurbishment was undertaken—yes or no?
The Prime Minister: My understanding is that the fire service and BRE, which was on the scene early to look at that issue, have been identifying the cause of the fire and any contributory factors. They are testing the cladding on the building, and they expect to make the results public in, I think, the next 48 hours.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm whether the firefighters who attended this harrowing scene, and their families, will get the psychological support that they may well need in the months and years ahead? Will she commit to report back to the House on how that will be set up for them?

The Prime Minister: Yes. My hon. Friend raises an important issue, which the Leader of the Opposition also touched on. I can confirm that we are ensuring that that support and counselling will be available. There will be further updates to the House on the response to the Grenfell Tower fire, and that will be an issue to be included.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Further to the question asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), the cladding on the tower is a standard product that is available for sale. I do not understand why the Prime Minister cannot tell us whether that product is compliant with the building regulations for a tower that is this high. Why can she not tell us the answer? Will she also confirm that the Building Regulations Advisory Committee, which should be looking at part B of the building regulations on fire safety, has not yet actually met to look at how the regulations could be improved?

The Prime Minister: I will add to the answer I gave to the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), and I ask hon. Members to remember that a criminal investigation is taking place in relation to this matter. The testing of the cladding and of the materials used is being undertaken, and a statement will be made by the police and the fire service within the next 48 hours.

James Cleverly (Br şeklinde (Con)): The London Resilience Forum has a number of multi-agency plans for things such as mass shelter, mass fatalities and mass casualties. Can we confirm whether those plans were fully implemented? Can we also ensure that what lessons we learn from the inquiry process are fed back into resilience forums, both in London and around the country, to ensure that the lessons are promptly implemented?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He obviously has experience from when he was on the London Assembly and took a particular interest in the London Fire Brigade and fire service matters. I can indeed confirm that we have already looked at the whole question of resilience forums around the country. We will ensure that any lessons learned from the Grenfell Tower fire are fed into those resilience teams and forums, but we also need to ensure that resilience forums around the country are as resilient as they need to be in providing support should any disaster happen. We have seen this issue in relation to other disasters, such as flooding. We need to ensure that resilience forums are operating as they should at every local level.

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister please confirm when the judge will be appointed? Following the comments from my Opposition colleagues, I would be grateful for some clarification on whether she is advising us that she does not know whether the cladding was compliant with building regulations. The question that she has been asked is about whether the material was compliant; is she advising us that it needs to be tested before she can give us a reply?

The Prime Minister: As I have said, the material is being tested. The results of those tests will be—[Interruption.] The information that the fire service and police are able to give publicly they will give; this is part of the criminal investigation. [Interruption.] It is. Hon. Members may shake their heads, but let me make this point: they want to ensure that if there are criminal charges to be brought, those charges are indeed brought, and we must therefore ensure that we give the police the opportunity to do the job that they undertake and that nothing we do prejudices that.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister’s commitment to the publication of an early interim report. After the Croydon tram crash last year, the Rail Accident Investigation Branch published two interim reports within three months, which identified the immediate cause of the crash and so action could be taken. Will she assure the House that a similar approach will be taken with this interim report?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for that. It was very important that interim reports came out quickly in relation to the Croydon inquiry. I can confirm that I fully expect the judge to bring out an interim report. May I say to the hon. Member for Peterborough (Fiona Onasanya) that I am sorry I did not answer her first question about the judge? I would expect within the next few days to be able to announce the name of the judge. We very much want to ensure that when the judge takes charge of this inquiry people feel, as I said earlier, that they can have full confidence in it, and so we are taking steps to ensure that that is the case.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Sympathies are not enough but, on behalf of my party, I offer them to all who have suffered. I also express my gratitude to emergency services officers, who showed the dedication of heroes in unimaginable conditions. Criminal investigations are only to be expected, but penalising individuals is partial retribution; those in government should search their souls. Will the Prime Minister commit to ensure that future policy, legislation and resources will mean a disaster of this magnitude can never happen again in a 21st century, first world country?

The Prime Minister: First, may I congratulate the hon. Lady on her appointment as leader of the Plaid Cymru Members in this House? I assure her that we are doing everything we can, and, obviously, the inquiry will play an important part, through its identification of action that needs to be taken, in ensuring that a disaster such as this can never happen again.
Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that if the cladding is found to be illegal and other research finds that other towers have been similarly clad, the public inquiry will extend its remit to look at investigations into all towers that are similarly clad?

The Prime Minister: If illegal activity has taken place, that is a matter for the police and it is part of the criminal investigation they will be undertaking. It is not just a question of what the inquiry does; it is a question of what we are doing now in relation to other tower blocks, which is why we are encouraging local authorities, housing associations and indeed private landlords to send in their material for testing.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): As the leader of a party that is responsible for seven years of austerity, which has cut 56% of the cash available to my local authority in the past seven years, and has spent its time talking about regulation as a bad thing, is the right hon. Lady now going to apologise to the country for the state of local government, when the richest borough in London could not cope with this emergency, while at the same time, it was giving money back to its council tax payers?

The Prime Minister: We are dealing with the aftermath of a terrible disaster that has led to people losing their lives and others losing their homes and everything that they owned. We are ensuring that we are putting the steps in place. As I have said, I recognise that initially the response was not good enough, which is why we have stepped up that response. It is why—I did not respond to the right hon. and learned Member for South Dorset (Mr Drax) in my statement—I have indeed been chairing the Cobra meetings myself. And it is why we have been putting extra resource in, to ensure that that response is suitable. This will be an issue of looking at the regulations. As I said, my understanding is that these regulations were established in 2006, and we will be looking at those. The inquiry will look at them and at how they were applied; and I am sure it will look at the issues that have been raised about the residents’ complaints in advance of this disaster about the tenant management organisation, and it will get to the bottom of who is responsible.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. As befits the occasion, these are thoughtful and solemn exchanges, but I must advise the House that progress thus far has been very slow. I am keen to try to accommodate the extent of the interest, and therefore I appeal to colleagues now to confine themselves to pithy, short, single-sentence questions, of which the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) is a notable exponent.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

At the end of her compassionate and comprehensive statement, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said that we had to think about the people living very different lives from ourselves. As I am sure she knows, in opinion surveys going back over decades people never said they wanted to live in tower blocks. Can we change public policy so that tower blocks can become a thing of the past?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question. There are many people who do not wish to live in tower blocks, and there are some who are perfectly comfortable living in tower blocks. What we have to look at, however, is the approach taken to social housing; that is one of the lessons that comes from this disaster.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I do not want there to be an outbreak of sibling rivalry, so I must now call Maria Eagle.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): The Prime Minister confirmed in her statement that testing arrangements have discovered combustible cladding on some tower blocks in other parts of the country. Given that people living in those tower blocks are perhaps going to fear more than others the consequences of that discovery, what steps can the Prime Minister take to ensure that the landlords and the local authorities where these tower blocks are located can deal swiftly with the consequences of this discovery?

The Prime Minister: That work is already being undertaken. First, local authorities and housing associations have undertaken the testing work of their blocks, and we encourage private landlords to do that, too, to ensure the fire safety. We encourage everybody to send in samples so that we can undertake this checking by lab testing. Local authorities are immediately informed if the material is combustible. They will then be looking, with their local fire services, at ensuring the safety of those buildings. That will be done in a number of ways, but of course there is a responsibility to ensure that people are housed safely, and the Government are working with local authorities to ensure that.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend’s statement and the extraordinary degree of personal responsibility she is taking in this response. Have she and her officials had the opportunity to look at reports by the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee and its predecessor Committee under Dr Tony Wright, which repeatedly recommended that the House of Commons should have more of a role in the setting up of such inquiries? Will she consider asking the House of Commons should have more of a role in the setting up of such inquiries? Will she consider asking the House to establish a special Select Committee very quickly, to look carefully at the reports of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee and its predecessor Committee. What is important is that we get this inquiry up and running with appropriate speed and, most importantly to me, that the residents affected
have confidence in it. Ensuring that the residents feel this inquiry is genuinely going to get to the truth for them is key.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): I am still waiting to hear the Prime Minister say that she will underwrite the costs to local authorities of inspection and urgent remedial action, given the cuts of up to a third and a half in local authority budgets and housing providers being required to implement a rent cut, which has squeezed their budgets. We must not have a postcode lottery in safety provision, and that requires a commitment now from the Government to underwrite these costs. Will the Prime Minister do that today—yes or no?

The Prime Minister: We are providing testing facilities to local authorities and working with them to identify their needs, their requirements and the response that they need to take. We will work with them to ensure that they can respond in the way that is necessary.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Will the Prime Minister please confirm that residents will be housed as close as possible to where they lived, to ensure that they are close to friends, family and support networks?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I can give that reassurance. It is about being close to friends and family, but it is also important for children to be able to go to their local schools.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister talked about looking to the future and about those whose lifestyles are far removed from the lifestyles enjoyed by many here in Westminster. That is the reality in my constituency, where there is overcrowding, with two families living in many homes, and where homelessness is the worst it has ever been. Will she live true to her word and take a personal lead in taking forward plans to ensure that we deliver not just more housing, but more genuinely affordable housing for the people who need it?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government published proposals on housing before the general election. We want to ensure that there are more affordable homes and that more houses are being built. We are putting half a billion pounds into dealing with homelessness.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): May I thank the Prime Minister for her detailed and compassionate statement? Does she agree that, although there are obviously legitimate questions surrounding the Grenfell tragedy and it is absolutely right that they must be asked, we should exercise caution in attributing blame or condemnation before we know the facts? As a former journalist, I feel really strongly about this. Scaremongering does not help anybody; getting to the bottom of things does.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right: it is important that the evidence is identified, that the issue is properly considered, that everybody is able to give their views and evidence to the inquiry, and that the inquiry is able to get to the truth, find the result and find out what happened. Obviously the fire services and the police are looking at the immediate cause of the fire and will make public any statements that they are able to, but the inquiry will get to the truth. It is important that we allow the inquiry to identify responsibility.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): Leeds City Council has responded swiftly by communicating with tenants and residents in all 116 blocks and testing the cladding, none of which uses the same material as was used in Kensington. Following on from the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), we now need to know that whatever recommendations are made on sprinklers, cladding, fire alarms and other remedial work, it will be central Government who provide the funds to ensure that tenants and residents in all the thousands of tower blocks throughout the country are safe.

The Prime Minister: I thought I had responded to a number of questions on this. The Government are working with local authorities. We will ensure that any essential works in terms of remedial action necessary for the safety of these blocks in relation to fire are undertaken. We will work with local authorities to identify how that—

Maria Eagle: Just say it!

The Prime Minister: There will be different circumstances in different local authorities. We will ensure that the work can be undertaken.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): May I commend the Prime Minister for her statement and for talking about the public inquiry? From my experience of the public inquiry in my constituency that lasted for two and a half years, I know that it is vital that the inquiry is thorough but also as swift as possible. I urge whomsoever is appointed to talk to people such as Sir Robert Francis, who chaired the public inquiry in my constituency, to find out from his experience how that can best be achieved.

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that point, and I will certainly pass that on. I absolutely agree that it is important that this is done as quickly as possible.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I welcome the Prime Minister’s statement that the Government will pay for legal representation at the inquiry for those affected by the fire. Will she confirm that that means that not only victims but tenants’ groups will be given public funding for independent and separate legal representation sufficient to enable them to have a voice equal to that of local and national Government and the private management company? I ask because I understand that the tenants association was not allowed legal representation in the Lakanal House fire inquiry.

The Prime Minister: One of the experiences that came out of the Hillsborough inquiry was the importance of ensuring that those who were affected had appropriate legal representation, and the Government did fund that legal representation to enable them to have the strength of voice that they needed in that inquiry. Of course, as the hon. and learned Lady will be aware, with respect to the way in which the inquiry is conducted, the witnesses who are called and the representations that will be
received, there will be an element of the judge deciding how he wants to conduct the inquiry. For those who require legal representation, that will be funded by the Government, and I have not set any limits in relation to the types of body or the individuals for whom that will be available.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): My right hon. Friend was absolutely right to highlight the incredible work of the brave firefighters who attended the scene in the immediate aftermath of the incident, but will she ensure not only that they are properly recognised for their herculean efforts, but that any welfare needs that arise are met immediately?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Support is being given to the firefighters, and indeed to the police and others who attended the scene, because they too, could potentially suffer trauma as a result of what they have seen, so that support will be available.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): The Prime Minister, in concluding her statement, said that we should “resolve never to forget these people”. I would like to ask her who she thinks forgot these people. Was it the previous Chancellor of the Exchequer, who defunded local authorities, including my own, which is still struggling with the consequences of the New Ferry explosion? Was it former Ministers who ignored pleas from this House on fire safety? Or was it her, who has seen other people in Britain as “these people”, rather than as our friends and neighbours?

The Prime Minister: I think that the best response I can give the lady. Lady on that matter is to refer her to the remarks I made on the steps of Downing Street when I became Prime Minister about a country that works for everyone.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I note that the Prime Minister said in her statement that all social landlords have been instructed to carry out additional fire safety checks, but that private landlords will be advised that they have the option of taking up the same facility. Can we ensure that the inquiry looks at both private and social tower blocks, because all citizens should be equal when it comes to safety and assurance?

The Prime Minister: The inquiry will obviously focus on what happened at Grenfell Tower, but any implications of the inquiry may very well affect not just social landlords, but private landlords.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): The Prime Minister has already been asked this question several times and failed to answer it, so I will give her another opportunity. Will the Government fully commit to meeting the cost of proper and appropriate safety checks, to fully funding the recommendations and schemes for retrofitting sprinklers, and to meeting any other associated costs?

The Prime Minister: I have answered that; I have made it clear that where work is necessary, resources will be available to ensure that it can be undertaken. But it is for the Government to work with local authorities to ensure that that takes place.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): The families of the victims are entitled to the truth—not speculation or conjecture, but the truth, based on evidence—so my right hon. Friend was absolutely right to set up the public inquiry, but can we ensure that an early date is agreed for publication of an interim report? In this case, perhaps more than any other, justice delayed is justice denied.

The Prime Minister: I would hope and expect that the judge, when appointed—obviously, that individual will be independent—will indicate publicly when they expect to be able to publish an interim report, so that people can have that confidence.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister confirm that the 68 flats in the Berkeley Homes Kensington Row development that are to be allocated to the victims of the Grenfell Tower fire are already designated as social housing? What we need in places such as west London, where for many people social housing is the only affordable housing, is large investment in new affordable housing, not rearranging the same pot. Opposition Members will remain very sceptical about her conversion to social housing until she starts providing it, not just talking about it.

The Prime Minister: The important point about the Berkeley Homes development is that it is being ring-fenced for people who have been affected by the Grenfell Tower fire. That is the significance of this; it will be available purely for the people who have lost their home and been displaced as a result of this tragedy.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): We have heard that the residents of Grenfell Tower had spoken out about their fears but not been listened to, like so many of our constituents, on whose behalf we, as MPs, frequently write to organisations asking for them to be given a fair hearing, despite the dedication of many thousands of staff. I ask my right hon. Friend to look at the management systems and culture in organisations that serve the public to work out what needs to change to ensure that every citizen of this country, whoever and wherever they are, are not just heard but listened to.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important matter. We must ensure that organisations that have a responsibility to the public do indeed listen to the public. With regard to any future disasters that should take place, I am considering the concept of an independent public advocate—somebody who can ensure that answers are given. They should ensure that people get not just the support that they need, but the answers that they need.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Obviously, many have paid tribute to the fire and rescue workers who put their lives in danger and who may still be feeling the trauma from that. As a surgeon of more than 30 years, I wish to highlight the fact that NHS staff will also be traumatised, because there is nothing more horrifying than dealing with the victims of burns. In the autumn statement of 2015, the former Chancellor identified £800 million to be taken from the new housing bonus scheme to make up the shortfall in social care. Will the current Chancellor now reverse that?
Mr Speaker: The erudition of the hon. Lady’s inquiry was equalled only by its length, and we need to be shorter from now on.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. As I have said, I visited one of the hospitals that had taken in victims and can say that, obviously, those NHS staff did a wonderful job as well. Here in London NHS staff have dealt with not only the Grenfell Tower disaster, but the terrorist attacks that have taken place. As she said, those NHS staff deserve support as do others in the emergency services to whom we referred earlier.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): As a representative of an area of the country that has no tower blocks, I know that the overwhelming wish of my constituents is for us to have timely implementation of any recommendations that come out of a public inquiry in a non-partisan manner. They recognise that that may come at a considerable cost to the public purse. Is the Minister willing to consider whether it would be an acceptable cost?

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am keen to accommodate the remaining interest, but it must be pithily conveyed.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): I have a very quick question. Will the one-in, two-out approach to the regulatory “burden”—so-called—now be abandoned for fire safety?

The Prime Minister: Yes, and it is absolutely the case with any recommendations that come out of this public inquiry, because those recommendations will be about keeping people safe, and action will be taken on those recommendations.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. We will have to wrap up at 10 past 11, so we will do what we can between now and then.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Residents of Grenfell Tower warned the housing provider of the dangers and said that it would take a fire in a tower block for notice to be taken. Will the Prime Minister relook at the Localism Act 2011, which currently requires residents to allow for eight weeks before they can make a compliant to the ombudsman for a matter to be taken up through their Members of Parliament?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising an issue that has not been raised with me before. I will look at the Localism Act. I think that there are reasons why that period of time was put into the Act. She is right that the issue of the response of the tenant management organisation has been raised, and that it needs to be looked at by the inquiry as it looks into the reasons for the fire.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Will the results of the individual examinations to which the Prime Minister referred be produced as they become available, or will they all be subjected to the public examination? If the former, may we have a timetable for that?

The Prime Minister: I assume that my hon. Friend is talking about the tests on the cladding—

John Howell indicated assent.

The Prime Minister: As regards the tests on the cladding, as soon as the results are available—the test can be done within hours of the samples being received—the local authorities, housing associations or private landlords will be informed of them.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. A single sentence, and a short one, from Jack Dromey.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Fire sprinklers save lives. May I correct the Prime Minister, because actually the inquest recommended that the Department issue guidance to all providers of high-rise blocks that they should retrofit sprinklers? There are 213 blocks with 10,000 households in Birmingham. Will the Prime Minister agree now to act on the advice given four years ago, retrofit sprinklers and have the Government pay for it?

The Prime Minister: I point out to the hon. Gentleman that the recommendation was that the Department “encourage providers of housing in high rise residential buildings containing multiple domestic premises to consider the retrofitting of sprinkler systems.”

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): May I ask my right hon. Friend whether the inquiry will look at the safety of tall buildings in which people work as well as those in which people live?

The Prime Minister: I think it is important that when the inquiry looks at the implications of the fire, it assesses them for all tall buildings, not just those in which people live. Indeed, we are ensuring that we
consider other tall buildings that might have been clad in a similar way, which might not be residential properties but used for other purposes.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister please tell us why she will not choose to show leadership, require all councils to retrofit flats and provide the resources?

The Prime Minister: I made the point earlier that we need to ensure that any accommodation provided by local authorities or housing associations is safe. People are making assumptions about the work that needs to be done to ensure that. What needs to happen on the ground is for the local authority or housing association—the landlord—to work with the fire and rescue service to ensure that they can provide that safety.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): When the Prime Minister considers her suggestion of a civil disaster taskforce, will she bear in mind one of the lessons of the severe Gloucestershire floods of 2007, which was to have a single leader at gold command responsible for co-ordinating all the different groups and controlling the media and information?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend. We will consider that. Putting it in place here, with John Barradell as gold command, has helped to move things forward and ensure that the response has improved.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): When an independent safety review of a block of flats recommends retrofitting sprinklers, or major refurbishment, will the Government fund it?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman’s question seemed to be about any blocks of flats in the country, whether they be in private or public sector ownership—

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Prime Minister: What we are doing is ensuring first of all that the fire service and landlords—local authorities and housing associations—assess what is needed for the safety of those properties. Where action is needed and work is needed, the Government will work with those landlords to ensure that that can be done.

Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): The Prime Minister concluded her statement by saying that it was the Government’s job to show that it is listening. Will she listen to the experts in the Fire Brigades Union and reverse the cuts to the fire and rescue service as well as retrofitting sprinklers in all high-rise residential accommodation?

The Prime Minister: As I have already said on the issue of sprinklers, some tests on retrofitting have been undertaken across the country, but it is not as simple as saying that retrofitting sprinklers is the one thing we need to do. There are a variety of ways in which action needs to be taken in blocks and what needs to happen is for the experts to assess that for every block.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The Communities Secretary has demanded that the chief executive of Kensington and Chelsea Council resigns. Should Councillor Puget-Brown resign?

The Prime Minister: That matter will be considered by the appropriate group on Kensington and Chelsea Council.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): If Bristol City Council comes to the conclusion that essential work is needed on its tower blocks, will the Government fund it? If so, how soon will we get the money?

The Prime Minister: If the decision is made, in conjunction with the fire and rescue service, that work needs to be done on those tower blocks, there will be a discussion between the authority and the Department for Communities and Local Government about how that work can be undertaken and the provision of resources for that work.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I know that the Prime Minister believes that politicians should be accountable for their actions or their inactions. On that basis, has she told the leader of Kensington and Chelsea Council that he should go because of the appalling way in which this tragedy has been handled?

The Prime Minister: I have had a conversation with the leader of Kensington and Chelsea Council. I told him that he needed to ensure that residents, victims and survivors of this terrible disaster were being given the help and support they need. We have now added more help and support to ensure that that is happening on the ground.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): In paying more attention to social housing, will the Prime Minister pledge to review the right-to-buy discount policy, the implicit message from Government that renting is not aspirational enough and how the one-for-one replacement process is managed, and will she allow greater building of council houses?

The Prime Minister: If the hon. Gentleman looks at the housing White Paper produced by the Government earlier this year, he will see that we clearly expect there to be a diversity of ways in which people will be in their homes. Some wish to own their homes and some wish to rent. Some wish to have rent-to-buy schemes and others wish to have shared ownership schemes. I want there to be diversity to suit people and their circumstances.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): Both the fire stations in my constituency are closing as a direct result of Government cuts, so will the Government now take action and increase funding to Merseyside fire and rescue service?

The Prime Minister: Fire services across the country are ensuring that they have the appropriate response to the fires with which they are dealing. Importantly, urban search and rescue as well as the London Fire Brigade were available for the Grenfell Tower fire. The resources were there and they were able to take the action that they took.
Mr Speaker: Short sentences—Matt Western.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I have heard the word “encouragement” used a lot today. In my experience, that word is not necessarily useful when we are talking about a tragedy of this magnitude. Markets do not work with encouragement; they work with regulation. There has been an explosion in the number of student properties built in the private sector in recent years. I suggest that it is incumbent on the Government to make it mandatory for not just the public sector, but the private sector to use their facilities and test all these properties.

The Prime Minister: There are fire safety and building regulations in place. Landlords have a responsibility for ensuring the safety of their properties. We are ensuring that facilities are available to them free of charge. I say, once again, that local authorities and housing associations are sending in samples. I encourage them and others to do so. As I said, the checking facilities are also available to the devolved Administrations.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister assure me that she will work with the devolved Administrations on the lesson-learning process, including with the Welsh Government, who have announced an expert group to do just that in recent days?

The Prime Minister: We are already talking to the devolved Administrations about the lessons and anything that is coming out so far, and we will continue to do so.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): It has already become apparent that landlords do not always know who occupies their properties, and the vulnerabilities of certain tenants. Will the Prime Minister ensure that we investigate opportunities for data sharing between, for example, local authorities, social services departments, schools and registered social landlords?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady raises an interesting issue. At the heart of this is ensuring that the service given to people interacting with various Government Departments is focused on and identifies their particular needs. I will consider the issue of data sharing.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Cuts have consequences. According to Home Office figures, the number of home fire safety checks has fallen by 25% since 2010. Will the Prime Minister now give the service the funding it needs to carry out 100% of the checks required?

The Prime Minister: The fire and rescue service obviously does conduct checks. It does that in relation to residential properties of these sorts of tower blocks owned by local authorities and housing associations. It does so in conjunction with those landlords, and some of those checks will be conducted by landlords themselves.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister meet urgently the fire and rescue service to discuss the advice given to residents of tower blocks as, sadly, it would seem that the advice given to the residents of Grenfell Tower to stay in their flats may have been erroneous?

The Prime Minister: The fire and rescue service has representation at the meetings that I have been chairing in relation to the response to Grenfell Tower. The issue of the advice that has been given to residents has been raised with it. Obviously this matter will need reflection and consideration, and I would expect it also to be one that the inquiry will look at.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): May I ask that as part of the inquiry an assessment is carried out of the capacity of the fire service to respond to incidents such as this, particularly with reference to crewing and high-reach appliances?

The Prime Minister: The fire service was able to respond in this instance, but of course when the inquiry looks at these issues I would expect that to be one that it considers.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) rose—

Mr Speaker: Mr Shannon—15 seconds maximum.

Jim Shannon: There are 32 high-rise tower blocks in Northern Ireland where safety tests have been carried out. When it comes to the lessons learned and the suggestions and recommendations made, may I ask that the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive be made aware of those?

The Prime Minister: We will indeed do that. This allows me to say to the hon. Gentleman that I hope that the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive will be formed such that they are in a position for us to give them that information.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Prime Minister very warmly for her time this morning, and all colleagues for their spirited co-operation on this very important and grave occasion.
Terror Attacks

11.11 am

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the terrorist attacks we have seen since Parliament last sat.

There has been no summer like it. When we rose seven weeks ago, we left this House in the wake of the worst terrorist attack our country had seen in over a decade, with Khalid Masood trying to strike at the heart of our democracy. He was foiled that day by one of our brave police officers. But tragically it has proved to be the first of many attempts to bring terror and hate to our streets. Two months later, a cowardly and devastating attack in Manchester left 22 people dead and 59 injured after a suicide bomber targeted children at a concert in the Manchester Arena. On 3 June, a van was deliberately driven into pedestrians on London Bridge before three men got out of the vehicle and began stabbing people in nearby Borough Market. Eight people were killed and 48 injured. And then on Monday, almost exactly one year after Jo Cox was brutally murdered in Birstall, we woke to the news of the return of far-right terror, with a man viciously driving into a group of Muslim worshippers in north London. One man who had fallen ill before the attack died, and nine others were treated in hospital. Westminster, the Manchester Arena, London Bridge, and now Finsbury Park: 36 innocent people dead and over 150 hospitalised; a tragic loss of innocent life.

Last week, I met a mother and father who had lost their daughter in the vicious attacks on London Bridge. She had been stabbed while out celebrating her new job with a friend in Borough Market. Just under two weeks before, she planned to be at the arena in Manchester where Salman Abedi committed his heinous crimes, but she decided not to use her ticket. She had come to London to enjoy a wonderful trip away—a once-in-a-lifetime experience. But instead it was the last trip she ever made. I know everyone in this House will want to join me in expressing our sorrow for the pain her family will be feeling, and all those families who have lost loved ones will be feeling, as well as passing on our thoughts and prayers for those victims who are still trying to recover from the trauma and tragedy of these events.

I also know that the House will want to join me in acknowledging the incredible efforts of our emergency services during this difficult period. The events of recent months serve to remind us of the bravery, professionalism and, above all, incredible sacrifice made by those who work to keep us safe.

As Home Secretary, there is nothing more saddening than standing before Parliament to deliver a statement like this. These acts of terrorism represent the very worst of humanity. They seek to spread fear, intolerance and hate. Countering this threat has always been a crucial part of the work of this Government. That was why we introduced measures to disrupt the travel of foreign fighters, and why we passed the Investigatory Powers Act 2016, which gives the police and intelligence services more powers and the tools they need to keep the public safe. It was also why, just seven weeks ago, we legislated to strengthen our response to terrorist financing with the Criminal Finances Act 2017.

We have protected overall police funding in real terms since 2015, increased counter-terrorist budgets and funded an uplift in the number of armed police officers. We are now in the process of recruiting over 1,900 additional security and intelligence staff. The Channel programme, which offers voluntary, tailored programmes of support to people assessed as being at risk of radicalisation, has supported over 1,000 at-risk individuals since 2012. Following referrals from the counter-terrorist internet referral unit, social media providers have removed 270,000 pieces of illegal terrorist material since February 2010.

However, we are entering a new phase of global terrorism, and many of the challenges that we face are unprecedented. We now believe we are experiencing a new trend in the threat we face. Between June 2013 and the Westminster bridge attack in March this year, the security services foiled 13 plots linked to or inspired by Islamist extremists, but just since then, we have seen five plots prevented as well as three such Islamist extremist plots succeed, and of course the appalling attack at Finsbury Park earlier this week.

We must therefore do more. We must do more to defeat ideologies of hatred by turning people’s minds away from violence and towards pluralistic British values. We must make sure that these ideologies are not able to flourish in the first place. We must do more to force tech companies to take down terror-related content from their platforms. We must also do more to identify, challenge and stamp out the extremism that lurks in our communities. That is why we will set up a commission for countering extremism. For just as the Labour Government in the 1970s set us on a course to tackling racial inequality in this country by setting up the Commission for Racial Equality, we need to—and must—do more to tackle the extremists who seek to radicalise and weaponise young people in Britain today.

Doing more also means asking difficult questions about what has gone wrong. In the light of the terrorist attacks in London and Manchester, Britain’s counter-terrorist strategy will be reviewed to make sure that the police and the security services have what they need to keep us safe. In addition, there will be a review of the handling of recent terror attacks to look at whether lessons can be learned about our approach, and I am pleased to announce that David Anderson, the former independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, will oversee it.

What we have witnessed in Manchester and London are the depraved actions of murderers intent on tearing our country apart, but each act of hate has been met by overwhelming defiance. In Borough Market, I recently saw stallholders dishing olives out into plastic pots, shoppers searching for delicious treats and tourists flicking through guidebooks in the shadow of the Shard. Rather than being divided by recent violence, people seemed even closer together. We should follow the example of the traders and the shoppers of Borough Market. Terrorists want us to fear and to turn on one another, but we will never give terrorists what they want. We will stand together, and we will make the point that terrorists will never win, and that our values, our country and our unity will prevail. I commend this statement to the House.
The variety of the attacks and the varied backgrounds of their perpetrators reveal that we face multiple threats. No single type of person and no single community is the sole source of these attacks. We all face these attacks and we must all face them together. Of course, the blame for the attacks lies solely with the perpetrators and any murderers support and enablers they may have had, but it is reasonable for this House to say that the role of Government is to secure the safety of our citizens, and it is reasonable for the House to ask whether anything has been done that could reasonably have been done.

I noted the actions that the Government have taken in the Home Secretary’s statement. Largely, the Opposition support them, but we warn against an emphasis on more legislation, rather than looking at resources. We will look at all legislative proposals that the Government bring forward on their merits, but we believe that resources are at the heart of this matter, not just new legislation. In that view, we are supported by Max Hill, the independent reviewer of terrorism legislation. His objective view is that the Home Secretary’s cuts run the risk of diverting to counter-terrorism, other areas of policing would suffer. He is saying that cuts have consequences, and that the Home Secretary’s cuts run the risk of putting us all in danger. The Opposition’s understanding is that the Home Secretary is going to cut again.

Mr Speaker: Order. At this early stage of the Parliament, can I just say something that I think is quite important for future reference? There are time limits for questioning on statements, which, in the last Parliament, were very substantially disregarded. That cannot happen in this Parliament, because it is not fair to Back Benchers. That is my first point.

My second point—forgive me; the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) is extraordinarily articulate and very experienced—is one that Opposition spokespersons frequently just do not seem to understand: in responding to a statement, the Chair is not expecting to hear a counter-statement. The Chair is looking to hear, as provided for in our procedures, a very brief response, followed by a series of questions. That should be the character of the response.

On this occasion, I will allow the right hon. Lady to finish, but I hope she will be sensitive to quite a widespread feeling in the House that she is approaching her peroration. Thereafter, we must observe these limits. If they are not observed, I will regretfully have to ask the spokesperson concerned to resume his or her seat.

Ms Abbott: So can I ask the Home Secretary, does she accept that resources are as important as new institutions and new legislation? The Opposition welcome the measures to get internet companies to block and take down content that promotes terrorism, but does she accept the need for a review of the Prevent programme and the need to reframe the debate around it as relating not only to the Muslim community but to far-right terrorism?

The Opposition believe that there is considerable unity on these issues in the country as a whole. We believe that the country as a whole wants to know that...
we will not play into the terrorists’ hands by stoking divisions, demonising communities or rescinding our hard-won freedoms under the law.

**Amber Rudd:** I thank the right hon. Lady for her comments and the constructive way in which she is approaching this. The Government look forward to working with her to make sure that we have a constructive, united approach to this enemy that is trying to attack us.

The right hon. Lady asked particularly about new legislation. She is right that Max Hill has said that he does not see the need for new legislation, but he also said that he does see the need for a review of sentences, so we will certainly look at whether we can have tougher sentences. On our potential new legislation and approach, I ask her to hold fire for now on concluding that to be the case until we have done this review. Looking backwards, our review over the next few months into why so many terror attacks took place will be critical. For that, we will have independent assurance in the form of David Anderson. We will also have a review looking ahead to what else we can do.

As I said in my statement, we feel we have entered a new phase. That may mean that we need to introduce new legislation, but we will not rush to do that based on the attacks. We will look at doing that depending on what we find out from these reviews. I ask her to keep an open mind on that, depending on what conclusions the reviews reach.

I yield to no one in my respect for the work of the police, particularly the work of the counter-terrorism police in the past few months. We all recognise the enormous extra work and effort that has gone into following up on the attacks and keeping us safe. We have protected the police budget from 2015. There has been a lot of scaremongering about changes to the budget, and I repeat here, in the House, that it will be protected. We will ensure that we always give the security services and the police who work to keep us safe the resources that they need.

**Mr Dominic Grieve** (Beaconsfield) (Con): I greatly welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement. I want to raise just two or three points. First, I particularly welcome the review of the sentencing guidelines. That should happen because of the evidence that individuals who commit acts preparatory to terrorism may be receiving sentences that are insufficient, although clearly they need to be proportionate.

The second issue concerns the response and how our security services work to deal with the threat. My right hon. Friend will know that the Government have invested considerably in that. The money spent and the number of officers available have been greatly enhanced. Equally, it is right that, because of the classified nature of the work, some details cannot be given to the House. That emphasises to me that one of the problems in the past three and a half months has been that we have not had an Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament to provide the sort of scrutiny that might be helpful to hon. Members in understanding what has gone on, what should happen in the future and whether any improvements could be made. I therefore gently urge my right hon. Friend to make representations to the Prime Minister that that should be given priority.

**Amber Rudd:** I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for his comments. He is very experienced in the matter, having been Chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee. He makes a good point and I will follow up his suggestion that we establish that Committee as soon as possible so that we can give the House the confidence of knowing that Members from both Chambers will look at the matter and provide assurance.

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I add the voice of the Scottish National party to those who condemn the terrible attacks, and extend our sincere condolences to the families and friends of the dead and our best wishes for a full recovery to those injured.

I welcome the Home Secretary back to her place and look forward to working with her on this and other important issues.

The Finsbury Park attack reminds us that terrorism is a threat to all communities in the United Kingdom and it is therefore important that measures to counter extremism never segregate or stigmatise communities.

I have three questions for the Home Secretary. First, I am concerned that, while commendable, the Government’s plans to establish a commission risk, without legislation, bypassing parliamentary scrutiny and the need for legal certainty about the definition of terms such as “extremism” and “British values”. How will she ensure that Parliament gets to scrutinise those matters?

Secondly, we in the SNP believe that to fight terrorism effectively we can use existing legislation, and that what really matters is that the police and security services have the necessary resources to act effectively under that legislation. Will the Home Secretary confirm that such resources will be made available in the future?

Thirdly, during the election campaign, the Prime Minister spoke of ripping up human rights to fight terrorism. Will the Home Secretary confirm that there is nothing in the Human Rights Act or the European convention on human rights to prevent us from taking a robust approach to terrorism? Will she therefore confirm that there are no plans to tear up human rights and that we can tackle terrorism and uphold the standards of this society without doing so?

**Amber Rudd:** I thank the hon. and learned Lady for her question and her kind welcome.

The recommendations that the commission on extremism makes will need to be brought before Parliament. I therefore expect full scrutiny of the recommendations when they are brought to Parliament to be taken forward. I can confirm that we will always provide the resources necessary to keep our citizens safe. We have already announced substantial uplifts to the security services. There will be 1,900 new people joining the security services up until 2020, and an increased number of armed officers are being made available in the country.

I can also tell the hon. and learned Lady that later this year we will conduct a full-scale counter-terrorism exercise involving Police Scotland and forces from the north of England. We will always work with the Scottish Government and police to ensure that we keep all parts of the United Kingdom safe.

**Dr Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): Will there be an opportunity to give evidence to the commission for countering terrorism and extremism, based on the
lessons that we have learnt in the past to counter other totalitarian ideologies such as communism and Nazism? Does my right hon. Friend accept that organisations like ISIL/Daesh and al-Qaeda rise and fall, but the underlying doctrine of what ought to be called un-Islamic extremism persists? Does she accept that that is what must be countered, and that an active Government agency to counter it is what is required?

Amber Rudd: My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct. Extremism comes in many different forms. “Un-Islamic extremism” is one way of describing it, and it is a perfectly reasonable description. I would expect the commission on extremism to ask people to give evidence, so that we can be sure to collect the best possible information in order to do the best possible job for our communities.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I join the Home Secretary in remembering the victims, and in paying tribute to the immense bravery of the emergency services and the public. I also join her in saying that extremists and terrorists must never divide us, be they Islamist extremists or far-right extremists, and wherever that violence comes from.

I welcome the proposal for a review by David Anderson of the attacks, but will the Home Secretary also tell us a bit more about them? For example, the Manchester attacker is reported to have been known to the intelligence services, and also to have travelled repeatedly to Libya. Will the Home Secretary tell us whether the man who committed that vile attack was on a watch list, and whether he was ever stopped by Border Force in the course of those journeys? Will she also ensure that the relationship between the intelligence services and Border Force is looked at as part of David Anderson’s review?

Amber Rudd: The right hon. Lady is right to draw attention to the relationship with the border forces and the security services. I would expect that to be looked at as well. I cannot, at this stage, give the right hon. Lady the additional details that she seeks. It is, of course, part of the nature of the security services that they do so much good work and we are not really at liberty to talk too much about it. However, I hope that the work that David Anderson does with them—which will start almost immediately—will help us to find the answers to some of those questions: for instance, quite how much the security services knew about that man, and whether there were instances that were missed, or whether this was just part of the much higher level of attacks that we are sadly witnessing at the moment.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Will the Home Secretary join me in expressing condolences to the family of Elaine McIver, an off-duty police officer who was killed in the Manchester attack, and who had worked at the Winsford police headquarters in my constituency? Will she also join in the praise for the Cheshire police, who went to the aid of their Manchester colleagues during a desperate attack which had a devastating effect on the local community, and will she confirm that the additional armed officers will be allocated to areas across the country, including Manchester and Cheshire?

Amber Rudd: Of course I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the immense bravery of, in particular, the off-duty policewoman whom she mentioned, and that of other members of the public who joined in to protect people. The work that Manchester did in responding to the attack was heroic. I particularly commend the chief constable, Ian Hopkins, who did such good work. It was part of a very well-practised and well-operated scheme. Other forces came in to assist: they “surged” their assistance to ensure that, in both police and emergency terms, the resources were there to protect people and look after them in the future.

Mr Speaker: I call Mrs Margaret Hodge.

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): I welcome the Home Secretary’s statement. In the days following both the Manchester and London Bridge attacks, a number of my constituents were arrested, with suspicions around terrorism. This is the first time that that has happened in Barking and Dagenham. Most of my constituents, of all religions, creeds and ethnicities, share with all of us the horror at the outrages, the praise for the services and the feelings of empathy for those who have been affected by the attacks. However, the Home Secretary said in her statement that those who perpetrate terrorism seek to spread fear, intolerance and hate, and I have concerns that, in the aftermath of the attacks, that is precisely what could happen in my constituency. The Muslim community in particular are feeling very vulnerable and isolated, and the police have not been able to give them the reassurance that they want. Will she take steps to ensure that police resources are made available so that there is a police presence there, the allegations of race hate crime, which are already growing, are dealt with, and other measures that will provide security for all communities in my constituency, and therefore promote tolerance, are put in place rapidly and not left to fester?

Mr Speaker: I have long known that the right hon. Lady is a magnificent woman, but I had momentarily forgotten that she is a Dame. I hope that she will forgive me.

Amber Rudd: I thank the right hon. Lady for her question. I share her concern: we must ensure that we do not see an increase in Islamophobia. We must be a country that can deal fairly with all communities. My hon. Friend the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service is meeting the Met commissioner, and he will raise that matter with her, thinking particularly of the right hon. Lady’s constituency of Barking.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and through her the people in the police and security services, who put their lives on the line to keep us all safe. Following on from the question from the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), I think that the Home Secretary acknowledges that all our communities, and particularly our Muslim communities, including the Muslim community in my constituency, need to have confidence in the protections afforded by those services. Will she therefore ensure that all our police forces have the resources to provide the continuous training that is required for the officers who are needed to provide those assurances throughout our communities?

Amber Rudd: My right hon. Friend builds on the question from the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) about hate crime and what
Amber Rudd: It is essential to ensure that people are aware that the Government's counter-extremism initiatives, their Prevent initiatives and their initiatives through Channel are focused on all extremism. The right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) asked me about Prevent, and I would like to remind people that 25% of the Channel referrals—Channel is the additional part of Prevent that some people are put on—are extreme right wing. In fact, there are some parts of the country where the extreme right wing is the real danger, rather than radical extremist Islamic terrorism. I would like to reassure the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) that we will listen to all parts of the community and to different bodies, to ensure that the counter-extremism commission has the opportunity to gather all the necessary information.

Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire): During the recent terrorist incidents, we all saw images on our TV screens of desperate families and friends going from hospital to hospital clutching pictures of their loved ones and trying to get more information on their whereabouts. I full appreciate that telephone helplines were set up, and I understand that in such instances people can sometimes have injuries that make them unrecognisable. Also, people often do not carry identification with them. Nevertheless, given modern technology, is it possible for the Home Secretary to work with her Government colleagues to establish a central point that families and loved ones can go to, and to which hospitals can provide information, so that people do not have to go from hospital to hospital?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for his suggestion. I saw those photographs and pictures as well; it must have been very distressing for the families involved, not knowing what had happened to their loved ones. We have to make sure, despite that, that the safety of the people involved is the first priority when the police and the emergency services arrive to secure the scene. I will certainly take his suggestion back to the counter-terrorism unit.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester): Two members of my immediate family were present at the Manchester Arena bombing, and my contempt for that bomb is heightened by the fact that this was not a thrash metal gig; it was Ariana Grande, and the targets were little girls. Does the Home Secretary share my concern about the continuing presence of far-right hate preachers in organisations such as the English Defence League, and does she agree that we ought to be tightening up on some of their activities as well, in order to prevent further Islamophobia?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We must root out extreme right-wing violent hate, as well as radical Islamic terrorism, wherever we find it. I was the first Home Secretary to ban a far-right group, National Action, which was proscribed last year. That has given the police a legal basis on which to go after people who join it. We will continue to be vigilant.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills): I should like to thank the Home Secretary for coming to the Chamber today and giving us this statement and our first opportunity in this new Parliament to ask important questions about these horrific attacks. My question is very simple—and short, Mr Speaker. Can she update us on the progress in recruiting the extra armed police officers?

Amber Rudd: Yes. We have done, I think, 650 so far, and we are on schedule to do the rest as planned. Given the circumstances in which we now find ourselves, I will ensure that we do that.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark): Time is tight, so I shall focus on Borough Market in my constituency. The horrific attack there was met with a community spirit, business action, and police and NHS responses that were truly second to none. This makes me even prouder to be re-elected to serve the area. The Home Secretary has said again today that the terrorists will never win, but that will require more action. How are the Government ensuring that tourist and leisure hotspots such as Borough Market are better protected? What budget is being made available to fit barriers and bollards to protect civilians? How will the Government ensure that the NHS is not a victim of major incidents? Southwark hospitals are struggling financially, so what additional budgets are being made available to ensure that their tremendous efforts are covered? How are the Government going to ensure that the police have not just the numbers but the resources and powers to prevent atrocities and to act when they occur? This short, brutal attack at Borough Market was over quite quickly, but the market remained closed for over a week, costing some of the small traders tens of thousands of pounds. What are the Government doing to make insurance companies pay out on their business interruption clauses, given that some are, outrageously, withholding payment?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. May I say how much I enjoyed my recent visit to Borough Market? It was a pleasure to see it so
vibrant and active, and I hope that people will show their support by continuing to visit or by shopping there for the first time.

We have put additional resources into the security services and will continue to do that, and additional money is going into the armed police uplifts. It is essential that we wait for the review to happen, rather than rush in now, so that we can find out where we have holes and where we should be putting in additional support.

After the memorial ceremony at Southwark cathedral, I met some of those who had been at the hospital in Southwark, and it was a great honour and privilege to speak to them and to hear about the fantastic work that they have done.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): At the weekend, I drove my family back to London from my constituency. My wife and daughters are Jewish. We were met by a protest where there were anti-Semitic banners and chants and where people were waving Hezbollah flags—for those unfamiliar with the flag, I should add that it has a big machine gun on it. To make a mockery of the law, somebody had put a post-it note on one of the flags saying, “You cannot arrest me because I support the political wing of Hezbollah, not the military wing—this time.” If enough really is enough, will the Home Secretary take action against such rallies, ban them, so that they can never happen on the streets of London again, and ensure that the whole of Hezbollah is a proscribed organisation?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. It is always distressing to see that sort of march going on, and the provocation that he describes must have been very upsetting for him and his family. I will certainly consider what he has suggested and come back to discuss it with him and, if needed, the House.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. There is a balance of obligations today. On the one hand, I am keen to accommodate the extensive interest in this matter. On the other hand, I should advise the House that the business statement follows, in which there is usually interest, and that no fewer than 29 colleagues wish to speak in this afternoon’s debate on the Gracious Speech, of whom five are would-be maiden speakers. I would like to accommodate them, so brevity is imperative.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): First, I have one bit of advice for the Home Secretary: please be very careful about language. Many people feel alienated by talk of “stamping out” and “enough is enough”.

Secondly, will there be just one commission? As a west Yorkshire MP, a neighbour of Jo Cox’s constituency and as part of a brilliant group of hard-working MPs who work with their communities, I know that Muslim communities are absolutely disgusted by these terrorist outrages. Could we have local commissions up and down the country that work together? There will be one national commission, but having local ones would be a great advantage.

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his suggestion. When the commission gets started, I can put that suggestion to it to see whether that would enhance its work.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I am fortunate to know the Muslim community in west Oxfordshire well, and I wonder whether the Home Secretary can provide further details of how the commission will work with local communities to our mutual benefit.

Amber Rudd: We have an open mind about working out the best way of approaching the commission for countering extremism. We will ensure that it covers all parts of the country, as has been suggested, and that it applies itself to rooting out and discovering information about extremism, wherever it is found. When we have more information, I will come back to my hon. Friend.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): According to security sources, some 150 ISIS terrorists are living in Northern Ireland and the Republic, either working together or alone. Will the Home Secretary ensure that security forces in Northern Ireland, the UK mainland and the Republic work together to monitor and resource the police efforts to ensure that those people do not become a threat to all of us in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. Our working relationship with Northern Ireland and the security services is very good. I will certainly take his suggestion under advisement to ensure that everybody is aware of his concerns and that we continue to step up that work.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I welcome the Home Secretary’s statement, given in answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), that she believes that she is on target to recruit the number of armed officers that she is seeking. I have been speaking to the armed officers who protect us on this estate, and interestingly, however, there is one common piece of feedback: they are worried about the quality of potential recruits due to the disincentive of automatic referral to the Independent Police Complaints Commission. I wonder whether it is time to consider whether that should still apply in terrorist attacks.

Amber Rudd: I can reassure my hon. Friend that for certain attacks, such as marauding firearms attacks, which are sometimes declared as a terrorist attack, as occurred here, the IPCC immediately states that such a referral is not necessary. A particularly different approach is taken when there is a terrorist attack, but in general the IPCC does an important job in creating that clear line, which is as useful to the police as it is to the rest of us.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): I join the Home Secretary in her congratulations to Ian Hopkins and all our public services in both Manchester and London on what they did during the recent attacks. I set the budget for Greater Manchester police for this current year and I was faced with cuts from central Government. If she wants to bring us all together to fight terrorism, she needs to recognise that combating terrorism, like other things, places real strain on our police service. We need more police officers to combat not just terrorism, but the things that we need a modern police force to do.

Amber Rudd: I welcome the hon. Gentleman back to the House. We have protected the police budget from 2015 to 2020. We will be conducting the review to find
out what else we could do better to combat terrorism. The security services are leading on the review, looking at what has happened in the past. We will have an open mind as to what is needed, depending on what that review reveals.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): At present, a person who pleads guilty to possessing a well-known extremist publication, which includes instructions for making homemade bombs, will typically be sentenced to just 14 months. So they will be out in seven months, and will still be radicalised and a danger. Does the Home Secretary agree that the time has come to toughen up sentences under sections 57 and 58 of the Terrorism Act 2000?

Amber Rudd: It is fair to say that that is exactly the sort of instance I was referring to in my comments earlier. We must look at tougher sentencing, as Max Hill has suggested, in those sort of instances.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): On behalf of my constituents, may I express our deepest condolences to the victims of the terror attacks and their families? We utterly condemn the horrific attacks, as most people in our country do. Will the Home Secretary heed the warnings of the Mayor of London and the head of the Metropolitan police about the £400 million cuts, which would put prevention at risk? Will she also update the House on where she has got to on ensuring that internet companies immediately take down religious extremist and far-right sites that promote violence?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Lady for her important question. I have had several meetings with the Mayor of London and I commend him on the work he has done. He has been working closely with us to make sure that we are really united on getting the right approach. Again, let me say that there have been no plans for police cuts and we have protected the budget; I hear the numbers she gives but I simply do not recognise them. In terms of the internet, we are making good progress. We have set up, in the UK, an internet forum to try to down religious extremist and far-right sites that promote violence.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement. I know she will agree that the people who committed these atrocities and the idiots who stoned Torquay mosque in reprisal are just two sides of the same coin of hate. How does she see the commission for countering extremism being able to deal with both those threats?

Amber Rudd: That is a very good point to make. I hope that our commission will do exactly that; it will make it clear that extremism in any form is, as my hon. Friend says, two sides of the same coin and is unwelcome in this country. We need to find out what else we can do to make sure that we reduce it.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for her statement. If reports are correct, the recent attack on Finsbury Park mosque was a premeditated attack by a self-radicalised extremist. My constituency knows more than most about the devastation that one extremist can bring. I welcome the Home Secretary’s statement that 25% of the referrals to Prevent have been for far-right extremists, but how many of those referrals have been acted upon?

Amber Rudd: Let me take the opportunity to commend the work that the Jo Cox Foundation did on the Great Get Together last weekend. Like many Members—many Labour Members as well—I took the opportunity to show that something good had come out of Jo’s horrible, terrible death. I am so sorry, but I have forgotten the hon. Lady’s question.

Tracy Brabin: I was asking how many Prevent referrals are acted on.

Amber Rudd: The Prevent activity comes from referrals, usually from schools, universities or community groups. They are mostly acted on. Only a smaller portion of them go through to the Channel programme. A disproportionately larger number of far-right-wing referrals go through to the Channel programme—about 25%. I can come back to the hon. Lady with more numbers if she would like.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Is the Home Secretary receiving sufficient co-operation from the tech giants and social media companies in her efforts to thwart terrorism? Are they putting sufficient resources in particular into removing inappropriate content quickly enough?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend knows a little bit about this issue. I am grateful for his question. A lot of this is about making sure the tech companies resource sufficiently—that they do not just wait for us to ask them to take down hate material, but take action to make sure that it is not put up in the first place. We are working with them; there are signs that they will take action, and they are making progress, but I do not underestimate the difficulty and the challenge of making sure we get a truly international agreement, which is the big prize.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Rightly, last week there was concentration on resources in London for policing, but terrorism does not respect police authority boundaries. It is not scaremongering but a fact that next year Durham Constabulary will have its budget cut by £1.1 million, and that is before inflation and wage increases. What is the Home Secretary going to do to ensure that Durham and other regional forces have the resources to keep the communities they serve safe?

Amber Rudd: I do believe that areas such as Durham have the resources they need to keep people safe. They are all making good progress in changing their arrangements so that they can save money and put more police officers on the frontline. If the hon. Gentleman has any particular concerns, I recommend he sees the police Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd), who I am sure will want to hear them.
Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I am confident that the Home Secretary will agree with me that we have the best emergency services in the world, and frankly their efforts in the past few months particularly have been nothing short of heroic. Will she therefore use her considerable influence to try to ensure that the public sector pay freeze is ended so that these workers are treated with the dignity and respect they surely deserve?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Lady for her helpful contribution to any future conversations I might have with the Chancellor.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Further to the question asked by my friend and constituency neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), houses next to constituents of mine were raided by the police over recent days, and there are links between the people who carried out the vile murders at London Bridge and Borough Market and several parts of east London. We know that radical so-called preachers such as Anjem Choudary were recruiting within our community for years before they were eventually jailed. What are the Government going to do to deal with, as the Home Secretary said, the ideological issues?

Amber Rudd: That is the nub of what we are trying to address. The fact is that people are becoming weaponised by the crazed ideology of Daesh, often over the internet while they are at home, and by all the hate material. The message from Daesh is not to join them any more in the so-called caliphate, but instead to become weapons in those people’s communities. We are making sure we work with the internet companies to take that information down, and that we have a programme that reaches out and tries to protect people in those communities so that they do not become radicalised. We are also looking at what else we can do. That is why we are taking part in a review, looking at both the past and the future. We want to make sure that we stop that radicalisation taking hold in people’s communities.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): May I praise the united response of Cardiff communities, particularly faith communities, to the recent attacks, both through condemnation and in solidarity with London and Manchester, especially given the shocking news that the alleged attacker in Finsbury Park was living in Cardiff?

The Home Secretary mentioned a forum to tackle the internet issue. The fact is that there is still far-right and Islamist content on the internet today on platforms like YouTube and Twitter. When is she going to get serious about sanctions for companies that are failing to deliver on their responsibilities to remove this content?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that we are trying to work with them on a voluntary basis, and we are making progress. If we abandon that voluntary basis and go straight to sanctions, there is always the danger that the hate material will just move elsewhere. We want to make sure that we have a resolution to this problem. We are not frightened of moving to sanctions; if that is where we have to go, but a better outcome would be having those companies working with us and, as my hon. Friend the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service has said, putting the resources in and making sure they are used to ensure that the material does not go up in the first place.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I have previously asked the Home Secretary about the number of UK-born fighters returning from Syria and what happens to them. Bearing in mind Max Hill’s comments and the very low number of TPIMs at the moment, does she expect that the number of TPIMs will go up considerably?

Amber Rudd: TPIMs form an important part of the tools we have to deal with returning foreign fighters. We do track foreign fighters very carefully, where we can, and we recognise that they are potentially the most dangerous cohort of people returning here. TPIMs are one of the tools and they can be used when necessary. I am involved in all the decision making around them. It currently seems correct that those tools are available and can be used when they are needed. If it becomes necessary to use them more, we may need additional legislation, in which case I will come back to the House and ask the hon. Lady to make that case with me to the shadow Home Secretary.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Will the Home Secretary join me in wishing a full recovery to Lisa Bridgett, of Mynytho, who suffered multiple injuries in the Manchester attack while waiting for her daughter? Of course, we sympathise with all victims of the recent atrocities. I note the Home Secretary’s recent announcement, but will she commit to consider undertaking an independent review of policing resources as a whole, not only to maintain public confidence in counter-terrorism and efforts to tackle cyber-hate, but to underpin essential community policing?

Amber Rudd: I will join the hon. Lady in wishing Lisa Bridgett a swift recovery, but I cannot see the need for an independent review of policing. The police are doing an exemplary job, and they need all the support that we in the House can give them at this difficult time.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): The uplift in the number of armed police officers in West Yorkshire has come directly from neighbourhood and response policing, making day-to-day policing that bit tougher. Is the Home Secretary in a position to update the House on when the review of the police funding formula will be published? Will she accept that the issue is not exclusively about powers; it is also about the number of police officers who are able to use such powers?

Amber Rudd: I understand the hon. Lady’s curiosity about the police funding formula. We are currently still reviewing its position, so I will come back to her when we have made a decision.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I, too, extend our thoughts to the victims of the recent terrorist outrages, those who were hospitalised and their families. The attacks were indiscriminate. People of all faiths were killed and injured. People of all faiths went to help, whether that was on the scene or in our hospitals and throughout the other emergency services. We know that there is a ripple effect of hate crime that
[Seema Malhotra] carries on afterwards, and that reaches much wider and affects other communities. Muslims in my constituency and throughout the country have told me about how they feel more vulnerable and less secure. Does the Home Secretary agree that it is important for MPs to reiterate the message that Islam is a religion of peace? Can she reassure the House that, in the final days of Ramadan and Eid, if more support is needed for Muslim communities, she will ensure that it is provided?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Lady for those comments; she is absolutely right. On her specific request for more support, we already have a £2.4 million fund for places of worship, to which a number of mosques have applied to make sure that they are safe. I can announce that next week I will open up an additional £1 million for places of worship. That addresses the concern from some people, including the shadow Foreign Secretary, that in order for a place of worship to apply for the funds there had to have already been a hate crime in the area. We are now making sure that additional funds are available so that people who are concerned about their mosques can apply for money to support their endeavours to keep those mosques safe.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The police have been magnificent, the faiths in this House have stood together in unity, and the Home Secretary is absolutely right that we face a uniquely awful generational threat from terrorism, but may I ask her this question? The four most senior police officers in this country have written to her to express their concern. They have put in place an emergency plan to protect the public, but they say that it is simply not sustainable. They are having to hollow out neighbourhood policing and divert officers from serious and organised crime and historical inquiries, including in relation to child sexual exploitation and abuse. The first duty of any Government must be the safety and security of their citizens. Does she therefore accept that the time has come to reverse those deeply damaging cuts of 20,000 to our police services?

Amber Rudd: I have of course received that letter from the four senior police officers outlining their concerns about resourcing. I would point out to the hon. Gentleman that the emergency matters to which they refer were part of a well-organised plan for this type of situation, such as Operation Temperer. The system is working. They needed additional support because, of course, in these circumstances resources have been pulled very tightly, given the additional work that is needed. There are different ways of addressing this. Before rushing in with additional money, I want to ensure that we get the right target and the right answers. I recognise what they are saying, and I recognise the fact that we cannot carry on at that emergency level indefinitely, so we will be working with those police officers to ensure that we get the right response.

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): Will the Home Secretary confirm that she has received a letter from Andy Burnham, the Mayor of Greater Manchester, on behalf of the three police and crime commissioners in the north-west, pointing out the impact on services of the drastic cuts in police numbers? Those three areas are affected by terrorism, rising gun crime and daily fracking protests in Lancashire. The three PCCs have said—indeed, Merseyside’s chief constable said this on television—that if the reductions are not put right and if there is not a commitment to further funding, policing as we now know it will deteriorate even further.

Amber Rudd: I will of course be responding to that letter, and I take very seriously the points that have been made. We must ensure that people are kept safe. I commend the new Mayor for the work he did after the atrocious attack in Manchester. If the hon. Lady would like, I will copy her in to my response to that letter.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Prevent programme has come under much criticism. Can the Home Secretary say how that will be critiqued, and will the Anderson commission address it?

Amber Rudd: Prevent has been a great success for many families. I refer, in particular, to the 150 people who were prevented from travelling to Syria last year, 50 of whom were children. I have met families who have managed to stop their children travelling to Syria or becoming radicalised because they engaged with the programme. However, I recognise that there is always more to learn, so we will ensure that we build on Prevent and improve it where necessary, and part of our review will be seeing whether it works. We have two reviews: one looking at what has happened with the security forces and one looking forward. We are not complacent and we do not think that Prevent has all the answers, but please do not underestimate the fantastically important work it has done in many different communities up and down the country.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Does the Home Secretary agree that the terrible events of recent months show the need now more than ever to continue to promote tolerance between people of different faiths, and between people of faith and people of none?

Amber Rudd: Absolutely. The more we can do in this House to reiterate that message, the better.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): As has been said, overseas travel is frequently a factor in radicalisation so I was very interested to hear what the Home Secretary has just said about trying to prevent that travel, rather than just using monitoring and TPIMs when people return. She spoke about families. Will she say a little more about what she can do to prevent young men being influenced by extremist ideology, travelling overseas, becoming radicalised and being turned into terrorists as a result?

Amber Rudd: The best examples I have seen—in Manchester, Leeds and Birmingham, for example—have been led within communities, often by Muslim men and women, giving a clear direction and reasons not to become radicalised, by talking to people on their level and engaging them in activities that they are interested in. That is the sort of successful work that Prevent does. It is about motivating and resourcing community leaders and people with good ideas about how to de-radicalise, right at the source of where those young men are. I think that is the best work we can do as a Government.
Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Community and faith leaders in my community have been outspoken in their revulsion at and condemnation of the attacks in Manchester and London, but there is also consternation at reports that members of the Didsbury mosque, which Salman Abedi and his family attended, had reported his radicalisation, but it appears that that was not heeded or acted upon. What can the Home Secretary say about that, and what assurances can she give the community that such reports will be acted upon, and that lack of resources will not present a barrier?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady asks a very fair question, and naturally I have been asking that of the security services. We should not rush to believe everything that is said about what was and was not done during that period. That is one of the reasons for having this review. It has not been about resources; really it has sometimes been about the number of calls coming in. However, we should still encourage people to use the terrorist hotline to make those calls. It is up to us to lead in that respect, and to do everything we can to ensure that people call out, as strongly and as often as possible, the types of activity that can lead to terrorism.

DEPUTY SPEAKERS

12.16 pm

Mr Speaker: In accordance with Standing Order No. 2A, I will now announce the arrangements for the ballot for the election of Deputy Speakers. The ballot will be held in Committee Room 8 from 10 am to 1.30 pm on Wednesday 28 June. Nominations may be submitted in the Table Office and in the procedural hub in Portcullis House from 10 am to 5 pm on Tuesday 27 June. Nomination forms, and a briefing note with more details about the election, are available in the Table Office, the procedural hub and the Vote Office. I hope that is helpful to colleagues.

Business of the House

12.17 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): With permission, Mr Speaker, I should like to make a statement about the business for next week. The business is as follows:

Monday 26 June—Continuation of the debate on the Queen’s Speech on Brexit and foreign affairs.

Tuesday 27 June—Continuation of the debate on the Queen’s Speech on Education and Local Services.

Wednesday 28 June—Continuation of the debate on the Queen’s Speech on Health, Social Care and Security.

Thursday 29 June—Conclusion of the debate on the Queen’s Speech on the Economy and Jobs.

Friday 30 June—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 3 July will include:

Monday 3 July—Second Reading of the Air Travel Organisers’ Licensing Bill.

Colleagues will also wish to know that, subject to approval by the House today and the progress of business, the House will rise for the summer recess on Thursday 20 July and return on Tuesday 5 September. The House will then rise for the conference recess on Thursday 14 September and return on Monday 9 October.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): May I start by welcoming the Leader of the House to her new post and to her first business statement? I also wish to pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington). He was an excellent Leader of the House and will make a fine Lord Chancellor, protecting the independence of the judiciary as we uphold the rule of law.

One of the conventions in this place is that when a statutory instrument is prayed against, the Government will provide time for a debate. Because of the general election, the personal independence payment regulations, the tuition fee regulations and the rape clause were not debated, although they were scheduled for debate on 19 April. Will the Leader of the House find time for debates on those regulations?

This wonderful resilient country of ours is grieving—from Manchester to London Bridge, Westminster to Finsbury Park, and Kensington to Batley and Spen. The pain of loss may lessen, but it never goes away and lives are changed forever. As we hear about those lives, we mourn the loss of talent for this country.

Earlier today, the Prime Minister made a statement on Grenfell Tower. I am not sure why it took a week for her to confirm that all the people who were affected could finally be housed nearby and that any payments made to them will not affect any other entitlement.

May I ask the Leader of the House to confirm—perhaps she could do it in a letter and place it in the Library—that the number of counsellors for firefighters was reduced from 14 to two under the previous Mayor of London—now the Foreign Secretary? Kensington Council has the reserves but not the staff to deal with the disaster. Other local authorities are helping. Ealing Council, for example, is running the rest centre in Westway. Yesterday, the Prime Minister said that the disaster was the fault of the state at local and national level, but it is the elected
members of the council and the Government who are responsible and accountable. The state, through its public servants, has responded brilliantly. It is blameless.

There seems to have been some confusion about the review of building regulations. The review, which was recommended by the coroner in 2013, was announced by the former Member for Croydon Central—now the Prime Minister’s chief of staff—in October 2016, but when asked when it would take place, we were told that it would be in due course. Will the Leader of the House make time for a statement on that before the inquiry?

The Government want to consult again on social care, but the independent Dilnot commission reported in 2011. Will the Leader of the House tell us whether the Dilnot report will be part of the consultation, or will it now be abandoned? Will it be yet another report that is not actioned? Dilnot costed his proposals at £1.7 billion. Simple maths tells us that the £3 billion top-down reorganisation could have saved the Government money.

It is unclear how Parliament will be kept informed during EU negotiations. Yes, we do want a running commentary so will the Leader of the House ensure that there is a timetable for a debate on the report-back on where we are with the negotiations? That is particularly important as the Chancellor appears to be providing a running commentary of his own, setting out his own different policy.

The Queen’s Speech mentions a new industrial policy. My hon. Friends the Members for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) and for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) want a statement or a debate on the Government’s position on the Swansea bay tidal lagoon, which is part of the old industrial policy. Without a decision from the Government soon, the project may collapse, putting at risk 2,000 local jobs. Will the Leader of the House please say whether we can have that debate?

I want to welcome new Members and say goodbye and thank you to former ones. Some Members used to turn up regularly to business questions and they are no longer here. I want to make a special mention of my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad). The people put their trust in her and she has repaid it, showing them what a great MP she is.

This time last year, we all came together to remember another brilliant colleague. We will have a permanent reminder in this Chamber of her campaigning zeal, her energy and her love for humanity. Helen Joanne Leadbetter Cox will be a permanent reminder to us that we will not be divided by hate as we work in this place for the common good and in the public interest of our United Kingdom.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr George Howarth): I call—

[Interruption.] I call Andrea Leadsom.

Andrea Leadsom: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I fully understand that it is early days for all of us. Hopefully, you will bear with me as I make mistakes too.

May I welcome the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) to her place? I have always admired her enormously. It will be a great pleasure to work together, and I am sure that we will do that very well. I thank her for her kind tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington), who is a fantastic colleague and who, I am sure, will be absolutely committed to his new role as Secretary of State for Justice.

The hon. Lady asked for time for a debate on carry-over regulations from the last Parliament. I will absolutely take that away and look into it. I am sure that it is in hand, but I will make sure that it is. She mentioned the appalling loss of life in recent weeks due to the deliberate and evil actions of terrible people who are either misguided or evil, and she was exactly right to raise that matter. Everybody across the House shares the horror at some of the actions that have been perpetrated against innocent citizens. She also mentioned the terrible fire at Grenfell Tower. I saw for myself what devastation it has caused. Our hearts go out to those poor, poor people. I hope that colleagues were reassured by what the Prime Minister had to say in her statement today, which is that we will leave no stone unturned in getting to the bottom of what has happened and in doing everything possible, including of course looking closely at building regulations, to see whether more can be done to ensure that such a thing never happens again.

The hon. Lady asked about resources for firefighters. We will of course review that situation. She will be aware that, fortunately in recent years, the number of fires and lives lost due to fires has reduced quite dramatically. The harrowing events at Grenfell Tower put a very different complexion on that and will require that we look again at those resources. I can assure her and all hon. Members that this Government will ensure that our emergency services have the resources that they need.

The hon. Lady asked about the Dilnot commission and the review of social care. She will be aware—as indeed are all hon. Members—that we have an ageing population. There will be more than 2 million over-75s within the next decade, which requires us to tackle this situation. We need to look holistically at how we can best balance the needs of an ageing population. There will be more than 2 million over-75s within the next decade, which requires us to tackle this situation. We need to look holistically at how we can best balance the needs of an ageing population. She will be aware that colleagues were reassured by what the Prime Minister had to say in her statement today, which is that we will leave no stone unturned in getting to the bottom of what has happened and in doing everything possible, including of course looking closely at building regulations, to see whether more can be done to ensure that such a thing never happens again.

The hon. Lady also mentioned the Queen’s Speech, which included our new industrial policy. I hope that she shares my excitement about some of the measures, which will see the UK leading the world in electric vehicle technology. Some of our commercial space flight programmes will be very exciting, creating new, well-paid, high-technology jobs. I will absolutely take away her requests about where we are on the Swansea bay tidal lagoon.

I wish to pay my own tribute to all those colleagues who did not win their seats this time. It is always a great sadness to say goodbye to so many good colleagues. It is also wonderful to have new blood coming into the House. I welcome all new colleagues right across the House. I am really looking forward to working with them and hearing their views. I ask them to please come and talk to me at any time. My office is just down the corridor.

Finally, as the hon. Lady said, the memorial to our dear colleague, Jo Cox, will be unveiled tomorrow, and all colleagues are very welcome to attend. I thank the hon. Lady for her opening remarks.
Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr George Howarth): The unveiling is on Saturday. As the Leader of the House said, Mr Speaker will be glad to receive any applications.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): May we have a debate in Government time about the ways in which society lotteries can increase the amount of money being channelled to local charities?

Andrea Leadsom: That is an excellent idea. The work that all of the jackpot-oriented lotteries do in raising money for charities is absolutely valuable. It sounds like an excellent bid for an Adjournment debate.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing next week’s business and warmly welcome her to her new Front-Bench role. I very much look forward to working with her in the future. Being awarded the position of Leader of the House suggests that she is either on her way up the greasy pole or on the way down. I am pretty certain that she is in the former category.

May I thank the right hon. Lady for announcing the recess dates? Scottish National party Members are profoundly disappointed that, somehow, we cannot design a summer recess that accommodates school holidays in all parts of the United Kingdom. I hope that we can work together to resolve some of the difficulties around the conference recess.

By God, Mr Deputy Speaker, has the right hon. Lady not got a job on her hands? This is a Government who arrogantly and unnecessarily called an early general election to secure an overwhelming majority only to find themselves humbled, diminished and without any majority whatsoever. As this is now a Parliament of minorities, does she agree that consensus must be the key for getting business through the House and that it will mean working with the devolved Assemblies and Parliaments throughout the United Kingdom?

On that and on the confusion around the great repeal Bill, will the Leader of the House confirm what the Prime Minister said yesterday, which was that the Scottish Government could have a role when it comes to legislative consent motions? Will she confirm that, in fact, the Scottish Government will have an LCM when it comes to those issues?

Looking around the Chamber, one can see quite clearly that English votes for English laws—probably the biggest innovation of the last Parliament—no longer commands a majority in the House. It is almost impossible to see how a minority Government can get their business through while being dependent on a party that is subject to the EVEL procedure. When will the Leader of the House introduce plans to get rid of this unnecessary and divisive measure from Standing Orders?

I am glad that you are back, Mr Deputy Speaker, with a reasonably good majority—I got through by the skin of my teeth, with a majority of 21. What is appalling about my situation is that the Conservative candidate whom I defeated will soon be ennobled as an unelected Lord, drafted into government as a Scotland Minister. That is a total affront to democracy and an insult to my constituents, who so recently rejected him. Will the Leader of the House pledge never to use the House of Lords as a receptacle for crones, donors and failed leadership candidates?

Amanda Milling: I shall consider the issue of recess dates. The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that dates are also set to try to work around some of the challenges posed by this building and the work that is already scheduled, but I will speak to Mr Speaker and the Chief Whips about whether more can be done in future to accommodate the Scottish National party conference.

As the hon. Gentleman says, we called the general election, and we do not have a majority. We have been very clear that we accept that result. We are very disappointed, but nevertheless we have a commitment to consulting widely across parties. As the Prime Minister has said, we want to be a listening Government. We seek the support of Members across the House and I very much hope and wish that the Scottish nationalists will support the democratic decision of the United Kingdom in last year’s referendum to leave the European Union. On the hon. Gentleman’s point about a legislative consent motion, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union has made it clear that he wants to consult the Scottish nationalists and other devolved Administrations on the repeal Bill. A decision will be taken on whether an LCM is needed at that point.

The EVEL measures, as the hon. Gentleman knows, were an attempt to ensure that when English-only matters are being discussed, only English—and perhaps Welsh—MPs can take part in those discussions. That is very important. Finally, decisions on who should be ennobled are taken on merit, and on the grounds of political contribution, regarding people who have given many years’ service, across the public sector. That is a matter not for us but for discussion at another time.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I warmly welcome the positive engagement between the new Leader of the House and the shadow Leader of the House. Between them they can achieve a great deal for Back Benchers through these sessions. The Leader of the House will be aware that a number of Select Committees, including the Select Committee on Defence, had to publish reports in great haste because of the suddenness of the announcement of the general election. As there is a hiatus and no Select Committees scrutinising Departments at the moment, will she ensure that at least those Departments that are obliged to produce responses to reports will get on with the job so that Committees can consider those responses at the earliest opportunity?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. Of course, Departments will respond just as soon as they can.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I welcome the Leader of the House to her place. Has she seen a copy of the letter that I, as the then Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, sent her predecessor asking whether, if there is any time for general debates before the Committee is established, the Leader of the House would consider giving time to Back-Bench business that was residual—debates that had not yet been held—from the previous Parliament?
[Ian Mearns]

On another matter, the Standing Orders of the House of Commons say that in a parliamentary Session the Backbench Business Committee will be given 35 days of debating time, 27 of which will be in the Chamber, but this will be a two-year parliamentary Session. Will the Leader of the House give us a guarantee that that will be pro-rated over the two years, rather than our being limited to that time limit?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his questions and, if there is Back-Bench time available, I will consider whether those outstanding subjects for debate can be prioritised. On the hon. Gentleman’s other point about extending the time available, my understanding is that the amount of time is set out in Standing Orders, but we will certainly look at whether it can be extended.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): Will the Leader of the House meet me and any other colleague who so wishes to discuss the erection of a permanent memorial to PC Keith Palmer, who fell defending us and our visitors before the general election, perhaps taking as inspiration the memorial in St James’s Square erected to PC Yvonne Fletcher?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is right to remind us of the tragic murder of Keith Palmer and to say that we need to consider how we can remember him and his sacrifice. I shall certainly take that up with Mr Speaker.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): May we have a debate in Government time on how to tackle the problem of persistent illegal Traveller encampments in public parks and other community facilities? This involves a costly game of cat and mouse, as these people are evicted but just move in a circle. It is expensive for cash-strapped councils and it is only a matter of time before it leads to a major incident unless the concerns and frustrations of law-abiding people are recognised.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue that comes up time and again for many colleagues across the House. I have certainly had problems in my constituency, and I know that many local authorities would like different arrangements so that they can act much faster. It sounds to me like a very good debate for the Backbench Business Committee to consider, but if the hon. Gentleman wants to write to me, I will be happy to pass that on to the Secretary of State for Transport so that appropriate action can be taken.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): Is the Leader of the House aware that yesterday Tesco announced that it will axe 1,100 jobs in my constituency? It was done with no consultation with either the UK or Welsh Government and some workers found out through social media that they were losing their jobs. That is shocking and wholly unacceptable behaviour, and will be devastating for all those concerned and for their families. Will the Leader of the House provide an urgent debate or statement on the issue so that we can hear what help the Government can provide and, at the very least, will the Department for Work and Pensions be dispatching a full emergency taskforce to support my constituents at this difficult time?

Andrea Leadsom: May I first welcome the hon. Lady to her place? She tells a very sad story. It is always terrible to hear of such situations, particularly when there is a large loss of jobs because that is incredibly unsettling for the whole community. The fact that the matter has been conducted in such a way is completely unacceptable. If the hon. Lady writes to me with her thoughts, I will seek a response from the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr George Howarth): Order. As Members will know, the next debate is heavily subscribed, so I implore people to make a single point. If you find yourself about to use the word “and”, resist the temptation.

Sir Peter Bottomley ( Worthing West) (Con): May we have a debate in Government time on housing, especially on leaseholds and commonholds? The former Housing Minister, Gavin Barwell, is now the Prime Minister’s chief of staff, wanted to reform LEASE, the Leasehold Advisory Service, paying attention to exploitation. It is time to do that with a debate on what the Government are going to do about Travellers. They have needs, but they do not solve them by coming into urban areas and camping on public parks.

Andrea Leadsom: As luck would have it, the very next debate on the Queen’s Speech is on the subject of housing. My hon. Friend may well want to take part in that debate later today.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Last year the Department of Health laid its accounts before the House on 21 July, the last day the House sat before the summer recess. Will the newly appointed Leader of the House—the champion of this place in Cabinet—ensure that this does not happen again? Could the accounts of not only the Department of Health but all Government Departments be laid so that we can scrutinise them?

Andrea Leadsom: I appreciate what the hon. Lady says. As she will appreciate, Departments move heaven and earth to ensure that they get reports out on sitting days. There is always a rush to try to get them out before the recess begins. I have some sympathy for Departments trying to meet those deadlines and trying not to deliver
during recesses, but I certainly take the hon. Lady’s point and will ask colleagues to try to ensure that there is time for parliamentary scrutiny.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Last year, the Secretary of State for Transport commissioned Chris Gibb, a rail expert, to deliver a report on the appalling performance of Southern rail. That report has been published today and it is excellent. It identifies the unions as the primary cause, but all parties have a role to play. On that basis, can we have a debate in Government time on the report and its impact across not just my constituency, but the entire rail network?

Andrea Leadsom: The plight of rail travellers on certain lines has been so bad for some time now. The report highlights that a great deal needs to be done to put that right. I will happily write to the Secretary of State for Transport to urge him to review that report fully and, if possible, will find some parliamentary time in which colleagues can debate it.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I have a constituent who was mugged in Ibiza, losing her passport and her money in the process, which, as hon. Members can imagine, was really upsetting. She wanted emergency documentation so that she could fly home, a time when demand is obviously higher. That is unacceptable for someone in an emergency situation. Will the Leader of the House commit herself to arranging time for parliamentary scrutiny?

Andrea Leadsom: The issue of children’s mental health is very dear to my heart. It sounds as though the hon. Lady should apply for an Adjournment debate. I am absolutely sure that the House would want to address such situations. If the hon. Gentleman writes to me, I can pass the specific details on to the relevant people.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Given the Prime Minister’s comments yesterday that every child deserves a place at a good school, will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on the plans of South West London and St George’s Mental Health NHS Trust and my local clinical commissioning group no longer to diagnose children with autism? The decision would mean that there will be no opportunity for a special educational needs statement and no opportunity, therefore, for an appropriate school place.

Andrea Leadsom: The Secretary of State for Health is time for parliamentary scrutiny. My hon. Friend will be aware that the Government are committed to significant real-terms increases in funding for the NHS. There are programmes in place to try to improve the efficiency of particular CCGs and hospitals. If he writes to me about the situation in Staffordshire, I will refer the matter to the Secretary of State for Health.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): We have seen developers across London reducing their commitment to provide affordable homes. Yesterday, the Battersea Power Station developer in my constituency announced that it is reducing its affordable homes commitment by 250. It is using viability assessments as a loophole to reduce the number of affordable homes provided. To tackle the housing crisis in London, we need to ensure that developers are held to account in providing a decent level of affordable homes. Is it possible to have a debate on how viability assessments are being used?

Andrea Leadsom: May I first welcome the hon. Lady to her place? She is exactly right that affordable homes are vital to a thriving economy and a society that is fair to all. We have delivered more than 313,000 affordable homes since April 2010. Our target is to deliver 400,000 new affordable home starts by 2020. As I mentioned to my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), the debate on the Queen’s Speech this afternoon covers housing, so the hon. Lady might well wish to make some interventions during that.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Will the Leader of the House consider my request for a debate in Government time in the next few weeks on the Royal Navy’s aircraft carrier, HMS Queen Elizabeth, and our continued NATO commitment as we return to a carrier strike capability?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an important subject. Billions of pounds are being invested in a growing Royal Navy with new aircraft carriers, frigates, submarines, patrol vessels, aircraft and support ships. The Royal Navy and the nation will reach a significant milestone this summer when HMS Queen Elizabeth commences her sea trials. She will be accepted into the Royal Navy later in the year. It is an exciting moment, and I am sure that the subject would make for an interesting Adjournment debate.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in your place, Mr Deputy Speaker, although I, for one, will greatly miss the former Member for North East Derbyshire, who was a good friend and colleague.

Since 2010, the previous Government were rather random in their use of pre-legislative scrutiny. For the Wild Animals in Circuses (Prohibition) Bill, for example, it was clearly just a delaying tactic. To what extent will the seven Brexit Bills be subject to pre-legislative scrutiny and when can that start?

Andrea Leadsom: First, may I say that I will also miss the former Member for North East Derbyshire? She was very good in the House, like many Members who lost their seats. Although we are delighted to see new colleagues, we will miss those who are no longer here.
There will, of course, be a need for broad consultation on our whole legislative programme. As I said earlier, we do not have a majority in this House, so there is a real need to take colleagues with us. There will be a lot of consultation with many opportunities for colleagues to give their views and thoughts.

**Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): A number of my constituents are concerned about the news that Easton Garford Endowed Church of England Primary School is to be relocated across the county boundary into Rutland. Can we have a debate next week about the need for statutory processes to be followed properly and for full consultation with parents before any such changes are made?

**Andrea Leadsom**: I am very sympathetic to my hon. Friend’s concerns. Again, this sounds as though it is a prime candidate for an Adjournment debate. If he would like to write to me, I will be very happy to take it up on his behalf with the Secretary of State.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the Leader of the House to her place and wish her every success in her new position. She will be aware of my interest in human rights and equality issues. Only last week, Taimoor Raza was convicted of blasphemy by the Pakistani anti-terrorism court and has been handed the death penalty. That is a flagrant violation of international law, and it is the first time that someone has been charged under article 295-C of the penal code, which prohibits blasphemy, for an offence on social media. The sentence also sets a deeply worrying precedent about the use of anti-terrorism legislation to deny citizens their right to freedom of religion or belief and expression. Will the Leader of the House agree to have a statement or a debate on this very important issue?

**Andrea Leadsom**: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this case. I am sorry to say that I was not aware of it, but if he would like to write to me, I will be very happy to take it up.

**David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): As a new Member of this House, I was struck yesterday by the excessive pomp and ceremony of the Queen’s Speech. I just wish that the British state had put half as much effort into making sure that children in Glasgow East did not go to bed hungry last night. May we therefore have a debate in Government time on child poverty?

**Andrea Leadsom**: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place. I absolutely share his concern about child poverty. He will be pleased to know, as will all Members, that child poverty has reduced as employment in this country has reached much higher levels and the number of workless families has reduced significantly. Nevertheless, he is right: it is an incredibly important subject, and he may well want to raise it as a Backbench Business Committee debate in due course.

**Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I welcome the right hon. Lady to her new position. In the light of the statement made earlier by the Prime Minister about the tragedy at Grenfell Tower, I have been contacted by a constituent about the hospital in Hull, which is a tower block that had cladding put on it a couple of years ago, who raised concerns about whether that cladding is safe. Would it be possible for the Secretary of State for Health to make a statement about all NHS buildings that the public may be concerned about?

**Andrea Leadsom**: The hon. Lady will be aware that the Prime Minister said that any samples of cladding on high-rise buildings should be sent to the Department for Communities and Local Government, which is arranging for their combustibility to be tested. I am not sure whether that extended to public buildings other than residential buildings, but I will get back to the hon. Lady on that point.

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): At least four minority political parties in this House fought the election opposing Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs office closures. Can the Leader of the House confirm that during purdah—the election period—HMRC signed new contracts for new regional centres? If so, may we have a statement or a debate in Government time so that Members of this House can discuss the provision of services that deal with tax avoidance and non-compliance with the national minimum wage?

**Andrea Leadsom**: HMRC has done a superb job since 2010 in raising the amount of money that it is recovering from those who seek to avoid paying their taxes. We should absolutely pay tribute to it for the billions of pounds in extra revenue that have been collected legitimately for the Exchequer. It is very important in dealing with our deficit that we do everything possible to reduce tax avoidance and evasion. As to the hon. Gentleman’s specific point about office closures, I am afraid I am not aware of the situation that he describes, but if he would like to write to me, I can take it up with the Treasury.

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I second the request made by my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin), who it is great to welcome to this House, about the shameful decision of Tesco, which affects nearly 100 of my own constituents. I also pay tribute to USDAW, which is working to support those workers.

May I ask the Leader of the House for a debate in Government time on historical injustices, particularly the historical injustice faced by those who were affected by the contaminated blood scandal, by the nearly 4,500 women in my constituency affected by the state pension age changes, and by the hundreds of people still suffering injustice from the Allied Steel and Wire pension scheme? These historical injustices need to be righted, and we should be debating them urgently in this House.

**Andrea Leadsom**: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that quite wide-ranging question. He is right: there are injustices from the past that this Government, since 2010, have sought to deal with. For example, the contaminated blood situation was absolutely terrible. I had two constituents who suffered from that injustice. Great steps were taken by the coalition Government to try to right that wrong. I guess that he is asking to reopen that and other injustices, as he describes them. I think that would have to be subject to a Backbench Business Committee debate when the Committee is up and running, and I would certainly be very interested to hear it myself.
Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): High Court judge Mr Justice Collins ruled this morning that the Tory Government’s benefit cap was “unlawful” and “discriminatory”, also stating: “Real misery is being caused to no good purpose.” Will the Government now act immediately, not duck the matter as they did with the statutory instrument on the rape clause, and stop wasting public money on appeals on this? Will they make an urgent statement on scrapping the rape clause and the two-child policy?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises an incredibly important point. All I can say is that the Government will be looking very carefully at the judgment and deciding on their position.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Following seven years of delay and four court cases that found the Government wanting, the Government published the draft air quality plan on 5 May. This was after Parliament had risen, and the consultation ended before Parliament met. The final air quality plan needs to be in place on 31 July. May we therefore have an urgent debate in Government time on this issue, which really does impact on my constituents who die prematurely because of poor air quality?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is right to raise this very significant and serious public health issue. As Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs until recently, I was very closely involved in the enormous amount of work that has gone into producing the air quality consultation. She is right that the plans will be published at the end of July. The Government are firmly committed to improving the UK’s air quality. That is why we have committed more than £2 billion since 2011 to increase the uptake of ultra-low emission vehicles and committed to support greener transport schemes with a further £200 million in the 2016 autumn statement. There is a lot that needs to be done, and it is a complex scenario, as she, too, knows very well, but I do believe that we will be able to make strong progress very soon.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Like many returning Members, I was contacted by several constituents just prior to Dissolution concerning the Roadchef employee benefits trust and the compensation due to its beneficiaries. Now that Parliament has resumed, may we have a statement or a debate in Government time regarding the HMRC and tax liability situation, when we could also look at future regulation of EBTs?

Andrea Leadsom: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s concern on this point. I suggest that it would be a very good candidate for an Adjournment debate, at least in the first instance.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): On the matter of tower block cladding raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), it is not just about flammability and the type of cladding, but how it is fitted, whether it has been compromised by later alterations, and whether it is compatible with the existing structures. This morning the Prime Minister was clearly struggling with that issue and who was going to enforce this and pay for it. May we have a full statement on those specific issues of fire safety, because nothing is more important now than the safety of the hundreds of thousands of people living in tower blocks?

Andrea Leadsom: Yes, I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman that nothing could be more important than getting to the bottom of this. I think he will agree that the Prime Minister has made it very clear that she is herself committed to absolutely getting to the bottom of all these questions. I cannot answer the specific points that he raises, but I can assure him that everything that could possibly be done is being done to understand whether it was a problem with the type of cladding or the way it had been fitted, and so on. The Prime Minister has also confirmed that all similar types of high-rise building are being inspected. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that there is a lot of work going on. We all have thoughts on what more needs to be inspected, but the Prime Minister is personally committed to ensuring that we do everything possible to get to the bottom of this.
Point of Order

12.59 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. You will have seen in your copy of The Guardian newspaper this morning, and indeed yesterday, the leaked reports of a new capped expenditure process for the NHS, revealing plans to cut services, close wards and ration treatments. So far, we have had no response from the Department of Health. Has the Secretary of State for Health given you any indication that he plans to come to the House to update Members and to tell us whether he approved these plans—and if so, when—and why the plans were drawn up in secret, with no consultation with patients, staff or local people?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr George Howarth): As far as I am aware, no such request has been made. The hon. Gentleman knows full well that that is not a point of order. However, he has used the opportunity to draw attention to the point he is seeking to make. I think that that is the end of the matter, and there can be no further point of order on that issue.

BILLS PRESENTED

AIR TRAVEL ORGANISERS’ LICENSING BILL
Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Chris Grayling, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Amber Rudd, Mr Secretary Liddington, Secretary Greg Clark and Secretary David Mundell, presented a Bill to amend sections 71, 71A and 84 of the Civil Aviation Act 1982, and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 1) with explanatory notes (Bill 1-EN).

EUROPEAN UNION (APPROVALS) BILL
Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Greg Clark, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr Secretary Liddington, Dr Secretary Fox and Secretary David Davis, presented a Bill to make provision approving for the purposes of section 8 of the European Union Act 2011 draft decisions under Article 352 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union on the participation of the Republic of Albania and the Republic of Serbia in the work of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights and on the signing and conclusion of an agreement between the European Union and Canada regarding the application of their competition laws.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 2) with explanatory notes (Bill 2-EN).

Debate on the Address

[2ND DAY]

Debate resumed (Order, 21 June).

Question again proposed.

That an Humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, as follows:

Most Gracious Sovereign,

We, Your Majesty’s most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.

Housing and Social Security

1.1 pm

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): Before I open today’s debate, I want to reflect briefly on the horror that unfolded at Grenfell Tower last week. My thoughts are still very much with the victims, their families and their friends. All hon. Members will have heard the Prime Minister’s statement earlier today and, having visited the site for myself and met some of the bereaved families, I want to echo her determination to get to the bottom of whatever went wrong. I will also write to hon. Members shortly with a detailed update on what we are doing to support the people who have been affected by this tragedy, the progress we are making in rehousing people and the steps we are taking to improve fire safety at similar tower blocks across the country.

In the longer term—this point is perhaps more pertinent to this debate—it is clear that any changes in the wake of this tragedy should not just be technical or legislative ones. What happened at Grenfell also showed us all that we need a change in attitude. We all need to rethink our approach to social housing, and we need to reflect on the way in which successive Governments have engaged with and responded to social tenants. We do not yet know for sure whether this disaster could have been avoided if the people who called Grenfell Tower their home had been listened to, but we do know that for far too long their voices fell on deaf ears. If nothing else, let the legacy of Grenfell be that such voices will never, ever be ignored again.

It is good to see the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) in his place, to which I am delighted to welcome him back after the general election. I am even more delighted that we have not swapped places. I know that we have a great deal in common—perhaps we use the same barber—and it is always a pleasure to debate with him. I look forward to doing so regularly during the next five years. Like other hon. Members, I have heard the right hon. Gentleman talk about his party’s policies on the big issues facing the country, especially the issue of how we can build more homes, and we will no doubt hear him set out some of those policies.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): On the point about building more homes in the context of what the Secretary of State has said about social housing, does he accept and will he now confirm that, since 2010,
the Government’s record on building social homes has been deplorable, with, in fact, a 97% fall in social housing starts?

Sajid Javid: There was a deplorable record on building social homes, but that was the record of the previous Labour Government. As the hon. Lady will hear shortly, as I rightly talk about their record, during the 13 years that Labour was last in office we saw, for example, a decline in socially rented homes of 420,000 units.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): We of course have a Labour Government in Wales who are committed to building 20,000 new homes, and who are building new social and council housing in Cardiff as I speak. Does the Secretary of State agree that lessons also need to be learned from Wales about its different approach to fire safety, including the fact that we introduced measures requiring sprinkler systems to be fitted in new high-rise buildings and converted buildings? There are a lot of lessons to be learned from Welsh Labour. Will he listen to them?

Sajid Javid: When it comes to fire safety, I think we should learn lessons from wherever we can—whether Wales or elsewhere. The hon. Gentleman will know that, since 2007, there has been a requirement for new buildings to have sprinklers.

Sir Peter Bottomley ( Worthing West) (Con): I am intervening, at the suggestion earlier of the Leader of the House, having spent three and a half hours in the Chamber. This debate is largely about housing, but is it possible for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to hold a debate on leasehold? He could then look at whether the Government can intervene on the Mundy decision, which affects the extension of the leases of 2 million leaseholders, and carry on the work of his former deputy Gavin Barwell in reforming Lease, the Leasehold Advisory Service, so that leaseholders who, frankly, should be on commonhold can get a better service and avoid being abused, intentionally or unintentionally, by managing agents and freeholders.

Sajid Javid: I agree very much with my hon. Friend. It is important to continue the work on leasehold reform, and we will certainly take it forward. Let me take this opportunity to thank him for all the work he has done and the contribution he has made to the debate on that reform.

During the general election, we heard from the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne and his colleagues about Labour’s housing policy, and no doubt we will hear more shortly. Let us be clear, however, that it was not just an attempt to wind back the ideological clock to the 1970s; it would have undone so much of the progress that we have made during the past seven years.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Since 2012-13, when the Government introduced the increased discount for right to buy, 51,352 homes have been sold, but for so-called one-for-one replacements over that period, there have been only 9,344 starts—starts, not completions—on site. Is that what the Secretary of State means by a new attitude to social housing?

Sajid Javid: If the hon. Gentleman will bear with me, he will very clearly hear the Government’s track record on social housing.

This is the progress that the Government have made since we first took office in 2010: we have a resilient, growing economy; the labour market is in its strongest position for years; and the claimant count is at its lowest level for 45 years, with millions more people in work compared with 2010. That is thanks in part to our wide-ranging process of welfare reform: 520,000 people are receiving universal credit, which is helping to transform lives and to make sure that people are always better off in work than on benefits. In the past year, the number of disabled people in work has increased by more than 170,000. The Department for Work and Pensions has launched tailored support for people with a disability or ill health through our personal support package. We of course remain committed to a strong, humane welfare safety net. Every year, we spend some £90 billion supporting families, people with disabilities, jobseekers and people on low incomes. By 2020, we will have given local authorities £1 billion in discretionary housing payments for residents who need extra help.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): The Secretary of State mentioned extra money for people on disability benefits. Does he agree that changing the work-related component so that from April this year people in the work-related activity group have received £30 a week less is hardly the most intelligent way to persuade disabled people to get back into employment?

Sajid Javid: Where that happens, we will compensate people in other ways and make sure that the welfare policy remains fair to everyone.

In the last year, we spent £24 billion on housing benefit, helping people to cope with the ever-increasing cost of housing.

We are not just tackling the symptoms of our broken housing market; we are taking action to fix the causes. Our housing White Paper, which was published earlier this year, set out exactly how we will go about that: releasing more land where people want to live, building the homes that we need faster, getting more companies involved in the housing market, and supporting people who need help now. The Queen’s Speech, which promises proposals to

“help ensure more homes are built”,
marks a significant step in turning that blueprint into bricks and mortar.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): The Secretary of State mentioned the housing White Paper, which I thought was a terrific document, but in his little list he neglected one thing. Given that the Self-build and Custom Housebuilding Act 2015 is now on the statute book and was strengthened by the Government in the Housing and Planning Act 2016, does he think that serviced plots and land pooling may have an important role to play?

Sajid Javid: I agree very much with my hon. Friend about the importance of self-build and factory-built housing, and making sure there are enough plots for that. That was why a key part of the housing White Paper was about working on how we can diversify the market further. I thank him for the work he has done and continues to do in this sector. He has made a significant contribution.
We are investing more than £7 billion through the affordable homes programme, which will provide funding to housing associations, local authorities and other providers to deliver 225,000 affordable housing starts by March 2021. We are making the affordable homes programme more flexible so that it funds a range of affordable homes for rent, as well as home ownership. That will enable providers to build a range of homes to suit people's needs.

My most urgent priority continues to be getting rough sleepers off our streets. We will establish a homelessness reduction taskforce, pilot Housing First and implement the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 so that more people are helped earlier.

In the wake of the Grenfell Tower tragedy, it is more important than ever that we continue to support housing associations and local authorities with their plans to regenerate housing estates. We have paid out some £32 million in grants to support early phase work with local residents. We are providing practical support and guidance to ensure that tenants are at the heart of all new regeneration schemes, and that their rights are protected. We shall continue to assess bids to allocate £290 million of project finance.

But that is not all: we are determined to make all types of housing more affordable and secure for ordinary working people. That is why we will legislate to stop tenants being charged fees for renting a property. That will mean that tenants will be able to see at a glance exactly what an advertised property will cost them, with no hidden or upfront charges. It will also stop unscrupulous agents who rip off tenants with unjustifiable and opaque fees. The full details will be in a draft tenants' fees Bill, which we expect to publish during the first Session of this Parliament.

Can we deliver all this? Yes we can. Just look at our track record. Since 2010, we have delivered 893,000 additional homes, including 333,000 affordable homes.

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman may be aware that the Homelessness Reduction Act was passed in the last Parliament, thanks to the hard work of Members across the Chamber, especially my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). Trying to prevent homelessness in the first place is precisely what that legislation does. I am sure that the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) would welcome that measure.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): To help the Secretary of State with delivery, I suggest he looks at the Housing (Wales) Act 2014, which was passed by the Welsh Labour Government. It sets out additional measures.

Sajid Javid: I have visited home building sites and potential home building sites in Cannock Chase. I commend the record so far and the proactive attitude that is taken, certainly by the local Member of Parliament, to ensuring that local people have the homes that they need and deserve.

Since 2010, house building starts have increased by more than three quarters. More than 382,000 households have been helped to buy a property through schemes such as Help to Buy and the reinigorated right to buy.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): The Secretary of State is telling us about his record. In these changed times, is it still Government policy that housing associations should be required to sell off homes faster than new homes can be built?

Sajid Javid: It is Government policy that people should have the right to buy their home, whether it is a council house or a housing association property. The hon. Gentleman will know that we are piloting how the housing association right to buy programme works. We will then work on how we can take it forward.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): On that point, the housing associations in London have made it very clear collectively that they are willing and able to massively ramp up the number of homes they are building. The one thing they ask from the Government is to accelerate the release of publicly owned land so that they can do so. Is that still very much part of the agenda?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend touches on a very important point. The public sector land programme is designed to do just that. In the past seven years, it has released record amounts of land for hundreds of thousands of new homes. There is always more to do. That is why we set out plans in the housing White Paper to achieve even more from that programme.

I can tell Labour Members one more thing that has happened since 2010: more council housing has been built in the past seven years than was built in the previous 13 years. Going back to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith), enough public sector land has been released to deliver at least 130,000 new homes, which is equivalent to a city the size of Nottingham.

More than 300,000 new homes were granted planning permission in the year up to March, which was up 15% on the previous 12 months. New build dwelling starts rose by 15% compared with the previous period. Once people are in their homes, they are staying in them because mortgage repossessions are at their lowest level for 35 years. This Government can offer an ambitious, far-reaching plans for the future of house building, built on solid foundations of real success.

I want to contrast that with what is on offer from the Labour party. Let us look at what happened last time Labour was in charge of housing. When Labour came to power in 1997, the average house cost 3.5 times the average salary. When it left office 13 years later, the average house cost seven times the average salary—a massive collapse in affordability and the biggest the country has ever seen. That hit ordinary working people the hardest.
**John Healey** (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): We are discussing this year’s Queen’s Speech, not 1997’s. Does the Secretary of State accept that the 13 years of the last Labour Government saw 2 million new homes built in this country, 1 million more people becoming homeowners and the largest investment in new affordable housing for a generation by the end of that period?

**Sajid Javid:** I will come to the right hon. Gentleman’s record in particular in just a moment, and then I will let him know what I will and will not accept. Let me remind the House that, on Labour’s watch, the number of social rented homes fell by 420,000. In fact, the only thing about social housing that actually grew under Labour was the waiting lists—by a massive 70%.

**Ms Buck:** I am looking at the live tables—published online yesterday, I believe—concerning the record of the Government that the Secretary of State represents. It shows that the number of social rent starts was 39,492 at the end of 2009–10 and had fallen to 944 by 2016–17. Can he explain that?

**Sajid Javid:** Over the past six years, 330,000 new affordable homes have been built, which is a record in a six-year period and is certainly higher than the last six years of the last Labour Government. For every 170 right to buy sales, Labour built just one new council house—a replacement rate of less than 0.6%.

In 2010, when house building completions hit their lowest peacetime level since the great depression, who was the Minister in charge of housing? I will let hon. Members know: it was the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne himself. You will forgive me, Mr Deputy Speaker, for being a little bit sceptical when the right hon. Gentleman stands up and claims to have all the answers.

What is the great answer to housing shortfalls and rising unaffordability? What is Labour’s magic bullet to fix the broken housing market? It is a Ministry of Housing. Young people struggling to get on the housing ladder or people who cannot find a place big enough for their growing family should not worry if nothing in their area is affordable because Labour is going to create a new Government Department. It is the typical Labour prescription: there is no problem that cannot be fixed with a bit more bureaucracy.

That is the difference between Labour and the Conservatives in a nutshell. We want to build more homes for hard-working people; they want to build more offices for civil servants. Moving the furniture around Whitehall may create the illusion of action, but it does not get any homes built. Only this Government can provide the economic strength we need for house builders to thrive in a post-Brexit world. Only this Queen’s Speech takes the first steps towards fixing our broken housing market. That is why I am delighted to commend it to the House.

1.23 pm

**John Healey:** I welcome you to the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker. I think this is the first time that you have been in the Chair in the Chamber. May I also welcome almost all of my Labour colleagues back to the House after the election, and all 87 new Members from all parties? As elected Members of the House, ours is a special job with special responsibilities. Last but not least, may I welcome the Secretary of State and his old team back to the Front Bench? There is a new Housing Minister, but, sadly, he comes with no new ideas or plans to deal with the housing crisis in this country.

These are extraordinary times. There is a Government Bench without a Government, a Prime Minister who cannot even seal a deal with the DWP—I mean the DUP. [Interruption.] She might have better luck with the DWP; she cannot seal a deal with the Democratic Unionist party. There is also a Queen’s Speech with no guarantee of getting the number of votes needed to approve it. This is the first minority Government in this country for 38 years, but this Prime Minister is no Jim Callaghan. She called the election expecting a bigger majority and saying she wanted a stronger mandate. She now has no mandate, no majority and no authority.

Normally, the Queen’s Speech sets out what the Government will do; this Queen’s Speech sets out what they won’t do, can’t do and daren’t do. They will not make the economic changes to invest for the future and protect our public services. They cannot put forward a full programme for government, because the Prime Minister cannot yet do a deal with the DUP. They dare not even implement their own manifesto, and have taken it down from their website.

**Mr Bernard Jenkin** (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): A Queen’s Speech with, I think, 21 Bills in it, and draft Bills, is not a thin Queen’s Speech. May I just point out that the mandate from a 42.5% vote share in this high-turnout election is rather better than, say, Tony Blair’s mandate in 2005, when he got only 35% of the vote?

**John Healey:** To come up with that number of Bills, the hon. Gentleman has to incorporate anything that can be loosely described as a draft Bill or flagged as potentially coming to the House in the next two years. The Prime Minister promised she would not call an election, but then did so because she wanted a bigger majority, a stronger mandate and greater authority. I am sure the Secretary of State will accept that the Prime Minister has none of those things at a time when our country is facing—I know he will appreciate this being such a strong Brexiteer—some of the biggest challenges we have faced for decades at home and abroad. At a time when we need a heavyweight Government, we have an interim leader and a set of lightweight Government Ministers.

**Mr Bacon:** There are plenty of heavyweight people around. Indeed, there are plenty of heavy people around, although I should say that I have lost two stone since the beginning of the election campaign. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will get on to housing at some point. Does he agree with the Redfern review, which he commissioned, that Help to Buy has the potential to be inflationary? Does he further agree that it might be better to switch the money towards help to build, which, unlike Help to Buy, would in every single case result in extra housing being built?

**John Healey:** We need to do both. Of course. The major flaw with Help to Buy is that nearly a fifth of the people being helped to buy through the scheme are not even first-time buyers. Nearly 4,000 being helped by
Help to Buy are on incomes of more than £100,000. It is not well targeted and it is not good use of public money. It could be spent much better, especially on helping younger people on ordinary incomes to get their first foot on the housing ladder.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman says that a £100,000 income should be too high to qualify for Help to Buy. What level would he set it at?

John Healey: We would be happy to consult on that. My main argument is with Ministers. They are making the wrong judgments and they are not putting in place the help that young people need in particular. That is why—the hon. Gentleman may know this—the number of homeowners under 45 has fallen by 900,000 since 2010. Young people’s hopes and dreams of ever owning their own home are being completely dashed, and the Government have no plan in this Queen’s Speech or in their manifesto to fix that.

In truth, the Prime Minister is locked in place by her party only until its members judge that they can dump her without facing the British people again in a fresh election. It was Margaret Thatcher who said: “Minority Governments can only struggle on from day to day with a series of short-term measures. They can’t and don’t tackle the longer-term questions that affect the future of our nation and the wellbeing of all of us.”

The question for the Queen’s Speech is whether the “short-term” will be days, weeks or months. On 8 June, the Prime Minister asked the people for their judgment on seven years of Conservative Government, and they gave it. Real wages have fallen, Government debt has risen, investment in new transport and housing has been slashed, the NHS is in crisis, schools are cutting teachers and last year, more than a million people used a food bank. At the same time, there have been big income tax cuts for the top earners, with more tax cuts to come for the richest on wealth that they do not even earn. We have had seven years of failure and a party with no answers to people’s problems, no hope for the future, and no plan to change the country for the better or to make government work in the interests of all.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman talks about our having no plan, but only a few days ago I was at the new Bexhill business park, which has been funded by Government money. There is a new road, which will open up new land not just for housing but for employment sites. Does that not sound like a plan?

John Healey: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman’s constituency of Bexhill has seen the benefit of some Government investment and support in recent years. The part of the Barnsley borough in my constituency certainly has not. The Government seem simply to overlook large parts of the country.

I now turn to housing, the theme of today’s debate, and to Grenfell Tower. The Prime Minister was right today to apologise, to admit that local government and national Government were too slow, and to take charge herself. However, in a set of important commitments, which we welcome, she set several hares running and failed to answer a number of important questions. Earlier, my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) made the point that the safety checks that are imperative for all 4,000 tower blocks around the country are about not just cladding but all aspects of fire prevention and fire safety. The Secretary of State needs to make it clear that the checks will be comprehensive and rapid and that if local authorities need support and resources to carry them out, the Government will make that available. He also needs to make it clear—the Prime Minister did not—that if remedial work is needed to make the blocks safe and funding is required for that, the Government will provide it to ensure that the buildings are safe for their residents.

Sajid Javid: The right hon. Gentleman is right: the checks need to be comprehensive. Everyone agrees about that and local authorities are carrying out those checks. Many have already done so. My Department contacted every single local authority and we have made it clear that we will make the testing facility available for free—we have said that we will pay for all the tests. We have also made it clear, as the Prime Minister did today from the Dispatch Box, that if a local authority needs support and help to implement any necessary changes, we will work with it to provide that.

John Healey: Support, help and funding if local authorities need it: is that what the Secretary of State is saying to the House, yes or no?

Sajid Javid: We have made clear exactly that if a local authority needs support, including funding support, we will work with it to provide that.

John Healey: I am grateful for that and I think that the House is, too. It has taken a dozen questions to the Secretary of State, the Prime Minister and the Leader of the House to get that statement, but it is of course welcome.

I paid tribute to the Prime Minister for her leadership, having acknowledged that the Government were slow to get a grip of the matter and appreciate the scale of the tragedy. I also pay tribute to the Mayor of London, who has given a strong voice to the concerns of local communities and residents and strong leadership to the emergency services that struggled to deal with the tragedy. I pay tribute, too, to my new hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad). She has been simply magnificent in her first week in the job as a Member of Parliament. I thank my less new hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) and for Hammersmith, both of whom know the area well and, as neighbouring MPs, spent much of the past week with my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington.

I was with our Labour leader in Kensington the day after the fire. Firefighters with more than 30 years’ experience told us that they had never seen anything like it. The police commander was right when she said to me, “You have to be here to appreciate how truly apocalyptic this fire was.” It was not a natural disaster, but man made. It should never have happened and must never happen again. Hon. Members of all parties have a deep responsibility to ensure that it does not.

Some have said, “Don’t try to score political points from the tragedy,” but it is about politics: ideology and policy, which the House exists to debate and decide. The
residents and communities affected by the terrible tragedy want us to tackle precisely the political and policy decisions that those in power took. The Prime Minister has talked about the lessons to learn and promised that all necessary action will be taken after the investigation. As the official Opposition, we will not rest until those who need help and a new home have it, until anyone culpable has been held fully to account and until every measure is in place to prevent such a thing from happening ever again.

Surely what has happened must shock the country and us into changing the policy, ideology and responsibility of government. When a country as decent and well off as ours fails to provide something as basic as a safe and decent home to all our citizens, things must change. When this happens in one of the richest parts of the country, it offends our sense of living together as one nation, with each and every person equally treated and valued by our society and our Government. Things must change.

For decades after the second world war, there was a cross-party consensus about the value of social housing. There was also a recognition that, in only one year since then did we build more than 200,000 new homes without councils doing at least a third. In 2015 we saw the first year since the second world war when central Government provided no new funding to build new social rented homes. Labour’s decent homes programme to overhaul and upgrade social housing has been stopped. Last year, Ministers ended secure long-term tenancies for new council tenants.

The Secretary of State talked about the Government’s track record on social housing. My hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North exposed it. Perhaps the Secretary of State could ask his officials for table 1012. My hon. Friend gave the figures for the number of starts; I will give the figure for social homes completed that people can live in. It was 37,000 when Labour left office. Last year, it was just over 1,000. That is the Government’s track record on social housing. It must change.

Sajid Javid: The right hon. Gentleman referred to the decent homes standard for social housing. The programme has not been ended. Since 2010, £1.7 billion has been provided. As a result of the Government’s work, the number of homes that fail to meet the decent homes standard is down by 41% from its peak in 2007.

John Healey: Will the Secretary of State confirm exactly how much is in the Homes and Communities Agency programme this year and last year for Government investment in the decent homes programme?

Sajid Javid: I shall be happy to write to the right hon. Gentleman and give him the exact number.

John Healey: Good. It is a small number, and it has a zero in it—and nothing else.

Let me return to the serious points that I wish to make. Secondly, let me say to the Secretary of State that all markets, organisations and consumers need regulation to guarantee safety, ensure fair practices, safeguard standards and stop abuse; yet that is not the mindset of current Conservative Ministers. Never again can a Minister who is challenged on fire safety measures say, “It is not the Government’s responsibility,” and justify it by citing the Government’s “one in, two out” rule on regulations. That must change.

Kevin Hollinrake: The right hon. Gentleman must accept that it was this Government who introduced improved regulations insisting on the installation of smoke alarms and carbon monoxide detectors in homes in the private rented sector, and, for the first time, required electrical safety checks and checks on appliances from this autumn.

John Healey: But my goodness, didn’t people—including us—have to argue hard for those basic regulations? Why did the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues, when the Bill that became the Housing and Planning Act 2016 was going through the House, reject intervention and regulation to ensure that all private landlords at least made their homes fit for human habitation before letting them? This is a Government whose mindset can see regulation only as red tape, and who do not see what the Prime Minister described as the important role played by good regulation in the public interest.

Mr Jenkin: May I put it to the right hon. Gentleman that the last thing people want to see now is parties turning this into a party political argument? It would be equally easy for us to point out that the present Government inherited the 2006 regulations from his Government. If there has been a failure of regulation, I think that it is shared. I think that what the public want to see is the House taking full and shared collective responsibility for what has happened and putting it right, rather than Members trying to accuse each other in order to score political points.

John Healey: This is precisely about politics. This is precisely what the House should do, and, in fact, it is precisely about what the Prime Minister said this morning. Indeed, my third point follows on from the point that she made when she talked about the fundamental issues that underpin the detail of what we have also been discussing.

Sections of our people feel marginalised and ignored, and that is what happened to the tenants at Grenfell Tower. It is no good the hon. Gentleman huffing and puffing; the Prime Minister said that this morning. She recognised it. However, this is a Government whose housing regulator has now dropped any real requirement for the voice and views of tenants and residents on governing boards to be heard, and who, in 2010, abolished the National Tenant Voice, which we had set up. Its establishment resulted from a report called “Citizens of equal worth”. Many Grenfell Tower residents, and other social housing tenants, will feel that that rings hollow in this day and age.

Let me now deal with the specific failures on housing. Two thirds of people now believe that the country is experiencing a housing crisis. Everyone knows someone who is affected—people who are unable to obtain a home that they need or aspire to. Many of the housing decisions made by Ministers since 2010—decisions that the Secretary of State boasts about—have made the problems worse. Because Ministers have done too little for first-time buyers on ordinary incomes, home ownership has fallen to a 30-year low. They have given private landlords a freer hand and rejected legislation requiring properties to be fit for human habitation, so 11 million private renters have fewer consumer rights than they
have when they buy a fridge-freezer. They have stripped away protections for people who need help with housing, so the number of people sleeping rough on our streets has more than doubled. They have cut investment and outsourced responsibility for building new homes to big developers, so, on average, fewer new homes have been built since 2010 than under any peacetime Government since the 1920s. That is the track record of the Secretary of State and his colleagues.

After seven years of failure, it is clear that the Conservatives have no plan to fix the country’s housing crisis. Some of what the Secretary of State has said this afternoon, and has said before, about house building and tenants’ fees is welcome, but there is nothing in the manifesto or in the Queen’s Speech to tackle the wider causes of the housing crisis.

Kevin Hollinrake: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

John Healey: I have given way twice to the hon. Gentleman, and I want to finish my speech so that others can speak.

There is nothing to change the scandal of rising rough-sleeping homelessness. There is nothing to deal with the lowest level of new affordable house building in 24 years, nothing to reverse the rapidly falling level of home ownership among young people, nothing to secure supported and sheltered housing for the future, and nothing to scrap the hated bedroom tax.

However, there is an alternative, as we showed in our Labour manifesto. It is possible to fix the failings in the housing market and in housing policy. I am not just talking about a fully-fledged new Department for Housing to reflect the seriousness of the crisis, to spearhead our new deal on housing and to tackle the crisis. I am talking about a new deal for first-time buyers, with no discount price linked to local average incomes. I am talking about a new deal on affordable homes, and no majority in the House of Commons. I offer them our new deal on housing: a deal between the people of this country and the Government, and a bold, long-term plan to start to fix our country’s housing crisis and meet people’s housing needs and aspirations.

1.47 pm

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I welcome you to the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker—on a temporary basis—and thank you for presiding over yet another day of debate on the Gracious Speech.

Let me, at the outset, associate myself with the remarks of both Front Benchers about the recent tragedies that have affected all of us, throughout the country, and will continue to do so. Let us hope that, after all the bad things that have happened, good things will come. I think we can all share that view.

I also think it apposite, on a day on which we are continuing our debate on the Gracious Speech, to welcome the fact that the Duke of Edinburgh—who, sadly, could not attend the State Opening of Parliament—has, I believe, left hospital today. I am sure that we all wish him a speedy recovery. I know that he would not have wanted to miss standing at the side of Her Majesty the Queen yesterday, but he was ably represented by his son.

I welcome not just the reflective way in which the Prime Minister announced the legislative programme, but, in particular, the way in which she has approached the recent tragedies. The parliamentary arithmetic that we have been given in the House will require restraint and, I believe, a great deal of thoughtfulness on the part of all politicians on both sides of the House as we steer our country out of the European Union, and increase our engagement across the wider world. It is against the sombre background of those national tragedies, which we have been discussing at such length in the Chamber since we reconvened, that we face a very daunting period as we negotiate Brexit.

The voters made the decisions for us in the House. I think we must all agree that, in the referendum and the general election, we have learnt a lesson in democracy. You cannot second-guess the electorate. None of us expected the outcome of the referendum or the general election. In welcoming the Gracious Speech, I think we all acknowledge that it is set against an extraordinary backdrop that no one truly expected.

It is natural that the legislative timetable is dominated by Brexit but it is crucial that, during Brexit, we do not lose the economic momentum that is delivering for the whole country, and in particular for my county of Buckinghamshire. Let us not forget that, over the lifetime of the last Government and the Government before, we cut the deficit by more than two thirds. We have the highest employment on record and, in 2016, we had the fastest-growing economy in the G7.

My local economy in Buckinghamshire has benefited greatly from the Conservatives being in government since 2010. Since May 2010, unemployment in Chesham and Amersham has more than halved: it has gone from 1.9% to 0.9% in May this year. Youth unemployment is down from 3.4% to 1.4% and almost 1,000 new businesses have started since 2010.
The health of the business environment is crucial to our nation’s success. Locally, we need to ensure that it is driven hard to provide not only the income that we require as a country, but the security that our citizens require. May I issue a word of warning, however, on the drive to create more housing? Particularly in Chesham and Amersham, we are finding that valuable business premises are being converted into residential properties. I do not know about the constituencies of the rest of my colleagues, but in Buckinghamshire there is a demand to start businesses, and people who want to start businesses in Buckinghamshire tell me that they cannot find the premises in which to start them. If we are losing business premises to housing, that is not the right way to create the balance in our society.

There are several Bills in the Queen’s Speech to build a stronger economy. I particularly welcome the automated and electric vehicles Bill, which I think grabs all our imaginations. I am also particularly pleased to see the space industry Bill. This country has a £13.7 billion space industry. I have to declare an interest. My husband is a long-retired senior civil servant, but he was the director general of the British National Space Centre. Thirty-three years ago, when we got married, we cancelled our honeymoon because the then lady Prime Minister was due to decide on the space plan. She failed to do so. Perhaps it will take this lady Prime Minister to decide the way forward for the space industry, which has been undervalued but is one of this country’s leading sectors. We have great expertise that can benefit us here and in the rest of the world.

I also welcome the smart meter Bill, although it raises a bit of a problem for me. I tried to have a smart meter put into my house but was told that the signal where the smart meter was supposed to go was so weak that it was impossible to install it.

Communications is vital to industry. The impediment to business in Bucks is not just the lack of premises but the lack of superfast broadband. I do not think we can expect our businesses to flourish in a post-Brexit world unless we have that vital infrastructure to support them. Sadly, we seem to prefer to put money into what I consider to be rapidly ageing technology.

There is no prize—my hon. Friends are all smiling on the Opposition Benches, too—for guessing my next point. It is inevitable—I cannot rise to my feet in the Chamber without mentioning it. I welcome everything in the Queen’s Speech, except the announcement of the HS2, phase 2a Bill.

HS2 will be written on my heart and my tombstone when I leave this world. I have to say that my heart fails me when I see that the Government are about to introduce what could be another hybrid Bill—a form of legislative torture for the House and the people who have to sit on the Committee that considers it—before we know that phase 1 is in the bag, so to speak.

We have heard today that there are three contenders to provide the rolling stock. Much is made of the fact that one of the bidders is Chinese, but HS2, phase 1, which is starting its construction phase, is in an appalling mess. It has haemorrhaged its senior management. Beth West is the latest person to leave the senior management of the company. Its governance and procurement policy has failed. It has failed to take into account conflicts of interest—the company CH2M pulled out of a £170 million contract. It has failed remarkably badly in its community engagement, particularly in Buckinghamshire.

I ask the Government to carry out, before any new legislation is brought forward, a complete and full review of phase 1 to date. I want them to revisit the business case, examine the governance of the project and decide whether it is good value for money for the taxpayer. That is the correct thing to do.

Of course, I would like the project to be cancelled. I make no secret of that. However, I think it is unrealistic, after so much money has been spent on it, to expect the Government to do that, but they do need to take a firm grip of the project. I would hope that, if the review showed that it was not good value for money for the taxpayer and that the technology was rapidly going to be overtaken, the Government would have the courage to bring it to an end.

I have still not given up hope that the Government, whatever their complexion, will honour their environmental principles. Although I have been grateful for the extra tunnelling that I have obtained under the Chilterns for the area of outstanding natural beauty, it still does not completely protect the whole AONB. The whole purpose of a national designation for an area of the country is to protect it from being violated by major infrastructure projects such as HS2. The Government have done only half the job. They could do extra tunnelling to the end of the AONB, which would greatly relieve Wendover, which is going to have vast noise barriers inserted in a rural environment. It would also show that the Government were putting their environmental credentials firmly at the centre of their legislative programme.

I am truly delighted that in the Queen’s Speech we have had confirmation that the mental health legislation and how it is delivering for people will be reviewed. I know that the Minister is aware that mental health provision is a huge issue for people on the autism spectrum. Research suggests that more than 70% of children on the autism spectrum develop mental health problems during their childhood. It is important that they and autistic adults are able to get good mental health support when they need it. I hope that, in responding, the Minister will be able to fill us in some more on the scope of the review. Will it just be about access to services, which Members on both sides of the House will agree is important, or will it be a root and branch review of all the legislation and how it is delivering for people? In any case, having been privileged to serve as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on autism in the previous Parliament, I look forward to working with the Government on where we can strengthen rights and entitlements for people with autism.

Social care has been much talked about, including the provisions that were in our manifesto but perhaps are absent from the Queen’s Speech. Improving our social care system is also a huge issue for people on the autism spectrum. I was glad to hear that the Green Paper with further proposals will be out soon.

I would like the Minister to confirm that the Green Paper will look at the whole system of adult social care, and to ensure that if any reform is brought forward, it addresses the needs of both the elderly and the working-age disabled populations. Much attention is rightly focused on the needs of our growing elderly population, but it is important that the needs of working-age disabled people, such as those with autism spectrum disorders, should also be looked at. The system is currently not working for them either.
[Mrs Cheryl Gillan]

In his opening remarks, the Minister alluded to the 170,000 disabled people who are in work. The Government have rightly made a pledge to halve the disability employment gap by getting 1 million more disabled people into work, and much good work was done in the previous Parliament through the “Work, health and disability: improving lives” Green Paper. However, as the House has heard me say before, the autism employment disability: improving lives Green Paper. However, as the House has heard me say before, the autism employment gap is even wider, and that work was not mentioned in the Gracious Speech. I hope that when the Minister winds up, he will be able to assure disabled people and those on the spectrum that the work to reduce the gap is still going forward and is still a priority for the Government.

I do not think anyone would disagree that the focus on mental health is welcomed on both sides of the House. However, speaking as a constituency MP, I can say that accessing effective help for people in crisis is still challenging, not least because of the multiplicity of agencies involved in the care of an individual. I hope that we can evaluate this and, in the case of the review, let us have a look at how we can simplify accessing help for problems for all concerned.

Finally, I would like to touch on education. Quite rightly, our programme is focusing on technical education, and we want to see educational standards improve across the board. However, I have to say that the funding of schools remains a major issue, particularly in my constituency. Buckinghamshire has seven out of the 10 lowest funded schools in the country, and I believe that it is necessary to ensure fairer funding to help with equality in education. I therefore urge my colleagues on the Front Bench to re-examine the funding of schools very carefully, and to ensure that sufficient funding comes to schools such as those in Buckinghamshire that have been grossly underfunded for many years.

This Queen’s Speech introduces a two-year programme. It contains 27 Bills and draft Bills, and it forms a great basis for this Government to move forward. It will provide the basis for a period of consolidation and enable us to grasp the opportunities for the whole of the country as we leave the European Union. We now have to establish the UK as a close friend of Europe, but a friend that, when it leaves the European Union, will enable us to grasp the opportunities for the whole of the country as we leave the European Union. We now have to establish the UK as a close friend of Europe, but a friend that, when it leaves the European Union, will once more be in charge of its own destiny. I commend the Queen’s Speech to the House.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr George Howarth): Order. Before I call the Scottish National party spokeswoman, I must tell the House that because of the pressure on time and our wish to get as many people in as possible, I shall introduce a six-minute time limit on Back-Bench speeches once the next speaker has sat down. That limit might have to be reduced further later, but I hope not. If people stick to the time limits, and if possible even undershoot them, we might be able to stick at six minutes.

2.3 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I should like to associate myself with the comments made by right hon. and hon. Members across the House about the tragic incident at Grenfell Tower. We on these Benches welcome the inquiry and believe that lessons must be learned from this event.

This Queen’s Speech seems to me to be one of the most shambolic and lame legislative programmes in my lifetime. The Tories, cowed by their unnecessary election defeat, are working on a weak mandate with no authority. Since the start of the month, we have seen promises ditched as they face defeat across the House. Pledges on introducing an energy price cap, disastrous social care plans, a free vote on foxhunting, the introduction of grammar schools and the setting of an immigration target have all been dropped—and yesterday we witnessed no mention of the deliberately harmful plan to scrap the triple lock on pensions.

Yet again, this Queen’s Speech proves one thing: the Tories will continue their obsession with austerity in spite of a sea of evidence against it. Let me be clear: another Parliament of cuts is a choice, not a necessity, and it is a choice that has been decisively rejected by voters across the country. The Resolution Foundation has warned that the continuation of austerity will drive the biggest inequality since the times of Margaret Thatcher. Much of the power to legislate on housing has been devolved to the Scottish Government. We ended the right to buy some time ago, taking the view that unless housing is replaced, many people are left disadvantaged and lacking the opportunity to obtain affordable housing. That is something that this Government have failed to learn.

Today’s debate also focuses on social security. The High Court ruling on the benefit cap highlights the fact that it causes real damage to single families. When will this Government learn their lesson? The incomes of the poorest third of working-age households will fall by 10% over the next four years, driving a further 1 million families across this country into poverty. By 2021, there could be more than 5 million children across the UK—a number equivalent to the total population of Scotland—living in poverty. This is one of the wealthiest countries in the world, and that is a disgrace.

We on these Benches choose to take a different approach. Unlike those on the Government Benches, and many on Opposition Benches, the Scottish National party has consistently and unapologetically opposed austerity. Our approach to the public finances would balance the UK budget for day-to-day spending by the end of the Parliament. It would set debt on a downward path and, crucially, free up an additional £118 billion of public investment. With our plans, we could stop the further £9 billion of additional social security cuts that this Government will inflict. That would mean that those on low incomes who rely on in-work social security, and the vulnerable and disabled, would not have to face further punishment. Despite the rhetoric from the Labour party, its plans fail to provide the same protections.

In my constituency, the cost of welfare reform is clear. Despite my constituency’s assets, almost 25% of the children in Lanark and Hamilton East grow up in poverty. Under this Government, my constituents have had to endure a reduction in employment support allowance, a freeze on in-work support, cuts to their personal independence payments and the removal of their mobility cars. Worst of all, they are now subject to a family cap and a despicable rape clause. Austerity has failed my constituents in Lanark and Hamilton East, and it has failed constituents up and down the country. However, we are, for now, in a better position than some.
My constituency is yet to face the massive ramifications of the roll-out of universal credit. Later this year, the UK Government intend to introduce universal credit in South Lanarkshire. Only a few weeks ago, the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations highlighted the policy as a key concern in tackling homelessness across the country. The Scottish Government have plans to mitigate some of the worst elements of the UK Government’s welfare reforms, including the roll-out of universal credit, but that will not help families across the rest of the UK. It is completely unreasonable to suggest that we should spend nearly £400 million mitigating poor decisions made by this UK Government. Universal credit will make some of my constituents homeless, and despite the work of the local authority and the third sector, the UK Government are intransigent and unrelenting in their approach.

It is clear that austerity has failed the economy and failed society. It has driven the people we should protect into poverty, hunger, humiliation and crippling debt. I had perhaps naively hoped that their defeat earlier this month would make the UK Government reflect on their approach to social security, listen to the experts, and inject the investment necessary to genuinely rebalance the economy and create a fairer society. At its very heart, that is what a social security system ought to do, yet that is exactly what this UK Government have failed to do.

Alan Brown: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that austerity has failed and that the social security system is not providing the necessary safety net. Does she agree that the application of a proposed cap on housing benefit for supported accommodation is another issue that this Government need to reflect on? Otherwise, this austerity will hit the most vulnerable: those in women’s refuges and other vulnerable adults in supported accommodation.

Angela Crawley: Absolutely. Statistics already show that over 80% of the cuts fall on women. That is simply not good enough.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Angela Crawley: I need to make some progress. The UK Government are fixated on a failed Brexit strategy and intent on damaging the economy and threatening jobs—so much so that they have cancelled next year’s legislative programme. In closing, my call to Government Members is this: stop being fixated on austerity will hit the most vulnerable: those in women’s refuges and other vulnerable adults in supported accommodation.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir David Amess): Order. I remind the House that the six-minute time limit starts now.

2.11 pm

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Deputy Speaker. I always think that a time limit is good for focusing the mind and generating extra productivity, so I will adhere to your strictures.

The Government said in their Queens’ Speech that they want to build more houses, which is an approach I strongly support. The title of the recent housing White Paper is “Fixing our broken housing market”—an important title and an admission of something that has been increasingly clear for many decades under Governments of all parties: our housing market simply does not work properly. The supply of housing does not rise to meet demand. [Interruption.] I see the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) nodding, and I am glad that he is nodding; I hope to persuade him of some of the solutions on which he is still resisting my charms. I am sure that I will get there over the course of this Parliament.

The fact is that our broken housing market is failing to meet aspirations. In effect, demand is unable to influence supply and drive volumes in the way that it does in markets that operate successfully. Some years ago in a Committee room upstairs, the presenter of “Grand Designs”, the famous Channel 4 television programme, told our all-party parliamentary group on self-build, custom and community housebuilding and place-making:

“The consumer has been on the receiving end of a pretty poor deal. We build some of the poorest, most expensive and smallest homes in Europe. That’s not something to celebrate.”

At the core of the housing debate is a key intellectual problem: is development good or bad? We often see the word “development” used as a pejorative term, yet the instinct that we all have to nest and to build a home is a response to one of our deepest human needs. Mr Deputy Speaker, if you were to go on a survival course, you would be taught that without food you would die within seven to 10 days and that without water you may last three days, but you can die without shelter in 20 minutes. However, we often talk about development, which means providing enough shelter for everyone, as if it is a bad thing.

During a general election debate, one of my opponents said that housing—although she admitted that it was necessary—was a “heavy price to pay”. I understand that language even if I disagree with it. The reason people so often speak about development in that way is because it is driven and brought forward in the wrong way. It should be obvious that without enough housing the chances of our children and grandchildren finding a home that they can actually afford are rapidly fading from view. In order to make “development” a good word, we have to have good development.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Does my hon. Friend accept that one way of driving forward house building is through neighbourhood plans? They are delivering more houses than originally set out by the district councils that instructed the building of houses.

Mr Bacon: I thank my hon. Friend for that and agree with him, although the caveat is that some developers are good at getting around neighbourhood plans, undermining their basis and confidence in them. The Government need to address that.

The key to getting the right kind of development is more choice and beauty. Now, that may sound airy-fairy, but it is the exact opposite, something which the Prince of Wales noted in his BIMBY or “Beauty-In-My-Back-Yard” campaign. We must have better, smarter, beautiful
[Mr Bacon]

development that offers a wide range of real choices to consumers and is actively welcomed by existing communities, including the grandparents and parents who so often oppose development with arms folded saying, “We don’t want any houses in our area.” They want to see the next generation flourish and do well, and see their own grandchildren adequately housed. We must allow our communities greater voice and choice about what gets built, where it is built, what it looks like and who gets first chance to live there.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): My hon. Friend is making some extremely important points that resonate in my constituency. Does he agree that one way to ensure acceptance and, indeed, the welcoming of development in our communities is to allow for the increased availability of self-build, of which he is a great supporter, and to ensure the diversification of housing providers? Small local companies should be able to benefit from building, which brings jobs and work to the area.

Mr Bacon: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As recently as 1988, 66% of housing in this country was built by small local builders. There has been a huge change that has benefited a small number of large companies, but not our communities or most of our constituents and society as a whole.

My hon. Friend mentioned self-build and it will not surprise him to know that I promoted, got through this House and the other place and secured Royal Assent for the Self-build and Custom Housebuilding Act 2015, which has now been strengthened by the Housing and Planning Act 2016. Some 53% of people in this country would, at some point in their lives, like to build their own house or have someone build a house to their design. They want to be anyone: a group of friends; the governors of a school looking to provide accommodation to help recruit and retain teachers in difficult-to-fill subjects; or the Royal British Legion or a similar veterans’ body, such as Help to Heroes, working with veterans to fulfil their accommodation needs—[Interruption.] I see my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) nodding and I am pleased to see her in her place. An association of individuals could include the governors of a school looking to provide accommodation to help recruit and retain social workers in parts of the country where jobs are difficult to fill. My act has now been strengthened by sections 9 to 12 of the Housing and Planning Act 2016, which require local authorities not only to keep a register of individuals and what are called “associations of individuals” who want to get a serviced plot of land to build a house. An “association of individuals” could be anyone: a group of friends; the governors of a school looking to provide accommodation to help recruit and retain teachers in difficult-to-fill subjects; or the Royal British Legion or a similar veterans’ body, such as Help to Heroes, working with veterans to fulfil their accommodation needs.

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I turn again to the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne, because I do not think that he is fully persuaded of how powerful such measures could be. The Dutch expert group will be imitated by the right to build expert taskforce being launched at the end of the month at a housing conference in, funnily enough, my constituency. The taskforce will take the lessons that have been learned in the Netherlands. If we were building as many units of self-build and custom house building as there are in the Netherlands now, we would be creating 60,000 extra units a year on top of what is currently being delivered, which could make a significant difference.

I have two requests of the Government. First, paragraph 2.19 of the housing White Paper states: “We will target the £2.3bn Housing Infrastructure Fund at the areas of greatest housing need. We will open this capital grant programme to bids in 2017... We will fund those bids that unlock the most homes in the areas of greatest housing need.”

Amen to that, but we need the details to be announced. I understand that they have not been announced due to the general election, but it needs to happen soon.

Secondly, the Government should adopt the 10-point plan of the National Custom & Self Build Association—point 2 in particular—which calls for a help to build equity loan scheme to help people get their own house. A deposit of just 5% is required to buy a home under the Help to Buy scheme, although that does not create any more dwellings; it just helps volume house builders to sell the houses that they have already built. I will happily provide the Government with what NaCSBA has proposed. A help to build scheme would ensure that an extra house was built. Moreover, one could recycle the money because, in most cases, as soon as the house is built the owner could re-mortgage, and the equity loan could be paid back and would be available to lend to somebody else.

The final thing that I want to say in the 30 seconds that remain is that our party did not reach out during the recent general election to young people in the way that it should reach out. However, it is true that all people, but young people in particular, need somewhere to live. It is absolutely fundamental. In many cases, young people have given up on the prospect of ever having their own place. We have to make owning a house a reality. The architect Rod Hackney once said: “It is a dangerous thing to underestimate human potential and the energy which can be generated when people are given the opportunity to help themselves.”

2.20 pm

Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): As the first Labour MP for Kensington, I am walking in the footsteps of giants. Although the boundaries have changed over the years, the charismatic figures of Alan Clark, Michael Portillo, who shares my Spanish heritage, and Malcolm Rifkind have created their own legacy, and I am grateful to my immediate predecessor, Victoria Borwick, for showing the way with her impressive social and organising skills, which I will never emulate.

I was born in Chelsea, went to school in Hammersmith and have lived in North Kensington for half my life; the constituency is in my DNA. As MP for both Harrods and the Notting Hill carnival, I hope to ensure that all my communities are cared for. I know, because I have spoken to many of them, that the good people of South Kensington have had their eyes opened in the past week and are asking the same questions that we are asking in North Kensington. The horror and fear of this man-made catastrophe will be etched in all our hearts forever. The tears may never stop, and I know that from the grief etched on the faces of people in Ladbroke Grove and from the total strangers approaching me for comfort,
reassurance, a question, a hug, to share their fears and disbelief that such horror could be visited upon our neighbourhood. The burnt-out carcase of Grenfell Tower and all that it represents, lours over us, and we have the Red Cross managing a relief programme in Kensington.

It has been said before that tenants of Grenfell, and of other council and housing association properties, have been voicing their very serious and evidenced concerns about poor and diminishing housing standards, and about how appeals, complaints and petitions have been ignored and discredited. I have witnessed over the years the deterioration, and perhaps even the deliberate managed decline, of social housing; the frustration of a loss of human comforts and a good education are givens. Some people demonstrate a total lack of empathy or respect for those not born to a world where basic human needs cannot be met in a world of charities, food banks and handouts. I do not understand how this can be.

The burnt carcase of Grenfell Tower speaks for itself and has revealed the true face of Kensington—the mask has dropped. We have poverty, malnutrition, overcrowding, poor maintenance and, underlying this, a lack of care. The people who have been failed want justice and accountability, and an honest and transparent process to achieve it. We all now have to step up to ensure that we live in a world where a terrible and avoidable tragedy such as the fire of Grenfell Tower never happens again. South Kensington has stood with North Kensington, and we will work together to achieve that, as I will, as the first Labour MP for Kensington.

People are proud. I have seen families coming out of disgracefully overcrowded and unhealthy homes who seem organised, clean and in control, however stressed and tired they are. I have had late night emails from one teenager who had been sitting on the stairs to complete her GCSE homework when her family had gone to sleep—this was the only time she could do it. I have visited a proud and ambitious family where four children, including teenagers of opposite genders, shared a bedroom. I have visited a very dear and confused elderly woman who had been living in darkness for weeks as her electricity ring main had blown and she was too afraid of strangers to let repair workers in. All these issues and more occurred in Grenfell Tower, including power surges that blew all the electrical devices, yet the residents’ protestations were ignored, and the so-called “frequent complainers” were blacklisted. By what process of deregulation and the bonfire of red tape was this disaster allowed to happen?

Some people seem to think that social tenants have no right to live in an area such as “desirable” Kensington. Some people demonstrate a total lack of empathy or even respect for those not born to a world where basic human comforts and a good education are givens. Some people think that social tenants should simply move away if they don’t like what they’ve been “given” and that housing people on low incomes in the inner city, who had been living in darkness for weeks as her electricity ring main had blown and she was too afraid of strangers to let repair workers in. All these issues and more occurred in Grenfell Tower, including power surges that blew all the electrical devices, yet the residents’ protestations were ignored, and the so-called “frequent complainers” were blacklisted. By what process of deregulation and the bonfire of red tape was this disaster allowed to happen?

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are the kinds of people this Government are helping, especially through our Help to Buy schemes. There are all manner of schemes under which one can now get into owning a property—or a bit of it or a share of it. There are so many different schemes and they are very popular. There are great advantages to buying or moving into a new home, because they are energy-efficient and they cost less to run.

Let us not forget that the people living in all these houses, particularly those around Taunton Deane, all have jobs and are all working in the constituency. They are all contributing to the economy and paying their taxes—low taxes I might add, to which we are committed in the Gracious Speech, unlike the Labour party. All of this is working for the economy as a whole. One thing I have noticed is that among these new housing developments we need to address the infrastructure and the traffic generated by all these new homes. We need to make sure we get the right facilities in the right places to accompany all these houses. I am very pleased that in the last two years I have been able to be part of a group of stakeholders that has managed to attract an incredible £300 million to Taunton Deane, largely for these infrastructure projects. That will make these developments much more viable. We have the developments at the Toneway, Creech Castle and the railway station, and they will all help to make the economy work and to make people’s lives more sustainable. We also now have garden town status, which I played a role in securing. With that, Taunton Deane will now be able to bid into the £2.3 billion housing infrastructure pot of money, to make these homes and the whole infrastructure around them more sustainable. So it is very important that we build the right homes in the right places and make them sustainable.

The excellent housing White Paper contains lots of ideas about the types of homes in which we might live: should we have container homes, or homes on water, for instance? We need to take great care if we are going to build up, as we know from the recent tragic events. Careful thought needs to be given to these matters, but we have got the building regulations and building controls. We have established an effective, new, high-quality system that will enable us to live in the homes that we want, and with sustainable drainage, because in Somerset flooding is a big issue so I urge the Housing Minister to be very conscious of including that as well. I applaud the introduction of the electric vehicles Bill, because all these initiatives will help to make our neighbourhoods better places in which to live.

Finally, I look forward to the introduction of the agriculture Bill. I hope we will build into this new Bill not only a Brexit that works for all our land use and agriculture—because this is a huge industry—but measures that work for the environment, too. We must attract and bring in all the environmental protections that we need to make our country sustainable. That brings us back to housing, because, of course, without a sustainable environment we do not have a sustainable future.

I welcome the Queen’s Gracious Speech; I welcome everything in it to make Brexit work and the fact that we will have the tools in place to continue to have a positive economy moving forward.

2.32 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Like many others, I had expected a little more from this Queen’s Speech. On the key point regarding the repeal of the European Communities Act, the certainty and assurance my constituents want to see is that there will be no loss of rights or protections as a result of leaving the EU. The last thing our country needs right now is a bunch of “here today, gone tomorrow” Ministers blundering around undoing the rights and safeguards on which the British people depend for protections at work, human rights, environmental security and economic wellbeing.

One thing is clear: we do not need to hear any more nonsense about extensive use of secondary legislation or Henry VIII powers, as this Parliament has plenty of time to debate these issues. As we reflect on whether contempt for regulation played any part in the Grenfell tragedy, the last thing we want is to see our water and air standards reduced and food safety compromised because of the behaviour of those who fundamentally reject precautionary principles or the idea that the polluter pays.

If part of my job is to reflect the concerns of my constituents, it is only fair that I point out that in a recent survey I undertook with the people of Selly Oak, they were very clear that their No. 1 concern was housing and homelessness. That is perhaps not surprising when we can barely move in Birmingham these days without coming across someone sleeping in a shop doorway. The problem is not confined to the city centre; it is rife across the suburbs and the same all over the country. It is a consequence of an obsession with austerity. In some cases it is a direct result of the Government’s pointless meddling with the Supporting People programme, heartless and botched attacks on local authority spending, and ill-considered welfare changes. My advice centres are full of people with housing problems: a mother with two children who has been forced to sleep on the floor of her parents’ two-bedroom house for over three years; the man whose bedroom is covered in black mould; repairs that never get done; or the woman who contacted me to say that she and her three-year-old son had been subjected to carbon monoxide poisoning courtesy of a flue that had not been properly connected to a boiler despite the work being signed off by the landlord’s gas engineer.

This Queen’s Speech should be setting out to make these problems a priority. We need the law to be simplified so that there are powers to utilise land that has been banked by individuals or organisations. We need permissive powers to encourage funding opportunities so that, as well as traditional build, there is scope for smaller developments, community build, and high-quality, healthy and environmentally modern systems. We need to be certain that this Government are now serious about building such housing and ending the scandal of homelessness.

Of course, rather than being shy of regulation, we need to tackle rogue landlords and developers, whether we are talking about council and social housing or the private sector. Last year, the Government had an opportunity to look at my Protection of Family Homes (Enforcement and Permitted Development) Bill, which warned of the dangers of rogue building and conversions. Perhaps if the Government had spent a little more time
listening and a little less time talking it out, their minds would have been a little more focused on safety and regulation. I hope that I will be able to give them another opportunity in this Parliament, but we should not be waiting for a private Member's Bill; providing protection for tenants and homeowners against rogue landlords and developers should be a Government priority.

Of course, with so little else to address in this Queen's Speech, I thought we might have seen an offer to revisit the plight of the WASPI women. If transitional arrangements in the form of pension credits are not the answer for these women, who are being punished through no fault of their own, what is the answer? It surely cannot be to wait until their numbers dwindle through age and ill health. This is an injustice for all to see. Why not have a short piece of legislation to tackle it now? And while we are at it, where is the promise to straighten out the mess that is affecting disabled people and the scandal of personal independence payments? How many people have to go hungry, suffer a breakdown, get into mountains of debt and lose their entire self-respect before this Government recognise that there is a world of difference between helping those who can work into work and setting arbitrary targets based on bonus payments for private companies that strip the poor, the sick and disabled of support to which any civilised society would see them as rightfully entitled?

We heard a bit yesterday from the mover of the Gracious Speech about his wish for a fairer, more just society. I want that as well. So how am I to explain to my constituents that the average chief executive of a FTSE 100 company now earns 144 times the average salary? How do we compare that with cuts to in-work benefits and pay freezes for low-paid workers? Why are salary? How do we compare that with cuts to in-work payments? How many people have to go hungry, suffer a breakdown, get into mountains of debt and lose their entire self-respect before this Government recognise that there is a world of difference between helping those who can work into work and setting arbitrary targets based on bonus payments for private companies that strip the poor, the sick and disabled of support to which any civilised society would see them as rightfully entitled?

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2.38 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to deliver my maiden speech during such an important debate on the future of our country. The challenges ahead of us all are indeed profound.

Representing much of the Scottish borders for 10 years in my previous role as a Member of the Scottish Parliament was a great honour and privilege. Now, as the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk, I find myself once again humbled by the trust and confidence placed in me by my constituents. I am deeply grateful for their support and promise to work as hard as I possibly can to represent them, regardless of their party politics.

I count myself very lucky to live in and represent one of the most beautiful parts of the United Kingdom—if not the most beautiful. Due to the rural nature of the constituency, it is one of the larger areas represented in this House. With size, comes great diversity: fishing communities like Eyemouth on the Berwickshire coast, paired with distinct and historic towns such as Duns, Coldstream, Hawick, Selkirk, St Boswells, Jedburgh, Newcastleton and Kelso; and then out to the valleys of the remote communities of Ettrick and Yarrow.

My new constituency includes the towns of Galashiels, Melrose, Earlston and Lauder, which I did not have the pleasure of representing in my previous role in the Scottish Parliament. For those who do not know this part of Scotland, all these border towns, and the lands that surround them, are famed for their beauty. Their history runs deep, as is clearly apparent in the centuries-old common ridings and festivals that are held every year in many towns throughout the borders. We also have the glorious home of Sir Walter Scott, Abbotsford house, on the banks of the mighty River Tweed.

Of course, the rural and diverse nature of the constituency provides us with many challenges. I will make it my mission in this place to improve broadband connectivity, thus ensuring that businesses can thrive and compete with the more urban areas of these islands. Similarly, I will make the creation of an environment that allows for job creation a priority. In my view, creating good and well-paid jobs is the best way of lifting people out of poverty. Effective and sustainable transport links—including the extension of the borders railway to Hawick and on to Carlisle—together with better broadband connectivity and improvements to other infrastructure, will be the key to pursuing that aim.

The challenges and opportunities thrown up by Brexit for my constituents—especially export businesses, farmers and fishermen—will be of fundamental importance over the coming years. I will work tirelessly to help to ensure that we come out of the process even stronger and even more together than we are now. Specifically, I look forward to working with the Government on establishing the borderlands growth deal, which will not only secure economic prosperity but deepen ties between communities in southern Scotland and northern England. Our communities may be divided by a border line marked on the map, but we share many of the same challenges, and the borderlands growth deal will give us the opportunity to tackle them together.

Speaking in this great Chamber today, I am struck by the importance of effective parliamentary democracy. Most of all, though, I am reminded of the significant contributions that my predecessors have made to this place. I know that my immediate predecessor, Calum Kerr, worked hard to ensure that the voice of Borderers was heard. We had differing views on big political issues of the day, but he is proud of his border roots and his contributions here were evidence of that. I wish him and his family well for the future. Before him, Michael Moore represented the constituency for 18 years. Such long service and loyalty to the borders will not be forgotten any time soon. His time as Secretary of State for Scotland at such a crucial time in our Union’s history, and his successful private Member’s Bill on the international aid target, show that his influence was not confined to the borders. I pay tribute to him, too.

As I mentioned, the borders is steeped in history and tradition. The foremost examples of this are our common ridings and festivals, which are currently getting under way throughout the borders. All the towns have their own distinct form of celebration and commemoration. However, one things remains constant: all are a celebration of identity and pride, and all allow those who gather a chance to reflect on those who have gone before them. Although a celebration of individuality, the events that take place in each town tie the people of the borderlands together in a show of pride and commonality.
2.44 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) on his maiden speech. As an Ulster Scot who has a very strong relationship with those on the mainland, it is always good to have a Scottish cousin in the House. I invite him to come to Strangford—then we will see whether he still thinks he has the most beautiful constituency in the whole United Kingdom. It is a pleasure to have him in the House, and we wish him well in all that he does.

It is no surprise that the Queen’s Speech mainly included issues relating to Brexit. This is the most crucial time in recent British history for good legislation, and it is clear that there must be a focus on getting the best approach to our exit from Europe. This debate is on housing and social security, and when we talk about housing, we should also focus on where that housing is. Where we have housing we need good healthcare, so we need to ensure that there is investment in GP practices nationwide—the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), who is not currently in the Chamber, referred to the lack of investment in his area. We need to encourage young students to commit to service as a GP. We need to strengthen the ties between GPs and their local surgeries, and we can give GPs the support they need in the form of initiatives such as treating minor ailments in chemists, thereby using the available professionalism and capability to the fullest.

Returning Members will know about one of my passions in this House, and new Members will hopefully know shortly: I am well known for being the Democratic Unionist party spokesperson for human rights and for my concern about persecution throughout the world. Sadly, this has been exemplified on our shores recently with terrorist attacks against freedom and democracy—attacks on the very core of our communities. The world is changing. As chair of the all-party group on international freedom of religion or belief, I believe that understanding the religious dynamics playing out in different communities must be of the utmost importance when Her Majesty’s Government form any internationally focused policy. I appreciate that the Government are committed to that.

Some 80% of people worldwide live in countries where social hostility and restrictions on religion are high or very high. Freedom of religion or belief is a human right that is often overlooked. In 2016, nearly 90,000 Christians were killed simply because of their religious beliefs. In more than 100 countries around the world, more than 215 million Christians continue to face intimidation, imprisonment, forced conversion or assault.

Stephen Lloyd: Does the hon. Gentleman, like me, support Open Doors, an organisation that publicises some of the shocking discrimination and persecutions against Christians around the world, and that urges Her Majesty’s Government to step up and make it absolutely clear that this is unacceptable, as it would be against any religion?

Jim Shannon: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. Open Doors does excellent work, and I am aware of it day to day. There are many organisations in the House, but Open Doors also takes the opportunity to stand up for and talk to people around the world.

So-called Islamic State has nearly succeeded in its attempt to eradicate the Christian communities of Iraq and Syria; the Christian population has plummeted from 1 million to 200,000 in Iraq, and from 1.25 million to 500,000 in Syria. Many Christians remain displaced and face discrimination that prevents them from gaining equal access to food, shelter, education and work. In May, 122 Christians in Eritrea were rounded up from their homes and detained, including disabled people and entire families. That escalation in the crackdown on Christians coincides with the Orthodox archbishop’s 10th year under incommunicado house arrest.

In April we saw the Russian Supreme Court’s decision to declare the Christian sect Jehovah’s Witnesses an extremist organisation, banning their headquarters and all 395 local organisations from operating and ordering their property to be seized by the state. That shows a clear escalation.

In Pakistan, only last week a Shi’ite man, Ta’imoor Raza, was charged with blasphemy and handed the death sentence, contrary to international law. That underlines the issues there. In Myanmar, since 2012 over 168,000 Rohingya Muslims have fled the country because of attacks by the military, including the burning of homes and the raping of women. Those are vile, evil, wicked deeds, and in some cases they are carried out by its Government.

Advancing freedom of religion or belief between faith communities helps to build tolerant and cohesive communities. I believe that it is a crucial component of Government policy, not only in preventing further violent attacks on people because of their faith, but in preventing violent extremism and achieving the sustainable development goals. There is a role to play for the Department for International Development, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and, I believe, the Ministry of Defence. I am pleased to see the Minister for Disabled
People, Health and Work on the Government Front Bench. This is not her responsibility, but I know that she will take my points on board.

The Government’s recent manifesto declared that they would “expand our global efforts to combat...violence against people because of their faith.”

The Prime Minister has made a commitment to stand up for the freedom of people of all religions to practise their beliefs openly and in peace and safety. Perhaps the Minister responsible will clarify what those measures will be. For example, will they ensure that displaced communities in Iraq and Syria can return home safely? I offer the Government the APPG’s assistance in taking those measures forward.

As part of its membership of the EU, the UK has routinely asserted its commitment to promoting the right to freedom of religion or belief as part of its global human rights diplomacy. The UK regularly reports on its implementation of the EU guidelines for freedom of religion or belief and has made further commitments within the EU human rights framework. I ask the Minister responsible whether Her Majesty’s Government will retain the commitment to monitor and report their implementation of freedom of religion or belief through their representatives globally. I urge the Government to deepen their work with multilateral organisations such as the Commonwealth and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

I believe that the Government are committed to that in some of their policies, but I am seeking an assurance because it was not mentioned specifically in the Queen’s Speech, and I think it is important that we put down a marker now. There are many things that we would wish to see happen. This matter is very close to my heart, as it is to the hearts of many people across the whole United Kingdom. The fact that people are intimidated because of their religious beliefs, having to live in endangered neighbourhoods, or even killed, indicates how important this issue is.

I want to mention a few other things that also concern me. There are many aspects of Brexit that we wish to support and take forward. I commend the financial guidance and claims Bill. Age UK recently contributed to the Government’s consultation on the future of the Money Advice Service, the Pensions Advisory Service and Pension Wise. I support the proposal to create one Money Advice Service, the Pensions Advisory Service and Co-operation in Europe.

I offer the Government the APPG’s assistance in taking those measures forward.

Debate on the Address
On education, I must repeat my call for fairer funding for schools, especially in a rural constituency such as mine in South Dorset. I accept that there are now more good and outstanding schools, and that is to be recognised — people must be congratulated on that — but the current funding formula is really not fair. We do not want all the cake in South Dorset, just a fairer share of it.

The vexed question of climate change is my next observation. Although no one would argue with the need to break away from our reliance on fossil fuels, there has to be an affordable and workable alternative that keeps our economy turning and the lights on. Yes, renewables must play a part, but phasing out our coal and gas-fired power stations could be a “monstrous act of self-harm”, according to Nick Timothy, the former aide to the Prime Minister. Interestingly, the Office for Budget Responsibility says that soaring green subsidies and levies are due to virtually double during this Parliament to £14.7 billion a year. Those are paid through our energy bills. We really need a credible approach to our future energy needs, and setting unrealistic and potentially damaging targets is not a sensible way forward.

On overseas aid, I am afraid that I do not agree with the arbitrary 0.7% target. Yes, we should help those who need help, but we need help in this country, too. Charity starts at home. I want the money that we send — taxpayers’ money — better targeted, and the money that we do not send spent on very good causes in this country.

2.58 pm

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): I wish to associate myself with the earlier comments from the Front Benchers on the Grenfell Tower tragedy. I also wish to congratulate the right hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Gauke) on his appointment as Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. I am glad to be back, and, as I have been appointed the Liberal Democrat spokesman on work and pensions, I shall be having numerous conversations with him. Today, there are four particular aspects of social services on which I want to focus. There is an awful lot to cover, but I shall restrict myself to four: universal credit, WRAG, WASPI and PIP.

When I was thinking of those four this morning in preparation for my speech—I was involved with all of them during the coalition, to a greater or lesser extent, often trying to improve or change things—I saw that they were shocking combinations of poor quality. Universal credit has poor-quality policy. I remember years ago, under the coalition Government, when it was first mooted, that I supported the concept of bringing all benefits together to one point of contact. That would be more sensible for the recipient. The key, though, was the taper. I was very disappointed that the former Chancellor of the Exchequer, who now edits the Evening Standard, insisted on an absolutely ludicrous taper that means that people on universal credit are barely better off in a low-paid job than they are on benefit, which defeats the whole purpose of universal credit. I look forward to the new Secretary of State using his charm with his close colleague, the current Chancellor, to get a more intelligent taper. Without that, universal credit is doomed to fail, and we all know in this Chamber the problems people already face with its delivery. The taper was bad policy.

WRAG is an acronym for work-related activity group, and is meant for disabled people who have had a disability or have had a disability for quite some time and believe that they can — and the DWP believes that they can — get back into jobs, with the correct levels of support. That is something that I am passionate about, and that I was passionate about when I was last in this House. From April this year, the Government took a decision to reduce the income of those in the WRAG by almost 30%. Anyone with any experience of disability at all will know that if someone has been disabled for quite some time, they can get out of the habit of getting into work. It takes a bit of support to get them back into employment, so they go into the WRAG. To then cut their income by 30%—folks, we know what will happen. People will do their damndest to stay in the support group, which means that they do not get back into jobs. I think that was a stupid decision by the Government.

Thirdly, on the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign, this decision was profoundly unfair. My partner, if she will forgive me for giving her broad age to the Chamber, is one of those affected. Many women between 55 and 58 across the United Kingdom are affected and it is profoundly unfair. I was glad that under the new consensual approach to government the Conservatives are ready to loosen the austerity strings, to listen more to people and to be fairer, and I would urge them to have the WASPI women at the top of the list for reconsideration.

Last but not least is PIP, or the personal independence payment. Again, I am very frustrated because I worked hard with Lord Freud in the other place to try to get PIP to work. The concept is about individual personal income, allowing people with disabilities to control the money they have and use it in the right way. The concept is good, but then guess what happens? I go and lose the election in 2015—I am sure that I am far too insignificant to have made any difference at all, but PIP has not improved things. We are still getting a high rate of people failing the work capability assessment and going to tribunal; more than 80% of them are winning, which means that PIP is not working and the delivery of PIP is not working.

Over the coming years—however long this Parliament lasts—I am looking forward to working with the Government in a spirit of compromise to improve these areas of the DWP and its remit so that it delivers what it is supposed to deliver: fairness, equity and ease of access. The latter is terribly important when someone has been on benefits for a long time, as there must be a smooth transition of funds.

On the pension side, I am delighted that the Conservative manifesto pledge to get rid of the triple lock was dropped in the Queen’s Speech. I remind the House that it was the Liberal Democrats in coalition who brought in the triple lock pension, so I am glad that despite those halcyon days the Conservatives are finally listening to the Lib Dems and have retained the triple lock.

Most importantly of all, it is good to be back. I pay tribute to my predecessor, who I know fought valiantly for Eastbourne. For me, it is a pleasure.

3.4 pm

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd), and I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the
Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) on his very fine maiden speech.

When Her Majesty Queen Victoria granted permission to her military command in 1854 to establish a permanent training camp for the British Army at the village of Aldershot, the foundation was laid not just for a successful garrison, but for a remarkable tradition of service to this country. Since that time, my constituency of Aldershot has been the home of the British Army and, since its foundation more than 160 years ago, thousands of servicemen and women have passed through the garrison while doing their loyal duty to the Crown. Today the garrison is still home to thousands of soldiers and their families: the 1st Battalion Grenadier Guards, the Queen’s Own Gurkha Logistic Regiment, 4 Rifles and my own regiment, the 1st Battalion Scots Guards. These regiments, as part of 12th Armoured Infantry Brigade, form one of the country’s most deployable and experienced combat units, with distinguished service in Iraq and Afghanistan.

For many years, Aldershot was home to the Parachute Regiment and British airborne forces. It was from Aldershot in 1982 that the airborne battalions of 2 and 3 Para joined the British taskforce sailing to the south Atlantic to liberate the Falkland Islands from the Argentine invasion. Last Sunday, to mark the 35th anniversary of their victory, our town was honoured to welcome back the surviving veterans of 2 and 3 Para, and the families of the fallen. They were joined by a new generation of serving soldiers and many local people from across our community in a demonstration of the high regard that Aldershot has for the armed forces community and the strong civic bond that exists between the military, the town and the wider borough of Rushmoor. Indeed, the borough has taken creative measures to support our veterans—for example, enabling a £10 million investment from Stoll to provide social housing for vulnerable veterans and help to reduce the alarmingly high levels of homelessness among that group of people.

Another group whose history is intertwined with that of Aldershot and the surrounding area is that of former Gurkha soldiers and their families. Their historic loyalty to our monarch and their immaculate record of courageous service is second to none, and they play a much valued and respected role in our community today. The Nepalese community is particularly active when it comes to charitable fundraising, and many other groups across the borough do exactly the same thing. Our football club, Aldershot Town, is more than just a club. It is a community hub that raises tens of thousands of pounds every year for good causes—as too, do the Rotarians, who are justifiably proud of the annual Rotary club donkey derby in Farnborough, which I recommend to all hon. Members.

Although my constituency is the home of the British Army, it is also the birthplace of British aviation. When Samuel Cody made the first British flight on the heath at Farnborough in 1908, it was the start of a remarkable story of courageous and determined innovation that has now blossomed into a huge global industry. Today, companies such as BAE Systems, TAG Farnborough, QinetiQ and a plethora of highly innovative defence aviation and hi-tech companies in Farnborough and the Blackwater valley employ thousands and earn millions for our Exchequer.

I did not start my life with a particular interest in politics. I started my career as a soldier and I am humbled to come to this place as a parliamentarian. I know that in my predecessor, Sir Gerald Howarth, I have very large shoes to fill. Sir Gerald is a man of absolute integrity who has dedicated his life to public service, and I have been hugely fortunate to benefit from his kindness and his wise counsel.

The strength of the military presence in my constituency is mirrored by the strength of civic society across Rushmoor borough, and I am proud of that. I am proud that we have a great history and a great future. We are diverse and dynamic. I am proud that we now have the youngest ever mayor of the borough, Councillor Sophia Choudhary, who also happens to be a young Muslim woman of Kashmiri heritage. I hope to serve my constituents with the same sense of public service, energy and compassion that they themselves display every day of the week across Aldershot, Farnborough, Blackwater and Hawley.

Anyone familiar with my constituency will know that one figure who literally towers over us is the Duke of Wellington. The Iron Duke sits on horseback in massive bronze relief on top of Round Hill. The Iron Duke, never one to be over-patient with politicians, would, I think, have agreed with this nation’s other greatest soldier-turned-statesman, Sir Winston Churchill, who, as a young cavalry officer, lived in Aldershot cavalry barracks before deploying to India. Churchill famously said:

‘Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.’

On that note, Mr Speaker, I will resume my place.

3.10 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) on a fine maiden speech, and congratulate others who have made maiden speeches today.

I hope I may be forgiven for particularly singling out my hon. Friend the new Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad), who not only made a fine and moving speech but has had to rise to the kind of challenge that I am sure anybody has ever had to rise to so soon after being elected to Parliament. Kensington needs her, and she has certainly risen to that challenge in these days. I hope we will all do what we can to support her in the times ahead. I speak with particular feeling because some of the wards in the northern part of her constituency were in my constituency under previous boundaries, as was Grenfell Tower. What she said was therefore particularly powerful and moving for me.

I echo what my hon. Friend and others have said about the extraordinary community response at a time of serious failure in the institutions of the state in the aftermath of the tragedy, including from many constituents in north Westminster, a sister community who have been working tirelessly over the past week to help the victims and survivors of the disaster.

Along with very many other Members of Parliament, my hon. Friend and I have residents living in other tower blocks, many of whom are deeply concerned. I hope that few will have anything like the equivalent level of reason to be concerned, although they will still need reassurance. However, some may need more support and assistance than reassurance. It is absolutely incumbent on us to rise to that challenge.

Steve McCabe: Is not the one single bit of reassurance that everyone needs the knowledge that if local authorities...
[Steve McCabe]

are going to carry out inspections and take remedial action, there will be funding from the Government to deliver it?

Ms Buck: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I and others pushed for that during the statement and at other opportunities. The local authorities, the arm’s length management organisations and other providers must have a guarantee. They must have the bills written both for the inspection process and for any remedial works. I think we have nudged closer to that commitment this afternoon, but we still do not have it unequivocally. This is important because local authorities have had their budgets cut very severely. Kensington by 38% in the past five years and my own borough of Westminster by 46%. Local authorities, including the environmental health teams who are so important in this context, have had their budgets cut, and social housing providers have had a rent cut imposed on them, with an impact on housing revenue accounts and on management and maintenance in social housing. That has to be recognised. It was a policy imposed by the Government and it has implications that they need to respond to. That action has to be forthcoming.

The Government will need to demonstrate to us how quickly they can respond to the findings of the inquiry, which cannot be prejudged, of course, but actions need to be taken even before that. We have spoken about social housing in this context, but we need to remember that many residents in towers and high-rise blocks, even those built by local authorities, are not actually local authority tenants. In many cases, about a third are either leaseholders, or are legally subletting their properties to private tenants. Those people are all in different situations and subject to different regulatory arrangements, and there are real concerns that the fire safety and other standards applying in social housing do not automatically apply to private owners and leaseholders in social housing blocks. That must be urgently addressed by the Government.

In my view, we need to bring into force section 38 of the Building Act 1984, which would allow victims of breaches of building regulations to sue for damages. The Government could move on that. We need to introduce a statutory consultation process applying to tenants when there are major works in buildings. Such a process currently applies to leaseholders, but not to tenants. We need to amend the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 to allow landlords to go into tenanted properties and ensure that fire safety standards are comparable. We also need to impose new obligations on leases to enable landlords to require access for the purpose of making fire safety improvements, and so forth. There are regulatory changes on which the Government could act immediately and urgently—and they must do so—without in any way prejudging the findings of the inquiry and the separate actions that they will need to take afterwards.

I ask the Government to revisit a revised version of the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Bill—I introduced the proposals as a private Member’s Bill, and the Opposition put them forward as amendments to the Housing and Planning Act 2016—because, particularly in an age of cash-starved local authorities, we need to enable tenants to enforce standards in law when there is substandard accommodation, as they can currently do with respect to properties in disrepair. This is not about having a new regulatory burden; it is about tenants being able to enforce such standards.

In my last remaining minute I want to raise one other matter. The absolute first priority today must be to house the survivors of the Grenfell Tower tragedy adequately—we must provide them with decent local accommodation—but that must not be at the expense of the needs of other people who are homeless and in desperate housing need, whether in Kensington, Westminster or other parts of London. At the moment, we are in the dire situation that homelessness is rising fast: it has risen by 17% since 2010, and just yesterday we saw figures showing that the number of households in temporary accommodation has risen by a staggering 61% since 2010. As has happened in Kensington and Westminster, many of those families have been moved away from their homes, their children’s schools and their support networks. Social housing is not part of the problem; social housing for these and other people is part of the solution, provided it is properly funded, decent and affordable.

3.18 pm

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): I want to place on the record my apologies for disappearing from the debate last night: I had a meeting with the Brexit Secretary, and that was unavoidable. I echo the comments made by Government and Opposition Front Benchers yesterday in offering their sympathies and condolences to all those who have died, been injured or been terribly affected by the horrendous recent events in Manchester and London.

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck). She quite rightly said that the hon. Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) has had the most extraordinary introduction to her career as an MP. She has conducted herself extremely well, and I commend her for her maiden speech. I also commend my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) and for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) for theirs. All three have made a very fine start to their parliamentary careers, and I am sure that we will hear much more from them in the future.

Mr Speaker, you and I were elected 20 years ago. I am proud to return to the House as the Member for North Shropshire, with a record number of votes and a record percentage of the vote. I put that down partly to my very clear line that I want decisions about our laws and our money to be taken in this place by directly elected politicians. I am very proud to follow my predecessor—the, sadly, late John Biffen—who voted against the European Communities Act 1972, and it is tremendous to be present for a debate on a Gracious Speech that states, among its first lines, that we will repeal the European Communities Act. We will be delivering what 17.4 million people voted for, which happily was announced on my birthday at about this time last year.

Members on both sides of the House had better realise that for the first time, a massive vote in a referendum has gone against the wishes of the establishment. That is a constitutional novelty and all of us in this House had better wake up to the catastrophic damage that will be incurred to the integrity of the whole political establishment if we do not deliver.
I am delighted to say that in the election, 85% of the electorate voted for the Conservative party and the Labour party, both of which said in their platforms that we will honour the vote, we will leave the European Union, we will leave the single market and we will leave the customs union. The Liberals, bravely and quixotically, said that they would not and did extremely badly. They got only 2.4 million votes. I believe that we have a very clear mandate in this Parliament to deliver. The Gracious Speech makes it clear that that is what we will do.

About three years ago, I made a speech saying that we should nationalise the acquis. That was my expression for adopting the whole corpus of European law and filleting it at a later date. The idea goes right back to the reception statute of Virginia of 1776, the reception provision of the Delaware constitution of 1776, the moves to make Australia and New Zealand independent, the Irish Free State Constitution Act 1922 and the Indian Independence Act 1947, all of which adopted existing UK law but said that from the stroke of midnight, any further provisions made in this Parliament would not apply.

That is effectively what we will say. We are going to take back control of our laws for the elected Members of this House. We are going to take back control of our money. There is much debate among Members from every part of the House. Every one of us knows how we would like to spend public money in our constituency. Happily, we will have £10 billion, which is our net contribution, to play with. We can decide in this House what to do with it. If we make bad decisions, we will get kicked out and people who might make better decisions about money will replace us.

Leaving the single market will deliver on the political imperative and the economic imperative. Opposition Members rightly say that we should have a Brexit for jobs. They go on about the single market, but do they realise that in 1999, 61% of our trade went to the EU, today it is 45% and in a few years’ time it will be 35%? The growth is in trade with the rest of the world. That is where our future lies. That is why I am delighted that we will leave the customs union. The Secretary of State for International Trade is in the States at the moment.

The EU is pathetic at striking trade deals around the world. I was involved in the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership negotiations with Secretary Vilsack in the States. The whole £100 billion deal was stuck on the Greek definition of feta. The EU moves as slowly as the lamest donkey in the caravan. We can now do trade deals with countries that are hungry to trade with us. That is the future. Do not forget that that will help many in the developing world. It is a disgrace that because of the common external tariff, Germany earns $3.8 billion from coffee and the whole of Africa, where they grow the stuff, earns only $2.4 billion because of the tariffs on worked coffee. Ending that would bring huge benefits, probably bigger than many aid budgets.

Looking quickly to the clock, Northern Ireland brings all this together, with the need for seamless borders and trade that is as free as possible. Critically, we have the ability to bring that about with modern technology. Today, 10,000 trucks will go from Canada to Detroit and they will not stop. With automatic number plate recognition and electronic invoicing, problems at the border are surmountable.

I will speak rapidly about the right of abode. I am delighted that the Prime Minister will make a commitment today on the 3 million EU citizens and the 1 million UK citizens.

Lastly, it is tremendous to see in the Queen’s Speech that we will have a UK agriculture policy and a UK fisheries policy right out to 200 miles, decided by elected politicians in this House. I support the Gracious Speech.

Mr Speaker: I do hope that, with the passage of time, the right hon. Member for North Shropshire will learn to overcome his natural shyness and to tell us what he really thinks.

3.24 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to make my maiden speech today, Mr Speaker. I start by paying tribute to my predecessor, David Burrowes. He dedicated more than 23 years to public service, first as a councillor and then as an MP, showing his commitment and affection for the area. I wish him well in the future.

I also pay tribute to our emergency services, across London and the UK. The recent terror attacks have been abhorrent and terrifying, but our emergency services have responded each and every time with the utmost courage and professionalism. For this they deserve both our praise and gratitude, as they do for their response to the awful tragedy at Grenfell Tower in Kensington. All London grieves deeply for the family and friends of those who sadly lost their lives. I join in thanking and praising the brave people from our emergency services in London who once again ran towards danger.

I am of Cypriot heritage. My parents came here from Cyprus, and English was not my first language, but we made a home in London, and we were welcomed with tolerance and warmth. That is what allowed me to be here today in Parliament to give my maiden speech as the proud new MP for Enfield, Southgate. That is the same welcome that the people of Enfield, Southgate extend to everybody from other nations who lives, works and studies locally. I am proud of our diverse, tolerant and inclusive community, which brings out the best in people. It is precious to us all in Enfield, Southgate in these difficult times, or in any times. We will not allow the preachers of hate to drive a wedge between our community.

Along with the majority of my constituents, I voted to remain in the European Union. I believe, as they do, that we are better off working together, and I believe that people from countries across the European Union should be allowed to live, work and study in London. I wish the result had been different, but we must now face the reality, and I will do all I can to campaign for the best deal we can get.

We are very proud of our local history and institutions in Enfield, Southgate. We are lucky to have the Chickenshed theatre, set up by Jo Collins and Mary Ward, with the assistance of John Bull, which has been running for more than 40 years. What a success story. It leads the field in breaking down barriers, promoting diversity and tackling discrimination. Chickenshed has given many young people hope, a fantastic experience and the confidence that they can succeed irrespective of background, ethnicity, or disability.
Many people know the Piccadilly line in London, with its iconic art deco stations at Arnos Grove, Southgate, Oakwood and Cockfosters in my constituency. Designed by the renowned architect Charles Holden, they were built in the early 1930s, and these transport links, along with the Great Northern rail line joining Bowes Park, Palmers Green, Winchmore Hill and Grange Park, led to the subsequent housing boom that made Enfield, Southgate the place it is today—the place I am beyond proud to represent, here in the mother of all Parliaments.

Those transport links were one reason why many people flocked to Enfield in the 1930s; later, in 1971, when I was just three years old, my parents made Southgate their home. At school in Enfield, encouraged by some incredibly dedicated and knowledgeable teachers, I developed a love for reading that has stayed with me. Enfield, Southgate has been fortunate in having a connection to a string of literary figures, including Sir John Betjeman, Thomas Hood, Leigh Hunt, Jerome K. Jerome and, of course, Stevie Smith. However, contrary to what I told my teachers, I do not admit to having read them all.

Education is the cornerstone of success in life. It plays a key part in breaking down inequalities and promoting tolerance and understanding, but unless we invest in our schools and our children, those aims will be lost. We have some fine schools in Enfield, Southgate, including both St Michael at Bowes Church of England Junior School and Eversley Primary School, for both of which I am a governor, and Hazelwood Primary School. However, the majority of our schools face Government funding cuts that will harm the prospects of many young people in my constituency. All children get only one chance to have a decent education. I was lucky enough to get that opportunity and I seized it. I want the same chances for our young people, which is why I will challenge the cuts to education funding and champion a properly funded education system.

Enfield, Southgate also has a place in suffragette history. When Hazelwood Primary School opened in 1908, its first headmistress was Laura Goulden, the sister-in-law of Emmeline Pankhurst, founder of the Women’s Social and Political Union. It is no coincidence, then, that between 1910 and 1913 there was a well-established and active local suffragette movement that gathered at the famous Palmers Green triangle. I am proud that the people of Enfield, Southgate played their part in supporting votes for women—but votes are established and active local suffragette movement that gathered at the famous Palmers Green triangle. I am proud that the people of Enfield, Southgate played their part in supporting votes for women—but votes are not enough. We still have huge inequality, women still earn less than men, and in Enfield, Southgate, just as elsewhere, women have borne the brunt of the Government’s austerity agenda. I will do my utmost to push for fair funding cuts that will harm the prospects of many young people in my constituency. All children get only one chance to have a decent education. I was lucky enough to get that opportunity and I seized it. I want the same chances for our young people, which is why I will challenge the cuts to education funding and champion a properly funded education system.

Inequality is also increasingly prevalent in our health services. It was a body blow for our area when Chase Farm hospital’s accident and emergency unit closed. Since then, mounting pressure on North Middlesex hospital’s A&E unit is pushing it to breaking point. This cannot go on. The people of Enfield, Southgate deserve better. I will not sit back and allow our precious NHS to be destroyed. It needs a massive tonic, and it needs it now.

I am here because my constituents have put their faith in me. They know I am one of them. I grew up among them, I live among them and I will not let them down.

3.30 pm

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) who made a brilliant maiden speech. I am grateful for having been here for most of the maiden speeches today. I wondered whether I qualified to make one, but apparently not. I see Mr Speaker shaking his head—this is therefore not a maiden speech. [Interruption.] Absolutely right—you can’t be a maiden twice.

Before I say a few words about housing, today’s main topic, I want to join hon. Members in sending my condolences to the families who have been torn apart in the disaster that affected London only a couple of weeks ago.

Housing shortage is undoubtedly acute. The word “crisis” is often overused in politics, but it is a crisis, particularly in London, where the demand is highest. We have reached a point where someone could be earning double the average London salary and still have no prospect of owning a home. The average home here costs around £500,000, which is 12 times the average income in this city. Young people in particular have been locked out. The fact that they have to pay exorbitant rents means that they are even less likely to realise their dream. Without urgent action now, the problem will get even worse—the population of London is likely to hit 10 million in around 15 years.

I was therefore pleased by the emphasis in the manifesto on tackling the problem: the commitment to deliver a million homes by 2021 and to double the housing budget to £20 billion. However, we need to get on and do it, and there are some clear priorities. We need to deal with the fact that there are so many empty homes. It is true that, as we heard from the Prime Minister earlier, the number is at its lowest for many years, but it is still too high. The Empty Homes Agency puts the figure in London alone at 60,000, and it may be higher.

We need to get more competition into the sector, which has become effectively an oligopoly—a tiny number of giant developers accounting for the vast bulk of the development and demanding huge returns based on often spurious viability tests. We need to accelerate the release of publicly owned land. Developers always press Governments to relax protections of our green spaces, but we do not need to do that, and we should not. In London, where the need is greatest, we have huge tracts of publicly owned brownfield land that could be developed. Transport for London alone has the equivalent of 16 Hyde Parks. As we build on publicly owned land—land that we own—we can and must ensure that the new homes are not simply sold off to overseas investors and left empty. We have to solve the problem that we face in this country.

There is something else that we need to do—something that has taken on a grim new relevance. Across the capital, we have tower blocks that were rushed and poorly designed, many of which are coming to the end of their lives. There is a growing realisation that we now have an obligation to rethink our approach. I want to focus briefly on one aspect of that.

We know that a low-rise, high-density, street-based design provides more homes because it makes better use of the available space. The estate agent Savills did a detailed report a couple of years ago. It estimates that rebuilding just one fifth of London’s run-down estates
could produce up to 350,000 more homes. Every survey shows that residents more often than not prefer that approach. With so many tower blocks needing serious investment, surely now is the time to look at a different way of doing things. We can avoid the mistakes of the past and build in a way that breaks down barriers, strengthens communities and provides homes that people want to live in.

One reason for the sensitivity of the issue is that the approach has been so ham-fisted in the past. Areas have been improved, but existing residents have effectively been pushed out to make way for newcomers. That is the consequence of bad policy and bad decisions. In my own constituency, we are at the very early stages of a major regeneration scheme to remove 1960s blocks and replace them with low-rise, street-based, beautiful homes—and there will be more of them, even if the design makes it appear that there are fewer. That process is underpinned by a cast-iron residents’ guarantee: no one living there today will be unable to live there tomorrow, no one living there today will have to pay more tomorrow, and no one will have to move twice, which is particularly important to elderly residents and young families with children at local schools. The provision of that guarantee made it possible, immediately, for residents to engage in the process and take ownership of it, without needless anxiety, I think it is a process that could be replicated and emulated through the capital, and beyond.

Planning is nearly always a deeply divisive issue. If we are to have any hope at all of securing people’s consent to the delivery of the sheer quantity of homes that we know we must deliver, the planning system itself must become more sensitive, more open and more consensual. It needs to work with, rather than against, people and communities, who need to feel that they own the process. People know that we need more homes; if not for them, for their children. If they feel they are in the driving seat, they will be much more open to the challenges—and that, I think, needs to be absolutely at the heart of this great enterprise.

3.36 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith). I congratulate him on his non-maiden speech, and I congratulate all Members who made their maiden speeches during this debate.

It is a great privilege to have been re-elected as the Member of Parliament for Torfaen, and to have the opportunity once again to speak for the eastern valley of the south Wales coalfield in the House of Commons in the days and months ahead. Torfaen, like every other part of the country, will face great challenges, and I fear that those challenges will not be met by the weak minority Government that we see before us on the Conservative Benches.

I have been a historian in the past, and I tried to find some parallels in history to give me some optimism at this time. What I found was an account of the general election of 6 December 1923, which was called by the then Conservative Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, at a time when he did not need to call an election at all. He lost his majority and his authority, and ended up making a statement in the House announcing that the Government would resign, only 42 days after the date of that election. Perhaps we can look forward to the present Government’s staggering to their inevitable end a bit sooner than they may think.

On a more serious note, I must say that, along with my constituents—many of whom have contacted me in recent days—I send all our condolences and solidarity to those who have been affected by the terrible events of recent weeks and months: the terrorist atrocities in Manchester, at London Bridge and in Finsbury Park, and, of course, the terrible Grenfell Tower fire. I should also put on record my admiration for the great work done by the emergency services in all those instances.

Let me now turn to one of the specific topics of today’s debate, social security. I shall begin by talking about the issue of personal independence payments, because it has been raised in my surgery so frequently over the past two years. I am glad that the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work is present, because the letter that she kindly sent me back in March illustrates very well why the system is not working. The mandatory reconsideration system is simply not effective. During my time as a constituency Member of Parliament, I have found that not enough decisions are overturned at that stage.

The Minister’s letter states:

“One of the Mandatory Reconsiderations cleared, 42,400”—

just 15%—

“led to a change in the claimant’s award”.

As for the appeals statistics, the letter states that in the period between April 2013 and September 2016, “125,564 appeals were lodged; and 55,495...were overturned”.

In other words, there was a 44% success rate on appeal: nearly half the number who appeal have their awards overturned, so people are not getting what they were entitled to in the first place. They are being driven through this highly stressful process of having to go all the way to a tribunal to get what they should have received in the first place. I urge the Minister and the Secretary of State to get a grip on that. Whatever one’s views on the Government’s policy on social security, this shows that the system is not working as it should. They should redouble their efforts to ensure that it does work properly.

Because of the record levels of in-work poverty that have arisen in the past seven years, it is not the case anymore that we can say that a job is a route out of poverty. However, quality jobs are a route out of poverty. That is why jobs should be at the heart of our Brexit negotiations. In recent weeks, I have visited the ArvinMeritor factory that produces brakes in my constituency and seen what can be done by the workforce, management, owners and the Welsh Government working together to create a successful business. However, in Wales, we still need, at the heart of the UK Government, a proper industrial strategy that looks at specific sectors, that helps the steel sector, which would be of particular importance in south Wales, and that promotes manufacturing. Manufacturing is where we could have the quality jobs. If we want to improve productivity, the easiest way to do it is in the manufacturing sector. If we want to have export-led growth, manufacturing growth is going to be the most durable example of that. The Government should be focusing their efforts there.

Over the past two years, I have found that my constituency of Torfaen has enormous potential. The statistics provided to me by the Children’s Society show...
that, of the 17,353 children who live in my constituency, 29.5% live in poverty, when housing costs are put to one side. That is because of the policies that the Government have followed over the past seven years. To unlock the potential of my constituency and others, the reality is that this Government have to go.

3.41 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I congratulate all new Members who made their maiden speeches in the House today. May I take the opportunity to pay tribute to David Burrowes, the predecessor of the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous)? David made a remarkable contribution to the House. The hon. Gentleman has big boots to fill. I wish him well.

It is right that the Queen’s Speech, which I welcome, focuses on Brexit, on strengthening the economy and on investing in infrastructure, but I want to speak about other aspects that I welcome: those that emphasise promoting social justice, tackling modern day slavery further, taking action to protect victims of domestic violence, prioritising mental health, and tackling discrimination, including discrimination on the basis of faith. Time prevents me from speaking on more than two of those, and I would like to focus initially on mental health.

I am repeatedly told by experts that many mental health problems in young people stem from fractured and dysfunctional family relationships. Indeed, the Government’s own research by Professor Gordon Harold has clearly established that couple conflict and family instability gravely affect children and young people’s mental wellbeing. Those are major drivers of our current epidemic of poor mental health, which cannot be ignored any longer. The demand on mental health services for young people could be addressed—indeed, I believe reduced—if the Government grasped the issue and put in place policies to strengthen family life, the breakdown of which is sadly at epidemic proportions in this country.

A great number of colleagues are concerned about that. Shortly before the election, several of us made a detailed submission to our Government, with practical proposals as to how family breakdown could be addressed. We would appreciate a meeting with the responsible Minister to go through those proposals at an early date.

Building tolerant, open communities in which people have the freedom to practise their own religion or their own beliefs, combined with the promotion of greater understanding of other faiths, is an important issue. It can help to prevent extremism in our country as well as elsewhere. Improving religious literacy to counteract extremist ideology needs more attention in our country, including by the Government. I welcome the Prime Minister’s commitment to drive extremism and hatred out of our society.

With reference to the proposals in the Gracious Speech for a commission on countering extremism, may I sound a note of caution? First, Parliament must have an effective say on the scope and powers of the new commission and continue to review its efficiency. Secondly, we must be very careful about how we define extremism. That is something that the Government have yet to satisfactorily undertake. Again, Members of this House must be engaged in this much more than they have been to date.

Violent extremism is abhorrent, but it is very different from the peaceful expression of thoughts, ideas and beliefs that might be unacceptable to some, or even to the majority in society.

As you have said, Mr Speaker, we in this House enjoy the precious privilege of free speech, and the constituents we serve should enjoy nothing less. We must be vigilant in protecting and defending that. To give one example, we should be expressing far deeper concern about no-platforming at universities. People in our country today should not be constrained, or feel constrained, from expressing non-violent views or views that could in no way be considered to incite violence, even if they are not currently mainstream views. Nor should people of faith feel inhibited or be prevented from engaging in public life, either in this place or elsewhere. The privatisation of religious belief must not be the price we pay in this country for tackling extremism. If that were to happen, the terrorists would have won. Religion contributes significantly to our nation’s common good and, in countering terrorism and extremism, it is critical that we also ensure that the basic human rights of freedom of belief, speech and association are not eroded for peaceful citizens. Put simply, religious rights are human rights, and this House must safeguard them vigilantly.

3.47 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The Leader of the Opposition, my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), rightly pointed out yesterday that this Queen’s Speech would be a thin, anaemic document had it been for one parliamentary year, but that as a two-year programme it is a positive embarrassment. Fortunately, however, we are unlikely to have to wait two years before the electorate is able to put it and this Government out of their misery. I suppose we should be grateful that the disastrous general election campaign means that much of the Conservatives’ toxic programme for government has now been shelved, but that does not mean that we can rest easy.

The general election result in my constituency and many others was in part a rejection of the extreme hard Brexit peddled by the Conservative party. Equally, however, it is a rejection of its determination to continue the destruction of our key public services. Hammersmith residents were being asked to vote for the demolition and downgrading of their main hospital, Charing Cross; for cuts of up to 25% in schools budgets; for further cuts of £400 million to the Metropolitan police; and for the refusal by central Government to invest in genuinely affordable homes. They decisively rejected that, preferring the message of hope offered by Labour, yet there is every indication that the automaton in No. 10 will plough on with hard Brexit and austerity.

Given the tragic events of last week, I will turn now to the consequences of the Grenfell Tower fire. This is not only a terrible disaster for all those involved and the west London community; it also has implications for the safety of hundreds of thousands of families living in high-rise buildings around the UK and draws attention to the neglect of social housing over many years. Yesterday, the Prime Minister apologised for letting down the people of North Kensington, but the apology appears already to have been forgotten, as she fails to give clear commitments on some of the key issues arising from the disaster.
The Government must lead on the programme of making tower blocks safe and giving reassurance to their occupants across the country. The issue is not just the Grenfell Tower, but all tower blocks and how they are fitted, whether it has been compromised by later alterations and whether it is compatible with the existing structure. If the cause of this fire turns out—as in the case of the Shepherd’s Court fire in my constituency last August—to be a faulty electrical appliance, it will be a further indictment of the lack of any effective system of product registration and recall in the UK. Insufficient means of escape, the lack of sprinkler systems, poor maintenance, inadequate alarms, fire service cuts, and outdated building regulations—all are complex, difficult matters that need to be addressed.

My council wrote to everyone in a high-rise block in Hammersmith and Fulham the day after the Grenfell Tower fire assuring them that every one of those blocks had a fire-risk assessment, but we cannot rely on every housing provider to carry out a full inspection of its stock and to act on recommendations made, not least because they do not have the necessary funds after years of cuts. The Government must lead on those matters and enforcement.

This week, figures showed that the number of social homes being built in England has fallen by an incredible 97% since Labour left office. In one of London’s biggest housing schemes, at Battersea power station, the developer is seeking to cut the number of affordable homes from the agreed 636 to 386. That is not a coincidence. Tory Governments and councils have systematically undermined and devalued social housing over more than 30 years. I think of the example in my constituency of the West Kensington and Gibbs Green estates, where 750 affordable and social homes were sold off to a private developer as part of a scheme promoted by Tory councils in Hammersmith and Fulham, and Kensington and Chelsea. I will add that residents from those estates have been looking after five Grenfell Tower families who were unceremoniously dumped in a bed and breakfast hotel by Kensington and Chelsea without any means of support.

I put it to the Prime Minister this morning that the 68 so-called luxury homes that have been made available at Berkeley’s Kensington Row development were already allocated for social housing. They are not additional homes. It is of course right to give precedence to Grenfell Tower residents, but why should it be a zero-sum game in which affordable housing is not being provided? It is exactly that issue which has led to the loss of trust among Grenfell Tower residents.

The public inquiry must restore that trust, but the disaster relief, which was so appallingly handled by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, has added to the sense of gloom and suspicion across west London. I do not know why the Prime Minister could not answer this, but if it is right for the chief executive to go—the Prime Minister said it was—why is not also right for the council’s political leadership to go due to the disastrous way in which it has behaved?

I end by commending the work, effort and maiden speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad). She and my hon. Friend the Member for Wollaton South (Ms Baxx), who I am sorry to learn used to cover North Kensington, have cared and looked after the population of that area, but that cannot be done without the necessary resources. The Prime Minister has to make good her pledge not only to the residents of Grenfell Tower, but to everyone in need of social housing. It must again be a main form of tenure in this country with proper Government support.

3.53 pm

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): It was Harold MacMillan who said: “Except for ‘going over the top’ in war, there is hardly any experience so alarming as giving one’s maiden speech.”

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for New Ashgate (Leo Docherty) and for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) for giving such excellent examples today. MacMillan, like me, was a Teesside MP, sitting for Stockton South, which was so ably represented by James Wharton until this election. I pay tribute to James, who was a great champion for Teesside, a staunch ally of Brexit, and an excellent constituency Member of Parliament.

What the electoral gods take away with one hand, they give back with another, and I stand here today having won Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland after 20 years of Labour control, which provides an opportunity to pay tribute to my predecessor, Tom Blenkinsop. Tom arrived in Parliament following the tragic death of Ashok Kumar just a few weeks before the 2010 general election. Tom is a proud Teessider, and an even prouder member of the Labour party, but he was always perfectly decent with me. Indeed, during the campaign, I found myself in a bizarre situation: the only person in my constituency who had a lower opinion of the Leader of the Opposition’s aptitude for Downing Street was in fact the sitting Labour Member of Parliament. Tom made his position perfectly clear and reconciled the situation by doing the honourable thing and resigning, and I wish him well with his return to the trade union movement.

If Tom was fire and brimstone, that was in marked contrast to Ashok Kumar, who, as Members who knew him will attest, was quiet and studious but inspired fierce loyalty from his constituents. It was inspiring for me, as a new MP, to see this high regard, and it was love, which I found on doorsteps right across the constituency. That is a powerful testament to the importance of constituency work. That quality is also true of his predecessor, the last Conservative Member for the seat, Michael Bates, now a long-standing Minister in the Cabinet, and I wish him well with his return to the trade union movement.

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Mr Simon Clarke

Hercules”, and the proud industrial heritage of my constituency continues today. We have world-leading engineering firms, the iconic brand of British Steel, mining and the industrial might of Teesport. Lest we forget, the north-east is the only net exporting region of England. We can add to that the huge potential of the new South Tees Development Corporation, which is being introduced under our new Conservative Mayor of the Tees Valley, Ben Houchen.

That is the narrative I am keen to champion in this place: a successful north-east and a successful Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland as part of a successful UK after Brexit. We need to challenge the tired narrative of decline and betrayal, which at its worst has proved self-fulfilling and has held Teesside back. Anyone who knows my constituency will attest to the fact that we have more than our fair share of social challenges, with lives blighted by the circumstances in which they begin. We face stubborn unemployment; poor education outcomes; family breakdown; drug and alcohol abuse; and communities that feel isolated and ignored, such as Loftus, Liverton and Lingdale. This is a powerful moral mission worthy of any generation. As a Conservative, passionate about helping people to help themselves, I am proud that our Government have a strong record in this area, but it is clear that there is much more to do.

That is not the whole, or indeed the end, of the story. The communities that face those challenges also throw up so many quiet community heroes, such as the vicar of Hemlington, Robert Desics, and the members of the Loftus ACCORD group, whom I had the pleasure to meet during the campaign. They support charitable activities, ranging from providing summer holidays for deprived kids who would not otherwise have one to backing the elderly. So many of my campaign team would be encompassed in that group; they serve quietly but dutifully as magistrates, they help to support Gisborough priory, and they manage gardening clubs but dutifully as magistrates, they help to support Gisborough priory, and they manage gardening clubs.

There is another side of the constituency, too—the side that people who do not know it may not appreciate so well. I am talking about Roseberry Topping, the beautiful hill that Cook climbed as a child; the North York Moors, to Scaling Dam and Cowbar; the East Cleveland coast, viewed from Brotton or from the hills above Skelton, with its thriving Victorian seaside resort of Saltburn; the prosperous market town of Guisborough; and the affluent southern suburbs of Middlesbrough itself.

As with any constituency, there are competing narratives and competing truths. The fact that there are so many positives about Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland has led to massive recent housing development. Some lovely new developments have been built, but we urgently need to ensure that the accompanying infrastructure follows and that the best possible use is made of brownfield land. Transport links will be a key part of my work in this place, be it linking rural communities in East Cleveland or ensuring that the traffic in south Middlesbrough can flow properly.

Middlesbrough’s motto is “Erimus”—we shall be. In closing, let me say that I am immensely proud and grateful to have the opportunity to champion my area on the next stage of its remarkable journey.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke), whose maiden speech was very funny and insightful, and commended some of his predecessor MPs: well done.

Housing, and especially social housing, has been shown up in sharp focus as a result of the Grenfell Tower tragedy. Indeed, in her statement this morning the Prime Minister admitted that “for too long in our country”—meaning England—“under Governments of both colours, we simply have not given enough attention to social housing.” That is in stark contrast to what is happening in Scotland, where the Scottish National party Government are committed to spending over £5 billion by 2021 to build social and affordable housing. The UK Government have allowed the sale of housing association properties; the Scottish Government have ended the right to buy, to protect the existing stock of social rented homes.

The UK Government do not really help 18 to 34-year-olds, and the Government’s tremendously difficult housing benefit recall for 18 to 21-year-olds is causing real hardship across the country. The Scottish Government welcome the fact that the UK Government are now looking into protecting vulnerable people in private landlord lets, but in Scotland we have made a real issue of this, because we want our younger people and tenants to be well protected. The SNP welcomes a full public inquiry into the Grenfell Tower fire and believes that no stone should be left unturned in order to ascertain the causes, ensure appropriate lessons are learned, and get justice for the many families of the victims and survivors.

The Scottish Government resilience operation has met to discuss any potential impact for Scotland of the Grenfell Tower tragedy. Building standards are devolved and Scottish Ministers are in discussion with local authorities today. The Cabinet Secretary for Communities has convened a short-term ministerial working group to review Scottish regulations, and the Scottish Government will work closely with the UK Government and learn any lessons relevant to construction practices following the subsequent investigation.

Moving on to social security, I call for an end to austerity. If one thing came out of the recent election campaign, it was that the Tories’ cost-cutting austerity agenda, especially where it impacts on our older citizens, is not wanted. The Prime Minister paid a heavy price for her suggestions on the dementia tax and on restricting winter fuel payments. Even Ruth Davidson, the Scottish Tory leader, could not swallowing that bitter pill and announced that there would be a different policy in Scotland.

In Scotland, we value all of our citizens, whatever their age or ethnicity. Many constituents have approached me in desperation and disbelief. I have a long list and I do not have time to go through it, but during the election campaign I was approached by a grieving grandson whose son had just been widowed. The so-called simplification of bereavement support resulting in cuts for widows and widowers when they are at their most vulnerable is scandalous. I ask Members to try to imagine how someone who is grieving must feel when having to give up their employment to deal with the young family and finding out that the financial support they expected because of their circumstances was no longer there. That happened in April of this year.
The SNP is opposed to any increase in national insurance, especially at a time of low consumer confidence and squeezed household budgets. We need a freeze on NI contributions and VAT. The SNP here in Westminster will fight for a moratorium and review of the closure of HMRC offices in Scotland and across the UK, for beneficial ownership of companies and trusts to be made public, for measures to improve the transparency of tax paid by major international companies, and for further action by the UK Government to tackle international tax avoidance. If these measures were taken, there might be no need for austerity cuts at all, or at least they could be lessened.

The SNP will fight for an end to benefit sanctions, to the roll-out of universal credit and to charges from the Child Maintenance Service, and we will fight to end private company involvement in social security benefits. Finally, we will fight to abolish the premium-rate telephone charge for those seeking advice or claiming benefits from the Department for Work and Pensions. Not only do the Government cut benefits, but they charge people increasingly large amounts to access what is rightfully theirs. We must help the worst off and most vulnerable in our society, not impose further cuts on them.

I cannot finish without mentioning the WASPI women. I made it—I got my state pension—but anyone who was born a year after me did not. Women have retired expecting to get what they paid in. They were not told that the changes would happen, and they are now living in straitened circumstances as a result of them. The Government need to stop the austerity and cuts and look after the people in this country much better.

4.5 pm

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, as Deputy Speaker Sir David—albeit fleetingly, perhaps. I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows). I did not agree with all her points, but I thought that the collaborative tone of her response to the Grenfell Tower tragedy set the tone that the public want and expect to see in the House. I commend the Gracious Speech. I am not going to labour the point on Brexit, except to make two brief points. First, the ex-remainers who continue to increase the demands that we should make on our European partners for concessions as we leave the European Union are actually making it harder to get any deal at all, because the more we demand and the more concessions we want, the more we will be accused of cherry-picking. The EU has made it very clear that—to paraphrase Michel Barnier—we cannot enjoy the benefits of membership and not be in the EU. Perhaps the ex-remainers have a plan to make so many demands that will not be granted to us in the hope that the country will decide, “Well, maybe we shouldn’t leave the EU after all.” I put it to them that if there is any idea that we are going to try to reverse the decision taken by the British people in the referendum, that would be an undemocratic decision for the House to take.

Secondly, we keep hearing about a cliff edge. What is this cliff edge? It seems to me to be a continuation of the fear campaign that is now so discredited. There is obviously not going to be a comprehensive trade agreement within two years—to that extent, we are not going to have a deal—but are we seriously suggesting that the EU is so insane that it will not make the same kind of arrangements on aviation, data protection, intellectual property, customs facilitation or product recognition on standards that it makes on 150 other countries, with which it does not have a trade deal? I prefer to regard the EU as a bit more constructive than that; indeed, the EU has said that it wants to be constructive and does not want to punish us. If we leave without a comprehensive trade deal, we will have an agreement about lots of detailed things that will enable goods to flow across the Northern Ireland border, just as goods flow across the border between Canada and the United States without the lorries stopping, as my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson) said.

I commend the Gracious Speech because I am delighted to see that it contains a draft patient safety Bill, which is the result of a 2015 recommendation on clinical incident investigation by the Public Administration Committee, which I chaired at the time. I had hoped to see a draft Bill on reform of the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman, which the Committee described as “stuck in time” in our report entitled, “Time for a People’s Ombudsman Service”. If we are going to introduce a public advocate for public disasters, is it going to be a statutory body? Would it not be a good idea to combine ombudsman reform with a new public advocate statutory function?

I wish to talk about the response to the Grenfell Tower fire and to raise some issues relating to how a public inquiry could be established. Just this year, in February, the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee produced a report called “Lessons still to be learned from the Chilcot Inquiry”. We drew on previous reports produced under the chairmanship of Dr Tony Wright. Public confidence in public inquiries is not to be taken for granted. As well as Chilcot, we looked at other inquiries that lost public confidence, including the child sex abuse inquiry, and at the length of time that it took for the Savile inquiry in Northern Ireland to report. We recommended that a public inquiry should not be established unless the House has voted for it, on an amendable motion dealing with the remit, the timetable and the chairmanship, and that before such a motion is debated a special Select Committee should be established to consider those matters and report back to the House.

Everyone wants to set up this inquiry as quickly as possible in response to public anger, which is very understandable, but so many public inquiries are set up in haste before their terms of reference are properly considered. The Leveson inquiry, for example, has been regretted because not enough thought was put into it. I do not belong to the tradition of democracy that believes that the elected Government are necessarily the fount of all wisdom, however much I admire the Prime Minister herself.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Is it my hon. Friend’s position that were a Select Committee to look into a terrible tragedy such as this, there might be a better chance of getting a non-partisan analysis that would lead to more information coming forward on the Floor of the House?

Mr Jenkin: I am glad that my right hon. Friend has made that intervention, because I want to be absolutely clear. I fully support what the Prime Minister is doing in
setting up a public inquiry; what I am suggesting is that a special Select Committee should be established to supervise the setting up of the inquiry, to monitor it and, essentially, to set some timelines. These inquiries take so long because lawyers can always think of new questions and new points to make. We need to put a sense of urgency into these inquiries so that they report on time and do not drag on and on.

I submit that the terms of reference should not be about finding blame. If there are to be prosecutions, there will be prosecutions, but we will not make life better by creating an atmosphere of blame, however understandable it is. I remember that after the Paddington rail crash there was so much blame, but in the end the report did not blame people. The Cullen inquiry was a good inquiry that resulted in far-reaching institutional changes in how safety is managed on the railways. I suspect that we need the same kind of far-reaching reforms on fire safety. We heard from the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) about the different regulatory arrangements that are scattered across the landscape of housing management.

All those arrangements need to be brought together and considered as a whole, and possibly there should be one new body supervising the safety management of residential property. There should probably be an independent investigatory body to determine the causes of accidents, rather like the air accidents investigation branch of the Department for Transport or the rail accident investigation branch. The healthcare safety investigation branch of the Department of Health is to be established in statute to do the same kind of thing in health. We want to know who is accountable and what lessons need to be learnt. The whole landscape is very confusing at the moment, and that is what this inquiry really has to resolve.

4.13 pm

Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): May I begin by congratulating those new Members who have made excellent maiden speeches today? I wish to join other Members in paying tribute to the many people who died in the Grenfell Tower disaster. I also pay tribute to my constituents, particularly those who, through Borehamwood synagogue, have made an extraordinary effort in fundraising and in the provision of goods and services to help those most in need. It really is an example of the whole community coming together.

I would like today to address the question of housing. I am a proud capitalist. I believe that capitalism is the most efficient way of allocating resources and that it is what has driven prosperity in our society for so many generations. However, in order to believe in capitalism, one must first either have capital or have a reasonable expectation that one will be able to acquire it. The problem we have with housing is reflected in a wider problem of the capitalist system in this country. A failure or an inability to expect to acquire one’s own home would lead us to question our interest in maintaining this capitalist system, which is so effective for our country. In my remarks, I wish to address how we can deal with that problem.

First, let me say that, as a Government, we have made progress on this matter. I am proud of some of the things that I did during my time in Downing Street as an adviser to the Prime Minister. For example, our work on allowing the conversion of offices to residential property has increased supply. Help to Buy has allowed many families without a sufficient deposit to acquire their first home. We have also made considerable progress in deregulation, which has allowed people to extend their own homes. People do not recognise it, but deregulation is a way of increasing supply in the housing market, because it allows them to expand their own home and provide more space for themselves and their families.

Clearly, though, there is a lot more to do. At the heart of this matter lies the conflict between the generations, which is so evident in my own constituency. We are very fortunate in Hertsmere. We have a beautiful constituency, which has built-up areas and green belt land—80% is green belt. There is an understandable reluctance to encroach on that green belt land. Certainly, it is essential that we maintain and protect that land. If we are to do that, we have to look creatively at how we can draw consent for further house building.

Members have raised a number of valid points in this debate. First, we have to get consent for housing, which means maintaining the central role of councils, which know where housing can be best placed. It is right that the housing White Paper maintains that central role for local government. Secondly, we need to ensure that we get the infrastructure in place. We cannot expect communities to agree to additional housing if they do not have the schools, hospitals, roads and railways to go with it. In places such as Borehamwood where there has been a lot of housing, one frustration is the lack of infrastructure to go with it. We need to maintain pressure on that.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith), the former candidate for Mayor of London, that we should not overlook aesthetics. Low-rise housing is denser than high-rise housing, but it is much more pleasant for people to live in. Certainly, one regret from my time at No. 10 was that we started to pioneer the idea of replacing high-rise with low-rise—[Interruption.] I should hasten to add that I was an adviser to the Prime Minister. If we continue with that agenda, we can get more buy-in for more housing.

We should look at design, because people are much more willing to accept housing if it is aesthetically pleasing. People will forgo some green space if it is replaced by something good. What people do not want is green space being replaced by ugly urban sprawl. Certainly, I will continue to resist that ugly urban sprawl, as I want to ensure that we maintain the character and unique charms of our towns and villages. If we can buy in communities with better design and local consent, we can get more housing, thereby ensuring that young people have a genuine hope of accessing capital. We would reinvigorate their faith in the capitalist system and ensure that, once again, we have a generation of home owners. That is what brought me into politics in the first place. My parents were able to buy their own social housing through right to buy. They got their first stake. The next generations must get that first stake too. If we are creative about this, we can do it and provide opportunities for the next generation.
4.19 pm

**Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and to follow such excellent maiden speeches from Members on both sides of the House. I was here to listen to the tremendous contribution made by my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke)—the first, I am sure, of many in this House.

I must draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I have been involved in the property market for 25 years and am still involved. I am deeply passionate about it, and I am very pleased by the Government’s clear and ambitious plans to increase house building by 1 million homes between 2015 and 2020, and by 500,000 more by 2022. Those are very ambitious plans.

I am delighted to see that the shadow Secretary of State is back with us in the Chamber. I tried to intervene on him earlier to question one or two of the facts that Opposition Members keep repeating. They keep saying that since 2010 house building has fallen to its lowest level since the 1920s, but the House of Commons Library shows that some 100,000 houses were built in 2009-10, and 153,000 in 2016. Where do these figures come from? The claim is that affordable housing building is at a 24-year-low—the shadow Secretary of State can intervene on me on this point—but we know that in the past six years we have built 304,900 affordable homes, and in the last six years of the Labour Government, 294,000 affordable homes were built. Members can choose their own opinions, but they cannot choose their own facts.

**Ms Buck:** Is the hon. Gentleman querying the Department for Communities and Local Government’s own statistics, on its website, which show that there has been a 97% drop in the number of social housing completions since 2010? Those figures are there on the website now to be inspected.

**Kevin Hollinrake:** The hon. Lady raises a valid point. There is a different definition. Social housing is part of the overall definition of affordable housing—that is true. The shadow Secretary of State will tell the hon. Lady that that is true. It is also true that we are building more affordable homes than the Labour Government were in their final six years in office.

Building more homes has to be our objective and Members on both sides of the House will agree that we must reform the planning process to deliver more homes and release more land, whether that is brownfield or greenfield. That must take up some of the slack to deliver the amount of housing we need.

We need not just to deliver more land but to reinvigorate some of the sectors of house building on which we have come to rely. Some of that is about our local authorities, and the Select Committee on Communities and Local Government reported on that just before Dissolution. We believe that local authorities should be given the opportunity and more levers to increase house building to previous levels—they were building about 100,000 homes a year back in the 1970s—but only if those houses are properly designed and communities are designed properly around those developments.

The key element of reforming planning to deliver more homes is the role of small and medium-sized enterprises in house building. In 2008, SMEs built 44% of new homes delivered in this country. Today, they deliver 26% of homes. It is not just about land; it is also about capacity. The difficulty for small house builders is that they cannot find the land. That is the primary difficulty: finding access to the land and to the finance.

A White Paper from the Department has accepted that we need to deliver more housing for more small sites, and proposes that in the future, instead of local authorities simply allocating a huge site that is ideal for a huge house build and drawing a big red ring around it, which is probably easier for those local authorities, a certain number of sites in that local plan must be allocated for smaller sites and for small and medium-sized enterprises. It recommends that 10% of those sites should be half a hectare or less. That is good progress, but we need to go further if we really want to get small builders back into the business of building houses. It is critical that they do that.

The other principal problem is finding finance. It is almost impossible for an SME house builder to get finance for their developments. The Government have recognised this with their £3 billion home building fund, but we need to go further. We need to ensure that the mainstream high street banks lend to those SMEs. Those banks are their first port of call, but that is a difficult conversation at the moment. In Germany, the state-backed bank, KfW, sits behind the loans to SME house builders, meaning that builders can keep building. Through that, Germany has been far more successful in ensuring that there is a mixed delivery of house building.

For the next couple of minutes, I will focus on something else of huge significance to the industry: the tenant fees ban. I am still involved in the business and I am told by my finance director that the ban will cost us around £800,000 a year, so hon. Members might think that I am against the legislation, but I support the fee ban. I recognise that there is a problem. It cannot be right that when a tenant finds a property they want, they are susceptible to charges of which they were not aware and which can vary wildly between different letting agents.

All legislation that we bring forward in this place cannot just be about the measures. Delivery—the oversight and enforcement—is also needed. My concern is whether the measure will be delivered with that proper oversight and enforcement. The team that currently manages that within the sector is the National Trading Standards Estate Agency Team near Bangor. That team does not have the capacity to deliver the necessary oversight. We need to ensure that if this legislation is brought forward, it drives out the cowboy operators, who will try to find a way around the rules, which cannot be right. If the legislation is well thought through, it can include new measures about rental property standards. We need to ensure that the rented property sector delivers an appropriate standard of rented accommodation.

4.27 pm

**Bill Wiggin** (North Herefordshire) (Con): I will keep my comments brief so that my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) gets a chance to have her voice heard.

I wanted to raise the issue of roads in Herefordshire at the very first opportunity. Herefordshire has the most roads per capita of any county in England, and...
those roads are deteriorating. The joke is that in England we drive on the left-hand side of the road, and in Herefordshire we drive on what is left of the road. It has now got to the stage where something needs to be done. I am grateful to the Secretary of State, who is coming to visit my constituency tomorrow to see the state of our roads.

The issue is not inextricably linked to our adult social care problem. It is appropriate that we are talking about housing today. People work all their lives in the prosperous cities and then retire to the beautiful countryside in seats such as mine, and they need and deserve proper adult social care. Every penny of council tax raised in North Herefordshire is spent on looking after the elderly and looked-after children. They deserve to be looked after properly, but counties and constituencies such as mine cannot cope with this burden. We need it to be shared across the nation.

The Queen's Speech is interesting in many ways, and I am pleased that certain bits are missing. I was deeply unhappy with the manifesto proposal to reduce the number of hon. Members to 600. That would be very difficult for the Government to pass. I hope that we will soon ask the Boundary Commission to look again at equalising the size of constituencies without reducing the number of colleagues here because as our MEPs go, the burden of work will fall to us.

I also had grave reservations about the manifesto proposals regarding section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013, which is all about the media being properly regulated. The media who do not like it complain that there is only one approved regulator, but there is nothing to stop them having more than one approved regulator. That would allow for low-cost arbitration for newspapers and complainants. Small local papers ought to have that bargain basement way of solving these problems.

Those are the two things in the manifesto about which I was deeply unhappy. This is a great opportunity for us to think again and continue to press forward for an outstanding and positive Brexit conclusion. Of course, we will never read about that in our newspapers, but the Government are going to do a grand job on it. The Opposition can knock the Queen's Speech if they will, but let us see them support all the things they say they believe in. We need it to be shared across the nation.

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4.29 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin) for so graced us with his presence in this debate. I will endeavour to be quick so that the Front Benchers have adequate time for the wind-ups.

I echo other hon. Members in expressing my sentiments and condolences in view of the tragic events at Grenfell Tower recently.

Today it has been a pleasure to listen to the maiden speeches of, I think, seven hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber. I recall giving my own maiden speech two years ago during the debates on the Queen’s Gracious Speech; I think I chose the enterprise debate on that occasion.

I welcome the Gracious Speech and the Government’s legislative priorities for the next two years, particularly the focus on recognising and grasping the opportunities ahead, as well as tackling the challenges we face as a country. Leaving the EU means that we are respecting the result of last year’s referendum. That is what my constituents in Aldridge-Brownhills expect. We need to get Brexit right. In doing so, we need to take the public with us and have their support.

We also need to continue to build and strengthen the strong economy that creates jobs, opportunities and aspiration. Since 2010, more than 2.9 million people are back in work—something to be commended. I particularly welcome the increase in the national living wage, the space industry Bill, the automated and electric vehicles Bill, and reforms to technical education. This is all part of a world-class education system and, importantly, the skills that we need for today and for the future—developing the traditional skills and trades that we often talk about in this place, as well as the new ones that arise in conjunction with the new, emerging technologies. I hope that businesses in the west midlands and in my constituency have opportunities to play their part in developing those too.

Today’s debate focuses particularly on housing. There is welcome news from the Government that the affordable homes programme will become more flexible. We have the homelessness reduction taskforce, building on the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which was taken through this place in the previous Parliament. It was spearheaded by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) as a private Member’s Bill one Friday, but he garnered so much support from Members on both sides of this Chamber that it could go all the way through the House of Lords and become an Act of Parliament.

Many of us will remember the first time we bought or rented our own home. For most of us, it is a huge step, and for many, a huge financial commitment, but a dream that has come true. I hope that through these measures we are able to make more people’s dreams come true, so that with Help to Buy they too can have the chance to buy that first home. This is where affordability matters more than ever before. I remember that affordability mattered when we bought our first home 20-plus years ago, and it is still an issue today.

I welcome the recent focus on using public sector land for building on. I hope that we continue with this so that we can prioritise housing on public sector land and brownfield sites—something that my hon. Friend the new Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) recognised in his speech. In the west midlands, as you may be aware, Mr Deputy Speaker, our new metro Mayor, Andy Street, has a very sensible approach to this—brownfield first. My constituents feel that that is an excellent way of tackling the housing crisis by putting those brownfield sites first and unlocking the potential to develop on them, thus protecting our precious green belt and green open spaces. There are also welcome measures in the Queen’s Speech to promote fairness and transparency in housing with the draft tenant fees Bill, which is also to be welcomed.

I am conscious of the time, but I ask for your generosity, Mr Deputy Speaker, in indulging me in making one request; I hope the Minister will also be generous. During the last Parliament, my name was drawn in the private Members’ Bills ballot, and I introduced the
Crown Tenancies Bill. I believe it had some support from the Government, so in considering housing in the round, might that be looked at again? Its purpose was to provide, for Crown tenancies, assured tenancies for the purposes of the Housing Act 1988.

4.35 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): It is lovely to see you in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I welcome the new Secretary of State to his place.

This has been an extensive debate. There were 24 speakers, and I want to thank them all. I congratulate all the new Members who made their maiden speeches, including the hon. Members for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke), for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) and for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), and my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), but I particularly pay tribute to the hon. Members for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke), for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) and for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), and my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), who spoke so movingly about the devastating effect of the Grenfell Tower tragedy. I know that she will go from strength to strength, and will continue to represent her constituents in the fantastic way she has during the past week.

I, too, extend my condolences to everyone affected by the fire, and to all those affected by the terror attacks in Manchester and at London bridge and Finsbury Park. It seems to be a sign of our times that, in the space of just a few weeks, we should have faced these horrific events.

On behalf of the more than 50% of people who voted against austerity in the general election just two weeks ago, I want to express my profound disappointment at the content of the Gracious Speech. After delivering Brexit and building a stronger economy, it refers to making our country fairer, echoing the Prime Minister’s warm words on the steps of Downing Street about building a country for everyone. Frankly, this just does not stack up. As a result of seven years of austerity under this Government, we have escalating levels of poverty, a £40 weekly killing 7.4 million working households, 4 million children and 4.2 million disabled people, while one in seven of our pensioners are living in poverty, which is an increase of 300,000 since 2010. At the same time, there have been excesses in boardroom pay, with Britain’s top bosses being paid, on average, 312 times more than a care worker, 165 times more than a nurse, 140 times more than a teacher and 132 times more than a police officer. It is all right to praise the work of the emergency services, but let us give them a decent pay rise.

The richest 1,000 people own more wealth than the poorest 40%, and this Government’s tax and spending policies have reinforced, rather than addressed, such inequalities. The Conservative manifesto promised more of the same—carrying on regardless of the pain and suffering that so many people have endured and are still enduring. The Conservatives have broken promise after promise: there was no mention in the manifesto of raising living standards, in spite of real wages being at 2007 levels in real terms, and there was no reference to raising the national living wage, in spite of one in five workers being in low-paid jobs. Instead, it boasted that corporation tax will continue to be cut in spite of the fact that it is already the lowest in the G7. Shockingly, it pledged to erode further the social security safety net for older people by removing the winter fuel allowance for 10 million pensioners and the state pension triple lock, while promising a dementia tax that people, if they could not afford it and were unfortunate enough to need home care, would have to pay by selling their home. The Queen’s Speech mentioned none of those Tory manifesto promises, so I would be grateful to the Secretary of State if he confirmed that, given the position of their coalition partners on these issues, they will not now be delivered.

Given that the Government are currently in breach of their own Pensions Act 2014, will the Secretary of State confirm when they will respond to the Cridland report and guarantee that there will be no further increase in the state pension age? Further to that, there was no mention in the Queen’s Speech of the plight of the 2.6 million WASPI women, including the 4,000 in my constituency, who have been affected by the accelerated increase in their state pension age, many of whom had no notice of the increase and many of whom have been left destitute. I have heard cases of women in their 60s who have had to sell up everything and who are sofa-surfing. What will the Government do to address their plight? We are the fifth richest country in the world. Those women have contributed to society and it is scandalous that they are being treated in this way. The Government must act urgently to address the WASPI issue, reflect on the desperate circumstances that many WASPI women are in and put in place mitigation.

The Government seem oblivious to the escalation in child poverty over the past seven years, with 1 million more children expected to fall into poverty by 2020. They seem unconcerned by the direct and immediate effect that that is having on those children’s health and wellbeing, let alone their long-term life chances. The Tory manifesto pledged to cut free school meals. While I am pleased that that has been dropped, will the Secretary of State confirm what specific measures are in place to address the rise in child poverty and to ameliorate its effects? Will the Government agree to exempt lone parents with children under two from the benefit cap, given today’s High Court judgment? Where is the legislation or other measures to deal immediately with low-paid work and to ensure that work always pays, given that low pay is a key driver of worker and child poverty?

Universal credit, as we have heard in this debate, is failing, from its shambolic roll-out to the escalating costs and ludicrous design flaws, including the so-called “digital by default” and the six-week “long hello” before people get their first payment. During the election, I spoke to a constituent who was told she would have to wait six weeks and then had another four weeks added on top. That is not good enough. Of course, there is also the mess around having four-weekly as opposed to monthly payments. Some people have two payments in one month and then have to reapply because they reach the amount they are allowed.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Universal credit is being rolled out to all new claimants in my constituency from next month. Does the shadow Secretary of State share my worry about the interminable delays that are causing such problems in the claiming of universal credit?

Debbie Abrahams: As I say, it is an absolute mess and we have pledged to address it when we are in a position to do so.
The cuts to universal credit work allowances mean that 2.5 million families will be more than £2,000 a year worse off. Delays in UC and other social security support were a major cause of more than 1 million people relying on food banks last year. That problem is worse in UC areas. People are falling into debt, with eight out of 10 tenants being in rent arrears and homelessness rising. Again, why was this issue not in the manifesto or the Queen’s Speech and what will the Government do about it?

The treatment of disabled people by this Government over the past seven years has been nothing short of scandalous. The scale and range of cuts in the Welfare Reform Act 2012 alone is huge, with £28 billion of support cut for 3.7 million disabled people. Of course, it did not stop there. Disabled people are now feeling the impact of the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, with cuts of £1,500 a year for half a million sick and disabled people in the employment and support allowance work-related activity group. The new work capability assessment, the introduction of the personal independence payment and its associated flawed assessment, and the new sanctions regime have all had profound detrimental impacts on disabled people. Even a United Nations inquiry found the Tories guilty of “grave” and “systematic violations” of the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, yet there was still nothing in the manifesto and there is nothing in the Queen’s Speech. Why do disabled people not count in this Government’s so-called quest for a fairer society?

Why, when the Government affirmed their commitment to parity of esteem for people with mental health conditions, did the Prime Minister not extend that to PIP support? Her Government overturned the independent tribunal rulings and introduced PIP regulations in March without a vote or even a debate, which deprived people with mental health conditions of the higher rate of PIP. Why does parity of esteem not extend to ESA? According to the Government’s own figures this week, 200,000 people with mental health conditions will lose £345 million in ESA WRAG support.

The Government’s warm words about making our country fairer ring hollow. The Labour party made different choices in our manifesto, and we would most certainly have made different choices in an alternative Queen’s Speech. We would introduce a new social security Bill that would repeal the personal independence payment regulations, reverse the cuts for those in ESA WRAG and transform universal credit to make sure that work always pays. Fundamentally, we would transform our social security system. Like the NHS, it is there for every single one of us in our time of need, providing security, dignity and the basics in life should we become sick or disabled or fall on hard times.

We would not stop there, but I will move on, because I know the Secretary of State wants to respond. Specifically on pensions, in addition to committing to the triple lock and maintaining the winter fuel allowance, we would extend pension credit to WASPI women and affected men and define new additional transitional protections. We would also commission a review to report on options for a flexible retirement age policy and much more. The Government are in chaos—saying one thing and doing another. We have the policies, we have the commitment and we are ready to deliver for the many, not the few.
contributions, particularly that of the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), who previously represented that part of London. It is a terrible tragedy and all our thoughts are with those affected and the families who are grieving.

Our priority is to ensure that the people affected by the fire get the financial help they need. We have staff on the ground who are handling people’s benefits claims sensitively and flexibly. For example, they are ensuring that payments continue if appointments are missed and that jobseeking requirements are suspended for as long as needed. The Department for Work and Pensions has also made sure that people’s benefits will not be affected by payments from the discretionary fund. The local authority has assigned key workers to affected households to ensure that they have continuity of support—wraparound support—and we are working closely with them to provide benefit advice and support.

Money is available from the £5 billion discretionary fund to meet funeral costs. The Department for Work and Pensions administers funeral expenses payments and the local authority also has funds to support people who cannot afford funeral costs. It is important that all parts of government work together to provide the necessary support for the people of Grenfell Tower and the surrounding areas.

The debate on Grenfell Tower has also shone a light on the wider issue of housing. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government set out the Government’s position. It is worth reminding the House that we have a proud record since 2010. We have overseen the building of nearly 1 million new homes and helped around 400,000 households to get on the property ladder through Help to Buy. However, with housing becoming increasingly unaffordable, there is much more to do. My hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Oliver Dowden) made that point. We have set out our strategy in the housing White Paper and we are introducing a Bill to ban unfair tenant fees.

We will drive that forward by investing £7.1 billion through the affordable homes programme, implementing the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and continuing to support the regeneration of housing estates. We have not built enough homes in this country for generations. We need to build more of the right homes in the right places and ensure that the housing market works for all parts of our community.

Let me deal with some of the welfare issues that have been raised in the debate. Our welfare reforms are restoring fairness and supporting people into work. Having a welfare system that offers work for those who can, help for those who could and care for those who cannot is part of our plan to build a fair society for all. The Government have improved the chances of finding employment and we will continue to build on that achievement.

The employment rate stands at a joint record high of 74.8% while the employment rate for women is at a joint record high of 70.2%.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): It is all zero-hours contracts.

Mr Gauke: There is a sedentary comment that it is all zero-hours contracts. The employment numbers that came out last week are striking because the increase was overwhelmingly a consequence of full-time employment.

We must bear in mind that those on zero-hours contracts constitute, what, 3%? [Interruption.] Less than 3%: 2.8% of the overall workforce. The majority of those people, when surveyed, say that that is what suits them. Moreover, the average number of hours worked by people on zero-hours contracts is 25. Let us not mischaracterise the nature of our labour market.

Let me now deal with universal credit, a landmark reform of the welfare system that will maximise people’s chances of getting work, staying in work, and progressing into better-paid work. Universal credit is working. People move into work faster, and there are encouraging signs in that connection. The roll-out of universal credit continues to deliver to plan. It is being rolled out in a gradual, safe and secure way to ensure a successful delivery and the best service for claimants. The programme has recently passed an important milestone, with well over a million claims made and the number of claimants higher than the number of people claiming jobseeker’s allowance.

Stephen Lloyd: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way, because I am aware that time is short. Does he agree that the current taper is simply inadequate in comparison with what we planned a few years ago? Given that taper, what is the advantage of going into low-paid work?

Mr Gauke: We reduced the taper rate recently, so we have taken steps in that direction. One of the attributes of universal credit, however, is that it does not have the cliff edges of the legacy system that we have run up to now, which features all the disincentives to work for more hours and take on more work. We believe that one of the great benefits of universal credit is that it will always be sensible to do more work. I do not know whether I am being over-ambitious, but one of my objectives as Secretary of State is to convince Opposition Members at some point that this is an important and beneficial reform, and that they should get behind it rather than opposing it. That, however, remains to be seen.

Let me now say something about disability and health. There are more than half a million more disabled people in employment than there were three years ago, and the unemployment rate is at a record low. However, we know that we have further to go. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) spoke about the disability employment gap, and referred to our excellent record on the issue. I want to put on record that the Government are committed, and remain dedicated, to continuing our work in improving employment outcomes for people with disabilities and health conditions. We have made a commitment to get 1 million more disabled people into work over the next 10 years. That will enable them to enjoy the benefits that we know good work brings.

Let me now deal briefly with the issue of pensions. We are committed to ensuring economic security for people at every stage of their lives, including retirement. We are also clear about the fact that fairness must be maintained between the generations. The new simplified state pension provides a firm foundation on which to plan for retirement. Alongside the state pension, auto-enrolment has been introduced to ensure that the UK builds pension systems that enable individuals, with the help of their employers, to save towards achieving the
lifestyle to which they aspire in retirement, and which is sustainable in the future. About 10 million people will be saving more for a private pension to top up their state pension by 2018.

The Government have worked hard to improve people’s lives. We are focusing on delivering more housing, and we have introduced successful welfare reforms on which we will continue to build. I am proud of this Conservative Government, of what we have achieved to date, and of what we have committed ourselves to achieving in this Parliament.

This is an important Gracious Speech. Part of what we will continue to do as a Government is ensure that we get people to work, reform welfare and deliver for the British people. Consequently, I commend the Gracious Speech to the House.

Ordered, That the debate be now adjourned.—(Mike Freer.)

Debate to be resumed on Monday 26 June.

Business without Debate

ADJOURNMENT (SUMMER AND CONFERENCE)

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

That this House—
(1) at its rising on Thursday 20 July 2017, do adjourn till Tuesday 5 September 2017; and
(2) at its rising on Thursday 14 September 2017, do adjourn till Monday 9 October 2017.—(Michael Ellis.)

Question agreed to.

NOTICES OF QUESTIONS (28 JUNE)

Ordered,

That, notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 22(5)(a), the questions for oral answer to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland circulated on Wednesday 21 June shall be put down for answer at the question time on Wednesday 28 June.—(Mike Freer.)

Kent & Canterbury Hospital

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

5 pm

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I would like to start by welcoming Ken Rogers and campaigners from Concern for Health in East Kent, who have come here today to hear this debate. Ken was born in 1948, the same year as the NHS. He was diagnosed with chronic lymphatic leukaemia when his daughter was 15 months old and told that he would not live to see her fifth birthday. That was in 1981. Thanks to Kent & Canterbury hospital, he is here today, listening to this debate. There are thousands of people with similar stories—people who would not be here today if it were not for Kent & Canterbury hospital, a treasured hospital with a history going back over two centuries, and for many years a top destination for junior doctors and aspiring consultants.

The hospital has an outstanding reputation in specialties such as urology, providing dialysis for patients across east and west Kent, neurology, neuro-rehabilitation and surgery, with surgeons using a state-of-the-art robot to carry out manoeuvres impossible with human hands. Last week, the Taylor ward was providing fantastic specialist care for cardiac patients and the hospital serves around 200,000 people in Canterbury, Faversham and surrounding villages, but people across that area are worried—very worried—because there is a big question mark over the future of the hospital.

The building is out of date—frankly, it is crumbling—and the hospital is struggling to recruit staff. I said that last week the Taylor ward was providing specialist cardiac care because, this week, that is no longer the case. On Monday, junior doctors were withdrawn from Canterbury and relocated to neighbouring hospitals, after Health Education England said that there were not enough consultants to oversee their training and there was too much reliance on locums. The shift of junior doctors means the shift of emergency care. Heart attack patients in my constituency, who previously faced a journey of under 20 minutes to get to the hospital in Canterbury from Faversham, will now have to travel to Ashford—a longer drive on winding roads, one of which will be closed all summer—or Margate, 40 minutes away. In rush hour or by public transport, these journeys are far, far longer. People are scared that they or a loved one will not make it in time, and that visiting will be harder, or impossible for some. Added to that is the confusion about the transfer of services, and the risk that the pressure to free up acute beds will mean patients being transferred between hospitals before they are ready or ending up in corridors. Nurses, some of whom are here today, are desperately worried about the risk for patients.

Then there is the impact on the staff. Some are now making longer journeys to work. Others are staying at Kent & Canterbury but are at risk of losing their specialist skills. No commitment has been made on when acute services will return to Canterbury. There is great scepticism about the efforts being made to recruit consultants. Public trust has been lost. The point is that these temporary changes must not become permanent. We must not allow the hospital to crumble further and drift towards a downgrade, when there is a real opportunity to seize this moment of change to form an ambitious long-term vision for healthcare in Kent.
What patients really need is a new acute hospital providing world-class care and a medical school attracting the brightest and best doctors and nurses, making east Kent a centre of excellence in healthcare. As a university city and a major population centre with good transport links, Canterbury is the right place for a major hospital and a medical school. The Kent and Medway sustainability and transformation plan is proposing to reconfigure acute services across east Kent’s three major hospitals into one emergency hub with specialist care and a trauma unit, a second emergency hospital also carrying out planned care and, at the third site, a rehabilitation hospital and a primary care-led urgent care centre. The STP is not specific about what will happen where, but all the signs are that Canterbury is the most likely to lose acute services, despite it being the obvious place to centralise specialist services.

We are at a crunch point, but this should not, and must not, be treated as a foregone conclusion. This is not the time for another short-term compromise. It is time to reverse the direction of travel and make the case for a long-term, visionary answer to the challenges of healthcare in Kent. A new hospital is not a panacea; it is not the answer to all Kent’s healthcare problems. We still need to invest in primary care and bring more services out of hospitals and into places such as the Encompass Vanguard in Whitstable and Faversham cottage hospital.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): On behalf of all the MPs in east Kent, I absolutely support my hon. Friend in making a powerful case for a new, state-of-the-art acute hospital in east Kent. Does she agree that cottage hospitals such as Buckland hospital in Dover make a great deal of difference and that we ought to have more services locally, wherever possible?

Helen Whately: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. In addition to the fantastic acute hospitals, community and cottage hospitals are really important. Patients who do not need acute care can be looked after closer to home and be given a different sort of care in the environment of a local community hospital such as the one in his constituency or Faversham cottage hospital in my own, which is deeply loved and enormously valued by the community.

The new hospital that I am asking for will take time, so it will not fix the immediate challenges that the NHS is facing in Kent, but now is the time to look to the future. It has been suggested that the STP consultation is looking merely at the next five years. That is totally inadequate; it is far too short a timeframe. We need to put politics aside and think further ahead than the next parliamentary term, just as we are putting party allegiance aside for this campaign. I am pleased to be working with my colleague, the new hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield). She is taking up this campaign from her predecessor, Sir Julian Brazier, who fought hard for many years for Kent & Canterbury Hospital.

In conclusion, I shall turn to the specific requests that I want to make of my hon. Friend the Minister. I ask him to note that Kent & Canterbury hospital has strong support in the community, represented here today by members of CHEK, and across the political parties. I ask him to look closely at the temporary changes to services, to challenge the hospital on its contingency plans and to make absolutely sure that, in the short term, these services are safe for patients. I ask him to ensure that these changes do not become permanent. I also ask him to look favourably on the case for a medical school in Kent, and to ensure that the STP consultation takes into account the connection between the medical school proposal and the decision about acute sites.

I have been told many times that one barrier to the idea of a new Canterbury hospital is a lack of capital. I ask my hon. Friend to help us here. More capital has been promised for the NHS, so will he make it clear to the local NHS leaders driving the process that if they, and we in Kent, can make the case, capital will be available. There is a risk that the consultation on Kent’s STP will be presented to the public with no option for an acute hospital at Canterbury. If none of the options propose keeping acute services at Canterbury, it cannot be called a true consultation.

Finally, will my hon. Friend please require STP leaders to look to the long-term, to be ambitious in their plans, and to aim for excellence? There is an opportunity here for Kent—specifically east Kent—to bring an end to the drift of services away from the area, to downgrading, and to the struggle to recruit and retain staff. Instead, Kent could become a centre of excellence, making the most of the combined assets of the NHS, local universities and the strong life sciences research sector in east Kent to offer people in Kent brilliant patient care, to develop innovative treatments and pathways, and to set an example for the whole country of how we can provide excellent, sustainable healthcare.

5.10 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship as Deputy Speaker, Sir David. I hope that that will not necessarily be as temporary as suggested by my hon. Friend when he sought the leave of the House to appoint you. It is also a pleasure to respond to my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), who has been on her toes in securing Mr Speaker’s consent to have this debate so early in the current Parliamentary Session. I am pleased that she has secured the support of many of her constituents, some of whom have come to witness her championing their interests in relation to Kent & Canterbury hospital. She has done that not just this evening, but consistently over the past few months with our mutual friend Sir Julian Brazier, who is sadly no longer with us in the House. However, I congratulate his replacement, the new hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield).

I worked closely with Sir Julian when we were Ministers in the Ministry of Defence, and both he and my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent have been doughty champions of the population of mid-Kent, particularly those in the areas surrounding Canterbury, in fighting for healthcare services given the challenges that she quite properly describes at Canterbury hospital. I pay tribute to them for that, and they are doing the right thing in ensuring that such issues are brought to Ministers’ attention. I know that she wrote to the Secretary of State only last week, and I am pleased to hear her arguments, which were so eloquently put today. I will say what I can in response to the questions and challenges that she posed, but I must say at the outset that I do not stand here tonight with all the
answers to all the questions because, as she will appreciate, many of the things that she is calling for are decisions that will be taken and led by clinicians in Kent. It is not for Ministers to prescribe the provision of services in Kent. Many such decisions will take place over a period of time; it will not be instant decision making.

I will start my response by providing a little context for what has happened over the past few years, and this week in particular. As my hon. Friend pointed out, the board of East Kent Hospitals University NHS Foundation Trust agreed to relocate some services from its Canterbury site, Kent & Canterbury Hospital, this Monday. The change happened overnight from Sunday into Monday and came in response to legitimate concerns raised by both the General Medical Council and Health Education England over a period stretching back to as early as 2014, when they raised concerns about the standard of training available at the Canterbury site, in particular the quality and safety of junior doctor training.

The situation was brought to a head following a visit in March this year. The recruitment and retention of key medical staff has been an ongoing challenge for the trust, and there is a shortage of consultants to provide the required training and supervision of junior doctors and to support the Secretary of State in having an oversight of trusts that are in special measures. The East Kent trust has been in special measures and is currently in financial special measures, so I take a close interest in what is happening in that trust. In view of my hon. Friend’s request and the events that have happened this week, I assure her that I will take a particular interest to ensure that the existing facilities at Ashford and Margate are up to scratch to cope with the increased demand they will undoubtedly have to manage.

I want to make it clear to the House and to the representatives on both sides who look after constituents in Kent that this issue is about maintaining the supervision of junior medical staff and ensuring that we have safe staffing levels for patients from central Kent; it is not about clinical practice or the competence of the hard-working staff in the hospital. I have been assured that before taking this decision every effort was made to identify appropriate senior staff cover from neighbouring trusts. The challenge has been to ensure that an adequate number of consultants were on duty at Kent & Canterbury hospital to allow junior doctors to have senior colleagues to refer to in the event of issues they felt uncomfortable dealing with. The problem that the trust has had is that it has been over-reliant on locum consultant cover in the hospital and there has been an inability to recruit to substantive posts in the hospital over a prolonged period, which has given rise to this concern on the part of HEE and the GMC that the training conditions for junior doctors were not adequate. That is what has led to this decision, rather than any criticism of the individual doctors or other staff members in the hospital.

I am also assured that the concerns of both HEE and the GMC are being addressed as quickly as possible. That will form part of any public consultation that follows from the development of the STP that is being worked up for the area.

I will not go into any great detail about the specifics of what has happened over the last few days as my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent has already done so, but our expectation is that this temporary relocation is likely to affect approximately 50 of the 900 patients who visit Kent & Canterbury hospital each and every day. It is important to recognise that there has not been a full A&E unit at Kent & Canterbury hospital since 2005, when services at the trust were reconfigured, and it was established as an emergency care centre. Trauma and general surgical emergency cases had already been sent to sites in Margate and Ashford for some time prior to the recent temporary changes, and I believe it was in 2016 that the emergency care centre itself was turned into an urgent care centre, which again had an impact on services at that time.

I am advised that local NHS leaders have fully explored the risks of temporarily relocating services and have put in place mitigating action and contingency plans when required. The decision has been an exercise in the balance of risk: it is clearly not desirable, and nor is it either common or unique, for the regulators to take action such as this when they have concerns about both patient and staff safety, and it is not a decision taken lightly or comfortably, but the trust has come to the view that the risk to patient safety outweighed maintaining the status quo and seeking to continue with, frankly, unsustainable levels of senior support.
My hon. Friend rightly raised concerns that this might presage a future closure of the site, and I want to try to reassure her: the trust board has been left in no doubt whatever that it should not regard this as a step on the road to a permanent solution and that it needs to consider the requirements of the population of mid-Kent in the round when looking at the provision for the future to be undertaken through the STP. The hon. Lady raised a perfectly reasonable concern that the STP horizon of five years is not long enough. If the STP were to consider a more wide-ranging reconfiguration, that absolutely would have to look at the long-term horizon for healthcare provision in the area and not just at meeting the immediate objectives of the next five years.

Charlie Elphicke: I thank the Minister for making this important speech, but may I gently press him on the issue of a new hospital? Is there not a cost-benefit analysis between the efficiency savings to be had from a new, state-of-the-art hospital, which can operate much more efficiently and do much more with much better use of resources, versus the cost in capital? How would the Minister and his Department strike that balance, and can they carry forward a feasibility study to look at the very interesting case being put by my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately)?

Mr Dunne: I was going to come on to the suggestion of my hon. Friend. The Member for Faversham and Mid Kent about both allocation of capital and the possibility of a new hospital. I was starting to develop the point that this matter needs to be assessed in the light of the overall requirements of the healthcare economy of mid-Kent and the East Kent trust through the STP process. Capital is currently constrained throughout the NHS. As hon. Members will know, in the March Budget we announced a capital allocation of some £325 million over the next three years to support the first phase of STPs. Fairly shortly, we should have made sufficient progress in deciding which of the STP proposals should be supported to secure that capital. Other capital pots are available to the NHS for what we refer to as business as usual, and there are always opportunities for trusts to make capital proposals to the NHS.

Right now, it is not appropriate for me to explain the basis on which future capital allocation decisions will be made. One can look to the recent past to identify some significant new hospital builds that are now in progress. There is currently a significant capital investment not far around the coast from Kent, in Brighton, and there is another closer to my constituency, in Sandwell in Birmingham. Such builds are few and far between, and bearing in mind the kind of major capital investment we are talking about, I think both my hon. Friends from different parts of Kent are arguing for space to undertake a study to consider whether a major build is appropriate to meet the needs of the mid-Kent population.

Generally, as can be identified from the two significant builds that are currently under way, which have been allocated hundreds of millions of pounds of capital each, a certain density of population is required to be served. Such builds are therefore most likely to occur in major cities rather than in less densely populated areas. That said, it is not for me to make suggestions as to what would or would not be appropriate. I urge my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent to discuss the matter, as I know she has already, with her STP leaders. If there is a desire among Kent MPs and the Kent community to consider whether in future a more holistic approach to satisfying healthcare needs should be taken in the county as a whole, perhaps my hon. Friend should work in conjunction with other hon. Members.

The right forums are the STPs, which are bringing together NHS providers and commissioners from throughout their regions to try to arrange provision to meet the future healthcare needs of their populations. Whether or not my hon. Friend is successful in persuading the STP that a new hospital in Canterbury is the right solution, that is a matter for her to take forward with the STP. Such an effort would carry more weight were it supported by other colleagues from the area.

Helen Whately: It needs to come from the top that, when a bid is put forward that makes the case for significant investment, capital will be forthcoming. That message is currently not coming through and it is deterring people from making that case. It needs to shift.

Mr Dunne: I am conscious that I am close to running out of time, and I want to address the other point my hon. Friend raised, but I will say that capital is allocated by the Department of Health on the basis of the strength of the proposals, which need to meet the criteria on meeting the needs of local populations. That has to be balanced against the amount of capital that is available throughout the country, where there are competing needs.

My hon. Friend also raised the idea of a medical school, which she has discussed with me previously. She is aware of the consultation the Department ran on allocating new medical school places. That consultation has completed and we are considering our response. I am grateful to her for her submission. We wish to encourage some development of new medical schools, but again, that is subject to regulatory approval by the General Medical Council and other bodies. Any universities that wish to establish a new school need to meet the regulators’ criteria. I encourage my hon. Friend to see what progress is being made in that direction.

In conclusion, I again congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and reassure her that I will be taking a close interest in how events unfold in the East Kent trust. I expect we will have an opportunity to discuss this matter again before too long.

Question put and agreed to.

5.30 pm

House adjourned.
Mr Speaker: I have a short statement to make covering three separate matters.

The House was informed before the general election that, following the shocking attack on Westminster bridge and these Houses of Parliament in March, the Lord Speaker and I commissioned an external independent review of how the perimeter of the parliamentary estate, including outbuildings, is secured and protected. At the same time, the Clerks of both Houses commissioned an externally-led review of the lessons learned from the operation inside Parliament of the incident management framework. The report of the first review has now been received and formal delivery of the second is imminent. Both will be carefully considered. I can assure the House that appropriate action will be taken swiftly and decisively.

Parliament’s first priority has been to ensure that the business of both Houses can continue. It is self-evident that this has been achieved, and I am sure colleagues will join me in thanking all of those parliamentary staff who have worked intensively over the past few days to ensure that our parliamentary democracy can operate freely.

On Thursday last, I informed the House about arrangements for the election of Deputy Speakers. Nominations are due tomorrow and the ballot will be held on Wednesday morning. I thought it would be helpful to all Members if I informed the House now, rather than late tomorrow afternoon when nominations close, that I have decided, after consultation with the Clerks and in the light of technical advice from the Electoral Reform Society, which is the House’s adviser on ballots, that if—and I stress if—there is only one candidate from the Conservative side of the House and there are more than two candidates from the other side, the name of the sole Conservative candidate will not be on the ballot paper and will be declared in due course as elected as First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means, in much the same way as happens when there is an unopposed candidate for the Chair of a Select Committee.

I hope that this will help Members in all parts of the House to deal with the perceived complexities of the single transferable vote system to which we are bound by the Standing Orders. If—I recognise that this is in the realms of conjecture—colleagues are in any way puzzled by its operation, they are welcome to seek advice from the Public Bill Office, the Library or, indeed, Wikipedia.
European Council

2.38 pm

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on last week’s European Council, and on the proposals we are publishing today, which, on a reciprocal basis, seek to give reassurance and certainty to EU citizens who have made their homes and lives in our country.

This Council followed the formal start of the negotiations for the United Kingdom’s departure from the EU, as well as marking the first anniversary of the referendum that led to that decision. In that referendum, the British people chose to take back control of our laws, our money and our borders, to restore supremacy to this Parliament, and to reclaim our sense of national self-determination, and this Government will fulfil the democratic will of the British people.

But the referendum was not a vote to turn our backs on our friends and neighbours. Indeed, as we become ever more internationalist in our outlook, and as we build the global Britain we want to see, we will continue to be reliable partners, willing allies and close friends with all the member states of the European Union. We want to work with one another to ensure that we are all safer, more secure and more prosperous through our continued friendship. We want to buy each other’s goods and services and trade as freely as possible. We will continue to celebrate and defend the liberal democratic values that we share, and to project those values that are the foundation of our freedoms and our way of life. In short, we want to build what I have described as a new, deep and special partnership between a confident, self-governing, global Britain and all our friends and allies in the European Union.

That is the positive and constructive spirit in which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting Parliament, and to reclaim our sense of national self-determination, and this Government will fulfil the democratic will of the British people.

But the referendum was not a vote to turn our backs on our friends and neighbours. Indeed, as we become ever more internationalist in our outlook, and as we build the global Britain we want to see, we will continue to be reliable partners, willing allies and close friends with all the member states of the European Union. We want to work with one another to ensure that we are all safer, more secure and more prosperous through our continued friendship. We want to buy each other’s goods and services and trade as freely as possible. We will continue to celebrate and defend the liberal democratic values that we share, and to project those values that are the foundation of our freedoms and our way of life. In short, we want to build what I have described as a new, deep and special partnership between a confident, self-governing, global Britain and all our friends and allies in the European Union.

That is the positive and constructive spirit in which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union began the formal negotiations last week, and it is the same spirit in which the United Kingdom made a full contribution to all the issues at this Council, including on security, migration, climate change and trade.

On security, I thanked our European partners for their condolences and for their resolve in standing with us following the appalling terrorist attacks that the UK has suffered in recent weeks. These attacks have seen citizens from across Europe tragically killed and injured, but they have also seen our citizens standing together in some of the most inspiring ways. At London Bridge, we saw a Spanish banker tragically killed as he rushed to the aid of a woman being attacked. We saw a Romanian baker fighting off the terrorists and giving shelter to Londoners in his bakery. These moments of heroism show that such attacks on our way of life, far from dividing us, will only ever serve to strengthen our shared unity and resolve.

But these attacks also show that we need to respond to a new trend in the threat we face, as terrorism breeds terrorism and perpetrators are inspired to attack by copying one another using the crudest of means. Therefore, building on the bilateral agreement I reached with President Macron earlier this month, at this Council I argued that we must come together to defeat the hateful and extremist ideologies that inspire these attacks, and to stop the internet being used as a safe space for extremists. When one third of all links to Daesh propaganda are shared within the first hour of release, it is not enough for technology companies to respond reactively to extremist content on their platforms. The Council therefore agreed to put pressure on these companies to do more to remove this content automatically, and also to ensure that law-enforcement agencies can access encrypted data. That was a significant step forward. We will continue to work together with our European partners to combat this evil, to defend our values and to keep our citizens safe.

Let me turn to other issues. On migration, the Council recommitted to the comprehensive approach that the UK has advocated, dealing with the drivers of migration while also doing more to stem the flow. At the summit I confirmed a new UK commitment of £75 million to meet urgent humanitarian needs in the central Mediterranean, while also facilitating voluntary returns of migrants making these treacherous journeys.

On trade, as the UK leaves the European Union we will be forging trade deals around the world with old friends and new allies alike, but that will not undermine the EU’s trade agenda; it is not even in competition with it. Therefore, for as long as we remain part of the EU, we will continue to press for an ambitious trade agenda that can deliver jobs and growth across the continent. That is what I did at this Council, where there was a particular focus on the work towards deals with Japan, Mexico and the Mercosur bloc of South American countries.

On climate change, the Council reaffirmed the commitment of all member states to fully implement the Paris agreement. The UK has already reaffirmed its own commitment, and I have expressed my disappointment to President Trump that he has taken a different decision. We will continue to make the case to our American allies to think again.

Turning to citizens’ rights, EU citizens make an invaluable contribution to our United Kingdom: to our economy, our public services and our everyday lives. They are an integral part of the economic, cultural and social fabric of our country, and I have always been clear that I want to protect their rights. That is why I initially sought an agreement on this before we triggered article 50, and it is why I am making it an immediate priority at the beginning of the negotiations.

But that agreement must be reciprocal because we must protect the rights of UK citizens living in EU member states, too. At the Council, I set out some of the principles that I believe should underlie that reciprocal agreement, and there was a very positive response from individual leaders and a strong sense of mutual good will in trying to reach such an agreement as soon as possible. So today we are publishing detailed proposals to do exactly that. Let me set out the key points for the House.

First, we want certainty. I know that there has been some anxiety about what would happen to EU citizens at the point we leave the European Union. Today I want to put that anxiety to rest. I want to completely reassure people that under these plans no EU citizen currently in the UK lawfully will be asked to leave at the point the UK leaves the EU. We want you to stay.

Second, any EU citizen in the UK with five years’ continuous residence at a specified cut-off date will be granted settled status. They will be treated as if they were UK citizens for healthcare, education, benefits
and pensions, while any EU citizens with less than five years’ residence, who have arrived before the specified cut-off date, will be able to stay until they have the five years’ residence and apply for UK settled status.

Third, the specified cut-off date will be the subject of discussions, but it will be no earlier than the date on which we triggered article 50 and no later than the date on which we leave the EU. Fourth, no families will be split up. Family dependants who join a qualifying EU citizen here before the UK’s exit will be able to apply for settled status after five years. After the UK has left the European Union, EU citizens with settled status will be able to bring family members from overseas on the same terms as British nationals.

Fifth, there will be no cliff edge: there will be a grace period of up to two years to allow people to regularise their status. Those EU citizens who arrived in the UK after the specified cut-off date will be allowed to remain in the UK for at least a temporary period, and may still become eligible to settle permanently. Sixth, the system of registration that citizens go through will be as streamlined and light-touch as possible, and we intend to remove some of the technical requirements currently needed to obtain permanent residence under EU rules. For example, we will not require anyone to demonstrate that they have held comprehensive sickness insurance.

Seventh, we expect this offer to be extended on a reciprocal basis to nationals of Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein and Switzerland, and the reciprocal agreement on citizens’ rights will apply to the entire United Kingdom and Gibraltar. Eighth, this is all without prejudice to the common travel area arrangements that exist between the UK and Ireland. We will preserve the freedoms that UK and Irish nationals currently enjoy in each other’s states, and Irish citizens will not need to apply for permanent residence to protect these entitlements.

Finally, the UK will continue to export and uprate the UK state pension and provide associated healthcare cover within the EU. We will continue to protect the export of other benefits and associated healthcare cover, where the individual is in receipt of those benefits on the specified cut-off date. Subject to negotiations, we want to continue participating in the European health insurance card scheme, so that UK card holders could continue to benefit from free or reduced-cost healthcare while on a temporary stay in the EU, and vice-versa for EU card holders visiting the UK.

This is a fair and serious offer. Our obligations in the withdrawal treaty with the EU will be binding on the UK as a matter of international law. We will incorporate commitments into UK law guaranteeing that we will stand firmly by our part of the deal. Our offer will give those 3 million EU citizens in the UK certainty about the future of their lives, and a reciprocal agreement will provide the same certainty for the more than 1 million UK citizens who are living in the European Union.

One year on from that momentous decision to leave the European Union, let us remember what we are seeking to achieve with these negotiations. We are withdrawing from a system of treaties and bureaucracy that does not work for us, but we are not withdrawing from the values and solidarity that we share with our European neighbours.

As a confident, outward-looking and self-governing nation, we know that it is not just our past that is entwined in the fortunes of our friends and neighbours; it is our future, too. That is why we want this new, deep and special partnership, and it is why we approach these negotiations with optimism. A good deal for Britain and a good deal for Europe are not competing alternatives; they are the best single path to a brighter future for all our children and grandchildren. That, I believe, is the future that the British people voted for, and that is the future that I want us to secure. I commend this statement to the House.

2.49 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Mr Speaker, may I join you in thanking all staff of the House of Commons for all the work they did over the weekend to ensure that our electronic systems are safe? I would be grateful if you passed that message on to staff.

I thank the Prime Minister for the advance copy of her statement. Sixty-eight days ago, the Prime Minister stood on the steps of Downing Street and asked the country to give her a strong mandate to negotiate Brexit. She offered little by way of strategy or plan, but more by way of hollow soundbites and grandstanding. For the past six months, the Prime Minister has stuck to her mantra—

“no deal is better than a bad deal”— and continued with her threat to turn Britain into an offshore tax haven aimed at undercutting the European Union by ripping up regulation, hacking back public services and leading a race to the bottom in pay and conditions. Well, the British people saw through that rhetoric and the threats and, instead of giving the Prime Minister the mandate she wanted, they rejected in large numbers the deregulated low-wage future that the Conservative party has in mind for this country.

The Prime Minister wanted a landslide and she lost her majority. Now, her mandate is in tatters, but she still insists she is the best person to get a good deal for Britain, and incredibly believes that she is the best person to strike a deal with the very people she spent the past six months threatening and hectoring. The truth is that this country needs a new approach to Brexit that a Tory Government simply cannot deliver. They are taking Britain down a reckless path, prepared to put jobs and living standards at risk just for the Prime Minister to maintain support within her party and to keep her Government in office.

The cracks are already beginning to appear. While some in the Conservative party want to move towards Labour’s approach to Brexit, at least in terms of protecting jobs, trade and the economy, the hard-right voices in her Cabinet and on her Back Benches, are still determined to force Britain over a cliff edge. The Prime Minister needs to ignore them; she needs now to listen. So I ask her, as she has promised to restore supremacy to this Parliament, will she now be more transparent and involve it properly in the Brexit negotiation process? Will she now finally rule out the possibility of no deal being a viable option for the country? [Interruption.] The choice is hers.

The Prime Minister went to Brussels last week to make what she described as a “generous offer” to EU nationals in this country. The truth is that it is too little, too late. That could and should have been done a year ago when Labour put that very proposal to the House of Commons. By making an offer only after negotiations...
have begun, the Prime Minister has dragged the issue of citizens and families deep into the complex and delicate negotiations of our future trade relations with the European Union, which she herself has been willing to say may result in failure.

This is not a generous offer. This is confirmation that the Government are prepared to use people as bargaining chips. So can the Prime Minister now confirm what will happen to her offer to nationals in this country if no deal is reached? What happens to the rights of family reunion that EU citizens are currently entitled to? Does the Prime Minister envisage that the five-year period that EU nationals must accumulate here in Britain will be the same for British citizens who want to retain the right to live in other parts of the European Union? Were these proposals drawn up to take into account the impact on our public services, especially the national health service, where there is already great concern over falling numbers of nurses and doctors?

What makes this situation more remarkable is what we learned this weekend from the former Chancellor of the Exchequer—that immediately after last year’s referendum, the Government were willing to give assurances to EU nationals in this country. However, that was blocked in the Cabinet by the Prime Minister herself. This is people’s lives we are talking about—our neighbours, friends, husbands, wives and children. The Prime Minister clearly did not care about them then. Why should they believe she cares about them now?

The country needs a change of direction; people are tired of tough talk from a weak Government and a weak Prime Minister. The Government need to listen, put the national interest first and deliver a Brexit for the many, not the few—one that puts jobs, the economy and living standards first by building a new partnership with the European Union on the basis of common interests and common values, and one that protects living standards and promotes human rights through new trade deals throughout the world. That is what Labour would do.

The Prime Minister has no mandate at home and no mandate abroad. Is it not the case that it would only be a Labour Government who work for the whole country who could deliver a Brexit that works for all and protects those jobs and living standards that are at risk while this Government remain in office?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman talked about a variety of issues. He talked about Parliament and transparency. We have been very clear that there will be a vote in this Parliament on the deal that has been negotiated with the European Union, and we expect that to take place before the European Parliament has an opportunity to vote on it. There will be many opportunities—in legislation and in other ways—in the coming weeks and months for Parliament to make its views known on these various matters.

Let me come on to the position that the right hon. Gentleman referred to in relation to workers’ rights. We are very clear, as I was in the objectives that I set out in the Lancaster House speech in January, and as I have continued to set out, in the article 50 letter and elsewhere, that we want to protect workers’ rights—indeed, we want to enhance workers’ rights.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about there being no plan. I set out our objectives in that Lancaster House speech and in the article 50 letter, and have continued to set out those objectives, whereas the Labour party has had seven plans on Brexit in nine months. We have members of the Labour party Front Bench—the shadow Home Secretary, the shadow Chief Secretary and the shadow Attorney General—who want to retain free movement. We have 35 Labour MPs who want to retain membership of the single market. Neither of those, as far as I am aware, were actually in the Labour party manifesto that people stood on at the last election.

Then we get on to the whole issue of the negotiations on EU citizens and their rights here in the United Kingdom. I have to say to the right hon. Gentleman that I find it bizarre, if not worrying, that, in the position he holds, he is willing to stand in this House and say he has no care for UK citizens living in the European Union, because that is what he is saying. I said at an early stage that we wanted to address the EU citizens’ rights issue early. The European Union were clear that there was no negotiation before notification. It is one of the first issues that we are addressing after notification. They were clear it had to be undertaken on a reciprocal basis, and they were clear that, whatever the United Kingdom said, the European Union would still be arguing about its proposals in relation to the protection of rights for EU citizens. So people who say that we should not be dealing with this on a reciprocal basis simply do not understand what negotiations are about, because the other side will be negotiating on these issues.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about the issue of no deal being better than a bad deal. I will tell him what I worry about in terms of a bad deal: I worry about those who appear to suggest in Europe that we should be punished in some sense for leaving the European Union, and I worry about those here—from what he says, I think the Leader of the Opposition is in this particular camp—who say we should take any deal, regardless of the bill and regardless of the circumstances. He would negotiate the worst deal with the biggest possible bill.

Finally, the right hon. Gentleman talks about wanting a future relationship based on a partnership of shared values with trade deals across the world. That is exactly what I said in my statement, so I suggest he start supporting the Government on their Brexit arrangements.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Given Brexit and our vital red lines on the European Court, and the repeal of the European Communities Act 1972, does my right hon. Friend agree that a reasonable framework to protect reciprocal citizens’ rights while making no concession at all on preserving our own Westminster jurisdiction and our own judicial sovereignty would be a tribunal system such as I outlined in the House last week which would be along similar lines to the EFTA Court and a parallel source of law agreement?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an interesting proposal. Of course, we are looking at a variety of arrangements for the enforcement of agreements that we come to. In relation to the EU citizens’ rights, if these form part of the withdrawal treaty, they will be enshrined in international law. But we should also recognise that our courts are world-renowned—they are respected around the world—and what I want to see, and would expect, is that these citizens’ rights for EU citizens in the
UK would be upheld and enforced by our courts in the same way as UK citizens’ rights are upheld and enforced by our courts.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): With your forbearance, Mr Speaker, I will make some short remarks on the sad passing of Gordon Wilson, who was Member of Parliament for Dundee East from 1974 to 1987. I am sure that everyone in the House would wish to pass their condolences on to Gordon’s family. Those of us on the SNP Benches were honoured to have Gordon’s wisdom, wit and intelligence with us for many, many decades. Indeed, he spoke with me on Wednesday before I entered the Chamber to respond to the Queen’s Speech. He will be sadly missed by all of us, and particularly by those of us on these Benches.

I thank the Prime Minister for advance sight of the Government’s plan for EU citizens. It was more than concerning to open the document designed to settle the lives of many of our EU citizens here to discover that it leaves many more questions than it provides answers. The Prime Minister went to Brussels last week and presented a plan for EU nationals. It fell short of expectations, with Dutch President Mark Rutte stating that there are “thousands of questions to ask” about the proposal. Will the Prime Minister confirm that the Joint Ministerial Committee was consulted on the proposals she has published today? When will she honour the pledge of a united United Kingdom approach to Brexit and give Scotland a place at the table in negotiations? Has the Prime Minister costed the plan for EU nationals, which she presented to the EU, last week, and when will the costings be laid before the House? Will she confirm that EU citizens in Scotland will not have to fill out the 85-page paper form for residency?

In the early hours after the EU referendum result, Scotland’s First Minister called loud and clear for the Prime Minister to unilaterally guarantee EU citizens’ rights. It is therefore shocking to learn in the Evening Standard that the then Prime Minister had pledged to do just that, but the current Prime Minister blocked the plan. Does the Prime Minister accept she was wrong, and will she now do the right and honourable thing and reassure thousands of concerned EU nationals living in the UK today by unilaterally guaranteeing their rights? We created these circumstances; we should be showing leadership.

We welcome the EU summit conclusions, especially those on jobs, growth and competitiveness. The SNP Government were the first Government in the UK to publish a plan for Brexit—we put the single market at the heart of that—and we call again on the Prime Minister to keep the UK in the single market to protect thousands of jobs in Scotland and the rest of the UK. Additional summit conclusions on the Paris agreement are a very welcome step in ensuring that the agreement is implemented following the US withdrawal last month. The Prime Minister must tell the House what the UK’s next steps will be in implementing the agreement in co-operation with our EU friends and neighbours.

I welcome the announcement today of the uprating of pensions for those living in the EU, but will the Prime Minister extend that to pensioners living in other parts of the world who currently do not benefit from uprating?

Finally, on behalf of those on the SNP Benches, I send best wishes to the Estonian President ahead of the European Estonian presidency taking over on 1 July, and give thanks to the Maltese presidency which is coming to an end this week.

The Prime Minister: First, may I join the hon. Gentleman in passing condolences to the family and friends of Gordon Wilson? I am sorry to hear of his passing.

The hon. Gentleman has raised a number of issues. I reiterate the point about the process of application. He referred to the 85-page application paper. As I said in my statement, the Home Office is working to introduce a streamlined, light-touch approach so that people will not have to apply on an 85-page paper.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the story in the Evening Standard. I have to say that that is not my recollection. What we are doing today is setting out what I believe is a fair and serious offer to EU citizens staying here in the United Kingdom, but we want to have a care—I repeat the point I made to the Leader of the Opposition—for those UK citizens living in the European Union.

I remind the hon. Gentleman that during the Scottish independence referendum the First Minister told EU nationals that, if an independent Scotland were not allowed to rejoin the EU, “they would lose the right to stay here.”

We are not saying that to EU nationals here in the United Kingdom. We are saying, “We want you to stay and this paper is the basis on which we will ensure that you can stay, and nobody will be forced to leave.”

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I congratulate the Prime Minister on her policy, which will bring many benefits to the UK and the rest of the EU. Can she tell the House a little more about how far we can go in negotiating free trade agreements with non-EU countries before we leave, and when will we learn how we can spend all the money we are going to save?

The Prime Minister: As my right hon. Friend will know, we proposed during the election campaign that some of the money that is returned be spent in a shared prosperity fund in the United Kingdom, which will seek to deal with and remove the disparities within regions and nations and between the parts of the United Kingdom. On trade deals for the rest of the world, of course legally we cannot sign up to free trade agreements with other parties until we are no longer members of the European Union, but my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Trade is doing much work with other countries around the world, such as India and America, to see what trade benefits we can achieve, before we leave the European Union, by removing some of the barriers that currently exist to trade between our countries.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Prime Minister will be aware that EU citizens living and working here are particularly concerned about the status of their children. Can she confirm that a young person of EU parents who has lived in Britain for four years, who is currently studying at a university elsewhere in the EU and who will be over the age of 18 when she returns will be able automatically to return to her parents, and will her parents be required to meet an income threshold?
The Prime Minister: Yes, that individual would be allowed to return to the United Kingdom. If EU citizens who are living here at the time at which we leave have lived here before the specified cut-off date and have five years’ residence, they will get their settled status. If they have less than five years’ residence before the cut-off date, they will be able to stay to build up that five years’ residence for settled status. For any new people coming afresh to the United Kingdom after we leave the European Union, we will set out those immigration rules in due course and a Bill will go through Parliament, which will enable the right hon. Gentleman to contribute.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): May I urge the Prime Minister to settle this issue as part of an interim deal with the EU, so that those affected do not have to wait for the conclusions of the negotiations?

The Prime Minister: I would very much like us to be able to do that by dealing with this at an early stage in the negotiations and by recognising that we all want to ensure that we give people reassurance and that they are no longer anxious about their future. I hope that the European Union will see the benefits of that and that we will be able to address this at an earlier stage than at the end of the negotiations.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): The Prime Minister needs to reassure Members of the European Parliament. I was in Brussels last week and heard petitioners from this country and others talk about their concerns. When I previously asked the Prime Minister whether she would address the European Parliament, she said that she was waiting for an invitation. She must know, however, that she does need an invitation; she can volunteer to address a plenary session of the European Parliament. Will she do that?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend the Minister for Immigration will be meeting some MEPs later today to talk about the proposals we have put forward. I have been in discussions with President Tajani about the possibility of my going over to speak to the European Parliament, and we are looking at the basis and a timetable on which that should happen.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the principal reasons why the British people voted to leave the EU was to reassert the supremacy of this Parliament and the UK courts? Will she confirm that, when we do leave, that will be the position for all citizens resident in the UK, no matter from where they came?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I can confirm that. One of the key differences between the proposals we have put forward and those of the European Union is that it wants the European Court of Justice to continue to have jurisdiction over EU citizens, even after we have left the European Union. I think people were very clear that they did not want the ECJ to have jurisdiction here in the UK. I believe that we have fine courts in this country. They will be able to uphold EU citizens’ rights, just as they uphold UK citizens’ rights.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Prime Minister did not answer the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn). If there are French parents whose 19-year-old daughter is studying in Paris and they have been living here for more than five years, will that daughter be able to return to live with them here without them having to pass the income threshold? If those parents have been living here for fewer than five years, will they still have all the same rights as if they had been living here for more than five years?

The Prime Minister: Yes: if the parents have been living here for the five years, their daughter will be able to return to the United Kingdom on the same basis that she would today. So there will be no new rules that would apply. If they have been living here for fewer than five years, they will be able to accrue the five-year status so that they go to exactly the same position with that settled status.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The Leader of the Opposition alleged that many Conservative Members were coming over to Labour’s way of thinking. Just in case I were tempted, does anyone have any idea what that is?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is always known for his plain speaking and he has put the point in a rather plainer way than I did in response to the Leader of the Opposition.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): Paragraph 6 of the summit’s conclusions refers to “peace and stability” in the world. Was there an opportunity to discuss the situation in Yemen, where 10,000 people have been killed, where the cholera epidemic has reached a fifth of a million people, and where the Saudis and Qataris are now refusing to speak to each other? Surely if there is a role for the EU at the present time, it is to work with the United Kingdom, which holds the pen on Yemen, to try to bring peace to Yemen.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman raises the serious issue of the situation that exists in Yemen. That has been a matter of concern for some time and the humanitarian crisis in Yemen is a growing issue. I am pleased that the United Kingdom has been able to provide some support. Of course, there are issues about ensuring that that support actually gets through to the people who need it.

I will be open with the right hon. Gentleman: there was not a discussion on Yemen specifically at this European Council, but we will continue to work with other member states of the European Union and through our role on the Security Council of the United Nations to try to find a solution, so that we can see a reduction in the humanitarian problems in Yemen and bring peace and stability to that country.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): The Prime Minister has been attempting to resolve the status of EU citizens since well before the triggering of article 50. What more can EU citizens residing in the UK do to put pressure on whoever is standing in the way of an agreement to resolve this issue, which is causing so much heartache to so many people?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend raises an interesting point. The message has to go across in the negotiations that this is a really important issue. It is
about people’s futures, and we want to ensure that we remove anxiety and give people reassurance. When I speak to other leaders within Europe, that is the message I get from them, but we need to ensure that the working group that has been set up under the negotiations recognises that and does its work as quickly as possible.

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Does the Prime Minister accept that the only way to reassure the 3 million EU citizens who work in, but are starting to leave, our hospitals, schools, care homes and businesses, as well as UK citizens in the EU, is for her immediately and unconditionally to grant full rights to EU citizens in the UK—no ifs, no buts? Anything less will leave them thinking that they are nothing more than a bargaining chip in a crude and cruel game of call my bluff initiated by the Brexiteers sitting next to her.

**The Prime Minister:** We are making clear in the document we have set out today the basis on which we believe a reciprocal arrangement can be made, but we are also making it clear to EU citizens here in the UK that nobody is being asked to leave the United Kingdom. That is one of the most important messages that we can give to people here, because there has been that anxiety. This is a serious offer, and nobody is being asked to leave the United Kingdom.

**Stephen Crabb** (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I strongly welcome the offer to EU nationals that the Prime Minister is making today and the spirit of generosity and pragmatism with which she makes it. Does she agree that carrying forward that same spirit into the negotiations about the rights of future EU workers gives us the best chance of protecting our own economic interests and securing the comprehensive trade deal that we all want to see?

**The Prime Minister:** My right hon. Friend is right. We want to work in a positive and constructive spirit, because it is in the interests of both sides—the UK and the European Union—to ensure that we get the right offer for EU citizens here and UK citizens in the EU, and also that we get the comprehensive trade deal we want, which will be to not just our benefit but that of the other member states.

**Caroline Flint** (Don Valley) (Lab): I certainly want the dilemma that EU nationals working and living here are facing to be put to bed so that they can plan for their future, but I also know that my constituents who voted leave want the reform of free movement. Will the Prime Minister pledge today to ensure that more of my constituents will be trained to fill any vacancies in both the public and private sectors created by the reform of freedom of movement? If the answer to that is yes, will she commit to come back to the House to explain just how we will do that?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the right hon. Lady for the references she makes and I can give her the assurance. It is absolutely crucial for this country that we ensure that young people are given the skills and training that they need to take up the vacancies and jobs of not only today but the future. That is why we will be reforming technical education. We will introduce changes to ensure we have proper technical education in this country for what I believe will be the first time. Alongside that, we have an industrial strategy that is about spreading prosperity across the country and ensuring that those job opportunities are available.

**Mr Mark Harper** (Forest of Dean) (Con): I commend the Prime Minister for the generous offer that she set out, and I hope that we will see an offer that will also benefit British citizens. I was pleased that, in reply to questions from Opposition Members, she said that EU nationals will get the same rights as British citizens but not better rights than British citizens. Will she take full opportunity of using the process to ensure that EU nationals who sadly have come to this country and abused our hospitality by committing crimes can be removed from our country?

**The Prime Minister:** My right hon. Friend knows very well from one of his previous roles the issue of those who have come to this country and abused, through their criminality, the rights they have been given. I certainly will ensure that we can take action to remove serious and persistent criminals from the UK.

**Mr Pat McFadden** (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): How can the cut-off date be earlier than the date we leave the European Union, given that EU citizens are living and working here legally at the moment and that the rights and obligations we have as members continue up until the day we leave, even though the article 50 negotiation process?

**The Prime Minister:** The rights that we have set out and the specified date are about the point at which people are able to qualify for settled status here in the United Kingdom. Of course, as we are members of the European Union, the arrangements that have always existed for us and for those here will continue, but for those who are getting settled status and wish to retain it for the future, the cut-off date is pertinent, and that will be a matter for negotiation.

**Crispin Blunt** (Reigate) (Con): I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister chose, exceptionally, to raise this extremely important issue in the Council, but will she confirm that in future all the threads of the negotiations will pass through the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, therefore bringing the negotiation together, in the same way in which the European Council is standing behind Mr Barnier?

**The Prime Minister:** My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union is looking at all those threads, which he is going to pull together. We are very clear that at different stages as we go through the negotiations—in the working groups and so forth—a whole variety of people will be involved, but as we saw last Monday, when my right hon. Friend went to the start of the negotiations opposite Michel Barnier, the status and position that he holds is very clear.

**Mr Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter) (Lab): The Prime Minister does not seem to understand that the election has changed everything and that her extreme, damaging Brexit is dead, so why is she making an offer that, as it affects British nationals living on the continent and EU nationals here, is far less generous than the offer that the EU made to us just two weeks ago?
The Prime Minister: There is no “extreme Brexit” that we have been talking about. There is no hard Brexit and there is no soft Brexit; what we want is the right deal for the United Kingdom. I remind the right hon. Gentleman that over 80% of people who voted in the recent election voted for parties that were committed to taking the United Kingdom out of the European Union. We have made a fair and serious offer; I believe it is a generous offer. There is one way in which it is different from the offer that the European Union has made, and that is in relation to the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. When people voted in the referendum last year, they voted to ensure that we stopped the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice here in the UK.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the comprehensive offer that she has made to secure the rights of EU citizens in our country, in a bid also to secure the rights of UK citizens in the EU. The next time she meets the Heads of Government in the European Union, can she explain to them that there are rather a lot of remainers in this country who would prefer the Leader of the Opposition to become Prime Minister, but that he says that he would scrap our nuclear weapons in six months, removing part of Europe’s vital defensive shield provided through NATO? Will she make clear the danger of that to them?

Mr Speaker: That was very tangentially related to the matters on which the Prime Minister is reporting to us, but we are grateful to the hon. Gentleman for what I think I will charitably call a cerebral meander.

The Prime Minister: Of course, Mr Speaker, the European Council did touch on defence issues as well, so it is possible for me to report to my hon. Friend that I did indeed address the importance of the United Kingdom being one of the key safeguards of NATO. Obviously, because of our nuclear deterrent, we are one of the key safeguards of NATO, and that is in relation to the jurisdiction of the Court. When people voted in the referendum last year, they voted to ensure that we stopped the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice here in the UK.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that no reasonable person could oppose what she has proposed? The only people who do never wanted us to leave in the first place. The idea that a foreign court should rule on the rights of people living here is akin to the outdated colonial approach taken towards China in the unequal treaties of the 19th century.

The Prime Minister: I always bow to my hon. Friend’s historical knowledge in the references that he makes, but the point is clear: what we want to see when we leave the European Union is that citizens here in the UK have their rights guaranteed and enforced by UK courts.

Mr Speaker: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman was present himself at the signing of the said treaties. We do not know; we will leave it to speculation.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Did the Prime Minister have an opportunity to speak to the President of Cyprus and express her support for the settlement talks between the Greek and Turkish Cypriot leaders, which are due to recommence in Switzerland on Wednesday?

The Prime Minister: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place in the Chamber. I did indeed have a bilateral discussion with the President of Cyprus about those talks, and about our hope and expectation because they have come so far. I think that both President Anastasiades and Mr Akinci have taken the discussions to a point that is far closer to a resolution than we have ever seen before, and I hope that we shall be able to take it over the line in the talks that will start in Geneva later this month. The UK, as a co-guarantor, stands ready to play its part in that.

Mr Shaiilesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): When EU leaders say that they want EU laws to prevail over their citizens in the UK, what they are effectively saying is that they do not trust our judicial system. When the Prime Minister next meets her EU counterparts, may I suggest that she gently reminds them that many of the companies in their own countries—the companies that drive their economies—actually use English and Welsh contract law, which is enforced in our courts by our judges, and the reason why they use English and Welsh law is that, globally, our judicial system commands greater respect than the judicial systems of Germany, France, Italy and so on?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point, and the nub of it is that our courts are respected around the world. As he says, people choose to use our law because they respect our courts, and they also respect the validity of our law. It is important that citizens in the UK are under the jurisdiction of our courts.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I note that the Prime Minister intends to do away with the technical requirement for comprehensive sickness insurance once a reciprocal arrangement has been reached, but people such as my Lithuanian constituent Dienta McDuff are suffering as a result of that requirement at present. Despite having been in Scotland for more than five years, she cannot secure permanent residency because she does not have comprehensive sickness insurance. During the last Parliament, the Exiting the European
Union Committee heard evidence that no such insurance product actually exists. Will the Prime Minister do away with that requirement here and now? It is a technical nonsense because these people are using the national health service anyway.

The Prime Minister: The requirement for comprehensive sickness insurance is an EU requirement, and as long as we are members of the EU, it will continue to be there. Once we leave, we can indeed remove it.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): I welcome the Government’s commitment to maintaining the “anything but arms” free trade relationship with the least developed countries. Will she say a little more about the Government’s intention to extend free and fair trade to developing countries which are not necessarily on the “least developed countries” list, but which have historically been penalised by the EU’s tariff arrangements?

The Prime Minister: I assure my hon. Friend that we are looking for a wide range of trade deals with countries around the world when we leave the European Union. I think that those trade deals are important because they bring prosperity, growth and jobs here to the UK, and also because it is free trade that has lifted millions out of poverty around the world. Ensuring that those free trade deals are in place has huge advantages for not just the least developed countries but others, and their citizens, and that will enable us to see growth, jobs and prosperity spread more widely than they are today.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Prime Minister tell us what discussions took place on co-operation against terrorism? Was there any reference to what happened on the streets of London just over a week ago on al-Quds day, when demonstrators were allowed to shout out blaming Zionists for the Grenfell Tower fire and castigating rabbis and synagogues?

The Prime Minister: There was a significant discussion on counter-terrorism and the need for us to co-operate in dealing with this issue. We focused, as I said in my statement, on issues around the internet and on the way in which it is used to promulgate hateful propaganda and to allow terrorists to plan and to have a safe space. We are united in our wish and our determination to take action with the tech companies to ensure that this cannot happen in the future. On the hon. Lady’s last point, I would simply say that across the whole House we are clear that there is no place for hate crime or hate speech in this country.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Some 3.2 million EU citizens currently choose to live, work and make their lives in this country. They are well aware that we are leaving the European Union. What does my right hon. Friend believe that says about their perception of our country’s prospects post-Brexit, and what does it say about Opposition Members when millions of EU citizens have more confidence in our country than they do?

The Prime Minister: I think that it shows what a great place the United Kingdom is to live and work in, and what great opportunities we have for the future. I am very pleased that those 3.2 million EU citizens have confidence in our country and want to stay here.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): In her statement, the Prime Minister talked about the drivers of migration, which include climate change, conflicts and extreme poverty. As a country, we have a proud record on international development. Does she agree that as this process moves forward, it is vital that we continue to co-operate closely with other EU countries to tackle extreme poverty, especially in Africa?

The Prime Minister: Indeed it is, and I am pleased that we as a country have been able to play our part in dealing with that. As an example, the Somalia conference that we hosted some weeks ago brought together countries from around the world to find ways in which we can continue to support Somalia, which people have been choosing to leave to come to Europe, and to provide greater stability and economic opportunity in that country. The UK has been at the forefront of the compact that we have with Ethiopia to provide economic and job opportunities for people who might otherwise try to migrate to Europe. We will continue to work with our European allies on this.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Does the Prime Minister believe that our new relationship with Europe will enable us to reduce further the significant numbers of European Union nationals in our prisons, which would give further headroom for our hard-pressed prison officers to carry out the vital rehabilitation work that they do so well?

The Prime Minister: Yes, indeed. We want to ensure that we are able to continue to transfer prisoners from the United Kingdom to their homes states in the European Union, but we also want to ensure that we are able to remove serious and persistent criminals from the United Kingdom, and we will do that.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I should like to ask my right hon. and even closer Friend the Prime Minister what reassurance she can give to the agri-food sector in Northern Ireland—particularly its producers and processors—about the rights of workers that will be required so that we can benefit from the increase in trade that that sector will undoubtedly get as a result of Brexit? Will this be marshalled by a work permit system and, if so, will it be capped in Northern Ireland?

The Prime Minister: The rules that we will set for people coming into the United Kingdom from the European Union, once we have left it—that is, those who are not already here—will be set out in the new immigration Bill that we will bring to the House following the repeal Bill. I fully recognise the importance of the agri-food sector in Northern Ireland, and that was made clear to me during several visits I have made there in recent months. We want to ensure that, once we have left the European Union, we see greater opportunities for the agri-food sector not only in Northern Ireland but across the whole United Kingdom, which will bring jobs, and greater growth and prosperity.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the typically warm and constructive response from Mr Juncker to these well-intentioned proposals reinforces the need for her to work ever closer with the European Heads of Government to compensate for the vested interests of the EU institutions?
The Prime Minister: As I said in my statement, the responses received from individual leaders in the European Union were positive to the proposals that were putting forward. I can cite the Prime Minister of Poland’s positive response to what was said, for example. I think my hon. Friend makes an interesting point.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): To follow the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley), the Prime Minister’s new governing partner, the Democratic Unionist Party, said in its manifesto that it would seek to deliver a “frictionless border” with the Republic of Ireland and a “comprehensive free trade and customs agreement with the European Union”.

Is it not the case that neither of those objectives can be secured if we leave the European Union without a deal?

The Prime Minister: I have to say to the hon. Gentleman that the desires to bring about a frictionless border between Northern Ireland and Ireland and to have a comprehensive free trade deal are exactly what the Government are pursuing. That is what was said in my incoming Taoiseach last week and discussed how we can work with the Irish Government to ensure that we can deliver just that.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): Violent ideologies from far-right Islamists are increasingly appearing online. Will my right hon. Friend provide some more information on what was agreed at the Council on tackling, fining or holding accountable internet companies that carry extremist content or those that are platforms for grooming?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an important point. With extremism that leads to terrorism, whatever the source, we see that people are trying to divide us in this country. That is why the response to all the terrorist attacks that have taken place in recent months—there being different reasons for those attacks having taken place, of course—has been one of unity and unity of purpose of British citizens to ensure that we drive out this hatred from our country. That is so important. In the discussions, we focused on the internet and in particular the industry-led forum, the setting up of which we and others have been discussing with tech companies. We want to see automatic technological solutions for the removal of material from the internet, because at the moment the process of removing extremist material is too slow and allows too many minds to be infiltrated before it is taken down. We want to see the automatic removal of that material.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister has made clear her hostility to the European Court of Justice. What will happen to British citizens living in other EU countries if they are not protected by the Court? Will they become citizens of nowhere?

The Prime Minister: As regards the jurisdiction of courts in the United Kingdom, I have made it clear that we should not be subject to the European Court of Justice and that EU citizens’ rights here should be protected in a different way. I believe that one of the things that people voted for when they voted to leave the European Union was for the ECJ not to have jurisdiction here in the United Kingdom.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I think the whole country will welcome the agreement that the Conservative and Unionist party has made with the DUP. The Prime Minister’s statement referred to the Brexit dividend of over £10 billion that we will save when we are not in the European superstate, and I welcome the half a billion pounds a year going to Northern Ireland. Is that the sort of funding that the Prime Minister thinks will happen in the rest of the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: I can say that we have to look at how we are going to use the money that we will no longer be sending to the European Union. People voted for us not to be sending vast sums of money to the EU every year, and we will have to look at how we use that money. One suggestion that has already been proposed by the Government is the concept of a shared prosperity fund to remove the disparities between different parts of the UK.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Did the Prime Minister have a chance at the European Council to discuss transitional funding arrangements for Wales? She will surely have to have something to say to the people of Wales, who now feel they are being treated as second-class citizens in the United Kingdom. She can magic up billions for Northern Ireland and yet will not give a guarantee on future funding for Wales.

The Prime Minister: We have already been very clear on various aspects of European Union funding for farmers, and on the guarantees we have over a period of years, but we want to make sure that, when money comes back from the European Union—money that we no longer give to the European Union—we are able to spend it as effectively as possible in driving improvements across the whole United Kingdom.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Before I came to this place, I used to teach effective negotiation skills. Through the Prime Minister, may I invite the Leader of the Opposition to a free trial period?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes a most generous offer, though I suspect the first thing he will have to do is explain to the Leader of the Opposition what a negotiation actually is.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I continue the efforts of my right hon. Friends the Members for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) in trying to understand what this will mean for our EU constituents resident here in the UK and their family members. Can the Prime Minister confirm that, under her rules, a Polish assistant on under £17,000 will not be able to bring an elderly relative to the UK? If so, what impact does she think that will have on our public services?

The Prime Minister: I repeat what I said earlier. For those EU citizens who are here and who qualify for settled status—either because they already have five
years’ residence or because they were here before the cut-off date and are able to build up the qualification for settled status—there will be no extra requirements to enable them to bring family members into the United Kingdom. We are not going to be splitting up those families.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister’s very clear assurances that, under Brexit, no families will be split up and that there will be no cliff edges for regularising their status. I also welcome the healthcare and pension arrangements. But the impact of Brexit on British businesses that employ EU workers simply cannot be overestimated, especially in the food, drink, farming and health industries in places such as Taunton Deane, so what reassurances can she give British businesses that employ EU citizens?

The Prime Minister: First, I emphasise again that there will be no cliff edges and that people will be able to bring family members here. We are not talking about splitting up families, which is a very important message. Once we have left the European Union, we will of course be putting immigration rules in place, but in doing so we will recognise, as we already do with people who come here from outside the European Union, the need to ensure that our economy can access the skills it needs, particularly in shortage occupations. We also want to ensure that people here in the United Kingdom are trained to take those jobs, hence the very important moves the Government are making on technical education.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Prime Minister said earlier that no families would be split up, but she said during the general election campaign that she intended to cut net migration to this country to the tens of thousands. Well, there is a problem here, because last year 136,787 people came to this country through the family route. If she is to meet her pledge, she is going to split families up, isn’t she?

The Prime Minister: Let me be very clear: EU citizens who qualify for settled status will be able to bring family members into the United Kingdom without any extra requirements.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister’s statement that Britain will become more internationalist after we leave the European Union. With that prospect in mind, could she give further details of her Government’s discussions with non-EU countries?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to say that we have already had a number of productive engagements on the issue of future trade with countries across the world, notably with India and America, but with other countries, too. We have had discussions with Australia, New Zealand, China and other countries across the world. There are real opportunities for the UK once we leave the European Union, and we will be making every effort to ensure that we take those opportunities.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): The Prime Minister’s offer is a step in the right direction, but it is long overdue. As a former Home Secretary, she will know that it is impossible both to grant the rights she proposes to 3.2 million EU citizens and to fulfil her target of reducing net migration to tens of thousands. Can she confirm today that she has set aside this fanciful target and is going to propose instead to follow the Chancellor’s advice about a Brexit that is rich in jobs?

The Prime Minister: We all want to ensure that the deal we come to with the European Union will ensure that we have the comprehensive free trade agreement that sees growth, prosperity and jobs here in the UK. That is the aim, but also we will be able to see jobs being brought here as a result of the trade arrangements we will be making around the rest of the world.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): May I pay tribute to the Prime Minister for confirming, once more, that the Conservatives will fulfil the delivery of the referendum result of control of our laws, borders and money? Will she give due assurance that any pressure to allow the European Court of Justice any role on immigration or the future indefinite leave to remain status of EU citizens in this country will be flatly opposed?

The Prime Minister: I give my hon. Friend the assurance that, as I said earlier, we believe that assuring the rights of EU citizens living here in the United Kingdom should be done through our courts, not through the ECJ. I will just reiterate the point I made: when many people voted to leave the European Union, one of the things they wanted to ensure was that the ECJ no longer had jurisdiction here in the UK.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Many of us who did not want this country of ours to leave the European Union took that view partly because we believed that leaving would make us more vulnerable and Europe less stable. Will the Prime Minister assure me that discussions took place at the European Council on the security implications of where we are now in Europe, given the increasing threat from Russia, both militarily and in terms of other activities it seems to be getting up to these days?

The Prime Minister: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that a particular set of discussions related to the activities of Russia and the EU’s response; the UK has been one of the countries leading on the requirements in relation to that. We remain clear that the sanctions must stay until the Minsk agreement is fully implemented in relation to the activity Russia has undertaken in Ukraine. We also discussed other security and defence issues, and I was able to reassure the other Heads of State and Government that the UK will retain its role in helping to ensure the security and safety of the European Union. We want to continue to have a defence and security partnership with our European allies.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): May I return to the Prime Minister’s welcome comments about the discussions on social media companies hosting hate material? We have led the way in this country on requiring employers proactively to make checks on the legality of prospective employees, landlords to check on prospective tenants and banks to check for money laundering. No such requirements or fines are in place
for social media companies, so will she now urgently set down a timeline, minimum requirements and the real prospect of significant and meaningful fines for social media companies that continue to act irresponsibly?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. It is precisely because we want to see those companies acting with greater responsibility in this area that we have been discussing with them this industry-led forum for the automatic take-down of material from the internet and that we have galvanised support, not just in the G7, as I did earlier this month, but in the EU Council last Friday. This was international support to ensure that we can put collective pressure on the companies to ensure that they are not carrying this material and that we see the importance and significance of taking this action. We have also discussed the fact that although the first step will be discussions with the companies about what they can do themselves, there is the prospect of legislation if that fails.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I call Darren Jones. [Interruption.] He was here a moment ago. I call Mr David Hanson.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister assure the House that she has made progress on securing our membership of the European arrest warrant, Eurojust and Europol as part of her discussions? In passing, will she also tell me that the UK Government do know when European citizens enter the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: As regards Eurojust, Europol and the European arrest warrant, those will be matters for the negotiations, but I have made it very clear that we want to retain our security co-operation, not just on counter-terrorism matters but on matters relating to crime.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): When we triggered article 50, it was very clear that a new immigration regime would be required. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it was therefore entirely sensible and appropriate to discuss the cut-off date with the EU Commission?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. New immigration rules will be brought in in the UK for those people who move from the EU to the UK after we have left. It is entirely right and sensible that, in part of the negotiations, we discuss the cut-off date for EU citizens who are here.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I represent many EU citizens who are fearful and indeed tearful about their future prospects, so I welcome some of the clarity that the Prime Minister has brought to the matter. She talks about a streamlined system for applying for status, but many people worry about how they will pay the costs for an entire family to go through the process in short order. Can she give us an indication of what those costs might be and reassure them?

The Prime Minister: The Home Office will be looking very carefully at ensuring that the costs are reasonable. It wants to ensure that the streamlined system, which will be a light-touch process, will be easy for people to access and that it will therefore be easy for them to regularise their status.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is very important to our economy that business continues to invest and that there are no cliff-edge changes to our trading relationships. As well as seeking a fair deal on exit and a new trade deal, will the Prime Minister seek a two or three-year transitional period to give business a total of up to five years to prepare for the future?

The Prime Minister: Once we know the basis of our future relationship with the EU, it will be important to recognise that not just business but Government as well may need to have an implementation period when they are able to make the necessary adjustments. How long that period will be will depend on what the new relationship is, and will therefore be part of the discussions that take place during the negotiations.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): With tens of thousands of Scottish jobs at risk, will the Prime Minister listen to her Chancellor’s warnings and protect our place in the single market?

The Prime Minister: As regards Scottish jobs, the most important single market is that of the United Kingdom.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Was the Prime Minister able to convey to her European counterparts in the Council the fact that, in the general election earlier this month, 589 Members of this House were elected on a promise to deliver a comprehensive Brexit?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I was very clear about the view of the electorate and about the position taken in the election by the Government and the majority of people who have come into this House, which was to deliver on the will of the British people as expressed in the referendum.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The Prime Minister said at the beginning of her statement that she wished the UK and the EU to trade as freely as possible in both goods and services. Can she confirm to the House whether any time was spent on developing proposals for the UK to remain both in the single market and the customs union?

The Prime Minister: We want to ensure that we have a good, frictionless access to the single market that is as tariff-free as possible. That is what we mean when we talk about a comprehensive free trade agreement, and that comprehensive free trade agreement will be part of the negotiations.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): European Union citizens in my constituency of Gloucester and their employers, notably the NHS, our university and many businesses, will greatly appreciate the clarity in the Prime Minister’s statement today. Will she give us an idea of whether an agreement on this crucial issue,
which affects so many citizens here and in Europe, might be possible before agreement on other issues, and if so, when?

The Prime Minister: I am pleased that this issue is one of the first to be addressed in the negotiations. I hope and believe that there is goodwill on both sides to recognise the importance of this issue for citizens both here and in the remaining 27 European Union member states. I cannot give a timeline, because, obviously, there are aspects that still need to be negotiated, and the European Union has said that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed. I hope that we will be able to give final reassurance to citizens at an earlier stage.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Prime Minister has said that she wants to see the removal of serious and persistent criminals from the UK, and I am sure that we would all agree with that. Will she say a little bit more about how she intends to do that, bearing in mind that she failed to do it in the six or seven years when she was Home Secretary?

The Prime Minister: I have to say to the hon. Lady that her portrayal of what happened during the time that I was Home Secretary, and indeed since, is not correct. A significant number of persistent and serious criminals were removed from the United Kingdom. The basis on which it is possible to do that for people who are here as European Union citizens of course is subject to slightly different rules than that for others, and once we are out of the European Union we will be able to adjust that.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): My constituency has proportionately more EU nationals than any other in the country in respect of how recently they have arrived. I know that they, like me, will warmly welcome the statement, which provides real clarity and which, I hope, will be concluded, as my right hon. Friend has said, earlier than the end of this deal. On social media, may I remind her that not that long ago internet companies were saying that the removal of child sexual abuse images automatically was simply impossible? Now, it happens routinely. Extremist material is harder, but does she agree that it can be done?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an important point in drawing that comparison. It did take a while, and hard work, to get the tech companies to the position where they would take the action they have done on child sexual abuse images on the internet. I believe we can do the same with extremism, and that is what we are encouraging them to do.

Mr Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Hello, Prime Minister.

At the Council, did the Prime Minister manage to raise the issue of the Erasmus+ programme and our continuing work in it? In particular, the deadline for the Erasmus+ grants is October. It takes six months for those grants to be awarded, and another year sometimes for them to be enacted. Will she ensure that any academic, student or young person who is awarded an Erasmus programme is able to come here without additional visa burdens?

The Prime Minister: While we are still within the European Union, the current arrangements and the opportunities to apply still apply to the United Kingdom. We have been able to give some certainty over certain programmes and their continuation after we leave the European Union, but even after we have left there will be options for us to find ways in which we can contribute and participate in such programmes.

Mr Speaker: We all warmly welcome the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Mr Russell-Moyle) to the Chamber and to our deliberations.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I have just returned from the Netherlands with a delegation from the Lords and Commons. On the Dutch Binnenhof tour, I had the opportunity, among other things, to speak to British nationals living and working in the Netherlands. What reassurance can the Prime Minister give to them and to other British nationals living and working across the EU that their rights will be protected, alongside EU rights for those living here?

The Prime Minister: The best assurance I can give to those British citizens living in the Netherlands and elsewhere in the European Union is that we have set out a fair deal—a fair offer—to those EU citizens living here, but we are very clear that this must be reciprocal and that those British citizens must have their rights protected as well, and we will continue to argue for that.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The Prime Minister mentioned the trade deal between Japan and the EU. She will be aware from leaked documents this weekend that a lot of people are concerned that there is no mention of environmental protections—for example, tackling Japan’s illegal timber trade or whaling—in the draft agreement. Does she think that those protections should be in there and what does this say about the agreements that we will be negotiating when we leave the EU?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, there is still further discussion taking place between the European Union and Japan in relation to that trade deal. Once we have left the European Union and are able to set up such agreements ourselves—Japan is another of the countries we have been talking to—it will be up to us, as part of the negotiations for that trade deal, to set the conditions for that trade agreement.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Returning to the issue of online content, will the Prime Minister confirm whether the Government would be willing to enact legislation should the internet companies not make sufficient progress with the removal of inappropriate content?

The Prime Minister: We are certainly willing to consider legislation; this matter is so important. I believe that, with the international pressure and co-operation that we are now building, we will be able to put pressure on the tech companies such that they do this themselves, but we should not rule any option out.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I do not know whether it is in order to blow a raspberry in this House, but that was the reaction of constituents—EU nationals—whom I met at the Partick language hub in
my constituency on Saturday, when they heard about the reports of this deal. I wonder how many EU nationals the Prime Minister met or consulted in drawing up the proposal she has presented today.

The Prime Minister: I have to say to the hon. Gentleman that, like other Members of the House, I have met people in my constituency who are employers of EU nationals concerned about this and people who are EU nationals who are concerned about their position. The detail had not been published at the weekend, but I suggest that he take the detail to his constituents and enable them to see for themselves the fair and serious offer we are making.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I was pleased to hear the Prime Minister refer earlier to our manifesto commitment to create a UK shared prosperity fund. Even though it was not specifically mentioned in the Queen’s Speech, will she confirm that the Government are committed to bringing forward such a fund to replace the EU structural funding that has been so important to places such as Cornwall?

The Prime Minister: We want to ensure that when we are no longer sending these huge sums of money to the European Union every year, some of the money that is available can be used in that way. There is a real need to ensure that we do that as effectively as possible so that the money has the maximum impact across all parts of the United Kingdom.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I am sure that the Prime Minister is aware of the problems already faced by our universities and research sectors because of these uncertainties. What discussions did she have at the Council with other leaders about dealing with these challenges, and will she take the opportunity today to say whether she wants us to stay within the Horizon 2020 programme?

The Prime Minister: A number of the programmes and projects that the UK has been part of and benefited from will be part of the negotiations. What I am very clear about—we have made this point consistently with EU circles—is that while we are still in the European Union we should have the same ability to apply to be part of programmes as has been the case previously. One of my concerns is that in some areas, such as university research, I am hearing some anecdotes that universities are finding it harder because of our future. As long as we are in the European Union, we should be able to apply on exactly the same basis as we always have.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: What a rich assortment of distinction. I call Joan Ryan.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): The European arrest warrant and its extradition orders have proved a very effective means by which we have seen speedy justice for those who have committed a crime and for victims who want a speedy outcome. What does the Prime Minister envisage as the future of the European arrest warrant? Has she yet discussed that at any point? If not, when does she think it will be discussed?

The Prime Minister: As I indicated earlier to the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson), those issues will be part of the negotiations. But I am bound to point out that I stood at this Dispatch Box as Home Secretary and argued for the United Kingdom to remain in the European arrest warrant, during a debate in which the Labour party was trying to stop us getting the legislation through.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP) rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Members are chuntering “It’s true” and “It’s not true” from a sedentary position. It is all very well, but it is rather unfair to the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), who wishes to unburden herself of a series of important thoughts that the nation should hear.

Alison Thewliss: Every week in my surgery I see constituents who are already worn down by the incompetence, intransigence and unkindness of the Home Office. What steps will the Prime Minister take to give the Home Office adequate funding to deal with all the additional EU nationals who will now need to be processed?

The Prime Minister: The Home Office is well able to deal with the issues that it will be addressing, and it will be ensuring, as I indicated in an earlier response, that the process that people will go through will be streamlined and light-touch.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I recently visited a manufacturer in my constituency that exports to the EU. It informed me that it now has to include the risks of Brexit in its export contracts. What advice does the Prime Minister have for manufacturers, such as those in my constituency, that today have to assess the risk that they might end up paying tariffs after we leave the EU?

The Prime Minister: What I say to those manufacturers is that I hope they will work with the Government to ensure that we understand the needs of every part of industry in this country as we go forward into the negotiation on the comprehensive free trade agreement. We want to see a tariff-free ability to trade with the European Union, and we will be considering the views and interests of British industry as we do that.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): The Prime Minister has twice this afternoon responded to questions about the skills challenges that will be created as a result of the reform of freedom of movement by referring to the reform of technical education, but of course the economy will have much greater needs, such as new dentists, doctors, vets and other professionals. On that basis, will she guarantee the funding necessary to ensure that our schools, colleges and universities will be able to meet the skills challenges of a post-Brexit world?

The Prime Minister: I have been very clear that we do need to meet those skills challenges; that is why we are bringing in the reforms. The hon. Lady refers to issues within the national health service, but one of the important
steps that the Government have taken is to remove the
caps on the number of people who can train as staff in
the national health service.

Annaliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): My question
relates to that posed by my hon. Friend the Member for
Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner). If the Prime Minister
truly is concerned about the future of British science
and European funding, why is there no mention of
British science and European funding in this statement,
any of the Brexit Bills or the Queen’s Speech?

The Prime Minister: I suggest that the hon. Lady look
at the 12 objectives set out in my Lancaster House
speech in January for a negotiated deal with the European
Union. We specifically referred to science and innovation.

Mr Paul J. Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op):
Much play has been made this afternoon about the
supremacy of this place in terms of the repatriation of
powers from the European Union, yet there has been no
consideration of how the whole governance and structure
of the United Kingdom is to be developed, post-Brexit.
Will the Government give any consideration to a concurrent
constitutional convention that would consider how stable
and sustainable governance and distribution of power
across the United Kingdom is considered after the
Brexit process, including the possibility of a federal
UK?

The Prime Minister: I welcome the hon. Gentleman
to his place; I did not welcome one or two other new
hon. Members who have stood up, so I apologise to
them for that. I say to the hon. Gentleman that the best
way of ensuring good governance and stability across
the United Kingdom is maintaining the United Kingdom.

Mr Speaker: I, too, welcome the hon. Member for
Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), who has just served
up an interesting hors d’oeuvre. We look forward to his
main course before very long.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): There
are two excellent universities in York, but they are
already challenged by the recruitment and retention of
EU staff. Researchers and academics need to move
seamlessly between UK and EU universities. How will
they accrue their settled status under the Prime Minister’s
new rules?

The Prime Minister: I suggest that the hon. Lady look
at the proposals set out today, which make clear the
basis on which people are able to get their guaranteed
settled status here in the United Kingdom. That will
cover people from all walks of life. We want EU citizens
who are here to stay. We are not talking about forcing
anybody to leave the United Kingdom.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The Prime Minister
has fielded without really answering a number of questions
about the longer-term rights of EU nationals to bring
their families over here should the need arise in future.
Can she now answer the question categorically? Will
she give an absolute guarantee that the minimum income
requirement that is obstructing so many family reunions
for non-EU nationals will never under any circumstances
be imposed on any EU national in the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: EU nationals who have been
here for five years and have the five years’ residence will
quality for settled status. EU nationals who have been
here for fewer than five years will be given an opportunity
to qualify for that settled status—to stay for those five
years in order to qualify. No extra requirements will be
imposed on those EU nationals in relation to bringing
family members into the United Kingdom. Once we
have left the European Union, we will be establishing
within the immigration rules the arrangements for EU
nationals who then move into the United Kingdom.
They will have the same status as those moving here
from outside the European Union.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): As part of
her recent little tour around Labour-held seats across
the country, the Prime Minister stopped for a photograph
at a farm in my constituency. Why was there no mention
of agriculture in today’s statement?

The Prime Minister: What I was reporting on were
the subjects discussed at the European Council on
Friday. I reported faithfully on those subjects.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister
confirm that she was aware of the details in the document
on EU nationals wanting to remain in the UK when,
during the general election, she promised to cut immigration
to the tens of thousands? Are the two compatible?

The Prime Minister: Yes. In the document, we are
talking about the rights of EU citizens living here in the
United Kingdom. We are making a fair and serious
offer that nobody will be forced to leave the United
Kingdom and that families will not be split up. We want
people to stay, and this is the document that will enable
them to do so.
Northern Ireland

4.10 pm

The First Secretary of State and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Damian Green): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on details of the agreement reached today between the Conservative and Unionist party and the Democratic Unionist party, under which the DUP will support the Government on a confidence and supply basis.

Having won the most votes and the largest number of seats in the general election on 8 June by a significant margin, only the Conservative party has the ability and legitimacy to lead the Government our country needs. This agreement delivers the certainty we need in the United Kingdom’s national interest at this crucial time. The agreement means that the DUP will support the Government on votes on the Queen’s Speech, the Budget, and legislation relating to our exit from the European Union and national security. It will ensure that we can govern in the national interest, strengthening and enhancing the Union, keeping our country safe, delivering prosperity for all and securing a departure from the European Union that benefits all parts of the United Kingdom. To support the agreement, the Government will chair a co-ordination committee involving both parties.

As Members of this House are well aware and as our manifesto made clear, the Conservative party has never been neutral in expressing its support for the Union. As this agreement states, Her Majesty’s Government remain fully committed to the Belfast agreement and its successors. This means that we will continue to govern in the interests of all parts of the community in Northern Ireland. These confidence and supply arrangements in no way affect our steadfast commitment to the re-establishment of an inclusive Northern Ireland Executive by this Thursday. The Government will do everything in their power, working alongside the Irish Government, to bring the talks process to a successful conclusion in the short time that remains.

Both the Government and the DUP recognise the unique circumstances of Northern Ireland’s history, and the effect this has had on its economy and on people from all parts of the community. The Government are resolute in their determination to deliver for the whole of the United Kingdom. In recognition of our commitment to support growth across all parts of the United Kingdom, we have agreed to provide additional support for the people of Northern Ireland. I hope this part of the agreement will play a positive role in the efforts to re-establish devolved government. Funding would go to a restored Northern Ireland Executive in the same way that the £2.5 billion of financial support and flexibility was made available to that Executive through the 2014 Stormont House agreement and the 2015 “Fresh Start” agreement.

The Government support further co-operation with the Northern Ireland Executive on infrastructure development in Northern Ireland. The UK Government will allocate £200 million a year for two years. The Government and previous Executives have recognised the integral part digital infrastructure plays in opening up new opportunities for growth and connectivity for businesses and consumers. We will therefore contribute £75 million a year for two years to help provide ultrafast broadband for Northern Ireland, just as we have made funding available for this purpose in communities across the United Kingdom.

The UK Government are committed to working with the Executive and others to work towards a comprehensive and ambitious set of city deals across Northern Ireland to boost investment and help to unlock the full potential of Northern Ireland. This is the sort of targeted, positive intervention that the UK Government can make across the UK. It builds on the success of existing deals such as those in Glasgow, Cardiff and Swansea. Since 2014, the UK Government have committed to more than £1 billion-worth of investment in Scotland and Wales through this programme along with other projects. This is a continuation of our determination to be a Government for the whole of the UK.

To target pockets of severe deprivation so that all can benefit from growth and prosperity, the UK Government will also provide £20 million a year for five years to the Northern Ireland Executive. We will also ensure that all parts of the UK are properly reflected in the future UK shared prosperity fund as we exit the European Union.

As our manifesto made clear, we are also increasing our commitment to investment in public services across the UK. That is why we have pledged a minimum of £8 billion in additional NHS funding in real terms over the next five years; it is also why we have pledged to increase funding in real terms per head in every year. Our spending on the NHS in England is also translated into extra spending in Scotland and Wales through the Barnett formula. How that is spent is, of course, a matter for the Scottish and Welsh Governments.

To address immediate priorities in Northern Ireland, the UK Government will also allocate an additional £50 million per year for two years to enable the Executive to address pressures in health and education. Recognising the priority given by the Executive to securing a modern, sustainable health service in Northern Ireland, the UK Government will allocate £100 million per year for two years to support the Northern Ireland Executive’s priority of health service transformation.

The Government and the Executive also agree on the importance of support for mental health, particularly recognising the historical impact of Northern Ireland’s past on its communities. [Interruption.] I am glad the shadow Foreign Secretary finds mental health in Northern Ireland amusing—I find that slightly surprising. The UK Government will provide £10 million per year for five years to support the Northern Ireland Executive to deliver this measure.

Our general election manifesto made clear that there would be no change in the pensions triple lock before 2020. As part of this agreement, both parties have agreed there will be no change to the triple lock for the duration of this Parliament. We further agreed that there will be no change to the universal nature of the winter fuel payment. The Prime Minister said we would listen to what people said during the election campaign, and this is an example of our doing so.

As the party with the most seats at the general election, the Conservative party had a duty to form a Government. It is right that we talk to other parties to seek to ensure that the Government can provide the confidence the country needs at this crucial time. I commend this statement to the House.
4.17 pm

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): This is a shabby and a reckless deal, which it has taken the Government at least £1 billion pounds to buy, and whose true cost for the future of peace in Northern Ireland could be infinitely higher. The Good Friday agreement is rightly seen across the world as a model for other countries seeking to end conflict, but it is also fragile and relies above all on trust, good faith and the impartiality of the British Government. For the Government to put such an agreement in jeopardy just to prop up this dismal Prime Minister is nothing short of a disgrace. So can I ask the First Secretary what legal advice the Government have received on whether today’s agreement is compatible with their legal obligations under the Good Friday agreement and whether he will publish that advice today?

I will not waste time discussing the so-called policy agreement set out today; after all, it was not the DUP who forced this Government to ditch their plans to hit pensioners’ income—the British people did that on 8 June. No, this agreement is all about the money, so let me first ask the First Secretary for some clarity on the funding. First, how much extra funding will go to support infrastructure, broadband, health and education and tackle deprivation in the rest of the United Kingdom? No one would begrudge the £1 billion extra support in those areas for Northern Ireland, but in Scotland, Wales and the English regions, the needs are just as great, so when will the rest of the country get its share?

Secondly, the agreement says there will be a consultation on reducing VAT on tourism in Northern Ireland. Just a year ago, the current Minister of State with responsibility for security told the House the Government had concluded that the costs of such a VAT cut outweighed the benefits and that it was not something the Government were going to consider. So what has made the Government change their mind? In the light of his commitment to be fair to all parts of the United Kingdom, will he extend this consultation to all parts of the UK, seeking to support their tourism and hospitality industries, and if not, why is he not including the likes of Blackpool, Margate or Colwyn Bay?

Thirdly, and most importantly, can the First Secretary tell us this: where is the extra £1 billion announced today going to come from? During the election he was fond of telling interviewers that there was no magic money tree. So what has happened today? Has he found the key to the secret garden, or is the truth that like everything else that this Government say and do, it can all be ditched if it helps them to hang on to power—no matter who the bedfellows, no matter what the manifesto said, no matter where the money comes from, no matter the unfairness for the rest of Britain, and no matter the consequences for peace? That is no way to lead a Government, and it is definitely no way to run a country.

Damian Green: Let me deal with some of the detailed points that the right hon. Lady has made. She seems to think that providing more money for Northern Ireland health and education, and broadband and other parts of infrastructure, in some way makes it less likely that an Executive will be formed. I can assure her that it makes it more likely that an Executive will be formed. She asked about infrastructure help for the rest of the country. I am happy to repeat some of the things I said in my statement and add to them. We are pledged to provide £8 billion of new money for the health service and £4 billion for education, and we have an overall infrastructure fund of £23 billion, so the rest of the country absolutely will share in the advance in infrastructure spending that we have promised.

The right hon. Lady asks, of course, about how we can afford this. We can afford this because we have a strong economy after seven years of Conservative Government. It takes some nerve for a party that had tens of billions of pounds of unfunded commitments at the election to complain about targeted infrastructure spending and spending specifically designed to help some of the most deprived communities in this country. Labour also had a pledge to nationalise half of British industry and said that it was not going to cost any money because although it would borrow the money, it did not count as borrowing because it would pay it back out of the profits of the industry. I have two things to say to the right hon. Lady: first, if you borrow money it is still borrowing; and secondly, after six months of a Labour Government running an industry there would not be any profits to pay back any of the borrowing.

The right hon. Lady is fundamentally wrong that this does not help, in what is a hugely important week for Northern Ireland, to try to make sure that we restore proper devolved democratic government to Northern Ireland. I think that helping the Executive to be set up will be one of the great achievements of this week. What she has missed is that this extra support—this extra money—goes to all communities in Northern Ireland, run by the Northern Ireland Executive, so that people from all political traditions—all communities—will benefit from it. I would have thought, frankly, that she would welcome that.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: The good doctor—Dr Julian Lewis.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): In the discussions with the Democratic Unionists, did my right hon. Friend make any progress on the question of protection for former service personnel who still face the possibility of prosecution many years after fatal incidents in the period of the troubles?

Damian Green: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that question. The answer is yes. We seek to ensure proper fairness in the issue he raises and other legacy issues. I am sure that the agreement that comes out of our talks with the DUP will help advance a balanced and fair solution to those issues.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): This is quite simply a pathetic, grubby little deal demonstrating all the worst excesses of pork barrel politics, designed to prop up a Government without a majority and increasingly without any credibility whatsoever. We now know that £1.5 billion is the price that this country will have to pay to keep this shambolic Government in power. The Government warned of a “coalition of chaos”, but this is much, much worse than that, as the social conservatives in the DUP exact their price from the Government.
This deal is not subject to the normal allocation of funds across the UK, and it will be delivered at the expense of all the other nations of the UK. Only 24 hours ago the Secretary of State for Scotland was categorically assuring us that Scotland would be in line for full Barnett consequentials as a result of the DUP deal. Either he was inadvertently misleading the Scots people, or he is so completely out of the loop that he has no idea what is going on, because we now know that Scotland will get nothing—zero, zilch—out of this deal.

What representations has the First Secretary received from the Scotland Office or from any of the new Scottish Members of Parliament who laughably said that they would stand up for Scotland? If the Barnett formula is to be bypassed, what is Scotland going to get out of this? Why has the Barnett formula been bypassed by this deal? This is a huge test for the new Scottish Tory Members of Parliament. They can either stand up for Scotland and Scotland’s funding interests, or stand behind this chaotic Government and their new best friends.

**Damian Green:** The hon. Gentleman is so far wide of the mark that it is almost laughable. He says that this comes from the block grant and specifically says that it is outside the Barnett formula. Let me give him some facts about what is happening in Scotland: a city deal for Glasgow; outside the Barnett formula, of £500 million; a city deal for Aberdeen, outside the Barnett formula, of £125 million; and a city deal for Inverness, outside the Barnett formula, of £53 million. Would he like me to go on? There is £5 million for the V&A in Dundee, outside the Barnett formula, £5 million for the Glasgow School of Art and £5 million for the Helensburgh waterfront. Huge amounts of money are going to Scotland from outside as well as inside the Barnett formula. If the Scottish National party does not recognise that, I suggest that its Members go back to their constituencies and find out what is happening in Scotland.

**Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con):** I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement, and his personal commitment to ensuring that the imbalances and inequalities that exist in all parts of the United Kingdom are tackled effectively by this Government. Will he say a bit more about how the UK prosperity fund will be used to raise economic output in the poorest parts of the United Kingdom? I encourage him to keep an open mind to some of the ideas that his Welsh colleagues might have for further investment.

**Damian Green:** I am very happy that my right hon. Friend brings up the UK prosperity fund, which we will introduce once Brexit has been completed. Its purpose is precisely to help disadvantaged communities across the whole of the United Kingdom. It is meant to replace the money that has gone to some of our deprived communities through European institutions. I know, for instance, that communities in Cornwall have benefited in that way. Absolutely, communities in Wales, as well as in Scotland, Northern Ireland and other parts of England, such as the north-east, may well benefit from the UK prosperity fund. I am always open to creative ideas from any part of the UK about how best to spend that sort of money.

**Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op):** Let me explain to the Minister why there is concern on this side of the House about these women from Northern Ireland. This is not a devolved matter; it is about when they come to our shores as UK taxpayers and their ability to use UK services. I note that the official agreement says that the Government and the DUP are committed “to providing health services which meet the needs of everyone, no matter who they are or where they live.” It does not seem like that when it comes to these women. Will the Minister confirm whether the question of their access to abortion in England, or the fact that Northern Irish laws on abortion have been found to violate the UK’s human rights responsibilities, were discussed as part of the negotiations? Did the Government make any commitment to the DUP about when this matter comes to the House? Are Northern Irish women simply expected to pay the price of what feels like a forced marriage?

**Damian Green:** I am happy to assure the hon. Lady and the House that the agreement is what is set out. There are no private or side agreements attached to it—it is completely open. Again, I appreciate the strength of feeling she brings to this matter. It is clearly a
political discussion she may wish to bring about in Northern Ireland when we have a devolved Executive there.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): I welcome the Government’s funding for city deals in Northern Ireland and urge them to continue their focus on foreign direct investment into the Province.

Damian Green: My hon. Friend makes the good point that foreign direct investment is extremely helpful to the Northern Ireland economy, as it is to the UK economy as a whole. It is absolutely the case that we wish to better utilise our embassies and high commissions around the world not just to boost exports, which is traditionally regarded as one of their important roles, but to help foreign direct investment, particularly into those parts of the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland, that would most benefit from it.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I thank the First Secretary for advance sight of his statement. My first thought on seeing it was that the Government had scraped the bottom of the pork barrel in reaching an agreement, but I suspect he will learn in the months to come that there is probably no bottom to that particular barrel.

The Government cannot be blind to the fact that this agreement places in jeopardy their role under the Good Friday agreement. That agreement can be secured only if the Government commit to transparency—not just today, but at every step of the way for as long as this agreement lasts. Will we get that transparency?

Damian Green: I do not agree with the right hon. Gentleman that this agreement hinders the formation of a new Executive and, therefore, the implementation of the Good Friday agreement. That agreement can be secured only if the Government commit to transparency—not just today, but at every step of the way for as long as this agreement lasts. Will we get that transparency?

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): In welcoming the additional votes that the DUP brings, may I criticise the Government for not being bold enough? As Labour Front Benchers move to the Back Benches, and its Back Benchers move to the Front Bench, a lot of Labour Members are left disaffected, as a number of them do not identify themselves as Leninists or Marxists—and many not even as socialists. Could we send out a warm offer to those discontented Opposition Members to vote with us in the Lobby to deliver this Queen’s Speech?

Damian Green: My hon. Friend makes a shrewd point. I would indeed extend that invitation. To be entirely serious, there will be large parts of the Queen’s Speech—for instance on economic regeneration and issues such as mental health—on which I genuinely hope that we will get support from all parts of the House. There are many issues to which partisan politics will not necessarily apply, some of which are included in the Bills in the Queen’s Speech, and I look forward to men and women of good will from all parts of the House supporting those Bills.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): May I warmly welcome the First Secretary of State’s statement? This is a good agreement for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and it is a good agreement for all the people of Northern Ireland. All the money that has been outlined, particularly that for mental health and hard-to-reach areas, is for every section of the community in Northern Ireland. This is a deal that delivers for all the people of Northern Ireland.

We commit to transparency—we are very open to that. Some day, I like to think we might publish all the correspondence and conversations we had in 2010 with Labour Front Benchers, and in 2015 with Labour Front Benchers and indeed also the Scottish National party, because some of the faux outrage we have heard is hypocrisy of the highest order.

We look forward to working with the Government over the next five years to deliver a strengthened Union of the United Kingdom, to deliver Brexit, to deliver prosperity to all parts of the United Kingdom and, most of all, to protect and defend our country at home and abroad.

Damian Green: I, of course, welcome completely my right hon. Friend’s words. He and I have spent more time together over the past few weeks than has been our wont in the past, and I assure him that it has been a life-enhancing experience at all times. I very much welcome the support of him and his colleagues so that we can, as he says, strengthen the Union and the economy in all parts of the country, get a Brexit deal that works for the whole country, and provide a confident Government for the next five years.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): May I welcome what both he and the right hon. Member for Walsall North (Bridget Phillipps) have said? This agreement places in jeopardy their role under the previous agreements, can help that, it is to be welcomed. That will strengthen the United Kingdom and the partnership of all the countries within it. I welcome what both he and the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) said.

Damian Green: My right hon. Friend is right. To repeat a hugely important point, the money will go to all parts of Northern Ireland. It will benefit all communities in Northern Ireland, and that should be a significant step towards ensuring that we have a successful conclusion to these vital talks about the re-setting up of a devolved Executive, which I am sure that everyone in this House wants to see.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Is the Minister concerned that his performance today is likely to bring crude hypocrisy into some disrepute? The Government have just lost an election. They made themselves and the country more unstable and weaker than they were before. In order again to correct problems within the Tory party, they are using this crude bribe. Is not the answer today that MPs who represent Wales and Scotland have to put our countries first, and is not the result of this that the Government are making the United Kingdom more divided than ever?

Damian Green: The problem with the hon. Gentleman’s analysis is his starting point that our party lost the election. No, we did not; his party lost the election—it
lost its third election in a row. We all know that Labour won more seats than most of its own Members thought it would—there are people sitting on the Labour Benches who assumed that they would be out of a job now. In the spirit of non-partisanship, I welcome them back to this House but, nevertheless, the idea that the Labour party won the election is a fantasy that I think is dying out even on the wilder shores of Momentum.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): Given that the DUP’s well known hard-nosed negotiators have generally done deals for about £1 billion when they need arrangements from the United Kingdom Government, may I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the fabulous value for money that he has obtained in a confidence and supply arrangement that will last five years and deliver Brexit? That compares rather well with the arrangement in 2008, when for about the same amount of money the then Government got one vote on 42-day detention—we were joined in the Lobby by the current Leader of the Opposition, shadow Chancellor, shadow Foreign Secretary and shadow Home Secretary—only for it to be reversed in the House of Lords three months later. This deal therefore looks like spectacularly good value for money for the United Kingdom.

Damian Green: I think that I thank my hon. Friend for that question. I am happy to agree with him that this is indeed a very good deal, not just for Northern Ireland but for the whole United Kingdom.

Mr Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley) (Lab): The Minister will be aware that the north-east of England is one of the poorest areas in the United Kingdom. We have not got a Barnett formula and the Government have only four or five MPs there—at least the last time I counted—so obviously we are going to get nowt, but is he giving our money away? Will we get what we are getting or are we going to get nowt?

Damian Green: If the hon. Gentleman wants to come and talk to us about a deal, I am sure that he and indeed his constituents, would be very welcome. I can absolutely assure him that this does not involve diverting money from any of the various programmes that we use. Indeed, the UK prosperity fund will be able to help some parts of his area. He is more than welcome to keep an eye on that. As he knows, there are many city deals across England, and I am sure that the metro Mayor in Teesside will also do great things for that area. We are committed to all parts of the United Kingdom, including the part that the hon. Gentleman represents with such distinction.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I do not think that the First Secretary of State mentioned defence in his statement, but will he confirm what I think I have read elsewhere: the Democratic Unionist party and the Conservative party have agreed that we will spend a minimum of 2% on defence?

Damian Green: My hon. Friend is right. I am sorry; I did not read out the entire agreement because you might have objected to that. Mr Speaker, but he is absolutely right. One of the things on which the DUP and the Conservative party are completely united is making sure that we meet our NATO commitment to spend 2% of GDP on defence. I hope my hon. Friend would also welcome the first sailing of the new aircraft carrier today, which shows that this party, and indeed the DUP, are very serious about defending our country.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): May I take this opportunity to thank you, Mr Speaker, for the fantastic family event on Saturday, when this Chamber was full of the sound of children and joy? You handled it with grace. I would encourage all Members to take a look at the coat of arms for our much loved Jo Cox and to enjoy the symbolism of mountains, the Thames, women’s suffrage and, of course, the Yorkshire rose.

Global goal 5, which we agreed to, states that there has to be reproductive rights for all women. Will the deal with the DUP mean that we have stopped our progress towards that goal, losing our position as one of the global leaders fighting for equality for all?

Damian Green: May I first associate myself with the hon. Lady’s very apposite remarks about the Jo Cox memorial? It was indeed very good to see it in this House on what was obviously a very sad anniversary.

In answer to the hon. Lady’s question, this is, as I said to her hon. Friend, a matter to be decided in Northern Ireland by Northern Ireland politicians and the people of Northern Ireland, and that is where she should be making her arguments.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Andrew Bowie.

Andrew C. Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the Government are committed to ensuring that everyone from every nation and region of our United Kingdom is able to share in the proceeds of continued economic growth? As has already been mentioned, one way of doing that has been through the successful city deals, and my constituency has benefited greatly from the Aberdeen city deal. What will the Government do to boost investment in Northern Ireland and spread the benefits of such mechanisms?

Damian Green: I welcome my hon. Friend to his place. He is completely right to point out the benefits of the investment that has been made in his constituency thanks to the Government’s strong economic progress over the past seven years, which enables us to afford regeneration and investment that those who would run the economy down would not be able to afford. I am happy to assure my hon. Friend, and indeed the people of Northern Ireland, that that same strength of the economy can and will be used to regenerate communities all over the United Kingdom, including in Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: I hope that I pronounced correctly the surname of the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew C. Bowie). If I may be permitted, I hope even further that the hon. Gentleman is as devoted an admirer of the late and great David Bowie as I have been for the last 40 years.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Will the First Secretary of State confirm that, constitutionally, the extra money that he has announced today is for the Northern Ireland Assembly, not one particular party—great negotiators
though I know its members to be? Will he confirm that the money has been agreed, and that its priorities have been agreed, by all parties that may form the Executive on Thursday?

**Damian Green:** As I have said a number of times during these exchanges, absolutely. This is money for Northern Ireland—for the whole of Northern Ireland. It is not for one party in Northern Ireland and it is not for one community in Northern Ireland. It is for the whole of Northern Ireland, and it will benefit every community in Northern Ireland. As I said to the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), I am quite surprised that Labour Members are not welcoming this extra money, particularly that for disadvantaged communities in Northern Ireland. There was a time when the Labour party purported to care about disadvantaged communities.

**Robert Jenrick** (Newark) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that while much has been said in recent weeks about the importance of working with others across the aisle in the national interest, not everyone seems to like that in practice? Does he agree with the words of Ronald Reagan, I think, who said that someone you agree with 80% of the time is 80% friend and ally, not 20% enemy?

**Damian Green:** I confess that I had never heard that extremely good quotation before. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend and I will use it shamelessly.

My hon. Friend is quite right. Having sat for four years in a coalition Government with the Liberal Democrats, I am happy to admit that there will be times when one has very strong disagreements with people in another party but can still work alongside them in the interests of the country as a whole. That is a duty that we should all take on board.

**Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson** (Lagan Valley) (DUP): I am sure the First Secretary agrees that it is a rather remarkable day when the Labour party criticises investment in schools, investment in roads, investment in housing and investment in jobs on the grounds that that threatens the peace process. It really is bonkers to suggest that that is the case. Perhaps some Labour Front Benchers might now want to reflect on their past equivocation when it came to supporting the IRA, and the message that that sends to young people today in Northern Ireland who might be thinking about taking up arms in the future.

**Damian Green:** I am happy to agree with my right hon. Friend. It is clear that anything that aids investment, particularly for disadvantaged communities, ought to help to produce a more positive political atmosphere in Northern Ireland. I am sure that Labour Front Benchers heard his other thoughts with interest.

**Nigel Mills** (Amber Valley) (Con): In welcoming this deal and the increased role of Northern Irish MPs in Westminster affairs, does the First Secretary agree that it is time to look again at the donations to the Northern Irish parties to ensure that they are consistent with the rules on the mainland, both in terms of transparency and of being sourced from outside the UK?

**Damian Green:** That is not part of the agreement, so it is not directly relevant to my statement today, but I am sure that the House will have heard my hon. Friend and will no doubt wish to discuss those matters further.

**Mike Gapes** (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The First Secretary of State said that the funding would go to a restored Northern Ireland Executive. If the Northern Ireland Executive are not restored, will the money still go there, or not until the Executive are restored?

**Damian Green:** At this stage, with three days to go before the deadline, the sensible thing for me to point out is that the Conservative party is completely committed to getting the Executive re-established, as is the Democratic Unionist party. We both believe that decisions about the funding of public services in Northern Ireland should be taken by politicians in Northern Ireland. That is the logic of the devolution settlement that we have with the other countries in the United Kingdom, and that is the position we want to get back to in Northern Ireland as well.

**Richard Graham** (Gloucester) (Con): Spreading infrastructure development, bringing stability to Government, delivering the Good Friday agreement and helping to implement the border with the Republic of Ireland are all good for Northern Ireland and for the United Kingdom. If none of that is welcome to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) and his party, would my right hon. Friend confirm that the Government would be happy to receive back from the Scottish National party the moneys received for the Scottish city deals?

**Damian Green:** I rarely disagree with my hon. Friend, but I disagree with him on that point. I do not believe that the SNP speaks for Scotland on this matter. I am interested in the prosperity and future of the Scottish people, just as I am in the people of England, Wales and Northern Ireland. That is the logic of being a Unionist, and I will preserve that logic to the end.

**Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): Hospitals, schools and other public services in my constituency continue to face unprecedented cuts, so how do the Government justify finding £1.5 billion in order to achieve self-preservation? Is there any money on the magic money tree for the Dewsbury constituency?

**Damian Green:** As I have explained to the shadow First Secretary, this Government are committed to spending an extra £8 billion on the NHS in this Parliament, as well as an extra £4 billion on education and an extra £23 billion on infrastructure as a whole around the whole of the United Kingdom. I hope and expect that the people of Dewsbury will be able to benefit from that like everyone else.

**Matt Warman** (Boston and Skegness) (Con): Twenty per cent. more of my constituents voted Conservative in 2017 than did so at the previous opportunity. No one else will blow that trumpet, so I thought I should. Many of them did so because they were inspired by the vision for Brexit that was laid out by Theresa May. Can the First Secretary reassure me that this deal will strengthen Theresa May’s hand when it comes to Brexit and ensure that we can deliver control of our borders and our laws, as was promised at the general election?
Mr Speaker: Order. I think the hon. Gentleman was in election campaign mode for a moment there. I gently remind him that no hon. or right hon. Member should be named in this place—perhaps least of all the Prime Minister. It was to the Prime Minister that he was referring; no name is required.

Damian Green: First, I should praise the perspicacity of my hon. Friend’s constituents for massively increasing his vote at the recent election. I am happy to assure him that this deal does indeed make it clear that the vision of a Brexit that works for all parts of this country is reinforced and strengthened by the agreement that we are discussing today.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The Prime Minister and the DUP pride themselves on being champions of this supposedly precious Union. While the Prime Minister is busy bribing the DUP to stitch up the seams of this threadbare Administration, she continues to neglect the people of Wales and treats us like third-class citizens in this so-called family of equals. My party has always been at pains to prove that the Barnett formula is not fit for purpose, and the Government’s disregard for it today seems to indicate that they now agree. If this Government can hand out £1 billion to Northern Ireland in times of such austerity, I ask on the behalf of the people of Wales, “Where is the £1.7 billion which is now so evidently our right?”

Damian Green: I am happy to remind the hon. Lady that, under the new funding formula agreed last year, public spending in Wales is roughly £120 a head for every £100 a head spent in England, so the idea that this Government are in some way neglecting the people of Wales—my homeland—is wide of the mark. That figure arises from the Barnett formula and, on top of that, the two city deals involve funding of up to £540 million, which should release private sector investment totalling £4.7 billion. As the hon. Lady can see, the people of Wales are being well served by this Government.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Be in no doubt that this deal has everything to do with the Conservative party and absolutely nothing to do with the country. If it had anything to do with the country, the First Secretary would come to the Dispatch Box and tell me how much money Scotland will get as a result of this deal being signed.

Damian Green: Since this deal is about Northern Ireland, Scotland will benefit in the way that it has in the past. I am quite happy to repeat the figures that I repeated to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), the SNP spokesman, but I would not want to embarrass him further. Scotland is doing extremely well out of city deals and other things, and it benefits from the Barnett formula as well. Scotland’s problem is that it has a Government in Holyrood that are not very good at running public services. The hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) and I probably ought to agree on that.

Mr Shaiilesh Varah (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): There has been much reference to the national interest this afternoon, and I commend my right hon. Friend for doing a deal with the DUP in the national interest. However, given this crucial time in our history and the challenges that lie ahead, does he agree that now is the time for Labour to work constructively with the Government for the greater good of the nation, not to seek to score political points?

Damian Green: I agree with my hon. Friend’s wise point. It is never too late to repent, and if the Opposition Front-Bench team want to adopt a more constructive attitude, I would very much welcome that.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Does the First Secretary view with utter despair the comments and implications from the Opposition Front-Bench team today that people will in effect go back to war because we intend to spend £1.5 billion on services that people so vitally need? A bit of rationale surely needs to be injected into this debate. This is a good deal for Northern Ireland and a good deal for the entire United Kingdom.

Damian Green: I agree that the extra £1 billion of new money in this deal, which will, as I have repeatedly said, be spent in the interests of developing the prosperity of all the people of Northern Ireland, is hugely welcome both in itself and in this crucial week for the devolution process. I am genuinely surprised that there is not a greater welcome for it among those on the Labour Benches.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Does the First Secretary agree that it is perfectly sensible that there should be a consultation on VAT rates in tourism in Northern Ireland? Uniquely within the UK, it has a land border with another country that has a lower VAT rate on tourism—9%—and is therefore currently at a competitive disadvantage.

Damian Green: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. There are various things about Northern Ireland that make it unique within the United Kingdom. The history is one, and the land border is of course another. That is why it has a specific type of devolved government, which we hope to see restored, and why we will be consulting on various other policy areas as well.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I am a little surprised by the First Secretary’s statement, because he left out the most important part of the agreement. He said that the DUP will support the Government on votes on the Queen’s Speech, the Budget and so on, but he left out the only bit that the Government really care about, which is that the DUP will support them on all motions of no confidence. That is what the Government have bought with this money, isn’t it? They have bought continuing support on all motions of no confidence, because the only way to bring down a Government under the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 is a motion of no confidence. All the rest is irrelevant. Now that the DUP has effectively become a party of government, and not a party of opposition, surely, surely, surely it should surrender its right to Short money.

Damian Green: I am quite surprised that the hon. Gentleman does not recognise that the addition of large sums of money for promoting infrastructure, for helping people with mental health problems and for helping particularly disadvantaged communities is the most
important part of this agreement. It seems to me to be the most important part of the agreement because it will actually help disadvantaged people in Northern Ireland. If he does not accept that that is important, he will lose some of his socialist firebrand credentials, which he loves to parade.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): We were told by Ruth Davidson, no less, that the 13 Scottish Conservative MPs in this Parliament would operate as a separate bloc, would put Scotland’s case forcefully and would make sure that they deliver for Scotland. Can the First Secretary tell us, with reference not to the last Parliament but to this Parliament, what additional targeted investments the 13 Scottish Tory MPs have secured for Scotland in return for supporting this deal?

Damian Green: I refer the hon. and learned Lady to what Ruth Davidson has said today. Ruth Davidson is completely in support of this agreement, and she makes the point that, just as Scotland benefits hugely from the strength of the economy that a Conservative Government have provided and that allows us to make all the investment in Scotland that I have already detailed—I am more than happy to detail it again, if the hon. and learned Lady wants—and just as we have treated Scotland fairly, we should treat Northern Ireland, Wales and other parts of England fairly, too. That is what this Government will continue to do. If she wants any new money, I refer her, as I have done repeatedly from this Dispatch Box today, to the UK prosperity fund that we will be introducing after Brexit, from which I hope many communities in Scotland, as well as in other parts of the UK, will benefit.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I recognise that abortion is a devolved matter, although I deplore the resulting legislative framework in Northern Ireland. Women are prosecuted and convicted in Northern Ireland for seeking to procure abortions, which forces them to come to England for terminations. This is the question we are trying to ask the First Secretary: will his Government fund those terminations, those procedures, in England, Scotland and Wales? Why do the Government, of whom the First Secretary is a leading member, not do the right thing and say that those women should not be charged for accessing NHS services, which, as taxpayers, they contribute to through the tax they pay on their wages?

Damian Green: The hon. Lady wants—and just as we have treated Scotland out of this formula.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): The hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) mentioned an extra £1.5 billion for Northern Ireland, and under the Barnett formula that should mean an extra £2.5 billion for Wales. Does the First Secretary of State agree that if the Welsh Secretary refuses to find that money for Wales around the Cabinet table, once again the Tories will have betrayed the people of Wales?

Damian Green: The new money of £1 billion in this deal is of course outside the Barnett formula. As I explained to the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts), under the Barnett formula every person in Wales receives approximately £120 for every £100 of public spending for every person in England. It is clear from the figures that Wales is not doing badly out of this formula.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): During seven years of austerity, which left north-east working families on average £1,000 worse off per year, Tory Governments refused to invest in smart growth for good jobs, but now they have found £1.5 billion to bung at the DUP. Does the First Secretary therefore acknowledge that unless he immediately invests an equivalent amount in the north-east, and undertakes an air passenger duty review, the Government’s reputation for economic competence will be on a level with their reputation for Brexit negotiations, where they are the laughing stock of Europe?

Damian Green: I point out to the hon. lady that over that period—indeed, over her period in the House—unemployment has consistently fallen in her area, as in other areas, until it has now reached its lowest level since the mid-1970s. I would have thought she would welcome that; more of her constituents are in work than ever before.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Why do this Government not do the right thing and deal with these women who have no option but to travel from Northern Ireland to seek termination services in England, Scotland and Wales? Why do the Government, of whom the First Secretary is a leading member, not do the right thing and say that those women should not be charged for accessing NHS services, which, as taxpayers, they contribute to through the tax they pay on their wages?

Damian Green: The hon. Lady knows that the NHS is a devolved function in the devolved Administrations, so if we accept the logic of devolution, this is clearly a political issue for the people of Northern Ireland.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): The House is disappointed this afternoon that the First Secretary of State has been so vague in explaining exactly where the money to pay for this deal is coming from. It is therefore incumbent on him to ask his Chancellor to come to this House to explain how it is that the period of austerity which we have suffered for
so long has so abruptly come to an end and how it is that if we now have the “proceeds of growth”, areas such as Yorkshire, the north-west, Newcastle and Cumbria are not also allowed to enjoy them?

**Damian Green:** All the areas that the hon. Lady talks about have benefited from an economic policy that has reduced unemployment to its lowest level for more than 40 years. I am happy to assure her that the money in this deal is well within the confines of the fiscal targets we have set ourselves, so we are still able to hit those targets of eliminating the deficit by 2025—and reducing the structural deficit to no more than 2% by 2020-21. This does not affect our fiscal targets at all.

**Stephen Kerr** (Stirling) (Con): Speaking as the new Member for Stirling, where there is a new city region deal in the offing, may I ask my right hon. Friend to confirm for the benefit of Opposition Members that all city deals in Scotland and Wales since 2014 have sat outside the Barnett formula?

**Damian Green:** I welcome another of my hon. Friends to his place. He is exactly right. The city deals and the city region deals have proved one of the most successful innovations of this Government. I look forward to the people of his constituency benefiting from them, as people in constituencies across the UK already have.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Secretary of State for Scotland is not in his place—no doubt he is off somewhere polishing his brass neck—so I will have to tell the First Secretary of State that the city deals arranged in Scotland have come at a cost to local government and the Scottish Government. The UK Government are paying only £678 million, whereas the Scottish Government and local government in Scotland have put in £1.3 billion. How much are local authorities in Belfast and in Northern Ireland as a whole expected to put into the city deals?

**Damian Green:** Only an SNP Member could idly talk about “only” £678 million; soon we will be talking about real money. **[Interruption.]** It is a Geoffrey Howe quote. The UK Government and the Scottish Government have joint responsibilities to help the economy of Scotland, and certainly the UK Government are already demonstrably meeting those commitments. I hope the SNP-led Scottish Government continue to do so.

**Anna Soubry** (Broxtowe) (Con): I welcome this agreement, but does the First Secretary of State agree that the injustice—because that is what it is—of women from Northern Ireland who seek terminations being charged to have them on the mainland by the NHS is nothing at all to do with this agreement? It is an entirely separate matter. To that end, does he agree that the Government should consider this matter, because it is not fair that women from Northern Ireland seeking terminations should be charged by the NHS here in this country?

**Damian Green:** I can only say to my right hon. Friend what I have said to Opposition Members, which is that this is clearly an enormously sensitive political topic, and the best place for it to be resolved is within the democratic politics of Northern Ireland itself.

**David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): Tonight, many of my constituents in Glasgow East will be wondering why our local jobcentres are being shut when the pavements of Northern Ireland are being made of gold. Was the Secretary of State for Scotland consulted as part of this grubby deal and the finances involved in it, or was the Cabinet’s man in Scotland once again frozen out?

**Damian Green:** Like all Cabinet members, the Secretary of State for Scotland plays a key role in all decisions made by the Government. The hon. Gentleman’s characterisation of this deal is, as I hope I have shown over the past hour or so, completely wide of the mark.
Grenfell Tower Fire/Fire Safety

5.12 pm

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will update the House on the Government’s response to the Grenfell Tower tragedy and our safety inspections of cladding in other buildings.

I know that I speak for the whole House when I express my heartfelt grief at the Grenfell Tower catastrophe. Almost a fortnight has passed, but the shock has not subsided. I have visited Kensington and witnessed the terrible anguish of those who have lost so much. In some cases, people have lost literally everything. I am sure that, like me, many hon. Members have returned some cases, people have lost literally everything. I am sure that, like me, many hon. Members have returned

I know that the entire country is anxious to hear what we are doing to reassure residents about fire safety in similar blocks around the country. My Department has contacted all councils and housing associations in England to identify all tall residential buildings with potentially similar cladding that they are responsible for. We estimate that number to be around 600. On 18 June, we wrote to those councils and housing associations and asked them to start sending samples. On 21 June, our combustibility testing programme for aluminium composite material started. It is run by the Building Research Establishment—BRE. On 22 June, the Government provided advice to all these landlords about interim safety measures where a building has ACM cladding that is unlikely to be compliant with building regulations. This advice was recommended by an independent panel of experts and includes advice based on the emerging findings from the Metropolitan police investigation into Grenfell Tower.

I can inform the House that, as of midday today, the cladding from 75 high-rise buildings in 26 local authority areas has failed the combustibility test. Members will rightly want to know whether their residents are affected, and my Department will publish regular updates on gov.uk.

The combustibility test has three categories rated 1 to 3, and it is judged that cladding material in category 2 or 3 does not meet the requirements on limited combustibility within building regulations. I can also confirm to the House that, so far, on that basis, all samples of cladding tested have failed. The fact that all samples so far have failed underlines the value of the testing programme and the vital importance of submitting samples urgently.

The testing facility can analyse 100 samples a day and runs around the clock. I am concerned about the speed at which samples are being submitted. I urge all landlords to submit their samples immediately. Landlords and local fire and rescue services are alerted to every failed test, and we are supporting and monitoring all follow-up action, including by dedicated caseworkers in my Department.

Landlords for all affected buildings have informed, or are informing, tenants and are implementing the interim safety measures needed, working with fire and rescue services. At this time, the safety of people living in these buildings is our paramount concern. I am determined that residents have as much peace of mind as possible in such worrying times. Landlords must keep residential buildings safe for their tenants. Where they cannot satisfy that obligation with appropriate mitigating measures, we expect alternative accommodation to be provided while the remedial work is carried out. That is exactly what happened in Camden, and I pay tribute to the residents for their brave response to such a distressing situation.

It is obvious that the problem of unsafe cladding may not be unique to social housing or residential buildings. We have asked other owners, landlords and managers of private sector residential blocks to consider their own buildings, and we have made the testing facility freely available to them. My Department is also working with the Government Property Unit to oversee the checks on wider public sector buildings. Hospitals are well prepared. Each one has a tailored fire safety plan, but nothing is more important than the safety of patients and staff, so, on a precautionary basis, we have asked all hospitals to conduct additional checks.

The Government will continue to work closely with fire and rescue colleagues to prioritise and conduct checks based on local circumstances. The Education and Skills Funding Agency is contacting all bodies responsible for safety in schools, instructing them to carry out immediate checks to identify any buildings that require further investigation. We will have more information this week.

Across the wider Government estate, 15 buildings have been identified as requiring further investigation. While that work continues, it is vital that we offer every assistance to the victims of the Grenfell Tower tragedy. As of this morning, 79 people have been confirmed dead or listed as missing, presumed dead. Sadly, it is believed that this number will increase.

As the Prime Minister told the House last week, the initial response of the emergency services was exemplary, but the immediate support on the ground was simply not good enough. A remarkable community effort sprang up overnight while official support was found wanting. That failure was inexcusable, and it is right that a new team and approach is now in operation. We have activated the Bellwin scheme and sent significant central Government resource, including a single point of access into Government provided by the Grenfell Tower victims unit, operating from my Department. Staff from six Departments are offering support at the Westway assistance centre and a family bereavement centre in Holborn.

The Government have also set aside £5 million for the Grenfell Tower residents discretionary fund, with more than £1 million already distributed. Each household affected is receiving £5,500 to provide some immediate assistance, and so far 111 households have received payments. The British Red Cross is operating an advice line for anyone affected or in need of support. It is just one of many charities, faith organisations and businesses that have provided invaluable assistance to victims. I can announce to the House today that the Government will contribute £1 million to support their efforts. That money will be new money. It will be distributed to a local consortium of charities, trusts and foundations that are working together to respond to this tragic event.
Our other priority has been to find survivors a safe and secure place to live. The Prime Minister made a clear commitment that a good-quality temporary home would be offered within three weeks to every family whose home was destroyed in the fire. Every one of those families will also be offered a permanent social home in the local area. That work is under way and the first families moved into their homes over the weekend. Last week I also announced that the Government had secured 68 homes in a new development in Kensington to rehouse local residents. We will do everything we can to support the victims of the Grenfell Tower fire, now and in the future, and I will regularly update the House on our progress.

As the Prime Minister said in her statement to the House last week, the disaster at Grenfell Tower should never have happened. There is an ongoing police investigation and there will be an independent, judge-led public inquiry to get to the truth of what happened and who was responsible. Building regulations and the system for ensuring fire safety in buildings have been developed over many decades. Until the Grenfell Tower fire, many experts would have claimed that that system had served us well. But now we have witnessed a catastrophic failure, on a scale that many thought impossible in 21st century Britain. It is clear that that failure must be understood and rectified without delay, and the Government are determined to ensure that happens. As an initial step, I can inform the House today that I am establishing an independent expert advisory panel to advise the Government on any steps that should immediately be taken on fire safety. Further details about the panel, including its members, will be released shortly.

This tragedy must never be forgotten. It should weigh heavily on the consciousness of every person tasked with making decisions that ensure that it can never, ever happen again.

5.21 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for the advance copy of his statement, and for what he has told the House. As he has said, the shock from this truly terrible, tragic fire at Grenfell Tower has not subsided, and neither has the fear. As the Prime Minister said in her statement last week, the Government’s response, both national and local, was not good enough in the early days. Nationally, it is still not good enough. Hundreds of residents of Grenfell Tower and their relatives are still struggling to keep their lives going in the face of this gravest loss, and hundreds of thousands of residents in 4,000 other tower blocks across the country are still wondering whether their homes are safe, worried about sleeping at night and want to know what the Government are doing to ensure their safety.

Trust is so low in the local community around Grenfell Tower that I welcome the local Gold Command leadership. I welcome the key workers who are in place to provide each household with support and advice, and I welcome the £1 million paid so far in immediate assistance payments. However, the Secretary of State has made a promise to rehouse all Grenfell Tower residents in the local area within three weeks. It is now nearly a fortnight since the fire. How many people are covered by that pledge? Two weeks on, is it correct that 370 households are still in emergency accommodation? How many have so far been found permanent new homes, or even the “good-quality temporary” homes mentioned by the Secretary of State? By what date will all residents affected by the fire be in a permanent new home? Finally, as those residents move, will the Government guarantee that the children will still be eligible to attend their same schools?

More widely, Ministers talk too loosely about the buildings that have been tested so far. The Prime Minister said last week:

“We can test more than 100 buildings a day”.—[Official Report, 22 June 2017; Vol. 626, c. 169.]

Will the Secretary of State make it clear to the House that the Government’s “testing” is only of cladding samples sent in by councils and housing associations? The Government say that more than 600 tower blocks with cladding need safety checks, so why, five days into the programme, have only 75 tests been done so far? Why have all failed? Importantly, will he confirm that cladding is just not the whole story? We know this from both coroners’ reports in 2013, into the Lakanal House and Shirley Towers fires. We may well find that from investigations into Grenfell Tower, as the fire there broke into almost every floor of the building.

We need from Ministers a much more thorough review of fire safety in all the country’s residential tower blocks, a total commitment to action to deal with any problems, and a guarantee that the Government will help to fund the costs. That also applies to other public buildings such as schools and hospitals, over which similar doubts may hang.

The issue of costs is crucial because some significant work and alterations have to be done, and quickly. Will the Secretary of State make funding available up front—not after the event through the Bellwin scheme—for any council or housing association that needs it for recladding or the installation of sprinklers and other fire prevention measures, starting with the highest-risk high-rise blocks and those with sheltered accommodation? Will he lift the central cap that he currently places on local authorities’ housing so that they can borrow and invest to ensure that their residents are safe?

I welcome the independent expert advisory panel, but frankly the Secretary of State is wrong to say that many experts would claim that our buildings regulation and fire safety system serves us well. Many experts have said exactly the opposite, especially since the two coroners’ reports four years ago into previous tower block fires. Will he now act on the recommendations in those reports?

There really should be a triple fire safety lock around buildings and works on them. First, the materials must be fit for purpose and meet safety specifications. Secondly, fire safety systems must be in place and fire risk assessments done regularly. Thirdly, building regulation and control must make sure that design, construction and any further works are fully safe. Instead, the update that the Secretary of State has given us this afternoon suggests a collapse of the fire safety control and check system. It is not working and it must change.

Finally, what is the Secretary of State doing to make sure that when the Prime Minister said that we simply had not given enough attention to social housing in this
country, those were not merely empty words? What is he doing to make sure that this terrible tragedy at Grenfell Tower means a profound change of course on housing in this country?

Sajid Javid: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments—in particular, his support for Gold Command and the relief effort on the ground in Kensington.

The right hon. Gentleman asked a number of specific questions. I can give him some updated numbers on rehousing the victims of the Grenfell Tower tragedy. The commitment that we have rightly made is that every single one of the families whose homes have been destroyed—both at Grenfell Tower and in the neighbouring Grenfell Walk: together, some 144 units—are guaranteed an offer within three weeks of temporary housing in the local neighbourhood; we have defined “the local neighbourhood” as Kensington and Chelsea, but also the neighbouring boroughs.

So far, some 373 hotel rooms are being occupied; that represents 153 households from Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk and 220 households from the cordon area. Individual housing assessments have been done for almost all those from Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk; the work is led by Westminster City Council, with support from a number of other councils across London. If any have not been done, that has been through choice: people have asked that their assessment be delayed because they are not ready. We are, of course, respecting their wishes. In respect of those whose assessments have been done, there have already been 59 offers of temporary accommodation.

As I am sure hon. Members will understand, we are finding that some families want to take their time to make a decision on the temporary accommodation. In a number of instances, some of the families have quite understandably first asked for something in Kensington as close as possible to where they lived, but when they have been shown the home and seen what is left of the tower they have understandably changed their minds and asked for some other options. We are working with them at their pace. Our commitment is that they will all be made offers within the three weeks, although they will not all necessarily be in the temporary accommodation within that time. We have to respect their choice when they are made offers. If they change their minds, we want to accommodate that.

The other issue is that some families actually doubted us when we said that the initial accommodation is temporary. One family I met in the Westway Centre on Friday said, perfectly understandably, “How do we know temporary is temporary? How do we know that you’re not just going to leave us there and not find us better quality, more suitable and permanent accommodation?” When I probed a bit further, the family said they were told that Grenfell Tower would be temporary accommodation when they first moved in, but they were still there 17 years later, so I absolutely understand their concerns. In that case, I had to make a personal commitment to that family. That worked; they are now in temporary accommodation. We want to work with each family at their pace to get them what they deserve and need as best we can.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the testing facilities. I can confirm that the testing facility operated by the Building Research Establishment is testing the cladding material only. That is so important because, besides the whole building structure, the material itself has to meet minimum combustibility standards. The test tries to achieve that. So far, 75 tests on samples have taken place and all 75 have failed.

I agree with the right hon. Gentleman’s statement that cladding is not the whole story, as it goes much further than that. One example is what has happened in Camden. The result of the cladding test for Camden triggered further investigations by the local fire service and the London fire commissioners. When the commissioners went into those tower blocks in Camden, they found, in their own words, multiple fire safety inspection failures, which, frankly, should not have happened in tower blocks of any type, and certainly not in those tower blocks in Camden. There were problems with gas pipe insulation, some stairways were not accessible and there were breaches of internal walls. Most astonishingly, literally hundreds of fire doors were missing. Camden Council itself estimates that it needs at least 1,000 fire doors because they were missing from those five blocks. That has nothing to do with the cladding. Something has clearly gone drastically wrong there. These issues need to be looked at very carefully to find out why this is happening in this day and age in our country.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about costs. We have been very clear that local authorities and housing associations must not hesitate at all. As soon as they learn about any action and necessary steps that they need to take to ensure public safety in terms of fire risk, they must take that action. If they are not able to pay for that themselves, we will of course work with them and put a financial support package in place with the individual organisation.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about what more we can do now. I am sure that he understands that we can do some things now in this immediate and urgent situation, but that there are also longer-term lessons to learn. Some will come from the public inquiry, but we cannot wait for the final results of that inquiry. Hopefully—it is up to the judge—there will be an interim report, but work can be done much sooner than that. That is one reason that I am putting the independent expert panel in place, and I would be very happy for the right hon. Gentleman to meet and have access to that panel.

The right hon. Gentleman’s final point was about social housing. I absolutely agree that there are very big lessons to learn about the quantity and quality of social housing. There has been massive investment of record amounts in social housing over the past six years. More than 330,000 new units have been created, and more council housing has been built in the past six years than in the 13 years before that. We can do a lot more, but it is much better if we work together.

Mr Speaker: There will be no more tragic matter treated of in this House in this Parliament than that which is before us now, in consequence of which I want every Member who wishes to contribute to the exchanges to have the opportunity to do so. It might, however, help the House if I point out that there are a would-be 52 contributors in the debate to come. As a result, there is a premium upon brevity from Back and Front Benches alike, now to be brilliantly exemplified by the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith).
Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for the action he is taking, the urgency with which he is seeing this process through and the way he wants to drive it through, but to return to the points raised by the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman, there is one issue we need to revisit in parallel and to get on with as fast as we can. My main concern is that, as we look at the cladding and all the other issues, such as the windows in these tower blocks, which can explode into flames if they are made of the wrong type of glass—that is often overlooked among the other things, such as the fire doors—we should really ask ourselves the simple question, and have a real review into, whether it is necessary any longer in many cases to have these older tower blocks, and whether we would not be better off taking a very strong decision to bring some of these tower blocks down and to provide much better, much more family-friendly low-rise, or even council house, accommodation. Will my right hon. Friend comment on that?

Sajid Javid: I thank my right hon. Friend for his remarks—he makes a very good point. Our most urgent work right now is to make existing tower blocks safe, but there are also longer term consequences, and that includes looking at our whole approach to social housing and the quality of social housing.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I would like to take this opportunity to extend my sympathies and those of the SNP to those who have been affected by the Grenfell Tower tragedy and those who face worry as they wonder about their accommodation tonight. I am glad to see the proposal to give funds to local charities, which is very welcome, but I would like to ask a few more questions on the statement.

First, will there be funding from central Government for mitigating measures and alternative accommodation where local authorities face expensive remedial work? That work may take a significant time, and residents will need to be housed and perhaps compensated during that period. Will there also be additional funding for the fire service, which was clearly not able to carry out fire safety work on, for example, the blocks the Secretary of State mentioned in Camden?

Will the tenancy agreements for those moved into temporary and more permanent accommodation be equivalent to, or better than, the tenancy agreements they had in Grenfell Tower?

It was clear—the Minister’s response acknowledged this—that the official response was not good enough, although I make these points in the spirit of helpfulness and not in any way on a party political basis. In Scotland and in Glasgow, we have a well-developed resilience strategy involving all local authority bodies. Will the Secretary of State look at the way it is implemented at local government level? Will he also look at how building regulations in Scotland compare with building regulations in England?

Is it possible to have Scottish representatives on the advisory panel the Secretary of State mentioned, so that they can share some of that experience and that different approach? Lastly, the Scottish Government have already established a short-term ministerial working group on building in fire safety. Will there be a means for it to report to the inquiry?

Sajid Javid: I thank the hon. Lady for all her important points and questions. On funding, we have made it clear that all the local authorities and housing associations absolutely must do all the necessary work, and we will work with each of them to make sure they have the funding they need if funding is preventing them from doing that work.

On the tenancy agreements for the Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk residents, the terms will be the same or better, whatever housing they eventually receive—whether it is temporary or permanent.

On Scotland, the hon. Lady made a good point. Scotland has already identified around 500 high-rise buildings with cladding, but none of them has ACM cladding. Scottish building regulations certainly deserve a closer look, and as we do a wider review, we should certainly take that into account.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): The most worrying thing in the Secretary of State’s statement was when he said that none of the examples of cladding so far had met the requirements in the building regulations but had clearly been fitted to buildings. May I urge him to make that the first thing he asks his independent expert advisory panel to look at? If we have widespread non-compliance with existing building regulations, that is the most urgent thing we need to deal with to prevent a recurrence of this tragedy elsewhere in the country.

Sajid Javid: I very much agree with my right hon. Friend. That is a very urgent question that is already being looked at. Once we have the independent panel established, which will be from tomorrow morning, that is one of the first things it will be tasked with.

Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): I have heard some very ill-informed comments about tower blocks here. As the only architecture expert in the House, as far as I know, I am happy to give a lecture about the safety of well-maintained tower blocks. Concrete-framed tower blocks are safer than Victorian terraces, for example. But that is for another day.

I have heard this morning, shockingly, that people who have concerns about their immigration status or lack of documentation are still not coming forward, and are sleeping rough, and some have been told that they may not be eligible for housing and medical services, and may be reported to the Home Office. Will the Secretary of State please make a firm commitment now, and communicate it widely, that immigration status will not be a barrier to help from medical and housing services, and nor will they be reported to the Home Office. Will the hon. Lady please make a firm commitment now, and communicate it widely, that immigration status will not be a barrier to help from medical and housing services, and nor will they be reported to the Home Office.

Sajid Javid: First, I thank the hon. Lady for the reassurance that she has been providing to her constituents, many of whom are looking for support from across Government and elsewhere. She has been a very reassuring figure locally, and I thank her for that.

On her particular question on immigration, I can absolutely give her that assurance. We have already made it clear that any information that anyone coming forward provides either to Government or local government will not be used for any kind of immigration check. That has been put in a letter that has been given to every
affected family. If the hon. Lady has some further suggestions about how we can get that message out, as I think we should follow up on those, I would be very happy to listen.

**Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I welcome the rapid pace of testing of the cladding. It is shocking to hear that so many tower blocks are unsafe. We have heard about the situation in Camden, where tower blocks are being evacuated. Does my right hon. Friend expect other councils to manage evacuations of tower blocks?

**Sajid Javid**: Thankfully, no other councils have come forward so far with a need to have an evacuation. There are many more tests to take place, so I do not want to prejudge them, but hopefully what has happened in Camden will be a rare occurrence. As I said earlier, in the case of Camden, in particular, the cladding was a trigger for further fire safety inspections, but it was the massive failure of those further fire safety inspections that caused the evacuation.

**Tulip Siddiq** (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for rightly commending the bravery of the 3,000 residents who were evacuated from their homes in my constituency on Friday. In the past few days, residents have repeatedly brought up the closure of Belsize fire station, which was 500 metres away from the tower block in question. Will the Secretary of State give his support to reopening Belsize fire station, which was closed by the former Mayor of London in 2014, so that my residents can feel safe in their homes again?

**Sajid Javid**: Of course, local fire and rescue services must have the resources that they need, but in the assessment that was done with Camden in recent days, there is nothing to suggest that that was the issue that might have led to an evacuation. As the hon. Lady is rightly concerned about her constituents, I am sure that she will be hugely concerned with what has come out of the fire inspection report on the towers in Camden, particularly the issue around the fire doors. I am focusing my efforts right now on making sure that Camden can get all that remedial work done, with significant help from Government to ensure that those fire doors are in place as soon as possible.

**Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Regrettably, it would appear that unsafe cladding is widespread. It exists where there are Labour councils, Conservative councils, and councils of other colours; it was put up during Labour Administrations and Conservative Administrations. Does the Secretary of State share my concern and regret, therefore, to hear some party politicisation of this tragedy, and hope that we can all work together across parties to make sure that it never happens again?

**Sajid Javid**: I agree very much with my hon. Friend. As I said in my statement, clearly some things have gone drastically and catastrophically wrong. It has happened over a number of decades. If we are going to put that right, we can do it if we all work together.

**Mr Geoffrey Robinson** (Coventry North West) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State inform us whether any samples of cladding have been received from Coventry for evaluation? Has he taken up with the Chancellor of the Exchequer the question of making money available from the central Treasury contingency fund, which is usually very large and was established precisely for this sort of disaster?

**Sajid Javid**: I will first attend to the question about Coventry. As I have said, 26 local authority areas have done tests that are public, but not all of them have told the residents of their respective towers. Coventry is not on the list of those that have gone public. I assure the right hon. Gentleman that, if Coventry were one of those, it would contact its local MPs individually. On funding, local authorities also have reserves for unforeseen circumstances. Some local authorities will certainly want to use their reserves.

**Mrs Maria Miller** (Basingstoke) (Con): May I commend my right hon. Friend for his extensive statement to the House? All our thoughts must still be with those affected by these dreadful events. I welcome the systemic testing of cladding material. What would be the legal ramifications if landlords failed to make use of that service or, indeed, to ensure that their property is safe? Secondly, does my right hon. Friend agree that local authorities should review the review of high-rise accommodation for disabled and very elderly people?

**Sajid Javid**: Let me start by addressing my right hon. Friend's final point about disabled and very elderly people. Of course, special circumstances will be required in situations such as evacuation in case of fire. That should certainly be taken into account by local fire services looking at those buildings and carrying out a further inspection. On the legal ramifications, if a landlord does not submit something for testing when there is good reason to do so, it is the legal responsibility of every landlord in the country, whether the property is social or private, to make sure that it is safe in every way for tenants, and there will certainly be action.

**Jim Fitzpatrick** (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): Although I welcome the announcement about an independent expert advisory panel, the Government have historically had the Building Regulations Advisory Committee. It has not met for five years, but it sounds as though the independent advisory panel will do the same job. What is the difference between the two?

**Sajid Javid**: First, I thank the hon. Gentleman for the work he has done over a number of years to promote fire safety. He has secured this evening’s Adjournment debate, to which my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government, will respond. I am sure that will enable the hon. Gentleman to further explore his question and others. In the light of the tragedy, this particular panel will possibly have a broader remit, and its membership might also be broader, including through taking on international experience.

**Ms Nusrat Ghani** (Wealden) (Con): The horror of Grenfell Tower will remain with victims and their families and friends for generations. Will my right hon. Friend expand on the role of the victims unit, in particular the work it is doing with children who have lost a parent and those adults who have lost the English-speaking member of their family?
Sajid Javid: The victims unit, which is now based in my Department, has a number of officials from at least six Departments. The idea is that if any victim, family member or friend has any issue that central Government can help with—it might relate to immigration, tax and benefits or housing—they would have to deal with only one individual, making it much easier for them.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I am grateful for the statement and share the Secretary of State’s grief, anxiety and shock at the Grenfell Tower catastrophe. When tower blocks fail fire safety tests, and when urgent mitigating measures cannot be done to make those buildings safe, what he has said to date does not reassure many Members, because local authorities and housing associations will need funding support to help them provide new housing for those residents affected. What consideration has been given to declaring this a civil emergency, so that central Government funds can be provided to housing associations and local authorities trying to rehouse local residents?

Sajid Javid: I reassure the right hon. Gentleman that funding is already being provided by central Government in certain circumstances. We have made it clear that if there is an issue and the remedial work to make a property safe cannot be done immediately, as was the case in Camden, the local authority should not hesitate but should take action immediately, regardless of cost, to make residents safe. When the local authority needs funding support, we will work with it and provide that support.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his full and detailed statement. I am sure that all Members on both sides of the House are united in their determination that the horrific events at Grenfell will never happen again. I am enormously encouraged by the announcement that there will be a full public inquiry. Will the Secretary of State give a commitment that that inquiry will not be allowed to drag and that it will happen as soon as possible? We need answers, and quickly.

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend refers to the public inquiry that was announced by the Prime Minister last week. It will be a judge-led fully independent inquiry. We should not prejudge the terms of the inquiry because they will be set by the judge. The issue of timing is important, but it is also important to ensure that the victims are properly represented, as the Prime Minister has promised that they will be.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Secretary of State referred to cladding but not to insulation. He will know that the police and the fire service have raised serious concerns about the way in which the insulation spread the fire at Grenfell Tower. What is being done about insulation? Is it now time to require that insulation materials are tested as well? Will there be transparency about what insulation materials were used in Grenfell Tower, and should those materials be banned in tower blocks and other properties?

Sajid Javid: The right hon. Lady is right to raise that issue, and the police report on Grenfell Tower rightly focuses on it. I will not say anything more about Grenfell Tower, as it is important that I do not get involved in that, but, more broadly, it is possible that a test could show that cladding was category I, which is the correct type, but that the insulation was the wrong type. Since the police report, we have worked with the Local Government Association to update the advice that is going to local councils. We are looking at what is the best way to respond and to ensure that insulation is also looked at properly.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my disappointment that this tragedy has been politicised so heavily by senior members of the Labour party? How long does he think the public inquiry will take to come to conclusions? Is there any evidence that the panelling has been used in countries other than ours?

Sajid Javid: What the public want to see—is what they are seeing today in this Chamber—is everyone working together. The timing of the public inquiry will be up to the judge, but it is hoped that the judge might see fit to produce an interim report that we can act on much more quickly.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I want to press the Secretary of State a little further on funding for local authorities. Most of them do not have vast reserves but are struggling with 40% funding cuts. There is still not sufficient clarity on exactly where and when the Government will step forward with funding. It is needed not only for places that need sprinklers and to get rid of cladding but, crucially, for rehousing. Will he say exactly what the national Government will fund?

Sajid Javid: I can only repeat what I said earlier: whether it is removing cladding, taking other necessary action to improve the fire safety of buildings or rehousing, local authorities should get on with it, just like in Camden. The first thought there was not, “How exactly are we going to fund this?” The council rightly got on with action and made the tenants safe. The Government will then work with those local authorities that cannot afford that to provide necessary support.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): As someone who previously worked for Shelter, may I thank that organisation and all the other charitable organisations that are working so hard in the constituency to do what they can for the victims of the Grenfell Tower fire? What is the Government’s timeline to rehouse all the displaced Grenfell survivors from temporary accommodation into long-term, stable homes in their local community?

Mr Speaker: We welcome the hon. Lady to the House and look forward to her bringing the benefit of her experience in that and other sectors to our deliberations.

Sajid Javid: On the timeline, the offer of temporary accommodation will be made within three weeks. On permanent accommodation, we have already found a number of units. Some people are starting to look at them, and my expectation is that we can hopefully do that within months and move very quickly, as long as that is what the tenants want. I, too, welcome the hon. Lady’s experience at Shelter. She may be aware that Shelter is giving tremendous help on the ground in
Kensington to a lot of the tenants who have concerns over whether temporary really means temporary, and I hugely welcome that.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): On funding, basically the Secretary of State has said that the Government will work with local authorities and housing associations to provide funding if they cannot afford to carry out the work. Will he explain precisely what that means and what criteria he will use? Is it not fundamentally wrong to expect other social housing tenants to pay for this work through either increased rents or less maintenance of their properties? Will the Government bring forward a comprehensive finance package that provides not merely increased borrowing for organisations, but the actual cash to pay for this work?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman will know that, as we speak, it is a legal requirement for local authorities and housing associations that they ensure that the homes they offer to tenants are fit for habitation. They should be meeting those requirements already. I gave the example of Camden; it should already have been meeting those requirements. Despite that, if authorities and associations are not able to do that from their current resources, they should get on with the job and meet those requirements, and we will work with them and give them the support they need.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): It is good to be back, Mr Speaker.

Ann Jones, the Assembly Member for the Vale of Clwyd, has brought forward her own legislation to introduce sprinklers in all new-build houses in Wales. I am a firm believer in the dictum that out of badness comes good. What happened at Grenfell Tower was bad—it was a tragedy. Can we use this disaster to open a complete review of fire safety across the UK, not just on the issue of cladding, but on insulation, containment, emergency lighting and especially sprinkler systems, and for not just high towers but other vulnerable housing, such as houses of multiple occupation?

Sajid Javid: As I said in my statement, there will certainly be a need for a complete review across the UK.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Approximately one in three properties in Westminster towers is leasehold and I am sure the same is true for other blocks. Does the Secretary of State have the power to require leaseholders to install fire doors and other internal fire safety measures? If not, what is he going to do about it and who is going to pay?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady raises a very important point. I think we can show appropriate sensitivity to victims who feel they have challenges with their immigration status and treat them more favourably.

Mr Clive Betts: The Secretary of State will be familiar with tower blocks in my constituency. I would like him to explain now why he will not simply use this opportunity to pay for the sprinkler systems that were recommended by the coroner after the Lakanal House fire.

Sajid Javid: It is important that we are clear on this. The coroner did not say in her 2013 report that all high-rise buildings should have sprinklers; she said that they should be considered where they are appropriate.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I want to follow on from the point made about immigration status by my very welcome hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad). Having worked with people with a very fragile immigration status who have suffered a trauma, I know that until people have a stable immigration status, they will never feel safe to speak out. The Secretary of State asks what we can do. We could give those people a message today that we will fast-track them for indefinite leave to remain, with access to public funds, so that they can go through the inquiry without fear or favour. Will he agree to that?

Sajid Javid: It is a very important point. I think we can show appropriate sensitivity to victims who feel they have challenges with their immigration status and treat them more favourably.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Public inquiries are slow, lumbering instruments of change, as we found with the Chilcot report and the Savile inquiry, which took nearly a decade. Will the Secretary of State give an assurance that we will not wait until we have inquiry reports for remedies, but that as soon as remedies are obvious and required, we will act instantly, because the danger is so high and the anxieties are so widespread?

Sajid Javid: I absolutely agree.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The Secretary of State is right that profound lessons need to be learned from this tragedy, such as why fire service
checks on high-rise blocks have been cut by 25% since 2010, but in the here and now, urgent action is necessary. There are 10,000 households in 213 tower blocks in Birmingham where rightly anxious tenants want action. Birmingham City Council has pledged that it will retrofit sprinklers to all those blocks. That will cost £31 million, but the council is suffering the biggest cuts in local government history and therefore urgently needs Government support. May I therefore ask for a straight yes-or-no answer? Will the Secretary of State guarantee that Birmingham City Council can go ahead and carry out that work, and that it will be refunded in full?

**Sajid Javid:** Birmingham City Council, like every other council, has a legal responsibility to its social tenants, so it should do whatever it believes is necessary. As I have said before, if there is an issue with funding for necessary works, we will provide the support.

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): May I praise the swift response of the Welsh Government and Cardiff Council in responding to the concerns of residents in Cardiff South and Penarth, which has more than 14,000 apartment units, and urge Vale of Glamorgan Council to come up with some answers as soon as possible?

Will the Secretary of State look at the issue of estate management companies? I have seen very variable records of action on fire safety and response to concerns across many privately owned tower blocks in my constituency. Quite frankly, some of them are not living up to their responsibilities in terms of staffing, resourcing and looking at issues such as fire door, sprinkler and fire alarm safety.

**Sajid Javid:** The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. One of the lessons from this tragedy and what we are learning now is that we should look at the private sector much more carefully, including estate management companies.

**Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): Thirteen Group owns most of the social housing across Teesside. It paid for fire-retardant and non-toxic cladding for the balconies at Kennedy Gardens in Billingham in my constituency but ended up with flammable, toxic material, which is now being removed. One thing was paid for and another dangerous alternative was provided. Does the Secretary of State agree that frauds such as those ought to be investigated and those responsible prosecuted?

**Sajid Javid:** I agree 100%.

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): The Secretary of State said nothing about the cause of the fire. I realise that product safety is a matter for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, but given that this is his statement, will he say when the tests of the fridge-freezer model that caused the fire will be complete, whether other fires have been caused by this model and whether he will immediately change the advice that owners of this model can continue to use it, pending the outcome of the tests?

**Sajid Javid:** I assure the hon. Gentleman that my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary and his Department are speaking to not just the manufacturer of the fridge-freezer concerned with regard to Grenfell Tower but a number of other manufacturers of white goods, some of which already have products on recall. The pace of recall is, frankly, far too slow, and my right hon. Friend is taking that very seriously.

**Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): Between 2010 and 2015, the Department for Communities and Local Government reduced its staff capacity by a higher proportion than any other Department—almost 40%. As a member of the Communities and Local Government Committee in the previous Parliament, I saw that in many areas the Department is clearly very stretched. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the number of staff in the Department is being increased, so that it can co-ordinate the national response to all aspects of the Grenfell Tower tragedy in an efficient and timely manner, including providing emergency support to any council that requests it?

**Sajid Javid:** Yes, it is being increased.

**Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): I want to echo what colleagues have said about the need for certainty on funding coming into councils. As the Secretary of State will know, Bristol is facing £104 million of cuts over the next few years. We need to know whether we have to make other cuts. May I press him on a couple of changes that would help us to raise our own finance? One is scrapping the annual rent reduction rule, and the other is allowing us to spend all right-to-buy receipts on new housing, which would free up other money for investment. Will he talk to Bristol City Council about being able to do those two things, which would help us to pay for this work ourselves?

**Sajid Javid:** In the light of the pressures on local authorities, it would make sense to look carefully at policies that may help them to meet some of the challenges, and that is something we have already started doing.

**Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Last week, the Prime Minister informed us that the DCLG would write to us with an update on safety tests of all tower blocks. There are 63 tower blocks in Lewisham, Deptford, but I have yet to receive any information, despite writing to the Minister and requesting the promised update. Will the Secretary of State provide an update now, and will the Government, having been asked umpteen times, commit to fully fund the fitting of sprinkler systems and any associated costs, to ensure that people’s homes are safe?

**Sajid Javid:** Following the Prime Minister’s statement, I sent a letter to every Member of Parliament and every Member of the other place on Friday; it has gone out. I believe I have answered the question on funding.

**Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): In the wake of the awful disaster at Fukushima, the German Government shut down all their nuclear plants, fearing that a catastrophe such as that could happen on their soil. Surely after an event like the Grenfell Tower tragedy, we should be looking to put sprinkler systems in all our tower blocks.
Sajid Javid: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we should certainly do whatever is deemed necessary by the local fire and rescue service—the fire safety experts—and ensure that we take all the action they recommend to keep our citizens safe.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): I think that hon. Members on both sides of the House would agree that what happened at Grenfell Tower was a national disaster. The Treasury contingency fund exists exactly to provide funding in these sorts of disasters. What conversations has the Secretary of State had with the Chancellor about releasing money to ensure that all remedial work and accommodation on an emergency basis is funded directly by central Government for local authorities and housing associations?

Sajid Javid: The conversations I have had with the Chancellor reflect what I have said at the Dispatch Box today. If any local authority or housing association needs funding help for any necessary works, we will support them.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): May I praise the staff, officers and leader of Ealing Council, who stepped in to run the relief effort at the Westway centre when Kensington and Chelsea was overwhelmed? I am informed that standards at Ealing are higher than at RBKC. I do not know whether that is the case, but surely any inconsistency needs addressing, with minimum stringent requirements that apply across tenure, even to student halls of residence—we have a lot of high-rise halls in my seat—and that are in place well before the inquiry ever sees the light of day.

Sajid Javid: I very much agree with the hon. Lady’s praise for the leader of Ealing, in particular for the help provided at the Westway centre. Ealing has taken this seriously in its response, like every council across London, but it is important that other councils do the same.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I have been contacted by many constituents concerned about our local hospital. Hull Royal Infirmary is a tower block and had cladding put on a couple of years ago. I note that the Secretary of State said that additional checks are being made on NHS properties. Are we likely to have a statement from the Secretary of State for Health about the outcomes of that investigation?

Sajid Javid: I will certainly pass on that request to the Secretary of State for Health, but I know that the whole Department of Health is taking the issue very seriously and is absolutely prioritising any buildings in the NHS estate that may have been clad.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I note from the Secretary of State’s statement that he has asked owners, landlords and managers of private sector residential blocks to consider their own buildings, but there are around 150 such privately owned residential blocks in Nottingham alone. What is he doing to ensure that those owners, landlords and managers do not just “consider” but act to ensure the safety of their residents? What is he doing to support local authorities, such as Nottingham City Council, that are working to secure such reassurances on behalf of their citizens?

Sajid Javid: First, we are reminding all the owners of those properties of their existing legal responsibilities. We have done that through their trade organisations, letting agents and other bodies. Secondly, we have made our testing facility available to all of them free of charge. We will keep monitoring that, but right now my absolute priority has been the more recently clad buildings held by local authorities and housing associations that have cladding similar to what was at Grenfell Tower.

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): Five tower blocks in my constituency were found on Saturday lunchtime to have this dangerous cladding. By Sunday lunchtime it had all been removed. I praise the housing authority, the local authority and the fire and rescue service for working together. That work was done quickly and the buildings are safe, but obviously more work needs to be done to put them into a good state. Can the Secretary of State assure me that funding will be made available not just to local authorities—the local authority in my area does not have properties; there was a total stock transfer—but to the smaller housing authorities with that responsibility? Will the correct funding be made available to put right those works? Also, when tower blocks or other buildings are retrofitted, they might comply with building regulations at the time but things change, so will the building regulations be looked at to ensure that when that happens more checks take place?

Sajid Javid: I can confirm to the hon. Lady that our commitment on funding and providing support where necessary for those who need it also applies to housing associations.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The Secretary of State said in his statement that the problem of unsafe cladding might not be confined to residential buildings. It is also not necessarily confined to high-rise tower blocks. There is a particular concern about sheltered housing, which was described to me as, in many cases, a tower block turned on its side. Will the facilities for testing where cladding has been applied to those buildings also be made available?

Sajid Javid: Yes, they will.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The truth is that we in this country have for far too long tried to do social housing on the cheap, and in the end that decision by this country has killed people. I fully understand why the priority now is primarily residential property, but my hon. Friends are absolutely right: there are workplaces, too, that are probably dangerous. Indeed, the fire at the Glasgow School of Art showed that very old buildings are sometimes in the most danger, because they have lots of timber walls and floors that can easily spread fire from one part of the building to another. This building is one such. We have had hundreds and hundreds of warnings, but we have not acted on them. We have a fire alarm system so antiquated that it no longer works. When will the Government make sure that we do the work that this building needs?

Sajid Javid: I have listened carefully to what the hon. Gentleman had to say and I will take it up with the Leader of the House.
Points of Order

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Queen’s Speech last week failed to include the much expected local government finance Bill, the omission of which has called into question the switch to local retention of business rates replacing the revenue support grant, causing financial uncertainty and concern to many local councils. Has the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government given any indication to you of whether he intends to come to the House and give an oral statement, so that hon. and right hon. Members may question Ministers on this important issue? If not, Mr Speaker, is this a matter on which you will look favourably for an urgent question?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has chanced his arm. In respect of the first part of his inquiry, my response is a conclusive no. The Secretary of State has not given me any indication of an intention to make a statement on that subject. He could do so now, but it is not compulsory. He can preserve a Buddha-like silence if he prefers, but if the right hon. Gentleman wishes to spring to his feet, either to offer his reassurance or otherwise, he can.

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. There is a debate on the Queen’s Speech tomorrow about local services, so perhaps the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) would like to bring the matter up then.

Mr Speaker: We are grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that. So far as the matter of urgent questions is concerned, if memory serves me correctly, during my tenure to date I have chosen no fewer than 369. I am therefore certainly not averse to selecting urgent questions and there is plenty of scope for them, but the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) is a seasoned enough contributor to our proceedings to know that we are not supposed to mention them on the Floor of the House—or at least a Member thinking of submitting such is not supposed to—and I am certainly not going to pre-announce them. I think there is a lot to be said for the worldly wisdom of the late Lord Whitelaw, who famously observed, “On the whole, I prefer to cross bridges only when I come to them.”

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As a new Member, I wonder whether the Chair can advise on the most effective way of raising the worrying news from my constituency today that the Royal Bank of Scotland has announced more than 400 job losses, to ascertain the potentially serious economic implications and whether this is in any way connected to the uncertainties surrounding Brexit.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady is undoubtedly a new Member, but she is clearly not a novice in finding very public opportunities to air her concerns on behalf of her constituents. The short answer is that she has of course already aired that concern through the device—or ruse in this case—of a perhaps slightly bogus point of order. However, my advice to her is that she should seek to question Ministers either orally at the appropriate time—or through written questions. If, however, she wishes to dilate on the matter more fully and to hear a Minister do so in response, the mechanism available to her is an Adjournment debate. She should wend her way to the Table Office, where she will find highly qualified and very conscientious staff, who are only too happy to advise her. I just have a sense that we are going to hear further from the hon. Lady on this matter, and probably before very long.
We can be a country that steps up to its role as a world leader, and to bring European Union policy into a wider global framework. As we leave the European Union, we have said, we seek a deep and special partnership with the European Union: one that reflects our shared values and history, one that works for all parts of the United Kingdom, our overseas territories and Crown dependencies, and one that delivers for the special circumstances relating to the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, because no one wants to see a barrier-free trade.

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend makes a very good point, as follows:

That an Humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, as follows:

Most Gracious Sovereign,

We, Your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.

Brexit and Foreign Affairs

6.18 pm

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): May I start by commending the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) for learning the ropes quicker than the rest of us did? I hope she has success with her Adjournment debate.

The negotiations over our exit from the European Union are fundamental to our future. It is no exaggeration to say that they will shape everything we want to achieve as a country over the coming years and decades. We are doing nothing less than refashioning Britain's place in the world. Our success or failure will determine and shape all our futures, so it is obviously a great responsibility but also a great opportunity, and it falls on all of us in this place—every one of us in this Parliament—to make a success of it. If we work together and we succeed, we can ensure a strong and growing economy that spreads prosperity and opportunity around the country, underpins well-funded public services and secures a better future for us and our children.

I have always made it clear that after Brexit the United Kingdom will continue to be the outward-looking global nation it has always been. Indeed, it should be more engaged in the world than ever before, for I firmly believe that last year's vote to leave the EU was not a call for retrenchment—a call to look in on ourselves. The UK has the means, the ambition and, now, the freedom to play a more positive role in the world.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I believe that the opportunities provided by Brexit will mean a global Britain. Does my right hon. Friend agree that leaving the customs union and the single market will allow us to forge trade links with countries such as China and the United States, which we cannot do on our own while we are members of the European Union?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend makes a very good point, which, if he will forgive me, I shall return a little later.

As I was saying, we have the means, the ambition and the freedom to play a more positive part in the world, which is demonstrated by our commitments on defence and international aid. The UK is the only country in the world that meets both its NATO pledge to spend 2% of GDP on defence and the UN target of devoting 0.7% of our gross national income to development spending. That ensures that we defend our values, work to tackle poverty and conflict, and help to protect the most vulnerable in the world.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman has talked about our commitments to defence and our commitments to the rest of the world in respect of international aid, and I agree with what he has said about both, but what about the Government's commitment to Wales? Before the Brexit debate, Andrew R. T. Davies said:

“I will make it my mission to ensure that Wales continues to receive at least every penny of the aid money it has historically received via the EU—we desire and are entitled to no less.”

Will Wales get what it deserves?

Mr Davis: Of course. Indeed, Wales is represented on the Joint Ministerial Committee, which has met several times, and that issue has arisen in the committee. The main funding streams for Wales stem from the common agricultural policy and structural funds, both of which have been underpinned by the Treasury until the end of the current financial round.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr Davis: Not for the moment. I will make some progress, and then give way again. I must be fairly disciplined about giving way, because we have a very tight timetable.

After exiting the European Union, Britain will still be a country that steps up to its role as a world leader, and that means continuing to help to protect and secure our wider European continent. We want to deepen co-operation with other European states, and to bring European Union policy into a wider global framework. As we have said, we seek a deep and special partnership with the European Union: one that reflects our shared values and history, one that works for all parts of the United Kingdom, our overseas territories and Crown dependencies, and one that delivers for the special circumstances relating to the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, because no one wants to see a return to the hard border. It should be a partnership like no other. It should be underpinned by ambitious agreements on free trade and customs, covering goods and services and seeking the greatest possible tariff and barrier-free trade.

Graham Stringer: There has been much talk about transitional arrangements. Can the Secretary of State guarantee that if such arrangements are put in place there will be legally binding agreements on trade and customs arrangements, as well as the removal of those arrangements from the remit of the European Court of Justice?

Mr Davis: Yes, indeed. One of the things that we will endeavour to achieve is the establishment of such legally binding arrangements. I shall return to that point in some detail in a moment, if I may.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP) rose—

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab) rose—
Mr Davis: I give way to the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley).

Ian Paisley: I appreciate what the Secretary of State has already said about the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic. Does he accept, however, that if security information indicates a radicalisation of people in the Republic, security considerations will always predominate in respect of the border issue?

Mr Davis: Security considerations pretty much always predominate when it comes to the control of immigration and control of migration generally, and there will be no difference in this case. We obviously treat the security of all our citizens, and all our allies’ citizens, as paramount.

Mr Davis: I do agree with my hon. Friend that we must ensure that we are prepared for every contingency.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Davis: No. If my hon. Friend will forgive me, I must make some progress.

A large part of my job—almost the invisible part—is ensuring that we are prepared for contingencies, and that is happening as we speak.

We have also made it clear that the new partnership must be overseen by a new and independent impartial dispute mechanism. That cannot and will not be the European Court of Justice. No nation outside the European Union submits to the direct jurisdiction of the ECJ, and neither will the United Kingdom. We will start to move towards the new partnership by securing the rights of citizens on both sides.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr Davis: No, not for the moment.

We intend to reach agreement on that issue as quickly as possible.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr Davis: I have given way quite a lot so far. I am going to be disciplined. No! I am practising being masterful.

Not everything in these negotiations will be easy. They will be complex, and I have no doubt that at times they will even be confrontational. However, I am convinced that both sides want to secure close co-operation and a deep new partnership.

Mike Gapes: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr Davis: No, not for the moment. In a moment.

Last year, in the referendum, we received a national instruction, which we will undertake in a way that serves the national interest. The instruction from the British people was for us to take back control of our borders, our money and our laws. Both the Conservative party and the Labour party campaigned on manifestos that promised to exit the European Union and end the free movement of people. Those two manifestos received more than 80% of the popular vote, so failing to deliver on that instruction is not an option for those of us who count ourselves as democrats. Ending the free movement of people means leaving the single market, as the EU has made abundantly clear to those who have cared to listen.
Mike Gapes: The Secretary of State said that countries outside the European Union would not be directly within the remit of the European Court of Justice, but several countries outside the EU indirectly have arrangements with the European Union whereby the European Court of Justice or an equivalent body is established. Is that what the Secretary of State is aiming for?

Mr Davis: No. What the hon. Gentleman is describing is something like the Court of Justice of the European Free Trade Association States—the EFTA court—where there is a parallelism. That is not the aim. The aim is to have an independent arbitration arrangement, as is normal. For instance, the EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement does exactly that. It has nominees from either side, and an independent chair. That is the sort of thing that we have in mind.

Chris Bryant: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr Davis: No. I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman has to learn some discipline at some point in life. I thought discipline was his thing, but there we are.

Ending the free movement of people means leaving the single market, as the European Union has made abundantly clear to those who have cared to listen. We all accept the need to protect existing UK businesses in the European Union. Leaving the single market does not mean losing access to that market, which is why we are proposing a new, ambitious free trade agreement. But this is not just about protecting existing markets, as my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) said. To deliver the national interest, we must seize on our new freedoms in terms of trade to create jobs and lift living standards. Britain must get out into the world, forge its own path and be a true beacon for free trade.

Chris Bryant: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr Davis: No.

That means leaving the customs union, so that Britain will, for the first time in over 40 years, be able to take full advantage of growing markets across the world and determine a trade policy that is fashioned not around the interests of 28 countries but around those of one country. We will have a trade policy that suits this country and this country alone.

Thangam Debonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr Davis: No.

The European Commission itself says that 90% of the future growth in world trade will come from outside the European Union. This has already been reflected in the long-term decline in the share of British goods that go to the European Union, while our global trade has increased dramatically.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I have just come from the European Parliament. Does the Secretary of State agree that many colleagues across Europe want a deep trading partnership with Britain, based on keeping strong standards for consumers and other such standards, and therefore a special, bespoke relationship for our trade?

Mr Davis: I congratulate my hon. Friend on what I think is her maiden intervention. It was delivered brilliantly, as I would expect, and she is exactly right. We want a deep, special, bespoke arrangement to maximise our trade opportunities.

As I was saying, the 90% growth outside the European Union means that our relative share of trade in the EU has gone down. In services, for example, we are now 60% outside the EU and 40% inside it, and all of this is without preferential trade agreements for much of our trade. Just so that the House understands, the best academic data that I could find show that creating a new trade agreement increases the amount of trade by about 28%. If the House wants an individual parable, in the first seven years of its operation, the North American Free Trade Agreement increased trade by 40%. These are really significant items of policy that we can exercise.
Chris Bryant: This is obviously the start of a very special relationship. The Secretary of State will know that the Prime Minister earlier published a document about EU citizens living in the UK. The one thing she failed to mention in the House was that all those EU citizens would not be functioning exactly as they are now. They will have to have documentation with them; they will effectively have to have an ID card. I am surprised: surely this Secretary of State is not going to support ID cards for EU nationals living in the UK.

Mr Davis: You know, I was right not to give way to the hon. Gentleman in the first place. He has got it wrong; it is not an ID card. We are talking about documentation to prove that people have the right to a job and the right to residence, but they will not have to carry that around all the time. It is not an ID card; it is rather like your birth certificate. It’s not an ID card! Good heavens!

I shall turn now to the legislative agenda—

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Would my right hon. Friend be kind enough to give way, just before he does so?

Mr Davis: This is going to be the last one, but yes, okay.

Sir William Cash: Does my right hon. Friend not think that those, such as the Liberal Democrats and others, who want to remain in the European Union should ask their constituents whether they really want the United Kingdom indefinitely to remain part of an undemocratic system that is governed by majority voting that takes place behind closed doors and that is moving towards integration with a common defence policy, a common Finance Ministry and further moves towards a political union in which we would be in the second tier of a two-tier Europe dominated largely by one country?

Mr Davis rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr George Howarth): Order. I know that that intervention was short by the standards of the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), but by the standards of an intervention it was very long.

Mr Davis: Nevertheless, it was a crisp characterisation of an argument that my hon. Friend has been making for many years, Mr Deputy Speaker, and he is as right about it today as he was when he first made it.

An extensive legislative agenda is necessary to prepare the UK for its new place in the world. Working together in the national interest will be crucial as we go through the process in this House and the other place to put the necessary legislation in position to ensure that our laws work effectively on the day we leave the European Union. For my part, I am willing to work with anyone to that end. The sheer importance of this issue makes that essential. The eyes of the country will be on us all, and we will all be judged on our willingness to work pragmatically and effectively together to deliver the verdict of the people in last year’s referendum.

Nothing is more central to this than the so-called great repeal Bill. The principle is straightforward: it is to repeal the European Communities Act 1972 and to transfer existing European Union law into UK law. To answer a question that my opposite number, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), has raised, these rights and freedoms will be brought into UK law without qualification, without limitation and without any sunset clauses. Any material changes will be dealt with by subsequent primary legislation.

I cannot stress enough to the House and to the nation the importance of this Bill in ensuring that we have a smooth and orderly exit from the European Union. Every part of the United Kingdom needs to prepare its statute book to ensure that it can function after we leave the European Union. The repeal Bill will give the devolved Administrations the power to do just that, to ensure a smooth and orderly exit for all. As we have also said repeatedly, we expect there to be a significant increase in the decision-making power of each devolved Administration once we exit the EU. That is why, given that the Bill will affect the powers of the devolved institutions and that it legislates in devolved areas, we will seek the consent of the devolved legislatures for the Bill. We would like everyone to come together in support of the legislation, which will be crucial to delivering the outcome of the referendum.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): In an earlier incarnation, the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), who is now the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, assured the people of Scotland that Scotland could expect to have devolved power over its immigration policy after Brexit. Does the Secretary of State still agree with that undertaking?

Mr Davis: No, I do not remember that, and I have not seen it. I will look into it and come back to the hon. Gentleman. I did not have an earlier incarnation in this job.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The Secretary of State talks about an extensive legislative agenda, but he is still missing out anything to do with the environment. There is no environment Bill here. Simply saying that we are going to transfer environmental legislation in the repeal Bill does not work, because the legislation will need to be updated and it will need to be enforceable. Without the Commission and the ECJ, there will be no clarity as to how that legislation would be enforced. Why is there no Bill?

Mr Davis: With respect, when it is transferred across, there will be stages in this, as I have explained, in which we will create—through statutory instruments or primary legislation—the relevant administrations and regulatory bodies to run the new legislation. Of course, development beyond that will come later, but at the moment we are talking about bringing the whole corpus of EU environmental law into British law. That is not nothing, by any stretch of the imagination.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr Davis: No. I have some progress to make.

When we designed our approach to the repeal Bill, we endeavoured to strike the right balance between getting our statute book in order for the day that we exit the European Union and ensuring full parliamentary
involvement and scrutiny. Indeed, it is the only viable plan that has been put forward in this House. While I have heard the Opposition raise some concerns, I have heard no alternatives or any detailed proposals on how they would approach this crucial matter. As I said to the Opposition spokesman when I presented our White Paper on the repeal Bill, if in the next two years we find that we have missed something, we will put it right, and that offer still stands not only to the Opposition, but to the entire House. We must get this right. We must be able to deliver a functioning UK statute book by the day we exit the European Union. When the House of Lords Constitution Committee examined the issue, it found few alternatives, and its recommended approach aligns closely with that which we have set out. It is vital for businesses, workers and consumers across the United Kingdom that this House undertakes the difficult but eminently achievable task of working together responsibly in the national interest to provide certainty and stability.

Kate Green: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr Davis: No, not for the moment.

While the repeal Bill is the centrepiece of our approach, it is far from the only piece of exit-related legislation that we will be putting through. The Government are bringing forward a first tranche of Bills—I say to the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) that it will not be the last—on areas affected by our exit from the European Union, including trade, customs, immigration, international sanctions, nuclear safeguards, agriculture, and fisheries. I have told the House several times that we will not make significant policy changes without first passing primary legislation, which will be thoroughly debated and voted on in both Houses. Those Bills deliver on that promise.

This initial tranche of Bills also has a further purpose. I am sure that many across the House will agree that it is the job of a responsible Government to prepare for all eventualities. I make it clear yet again today that we want a close new partnership with the EU that works for everyone, as mentioned a few moments ago by my hon. Friend for Dover (Charlie Elphicke). However, we must also ensure that we have a functioning statute book and functioning national systems—no matter what and for all outcomes. The Bills will help to provide that. As I think my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) put it when he was Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, not doing so would be a “dereliction of duty”. We must and will be prepared for any outcome.

However, I remain confident that we can get the right deal from the negotiations. Doing so is fundamentally in the interests of both the UK and the EU. A strong and prosperous EU, capable of projecting its values and continuing to play a leading role in the world, is in the United Kingdom’s best interests, just as a strong and prosperous United Kingdom is the European Union’s best interests. The task ahead will no doubt be challenging, but it is a task that the British people set us in last year’s referendum—a national instruction. It is our duty in this House to pull together and deliver on that instruction in the national interest. If we do, we can deliver a better and brighter future for the entire United Kingdom—a future in which we step on to the world stage as a champion for free trade, a firm advocate of the rule of law, and a true beacon for democracy.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): When Britain voted in the referendum one year and four days ago, the question on the ballot paper was narrow and technical—to remain in or to leave the European Union—but the vote was far from narrow and technical. People saw different questions behind those boxes. Above all, the referendum was a vote on the state of the nation, just as the general election turned out to be. The nation is fed up with inequality, fed up with low wages, fed up with under-resourced public services, fed up with the imbalances between our nations and regions, fed up with austerity, and fed up with politics and politicians. If ever there was a need for a Government capable of transforming the country both economically and politically, it is now. Britain needed a transformative Queen’s Speech last week, but this Government are too weak to deliver it. The Queen’s Speech is threadbare and lacking in ambition. There is no detail, and there cannot be, because the Prime Minister gambled and lost. A majority has become a minority. All bets are off for the future. Just when we needed strong government, we have uncertainty and fragility, and I suspect that history will be a harsh critic.

It does not end there. When the Prime Minister made her statement calling for the general election, she said: “Every vote for the Conservatives will make me stronger when I negotiate for Britain... Every vote for the Conservatives will mean we can stick to our plan.” She wanted a landslide; she ended up in a mess—her own description. She now has no majority, no mandate, and no authority, and it tells.

The outcome of the first round of negotiations showed how unrealistic the Government’s rhetoric has been. The Secretary of State promised before the election that there would be the “row of the summer” over the Commission’s proposed timetable and schedule for the negotiations. By lunchtime on Monday, he had folded. The Government have also managed to get on the back foot in relation to EU citizens. Had they acted quickly and unilaterally, as Labour repeatedly said that they should, they could have set the agenda. The EU did so instead and stated its position in April: full rights as they are currently enjoyed to be guaranteed and underpinned by the European Court of Justice. The Government’s position is now seen by the EU as an inadequate response.

Although the Prime Minister struggled to give an adequate answer to my right hon. Friend for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), the Secretary of State and I know, and our EU partners know, that the rights of family reunification currently enjoyed by EU nationals will change, and they will be subject in future to financial and other qualifications that apply more generally. The rights will change, and that is perhaps why that question was avoided. I hope that we get an agreement on EU citizens and on UK citizens, and I hope that we get an early agreement to settle the anxiety, but the Government’s approach to date has made that harder to achieve than it should have been.

Mr David Davis: On a point of information, may I ask the right hon. and learned Gentleman—congratulations by the way—whether it is now Labour policy to support the rule of the European Court of Justice within the United Kingdom?
Keir Starmer: Let me deal with that in relation to EU citizens first. I will discuss it more generally when I get to that part of my speech.

As far as EU nationals are concerned, we need to understand the worries of our EU partners. Whatever agreement is put in place, they recognise that it has to last for the lifetime of EU nationals here—the lifetime. In some cases, that will mean 50-plus years. They know how our system works. They know that no one Government can bind the next. Their concern is understandable. What is given in good faith and assured today can be taken away in a year, two years, five years or 10 years, yet their citizens want to live their lives here for decades. That is why they want some mechanism, external to our parliamentary regime, to underpin those rights. It is no answer to their concern simply to say, “We have the best judges; we have the Supreme Court,” because, as the Secretary of State understands, if the law of this country changes in five years and these people’s rights are reduced, our Supreme Court will have to apply the legislation as it is then rather than any agreement that is reached now. That is their concern.

When pressed on the matter last week, the Prime Minister made it clear—I think this is in the document that was produced today—that this will be an international agreement and will therefore be subject to international enforcement. It is a pretence that this can all be done within our courts and our own jurisdiction. I will come to the wider question later, but if we are talking about honesty and proceeding in a grown-up way, it would be far better if the Government recognised the EU’s core concerns and found a way of ensuring that they are met, because this is about the lives of real people for decades and decades.

Charlie Elphicke: Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Keir Starmer: I will make some progress, if I may.

Back home, the divisions are obvious. The Chancellor’s Mansion House speech last week was clearly an attempt to spike the Prime Minister’s Brexit approach. Thus his speech was “fair rules and reasonable management of migration.” He has clearly been reading about our position.

Keir Starmer: I will in just a moment.

This approach is damaging our reputation abroad and weakening our position. Like the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, I was in Brussels last week. The talk in Brussels is, “What is going on? How long are this Government going to last?” We have put ourselves in the worst possible starting position.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): While we are on the right hon. and learned Gentleman’s manifesto, will he clear up an important point? Directly after the general election, having fought on a manifesto that made it clear that the Labour party would take back control of the borders, his leader, the shadow Chancellor and the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) made it clear that Labour’s position was to take back control of our borders, and to leave the single market and the customs union. Subsequently, the right hon. and learned Gentleman has gone out and said that leaving the single market and the customs union are not absolutes and are on the table. Will he clear up what the Labour party’s position really is?

Keir Starmer: That is not an accurate reflection of what I said. I will come to that in due course—[Interruption.] I will come to it when I get to that part of my speech.

The Prime Minister and the Secretary of State need to acknowledge the effect of the general election on their Brexit strategy. If the general election was an attempt, as the Prime Minister said, to strengthen her hand on Brexit, the outcome is a powerful case for a rethink. It is time to press the reset button. First, the tone and approach have to change. The belligerent, hostile attitude to date has alienated our allies and left Britain isolated. We need a more constructive and responsible approach. We share values with our EU partners, with whom we have a shared history. We will continue to share values, and we want a shared future: not membership of the EU—that was decided last year—but a full and meaningful partnership, based on principles of co-operation and collaboration.

The Foreign Secretary does not understand. I am talking about tone and approach, which is particularly pertinent for him. Anyone who has been backwards and forwards to Brussels knows very well how badly some of his comments have gone down with our EU partners. This is about building an environment in which we can get the best deal for our country, which is in all our interests.

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): Speaking of tone and approach, may I request that the right hon. and learned Gentleman changes his tone and approach to something a bit more positive? Brexit is an opportunity for our country to grasp, not a crisis to manage. It is hypocritical and arrogant of him to look behind what our country to grasp, not a crisis to manage. It is hypocritical and arrogant of him to look behind what

Keir Starmer: One of the biggest risks to these negotiations is utter complacency—the failure to realise the risks and complexity of the negotiations. It is quite right for the Opposition to challenge the Government at every twist and turn to ensure that these negotiations go as well as possible.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Keir Starmer: I will make some progress.
In addition to tone and approach, the second thing that needs to change is that we need to drop the “no deal is better than a bad deal” mantra.

Andrew Bridgen: Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Keir Starmer: I will make my point and then I will give way.

No deal would be a miserable failure. As the Chancellor said last week, no deal would be a very, very bad outcome indeed, but it is what happens automatically on 29 March 2019 if we do not reach agreement—we will be gently pushed over a cliff. Threatening to jump does not kid anyone. No deal means no agreement at all—no agreement on trade, no agreement on security and no arrangements for passing on information, because that is all done according to an EU framework.

Mr David Davis: All?

Keir Starmer: Not all, but most of it. The Secretary of State knows this very well and he should not belittle it. If we do not reach agreement, we will have nothing in place to replicate current arrangements for passing across security, intelligence, counter-terrorism and counter-crime information. [Interruption.] There is no point in the Foreign Secretary giving that pained expression. No agreement will also mean that we have not reached an agreement on aviation, the Northern Ireland border or EU citizens. That is what no deal is; no deal means no agreement.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union said that we must be honest in this debate. He must know in his heart of hearts that no deal is an untenable position for the United Kingdom to find itself in in 2019, so let today be the day when we bury the phrase, “No deal is better than a bad deal.”

Nadhim Zahawi (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con): For the shadow Secretary of State to be balanced in his view on no deal, he also needs to talk about what no deal means for the EU27. We looked at this on the Foreign Affairs Committee and, actually, the experts say that no deal is as harsh for the EU27 as it is for the United Kingdom. A bit of balance in the right hon. and learned Gentleman’s words would go down well in developing a common policy on this issue.

Keir Starmer: I readily accept that not only do we need a deal but that the EU needs a deal, which is why we should not talk up no deal as a viable strategy or adopt the Foreign Secretary’s position that no deal is perfectly okay. No deal is not a viable or tenable option. No deal means that we have not agreed anything.

Ian Paisley: Does the shadow Secretary of State agree that by adopting a narrative that is so wholly uncritical of the European Union, he leaves himself and his party open to the charge that they wish to subvert the will of the British people? Does he hold to page 6 of his own manifesto, which says we wish to leave the European Union?

Keir Starmer: I do not think that shooting the idea that no deal is viable, tenable or, honestly, a position we could possibly arrive at in 2019 is adopting the position of the EU. It is actually adopting the position of the UK. The UK needs a deal to safeguard its interests. This is a point made in the national interest.

Mr Jenkin: It is realistic to imagine that we will not get a comprehensive trade agreement with the EU when we leave and that interim arrangements will persist under WTO rules, which may well be zero-tariff rules, but we would have to believe the EU was seriously insane if it wanted to ground all flights between the UK and the EU, if it refused to offer the products and standards arrangements it has with 100 or more other countries—whether or not it has a free trade deal with those countries—or if it wanted to check every Mini exported to the EU to see whether it fits the EU’s definition of a car. Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman really think the EU is so insane that it would want to do that?

Keir Starmer: This mischaracterisation of the point I am making does not help. This is not the EU demanding here; if we do not have a lawful basis for these activities in the UK, we do not have the authority to do this. It is no good talking up a “no deal” as if it is a viable, tenable option.

Andrew Bridgen: All right—

Keir Starmer: I am going to press on to my third point about the reset: we need a razor-like focus on how we retain the benefits of the single market and the customs union. The Secretary of State stood at that Dispatch Box on 24 January and promised this House that he would reach an agreement that provided the “exact same benefits” as single market membership and the customs union. He knows, because we have raised it repeatedly since then, that we will hold him to that; it is one of the six tests I set out for the Government to meet in the final agreement.

Mike Gapes: Does the shadow Secretary of State agree that the best way to get the benefits of the single market is by staying in it? [Interruption.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr George Howarth): Order.

The shadow Secretary of State will be heard, and if that means people being removed from Chamber, that will happen.

Keir Starmer: Our manifesto was absolutely clear about retaining the benefits of the single market and the customs union. As for membership, although almost everybody who wants a progressive new relationship with the EU wants to retain the benefits of the single market and the customs union, almost everybody accepts that that cannot be done in an unreformed way, because of the rules of the single market as they now are. The question of whether we start from reform of the single market or from a bare agreement and then work up is secondary to the outcome we want to achieve. The outcome we want to achieve is: no tariffs for goods going across from us to the EU, and vice-versa; no new red tape at customs, including rules of origin; and a deal that works for services as well as for goods.

We have to recognise the concerns of the EU, and two in particular. First, the main concern is that if we are released from all obligations of a regulatory nature in relation to moving goods and services across Europe, we will be able to undercut EU countries economically. Secondly, if we strike free trade agreements that are released from any of the standards and regulations that
they apply, there is the prospect of flooding the UK with goods and products from other countries which do not meet those standards and/or go into Europe. Those are the issues we need to negotiate.

Several hon. Members rose—

Keir Starmer: I want to deal with this point, because I know it is an issue of real concern to my party. We have said that the outcomes are what matter, not the model for achieving them.

Mr Jenkin: I listened carefully to what the right hon. and learned Gentleman was saying, and he said he does not want to have to adopt rules of origin. How will we avoid doing so unless we are in a customs union relationship with the EU?

Keir Starmer: I have said on a number of occasions that we should leave being in the customs union on the table. What the Government have done is to sweep these options off the table without evidence, without facts and without assessing the risks. We have said that what we should do is focus on the outcomes. One of the best ways to achieve tariff-free access across Europe is to have the customs union on the table at least as an option to consider.

Mr David Davis: I apologise for interrupting the right hon. and learned Gentleman’s flow, but the leader of his party said a couple of hours ago in this House, when I believe the right hon. and learned Gentleman was in the Chamber, that he wanted to strike free trade deals around the world. How is that possible if we remain a member of the customs union?

Keir Starmer: The Secretary of State knows very well what I said, and I said it carefully—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mark Garnier): Chaos!

Keir Starmer: I am not sure how I respond—[Laughter.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr George Howarth): Order. I am not sure what part of the words “I am going to press on” right hon. and hon. Members do not understand. The Opposition spokesman has made it clear that he intends, for the present, to press on, and that should be respected until such time as he changes his mind.

Keir Starmer: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. If we are to obtain the exact same benefits of the single market and the customs union, it would be a good start if the Government now accepted that the negotiations will not be complete by March 2019, that transitional arrangements will be needed if we are to avoid a cliff edge and that transitional arrangements must safeguard our economy and jobs, and provide certainty for business. This also means that by the time of the final agreement at the end of transitional arrangements, a model or framework will have to have been agreed which truly does deliver the exact same benefits as the single market and the customs union. We also need a recognition—if we are being honest—that in the end, if we are going to have a meaningful and ongoing relationship with the EU, a court-like body will be needed to settle disputes. I refer not just to state to state disputes, but business to business disputes and individual to individual disputes.

We need to address a further issue on reset: the involvement of Parliament. For the first six months after the referendum decision, the Government fought in the courts to prevent this House having a say even on the triggering of article 50. They then called a general election to crush the opposition to their Brexit strategy, and that approach has to change. There needs to be a much stronger role for Parliament; we need to strengthen scrutiny and accountability, not push it away. Let us start in the following way—I hope and believe this will be agreed: this House needs a formal statement from the Secretary of State after each round of the negotiations, so that we can hear how he reports on progress and we can ask questions. I ask him to set that precedent now and agree that he will come to this House to report in a formal statement.

Mr David Davis: As the right hon. and learned Gentleman knows, the answer is yes, I will. The only reason we did not do this today is that we had a statement from the Prime Minister on, in effect, the same subject and, I was hoping, a whole day’s debate on it now.

Keir Starmer: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for that, and I understand the point he makes about what happened today—we had a discussion about it earlier. I am grateful that he will set the precedent for the future rounds, the dates of which we know, to come back to this House at the earliest opportunity to make a statement so that we can debate it and question him here.

Let me turn to the repeal Bill. We recognise the need to entrench all EU rights and protections in our law—I said that when the White Paper was published and I say it again now—hence our manifesto proposed an EU rights and protections Bill designed to that end. How it is done matters. As proposed, the repeal Bill would
contain sweeping powers for the Executive, with no enhanced safeguards. The statutory instrument procedure has no enhanced safeguards. That is far too sweeping to be accepted across this House. I hear what the Secretary of State says and I take him at his word when he says that there will be no limitations, no qualifications and no sunset clauses. I hope that that message is getting through to his Back Benchers, because many of them campaigned to leave the EU on the very basis that those rights should either not exist or be much reduced or limited. I look forward to seeing a strong three-line Whip through this Bill, making sure that there are no limitations, no qualifications and no sunset clauses.

The repeal Bill does not include the Charter of Fundamental Rights—I hear what the Secretary of State says about that—or any future proofing to ensure that we do not fall behind our EU partners as standards evolve, particularly in the workplace. There are at least seven other Bills, but there is no detail about them because no agreement can be reached on what to put in them.

The Prime Minister called a general election saying that it would provide “certainty and stability” as we enter the Brexit negotiations. Nothing could be further from the truth. We need a deal, and a deal that works. We have started the negotiations in the worst of all circumstances. Britain deserves better than that.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr George Howarth): Order. Before we move on to the next speech, may I announce that, to begin with, there will be an eight-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches? Almost inevitably, that will have to be reduced still further later in the debate.

7.11 pm

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Where I agree with the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) is on the fact that the decision that was taken just over one year ago was probably the most momentous political decision taken in my lifetime and that it will have profound consequences for this country. Obviously, it is essential that we should try to get the best possible deal. Unlike him, though, I campaigned in favour of a leave vote and I continue to believe that the decision that was taken is in the best interests of this country and offers huge opportunities for us both to reassert the supremacy of Parliament in our becoming an independent self-governing nation again and to take advantages of the opportunities that are opening up to us around the world.

Negotiating many of the detailed issues will be the responsibility of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, and the talks are just beginning. I do not agree with the right hon. and learned Gentleman when he says that no deal is necessarily worse than whatever bad deal we may get. It would be crazy for us to go in at the start stating that we could not contemplate not reaching a deal. That is a guarantee of not getting the best outcome. I do not want to spend too much time on the negotiations. I hope that, if I am successful in re-joining the Select Committee under the chairmanship of the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn)—if he is chosen as the Chairman—we will be seeing a great deal of the Secretary of State.

The opportunities that come from our decision are set out very clearly in the Queen’s Speech, and the first is the repeal Bill. I would have thought that everybody in this House welcomed the fact that, as we are going to leave the European Union in two years’ time or thereabouts, the repeal Bill will give certainty as it ensures that European law, which currently applies, will be transferred into British law. It also gives us the opportunity to consider at our leisure each of those individual measures to decide whether they are most appropriately framed and whether we could reduce some of the burden, or, in some instances, perhaps even increase the protection if we think that that is the right thing to do. The repeal Bill is not necessarily about reducing regulation—although there may well be plenty of examples where it is sensible to do so—but about giving us back the control to decide for ourselves the most appropriate level of regulation.

The immigration Bill will allow us to design our own system of determining whom we should welcome into this country and to whom we should say that we simply cannot accommodate them given the need to reduce the overall level. It means that we can create an immigration system that is fair to all and that does not discriminate in favour of European citizens against non-European citizens. We can judge everybody on the basis of what contribution they can make.

The agriculture Bill will allow us to design a system of support for farmers that is tailor-made for the benefit of British agriculture. It is not a one-size-fits-all system, which has to accommodate Greek olive growers just as much as it does wheat farmers in Essex. I hope that it will mean that we can deliver more support to British farming, and at a cheaper price as we will not have to be sending the money across to Brussels to have it judged, recycled and sent back to us.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): On that point, my right hon. Friend will surely agree that the common agricultural policy is one of the most environmentally destructive pieces of policy in the history of policy. Repatriating the common agricultural policy gives us an opportunity to ensure that, as we dish out vast quantities of taxpayers’ funds to landowners, we get something in return, including biodiversity and general benefits for our natural environment.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir David Amess): Before the right hon. Gentleman responds, let me make this appeal to the House. There are 37 speakers and a number of Members waiting to make their maiden speeches. If there are lots of interventions, we will be down to a three or four-minute time limit. I appeal to Members on both sides of the House to reduce their interventions.

Mr Whittingdale: I accept your stricture, Mr Amess. I agree completely with my hon. Friend, whom I am delighted to see back in his place in the House of Commons. British farming is already doing a great deal to support the environment. In designing a new system of support, we should emphasise that farmers need to be rewarded for what they are doing to conserve the landscape for future generations.

The fisheries Bill allows us to right a wrong that was done about 40 years ago. Many fishermen in this country feel that they were sold out when we joined the European
Union and were the price that we had to pay for membership. This Bill will allow us to restore their traditional fishing rights.

The trade Bill allows us now to reach new agreements with the countries that offer the greatest opportunities—the countries that are experiencing the fastest growth and where there is the most likely demand for British exports and British goods. It is no coincidence that there is no European trade deal with China, India, Australia, Brazil, New Zealand, or the United States of America, and yet all those countries want to do business with us and trade with us, and this gives us the opportunity to do so.

This debate about hard Brexit versus soft Brexit is a complete fiction. Soft Brexit does not exist. Apparently, it means remaining within the single market and customs union, which means that we will not be able to set our own immigration policy or our own trade policy and that we will still be subject to the European Court of Justice. Frankly, soft Brexit is worse than remaining a member of the European Union. The reasons that we wanted to leave the European Union require us no longer to be a member of either the single market or the customs union. Therefore, I strongly support the approach taken by my right hon. Friend and the Prime Minister.

I am pleased to see the Foreign Secretary in his place. He may know that I have taken a long-standing interest in events in Ukraine, and I am delighted that he will be meeting the Prime Minister of Ukraine next week. Ukraine may have passed out of the headlines, but the conflict going on in that country is still raging. About 2,700 troops have died since 2014 and nearly 10,000 have been wounded. This is a country on the mainland of continental Europe, part of which is still under occupation in Crimea by Russian troops. In another part, a separatist movement supported by Russia is waging war. We support the Minsk process to try to put that right, but we do have a responsibility as one of the original signatories to the Budapest memorandum, which guaranteed the territorial integrity of Ukraine. I very much welcome the attention that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is paying to this, and I hope that he will take the opportunity next week to express once again the very firm support of the British Government for the people of Ukraine.

I welcome the counter-terrorism review that has been initiated, but there is one aspect that I want to highlight in the hope that my right hon. Friend and the Prime Minister.

7.20 pm

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I start on a European theme, which is apt. The Prime Minister called the election because she was concerned about the opposition to her ideas on our future relationship with Europe. In response, the electorate made politics in this place that little bit more European: no one party holding a majority and parties being forced by the electorate to work together is common in other European legislatures and it is an idea that we certainly welcome. At long last, this place seems to be catching up with ideas that have caught on elsewhere in the UK, with minority Governments in both Edinburgh and Cardiff at the moment. Once again, Westminster appears to be playing catch up with both the devolved Administrations and our European partners.

No party in the House, not least mine or others, has a majority of wisdom or all the good ideas. Big decisions will be made that impact on us all and are the responsibility of this place, devolved Administrations and local government. I have said before that democracy no longer begins and ends here, and the same should be true of decision making, so I welcome the Secretary of State’s remarks earlier about a legislative consent motion. If I may say this to him, I do not expect the devolved Administrations to give the Government a blank cheque, and nor should he expect one.

Only two parties in this Parliament won a majority of the seats in which they stood at the election: the Democratic Unionist party and the Scottish National party. I hope that they will be listened to in equal measure on these issues. In spite of our clear mandate, we are prepared to listen and work with other parties.

I also recognise the loss of some our finest parliamentarians at the last general election. After all, Angus Robertson—I have heard the chuntering from those on the Labour Benches, but they could learn a thing or two from him about providing effective opposition to that lot—was a parliamentarian who managed to show up the Prime Minister long before the Labour party managed to do so.

Alex Salmond is a political giant and one of the few parliamentarians with extensive experience of minority government. The UK Government may wish to reflect on the fact that the former First Minister led a Government for a full term, passing historic measures on free education, world-beating climate change measures and measures on universal services that remain the envy of the rest of the UK, with just 47 out of 129 Members of the Scottish Parliament. That is something that they will perhaps reflect on.

We on these Benches stand on the shoulders of giants, and if I might be permitted to say so, Mr Deputy Speaker, that includes our former leader and former Member for Dundee, East, Gordon Wilson, who passed away yesterday. It is easy to forget in these days when some in this Chamber claim that a majority of Scottish seats is somehow a failure that our former leader sat in a group of two. In spite of those numbers, he provided Dundee and Scotland with a powerful voice. We on these Benches, and I think elsewhere, owe him a huge debt of gratitude. We think of him and of his wife, Edith, at this moment.

Given the dynamics of Parliament, the SNP group will use its position to work with others where we can. That will be especially important in terms of our future
relationship with our European partners. It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of those negotiations to each and every one of us. It is fair to say and abundantly clear that this Government do not have all the answers on our future relationship with Europe. They have taken up the “whole lotta nothing” provided by Vote Leave and built on that with a year of not much in the way of progress. I am afraid to say to the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union that the talks have not got off to the best of starts, as the Labour spokesperson, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), said. The Secretary of State promised us the “row of the summer” over whether trade talks should start at the same time as talks on agreeing the cost of Brexit. That has turned into the “sound of silence”—the new quiet man, indeed, of Conservative party politics. It would be comical if it were not so serious.

The whole Government must have some culpability for the vacuum that has been left in our relationship with Europe, and none more so than the Foreign Secretary, who sat at the heart of the leave campaign and has spent a year in the Foreign Secretary’s chair giving us not much more detail than we had previously.

A minority Administration leaves all of us in this Chamber, not least those of us on the SNP Benches and Members across the Opposition Benches, with an opportunity. May I give credit to my colleagues from across the political divide who have put aside political differences to table amendments such as that which stands in my name and that of other colleagues, and I include in that the hon. Members for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) and for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas)? We will not agree on everything, but where we can agree we should try to come together.

We certainly agree that we should try to retain our membership of the single market and the customs union, and provide both a role for devolved Administrations and security for EU nationals, which, frankly, they deserve and which we should have given them long before now. That respects the referendum result. In fact, in July last year, just after the EU referendum, the Secretary of State for Scotland, no less, argued:

“My role is to ensure Scotland gets the best possible deal and that deal involves clearly being part of the single market.”

We had a referendum that delivered a narrow win for leave and a general election in which no one won a majority, but there was certainly a rejection of a hard Tory Brexit, so where we can come together we should do so. There has to be—I will say it clearly—a four-nation, cross-party and cross-institutional approach. That is the clear mandate that we have been given from the electorate across the UK.

In terms of the devolved Administrations, it is important that the Government do not turn the great repeal Bill—or rather the repeal Bill now—into the power grab undermining devolution. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) pointed out, whatever happened to the promise from the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs that it would be “for Scotland to decide” its immigration levels? For the avoidance of doubt, and there seemed to be some from the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, that came from the DEFRA Secretary just before, on “Good Morning Scotland” no less.

I am a passionate pro-European and our relationship with the EU is one that gave me many opportunities. It has made us all safer, healthier and wealthier, and the UK’s departure is bad news for our EU partners, but worse news for us in the UK. In fact—I see the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi) in his place—it was our Foreign Affairs Committee report that found that although no deal would be bad for our European partners, it would be much worse for the UK. That was the conclusion that we collectively came to.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I would not want the hon. Gentleman accidently to misrepresent our report. What we precisely said was that there would be mutually assured damage if there was no deal and that in absolute terms the damage would probably be greater to the 27 than to us, because that is where the balance of trade and the money flows sit, but that in relative terms the damage would be greater to the UK. I think that is a full summary of the conclusions of our report, which we fairly reported.

Stephen Gethins: I thank the, at the moment, former Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee for that intervention, but what he makes clear and what we came to a collective decision on was that this will be damaging for the UK. It is damage that we are causing to ourselves, and that we can do something about. We are willing to compromise. The Scottish Government’s publication, “Scotland’s Place in Europe”, provided a route towards a mid-way option. That openness, despite the fact that Scotland and my constituents voted overwhelmingly to remain part of the EU, shows the way we have to go.

I want to touch briefly on a couple of other issues apart from Europe. We are undergoing the worst refugee crisis in European terms and global displacement stands at almost 60 million people—its highest ever level. UK foreign policy must bear some responsibility, and I am sure that the Foreign Secretary will reflect on some of the measures that we should be taking. Not least, we have those fleeing conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the open door that is the failed state in Libya. In Syria, which is so closely linked to the refugee crisis, we need a coherent, long-term strategy. With regard to Yemen, we on the SNP Benches will continue to ask questions about arms sales to those involved in the conflict.

I was glad to hear the right hon. Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) mention Ukraine. On Russia, we must continue to work with our European partners, not least in relation to Russia’s actions in Ukraine, the Caucasus and elsewhere. I am grateful to him for making those points.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): All the party manifestos committed the UK Government to retaining the 0.7% aid target, but does my hon. Friend share my concern about some of the language in the Conservative manifesto, which seemed to suggest that the Government could simply redefine aid and spend it on whatever they wanted?

Stephen Gethins: My hon. Friend, as usual, makes an excellent point. In this Parliament we will seek to build on the good work he did in his previous role as our international development spokesperson, especially with reference to the 0.7% commitment. Perhaps the Foreign Secretary will also mention that.
[Stephen Gethins]

In conclusion, my appeal is that we continue to work together. Our European neighbours remain our closest partners, not just geographically, but economically, culturally and politically. That reality needs to start seeping in. We will work as constructively as we can with colleagues in other political parties, but there must be an openness and a willingness to do so.

7.31 pm

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak so early in the debate. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins); I enjoyed listening to his speech and appreciate the spirit in which he made it. I think that many Members on both sides of the House will wish to return to the theme of working together pragmatically. It will certainly inform some of the remarks that I make in the next few minutes.

I have not taken many of the opportunities that we have had in this House over the past 12 months to speak about Britain’s withdrawal from the European Union. In part that is because I had campaigned strongly for us to remain and on referendum day I found myself part of the minority in the country, and certainly in my constituency, which voted strongly to leave. I have spent part of the past year trying to understand what drove that vote, not least in my constituency and across Wales, and how the debate is evolving. I have one or two observations to make.

First, I have been deeply impressed by the pragmatic and assiduous approach taken by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State over the past 10 months. I think that it has been appreciated on both sides of the House and, judging by what people on the continent tell me, deeply valued in the discussions with our European counterparts. Listening to his remarks today, and to those of the shadow Secretary of State, the newly right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), I was struck by the fluidity and room for manoeuvre that exists in both Front-Bench positions.

That fluidity might reflect different shades of opinion within the Government, and certainly within the Opposition, on how we should take forward the Brexit negotiations, but it also reflects a level of pragmatism. Listening to both Front Benchers this afternoon, I asked myself whether a pragmatic centre ground might be emerging around which Members on both sides could coalesce. One of the things I took from the general election campaign is that the country remains hopelessly divided on this issue. If we in this Chamber are to do anything over the next two years, it should be to provide some kind of leadership that helps bring the country together.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): No tariffs; frictionless trade; the best possible access to, but not membership of, the single market—is not the truth that there is vanishingly little difference between the strategic priorities of those on both Front Benches? Does my right hon. Friend agree that it would help our constituents, and indeed our negotiators, if all parties were to make that clear?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir David Amess): Order. Before the right hon. Gentleman replies, I appeal again to the House, because the more interventions there are, the less time there will be for the very many Members who wish to speak, including those who wish to make their maiden speeches.

Stephen Crabb: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention, because I was about to say that I was also struck by how similar the strategic objectives of both Front Bench positions actually are. The outlines are emerging of what I hope will be a pragmatic, sensible Brexit deal that can command widespread support across the country. The Government and the Opposition are united in wanting to prioritise jobs and prosperity and to protect workers’ living standards and the interests of our business community—I do not think that there is any dispute about that. However, getting an outcome that actually delivers will require more direct honesty about some of the trade-offs that need to be made.

In particular, we need to be far more honest with the public about the trade-off between maximising access to the single market—that is not the same thing as retaining membership of the single membership—so that we can enjoy as many of the benefits of those trading relationships that we currently enjoy, and the posture we adopt towards future EU workers wishing to come to this country. We had a good discussion earlier today about the offer being made to EU citizens currently living here, and we debated it at some length. Again, the point needs to be made that, despite the acknowledgment that clearly important details have yet to be resolved, we have the outlines of a deal with the European Union, which is a big step forward. If we carry the same spirit of pragmatism and generosity that has informed that offer into our negotiations on future EU workers, while also keeping an eye on the economic importance of people coming from overseas to work in this country—we do not debate that enough—there is a deal to be done that will give us a good chance of maximising trading access to the single market and protecting our economic interests as far as possible.

Over the past year I have looked at different economic sectors and asked myself which group of EU workers, whether in the NHS, the road haulage industry or our agri-food sector, should not be here in a post-Brexit scenario. The truth is that one cannot put one’s finger on any significant group of EU workers currently here and contributing to our economy about whom we would say, “It would be better for this country if they weren’t here, and actually we should design a Brexit that will stop them coming here.”

By focusing on our economic interests and being honest with the public—there is a particular challenge on my side of the House to us to debate this with our constituents in a more direct and honest way than we have perhaps been willing to do in recent years—I think we can move some of the opinion in the country that undoubtedly opted for Brexit a year ago because people thought that that was the change button for reducing immigration. The truth is that it is not, and we need to be honest about that.

I am optimistic, having listening to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State, that there is a pragmatic and sensible centre ground that can emerge and around which we can...
coalesce, that will command the support of the business community—which at the moment feels that its voice needs to be louder in the Brexit discussions—and trade unions, and will reassure British workers and give us the best possible chance of enhancing, not diminishing, our prosperity in the years ahead.

7.39 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Secretary of State was characteristically confident about the Brexit negotiations when he spoke, but even he would recognise that things are rather different now. Following recent events, the Prime Minister is clearly weaker than she expected to be, and the EU is stronger than many thought it would be. The non-appearance of the “row of the summer”, referred to a moment ago, reminded us all about who is actually in control of these negotiations as we listen to the ever-insistent ticking of the article 50 clock.

In her speech on Wednesday, the Prime Minister promised that she would seek to “build a wide consensus” on Brexit. The words sound good, and our divided nation certainly does need to come together on this great matter. But let us be frank—the last 12 months have been spent doing anything but forging a consensus. Quite the contrary: we got no running commentary when people asked about the Government’s negotiating objectives; it took a recommendation of the Brexit Select Committee to get the Government to publish a White Paper; there was resistance to the need for transitional arrangements, although now almost everyone recognises that these will be necessary; and there was an initial reluctance to concede that Parliament will have the final say on any deal. I would like to think that this new commitment has come because Ministers have reflected on their behaviour and listened, but I suspect that it has much more to do with the outcome of the general election and the chaos that has ensued.

Like my right hon. and learned Friend the shadow Secretary of State, I cannot understand why we continue to hear the argument that the Government would be prepared to leave the EU with no deal, given that we now know that the Chancellor of the Exchequer does not agree with that proposition. He made that absolutely clear in his interview a week ago, when he talked about leaving with no deal as “a very, very bad outcome for Britain”.

He is right. I gently say to Ministers that the chances of this Parliament’s agreeing to leave the European Union with no deal have melted away, along with the Government’s majority. The question is how this consensus can be built. I echo what the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) said a moment ago.

I welcome the greater detail announced today on EU nationals, although the families affected still need answers to questions, including about what the new simplified system will look like, the cut-off date and how family members, including children, could join them. Earlier, the Prime Minister said:

“After the UK has left the European Union, EU citizens with settled status will be able to bring family members from overseas on the same terms as British nationals.”

In responding, will the Foreign Secretary confirm that in such cases, after March 2019, that will involve meeting an income threshold? That is what British citizens currently face. On the oversight of the arrangements and the rights of UK nationals, which we must of course protect, I personally think that a court made up of UK and European judges would be a very sensible way forward.

But let us be clear—the issue of EU and UK nationals is meant to be the simplest, to be sorted out at the start of the negotiations, compared with all the fundamental questions so important to the future of our economy and our country: our trading relationship with the EU; access to the single market; how we will ensure that we continue to have the skills we need for economic growth; public services and the tax revenue that we need to pay for those services; the future of co-operation on foreign policy, defence, security, the fight against terrorism and science and research. On that latter issue, I do not understand Ministers’ reluctance simply to say that they wish to remain part of the Horizon 2020 programme.

Given that the Government’s central aim—indeed, it is the aim of the Opposition—is to maintain tariff-free and barrier-free trade, I also do not understand why the Government have turned their backs on the simplest means of achieving that, which is to remain within the customs union, especially as that would solve the problem of the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic. Perhaps the Government have chosen this path because in practice they know that Britain will probably remain a member of the customs union for some time to come. The Chancellor’s speech at the Mansion House gave a strong indication of that.

No one I have met, Ministers apart, believes that negotiating a new trade and market access agreement will be completed between now and next October. The best that we can look to is an agreement in principle to negotiate such a deal and then transitional arrangements that will cover the period from the end of March 2019 to the conclusion of these negotiations. In the meantime, as the Secretary of State knows, all this uncertainty is profoundly bad for business confidence, as is talking about leaving with no deal.

On the great repeal Bill, Parliament faces a huge practical task in transposing the regulations and decisions, but Ministers need to understand, in the spirit of the new consensus, that the House will enable that to happen only as long as it is crystal clear that no attempt will be made to remove, erode or undermine any of the workers’ rights, consumer protection or environmental standards that the British people have come to value.

Despite what the Prime Minister said, we have to be honest and recognise that there is not currently a consensus on the type of Brexit that we should seek, so the Prime Minister’s commitment will have to be given form through the Government’s actions. I urge Ministers to start demonstrating this new approach to the House, the British people and British businesses. I urge them to listen to the voices of the many and not just those who shouted loudest for leave during the referendum. I urge them to be flexible in their approach. Since we all want tariff-free and barrier-free trade, why do they not at the very least leave the prospect of remaining in the customs union on table, given that the Secretary of State—with, as he described it, his characteristic honesty—said on Sunday he is pretty sure but not certain that he will get the deal that he wants? I also urge Ministers to understand that, as my right hon. and learned Friend the shadow Secretary of State said so eloquently, if their confidence is misplaced, the unhappiness—indeed, the anger—that
[Hilary Benn]
gave rise to the referendum result will return as people discover that the things that they were promised fail to materialise.

If Ministers do all the things I have mentioned, we may find a way forward. If they do not, this Parliament, be it long or short, is going to be very hard work for them. That is not where we should want to be, given the scale of the task that we face as a country as we all seek to get the best deal that we can on behalf of all the people who so recently sent us here.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir David Amess): Order. Unfortunately, I now have to drop the time limit to four minutes.

7.47 pm

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): Our great country is about to embark on a journey of national self-determination, rediscovering and building our identity as a great trading nation, an outward-looking nation and a nation that has every reason to be confident in its future. The Government have rightly rejected staying in the customs union and the single market. If we are to realise our aspiration of becoming a self-governing, global-facing democracy, we cannot remain signed up to the single market or customs union.

Contrast the Government’s position with what we have heard from the shadow Secretary of State today: confusion and an illogical position, as he stated that membership of the customs union remains on the table. Contrast that with what the shadow Attorney General said this weekend: we will not necessarily be able to control our immigration policy. But that was what people voted for last year. If Brexit is to mean anything, it must mean control of our borders, our immigration policy and our trade.

Why has the customs union not served our purposes? There are four main reasons. First, it has not served our country’s trade interests. The EU has a laughable track record on securing trade agreements with the more flourishing parts of the world. Since 1999, our trade deficit with the EU has grown from £12 billion to £71 billion. That is in contrast to our growing trade surplus with the rest of the world—we have gone from a deficit of £4 billion in 1999 to a surplus of £34 billion in 2016. There is therefore an amazing opportunity for our country to forge trade links with the rest of the world, rather than being reliant on the declining market of the EU.

We will be able to strike new trade deals only if we are out of the customs union. The alternative is impossible because of the common commercial policy, which binds all its members. The Labour manifesto says that it wants to “work with global trading partners to develop ‘best-in-class’ free trade and investment agreements that remove trade barriers and promote skilled jobs and high standards”, but that is simply not possible as long as we are members of the customs union.

Secondly, EU protectionism harms British consumers. We are denied products such as cheaper sugar from developing states because protectionist tariffs favour less efficient farmers in northern Europe. The EU customs union has pushed up the price of food and clothes by an estimated £500 a year for each household. By opening up the market and lowering barriers to entry for new competition, prices will fall and consumers will benefit. Choice and quality will increase as producers will no longer have a captive market or a monopoly.

Thirdly, the EU’s trade agreements have focused too much on goods. When 80% of our GDP is from services, we need to realign our trade policy. Lastly, the customs union severely penalises farmers and workers in developing countries when they export to the EU. The tariffs are unequal and discriminatory, and that really is an enemy of fair trade. If we want to, we can develop more opportunities to support African countries to become more sustainable and to industrialise.

In conclusion, Brexit is not a crisis to manage, as the Opposition would have us believe. It is a golden opportunity for us to seize. I implore them to get behind the Government and support Brexit in all its forms.

7.50 pm

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): This Queen’s Speech is not a plan for a Government at the height of their powers with a raft of policies to deliver. It is a legislative programme for a Government in a holding pattern, led by an isolated and humiliated Prime Minister who has been shorn of her authority after a bruising encounter with the electorate in an election that she chose to call three years early. She flunked the test spectacularly, hobbling her premiership, and weakening rather than strengthening her hand in the EU negotiations in the process. Far from gaining the landslide victory that the polls indicated would be hers when she called the election, the Prime Minister has managed to turn a Tory majority into a hung Parliament. Her much vaunted deal with the DUP has only just been concluded in the nick of time, 18 days after the general election. Meanwhile, No. 10 is beginning to resemble the Mary Celeste.

Anyone who doubts the truth of the Prime Minister’s predicament need only peruse the weekend’s front pages to see the unseemly jockeying for position that has already begun in this most weak and wobbly of Administrations. The programme is defined more by what has been missed out than by what it actually contains. The Leader of the Opposition pointed out in his speech that the Tory election manifesto has disappeared in its entirety from the party’s website. That gives us an insight into the real motivation for the Government introducing a new right to be forgotten in the data protection Bill.

There is no mention in the Queen’s Speech of the triple lock on pensions or the abolition of winter fuel payments. The Prime Minister’s highly divisive personal pet project—introducing new grammar schools—is not referred to, nor is the possibility of allowing a free vote on fox hunting any time soon. The dementia tax proposals have gone, as have the police cuts.

The election result destroyed any mandate for an extreme Brexit. Parties holding extreme positions on Brexit—whether the UK Independence party or the Liberal Democrats—were rejected emphatically. For the first time in decades, the Tories and Labour together received 80% of the votes. There is no appetite for the hard Brexit that the Prime Minister has tried to pursue since the referendum. She interpreted the decision in the
referendum as giving the Government alone the power to decide how to proceed. The Supreme Court rightly interpreted the constitutional reality and disabused her of that vanity. She then asked voters to give her a free hand to drive though her own personal hard Brexit, and the British people disabused her of that vanity.

Two things must now happen. First, we need a cross-party council, comprising expertise and experience, to advise the Government on how to progress. Scrutiny benefits from a plurality of opinion. Good decisions require managed dissent. Secondly, the Brexit council should work out what a baseline acceptable deal would be and put that in place. That deal might look something like the Norwegian model—that is, to agree to Britain entering the European economic area. We could then work out which incremental elements we need to get a deal to strengthen that base. Working from a baseline, we can build a genuinely successful deal with the best chance of safeguarding jobs and building prosperity for the future.

7.54 pm

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): This is a defining Parliament for Britain’s place in Europe and in the world, and Parliament will fail in its duty if it does not preside over the United Kingdom leaving the European Union, and doing so in as good order as our 27 partners and negotiators enable. This entails the historic amount of legislative activity announced in the Queen’s Speech to convert the acquis communautaire into UK law. Much of the work will be detailed and technical, and it is important that we get it right, but hopefully it will not be controversial. However, the diplomatic activity that we undertake in the coming months and years will be important for Britain’s future and must not play second fiddle to our legislative challenge.

I welcome the commitment in the Queen’s Speech that Ministers will ensure that the UK’s leading role on the world stage is maintained and enhanced as it leaves the European Union. Few in this House, regardless of their position on the referendum question that we resolved a year ago, want the United Kingdom to be anything other than open and internationalist in its outlook. Now more than ever, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will have a central role in maintaining our networks and alliances, and in developing our political, security and economic ties around the world.

In the previous Parliament, the Foreign Affairs Committee, which I chaired, as I hope to do again in this Parliament, repeatedly called for the FCO’s capacity to be boosted. Immediately after the referendum, we reported that there was an urgent need substantially to increase “the funding available to the FCO commensurate with the enormity of the task it now faces.”

Since then, the Department for Exiting the European Union and the Department for International Trade have been created, but the diplomatic task required in all European capitals and beyond will outlast the withdrawal process and is discrete from the trade agenda. I reiterate that just protecting the FCO budget is wholly inadequate for the task in hand.

Events will continue to develop with serious consequences for our interests. The current crisis in the Gulf and the potential for a hot or protracted cold war on the Arabian peninsula threaten the stability and prosperity of key British partners and have undermined the effectiveness of the Gulf Co-operation Council. There are calls for the United Kingdom to play a role as a third party in the implementation and monitoring of any future agreement. We should do so, particularly by offering our expertise in auditing any counter-terror financing measures, and indeed on what the ground rules might be for political Islamists to take part in developing democracies. That would be in the interest of all parties. It is vital that we are ready and properly resourced to carry out such work if requested.

Inevitably, I would like to be able to say much more in this debate about: our current operations in Syria; the future of liberated territory in Iraq and Syria; the authorisation of the use of force; a new sanctions regime as we leave the European Union; our involvement in the European Union’s future common foreign and security policy, and common security and defence policy; and, importantly, possible Brexit transition options. Finally, I want to make the point that 2020 would be a suitable date for the state visit of President Trump, which was notably omitted from the Queen’s Speech. I regret that people will now have to look at my website to see the full text of the remarks I had hoped to make in this debate.

7.58 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): This Queen’s Speech shows the extent to which Brexit will dominate our legislative agenda. We have the repeal Bill, and Bills on trade, customs, fisheries, agriculture and more. No matter what outside events may say, we now have a single-purpose Government and a single-purpose legislative programme. The Prime Minister called the election because she said that she could not get Brexit through Parliament. How ruefully she must reflect on that statement now. Before she said that, the article 50 Bill had gone through this House with a majority of 372 votes. The other place had not tried to block it. Given that that legislation went through, the election was never called because Parliament was blocking Brexit. It was called because the Government wanted to cash in on big opinion poll leads.

The backfiring of that political gamble has left the Prime Minister leading a minority Government, dependent on the deal with the DUP that was announced today, at an immediate cost of £1.5 billion. When I was a child, we had a programme on television called “The Six Million Dollar Man”. I thought that that was a lot of money at the time, but the DUP has guaranteed far more than that for each of its representatives in this House. We enter the most important negotiations the country has conducted since the war weakened, not strengthened, with the authority of the Prime Minister shot to pieces, her Cabinet divided and her position sustained by nothing other than fear of another election.

As these negotiations begin, we are reminded of a salutary fact. We have discussed Brexit too often in the past year as though it was something Tory Ministers could define—we have heard that it would mean this, and it would mean the next thing—but this is actually a negotiation between the two parties around the table; it is not a Tory wish list.

When the Secretary of State was asked yesterday what he thought of Mr Barnier, he gave an insight into the level of preparation undertaken when he said, “He’s very French.” With that level of preparation, it is perhaps no
wonder that the first demand, repeated four times in the article 50 letter—that the future trade negotiations take place alongside the article 50 negotiations—did not survive the first meeting on the first day. That reminds us that this is a negotiation between two parties, not a Tory wish list.

In substance, what does that really boil down to after the election? As other colleagues have said, the thing that should go is this mantra that no deal is better than a bad deal. No deal would be damaging for the European Union, but as the past and perhaps future Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee said, it would, relatively speaking, damage us more. We know the consequences: tariffs on cars and bigger tariffs on agricultural produce. It would make it impossible to have no hard border, at least in economic terms, between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. It is, in relative terms, a gun least in economic terms, between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. It is, in relative terms, a gun held to our heads, not to the European Union’s head.

Ultimately, this negotiation will come down to a choice for the Prime Minister: will she do as the Chancellor held to our heads, not to the European Union’s head.

That is ultimately the choice that faces us.

8.2 pm

Anna Soubry (Bromsgrove) (Con): It is a great honour and pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden). I agree with much of what he said and, indeed, with the excellent speech from my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb). As ever, I also endorse much of what was said by the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn).

People right across this House, and indeed this country, have to be utterly realistic and honest about this and accept that everything has now changed. In my constituency, I found very few angry remainers—I know there are many angry remainers, but it tends to be a London-based thing, and the results in London for the Conservative party say it all. However, in my constituency, there are very few angry remainers. What there is is an acceptance of the result and almost a sense of resignation—it is not an agreement, and it is not a welcome. That is especially true of constituents who run their own businesses, who did not welcome the result and who do not welcome the fact that we are leaving the European Union. However, people have accepted the referendum result, and their message and their plea now is that we should come together and get the best deal we can in the national interest.

That is why I am so pleased that we are already seeing changes in the approach being taken, and many other hon. and right hon. Members have expressed that view. I repeat much of what was said from the Opposition Front Bench about the need to change the tone. Those on the Government Front Bench need to wake up and understand that things have now changed. The rhetoric has to be dropped. The slogan that no deal is better than a bad deal is nonsense, and it has always been nonsense. The British people know that, and that is why they voted as they did on 8 June.

Nobody likes somebody being very smart, but I am going to have to say this: I stood up in this place—on this spot—on two occasions, and I warned hon. and right hon. Friends of the dangers of ignoring the 48%, and the young in particular. The expression I used was that many young people who voted remain believe an older generation have stolen their future, and the result was there on 8 June. I hate to have been proved right, but I was. Look at the demographics of the results; they almost mirror those from the referendum. The older people were, the more likely they were to have voted Conservative; the younger ones—obviously, in my terms, that is anybody under the age of about 50—did not. More people under the age of 45 voted Labour in the election.

Of course it is profoundly ironic that people who voted remain then voted for the Labour party and the Leader of the Opposition—a man who gave remain a very lukewarm seven and a half out of 10. If I may say so, Opposition Members, too, now have to wake up and accept the reality of the situation, because they have promised many of these people things they may not be able to deliver on. When they talk about the customs union, the single market and immigration, they now have to say what they mean, and they should stop being cowards about it: if they think they want the benefits of the customs union, they should have the—I nearly said a very unparliamentary word—courage to stand up and say that. They should make the case, and make the argument, just as we now need to make the case and make the argument about the benefits of immigration.

Finally, this is a great country. We still have a very good economy. We have a great and bright future. That is because we are leaving the European Union, but despite it. We now need to make sure we have the education and training to seize those opportunities.

8.7 pm

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to make my maiden speech today. It is a privilege for me to follow Craig Williams as the Member for Cardiff North. I know how hard Craig worked to represent the constituency over the past two years.

The recent election campaign was punctured by a number of tragic events, from Manchester to London. In Wales, there was another sad event, which brought together the nation. The loss of our former First Minister, Rhodri Morgan, was felt in homes across Wales. Some may remember his time here representing Cardiff West, as well as his wife, Julie Morgan, who represented Cardiff North, and who still represents the constituency in the National Assembly. Julie and Rhodri were a team for over half a century. Rhodri was always a close friend and wise counsel. He is much missed, and I am sure Members will join me in extending our love and sympathy to Julie and the family.

The history of the modern Cardiff North is a history of how industry and people changed and revolutionised the city and the whole of south Wales. But it is industry that has defined the modern part of the capital that I represent. It was the wealth created by the traditional industries of south Wales that created the gothic splendour of Castell Coch, and it was this same industry that brought people to create Cardiff and that led to the growth of Whitchurch, Rhiwbina, Llanishen, Pontprennau, Heath and Llandaff North, to name only a few of its communities.

That industry also created a cosmopolitan, multicultural city that is home to Cardiff’s first Welsh-medium secondary school—a school where my daughter learns through
the medium of a language that is growing and that will be spoken by 1 million people in the coming decades.

It is the people of Cardiff who voted to remain in the European Union. The vote in many parts of Wales was not a vote against Europe or the concept or the reality of the European Union; it was a vote against politics—against the reality of the decisions taken here. The cumulative impact of benefit cuts and reductions in public spending has hit the poorest hardest, so I intend to use my time here to speak up against a failed austerity where the richest people have forced the poorest people to pay the price. The UK Government seem to have abandoned austerity for Northern Ireland today: what about the rest of the UK? The UK is weaker and less united this evening than it was this morning. I also hope the UK Government understand that it is important that the whole of the UK is represented in these talks and negotiations. At present, the UK Government are in danger of losing the argument not only in Brussels but in Cardiff as well, with a disunited kingdom where jobs and livelihoods, workers’ rights and action on climate change are sacrificed in the pursuit of an impossible imperialist fantasy.

During the business statement last week, Mr Deputy Speaker, you were kind enough to allow me to raise the issue of the loss of over 1,000 jobs in my constituency because of the closure of a Tesco customer care centre, and I am grateful. Since then, I have had the opportunity to spend time with and speak to many of the workers who have been told they have lost their jobs. They are devastated; many have two or three members of the same family working there. Over the weekend, one of them wrote to me. Her words speak for everyone affected there. “Please fight for us”, she said, continuing:

“Each and every single one of those 1,100 people are heartbroken and terrified as we face uncertain futures for ourselves and our families. Anything you can do, anything at all—we all will be forever grateful”.

Those are her words, not mine, and they are a challenge to us all. It is those people and their voices that are in my mind today and will be guiding me.

My fear is that if this Government are allowed to drive through a Brexit where the jobs and livelihoods of the people we all represent are treated with disdain and indifference, then these will be the stories we hear every day, every week, and every month. I intend to use my time to stand up against failed austerity measures and for a more prosperous, fairer and more equal society. I look forward to working with my colleagues here. Thank you.

8.11 pm

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) for her contribution today. It is a pleasure to follow her, and to thank her for her kind and generous remarks about her predecessor, Craig Williams. I am sure that we all wish her every personal success serving in the House of Commons.

As the UK leaves the European Union, the British people and Parliament will again have the right to make our own decisions in our own national interest. With our freedom restored, our nation will boldly make its own way in the world just as our forebears did throughout the centuries. The benefits of trade and the sharing of culture should not require the United Kingdom to be locked into a political union. On the contrary, upholding every essence of our sovereignty and democracy is what the people of these islands have fought for for nearly 1,000 years. The measures outlined in the Queen’s Speech will lay the foundations for a better future for all parts of our nation. All of us must now accept that the ultimate ambitions of the European Union do not run with the grain of the British people; our historical development and approach have always been different. Our energies must now surely be focused on working to construct a new British-European bilateral relationship that I certainly believe is not only possible but will eventually prove to be the right path for our nation.

Our future lies, as it always has, beyond the shores of Europe, with the rest of the world, and particularly the Commonwealth and the English-speaking nations. I speak as co-chairman of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly when I say that the very special and enduring relationship between the people of the United Kingdom and Ireland must be secured in any new arrangements—most particularly, the common travel area and access for trade, hopefully unfortherted, across the two borders. It is possible to be outside the European Union and at the same time have beneficial bilateral relations without compromising sovereignty, as our Crown dependencies of Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man have demonstrated, and Her Majesty’s Government have a responsibility to defend and secure their rights and interests. The same applies to the subjects of the British overseas territories who depend on the United Kingdom to look after their wellbeing, and we have a duty to defend their rights as well.

However, the people of Gibraltar are, I have to say, rightly nervous at this time. I welcome the announcement that His Majesty the King and the Queen of Spain will soon come to the United Kingdom on a state visit, but there was nothing in our Queen’s Speech that gave any public reassurances that Gibraltar’s economy and sovereignty will be safeguarded. I therefore call on Her Majesty’s Government to do just that. We must never let down the people of the Rock, who have time and again demonstrated their undying loyalty to the British Crown and the United Kingdom.

Let us embrace the fortunes that this historic moment offers by securing an agreement that exemplifies the bold ambition of our nation to be a great economic and cultural centre of the world again. This is what the British people expect of Her Majesty’s Government, so let us all unite behind that great vision for our United Kingdom.

8.16 pm

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), who ended on the subject of Gibraltar. I am glad that he did so, because I want to highlight the fact that there is a major problem with not only Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic but with what will happen to Gibraltar. It is quite possible that there will be a real problem getting any agreement because of disagreement with Spain over Gibraltar. The Government of Gibraltar interpret clause 24 of the guideline document produced by President Donald Tusk of the European Council as potentially leaving their position uncertain and unsettled after any deal. The question will be whether the British
Government are prepared, in order to get an agreement, to sell out Gibraltar and its interests, or, if they do get an agreement, whether it will be worth anything after we have left the EU, when we will no longer be able, within the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament, or through other measures, to protect the interests of Gibraltar, and when there will be a member state in the EU that has another agenda. Similar issues would apply elsewhere, but Gibraltar is a fundamental sticking point and problem in these negotiations. The Foreign Secretary and the British Government need to come clean and state publicly what their position will be.

We have heard reference to the state visit by the King of Spain but there was of course no reference to the state visit of President Trump. I draw attention to the early-day motion that my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) and I, and others, tabled on this issue. If the British Government are serious about being honest and open, they should say now whether the hand-holding is over, and whether President Trump will be welcomed here this year as was originally intended or his visit is put off indefinitely. The former Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), said that it should perhaps take place in 2020. I suggest that it would best take place after the presidential election in which Donald Trump’s successor has been elected, during the period in November to December before the inauguration of his successor.

Crispin Blunt rose—

Mike Gapes: In the interests of others, it is not fair that I take an intervention.

As other Members have said, there is a fundamental problem in the Government’s approach: our country will be poorer, weaker and less influential on the world stage if we leave the European Union. We have seen, in the past few days, a vote at the General Assembly of the United Nations relating to the Chagos islands and Mauritius where EU countries did not line up alongside the UK. That is pretty unprecedented. Usually, EU countries work collectively in the General Assembly to defend each other’s interests. That did not happen and we will see a lot more of that in the future. I pledge to fight this hard Brexit and I will do so throughout this Parliament.

8.20 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes).

It is an incredibly humbling experience to have been elected to this place. I hope that, however long or short my time here may be, I will be able to serve West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine with the same dedication and purpose as my predecessor, Stuart Donaldson, did for two years.

I am fully aware that I walk in august footsteps: Sir Robert Smith held the seat for 18 years; George Kynoch sat here and represented the equivalent seat of Kincardine and Deeside for five years; and, of course, the still much respected and fondly remembered Sir Alick Buchanan-Smith held Kincardine and Deeside and, before that, Angus North and Mearns from 1964 until his death in 1991. That was 27 years, and I am only on day 18.

Members will, I am sure, get fed up with my 12—yes, 12—Scottish Conservative colleagues insisting that their patch of God’s own country is the most beautiful in the entire UK. Although I do, of course, sympathise with them, it is quite clear that the most beautiful, unique, attractive and downright brilliant constituency in the entire country is West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine—from the Cairngorms National Park around Braemar, down through the Dee Valley and Royal Deeside, to Ballater, Aboyne and Banchory, skirting the edge of the granite city itself, taking in Blackburn, Westhill, the subsea capital of Europe, and down to the North sea coast at Portlethen and north Kincardine. There is also the picturesque, pastoral Donside, Corgarff, Strathdon, Alford and Kemnay. Stonehaven and the villages in Howe of the Mearns were made famous, of course, by Lewis Grassic Gibbon in what was the favourite novel of my grandfather, an English teacher, “Sunset Song”.

In the old rhyme, “the two peaks you can see from the sea, Clachnaben and Bennachie”, are both in West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine, although I should admit to having to share the latter with my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Colin Clark).

What other seat has such history? I could—but I will not, because time will not permit it—tell the gripping tale of how the Honours of Scotland were smuggled out of Dunnottar castle in a creel basket by a minister’s wife, to save them from the clutches of the marauding army of Oliver Cromwell; or of the romantic but ultimately doomed 1715 Jacobite rebellion, which began at Braemar with the raising of the standard of James VIII and III; or of Victoria, Albert, John Brown and how Deeside became Royal Deeside; or of the Monymusk reliquary, thought to be 1,300 years old and which held the bones of St Columba and was carried in front of the victorious Scottish army at Bannockburn. I could tell those tales, but I will not.

It would, of course, be entirely remiss of me to speak today without mentioning how I, in West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine, now have the immense honour of representing Balmoral. In fact, as Members from Scotland will be aware, the residence in the north-east of Scotland is now represented by a Conservative not only in this place, but in the Scottish Parliament by my friend and colleague Alexander Burnett. With Ruth Davidson herself representing Holyrood palace in Edinburgh, Her Majesty will, I am sure, be delighted to know that she now has three elected Conservative representatives on whom she can call. It is an honour to represent Balmoral, even when, if canvassing, it is an extremely long drive to walk up only to find that the resident is not on the electoral roll.

I have 33 seconds left, so I will canter through the rest of my speech. Today we continue to debate the Queen’s Speech, specifically how it relates to Brexit and foreign affairs. The speech last week stated that a Bill would be introduced to repeal the European Communities Act 1972 and provide certainty for individuals and businesses.

Last Thursday I attended the royal highland show in Ingliston. I met many farmers, including from West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine. In between lamenting how appallingly poor the Scottish National party has
been at managing the common agricultural policy system north of the border, they wanted to make one thing abundantly clear. What farmers and all in the agriculture sector require—what they need now more than anything else—is certainty and stability in our country and our economy, and a clear way ahead so that they can plan and grow their businesses, not just for the next five years, but for the next 10, 15 and 20 years.

What the farming sector and, indeed, this country do not need is further uncertainty in the shape of another referendum on Europe or another general election, and they certainly do not need another referendum on Scottish independence. Why not all come together, in the national interest of the United Kingdom, and support the Government this week? That is what my constituents need me to do, and that is what I will do.

8.24 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Diolch yn fawr iawn, Mr Dirprwy Lefarydd. I congratulate the hon. Members for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) and for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) on their maiden speeches.

This will obviously be one of dozens of debates on Brexit during this Parliament, and the brevity of the Queen’s Speech is evidence that the plethora of necessary Brexit legislation is already detracting from the day job of governing. It will also undoubtedly detract from our ability in this place to debate and address vital issues that will continue none the less to affect people’s lives, regardless of Brexit. I propose that the suggested Brexit legislation even fails to respect the interests of this House, the constitutional framework of our country and the concerns of real people, and it is on that that I will focus my comments.

As the Government have now acknowledged, they do not want to create even more uncertainty and risk derailing the Brexit negotiations further. They must respect all of the opinions represented in the House, from all of the UK’s nations. In the Queen’s Speech, the Government committed to working with devolved Administrations, as well as others, to build the widest possible consensus on the country’s future outside the European Union. For a decision of that magnitude, which affects almost every aspect of the way in which we live our lives and will affect generations to come, that process and approach seem eminently sensible. The four-nation approach is what Plaid Cymru has insisted on since the beginning.

I note, however, that there was not a single piece of proposed legislation in the two-year Queen’s Speech that specifically delivers for Wales. In actuality, the proposed Brexit legislation seeks to take power away from Wales, shredding our constitutional settlement. Pursuant to the Sewel convention, the UK Government have a duty to gain the consent of all the devolved Administrations before legislating on a matter that is already devolved. As powers are repatriated to Westminster from Brussels through the repeal Bill, those powers that sit within the framework of the National Assembly for Wales must be presented to the Welsh Assembly to be decided on. The democratic voice of Wales should not and will not be weakened by Westminster.

It is vital that the National Assembly for Wales is provided with the right to give or withhold its consent in relation to legislation that is so central to its constitutional position and to the future of our country. Wales has unique needs during the Brexit process and beyond. Our economy, agriculture, funding and public services are our own, and it must be up to us to decide how they are governed outside of the European Union. A real four-nation approach to our exit from the European Union means genuine input and tangible representation from the devolved nations.

I noted the Secretary of State’s commitment earlier to seek the consent of the national Parliaments of the UK on the repeal Bill, but I make it clear to him that Plaid Cymru will not support any legislation that hordes powers, taking them from our devolved areas and back to Westminster. Why not all come together, in the national interest of the United Kingdom, and support the Government this week? That is what my constituents need me to do, and that is what I will do.

8.28 pm

Nadhim Zahawi (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts).

I welcome the fact that most of the legislation in the Gracious Speech was devoted to equipping our country for its departure from the EU and to the forging of a new place for us in the world. I am proud that the Government are fully committed to delivering on the will of the British people, so that our laws may now be made in Westminster, Edinburgh, Belfast and Cardiff.

We can no longer doubt the instructions given to us by the electorate. The Secretary of State rightly spoke of the 52% who voted to leave the EU last June and the more than 85% who voted for Brexit parties at the election. There are, of course, lessons that the Government urgently need to learn from the outcome of the election, but one thing I hope we can all take away is a commonality of purpose on the part of all Members across the House who were elected to this place on a manifesto pledging to make Brexit a success. We must deliver on that because, with two successive mandates for leaving the EU in under a year, the damage that would be done to the reputation of elected politicians if we were seen to undermine the electorate’s wishes would be severe.

It is no secret that the current parliamentary arithmetic is not what I wanted to see in the wake of the general election, but the Conservatives are the largest party by a considerable margin. However much the Leader of the Opposition defied expectations on 8 June and however much he might preach this to the crowds at Glastonbury, he did not win and is in no position to form a Government. It falls to the Prime Minister and her team to take to the negotiating table and make Brexit a success.

Given the Parliament the people have chosen for us, I refer once again to the commonality of purpose I spoke of earlier. If we are to make Brexit work for all our citizens, whether they voted for the Conservatives, Labour or any other party, we need to show a united front in this House and give the Brexit team the backing they need. I am not saying at all that Members across the House should desist from offering the Government constructive criticism at this most vital of times, but a Parliament that offers opposition for opposition’s sake, rather than well intentioned advice is one that will undermine our position in the eyes of our interlocutors and harm the negotiation process.
[Nadhim Zahawi]

If Members will not take it from me, I invite them to listen to the comments made by the former EU commissioner and ardent remainer, Lord Hill, before the Foreign Affairs Committee in the last Parliament. He said that the best chance we have in these negotiations is if we show a united front and band together around the Prime Minister. So I put it to the House: do right hon. and hon. Members care more about opposing the Prime Minister and her team, whatever they do, than about pulling together to ensure there is a successful Brexit deal? For me, the priority will always be a successful Brexit, so I hope that as many colleagues as possible join me in refraining from undermining the negotiations in the hope of short-term political point scoring and get behind our team.

8.32 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me to give my maiden speech.

Being elected as the Member of Parliament for my home constituency of Bristol North West is deeply humbling. It is humbling for me personally, as a working-class kid from a council estate in Lawrence Weston in my constituency. To be able to speak here on behalf of my friends, my family, my community and, indeed, my country is a great honour.

Let me pay tribute to my predecessor, Charlotte Leslie. The Member of Parliament for seven years and a candidate for three further years, Charlotte’s decade of local leadership was held in warm regard by my constituents and by me. We thank Charlotte for her public service.

From the earliest evidence of human habitation in these British Isles on the shores of the River Avon near Shirehampton to the eighth-century monastery of Westbury-on-Trym, granted by King Offa of Mercia, to the Roman settlements at Sea Mills and Lawrence Weston, and the Domesday reference to the parish of Henbury, and now, so I am told, to the first ever Darren elected to this House of Commons, Bristol North West is an historic and fascinating constituency.

But the successes of my home and its people, from jobs at the port and advanced manufacturing, to research and development, to the professional services, rely on our trading relationship with the European Union. That is why my first priority during this Brexit Parliament is to fight for Britain’s membership of the European single market. Because in times of peace our first priority must be prosperity for all. That is why the politics of holding on to power for power’s sake, or political positioning to win internal ideological battles, must stop. We are all here to do what is right for the country. For if that is not the case, I do not know why we are here at all.

So I stand here humbled by my election, with a sense of urgency to tackle a hard Brexit but also with a sense of sadness—sadness because the world feels more fragile than it has in the past, with Britain seen as weak and uncertain in high-risk times, and with fast-paced technological change, shifting geopolitical power, young people frustrated by the country, old people increasingly left alone and public services allowed to slowly die by a thousand cuts.

Politics is hard work, but it is the only forum through which we can provide hope. Whether I am an MP for four months or four years, and whether my actions bring success or failure to my own political career, I will always put my constituents and my country first. In this mother of Parliaments, let us do all we can to show that a modern and just Britain can rise from the ashes of our current disarray. We are merely shepherds of the nation, standing on the shoulders of giants, tasked with leaving a country to our children that we can be proud of.

This Brexit Parliament will define the future of our country. Let us not self-harm and cause pain, but let us instead unite and act with sense, as well as with patriotism in our hearts, for a national renewal after the dark years of austerity, for the birth of a new British chapter that works for the many, not just the few, and for a new dawn for a new Britain. It is for us now to seize that opportunity and to avoid the risks of failure, but we can do it only by working together in this Brexit Parliament—leavers and remainers—in the national interest.

As Members, we all sit here thanks to our constituents engaging in the democratic process and putting their faith in us to represent them in this Chamber. Over the course of this Parliament, however long it might be, we will do our utmost to make our constituents’ voices heard, to help fight their battles and to provide reasoned and hopefully enlightening additions to these debates. However, when all is said and done, after our most impassioned efforts and earnest contributions, that may not be enough, and those same constituents who gave us this great privilege may opt to bestow it on someone else. That is right and proper; it is the democratic process working as intended.

I believe, with the Brexit negotiations occurring as we speak, that democracy is our greatest export. My admiration for the principles of democracy that the House upholds—representation, accountability and liberty—is what lies behind my support for our withdrawal from the EU. I am sure that all Members would support those principles and fiercely defend them, but where is the same vigour when it comes to the unelected bureaucrats in Brussels, to whom we have ceded more and more of our sovereignty with each passing year? These unrepresentative bodies are not in the habit of giving back powers once they have taken them, and as recent history has shown, the EU has strived and will continue to strive to become bigger, more centralised and more powerful.

As we begin the process of our withdrawal, it is vital we ensure that whatever deal arises, there is a clean cut from the shackles the EU has attempted to hold us in and that we take back ownership of our laws, leave the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice and remove the excessive bureaucracy that has been strangling business here. There has been an endless tide of regulation emanating from Brussels, and it should be no surprise that a one-size-fits-all approach to regulation does not work, as there are 28 different countries, all with differing needs and wants.
Now we have the time and opportunity to design policies tailored to our specific needs and remove rules that are holding Britain back. For example, the agriculture Bill will provide an amazing opportunity to develop our own legislative framework that will provide support for farmers who need it most, incentivise farmers to work in a way that further safeguards the environment, help to ensure the long-term sustainability of the food and farming sector and protect our important rural communities.

Leaving the customs union will create opportunities for relationships with global markets and for trade agreements to be reached. In doing that, it is important for us to ensure the long-term sustainability of the food and farming sector and protect our important rural communities.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): It is an absolute pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) and also three fantastic maiden speeches, which were powerful, lyrical and passionate, from my hon. Friends the Members for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) and for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), and the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie). It is a real honour to follow them all.

As the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) said, when it comes to Brexit, everything has changed. All of us in this place need to recognise that. That is why I greatly regret that the Gracious Speech did not rule out withdrawal without a deal, did not give a categorical guarantee on a parliamentary vote or, indeed, a role for our devolved Administrations, and did not set out transitional arrangements that would give some certainty and guidance to our businesses and all of us in this country. Instead, we get: “Pretty sure we’re going to achieve some sort of deal.” What sort of certainty is that for businesses and all those striving in our economy? The Gracious Speech does not set out proposals to remain in the customs union and the single market, which is what I fervently believe would be best for businesses and the people in my constituency.

Nor does the Gracious Speech set out our devolved Administrations, as the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) said, whether that is to do with their competences under the devolution settlement or with regard to funding the needs of our devolved Administrations. I spoke about this earlier today, but it seems remarkable that the Government can find £1.5 billion and possibly more for Northern Ireland in the DUP deal, yet we in Wales cannot get guarantees of what the funding for Wales will be after Brexit happens. There is great anger in Wales at the deal that has been done today.

The Gracious Speech does not provide categorical protections. We have heard all sorts of mixed answers today about the situation of EU nationals and UK citizens abroad. This matters to the people of Cardiff South and Penarth, particularly all the young people who voted in the recent general election. What will their opportunities be in the future? What will the future be for businesses in my local community? Where will we get the fairer funding deal for Wales? Will we keep the crucial labour and environmental protections? Will the rights of EU citizens in my constituency—a very diverse constituency—be respected or will those individuals be merely pawns in this game? I welcome all efforts and the cross-party co-operation of those across the House who seek to put this minority Government on the spot on those issues over the weeks and months to come. Everything has indeed changed.

What matters abroad matters for all the people in Cardiff South and Penarth and all of us in this country. I have said it in this House before, and it is not just about Brexit and the future nature of our trading relationships. It is about the family links and concerns of the many diverse communities in my constituency; the care that many show locally for those fleeing conflict and persecution and for the human rights of others around the world; the care that they show on global issues such as climate change; their opposition to the threats posed by extremism and the undermining of our values; and, indeed, the concerns of the many locally with family members who are serving or have served in our armed forces bravely around the world, in many different contexts.

That is why the issues that I intend to raise in this Parliament and in the debate about foreign affairs include the situation in Yemen and our continued sale of arms to Saudi Arabia, helping to fuel that conflict; the situation in Syria, where we must continue the fight against the barbarous Daesh operatives, but also seek to protect civilians; and the situation of Somaliland, a country that has many connections with my constituency. Will Britain and other countries finally recognise Somaliland and also provide crucial support for the upcoming elections later this year? Will we continue our spending commitment of 0.7% on international development? Will we stand up for our principles on climate change and oppose those such as President Trump who would undermine them? Will we do right by our armed forces and support a strong Army, with the right levels of recruitment, the right deal and the right armed forces covenant, which it so fully deserves?

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): It is a privilege to be able to make my maiden speech and to follow the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), who spoke with his usual eloquence.

I am honoured and humbled to have been elected by the residents of Mansfield as the constituency’s first ever Conservative Member of Parliament. The seat has been held by Labour since 1923, so that is a huge vote of confidence and faith that I must strive to repay in full over the coming years.

In this my first speech, I must pay tribute to my predecessor, Sir Alan Meale. Sir Alan was the MP for Mansfield for 30 years. That means that he was its MP for longer than I have been alive, which, in itself, is some achievement. As his knighthood would suggest, over those years Sir Alan contributed to many causes, including the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, and also played a role in the Blair and Brown Governments. Between them, the last three MPs for Mansfield represented the area for a total of 76 years, and I can only hope to be able to emulate their longevity.
Debate on the Address

26 JUNE 2017

Debate on the Address

[Ben Bradley]

I am sure that I am not the only new Member sitting on these green Benches to have wondered at some point over the last few weeks how on earth I have ended up here. Looking back, I have realised that after working as a landscape gardener and as a recruiter, I actually found my calling and inspiration—as so many people surely do—in the bin. I was so frustrated by the local council’s failure to empty my household bins for a full month because of just one day of snow that I simply had to act. I could not rest until there was action on the issue, so I stood for the council myself. I was duly elected and have been banging on about household waste management ever since to the limited audience who will listen.

Mansfield is an area that has been sustained over centuries by great industry. The first cotton mills and frame-knitting factories sprang up many centuries ago, and many of the landmarks that exist today are named after them. There is the hospital, King’s Mill, the football stadium, Field Mill—although it is currently known by a sponsor’s name—and many other examples. Legend tells that, in the 12th century, King Henry II got lost in the woods while hunting in Sherwood Forest and found his way to one of the local mills. The miller and his family thought that he looked a clean and decent kind of chap, and offered him a bed for the night. In the morning, when the King finally announced himself, the family dropped to their knees to beg forgiveness for being so familiar. He promptly knighted the miller, there and then. The Sir John Cockle pub now stands as a landmark to that event, and was a favourite haunt of Milton. If I may, I will end where I began—with the election campaign. Of all the many factors that were prevalent on the doorstep during the campaign, the one about which I heard most often was Brexit, and that was why I chose to make my maiden speech during today’s debate. My constituency voted 72% in favour of leaving the EU, and in favour of Britain setting its own course in the years to come. What has been made very clear is that residents of Mansfield simply will not accept any deal that does not involve taking back control of our borders. That is a red line that must not be crossed. It is not about individuals who usually contribute to our society; it is about the sheer weight of numbers, which affects our local services and jobs.

The other key message from the campaign has been that no one has been speaking up for Mansfield down here in Westminster, and banging on the doors of Ministers looking for support. My pledge during the election was to shout up loud and shout up often, and I intend to fulfil that promise.

8.48 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I congratulate all those who have used today’s debate to make their maiden speeches. It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley), and I look forward to finding out even more about how the bin collections are going in the months to come.

There has been much discussion about the eight Brexit Bills in the Queen’s Speech, but a Bill on environmental protection is conspicuous by its absence. Given the significance of the EU’s role in environmental protection, I think that that is a particularly grave omission on the part of the Government’s Brexit team. Effective and robust environmental protection relies on well-funded and well-staffed institutions to monitor compliance with environmental law. It also needs powerful regulators and courts to ensure that breaches of the law are challenged and the law is enforced. For the past 40 years, that system of enforcement has been grounded in the legislation and institutions of the EU, notably the Commission and the European Court of Justice. That structure has meant that the UK Government can be held to account for their actions, and there are countless examples of that taking place. For example, since 1981, the Commission has received more than 200 complaints about the UK under the nature directives, thus protecting wildlife and habitats across the country. Let us be under no illusion: it is precisely the threat of fines from Brussels that has finally concentrated the Government’s mind on acting on issues such as air pollution. Domestic legislation simply did not go far enough to do that.

It is therefore rather astonishing that, beyond a few offhand comments from Ministers, we currently have no details of how this important system of checks and safeguards for the natural environment will be replaced. We do not yet know if the Government intend to rely on existing regulators to fill the gap, but if they do, let us remember that those agencies have seen their budgets slashed over recent years and their capacity to hold the Government to account has been greatly diminished.

When it comes to the repeal Bill, let us be clear that the process will be a lot more complicated than simply cutting and pasting a whole set of EU legislation into UK law. When the former Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs appeared before the Environmental Audit Committee, she acknowledged that fully one third of environmental legislation would be extremely hard to transfer in that way. Moreover, once that material is transferred, it will become effectively unenforceable—
so-called zombie legislation—due to an absence of monitoring and enforcement. Without the Commission and the European Court of Justice, we will not have the necessary legal architecture. People say, “Don’t worry, we’ll rely on the UK courts instead,” but we must recognise that the threshold to access UK courts for judicial review is very high and involves considerable expense. That system will simply not be as effective as the current one.

Let us also be honest about the fact that a small but vocal part of the right wing sees Brexit as an opportunity for mass deregulation. A fight is coming, and it feels particularly necessary given that the new Environment Secretary has previously suggested that we scrap vital EU environmental protections and described one of the centrepieces of that legislation, the habitats directive, as “absurd”. The right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) also has a track record that involves voting against measures to halt climate change and attempting to wipe the subject from the education curriculum. I hope I will be forgiven for not having much confidence that the environment will be safe in his hands post-Brexit.

That is why the amendment that I have tabled to the address asks for an environmental protection Act. Such an Act would cut through the political ideology on the right and the left that all too often sidelines the environment, and would instead require a long-term evidence-based approach. Crucially, it would do so via primary legislation, thereby guaranteeing a proper degree of parliamentary scrutiny and oversight. No one voted on 23 June last year to scrap our environmental legislation, yet there is a real risk of that happening unless we enshrine it in a new environmental protection Act.

8.52 pm

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) and the four superb maiden speeches that we have heard today. I am quite pleased with the progress that the Government are making in the transition from being part of the European Union to leaving it. First, they held the referendum. Then, seeing the right result, they committed to delivering on Brexit. They triggered article 50 and are now setting a clear, strong agenda in the Queen’s Speech.

It is important to reflect that when we had the referendum a year ago, the result was that we should leave the European Union. There was no lack of certainty in that, yet to hear people today, we might almost think that the general election had cancelled out the referendum result. We still need to leave the European Union, yet elements of the political establishment seem to be doing whatever they can, in a kind of war of attrition, to undermine the decision of the British people. It is a deliberate redefining of what Brexit means, and we have seen the invention of the notions of hard and soft Brexit, which never existed before the referendum. There is no such thing.

This reminds me of when the British people voted in the referendum in 1975 to remain in the European Economic Community, which people understood to mean the common market. Since then, year in and year out, more power has been accrued to what is now the European Union, which seems to be on the verge of becoming a united states of Europe. Just as the European Union’s identity and nature have changed profoundly, the nature of the argument and debate in Britain has also changed, but the decision of the British people has not changed: we should still be leaving the European Union.

However, some people have worked to undermine the views and opinions clearly expressed by the British people. One argument is that people did not know what they were voting for, as though the British people are ignorant. Some people say that it was all about immigration, but that was just one of several different reasons. Despite that, there has been a clear inference that anyone who voted leave is a racist and that people were unable to distinguish between and understand the arguments. So much of why people voted was based on their lived experiences over the past 40 years, not the few weeks of the campaign.

The Queen’s Speech builds on the positive attitude and outlook of the leave campaign. We have a positive vision for the future of the country. We want to go out to the world. We want a fantastic relationship with the European Union, and there is no reason why we cannot have that. However, the continuity remain campaign seems to be a rather depressing place, full of depressing arguments. Other than dumping the Members of the European Parliament, it seems as though it wants no change whatsoever—remain in all but name.

I would like some clarification on the Horizon 2020 programme. We are still part of it and will be part of it until the end, but we need clarification on the successor programme. The British people voted to take back control of our laws, our borders and our money, and that is what we have to deliver.

8.56 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is a great privilege to stand here on behalf of Plymouth. Plymouth is my home. It is where I was born and it is where I live. I stand here mindful of the political greats who have contributed not only in this Chamber, but to my city. Nancy Astor, the first woman to take her seat in this Chamber, represented Plymouth, Sutton from 1919 to 1945. Michael Foot represented Plymouth, Devonport from 1945 to 1955, rebuilding our city after its devastation in the second world war. Then there was David Owen and his defection, and Alan Clark and his diaries. More recently there was David Jamieson, Linda Gilroy and Alison Seabeck, to whom my city owes a great deal. I have a lot to live up to, but luckily there is a lot to do to get Plymouth its fair share.

I want to thank Oliver Colvile, my predecessor, for his service. Mr Colvile represented Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport for seven years. In that time, he always conducted himself well, with decorum and generosity, describing himself as “jolly Olly”. I am sure that the whole House will join me in wishing Mr Colvile a speedy recovery from his time in hospital since the general election. Many hon. Members will know of his passion for hedgehogs. I hope that someone will pick up the protection of those little prickly creatures, but that will not be me. There was, however, one campaign on which he and I co-operated and worked together. In 2014, we joined forces to campaign for one of the new Type 26 frigates to be named after Britain’s ocean city—an HMS Plymouth—and I intend to continue that campaign.
As the son of a Devonport-based submariner, I grew up knowing how important strong defence is to my city and our country. Plymouth is home to Devonport, the largest naval base in western Europe, the nation's amphibious assault ships, the submarine and surface fleet re-fit facilities at Devonport dockyard, and the Royal Citadel and the historic home of the Royal Marines at Stonehouse barracks—two bases that are facing closure.

With the aircraft carriers coming on stream soon and the enormous demand that they will place on the Royal Navy, with regard to both personnel and escort frigates, it is time for us to think again about how many frigates our nation needs. Brexit and international uncertainty mean that we need a larger Royal Navy. Orders for Type 26 frigates have been cut from 13 to eight, and the new Type 31 frigate is still early in the design stage. The 1997 strategic defence review called for 32 frigates and destroyers. We now have just 19, so I want the Government to increase orders not only for frigates, but for offshore patrol craft. More frigates, modularly constructed and supporting marine engineering and shipbuilding businesses, large and small, in Plymouth, across the south-west and across our nation, are exactly what our country needs.

During the Prime Minister's statement on Grenfell Tower last week, I received the news that tests showed that the cladding on the Mount Wise tower blocks was combustible. I immediately called for the unsafe cladding to be removed, and that will happen. There can be no compromise on safety. I am pleased that we now have cross-party support for that in Plymouth, with the hon. Members for South West Devon (Mr Streeter) and for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) joining me in asking the Government to pay for that emergency work.

Plymouth is one of the UK's great cities, a grand bastion of parliamentary democracy from the Sabbath Day fight during the English civil war on Freedom Fields to the modern day. Plymouth has seen the pilgrim fathers setting sail on the Mayflower, a fleet setting sail to defeat the Spanish armada and Captain Cook setting sail on his voyages, and there are many more examples. As a base for marine research and expertise, we are second to none. That is why I want not only a ministry of maritime affairs to be set up in Plymouth after Brexit, but Plymouth Sound to be designated as the country's first national marine park.

Plymouth's great contribution has not always been matched by us receiving our fair share. The poor deal of maritime affairs to be set up in Plymouth after that period, we have seen huge changes. In some ways, the agricultural industry has been supercharged by the huge number of new migrant workers and by changes in industrial practice, but we have also seen huge changes to the town of Boston, in particular, and to Lincolnshire as a whole.

Those changes did not come with the democratic consent of my constituents, and the changes placed huge pressure on the public services in my constituency. It is a testament to all previous Members of this House that we did not even have an argument about the benefits of being in the European Union, never mind win it. Now, the fact is that if we were to seek to vote down this Gracious Speech, or indeed to undermine much of its content, we would be undermining democracy itself. I do not say that in a bid to ask people not to oppose it, but, overall, the fact that we are leaving the European Union was not only in the manifestos of both major parties but is very much on the minds of my constituents. Seventy-six per cent. of those constituents turned out to vote in the referendum, with 76% of them voting to leave. We must respect that result as we look to the future.

With that in mind, I pose two questions. First, what will the future of our country outside the European Union mean for the farming industry? That is closely linked to my second question, which is, perhaps unsurprisingly, on what many of my constituents tell me was the No. 1 issue when they voted to leave the European Union: immigration.

I plead that we acknowledge that the process we are going through will, in part, supercharge an ongoing process of mechanisation. I believe that the changing availability of labour will see more and more farmers in my constituency invest in more and more machines that enable them to be infinitely more productive and require less labour, but the fact is that they will require significant amounts of labour in the future. Before being a member of an expanded European Union, we had a successful seasonal agricultural workers scheme, and I hope that that work permit scheme can, in some form, be quickly reconstituted to provide stability for the agricultural industry, just as today we heard the Prime Minister seek to provide stability for the many of my constituents who came from eastern Europe to make their home in Boston and Skegness. I hope that today they find themselves in a better position than they were in earlier this week.

9.5 pm

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I congratulate the five Members who have made their maiden speeches in this debate: the hon. Members for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin), for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) and for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie). They spoke with good humour, giving us an insight into everything from the history of their constituencies to the best tourist spots and pubs. I am sure we will agree on some issues and not on others.

One issue on which I particularly agree with the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine is the need not to have a second independence referendum. Although I will disagree with him on many issues in this place, I welcome the fact that the election result in

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[Luke Pollard]
Scotland means a greater diversity of voices in this place; it is a truer reflection of the diversity of views in Scotland.

It is two years and three months to the day since my last contribution in this House, and I am delighted to be back. In the intervening period, John Nicolson spoke from the Scottish National party Benches for East Dunbartonshire, and although we had profound disagreements on Scotland’s place in the UK, I pay tribute to his work, particularly on equality issues—and LGBT rights especially. I know he would share my concerns, as many of my constituents do, about the Conservatives’ deal today with the DUP and, in particular, what it might mean for LGBT rights, climate change and women’s rights.

At the start of the general election campaign, Brenda from Bristol struck a chord with many when she said that there was “too much politics”. If she had lived in Bearsden or Bishopbriggs, she might have had even more cause to say that, because in the past three years there have been no fewer than seven elections or referendums in Scotland. However, in East Dunbartonshire we still have great enthusiasm; in 2014, we had the spectacular turnout of 91%, with 61% of people voting to keep Scotland in the UK, and two years later 71% voted to remain in the EU. East Dunbartonshire wants a Scotland in the UK and the UK in the EU, and that is what I will advocate as its representative in this House.

Brexit will, of course, be the overarching issue for this Parliament. From my time in government, I can well imagine the treacle of Brexit that civil servants and Ministers will be wading through. There is a real risk—indeed, it is probably a near certainty—that Brexit will divert attention from other important issues. The Government’s response to this election result is very disappointing; there is no mandate for that extreme vision of Brexit. Instead of looking at this balanced Parliament and reaching out in a spirit of compromise to try to find genuine cross-party agreement and consensus, the Government are sticking rigidly to their mantra of “No membership of the single market or the customs union.”

Recasting our relationship with the EU throws into sharp relief our relationship with the rest of the world. It is a volatile world and we will discuss in detail the global developments, risks and threats. I do not share the rose-tinted view of the Brexiteers that it is all going to be jolly wonderful, because on the cross-cutting issues of human rights, democracy and climate change it is often our EU partners who most closely share our values. This is the worst possible time to be loosening ties with our European neighbours, as we have a White House so at odds with UK interest. We must not roll out the red carpet for President Trump, a man who demonises a whole religion, shows disrespect for others in the words he uses about women and poses a real danger to the world by withdrawing the United States from the Paris climate change agreement. I urge the Government to think again and to look for genuine cross-party consensus as they approach the difficult issues we face.

9.9 pm

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): May I say what a pleasure it is to follow the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) and how lucky we have all been to have listened to so many outstanding maiden speeches, from Members from all parts of the House? They have all described their constituencies with passion and poetry.

I am also honoured to be returned to this House to represent the people of Witney and west Oxfordshire on whose behalf I pledge to vote in the time ahead. There is a great deal to mention in the Gracious Speech, but, sadly, time will not permit that today. I wish to concentrate on one aspect of the Brexit negotiations. It is a fact of the election that 85% of the people who voted supported parties, which, in their manifestos at least, support withdrawal from the single market and the customs union.

In the brief time available to me, I would like to focus on the important matter of the customs union. It is important to remember how the European Union, which should be a beacon for free trade, operates as a protectionist bloc, and it is that that troubles me the most because I believe in free trade. I do so because of the power that it has for our economy and because of the help that it gives to the poor across the entire world. It is for that reason that we must have independent control of our own trade policy. In that way, we can focus on the great and emerging markets of the world.

Six members of the G20 have already expressed an interest in having talks and a possible free trade agreement with us in the future. They are: Australia, South Korea, India, Brazil, China and our greatest single trading partner, the United States. It is a fact that British trade has been moving away from the European Union for many years to the extent that we now have a trade deficit, particularly with regard to services. Markets worth only $4.8 trillion have been opened up to the UK by the European Union, but $35 trillion have been opened up to Switzerland in free trade arrangements. These smaller groups tend to be more favourable to services, and, as we all know, services are a very important part of the UK economy. We are talking about only 68% with the European Union, but up to 90% with these smaller bespoke agreements.

Free trade is not just about the interests of finance—important though that is to the UK economy—but about helping the poorest around the world and in our society, too. It is anticipated that free trade, which is the greatest tool for reducing poverty that history has ever seen, could reduce the annual food bill for people in the United Kingdom by up to £361 per household. That is a prize worth considering. It may be that there is no need to reinvent the wheel. I urge the Government to look around the country and the world to see whether there are existing arrangements that we may be able to accede to. It may well be that the North American Free Trade Agreement or the Trans-Pacific Partnership would welcome a dynamic, outward-looking free trading Britain, and we should seize those opportunities if they are out there.

Although I am very aware of the challenges that exist—in west Oxfordshire, there are challenges with regards to agriculture, defence and finances—I wish to emphasise the positives, such as US components, and the fact that we can take the brightest and the best from all over the world and that we can replace the common agricultural policy with a policy that works for us to improve the environment. There is everything to play for. I urge the House to be positive and support the Queen’s Speech.
9.13 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I wish to start with a statement that will cause anger and disbelief on the Conservative Benches:

“Parliament has remained sovereign throughout our membership of the EU.”

Those are not my words; they are the words of the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union. In other words, he has admitted that the notion of taking back sovereignty to this Parliament is nonsense. Some of us have a much more democratic tradition. We believe that the sovereignty that is exercised in this place belongs not in this place, but in the people who have sent us to represent them here. For me, that principle of the sovereignty of the people is a red line, on which neither I nor the SNP will everudge an inch. That is why 62% of our sovereign citizens say that they want to stay in the European Union. It is not about being defeatist, remoaner or continuity remain, but about respecting the will of the sovereign people. If the nearest we can come to that is to retain our membership of the single market and customs union, then that is what we will do. If that has to mean Scotland looking for a differentiated deal, as has already been guaranteed to Northern Ireland, or having to ask for a special deal as well, that is what we will ask for.

I have one ask for when the Government sum up: will they tell us exactly what is going to happen now with the Joint Ministerial Committee, because there seem to have been two JMCs operating since the Brexit vote? The Government have attended a JMC that was wonderful and so constructive—everybody had a great time and thought that it was very helpful—but the Governments of the devolved nations have attended a JMC that was a total and utter waste of time, for they went and spent 45 minutes being told that the UK Government had decided, and if they were very lucky they might get the chance to decide whether they wanted milk and sugar in their tea or coffee. That is the extent of the consultation we have had so far. It is not enough.

I was delighted to hear the hon. Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) insist in her maiden speech that the Government of Wales must be part of these negotiations. I look forward to the shadow Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union. In conclusion, we in Bristol West want the Government to no more than 1°. We need carbon dioxide emissions to peak before 2020 and fall to zero by 2070 by weaning ourselves off fossil fuels, and we need to press our international ally across the Atlantic also to honour its commitment.

An unprecedented 63.5 million people are forcibly displaced worldwide due to conflict. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on refugees, I spend a lot of time on refugee policy: only a fraction of refugees ever come to the UK and the global system is broken because, designed for cold war circumstances, it leaves refugees either trapped in their own country or stuck for years in camps in neighbouring countries, without work. Small wonder that some will, out of desperation, risk very dangerous journeys to other shores.

This is also economically and geopolitically dangerous. If refugees are not allowed to work, they cannot provide for themselves. They also lose skills and experience, which will be necessary to rebuild their own countries post-conflict to help return them to stability.

In Uganda, refugees are allowed and supported to work or to start businesses. We have much to learn from other countries about responding to refugees, and we also have much to contribute.

The Secretary of State referred earlier to doing trade deals for the benefit of one country only. On behalf of the people of Bristol West, I urge him and his colleagues to think more widely and about least-developed countries in particular, and to integrate environmental protection, workers’ rights, human rights and the impact on developing countries into all trade deals.

In conclusion, we in Bristol West want the Government not to become so distracted by Brexit that they neglect vital action on climate change, we want reform of the international refugee system, and we want trade agreements to contribute to, not detract from, social justice, because this beautiful planet and everything and everyone on it, from humans to microbes, cannot wait.
Mr Speaker: I was about to call Ian Paisley, but I cannot see him in the Chamber. We are impoverished by that. In the meantime we will hear from Kate Green.

9.19 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker; the Chamber’s loss is my gain. Before turning to the main topic of the debate, may I say what a pleasure it has been to listen to the maiden speeches of so many hon. Members? I congratulate them on their lucid and articulate speeches and look forward to hearing many more such contributions in the months and years ahead.

I want to take a moment or two to touch on another aspect of the Gracious Speech. The issue of schools funding is particularly important to my constituents. Trafford has traditionally been an underfunded authority, so I initially welcomed the Government’s intention to develop a new funding formula. But the formula brought forward towards the end of the previous Parliament has been holed below the water line by the lack of overall funding in the pot. Trafford stands to see real-terms budget cuts of over £14 billion by 2019-20, which will mean the loss of teaching and support jobs. I say to Ministers that rearranging the deckchairs by treating the deprivation funding as in some way double funding simply will not do, because it will put schools in my constituency with very disadvantaged intakes under very significant pressure. We need to ensure that there is enough money in the total pot and then have a new funding formula that meets the needs of all pupils in all schools, especially those who are disadvantaged.

Let me turn now to the main topic of the debate, which is Brexit and foreign affairs. Over the weekend I asked my constituents what they thought the main focus of this Parliament should be. Overwhelmingly, those I spoke to were clear that the focus should be getting the best Brexit deal we can. I am not surprised that they considered that to be of such significance. After all, our best Brexit deal the House thinks are important—and I think we have heard tonight that by and large we do—why not just talk on board the fact that we already have structures in place within the European Union that would deliver them? I hope that we will not knock off the table ideas that can continue to work or that can be made to work simply out of a misreading of the referendum result or a misreading of what is in the interests of the Conservative party but not those of the country as a whole.

Finally, I was pleased to hear that legislative consent will be sought from the devolved Administrations.

9.24 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I add my congratulations to Members who have made their maiden speeches this evening—particularly those who have hung around and listened to the rest of the debate.

I once drove through a snowstorm to get from Darlington to Jedburgh. I clearly remember driving up Carter Bar, which leads over the border between Scotland and England. When I reached the top, I was chuffed to bits: I had manoeuvred a rear-wheel-drive automatic through difficult terrain in a snowstorm. Then the reality dawned on me: the second half of the journey would be the hard bit. A steep decline, twisting and turning with no road markings and every chance of running off the road—that is what lay ahead, and that is my Brexit allegory.

The Prime Minister and her cohorts, blinded with power, have marched us to the top of the hill, only to discover that in this case it is a cliff edge. Over time, plenty of people have negotiated difficult journeys but I fear that the Brexit journey that lies ahead will be particularly dangerous. Those leading it will not admit just how hard it is going to be. They should be seeking out every pitfall and identifying all the hazards—instead, we are being fed a diatribe of jingoistic clichés.

The situation was a mess before the Prime Minister called a general election but now her selfish actions have complicated matters beyond anyone’s wildest nightmare. No one will form a coalition with this precarious Government; the Democratic Unionists have chosen to provide their votes when it suits them, supplying a billion pounds’ worth of tissues when it all goes wrong.

This brave new world seems to be based on an, “We did it before and we can do it again” empire mentality, flag waving and patriotism. As we turn our backs on the European Union and seek to create new trade agreements, we will require diplomacy and negotiating skills, which so far have been conspicuously absent in the whole Brexit mess. That is one reason why I have been delighted to hear that politicians across the EU have in increasing numbers been prepared to add their support for Scotland to remain in the EU and the single market. While the UK was committed to the EU, those same voices remained silent: they respected the UK and its position. However, by serving article 50 to leave the EU, the UK has turned its back on the EU and the single market. As a result, the loyalty of previous partners has been lost.

Where is Scotland’s influence in these negotiations? While Scotland makes up only 8.6% of the population of the UK, the Scottish fishing zone represents over 60% of UK waters—the fourth largest sea area in EU core waters. Scotland has 32% of the UK’s land area. We provide 40% of wind, wave and solar energy production; 47% of the open cast coal production; 62% of the
timber production; 65% of the natural gas production; 81% of the untapped coal reserves; 92% of the hydro-electric power; 96.5% of the crude oil production; and 100% of the Scotch whisky industry. Yet we have no voice. If these negotiations are to have any credibility, the Scottish Government must have a place at the negotiations. Anything less is a flagrant disregard of the democratic standings of the United Kingdom.

9.27 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): When the Foreign Secretary makes his concluding remarks, I hope he will make it clear that the discussions are not going to be contingent on what the devolved Assemblies do. He will certainly take their view, but they will have no veto over the will of the British people across the entirety of the United Kingdom.

A lot has been said in this debate about the relationship between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and in the next three or so minutes I want to focus my comments on the Republic. It stands to lose most out of Brexit—not Northern Ireland, as some in this debate have tried to imply. I agree that we must have a frictionless border, which is good for Northern Irish trade, but the border must not become the weak link in security terms. We must not sacrifice the security of any of the peoples of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—or, for that matter, the people of the Republic of Ireland—for an open border that does not protect our people.

Last week, I informed the House that security analysts had made it clear that levels of radicalisation are worryingly high in the Republic of Ireland. If that is the case, let us face up to it and address the matter. The five issues that President Tusk and Monsieur Barnier wish to agree with Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland—a unique relationship between our two countries; the avoidance of a hard border; keeping the common travel area in place; no harm to the Republic’s trading relationship with the United Kingdom; and the maintenance of the peace between our two nations—are almost exclusively within the gift of Monsieur Barnier. The House should recognise that. He can do more to ensure that those five things are maintained than anyone else in the discussion. I urge the Republic of Ireland, therefore, to take the same position as the United Kingdom because it cannot afford to remain uncritical of the EU. The EU should not blackmail the Republic of Ireland, as it should not be allowed to blackmail Northern Ireland.

The director of social policy at Trinity College Dublin said in a letter to the leader of the Democratic Unionist party:

“If the Government of the Republic of Ireland is so foolish as to seek to stay in the EU when Northern Ireland and Britain leave, it is the Republic, not the UK, that will be putting the Common Anglo-Irish Travel and Trade Area at risk.”

Those are very important comments because the onus is actually on the Republic of Ireland to address its problems with Europe. It is not for Northern Ireland to address those issues. Since 2014, the Republic of Ireland has been paying €1.7 billion to be a member of the EU.

Andrew Rosindell: Does the hon. Gentleman also agree that there is another border between the European Union and the UK, and that is between Gibraltar and Spain? What is his view on that one?

Ian Paisley: The hon. Gentleman knows that I fully support Gibraltar, but I do not have time to deal with that issue at this point.

Post-Brexit, the Republic of Ireland will be required to pay even more to make up for the UK leaving the EU. All the trading issues between the Republic of Ireland and the UK show very clearly that the Republic of Ireland can do far better by leaving the EU along with the UK. I hope that the Republic of Ireland gets that message loud and clear, and recognises that it can do more for our common citizenship by leaving the EU along with us.

9.31 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): It has been a pleasure this afternoon and this evening to take part in a debate with such excellent maiden speeches from both sides of the House.

A year ago, the country voted very narrowly to leave the EU. The Prime Minister has spent the past year trying to articulate her version of Brexit. In calling the election, she sought very explicitly to strengthen her mandate to deliver a hard Brexit. The country looked at the Prime Minister’s version of Brexit and did not support it. On her own terms, she failed, and she has no mandate to negotiate the hard Brexit for which she sought support. My constituents voted overwhelmingly to remain in the EU, and I stood in the general election on a firm promise that, if re-elected, I would continue to be a strong voice for their firmly pro-remain views. I am pleased that my constituents gave me that mandate. More than 50% of the total registered electorate returned me to this House, and I stand firm in my commitment to represent them and to speak up for a continued relationship with the EU that reflects our values of tolerance, diversity and internationalism, protects our jobs, public services, environment and rights at work, and enables the UK to play the fullest possible role in working for peace and security in an increasingly unstable world.

Although the country voted to leave the EU, not a single person in the UK voted to become poorer, to damage our public services or to live in a country that is less fair or less safe. Yet we are seeing those impacts in the fall in the value of the pound, increasing inflation and the calamitous drop in the number of EU nationals applying to fill nursing vacancies in our NHS or study at UK universities. Brexit is harming the UK. It is the duty and responsibility of this House to scrutinise the Government’s approach to it and to call a halt to any aspects of the process that will result in material damage to our country.

I have some clear questions for the Government. Will they accept that leaving the single market and the customs union are not inevitable consequences of leaving the EU, and put them back on the negotiating table? The single market and the customs union are vital for British jobs and businesses because they provide tariff-free access to the largest international market for our goods and services. They are also important, however, because they are based on shared values and are governed by a framework of rules that create not only the largest, but the fairest, international market. They provide a basis for trade that ensures protection for workers in relation to employment rights and health and safety at work, and that ensures protection for our environment.
Will the Government provide assurances that, in seeking to negotiate additional trade agreements with other economic communities, they will place environmental protection, employment rights, and health and safety centre stage, or will they sacrifice our high standards in a race to the bottom to enable the UK to compete in markets where costs are lower because key protections are not in place?

Finally, the Prime Minister made it clear today that EU nationals living in the UK are still pawns in the Government’s negotiating strategy. The Government should make an unconditional commitment to EU nationals, who make a vital contribution to our economy and our communities. Even if the Prime Minister is able to secure a deal along the lines she has set out today, it is still not clear on what basis the EU nationals we urgently need to work in our economy and public services will be able to come to the UK in the future. I call on the Government today to urgently set out a positive and welcoming approach to immigration and to explain how the key workforce needs of the UK—of our NHS, construction industry, agriculture and scientific research—can continue to be met in the future.

9.35 pm

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): May I start by saying how delighted I am that the Foreign Secretary is actually taking part in this debate on foreign policy? During the election, I turned up to a number of foreign policy debates—one at the Royal United Services Institute, one at Radio 4 and another at Sky—and he was nowhere to be seen. Chatham House, Channel 4 and “Newsnight” had to cancel their debates because he refused to take part. However, I saw him having regular debates—indeed, wrestling matches—on television with my good friend the shadow Communities Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), and I have to admit that I felt what can only be described as a pang of jealousy, because I thought to myself, “When is Boris going to try and wrestle me?” But I am very glad that he is involved in the debate today.

It is also good to see so many new Members present for this important debate. We have had some excellent contributions from those making their maiden speeches. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) spoke with great eloquence about the Brexit Parliament. I have always believed that this House could do with more lawyers—particularly those from council estates—and he has clearly shown why.

My new hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) delivered a speech of great passion, talking about the importance of frigates to our national defence, and demonstrating his pride in his home town. I think the people of Plymouth will be equally proud to count him among their MPs.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorran) showed what a powerful voice she will be in this House, not just for her constituents, but particularly for the heartbroken and, as she said, terrified Tesco workers who have lost their jobs. She also spoke on behalf of citizens of the whole world when she dealt with the reality of climate change—a theme I will return to in my speech.

We also had maiden speeches from the hon. Members for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), who gave a confident and entertaining performance, and for Mansfield (Ben Bradley), who told us about his passion for bins. In my current spirit of generosity, may I also—I never thought I would hear myself say this about a Liberal Democrat—welcome the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) back to this place?

I congratulate all the new Members. I only wish that their maiden speeches had been made debating a Queen’s Speech that was truly worthy of its name. Let us be honest: this was not one. The Prime Minister promised us a Government that would tackle the big issues facing Britain; instead, we got a Queen’s Speech that ducked every one of them. It is timid on domestic policy. It is vacuous on foreign policy. And on Brexit, we have just a bunch of Bills whose titles we now know, but whose contents remain a mystery.

However, I do want to praise the Foreign Secretary, because at least he was the only member of the Cabinet who had the foresight to put absolutely no policies in his section of the manifesto, so he was not in the embarrassing position of having to abandon them later in the Queen’s Speech. Indeed, in the 2,285 words in the Tory manifesto devoted to “Global Britain” in an “Uncertain World”, only one nation was actually mentioned by name, and that, of course, was Donald Trump’s United States. Russia? Korea? China? Not a word. Iran? Iraq? Afghanistan? Yemen? Syria? Daesh? None of them mentioned.

I hope Conservative Members realise how unprecedented that is. This was only the second Tory manifesto since the Yom Kippur war not even to mention the middle east. In the same sections of the 2015 Tory manifesto, separate policies were set out on 23 different countries. Now the Government are down to just one. The question is why. Why is the Tory manifesto and this Tory Queen’s Speech such a blank space with regard to foreign policy? The answer, of course, is clear: their sole foreign policy ambition is to stay in lockstep with Donald Trump, whatever hill he chooses to march us up next. That means we are left with a Government who no longer know their own mind on foreign policy because they are beholden to a President who keeps changing his.

Nowhere was this more pathetically exposed than on the Paris agreement on climate change. In November, two weeks after Donald Trump’s election, I stood at this Dispatch Box and urged the Foreign Secretary to make Paris the first priority in talks with him. What did he say in response? He said that my concerns were “premature”. At the end of March, I stood here again and said that we must tell Donald Trump that Britain would not stand by in silence while he wrecked the Paris agreement. What did the Foreign Secretary say? He said that I was being “far too pessimistic”. He said:

“We have heard the mutterings of the right hon. Lady; let us see what the American Administration actually do. I think she will be pleasantly surprised.”—[Official Report, 28 March 2017; Vol. 624, c. 116.]

Well, we have now seen what Trump has done. I was not very surprised, and it definitely was not very pleasant. What made it so much worse was this Government’s frankly spineless response. Rather than join the legion of world leaders, US mayors and governors, and business chiefs around the world in condemning Trump’s withdrawal from Paris, our Prime Minister would say only that she felt “disappointed”. The Foreign Secretary explained that it was not for Britain to “wave fingers” at the
US President. Well, if he gets a chance to organise Donald Trump's state visit, he will see how British people feel about waving fingers.

This whole sorry episode prompts the question that is at the very heart of today's debate: "If this Government cannot persuade Britain's closest ally to stick to the Paris agreement, and if they cannot even stand up to him when he refuses to do so, what chance have they got of getting the rest of Europe to give us the deal we want on Brexit? The answer is, "None." If they continue down their current path, the inevitable result will be Britain crashing out of Europe in just over 600 days in a state of total chaos, with millions of jobs and half our trade in jeopardy. I have absolutely no doubt that the Foreign Secretary will stand up in a moment and tell me that I am being premature, that I am being overly pessimistic, and that I will be pleasantly surprised. All I have to say to him is, "That’s what you said about Paris."

If we are hoping for a different outcome on Brexit, with this Government, with this Queen's Speech, and with the same crack team of negotiators sitting on the Government Front Bench, we might as well give up now. Yet it does not have to be this way. We could have a Foreign Secretary and a Brexit Secretary working night and day to get the best deal for Britain, not fighting like cats and dogs about who is going to be the next leader. We could have a Government leading the country to a better, more prosperous future, not a Queen's Speech devoid of ideas, hope or vision. We could have a Prime Minister of principle and strength able to stand tall with European leaders and stand up to Donald Trump, not a hopeless Tory leader just trying to make it through the summer. With all that in place, we could have a Britain that actually has a foreign policy of its own—a Britain ready once again to be a beacon of strength and security, prosperity and values for every country around the world. This Queen's Speech does nothing to advance that. This Government are doing nothing to advance that. They are too weak, too shambolic and too divided to take this country forward, and it is about time we had a Government who can.

9.43 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): This excellent debate has been landmarked by a succession of first-rate maiden speeches. I single out the hon. Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorran), who spoke passionately in the cause of social justice for her constituents; my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley), who showed exactly why he is the first member of our party to capture that seat for 100 years; the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), who spoke movingly of his predecessor's campaign for hedgehogs, as well as a rather important matter relating to that great port; and my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), who spoke for many in this Chamber, and many in this country, when he said that it was time for the whole House to come together in the national interest and get Brexit done.

I have to say that, after about 37 speeches, my abiding impression is that there is far more that unites this House—both sides of the Chamber—in our approach to Brexit than divides it, and there is more confidence in this country's future than we would expect given some of the coverage in the media. I was particularly pleased to hear my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), who I am delighted to see in her place, saying that we have a great economy and a bright future. She is entirely correct. My hon. Friends the Members for Fareham (Suella Fernandes), for Witney (Robert Courts), for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) and for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), and many others, raised their voices in favour of free trade and free trade deals.

Not a single Labour voice—not the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) nor the hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins), and certainly not the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry)—dissented from the point made so powerfully earlier by the leader of the Labour party, who said that it was his ambition to make sure that Brexit delivered new free trade deals around the world. None of them dissented from that, and of course the logical consequence of that is coming out of the customs union. There is far more agreement—[Interruption.] Well, this chap—the hon. Member for North East Fife—is not a Labour MP, as far as I understand the constitutional position. None of them dissented from that essential and fundamental understanding about Brexit. There is far more that unites us than divides us.

I think that confidence is right and justified in our country, because the ideal of and belief in free trade continues to lift billions of people out of poverty around the world. In 1990, 37% of the world's population lived in absolute poverty. That figure has now gone down to 10%, and it is falling.

Wherever there is a crisis in the world—wherever there is terror or conflict—we will find that it is the United Kingdom that is at the forefront of trying to tackle those scourges. In Iraq and Syria, we should all be proud that the RAF is delivering more airstrikes against Daesh than any other air force apart from that of the United States. In the face of a revanchist and resurgent Russia, it is the UK that has kept up the pressure for sanctions over what it has done in Ukraine, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) rightly pointed out. In the face of the blood-curdling threats from North Korea, it is this country, in the UN, that has helped to marshal a coalition against what Kim Jong-un is doing. I am delighted to say that that coalition—hon. Members may have followed this—includes, for the first time, the Chinese, which is an important and hopeful development for our world.

In one of the most grizzly conflicts currently taking place in sub-Saharan Africa, it is this country that is sending 400 peacekeepers to South Sudan. We can be proud of what they are doing. If we think about the crisis that has just broken out in the Gulf—an unwelcome dispute between some of our closest friends—I can assure right hon. and hon. Members that it is to the United Kingdom that the world is looking to help to resolve it. That will take some time, but I have absolutely no doubt that we will get there. It is because the world looks to Britain, and it is because the work of the UK overseas is so vital for global security and stability, that it is absolutely vital that we resist the temptation to run down our defences and abrogate our responsibilities to our friends and partners around the world.
Caroline Lucas: Will the Foreign Secretary give way?

Boris Johnson: I will certainly give way, but then I must wind up.

Caroline Lucas: Does the Foreign Secretary feel equally proud of the UK’s role in selling arms to Saudi Arabia that then find their way to Yemen? He did not mention that.

Boris Johnson: As the hon. Lady knows very well, the United Kingdom holds the pen at the UN in trying to bring a resolution to the crisis in Yemen. As the Prime Minister said earlier today, of course a humanitarian disaster is taking place, but it is folly and an illusion to believe that that humanitarian disaster is in any way the responsibility of the United Kingdom. On the contrary, the policy the hon. Lady advocates of disengagement and not being involved at all would void us of any influence or any role at all in bringing about a peaceful resolution in Yemen, although I understand and appreciate the point that she makes. We can be justly proud of the work that has been done in the UN and elsewhere in trying to solve the Yemen crisis.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) pointed out in his excellent speech, we should be proud of our entire diplomatic network and our superb armed forces. Members on both sides of the House spoke well about the strength of our armed forces, including the hon. Members for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) and for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport. Of course, our intelligence services are also admired around the world.

The Queen’s Speech said that we will take new powers to set our own sanctions policy. I have alluded to the importance of sanctions in respect of Ukraine and other areas. I trust that that Bill, in the spirit of unity we have seen for much of this debate, will attract cross-party support.

Do not forget that this country is the second biggest military power in NATO, with a new aircraft carrier putting forth to sea today that is, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence acknowledges, the biggest ship ever built in this country—I believe it is longer than the Palace of Westminster. But even more important than our military role—do not forget that our military forces are engaged in, I think, 33 countries around the world, which is far more than any other European country—

Stephen Doughty: Is the Foreign Secretary willing to commit to the level of 82,000 for our Army? What does he have to say about the chronic under-recruitment in the Army at the moment? Surely with all those commitments abroad, we should be boosting the numbers in our Army, not cutting them.

Boris Johnson: I have already congratulated the hon. Gentleman on his remarks about our armed forces. I am glad that he at least among Opposition Members supports our armed forces. He will know that we are committed not only to spending 2% of our GDP on defence, but to a further 0.5% increment every year until 2020. As my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary has pointed out, we will maintain the size of our armed forces, which are superb and the best in the world.

Even more important than our military firepower and throw-weight, however, and even more important than our vast aid budget, is Britain’s soft power—

/Interruption./ The hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) interjects from a sedentary position to suggest that our aid budget is not vast. Having spent a year in this job and having flown around the world, I can tell her that the world is lost in admiration for how much this country spends on international development and for the efficacy of British aid spending. She should be proud of what the Department for International Development does. It is a huge, huge sum of money. By the way, the only question is how we can ensure that that wonderful aid budget is used so as to deliver the political and economic objectives of this country more effectively, and that is what we are working on.

Even more important than our vast aid budget is our soft power—the sometimes invisible network through which this country’s ideas and values are projected around the world. It can be seen through our partnerships and friendships in Europe, and with the overseas territories and dependencies. A couple of hon. Members asked about the future of Gibraltar. Let us be absolutely clear that the sovereignty of Gibraltar is inviolable and will remain so for as long as this Government are in power.

Emily Thornberry: The right hon. Gentleman is probably aware that the question for Gibraltar is not sovereignty, but what its trading relationship will be, and how people will be able to move backwards and forwards from Gibraltar to Spain and continue to trade. It is the continuing economic position that is important.

Boris Johnson: As the right hon. Lady will understand, we are absolutely bound to protect the economic interests of the people of Gibraltar, not least—this point can be made in respect of the whole argument about Brexit—because of course a strong Gibraltar and a robust Gibraltar economy are in the interests of Andalucia and the rest of Spain. We will get that done.

We have many networks around the world, not only in the territories and dependencies, but in the 52 Commonwealth nations that will come to London next year for a landmark summit, and through our languages, universities and broadcasting. It is a stunning fact that we sell £1.3 billion of TV programmes abroad. That is almost 10 times as much as the French, I am delighted to say—without in any way wishing to be chauvinistic about this. Indeed, our biggest single market for UK TV programmes in Europe is France. I am absolutely delighted that it is.

We project ourselves through our music, and the broadcasting of that music and great musical festivals, in which this country specialises. When this weekend the BBC broadcast Glastonbury around the world—[Hon. Members: “Glastonbury?”] It is “Glastonbury”;

it is in the south-west. Of course, I know it was perhaps different for the people who spent £285 to go and be among the crowd there to watch elderly people such as Kris Kristofferson, but I can tell you, Mr Speaker, that when those extraordinary scenes on the stage at Glastonbury were broadcast, friends and admirers of this country around the world were genuinely alarmed that at a time of such uncertainty, the leader of the main Opposition party in this country should have exercised such an orphic spell on those who had previously been his
opponents that they have meekly acceded to his desire not just to run down our defences but, as he said on the stage of Glastonbury—‘Glahstonbury’—to scrap our nuclear defence. That was what he said, and it will have gone around the world.

It will have gone around the world that the leader of the main Opposition party in this country is actually committed to getting rid of the fundamentals of our nuclear defence, imperilling—this is the crucial point—not merely our own safety, but the safety of our friends and allies. That is not this Government’s way, and that is not the right way for this country. That is why we need a strong, open, confident, outward-looking and global Britain—for the good of our people and for the good of the world. I commend the Gracious Speech to the House.

Ordered, That the debate be now adjourned.—(Craig Whittaker.)

Debate to be resumed tomorrow.

Mr Speaker: If Members insist inexplicably upon leaving and denying themselves the opportunity to hear the Adjournment debate, perhaps they will do so quickly and quietly, so that the rest of the House can attend to the words and messages of Mr Jim Fitzpatrick.

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**Grenfell Tower Fire**

*Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.*—(Craig Whittaker.)

10 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise the tragic Grenfell Tower fire and to put on record a number of questions for the Government, most of which are on the record already, especially after the statement today by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government. I will not be covering the awful response by the authorities locally to the survivors—that is well documented—but I do want to pay tribute to all those who tried to help, volunteers and officials, and to my new hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad), who has performed admirably in the service of her constituents.

Because I was in the London fire brigade for 23 years and I am a former Fire Minister, I have been asked to make many comments on the fire. I need to say that I am no fire prevention expert. I was an operational fireman for 13 years and an elected Fire Brigades Union lay official for 10 years, acting as a safety rep, as well as performing other duties. I am therefore no expert, but I know many who are—those who work with the all-party group on fire safety rescue and in the field of firefighting, fire protection and fire prevention, and of course I had my departmental officials, who were also very knowledgeable.

Armed with that assistance, experience and common sense, there are many questions that I want to ask or, rather, that I want the public inquiry to address. It would be very helpful if the Minister gave the House any details of when more might be known about the inquiry, which will face many questions on many issues. They include: the source of the fire; the rapidity of the spread of the fire; the catastrophic failure of all the fire protection features that the building should have contained; the building’s refurbishment, including the original specifications and the materials actually used, as well as the quality of the work and the finish; the monitoring of building control; the inspection of the completed job by the council, the designated responsible person and the fire service; and the recommendations of the Lakanal House coroner’s inquiry concerning a review of building regulations guidance in Approved Document B and the role of the Building Regulations Advisory Committee. I will finish with the question of the Government’s decision not to equip new schools with fire sprinklers, reversing the upgraded advice that they should have sprinklers, published in 2008.

Mr Speaker, you may know—I would be surprised if you did not—that my original bid was for an Adjournment debate this week on the subject of the governance and accountability of registered social landlords, or housing associations, but obviously matters changed shortly after and I retendered my bid. When Labour came to power in 1997, there were 2 million homes below the decency threshold in our social housing sector. We tackled that challenge aggressively, spending billions on new kitchens, bathrooms, double glazing, central heating and security. The de-municipalisation of much housing brought many pluses in recent decades, but also problems. Those wider problems need examination, as we have heard with the many challenges in recent days, in connection
with how we provide social housing in the UK. How we address that question sets the perspective for how we approach the build, maintenance and safety of those homes—the kind of housing I lived in for decades.

In respect of the questions I want to raise, I would like to thank Jon O’Neill OBE of the Fire Protection Association, London fire brigade, Sir Ken Knight, Ronnie King, the Fire Brigades Union, the Commons Library and the Lakanal House coroner for their assistance with material for my remarks this evening. Let me take the questions in turn.

The police have apparently identified the source of the fire as white goods on the fourth floor. London fire brigade and the Electrical Safety Council, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), who I am pleased to see in his place, have been leading the Total Recalls campaign for such faulty white goods—dryers and the like—and for improvement in their design. Initially, the Government seemed well disposed to this. I am pleased to see the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service in his place, as he responded so positively and has had a number of meetings with colleagues about the campaign, which would have required compulsory product registration at the retail point of sale and better manufacturer marking of goods to allow them to be identified after a fire and traced back to source. One person has already died and there have been a series of serious fires, including one in a Hammersmith tower block. Fortunately, the fire integrity of that block was better than at Grenfell. If the Minister responding to the debate has any information about the campaign from his colleague, I would be very pleased to hear it.

As for the fire integrity of the Grenfell block, it is difficult to know where to start. The public inquiry, assisted by fire investigators, forensic specialists from the Metropolitan Police Service and the Building Research Establishment, will pronounce on the cladding and the insulation, why the fire spread so rapidly and what other contributing factors there may be. There will be questions not only about the fire resistance specification of the material used for the refurbished block, but about whether the architect’s original plan was followed, as well as the finish. Those, along with compartmentalisation and correct fire doors, are the basis of the “stay put” policy about which so much has been written. I am sure that the public inquiry will look again at that as well.

The failure of all the cladding panels tested since the fire, allied to the Secretary of State’s startling information from Camden earlier today about fire doors, indicates a complete systemic failure. Many decent local authorities and housing associations are under scrutiny in relation to how they manage their housing stock, and many good construction companies are as well. Questions about monitoring, building control, “responsible person” and fire brigade sign-off, and the rules that we put in place, will all be issues for the inquiry, as well as the question of how contracts are delivered, including the system of subcontracting.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jim Fitzpatrick: I am sorry. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, but I have declined intervention requests from other colleagues. If I have time at the end of my speech, I shall be happy to give way.

I am not sure whether the Minister will be able to comment on any of those building matters. The fire service, as inspector and enforcement body, should offer us some peace of mind, but reports of a 25% reduction in both domestic fire brigade inspections and fire safety audits do not inspire confidence, and perhaps the Minister will be able to comment on the accuracy of those reports. I am pleased to see that the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service is present; he may be able to advise his hon. Friend.

Of course, the Lakanal House fire, the six people killed there and the coroner’s inquiry were a wake-up call, as was the Shirley Towers fire in Southampton, in which two firefighters, Alan Bannon and James Shears, died. Much happened as a result, but not all the lessons were learned. The key lesson for the Government was about the reviewing of the building regulations guidance on fire, as contained in Approved Document B. That is the architects’ bible: it says what is allowed and what is required. The guidance needs to be reviewed regularly to take into account not only new methods of construction, but new materials being used. They are changing all the time, as we can see from the structures and the skyline around us. Approved Document B gives details of when and where sprinklers should be used, and what types of fire alarm system should be mandatory for which types of building.

I welcomed the Secretary of State’s announcement earlier today, and the convening of his new independent expert panel of advisers. As I said to him at the time, the Building Regulations Advisory Committee has historically been central to such work. The last published review of Approved Document B appeared in 2006. Her Honour Frances Kirkham, CBE, the Lakanal House coroner, wrote to the Secretary of State in 2013 saying, very simply,

“It is recommended that your Department review” Approved Document B. The Secretary of State’s response, in the same year, was:

“We have commissioned research which will feed into a future review of this part of the Building Regulations. We expect this work to form the basis of a formal review leading to the publication of a new edition of the Approved Document in 2016/17.”

As the Minister will know, however, BRAC has not met for five years, although a succession of Ministers assured us that work was in hand.

As late as last Thursday, when I asked the Prime Minister what assurance she could give

“that the review of building regulations and Approved Document B, as recommended by the Lakanal House coroner, will be carried out as urgently as possible, and that the Building Regulations Advisory Committee, which has historically undertaken this work, will be recalled as a matter of urgency”,

she replied:

“That work is indeed in hand.”

She also said:

“Obviously, that will be one of the issues that the public inquiry will want to look at.”—[Official Report, 22 June 2017, Vol. 626, c. 178.]

As I said then, that work does not need to wait for a recommendation from a public inquiry. Can the Minister assure us that the new independent panel of experts will undertake it as a matter of urgency? I should be grateful if he could give us a timeframe for its work programme.
The final matter that I want to raise, before making some concluding remarks, is Government policy in respect of fire sprinklers in new schools. In 2008, the Minister of State at the Department for Education upgraded the guidance for local education authorities and school governors, and changed the wording on what was expected. He wrote, and the Department published, the following:

“It is now our expectation that all new schools will have sprinklers fitted. Any exceptions to this will have to be justified by demonstrating that a school is of low risk” — for instance, single-storey or brick-built. The Government have changed this guidance, and the new revised version from the Department for Education states:

“The Building Regulations do not require the installation of fire sprinkler suppression systems in school buildings for life safety and therefore BB 100” — that is, building bulletin 100 — “no longer includes an expectation that most new school buildings will be fitted with them.”

The regulations that it cites are 11 years old. They are overdue for revision, and at least one coroner’s inquiry has requested that they be reviewed. I would be grateful if the Minister confirmed press reports at the weekend that the Government were reversing this and going back to the original guidance from 2008.

Sprinklers save lives, and they are not as expensive as some detractors claim. The situation is not helped by TV adverts, dramas and films incorrectly portraying buildings being flooded whenever a sprinkler head activates. It is only the sprinkler directly above the fire that sprays water, not those across the whole building or even a floor. We know from reports that the cost of fitting sprinklers to Grenfell Tower would have been £200,000. If we divide that by 79 — you do the math, Mr Speaker — it works out at just over £2,531 per death, and that figure is likely to come down as more deaths are confirmed.

To conclude, we need to know the terms of reference of the public inquiry as soon as possible. We need to know who is to preside over it, when it will be expected to report and when we can expect interim reports on urgent life safety matters. We need to know when the independent panel will be convened, and when we can expect building regulations and the guidance in Approved Document B to be published.

It has been said often over the past 12 days that the Grenfell Tower fire could have been prevented at best, or at least mitigated. The deaths could also have been prevented, at least in the main. It is right to acknowledge that there has been controversy over this — that the Lakanal House inquiry did not order the retrofitting of all high-rise blocks with fire sprinklers. What it did say was:

“It is recommended that your department” — the Department for Communities and Local Government — “encourage providers of housing in high-rise residential buildings containing multiple domestic premises to consider the retrofitting of sprinkler systems.”

It was not quite an instruction, but coming from a coroner’s inquiry, it was a pretty forceful recommendation.

There will be harrowing accounts to come at the public inquiry and/or the inquests. Historically, the vast majority of safety legislation has been written after a tragedy or disaster, and that includes fire regulations. Health and safety regulations, which are much derided in the media, save lives but they also cost money. The message from the Secretary of State’s statement today is that there will be a cost to local authorities and registered social landlords, and we need assurances of Government support that will pay to keep our people safe. The full lessons of Grenfell Tower will not be clear until after the public inquiry, but it is clear that actions need to be taken now. The Government have a responsibility. Ultimately, the buck stops here in Parliament with all of us, and we need to commit the support that is needed in communities across the country now.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing this matter forward. There are 32 high-rise blocks of flats in Northern Ireland, plus other private high rises as well. Does he think that the independent panel of advisers should include Northern Ireland in its investigation, so that all parts and regions of the United Kingdom can benefit from its findings?

Jim Fitzpatrick: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising the matter of the devolved Assemblies, because there are different practices in different countries. I commend the Welsh Assembly in this regard. Ann Jones, a former colleague of mine in the Fire Brigades Union, has piloted legislation through the Assembly, and Carl Sargeant, the Minister, has been on to my office today. The legislation in Wales is different from ours; it has improved and is more protective. I know that there are different procedures in Northern Ireland and Scotland as well. A lead from the Westminster Government would be very welcome, and I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say. My last word is to commend the emergency service workers — firefighters in the main — who risked life and limb to try to help. If we give them the resources and the kit, they will do the job, and we stand in admiration of them, as always.

10.14 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government (Alok Sharma): I start by thanking the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) for calling for this timely debate. As he said, he is a former firefighter and was responsible for fire safety when he was a Minister, so he speaks from a position of knowledge and experience. This House is rightly taking a very strong interest in the tragic events at Grenfell Tower, and we want to ensure that the lessons are learned for the future. This disaster should never have happened, and we are absolutely determined to ensure that this never, ever happens again in our country.

Last week, I attended a community safety partnership meeting with the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service, my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd), and we were both deeply moved by the bravery and dignity that has been demonstrated by those directly affected by the Grenfell Tower fire. I pay tribute to all Members here on both sides of the House who have helped and have made a contribution, particularly the new hon. Member for Northwood and Pinner (Emma Dent Coad) for the mentorship today that she has been doing locally to support her community. Of course, all of us need to do everything we can to help those who have suffered during this tragedy to rebuild
their lives, and that is what the Government are doing. We have put in place measures to help people to get back on their feet, but we absolutely understand that that will take a long time in many cases. As the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse outlined, it is equally important that the questions that are being asked by those who have been directly affected are answered. We need to understand what went wrong and fix it for the future.

The hon. Gentleman has raised several extremely good points, and I will try to address them as I go through my speech. In the spirit of co-operation, however, we need to work together across the House on this issue, so I would like to meet him and colleagues on the all-party parliamentary fire safety rescue group. If he has time tomorrow, I would be happy to sit down and have a discussion with him and those colleagues. It is important that we work together, and I want to demonstrate that there is a clear willingness on the part of the Government to ensure that that happens.

We will do whatever it takes to get to the bottom of the causes of this disaster. There will be a full public inquiry, as the Prime Minister has announced, and it will have an independent chair. We want to be clear that the inquiry should leave absolutely no stone unturned to get to the truth. We will question everyone who has evidence to provide. We want to ensure that the survivors and the victims are consulted on the inquiry’s terms of reference and that the victims are able to be represented, so the Government will cover the costs of legal representation. That has been an issue in previous public inquiries, which is why we have been clear about coming forward and making that commitment.

Alok Sharma: I completely understand that colleagues want to have that announcement as soon as possible, and the Government are well aware of that. I hope that there will be an announcement soon and that the work will start. When Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government made his statement earlier today, there was a discussion about how long an inquiry report would take. Clearly, it will be up to the chair to set out the full terms and to determine how to take things forward, but we would ideally want to see an early interim report.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse mentioned the Building Regulations Advisory Committee, and I will come on to talk about the panel that the Secretary of State outlined in his statement earlier today. However, the BRAC actually meets several times a year, and I understand from my officials that the most recent meeting was actually last Thursday. The committee talked about the Grenfell Tower tragedy and how its work could have an input into what the Government and the Department are doing but, of course, as the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government also clearly outlined, the committee’s scope is more limited. He has talked about a panel that has a wider remit, and I will outline what that panel will be looking at.

Jim Fitzpatrick: My apologies. I should have said that the vice-chair, my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon), and the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on fire safety and rescue, the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), are both here, so I kindly invite them to our meeting tomorrow, if possible. I did not question the Minister about when BRAC’s meetings were, but what he says about the advice on sprinklers in schools is consistent. It is not the guidance that was issued in 2008, but I will not quibble now. I welcome the meeting, where we can clarify the matter with him and his colleagues in the Department for Education. I welcome the fact that there seems to be some movement in the Government’s position on that.
Alok Sharma: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, and I am of course happy to have a detailed discussion on all these points with him tomorrow—if that is possible for him.

The coroner’s report recommended that the Government look to simplify the guidance on part B of the building regulation. Although we have been working on the guidance, I accept that the work has not been completed. In the light of what has happened at Grenfell, we are going to have to take a very thorough look at the regulatory regime. That is precisely what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said in his statement to the House earlier. As he noted, there is an ongoing police investigation, which we are all aware of, and, as the hon. Gentleman noted, there will be an independent public inquiry to get to the truth about what happened and who is responsible. What is absolutely clear is that what we witnessed in the Grenfell Tower fire is a catastrophic failure on a scale that no one thought possible in our country at this time, in 2017. I cannot anticipate what the public inquiry will conclude, but I agree with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State when he said that the failures must be understood and rectified without delay, and the Government are absolutely determined to ensure that that happens.

The Secretary of State has informed the House that he is establishing an independent expert advisory panel, and I hope very soon that more information emerges on that. I can already say that it will advise the Government on any immediate steps that need to be taken on fire safety measures, policies, inspection and regulation arising from the Grenfell Tower fire, and it will look at the wider fire safety regime.

I very much look forward to having a meeting with the hon. Gentleman and other colleagues to discuss these matters. As I said at the start of my remarks, this is a time for us to work together, to listen to wide-ranging views and ultimately to ensure that a tragedy such as the Grenfell Tower fire never happens again. We owe that to the victims, to their families and to the country.

*Question put and agreed to.*

10.27 pm

*House adjourned.*
House of Commons

Tuesday 27 June 2017

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER in the Chair]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: I have a short statement to make. I would like to draw Members' attention to the fact that the book for entering the private Members' Bills ballot is now open for Members to sign in the No Lobby. It will be open until the House rises today and when the House is sitting on Wednesday 28 June. The ballot itself will be drawn at 9 am on Thursday 29 June in Committee Room 10. An announcement setting out these and other arrangements, and the dates when ten-minute rule motions can be made and presentation Bills introduced, is published in the Order Paper.

Oral Answers to Questions

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

The Secretary of State was asked—

North Sea Oil and Gas

1. Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with trade bodies and companies involved in extracting oil and gas from the North sea.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): My Department is in regular contact with the oil and gas industry. As hon. Members will be aware, my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), met industry representatives regularly, both in London and in Aberdeen. On 23 March the Oil and Gas Authority awarded licences for 111 blocks to enable exploration and production across frontier areas—the first licensing round to focus on frontier areas in two decades. I look forward to continuing this relationship, which is very important for jobs and the wider economy. Indeed, in my first week in post I attended a reception at Imperial College London and met several companies and trade bodies in the field.

Kirsty Blackman: I thank the Minister for that answer and warmly welcome him to his new post. In 2016 the Chancellor announced that action would be taken to improve the tax regime for late-life asset transfers. In the 2017 Budget he re-announced the same policy, but now an expert panel is to be set up. Can the Minister let me know how many times the expert panel has met so far, and when we can expect the outcomes of its deliberations to be made public, as it says they will be on the gov.uk website?

Richard Harrington: I thank the hon. Lady for that question. She and I have worked together in previous roles, and I look forward to visiting Aberdeen, where hopefully she will be able to explain this further. As far as late-life assets are concerned, we realise how important it is to get this right, and not just for the jobs and tax revenue, but for generating further investment. The discussion paper and the panel of experts are considering this. We look forward to hearing a wide range of views and will report our findings at the autumn Budget.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): The Minister will be aware that over the past decade Qatar has become an increasingly important source of gas for the UK, not least from imports of liquefied natural gas through my constituency. What steps is he taking to ensure that the current diplomatic crisis in the Gulf affecting Qatar does not lead to any disruption of energy supply into the UK?

Richard Harrington: As my right hon. Friend will be aware, the Government are monitoring the situation very carefully, and we do not believe that it will make any difference whatsoever to liquefied gas supplies.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I welcome the Minister to his new post. Getting back to the North sea, the kind of action described by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) is vital, especially to help along the return optimism. The Scottish Government have invested £5 million to explore decommissioning opportunities in oil and gas that could grow many new jobs. When will we get action from the UK Government, and when will we see a robust and comprehensive future energy strategy from the UK Government?

Richard Harrington: As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, the Government have been very actively involved in funding seismic surveys and the 3D visualisation centre at Heriot-Watt University. I am looking forward to the next licensing round and to dealing with the strategy he mentioned. I should mention the Kraken development, which the Government have supported, because the first barrels of oil were produced last week, and we look forward to there being 50,000 barrels a day at peak.

Drew Hendry: The fact is that the UK Government have been slow to realise the potential of decommissioning, pulled funding from vital carbon capture and storage pipeline projects, failed adequately to address the drop in renewable energy investment and plunged public funds into risky and poor-value nuclear power projects against the advice of experts. When will this Government wake up and take our energy opportunities seriously?

Richard Harrington: I am afraid that I must completely disagree with the hon. Gentleman’s view of things. We are committed to supporting the development of a decommissioning industry. I think that there are significant opportunities. We are currently considering options for...
the delivery of a port and yard, and we will continue to engage closely with all relevant stakeholders as we develop our options.

**Leaving the EU: Business Consultation**

2. **Jo Churchill** (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): What steps he has taken to consult businesses on the process of the UK leaving the EU. [900017]

**The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark):** Since the referendum, I have held discussions with businesses, workers and local leaders across the UK, and investors all around the world. These will continue over the coming months, including my weekly meetings with the directors general of the five main business organisations. The Government are creating a new EU exit business advisory group to ensure that business is not only heard but is influential throughout the negotiations.

**Jo Churchill:** My particular interest is in the UK’s life science sector, which is worth some £30 billion to the economy and involves nearly half a million jobs, many of which are in my constituency of Bury St Edmunds. Will the Secretary of State tell me how he will ensure that there is continued support to this vital leading research and science sector as we leave the EU?

**Greg Clark:** I will indeed. My hon. Friend is a great champion of the sector. In our negotiations, we want to ensure that we can continue these successful collaborations, as well as making further investment in the future of research through our industrial strategy. The House may be interested to know that I can announce today that the Government’s commitment to underwrite the UK’s fair share for the Joint European Torus costs—the leading nuclear fusion facility in Oxfordshire, supporting 1,300 jobs—will be made. The facility is funded through a contract between the European Commission and the UK Atomic Energy Authority. In making this commitment, the Government hope to provide the certainty and reassurance needed for a mutually beneficial extension of the contract.

**Mr Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter) (Lab): All the five business organisations to which the Secretary of State refers have come out against the Prime Minister’s extreme and damaging Brexit. What is he personally doing to ensure that the Prime Minister not only hears what they are saying, but listens to it?

**Greg Clark:** The right hon. Gentleman will know that the five business organisations have put forward a sensible set of principles to govern the transition and the shape of a final agreement. Those suggestions seem very sensible. Part of the point of engaging with business, as I do rigorously and frequently, is to ensure that that voice is heard.

**Robert Neill** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): One of the important principles that those business organisations have stressed is the essential nature of having contractual and legal certainty for those who are entering into legal obligations so that they know that that will continue to be enforceable once we leave the EU. Will the Secretary of State therefore ensure that particular regard is had to the need for transition periods to be based on the reality of business practice, rather than on arbitrary considerations?

**Greg Clark:** My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. If he has the continued privilege to chair the Select Committee on Justice, I am sure that it will provide some help in this.

**Rachel Reeves** (Leeds West) (Lab): Many businesses are particularly concerned about additional checks on trade imports and exports if we leave the customs union. Can the Secretary of State give businesses any reassurance at all that there will not be additional checks if and when we leave the customs union?

**Greg Clark:** I have always been clear, as have the Government, that we want not only no tariffs, but no bureaucratic impediments of the type described by the hon. Lady. That is one of the objectives set out by the business organisations. As she knows, the negotiations have just started, but we are clear that that is our objective.

**Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg** (North East Somerset) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend be asking businesses to list the most egregious and restrictive EU directives that may be removed once we leave in order to make British business more competitive and efficient?

**Greg Clark:** I am sure that my hon. Friend will be an assiduous contributor to the scrutiny of the repeal Bill. The approach is to transfer into UK law that which was part of EU law precisely so that this House can scrutinise and consider what should be continued.

**Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): The Government said yesterday that EU citizens will be able to apply for what they called “settled status”, so that they can continue to live and work in the UK. Application processes can be time-consuming, not to mention complicated, expensive and off-putting, especially when this Government are involved. How can the Secretary of State guarantee that EU nationals working in the UK will be allowed to stay not just in theory but in practice, to the benefit of the many businesses that rely on EU workers?

**Greg Clark:** I welcome the hon. Gentleman back to his place. In fact, I think that Labour’s whole Front-Bench team has been reappointed. It is nice to see loyalty rewarded. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and I thought that he would welcome the Prime Minister’s very positive statement. It is important that the process is implemented with no bureaucracy so that people can apply with confidence.

**Construction Industry: Cash Retentions**

3. **Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What his policy is on the non-release or late release of cash retentions in the construction industry. [900018]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James):** Unjustified late and non-payment of a retention payment or any amount owed is unacceptable. These practices cause particular problems for small businesses in the construction sector, and the Government are committed to tackling them. We will shortly be publishing research into these issues, alongside a consultation document.
Stuart C. McDonald: The system of cash retentions has been wreaking havoc in the construction industry for decades. Can the Minister assure us that there will soon be radical action to overhaul the system, and can she explain why it has taken so long?

Margot James: There is, indeed, far too much abuse of the system of cash retention, and it has been going on for too long. The burden of administrative time spent securing payments and the drain on working capital weigh far too heavily on smaller firms in the supply chain, and I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we will be taking action.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): If the Government had only listened in 2015 to the amendments the Labour party tabled to the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Bill, we would already have a solution. We were told then that the Government were going to take action. We were told again a few months ago that they were taking action with their proposals about naming and shaming businesses that did not publish their late payments. We now have yet another consultation. Research from Crossflow Payments shows that 74% of small businesses do not believe that the Government’s recent changes will make any difference. Can we have a policy that actually enforces action on late payments, rather than the series of consultations that we have had?

Margot James: I agree that action is needed, but it is important that we take the right action. We have undertaken a consultation, the results of which will be published shortly. That will be followed by a consultation on the 2011 changes to the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996, which will consider the merits of ring-fencing retentions and the extent to which contractors are making the payment of retentions conditional on the performance of obligations under other, completely separate contracts.

Electric Cars

4. Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that the electric grid is able to support the charging of the number of electric cars estimated to be in use by 2020. [900019]

The Minister of State, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Claire Perry): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his pathfinding work in this area. I understand he is a proud owner of a Nissan Leaf—an electric vehicle made in the UK. He will therefore know that this is an exceptionally important point for us. I am very proud of the Government’s ambition for almost all cars on our roads to be zero-emissions by 2050, and also of our success in positioning the UK as a leading manufacturer of electric vehicles—one in five electric vehicles sold in the EU are made in Britain—but as a hub for innovation. We are putting millions of pounds into innovation studies and research, to see how those new technologies can work together to ultimately achieve the aim of zero emissions by 2050.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Electric vehicles are a vital part of meeting our climate change commitments. Can the Minister update us on further action to tackle climate change after the US’s repudiation of the Paris agreement?

Claire Perry: I thank my hon. Friend for that valuable question. I was delighted to be sent, on almost the first day in the job, to Luxembourg to meet our EU counterparts to discuss the fact that we are all very disappointed with Mr Trump’s decision to withdraw the US from the Paris agreement, and accept that more work needs to be done by the remaining countries to emphasise that Paris is non-negotiable, although we would like him to come back to the agreement. I was also personally able to increase the level of UK funding for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change trust fund, across the board with other European friends and neighbours, to ensure that any reduction of USA funding can be met.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): May I welcome the hon. Lady to her new position and, indeed, Front-Bench Members, new and old, to their roles? Can we have
proper local accountability and ownership of local community grids, so that we break the monopolies of the distribution companies, which make masses of money and do not always reinvest?

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman raises an incredibly valuable point about how we start to move ourselves away from generating emissions in the heating and lighting sector. He will be pleased to know that I was able to put more innovation funding into trials that are doing exactly that.

Albert Owen: Already!

Claire Perry: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I like to do these things seriously. We are already funding pilots to see how peer-to-peer exchange of power can work, and how further to improve community generation and storage of energy.

Thames Gateway: SMEs

5. Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): What steps he is taking to support the growth of small and medium-sized businesses in the Thames Gateway.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): Supporting small business is a crucial part of our industrial strategy. The Government are investing in the Thames Gateway, including through the local growth fund and the new lower Thames crossing. We will continue to work with industry and local authorities in the Thames Gateway to create the conditions for all businesses to thrive.

Gareth Johnson: The lack of connectivity between Kent and Essex frustrates commerce between those two counties. The lower Thames crossing will help with that, but it will take some years for it to be built. Will the Minister use that time to work with local businesses in the area to unlock its huge potential, which has yet to be fully realised?

Margot James: The lower Thames crossing is due to open in 2025. In the meantime, local growth hubs will continue to deliver support services to help businesses in the area to grow over that period. In addition, almost half of the South East local enterprise partnership funding of £274 million is directly supporting growth in north Kent and south Essex by improving transport infrastructure, addressing skills needs and creating new business spaces.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The Minister will know that one of the strengths of the Thames Gateway is the closeness of connections elsewhere in Europe, and one of the worries that small and medium-sized businesses have is whether they will be able to continue to recruit staff from other EU countries after Brexit. Will she acknowledge the strength of concerns of firms in the Thames Gateway, and can she offer them any reassurance about the prospects after Brexit?

Margot James: Having travelled around the country talking to many businesses over the past year, I acknowledge those concerns in the Thames Gateway area. However, I was reassured—I hope the right hon. Gentleman was, too—by the Prime Minister’s opening contribution to the negotiations last week and the reassurance she offered many hundreds of thousands of EU citizens currently residing in the UK, including those working in the right hon. Gentleman’s area.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP) rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is an estimable fellow, but West Dunbartonshire is a considerable distance from the Thames Gateway. Knowing the intellectual eclecticism of the hon. Gentleman, I think he may have a pertinent inquiry and I am absolutely fascinated to discover whether that is the case.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Businesses—those in the Thames Gateway, along with those in West Dunbartonshire—require confidence in those who form Governments and in those who support them. Does the Minister agree that that requires transparency? Will he call on every political party in Northern Ireland to publish fully everything in terms of the political donations and campaigns they are involved in?

Mr Speaker: No, that is manifestly out of order. The hon. Gentleman, I think, was more interested in what he had to say to the Minister than in anything the Minister might have said to him.

Gas Storage Facilities

6. Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): What estimate his Department has made of the future level of investment required in the UK’s gas storage facilities.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): There has been significant investment in the UK’s natural gas supply infrastructure over the past decade. It is highly complex, because we benefit from highly diverse and flexible sources of natural gas. They include: indigenous production from the North sea; six international gas pipelines with Norway, Belgium and the Netherlands; three liquefied natural gas terminals that can bring supply from anywhere in the world; and a number of modern, responsive gas storage facilities. We are confident that market-led investment will continue to deliver secure gas supplies, but I will continue to monitor the position.

Gareth Snell: I thank the Minister for his answer. The ceramics industry is a major employer in my constituency. It is very energy-intensive and heavily reliant on a secure supply of gas for business continuity. In the light of the announcement that the Rough gas storage facility is to close, what assurances can the Minister give the ceramics industry that the gas it needs will not run out or become unaffordable?

Richard Harrington: As I explained in my answer to the hon. Gentleman’s first question, we have a very diverse range of sources. Analysis conducted by the National Grid and others confirms that the closure of Rough will not cause a problem with security. I give the hon. Gentleman an undertaking to monitor this, with my Department, on a weekly basis.
Business Confidence

7. Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What steps he is taking to improve business confidence. [900023]

14. Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to foster a positive environment for business growth. [900030]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): The industrial strategy Green Paper was launched on 23 January and has been warmly received across the country. We have received over 1,900 responses to the consultation, with respondents from every part of the United Kingdom. I look forward to taking our modern industrial strategy forward, with the involvement of all Members of this House, in the months ahead.

Gavin Newlands: In a damaging blow to business confidence and the wider economy in Renfrewshire, Chivas Brothers announced that it was moving operations from Paisley in 2019. The workforce have voted to strike over a pay offer that Chivas Brothers itself admits does not meet commitments it made to the workforce. Will the Secretary of State join me in urging Chivas to offer a deal that prevents industrial action and recognises the contribution the Paisley workforce have given to Chivas over many, many years?

Greg Clark: Of course we want to avoid industrial action. I am not aware of the particular circumstances, but I am very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman so he can inform me of them in more detail.

Liam Byrne: Does the Secretary of State agree with the Secretary of State for Defence, who spoke this morning about the need to provide extra investment in those areas that are left behind—even if the bill comes to something like £1.5 billion? When is he going to open talks with other hon. Members about the needs of their areas, so we can ensure that those left-behind regions are not left behind and left out?

Greg Clark: I am very surprised to hear that question from the right hon. Gentleman. Of all the people in this House, he was a great proponent of a city deal and a devolution deal for Birmingham and the west midlands, the value of which is over £1 billion. Looking around the Chamber, there are many Opposition Members who have made precisely such a case that we should invest in areas of the country, outside of national programmes. It seems to me to be reasonable to continue that programme.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I took soundings from small businesses in Rugby at a small business expo run by the Federation of Small Businesses on Friday. Their single biggest concern related to the recruitment of staff, in that the skills they are looking for often are not available among local jobseekers. Given those instances, will the Secretary of State reassure us about the training of young people and the ability to recruit staff from the EU moving forward?

Greg Clark: I will indeed. One of the big findings, which has been reinforced by the consultation on the industrial strategy, is that we need to ramp up the level of skills and technical education and training in this country. We will respond to the consultation in the weeks ahead, but my hon. Friend can rest assured that that will be one of its key pillars.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): The Kingswood Lakeside business park in Cannock is home to many leading businesses, and the new developments there will create hundreds of new jobs. Does my right hon. Friend agree that those developments are evidence of business confidence, and show that Cannock Chase is well and truly open for business and is a great place to do business?

Greg Clark: I do indeed. Having visited Cannock Chase with my hon. Friend, I know that she is a great champion of the businesses there. It is fair to reflect that the confidence of manufacturers and employers in other sectors is high. As the CBI attested this week, it is high across the country, including in Cannock Chase.

Euratom Treaty

8. Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues and other key stakeholders on the potential effect of the UK leaving the Euratom treaty on energy suppliers and on the availability of radioisotopes for the NHS. [900024]

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): We have discussed the UK’s exit from Euratom across the Government and with key stakeholders. Our objective is to ensure that leaving Euratom has no adverse impact on energy suppliers or on our international commitments on nuclear non-proliferation. Medical radioisotopes are not special fissile nuclear material, and are not subject to international nuclear safeguards. Therefore, their availability should not be impacted by the UK’s exit from Euratom. As the hon. Lady will have seen, the Queen’s Speech announced the Government’s intention to legislate to establish a domestic nuclear safeguards regime.

Layla Moran: Yesterday The Times reported that officials from the Minister’s Department estimated that it would take seven years to negotiate equivalent terms to this treaty. Given that experts have warned that, above all, we must avoid a cliff-edge withdrawal, does he not agree that leaving on the current timeline is infeasible and that it would be in the UK’s best interests to stay in Euratom and avoid this mess?

Joseph Johnson: I should have welcomed the hon. Lady to her place in the House. Our objective in these proceedings is clear: we want to maintain the UK’s leading role as a responsible nuclear state, with world-leading nuclear research and development and a flourishing nuclear power industry. We will establish a regime that ensures that nothing changes in that regard as we leave Euratom.

Zero-hours Contracts

9. Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): What the Government’s policy is on zero-hours contracts. [900025]
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): I welcome the hon. Gentleman to the House, along with the considerable expertise he brings on labour market issues from his former employment.

Zero-hours contracts allow people to access the labour market who cannot or do not want to commit to standard, regular work. The Government recognise the concerns about employers who may be breaching the rules or otherwise exploiting their position. We want to make sure that everyone is paid properly and receives the employment rights to which they are entitled.

Alex Norris: I thank the Minister for her response and for her kind words. Given the ease with which, just yesterday, £1 billion was found to protect only one job in Westminster, will the Minister please say what actions the Government are taking to encourage business to offer genuine financial and personal security to the nearly 1 million workers on zero-hours contracts?

Margot James: The Government believe that people are entitled to be treated fairly at work, regardless of what type of contract they have with the company for which they work. The Prime Minister commissioned Matthew Taylor to undertake a review of the rights of employees. He will report on the ways in which employment regulations need to keep pace with changes in the labour market very shortly.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): I welcome the Minister’s statement that the Government are determined to ensure that employees get their employment rights. Why, then, did the Government introduce the huge fees for access to employment tribunals? Will they now abolish those fees?

Margot James: Employment tribunals are a matter for the Ministry of Justice, but I am in discussions with it over the review of employment tribunals that it has undertaken and we keep a watching brief on the matters the hon. Lady raises.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): What does the Minister have to say to the young dustman who said to me, “Jack, I’ve just got married. We’re about to have a baby. We’re paying a fortune in rent. We’d love to buy our own home, but no chance, because I’m on zero-hours contracts”? Is not the truth that he and millions of workers like him have seen through the phoney promises, and have simply had enough of falling pay, squeezed living standards and insecurity in the world of work?

Margot James: I think we should have perspective on these matters, because less than 3% of the UK workforce are actually on zero-hours contracts, and according to the most recent research 70% of those people are content with the number of hours they are working. I do accept the hon. Gentleman’s point about his constituent, however, and that is precisely the scenario that Matthew Taylor has reviewed and will report on very soon.

Leaving the EU: Small Businesses

10. Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): What safeguards the Government plan to put in place to protect small businesses as part of negotiations on the UK leaving the EU.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): Ministers in the Department for Exiting the European Union and I are in regular discussions with small and medium-sized enterprises and their representatives, and we are arranging a joint ministerial roundtable with SMEs to ensure that their voices are heard throughout the Brexit negotiations. Only last week, the permanent secretary of the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and I held a roundtable with small businesses on the negotiations.

Carol Monaghan: A survey by the Federation of Small Businesses found that 92% of exporting small businesses trade in the EU single market. How does the Minister predict those small businesses will be affected by the loss of our membership, and how will she ensure that the sector continues to be represented in any future negotiations?

Margot James: The Government are committed to negotiating a full and open trade agreement with the European Union on our departure. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said earlier, we are aiming for a situation in which no tariffs are applied to SMEs that export into the single market and there is no unnecessary bureaucracy.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Many SMEs in my constituency are part of European and global supply chains. Does the Minister understand that those businesses, as well as larger financial services businesses, need clarity and certainty? When will she and the Government be in a position to give those businesses certainty about the transitional arrangements that will be put in place? As she knows, businesses are already making investment or de-investment decisions.

Margot James: The hon. Gentleman’s points are valid, but they are part of the ongoing negotiations, which, as he knows, have some way to go. However, we are defending our position as the No. 1 destination for foreign direct investment, and we will ensure that SMEs have a strong position in global supply chains into the future.

Energy Price Cap

11. Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): What plans he has to implement an energy price cap.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): Our manifesto said that “we will introduce a safeguard tariff cap that will extend the price protection currently in place for some vulnerable customers to more customers on the poorest value tariffs.” I stand by that commitment.
Emma Hardy: The lived experience of many people in Hull West and Hessle is that the Conservative party has done nothing to fix the energy market for the past seven years. Although I welcome the Government’s move and transformation from calling an energy price cap Marxist and extremely dangerous to copying it, is the Minister facing calls to water down that policy either from the big six or from his own Back Benchers?

Greg Clark: I welcome the hon. Lady to the House; she follows a distinguished predecessor. I would perhaps invite her to reflect on her own party’s history in this matter—the former Leader of the Opposition was the Energy Secretary and failed to do anything whatever about it. I have been clear about the commitment that we have made, and we will see it through.

Chris Ruane: Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. To misquote Caroline Aherne’s question to Debbie McGee, what first attracted the Secretary of State to Labour’s financially astute, socially just and politically responsible energy price cap?

Greg Clark: I welcome the hon. Gentleman back. What he describes as an energy price cap was launched as an energy price freeze. The problem with that was that as energy prices fell, consumers would be paying more than they needed to. That would have been disastrous for them, which is why the proposal that we have made, in response to the Competition and Markets Authority analysis, is a much more sensible approach than we got from Labour.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): As we have heard, various media outlets have reported recently that senior Cabinet members were lobbying for the Conservative price cap manifesto commitment to be dropped. Indeed, the Secretary of State’s recent letter to Ofgem was silent on the price cap element and, when questioned last week, the Prime Minister refused to confirm unambiguously that the price cap would be upheld. Will the Secretary of State confirm for the avoidance of doubt that he will implement the promised price cap, and not just stand by it, to deliver to 17 million customers the £100 saving that his Prime Minister promised?

Greg Clark: I welcome the hon. Lady. It is very good to see her back in her place. I did not hear her name chanted at Glastonbury and it is probably unparliamentary to do it here, but I warmly welcome her back. I have been very clear and the Queen’s Speech is very clear. It said, in terms:

“My government will ensure fairer markets for consumers, this will include bringing forward measures to help tackle unfair practices in the energy market to…reduce energy bills.”

Rebecca Long Bailey: I am afraid it is not clear. The Secretary of State’s recent letter to Ofgem simply asks it to advise him of the action it intends to take to safeguard customers on the poorest value tariffs. It was not a direction to implement a price cap. Can the Secretary of State confirm that should Ofgem not take directions to implement a price cap, or if it directs a price cap that is narrower than the Conservative manifesto commitment, he will legislate to uphold his party’s manifesto commitment and, if so, when?

Greg Clark: The powers that I have are to ask Ofgem to move in this way, not to order it; Ofgem is independent. As there is a strong body of opinion on both sides of the House that the detriment that consumers have been suffering should be put to an end, I would have thought that the hon. Lady welcomed it being put to an end as soon as possible, rather than waiting for legislation to pass through the House. Ofgem has those powers and I believe it should use them.

Industrial Strategy

12. Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to ensure that all regions benefit from the Government’s industrial strategy.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): The importance of our regions is a core pillar of our industrial strategy. We will build on successful clusters, of which the Humber Energy Estuary is a perfect example, as the hon. Lady knows. The Humber’s leading position in marine engineering has been further strengthened by the opening of factories around the offshore wind industry, including at Siemens, where 1,000 new skilled jobs have been created. This is the industrial strategy in action.

Diana Johnson: Ministers recently blocked Hull’s privately financed initiative to deliver rail electrification all the way to Hull, an important part of our infrastructure that is needed in east Yorkshire. Are people in Hull right to now believe that the £1 billion that was found for the Northern Ireland powerhouse comes at the expense of the northern powerhouse?

Greg Clark: The hon. Lady knows as well as anyone in this House the commitment that this Government, and I in particular, have made to devolving funds to Hull and the Humber. They have benefited considerably, first from a city deal and then from a growth deal. That has contributed to the increased prosperity in her city, which I would have thought she would welcome.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Notwithstanding what my right hon. Friend has just outlined, and despite the fact that business confidence in the region is high, as outlined by the most recent Hull and Humber chamber of commerce’s quarterly report, there are still further initiatives that could be taken to advance the northern powerhouse. What further plans does my right hon. Friend have?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One of the aspects of the progress made around the Humber is the close working relationships that have been established by businesses and council leaders north and south of the Humber with the Government. I look forward to visiting the area again—I am a regular visitor—so that we can address those serious challenges and ensure that the industrial strategy reaches York as well?

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Over the last seven months nearly 2,500 job losses have been announced in York, including some at Nestlé, as well as the closure of two company head offices. There are clear challenges to York’s economy. Will the Secretary of State agree to meet me, along with his senior officials, so that we can address those serious challenges and ensure that the industrial strategy reaches York as well?
Greg Clark: I should be very happy to do that. Nestlé is, of course, a major employer, and there is a cluster of food and drink and agriculture businesses in and around York. It has been identified in the industrial strategy as an area of real potential, and I look forward to working with the hon. Lady to realise that potential.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): As the Secretary of State will know, expanding Torbay’s manufacturing sector is a key part of diversifying our economy for the future, but a lack of skills may hold us back. Will he confirm that the Government are still seeking to deliver institutes of technology throughout the regions in England?

Greg Clark: I will indeed. As I said in an earlier answer, the importance of upgrading our skills education is vital in all parts of the country, including Torbay, and institutes of technology are a way of making sure that industries can benefit from the particular skills that they need.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Having abolished the regional development agencies, the Conservative party has refused to invest in growth for good jobs across the country. Ours is now the most unequal economy in western Europe. If every region produced at the same rate per head as London, we would all be one third richer, but instead working people have not had a pay rise for seven years. Will the Secretary of State commit himself to matching the specific proposals for investment for jobs that are laid out in Labour’s industrial strategy, or does his new-found largesse end at the shores of Ulster?

Greg Clark: Again, that was a disappointing response. The hon. Lady knows, and the leaders of her local councils know, how important initiatives such as the city deal and the growth deal have been in the north-east. If she looks around the country, she will see that, whereas in past years most jobs were created in London and the south-east, that situation has been transformed, and the north-east of England is one of the areas that have created jobs at a more rapid rate than anywhere else in the country. She should commend that development.

Carbon Reduction Plan

13. Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): What are the reasons for the time taken to publish the Government’s carbon reduction plan?

The Minister of State, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Claire Perry): I welcome the hon. Lady to her new job. I also have a new job, and, since taking on the role I have been incredibly impressed by the progress that the United Kingdom has made, both in meeting its own climate emissions targets and in exercising international leadership in that regard. I want the carbon growth plan to be as ambitious, robust and clear a blueprint as it can be, so that we can continue to deliver on this hugely vital piece of domestic and international policy. I am therefore taking the time to ensure that the draft could be extended to become more ambitious, and I intend to publish the plan when Parliament sits again after the summer recess.

Mr Speaker: Order. I have been on the edge of my seat while listening to the hon. Lady, as has always been the case, but I think I am right in surmising that she was seeking to group Question 13 with Questions 15 and 19. So carried away was she with the excitement of her new responsibilities that I think she neglected to inform us of that.

Claire Perry: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I shall group Question 13 with Questions 15 and 19.

15. Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): What are the reasons for the time taken to publish the Government’s carbon reduction plan.

19. Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): What are the reasons for the time taken to publish the Government’s carbon reduction plan.

Ruth George: I thank the Minister for her words. Will she join me in commending the work of the Moors for the Future partnership in my constituency in the Peak District for the purpose of carbon reduction? It is revegetating the large areas of bare peat that exist there, thus fixing carbon emissions. Will the Minister also please let us know what effect the new timeframe of the carbon reduction plan, which was due in 2016, will have on industries and other partnerships that are relying on seeing the plan?

Claire Perry: I am, of course, delighted to welcome that incredibly innovative partnership, which was launched in 2002 and is making real progress in working out how we can naturally store carbon in the peat environment that the hon. Lady now represents. As I have said, I intend to publish the clean growth plan when Parliament returns from the summer recess. I look forward to cross-party discussion and, hopefully, consensus on a document that is hugely important both for Britain’s domestic future and for our international leadership.

Paul Blomfield: The publication date that the Minister mentions is almost a year after the date originally intended by the Government. Does not this reflect a lack of commitment to tackling climate change? What is she doing to engage with other Departments to ensure that they carry out emissions impact assessments so that we can see a real commitment to tackling climate change across the whole of the Government?

Claire Perry: May I gently say to the hon. Gentleman that, as the proud MP for the constituency that has Britain’s leading carbon capture and storage research facility, he ought to welcome the progress that successive Governments have made on this agenda? We were the first country in the world to set binding carbon budgets, and we have over-achieved on the first and second ones. Our full intention is to engage the whole of Government and industry in delivering on the upcoming budgets.

Mike Amesbury: Again, we do not seem to have a date for publication. The Minister talks about a date after the recess, but what specific date is that? Does she not agree that this delay is creating considerable uncertainty for the business community, and that it has the potential to increase energy bills?
Claire Perry: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place. He will know that we are talking about setting a trajectory of budgets from 2022 and beyond. The progress we are making is absolutely exceptional, both domestically and internationally. Perhaps he is new in his place, but he could look in his diary and check when the House returns from the summer recess. My intention is to publish the plan when the House returns from the summer recess.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Single-sentence inquiries are now required.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The Minister spoke of peer-to-peer exchanges of energy. I have no idea what they are, but given the enthusiasm she has brought to her brief I believe that we all deserve a tutorial. Could that be arranged?

Claire Perry: It would be a pleasure to educate my right hon. Friend. Let us think of it as a lot of hot air being generated by one particular point and being shared around many other data points. It is part of our future, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I am sure the hon. Lady’s ministerial peers in other countries—to whom I think she referred earlier—must have felt keenly conscious of their great privilege in meeting her.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I would like to applaud this Government’s record on tackling carbon emissions. Our carbon reduction plan, alongside investment in new technologies and ratification of the Paris agreement, will make us world leaders in this field and create many more jobs—particularly, I hope, in Taunton Deane, with spin-offs from Hinkley Point, the lowest carbon energy development in Europe. Can the Minister give any further indications of how the Government are responding to the United States’ withdrawal from the Paris climate change agreement?

Claire Perry: Even those who do not think that this is a pressing international issue must surely welcome the fact that there are now more than 400,000 people employed in this industry—more than in the aerospace sector. Britain has shown, in the G7 and the Environment Council meetings, that we are absolutely prepared to stand shoulder to shoulder with our European and international partners to make up any deficit caused by Mr Trump’s withdrawal.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): We were promised the publication of this report in the middle of 2016. In October 2016, the permanent secretary promised that it would be published by February 2017. In January 2017, the then Secretary of State promised that the report would be published in the first three months of this year. Now we hear that it might be published this autumn. A year and a half on from the Committee on Climate Change’s report was produced. We have had Brexit, we have had a general election and we have had the withdrawal of the USA from the Paris climate change agreement. I want to take the time to ensure that this report exceeds his expectations. I will take no lessons from those on the Opposition Front Bench, who have consistently failed to welcome this country’s progress, which the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband)—who is, sadly, not in his place—was sensible enough to kick off in 2009. I believe in delivery, not promises, unlike the Labour party’s manifesto.

Topical Questions

T1. [900041] Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): As outlined in the Queen’s Speech, our industrial strategy will drive prosperity across the country, and in the past month we reached an important stage in that process. While we analyse the nearly 2,000 responses, we continue to make decisions that help UK-wide industries. We have announced £1 billion over the next four years for our most innovative industries, such as artificial intelligence, medicine, and autonomous vehicles. We have boosted investment in UK bioscience, such as by providing the University of Edinburgh’s Roslin Institute with some £20 million, which will not only support its research on infectious diseases but create more highly skilled jobs and cement the UK as a world leader in science and innovation.

Rachel Reeves: Energy security is essential for national security and for family finances. The essential Moorside energy project in Cumbria is key to such security, but with Toshiba now predicted to lose £7 billion and the French firm backing the project pulling out will the Secretary of State tell us if and when the project will go ahead and provide the assurances that industry, workers and consumers desperately need?

Greg Clark: We have inaugurated a new era of nuclear power through the approval of Hinkley Point C. The NuGen consortium, the membership of which has changed from time to time, is confident that that investment will be able to proceed.

T5. [900045] Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): I welcome the Government’s commitment in the Queen’s Speech to the new industrial strategy. Will the Secretary of State update the House on his plans to support new, cutting-edge technologies that will help Britain to lead the fourth industrial revolution?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend was a great champion of the strategy in the previous Parliament, and I hope that he will be here. One of its early fruits is the industrial strategy challenge fund, which is already making resources available for research in healthcare and medicine, artificial
intelligence, clean energy, driverless cars, advanced materials, and satellites and space technology. That is exactly in line with what he and his group have been urging.

T2. [900042] Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): The Conservative manifesto pledged to deliver a country “where wealth and opportunity are spread across every community in the United Kingdom”. and I see that Northern Ireland has just had its share. Will the Secretary of State tell me how the Government’s industrial strategy will bring wealth and opportunity to places such as Blackburn, where the national average wage is far less than it is in Maidenhead, for example? Blackburn has seen too many cuts from this Government and it is time that we had some investment, so how quickly can the strategy be delivered?

Greg Clark: I welcome the hon. Lady to her place. She will discover over time, I hope, that a key part of the industrial strategy is to drive growth in all parts of the country. My Department and I have looked to get funds out of Whitehall and into local places in every part of the country, including £320 million in Lancashire for the funding of the growth deal. She will also be aware that it is necessary to have an economy that is prospering, and one thing that would stand in the way of that is the record peacetime taxation with which the manifesto on which she stood was threatening the country.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are very short of time. We need to speed up.

T8. [900048] Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Our emerging technology and universities sectors welcomed our manifesto commitment to increase R and D spending from 1.7% to 2.4% of GDP, but it was not in the Queen’s Speech, so what has happened to that commitment?

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): Fear not, Mr Speaker, legislation is not required to deliver on that commitment. It remains a priority for the Government and for the delivery of our industrial strategy. We want to get to 2.4% of GDP for our R and D spend, and we have a longer-term ambition of 3% after that.

T3. [900043] Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): Research by Citizens Advice found that half the people on zero-hours contracts, and two thirds of people on temporary contracts, worryingly believe that they are not entitled to paid holiday. Kirklees citizens advice bureau has found employers deliberately misleading workers about their rights. What steps is the Minister taking to make sure that workers are aware of their rights to a fair holiday? What repercussions will there be for companies that mislead staff? Can the Minister confirm when the Taylor review will be published?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): The hon. Lady is right to draw attention to workers who are misled and workers who believe erroneously that they have fewer rights than they do. We are absolutely committed that any individual, whatever contract they are on, is entitled to their rights. We have increased the powers open to Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs to enforce those rights.

T9. [900050] Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): Market towns are vital to the rural economy, and they are the heart of rural communities, drawing people together across the 531 square miles of my constituency. Modern shopping habits, however, can mean that it is difficult for businesses in market towns to survive. What are the Government doing to support our much-needed and much-loved market towns?

Margot James: Market towns, such as the ones in my hon. Friend’s constituency, will have all the support we are giving to the retail sector and high streets so that they can flourish.

T4. [900044] Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): The National Audit Office recently published a report on Hinkley Point C that is nothing short of damning, describing it as “risky and expensive”. When will the Government listen to the experts and scrap this costly expenditure, and when will they invest instead in carbon capture and storage?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): If ever you decided not to be Mr Speaker, a career as chairman of the BBC Radio 4 programme “Just a Minute” would be appropriate. In answering the hon. Lady’s question, I will try to keep to your one sentence rule.

The Hinkley Point contract is entirely designed so as not to get the Government involved in expensive capital expenditure, and the nuclear power produced by Hinkley Point will be an excellent part of a mix of power for decades to come.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): Having access to the next generation of skilled workers is vital for business confidence and growth. Will the Minister consider promoting the opportunities of our ambitious apprenticeship programme through the annual business rate mailer to increase awareness?

Joseph Johnson: Significant attention was given in the Queen’s Speech to commitments to roll out new institutes of technology, to the extra £0.5 billion of spending that will be given to further education and to our target to deliver 3 million apprenticeship starts by 2020. High-quality further and technical education is an absolute priority for this country and this Government.

T6. [900046] Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): The British ceramics industry owes its current success and future survival to the innovation and development of breakthrough technologies. With funds such as Horizon 2020 potentially disappearing along with our EU membership, will the Government assure me that domestic projects such as the advanced manufacturing research centre will receive support to keep us at the cutting edge?

Joseph Johnson: We remain committed to ensuring that the UK remains the go-to place for science, innovation and tech investment in the years ahead. We want to remain open to collaboration and research partnerships with institutions across the European Union and around the world as we negotiate our departure from the EU.
Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the Government’s industrial strategy for Scotland?

Greg Clark: It has been warmly received in Scotland, and we have had a positive response from businesses there. I had an enjoyable roundtable in Aberdeen, which was described by one local business as a “breath of fresh air.” I look forward to continuing that engagement with everyone in Scotland, and I am sure my hon. Friend will play a big part.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): While other countries, including our EU partners, have over the years used public purchasing to support their own industries, Britain often has not. As Brexit approaches, what are the Government doing to ensure that Government Departments, local services, emergency services, councils and other public bodies back British industry and British jobs by buying British first?

Greg Clark: The right hon. Gentleman will know that we have already changed the procurement guidance so that local value can be taken into account. We have anticipated the issue he mentions and this is being done.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): The Secretary of State is aware that I have long campaigned for parental bereavement leave, and I was delighted to see this policy in not only the Conservative manifesto, but the Labour manifesto. On that basis, will he kindly set out what steps the Government will take to introduce this important benefit?

Margot James: I agree that bereaved parents should have the opportunity to grieve away from the workplace, and we will seek to provide for that. I am willing to meet my hon. Friend to discuss further how we might make such provision.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): The Secretary of State has talked repeatedly today about the discussions he has had on Brexit. Which trade unions has he met, and when?

Greg Clark: I regularly meet trade unions: I met Frances O’Grady of the TUC last week; I spoke to Roy Rickhuss of the steel union yesterday; and I spoke to Len McCluskey a few weeks ago. My contacts cover both sides of the employer and trade union mix.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Earlier this year, 116 MPs signed a letter I wrote to the Secretary of State urging him to implement the recommendations of the Hendry review for the world’s first ever tidal lagoon. When will a decision be taken?

Richard Harrington: The Hendry review also said that there are significant questions as to whether tidal lagoons can be cost-effective, and very complex issues are involved. We are fully aware that a Government decision is needed in order for anything to proceed, but it is absolutely right that we take the necessary time to consider this carefully.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Now that the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner) has reached the midpoint of his parliamentary career, I had intended to call him if he was standing, but he is not and so I will not—but if he does, I will.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): I have listened to the questions and answers for the past hour, and I hear about the city deals and all the rest of it, but why does the Secretary of State not answer the specific questions about the trade unions? If he wants to give the impression that he is on the side of working-class people, why do not the Government drop the trade union Bill and all the rest of it?

Greg Clark: I could not have been clearer about the regular discussions I have with trade unionists. My concern, which I hope would be the hon. Gentleman’s concern, is to make sure that in all parts of the United Kingdom we generate the jobs and growth to ensure that all working people have a prosperous future to look forward to. That is the purpose of this Government, in contrast to the manifesto on which he stood.

Mr Skinner: Answer the question!

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Skinner: I did not get an answer.

Mr Speaker: Order. I must say to the hon. Gentleman that on the strength of his 47 years’ experience of this place he knows that not receiving an answer is not an altogether novel phenomenon in the House of Commons, irrespective of who is in power at the time.
NEW MEMBERS

The following Members took and subscribed the Oath, or made and subscribed the Affirmation required by law:

Jonathan George Caladine Lord, for Woking
Adam James Harold Holloway, Gravesham.

Mr Speaker: As we are about to hear the first urgent question of the Parliament, I think it right to remind the House, particularly the Front-Bench teams, of the conventions on time limits. Colleagues will understand that I do so because they have not been adhered to with any religiosity in recent times. For urgent questions, the Minister may speak for up to three minutes; the person asking the urgent question and the official spokesperson, where different, a maximum of two minutes; and the third-party spokesperson a maximum of one minute.

For oral statements, the Minister is usually limited to 10 minutes; the Official Opposition spokesperson to five minutes; and the third-party spokesperson to two minutes. Members wishing to take part in statements, urgent questions and business questions must be in the Chamber, in accordance with a very long-established convention, before such events begin, and colleagues should not expect to be called to ask a question if they are not in their place as the statement/urgent question/business questions begin.

In a moment, I shall call Jonathan Ashworth, but it might be helpful if I indicate to the House that, as there are not far short of 70 Members wishing to take part in the continued debate on the Queen’s Speech, I would like the exchanges on this question not to go on much beyond half an hour.

NHS Shared Business Services

12.41 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State to make a statement on NHS Shared Business Services.

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): As the House knows, on 24 March 2016 I was informed of a serious incident involving a large backlog of unprocessed NHS patient correspondence by the company contracted to deliver it to GP surgeries—NHS Shared Business Services. The backlog arose from the primary care services’ GP mail redirection service that SBS was contracted to run. No documents were lost, and all were kept in secure storage, but my immediate concern was that patient safety had been compromised by the delay in forwarding correspondence. A rapid process was started to identify whether anyone had been put at risk.

The Department of Health and NHS England immediately established an incident team. All the documentation has now been sent on to the relevant GP surgery where it was possible to do so, following an initial clinical assessment of where any patient risk may lie. Some 200,000 pieces were temporary residence forms and a further 535,000 pieces were assessed as low risk. A first triage identified 2,508 items with a higher risk of harm, of which the vast majority have now been assessed by a GP. Of those 84% were confirmed to be of no harm to patients and 9% as needing a further clinical review. To date, no harm has been confirmed to any patients as a result of this incident.

Today’s National Audit Office report confirms that patient safety was the Department and NHS England’s primary concern, but as well as patient safety, transparency with both the public and the House has been my priority. I was advised by my officials not to make the issue public last March until an assessment of the risks to patient safety had been completed and all relevant GP surgeries informed. I accepted that advice for the very simple reason that publicising the issue would have meant GP surgeries being inundated with inquiries from worried patients, which would have prevented them from doing the most important work, namely investigating the named patients who were potentially at risk.

A proactive statement about what had happened was again not recommended by my Department in July for the same reasons and because the process was not complete. However, as I explained to the House in February, on balance I decided that it was important for the House to know what had happened before we broke for recess, so I overruled that advice and placed a written statement on 21 July. Since then, the Public Accounts Committee has been kept regularly informed, most recently being updated by my permanent secretary in February. The Information Commissioner was updated in August.

In July 2016, I committed to keeping the House updated once the investigations were complete and more was known, and I will continue to do so.

Jonathan Ashworth: I welcome the Secretary of State to his place, but is it not an absolute scandal that 709,000 letters, including blood test results, cancer screening
appointments and child protection notes, failed to be delivered, were left in an unknown warehouse and, in many cases, were destroyed? Does not the National Audit Office reveal today a shambolic catalogue of failure that took place on the Secretary of State’s watch?

As of four weeks ago, 1,700 cases of potential harm to patients had been identified, with this number set to rise, and a third of GPs have yet to respond on whether unprocessed items sent to them indicate potential harm for patients. Does the Health Secretary agree that this delay is unacceptable? When will all outstanding items be reviewed and processed?

The Secretary of State talks about transparency, but he came to this House in February because we summoned him here. In February, he told us that he first knew of the situation on 24 March 2016, yet the NAO report makes it clear that the Department of Health was informed of the issues on 17 March and that NHS England set up the incident team on 23 March, before he was informed, despite his implying that he set up the incident team. Will he clear up the discrepancies in the timelines between what he told the House and what the NAO reported?

The Secretary of State is a board member of Shared Business Services, and many hon. Members, not least my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), have warned him of the problems and delays with the transfer of records from SBS. Given that those warnings were on the record, why did he not insist on stronger oversight of the contract?

The cost of this debacle could be at least £6.6 million in administration fees alone, equivalent to the average annual salary of 230 nurses. Can the Health Secretary say how those costs will be met and whether he expects them to escalate?

Finally, does the right hon. Gentleman agree with the NAO that there is a conflict of interest between his role as Secretary of State and his role as a board member? Further to that, can he explain why his predecessor as Secretary of State sold one share on 1 January from the Department to Steria, leaving the Secretary of State as a minority stake owner in the company, and never informed Parliament or reported that share in the Department’s annual report—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. We are immensely grateful to the hon. Gentleman, but sooner or later the discipline of sticking to the two minutes has to take root. I am afraid that it is as simple as that and I am sorry, but he has had two and a half minutes.

**Mr Hunt:** Let me respond to those points. First, what happened at SBS was totally unacceptable. It was incompetent and it should never have allowed that backlog to develop, but before the hon. Gentleman gets on his high horse, may I remind him that SBS and the governance arrangements surrounding it were set up in 2008, at a time when a Labour Government were rather keen on contracting with the private sector? I know that things have changed, but the fact of the matter is that throughout this process our priority has been to keep patients safe. Transparency is nearly always the right thing; I am the Secretary of State who introduced transparency over standards of care in hospitals—

[Laughter.] It is interesting that Opposition Members are laughing, as Labour was the party responsible for sitting on what happened at Mid Staffs for more than four years, when nothing was done.

Transparency is incredibly important but it is not an absolute virtue, and in this case there was a specific reason for that. If we had informed the public and the House immediately, GP surgeries would have been overwhelmed—we are talking about 709,000 pieces of patient data—and they would not have been able to get on as quickly as we needed them to with identifying risk. That was the priority and that is what today’s report confirms: patient safety was the priority of the Department and NHS England. I put it to the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) that if he were in my shoes, and faced with advice that said that it was wrong to go public straight away as that would compromise the very important work GPs had to do to keep patients safe, he would have followed exactly the same advice. That is why, while I completely recognise that there is a potential conflict of interest with the Government arrangements, I do not accept that there was an actual conflict of interest, because patient safety concerns always overrode any interests we had as a shareholder in SBS.

The NHS is a large organisation. It has a huge number of contracts with both the public and private sectors, and no Government of any party can ever guarantee that there will be absolutely no breach of contract. However, what we can do is ensure that we react quickly when there is such a breach, which happened on this occasion, and that we have better assurance than we had on this occasion. I assure the House that the appropriate lessons will be learned.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): While Members from across the House will be relieved that so far no patients are identified as having been harmed by this appalling incident, will the Secretary of State set out what steps he is taking to ensure that this can never happen again?

**Mr Hunt:** Absolutely. There is a short-term and long-term lesson. The short-term point is that it is unlikely this would happen again because it was paper correspondence, and we are increasingly moving all the transfer of correspondence to electronic systems. The longer-term point is exactly that—

[Interruption.] An Opposition Member mentions cyber-attacks; they are absolutely right to do so, because of course we have different risks. This clearly indicates that we need better checks in place, so that when we trust an independent contractor with very important work, we know that the job is actually being done, and that did not happen in this case.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): The NAO’s findings are deeply concerning for the families of patients caught up in this chaotic shambles. For those involved and the wider public, this will only deepen their mistrust and misgivings in how the Tories are running the NHS; we can be grateful that they are not in charge in Scotland. Surely it is simply astonishing that a company partly owned by the Department of Health failed to deliver 500,000 NHS letters, many of which contained information critical to patient care. Not only were 1,700 people potentially at risk of harm, but thousands of others were put at risk. Was this SBS
contract properly scrutinised by the Secretary of State? Was patient care or cost-cutting at the forefront of that decision? Why did he publish a vague written statement in July 2016 when he actually knew what was going on four months earlier?

Mr Hunt: I am happy to confirm that. I am also happy to say that the problems in the old Mid Staffs, which I am afraid we had in many parts of the NHS, are being addressed much more quickly because of an independent oversight regime—the new Care Quality Commission inspection regime—and the appointment of a chief inspector of hospitals, who is independent in law and gives his judgment independently in law. That is something the Labour party regrettably tried to vote down.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): May I commend to the House the record of the debate I secured in November 2011, in which I warned the Government in terms about the very poor record of SBS and urged them not to part-privatise what had been an excellent NHS service? Ministers said at the time that the new contract would save £250 million. Will the Secretary of State now tell the House how much this scandal has cost, rather than saved, the taxpayer? Will he apologise both to the staff and the patients affected?

Mr Hunt: The costs are in excess of £6 million, and we are seeking to recover as much of that as we can from the company involved. I know that the regime in the Labour party has changed, but to try to turn this into an issue of privatisation when under the right hon. Gentleman’s own party’s Government—and indeed, during his own time as Health Secretary—we had problems at Mid Staffs that were squarely in the public sector is wholly inappropriate. This is about proper assurance of what is going on in the NHS, and both sides of the House need to learn the lessons.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): In order to reassure my constituents, will my right hon. Friend confirm that NHS SBS no longer provides this mail redirection service, that all backlogged correspondence has now been delivered to the relevant GP surgeries for filing and that no patient harm has been found in this case?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is exactly right. Of course we welcome the fact that no patient harm has been identified to date. We have to wait until the process of the third clinical review is completed on at-risk patients’ records, which will happen by the end of December. She is absolutely right to say that SBS is no longer performing this contract; it has been taken in-house. Other parts of the SBS contract not related to what we are discussing today were given to another supplier.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): Does the Secretary of State agree that this is a very straightforward case? It shows a woeful lack of transparency, is a good example of why so many of us have concerns about too much private sector involvement in the NHS and, bluntly, there is a conflict of interest for the Secretary of State.

Mr Hunt: I acknowledged in my statement that there is, or was, a potential conflict of interest when the contract with SBS was in operation, and the National Audit Office talks about that today. In reality, as the National Audit Office confirms, patient safety was always our overriding priority in all the decisions we took. I suggest to the hon. Gentleman, as I do to the shadow Health Secretary, that he would have taken exactly the same decisions had he been in my shoes.
Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): My right hon. Friend has confirmed that the contract has now been taken in-house. Can he also confirm that it is a totally different operation and that none of the people who were involved in making the decisions is now involved in making the decisions on the current service?

Mr Hunt: I can absolutely confirm that.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I am pleased that the Secretary of State at least acknowledges that this was incompetent but, crucially, does this not run deeper? Problems were first raised in January 2014, and then again internally by an administrator in June 2015. He found out, as Secretary of State for Health, only in March last year, and the Public Accounts Committee found out and was able to look at this only in September, because information was released on the final day that Parliament sat last summer. He talks about transparency, but does he not think there are deeper lessons to be learned here not only about transparency but about how the NHS supports whistleblowers?

Mr Hunt: There are two big lessons that we need to learn. First, why did the company have no internal systems in place to deal with the fact that from 2011 the mail was building up into a backlog? According to the NAO report, the situation was not escalated to the chief executive’s level until the end of 2015. That is wholly unacceptable. Secondly, it is also unacceptable that we did not have the assurance systems in place that would have allowed us to know that a backlog was building up. That is why it is so important that lessons are learned.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Who drew up the contract for the redirection service that omitted any key performance indicators?

Mr Hunt: The original contracts with SBS went back to 2008, which is when it started providing mail redirection services, but they were renewed in 2011, which is why I think Members on both sides of the House need to reflect on this.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Over 700,000 pieces of sensitive medical information went missing, and the situation was allowed to escalate over a five-year period without being discovered, which I think shows gross incompetence. What has been done to set right this wrong, especially for the families left behind who have been affected by this worrying incident?

Mr Hunt: There has been a huge operation to deal with this. As the hon. Gentleman will know, there were 709,000 pieces of correspondence. We did an initial clinical triage to identify which ones were low risk, such as notifications of change of address, and which ones were higher risk, such as test results. We identified 2,500 that had a high priority, and 84% of those had so far been identified as being of no clinical risk, but we are continuing to do more thorough clinical risk assessment.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): As I am sure the Secretary of State is aware, for many patients the image created by the media is one of documents being lost. Can he confirm that at all times the correspondence was kept either in secure conditions on NHS premises or in secure archive facilities?

Mr Hunt: I am happy to confirm that. I think that in such situations it is important to allay public concerns about what might have happened. What happened was unacceptable, but no patient data were lost.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): The Secretary of State says that no patients were harmed and that the documents were securely stored, but 35 sacks of mail were destroyed. How does he know that he made the right call in every situation?

Mr Hunt: Just to be clear, what I said was that to date there is no evidence of any patients being harmed, but the process of proper clinical review, with multidisciplinary teams, will take until the end of the year. We have to do this properly to get to the answer. We hope that it remains the case that no patients were harmed, but we will not know that until the end of the year. However, throughout this whole process we have prioritised the highest risk cases and made sure that they get the most urgent attention.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): Following this failure, I welcome the Secretary of State’s decisive action in bringing in the national incident team. How will we learn the lessons and share the best practice, as discovered by that team?

Mr Hunt: The NHS is extremely good at responding to crises and emergencies, as tragically we have found out in recent months. This is an example of the NHS doing a very good job when it realises the scale of the problem. For me, the lessons that really need to be learned are about not the response to the issue but the assurance processes that allowed the problem to happen in the first place.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): The National Audit Office says that the review of the backlog of correspondence has found 1,788 cases of potential patient harm, so what action is the Secretary of State taking to support those patients?

Mr Hunt: All those cases have already been looked at by two sets of clinicians, and so far, on the basis of those two reviews, no patient harm has been identified. However, because we want to be absolutely sure, we are having a third clinical review that will be even more thorough, potentially with more than one set of clinicians, so that we can get to the bottom of this and find out.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I understand that the inquiry has focused on patient risk, but has there been any analysis of the impact on patient waiting times, which are also extremely important for patient care? Exactly how many patients have waited longer than they should have for treatment?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Lady is right. That is one of the most critical questions when it comes to trying to understand whether there was any actual patient harm. Ordinarily, if a patient was waiting for a test result that
did not arrive at their GP’s surgery, the GP would chase it up and get a copy, so there would be no delay in treatment. However, only by looking at the patient’s notes can we understand whether any harm is likely to have happened. So far we have not identified any patient harm, but we will continue to look.

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): The Secretary of State told the House in February that all correspondence was kept safe and secure, and he has repeated that claim today, so when did he know that 35 sacks of mail had been destroyed by staff, and why has he not mentioned it since?

Mr Hunt: As the hon. Lady knows, I was informed at the end of March 2016. The issue with the correspondence that was destroyed relates to procedures around what it is legitimate to do when patients have been dead for 10 years. At the moment we are not aware of any specific risk to patients as a result of those sacks of mail being destroyed, but we will continue to look at the issue very closely.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Secretary of State was made aware of the failings of the contract and warned about the dangers in the House in 2011, yet he did not take up two places on the company’s board. Would that not have added to the overall scrutiny of the contract? Is he not guilty of being asleep at the wheel?

Mr Hunt: I have been Health Secretary for a long time, but not since as far back as 2011. However, the hon. Gentleman asks an important question. It is true that the Department was entitled to three seats on the SBS board but took up only one, but I do not believe that would have made a difference in this case, because the board directors were intended to represent the Department as SBS shareholders. What we needed was better assurance of the implementation of the contract. That needed to happen with the NHS as a contractor. That is the lesson that needs to be learned.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The Secretary of State talks about the need to learn lessons, but we have seen a pattern across Government—not just in the Department of Health, but in the Department for Work and Pensions and the Home Office, for example—of companies being awarded contracts and then failing miserably. Those companies have the contract taken away but are then awarded another one. Clearly the lesson to be learned across Government is that some companies are simply not fit for purpose when it comes to delivering public services.

Mr Hunt: We do need to be robust when companies fail in their contracts with the public sector. I do not think that this affects only private sector companies, because we contract with people in the public sector and are let down. Equally, we need to be robust when the right things do not happen. Most importantly, the lesson from what happened with SBS is that we need to understand much more quickly when things are going wrong, so that we can nip problems in the bud. That did not happen in this case.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): How many more times is the Secretary of State going to come to this House, as he has done on countless occasions, when he personally is at the centre of a controversy? Even a cat has only nine lives.

Mr Hunt: I am not sure that I have as many lives as the hon. Gentleman.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) was absolutely right when she suggested that the Secretary of State is trying to downgrade 1,788 cases of potential harm and a potential conflict of interest to no more than an administrative error by a contracted-out service. In my constituency, a tender for cancer care was ended prematurely, costing the taxpayer millions of pounds. Are these not examples of where the Conservative party’s ideological agenda to contract out our NHS services is failing and patients are suffering as a result?

Mr Hunt: Quite the opposite. Those examples show that we take the contracts off the private sector when it lets us down. That is what happened in the case raised by the hon. Gentleman and with SBS.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Shared services in my constituency saved £120 million in four years. When the system was privatised under Steria, it lost £4 million and goes on being inefficient. Can the Government escape from this paralysis of thought that is costing the country so much—that everything private is good and everything public is bad? Will they look to not outsourcing but insourcing services from the inefficient private sector back to our wonderful, efficient civil service?

Mr Hunt: I gently remind the hon. Gentleman that the last Government who had an active policy of increasing private sector market share in the NHS were the last Labour Government. This Government legislated to stop the Government nationally prioritising the private sector and made that a decision for individual doctors at a local level.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): As a doctor, I understand the importance of ensuring that results and letters are reviewed in a timely manner. There will always be opportunity for error in any system relying on bits of paper being sent around. Hospitals such as Peterborough City hospital, where I have worked, provide results electronically, which is quicker, as well as having a back-up paper form, which provides for patient safety. Will the Secretary of State reassure us that good practice such as this is being rolled out elsewhere?

Mr Hunt: Absolutely. My hon. Friend is right to point out that we are in a different world from the world of 2011. The future is to transport patient records securely over electronic systems. It is much quicker and there is much less room for error, but we do need the back-up systems that she mentioned.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I wrote to the Secretary of State in January on behalf of a GP practice in my constituency that is concerned about the potential impact on staff working at the
practice. I raised the matter again four months ago during the previous urgent question, and the Secretary of State promised to look into the impact on staff. Can he report back to the House today?

Mr Hunt: I will relook at the situation in that surgery to ensure that we are learning any lessons that need to be learned. However, this is a complex process. There have already been two clinical reviews in the vast majority of the high-risk cases, and we want to have a third review to really establish whether there was any actual patient harm. That takes clinician time, which is one of the reasons why we have not been able to complete the process by today. It will take until Christmas to do that because we have to balance the other responsibilities that clinicians have in their daily work.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Earlier, the Secretary of State assured the House that the individual directors who are responsible for this catastrophe are no longer in a position to cause similar damage. Is he aware that the briefest of searches through Companies House records shows that the same three or four names associated with Shared Business Services come up time and again?

There are about a dozen companies, many of which come under the Sopra Steria Ltd group of companies, and most of which advertise the fact that they do a lot of work for the NHS right now. One is titled NHS Shared Employee Services Ltd, which suggests that, far from having been removed from any influence, the individual directors who were legally responsible for this disaster are still very much in a position to make money for themselves while presiding over similar disasters in the future.

Mr Hunt: I note the hon. Gentleman's comments, but he will understand that I am not in a position to pass judgment at the Dispatch Box on the behaviour of individuals. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has respected and well-established systems in place to ensure that people who are not fit and proper to be company directors are not able to continue with their duties.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): My constituents are served not by the SBS contract, but by the Capita contract. I have raised problems with that contract to the Secretary of State on many occasions. There are still problems with the helpline, which appears incapable of logging and following through with complaints. Why is this contract, which is clearly failing, not taken back in-house by the Government?

Mr Hunt: Just to be clear, this is a different contract, as I know the hon. Lady understands. We have been working hard, and I know that the hon. Lady worked hard with my Department in the previous Parliament to try to get to the bottom of the problems with the Capita contract. My understanding is that the situation is improving, but I will happily look into the individual situation she mentioned.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State said that this takes time and, if I heard correctly, that a third of GPs have failed to respond. What steps is he taking to ensure that patient care is not being compromised by the extra admin burden on already overworked GPs?

Mr Hunt: We are paying GP surgeries for the extra admin time that this is taking. That is designed to ensure that, where necessary, they can buy in extra resources to deal with the extra admin. The hon. Lady is absolutely right that we have to ensure that GPs' core work is not compromised by the issue.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I used to work as a clinical scientist in the NHS, so I know only too well the harm that can be caused by the non-arrival of a test result. If a diagnostic test is performed and the result goes nowhere and is not seen by a clinician, as in this case, it is the same health outcome as if the test was not done at all. Will the Secretary of State stop trying to downplay the situation and own up to the seriousness of this scandal?

Mr Hunt: No one listening objectively could possibly say that I am, or that anyone on this side of the House is, downplaying this very serious situation. Since the issue came to light, we have instituted a review of 709,000 pieces of patient correspondence. We have identified the high-priority ones, of which there are 2,508. Two, and sometimes three, clinical tests have been done on all of them. No patient harm has been identified to date, but we are not complacent. We will continue the process until we have been through every single patient record with that thoroughness.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I too will mention the Capita contract. This is not an isolated case. A pattern is occurring. The Government are failing in their governance over patient records. Will the Secretary of State now review that governance and bring it back in-house? It is so urgent that we oversee the safety of patients first.

Mr Hunt: As I confirmed to the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), I will look into the outstanding issues with the Capita contract for GPs that are not related to the delivery of patient records. My understanding is that things have got better, but we were very unhappy with the initial performance from Capita.
Confidence and Supply Arrangement

Application for emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

1.17 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I rise to propose that the House debates a specific and important matter for urgent consideration—namely, the Government’s confidence and supply deal with the Democratic Unionist party and the associated funding arrangements.

Yesterday morning, the Government confirmed a confidence and supply agreement with the Democratic Unionist party to secure a working majority in this Parliament. The central part of the deal involved a funding arrangement that would see Northern Ireland benefit from more than £1 billion of extra investment, while the other nations of the United Kingdom would secure next to nothing. The full details of the deal must be fully debated and all the issues properly scrutinised as quickly as possible, certainly ahead of Thursday’s votes on the Humble Address. Yesterday there was an hour-long statement, with little notice, from the First Secretary of State, who took questions from hon. Members. That cannot be considered satisfactory, given the significance and importance of the deal. Members must be given a chance to debate all the issues fully.

The normal arrangements for the funding of the nations of the United Kingdom have been turned on their head with the disregard of the Barnett formula. Had the Barnett formula been applied, Scotland would have been entitled to nearly £2.9 billion of additional funding and Wales would have got an extra £1.7 billion. The First Secretary yesterday claimed that the deal was to be compared to allocations made under city deals. That is not the case and that assertion must be tested. City deals in Scotland are match-funded by the Scottish Government and local authority partners; and Northern Ireland is not a city.

There are also questions about the role of the Scotland Office in all this. On Sunday, the Secretary of State for Scotland noted he would not support any funding that, “is deliberately sought to subvert the Barnett rules”.

This deal clearly does—it fails that test. We and all the new Scottish Members of Parliament need to know whether the Scotland Office made representations to the Prime Minister in advance of this deal being announced, and whether it did anything at all to protect Scotland’s vital funding interests in this deal.

While we welcome the increased funding for Northern Ireland, we believe there are serious questions regarding the relevance of the Barnett formula in the light of this new deal. If this represents a relaxation of ideological austerity, all regions and nations of the UK should benefit. This matter requires more attention from the House, and I humbly request an emergency debate to get the answers that this House and this country need.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member asks leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration, namely the DUP funding deal. I have listened carefully—it was my decision to allocate to the hon. Gentleman three minutes in which to make his case—to the application from the hon. Member. That cannot be considered satisfactory, given the significance and importance of the deal. Members must be given a chance to debate all the issues fully.

I do realise that that will disappoint the hon. Gentleman, but he is a persistent terrier, and I feel sure that he and other Members from his Benches will raise this matter in all sorts of ways in days to come, and they will not be deterred in any way by the thought that they might be repeating themselves. [Interruption.] They will very properly return to this matter as and when they wish—preferably, however, when they are on their feet, rather than, as exemplified by the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), from the comfort of their seat. We will leave it there for now.
Points of Order

1.21 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday, I raised the lack of clarity from the Communities Secretary on the Government’s plans to introduce local retention of business rates to replace the revenue support grant to local authorities. In reply, the Secretary of State indicated that today’s Queen’s Speech debate may be an opportunity to raise the matter. Has the Secretary of State given you, Sir, any indication that he intends to make an oral statement on these matters during the forthcoming debate? How might Members with an interest in this matter adequately question him if they have not put in to speak in the debate?

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. The relevant Minister will, I think, be making a speech to the House. That, of course, does not constitute a statement as such, but it is nevertheless a full treatment of the issues of which the Minister wishes to treat.

In answer to the hon. Gentleman’s second inquiry—how do Members probe the Minister if they have not put in to make a speech?—the short answer is, by intervention. It is not for me to try to set myself up as an executive coach, and the hon. Gentleman would not wish me to do so, but the idea of Members proceeding collectively with the same line of inquiry is not entirely a novel idea, and if the hon. Gentleman wishes to encourage his colleagues to focus on a particular theme or point and to keep repeating that theme or point until they are satisfied, it is perfectly open to him to do so. I feel sure the hon. Gentleman’s followers, or his disciples, will listen to his advice with the very closest interest and respect at all times. We will leave it there for now.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: A separate and unrelated point of order, I feel sure, from Mr Paul Flynn.

Paul Flynn: With your prodigious memory, Mr Speaker, you might recall that the final point of order in the last Parliament was about a worry that the electoral system in this country is more open to corruption than at any time since 1880, and it is possible now to buy an election.

I do not know whether you saw the Channel 4 programme about the activities in Wales of a call centre that was employed by the Conservative party throughout the election to concentrate on my constituency, among others. It was not carrying out any kind of market research; it was being used to give information that was damaging to the Labour party to as many voters as possible. One hundred people were employed to do that, and they were paid to do it. The allegation was also made—I can confirm it from what happened in my constituency—that canvassing was also done from this call centre on polling day, and I had many complaints about people getting repeated calls.

We have an electoral system that is not fit for purpose. We are in an age where neither the Electoral Commission nor the Information Commissioner can handle the election. To restore integrity to our electoral system, we need major reforms, and I am sure you will use your office to ensure that that is accelerated.

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I think he invested me with powers or influence that I might not currently possess, but I am very grateful to him for encouraging an increase in the said powers or influence.

As it happens, I do recall the last point of order of the last Parliament, and it is very reasonable of the hon. Gentleman to draw my attention to it. My pithy advice is that if he has ongoing concerns about what might constitute an offence, he should notify both the Electoral Commission and, indeed, the police.

I did not see the Channel 4 documentary to which the hon. Gentleman refers, although I have a feeling that he will exhort me to view it sooner rather than later. What I would say is that if there have been egregious activities taking place in his constituency—I do not suggest that this invalidates his concern, because it does not—manifestly those activities have not been successful if they were directed against the hon. Gentleman. That is not altogether surprising, as he has been a consistent presence in this House for three decades—he might not yet have reached the halfway mark in his parliamentary career attained by the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner), but he is getting a bit nearer to it. We will perhaps leave it there for now.
Debate on the Address

[4TH DAY]

Debate resumed (Order, 26 June).

Question again proposed.

That an Humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, as follows:

Most Gracious Sovereign,

We, Your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.

Education and Local Services

1.26 pm

The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening): It is a pleasure to be able to open this Queen’s Speech debate this afternoon.

Since 2010, this Government have been focused on the pursuit of higher standards in education, higher standards in our schools, higher standards in our universities and higher standards in technical education—in fact, higher standards across the board—to unlock the talents of every single one of our young people.

We have made significant progress. Thanks to the energy of our great teachers and leaders, nine out of 10 schools are now good or outstanding, with 1.8 million more children in those places since 2010. Thanks to the energy of our thriving universities, more young people are going to university than ever before, including more young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Thanks to the energy of businesses, we are well on our way to achieving our target of 3 million apprenticeships by 2020.

Perhaps more than most Departments, the legislation we need to drive up education standards and opportunity is already in place. In the last parliamentary Session alone, we passed the Technical and Further Education Act 2017, creating the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education to oversee our bold new reforms; we passed the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, the most significant legislative reform of the past 25 years in higher education, to give students better value and more choice, information and opportunity; and we passed the Children and Social Work Act 2017 to better protect and safeguard the most vulnerable children in our society.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): My right hon. Friend mentioned the Children and Social Work Act, and an important provision the Government put into it was making relationship and sex education compulsory. What progress is being made on regulations to bring that into force?

Justine Greening: I am grateful for the cross-party support that enabled us to do that, and we are determined now to push on with the issue. We will shortly be setting out our plan for how we take the review forward and how we continue to get the overall support we need to make sure relationship and sex education in secondary schools, and relationship education in primary schools, are age appropriate and effective for children growing up in a very different Britain from the one many of us grew up in.

Several hon. Members rose—

Justine Greening: If I could make a little progress, that would be appreciated. I am sure there will be plenty of opportunities for interventions.

As I was saying—[Interruption.] I am sorry, but there is a fly buzzing around. We are determined to build on that strong platform of success, to create an education system that works for all our children and all our young people. Equality of opportunity for everyone—wherever they are, whatever their background—is in the end unlocked only by education.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): The North Shore Academy in my constituency faces a spending cut of several hundred thousand pounds. It serves one of the areas that the Secretary of State is talking about—an area of high deprivation. How on earth can that be fair funding in an area of high deprivation?

Justine Greening: I will come on to funding later, but suffice it to say that it is important we make sure that all our schools are fairly funded. That challenge is recognised across the House. Clearly there are difficulties in doing that.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Does the right hon. Lady feel that education and local services in England would be helped in any way by the large part of £30 billion that would be the Barnett consequential of money for England as a result of the deal in Northern Ireland, given what the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) just said about the North Shore Academy in his constituency?

Justine Greening: Our manifesto pledged to increase education funding. The challenge that the hon. Gentleman’s part of our United Kingdom faces is the real issue of its standards lagging significantly behind those of England in relation to scores on the programme for international student assessment.

Several hon. Members rose—

Justine Greening: I will make some progress. We want equality of opportunity for everyone. In her speech, Her Majesty the Queen set out that we will work to ensure that every child has a good school place and that no young person will be left behind, in part by making sure that this country possesses world-beating technical education and, of course, by maintaining our world-class higher education.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab) rose—

Justine Greening: I will give way to the hon. Lady, who is a near neighbour of mine.

Siobhain McDonagh: On the issue of a good school place for every child, the Secretary of State will be aware of the proposal that the local mental health trust
in our area should no longer diagnose children with autism. Without a diagnosis there is no chance of an educational care plan, and without an ECP there is no opportunity for a child with autism to get a good school place. Will she personally intervene to stop that?

**Justine Greening:** Work on making sure that children can be in mainstream schools has been a key focus for this Government. That is why we have introduced educational health care plans—the correct term is EHCPs—which are holistic plans to make sure that children get not just their educational needs but their broader health needs assessed. I am always happy to look at specific issues raised by hon. Members. It is exceptionally important that our education system works for all children, whatever their challenges, not just the majority of children.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Justine Greening:** I am going to make a little progress. Under our education reforms, we are determined that no person, community or group should be left behind, because in reality no person, community or group has a monopoly on talent. Talent is spread right the way across our country, and this Government will create an education system that unlocks that talent in everyone and in all parts of the country. That is how we will succeed in finally shifting the dial on improving social mobility in the UK.

**Wes Streeting** (Ilford North) (Lab): The Conservative manifesto proposed introducing primary school breakfast clubs. Given that research commissioned by Magic Breakfast, the Educational Endowment Foundation and the Institute for Fiscal Studies showed that a good, nutritious breakfast can improve educational attainment by about two months in any given year, may I urge the Secretary of State to stick to that part of the manifesto and make sure that it is fully funded, so that all children can go to school without being too hungry to learn?

**Justine Greening:** The hon. Gentleman may be aware that we already had plans to scale up the sorts of programmes undertaken by fantastic charities such as Magic Breakfast. We all recognise their benefits, particularly for disadvantaged children, who can get into school a bit earlier, have time to settle and start their classes ready to concentrate and learn.

In the election, people were faced with choices. Indeed, the Opposition set out their alternative plan. It was very big on rhetoric, but the question is what it will actually mean for people in reality. Of course, we do not have to go far to find out. It is clear what Labour would mean for education standards as we only have to go across to Wales and look at its education performance. Instead of making proposals, the Institute for Fiscal Studies said that its plan on university and higher education funding would mean cutbacks for universities. It would mean lower teaching standards or the introduction of an emergency cap on student numbers. If we look at how that £2 billion teaching black hole could force universities into significant financial trouble.

Inevitably, that Labour higher education black hole would mean cutbacks for universities. It would mean lower teaching standards or the introduction of an emergency cap on student numbers. If we look at how that £2 billion black hole would be plugged, we see that it would be the equivalent either of cutting 40,000 lecturers or of a cap that would mean 160,000 fewer students going to university, based on the average student grant for fees and maintenance loans. There just would not be the money. In fact, we know that if a cap were reintroduced because of a black hole in our higher education funding, it would be disproportionately likely to hit students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. Labour’s higher education black hole could force universities with lower student numbers into significant financial trouble.

On equality, what is the evidence that no tuition fees mean that more disadvantaged students can go to university? Again, we do not have to go far to find the evidence. In Scotland, the policy of no tuition fees goes side by side with lower equality of opportunity for disadvantaged young people to go to university.
because the policy benefits children who are more likely to go to university. However, the people more likely to go to university are children from better-off families. We all know that: it is not a surprise to the Opposition.

What benefits disadvantaged children is having more places at university for them overall. The imperative therefore is not having a cap on the numbers. In Scotland, there are no fees. In England, where there is no cap, more disadvantaged young people go to university.

Wes Streeting: Clearly, the right hon. Lady's party had no offer whatsoever for students and young people at the election, so perhaps she might like to reflect on the terrible mistake that was made in the previous Parliament? Non-repayable grants targeted on the poorest students were scrapped by the Government. Is it not time to deal with the real funding crisis facing students, which is the one in their pockets?

Justine Greening: I notice that the hon. Gentleman did not answer my question. [Interruption.] There will be plenty more time to dig into the Labour proposals for higher education and what they mean for the most disadvantaged children in the country.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I hope that it is a point of order, rather than merely a point of frustration.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Is it in order, Mr Speaker, for Front-Bench Government spokespeople to put questions to Back-Bench Members of the Opposition? They are there to defend their record; it is not for the Opposition to do so.

Mr Speaker: There is nothing disorderly about it. It is not in that sense, I must tell the hon. Gentleman, narrowly analogous to Question Time. At Question Time, I have said now and again to Ministers that it is not for them to ask questions; they are there to answer questions. A debate is a more seamless enterprise, as I think the hon. Gentleman, who is an experienced denizen of the House, must know. It is perfectly in order for the Secretary of State to pose an inquiry to a Member, just as it is perfectly in order for another Member wholly to disregard it. I call the Secretary of State.

Justine Greening rose—

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con) rose—

Justine Greening: I should be delighted to give way to my hon. Friend.

Rebecca Pow: Am I not right in saying that there has not been a fall in the number of students going to university since fees have had to be paid? Indeed, I have two daughters who have recently completed university. They both paid fees, but on different rates—one the high rate, one the low rate. They both agree that it was right that they should pay fees for the advantage they have gained, because they should earn more money than someone who does not go to university. Is it right that someone who does not go to university should fund people who do and who have the potential benefit of earning more money?

Justine Greening: My hon. Friend asks some important questions not just about equality of opportunity but about equality more generally and why we are prioritising technical education. The approach in England has benefited students from disadvantaged backgrounds, who now go to university at a record rate. In 2009, the rate was 13.6%; it was 19.5% in 2016.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give way? I have been very patient.

Justine Greening: I will give way to my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), and then to my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown).

Mr Harper: I listened carefully to what the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) said. He asked what we had to offer young people, and I will tell him, although I will say that it would have been better if we had mentioned it during the election campaign. Unemployment for young people is now six percentage points lower than it was in 2010, whereas in the eurozone it remains at 20%. Under this Government, young people have a very, very good chance of getting a job, which is an excellent route to prosperity. That is what we have to offer.

Justine Greening: My right hon. Friend is right. Under the Labour Government, youth unemployment went up by just under 50%. It was not just young people from lower income backgrounds coming out of the education system often without basic skills. It was graduates who came out of the system and could not find a job. We are determined to make sure that never again is there a lost generation of young people in our country coming out of the education system wanting a career but not even being able to find a job.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I congratulate the Secretary of State on giving way to me. May I commend her on the increase in standards in education? To improve those standards still further—the current funding formula is unfair and depends on a lottery code—does she agree that every pupil and every school deserves fair minimum funding?

Justine Greening: As my hon. Friend knows, we are absolutely committed to making sure that we have fair funding across our schools. We had an extensive consultation that received 25,000 responses, which we have gone through. We are pulling together what that means for the right way forward. He is right to point out that many schools in his local community have been systematically underfunded, which is not tenable in a country where we want all children to receive consistent investment and a consistent opportunity to make the most of themselves. We are determined to introduce our plans to ensure that schools are fairly funded, wherever they are.
Several hon. Members rose—

Justine Greening: I am going to make a little more progress, because I was pursuing an argument on access to higher education, which is hugely important in relation to how we drive social mobility.

The Labour party has proposed a policy that will lead to more inequality. It would benefit the young people most likely to do well: university students from better-off, richer backgrounds. However, the policy would be paid for by everyone, including lower-income workers and pensioners. The Institute for Fiscal Studies says that Labour’s policy does not seem to be an effective use of £11.5 billion to £13.5 billion if the aim is partly to aid social mobility for the most disadvantaged students. I am not sure what the Labour party thought was its raison d’être, but clearly it is no longer lifting up the children growing up in our most disadvantaged communities that are furthest from a level playing field on opportunity.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): Given the incredibly important role that primary education plays in the preparation of young people for secondary and further education, will the Secretary of State explain how the proposed funding cuts in Sandwell, which will amount to nearly £600 per pupil over the next three years and lead to a reduction of seven teachers per school, will help that process in one of the most socially deprived areas?

Justine Greening: I have made it clear that we are going to introduce proposals on fair funding. There is record funding in our schools, and we have set out a commitment to increase that further in our manifesto. We will introduce those proposals shortly.

To conclude on higher education, the £2 billion higher education black hole would mean an emergency cap on student numbers. Young people would miss out on university. They would almost certainly be from disadvantaged backgrounds: young people hoping to be the first in their family to get the chance to do a degree, as I was. It is literally a cap on aspiration. Labour are not being honest and up front with young people about the implications of their proposals for higher education funding. It is simply snake oil populism.

It is vital to ensure that higher education remains accessible, is affordable and provides value for money. We need to listen to the voices of young people at the last election and we are committed to doing so, but our approach must reduce inequality and the lack of access for disadvantaged young people, not increase it as Labour’s policy would.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I remind the Secretary of State that the last Labour Government expanded higher education and had a cap on fees. She talks about 1 million young people being unemployed. In the first Parliament under the Tory Government, youth unemployment was at 1 million and the Work programme was a disaster, wasting billions of pounds. I ask her to reverse the £3 billion of education cuts being proposed by her Government, which will devastate aspiration in schools around the country. It is time to act, Secretary of State, not attack the Opposition. You are in power—deal with the cap on aspiration now.

Justine Greening: I can set out for the hon. Lady exactly what we have been doing. We have been reforming our education system and standards have gone up; we have taken away a cap on the number of students going to university, which is why a higher percentage of disadvantaged young people are going to university than ever before; and, of course, our economic policies have led to 2.8 million jobs being created in our economy, which has provided opportunity for young people who would otherwise have been sat at home getting unemployment benefits, with their careers on hold until they were able to get them kick-started. That is what we have been doing.

The final thing we have been doing is tackling the huge, huge deficit left by the Labour party when it left office. The Opposition are bored with hearing about it, because clearly—I am sorry they are in such uproar at being reminded that when we came to power, the country was living £151 billion a year beyond our means—borrowing that was due to be passed on to young people. Clearly, the Labour party has learned nothing from this at all. Its only answer to every single question it faces in any policy area is, “Spend more money, but don’t worry about where it comes from because”—

Mr Speaker: Order. There is a cacophony of noise. I have told the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) before that he should not yell out from a sedentary position. I had great aspirations for him to obtain the level of a statesman, but his apprenticeship has some distance to run if he is going to conduct himself in that manner. The Secretary of State must be heard, and the same goes for everybody else in the Chamber.

Justine Greening: We are focused on raising social mobility and on levelling up opportunity for people who do not have it. That is why we have made investment in technical education a priority, as Her Majesty set out in the Queen’s Speech. For too long, there has not been parity of esteem between technical and academic routes in education. That has cost our country dearly. It has also created inequality between those who go to world-renowned universities and those young people who do not have the chance to do so. That inequality stretches across communities and regions. It has cost us dearly in the loss of the human capital and productivity that high-skilled people in a high-skilled economy provide. We are determined to continue our work to recover the legacy of Labour’s lost generation of young, unemployed, unskilled people coming into the labour force. Those young people have been let down—

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr Speaker: The Secretary of State cannot hear that. I give way.

Trudy Harrison: I congratulate the Government on the annual £500 million increase in technical education. In my constituency of Copeland, a practical skills
community, it is essential to continue the legacy of world-class trades if we are to deliver a modern industrial strategy.

Justine Greening: That is absolutely right. It is critical that we take advantage of two opportunities. The first is the kinds of businesses and industries in my hon. Friend’s area that are creating jobs and opportunities. The second is a generation of young people who want opportunity and want a career. We should be investing in generating our home-grown talent to take advantage of those opportunities, which we all see in our local communities. Exiting the European Union provides new impetus to the focus on developing our home-grown talent.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Secretary of State referred to world-class universities. We are proud of them in this country, but it is important that they are able to attract students from all around the world. Why do the Government persist with the ludicrous idea that we must cut net migration to the tens of thousands, including cutting the number of international students coming to stay in this country? They pay their own way, they improve their relationship with this country, and when they go back home they want to continue doing business with us. It is ludicrous!

Justine Greening: The hon. Gentleman will be delighted to know that he is entirely misinformed, because we do not have a cap on the number of international students. That will save him from having to ask that question again. We are determined to ensure that our universities sector remains open to the best and brightest talent around the world. He can scaremonger and raise fake issues all he likes, but it will not change the position. The much bigger threat to universities lies in decimating the funding going into them. That is the biggest challenge they would face if they ended up with the kind of higher education funding black hole that the Labour party would present them with.

We are shaping the curriculum for young people going into technical education into 15 technical routes, each culminating in a so-called T-level, which will become the gold standard qualification for technical excellence. That reform is matched by investment, as the Chancellor announced in the March Budget—a Budget that the CBI called “a breakthrough Budget for skills.”

That investment would be at risk under a Labour Government because of the black hole in post-16 funding for higher education. Our new institutes of technology will also provide a path to develop excellence in higher technical skills. One problem we have had with technical education is that there has not been a ladder of steadily more challenging qualifications so that young people can better themselves.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend outline how the technical qualifications will meet the needs of employers? After all, we need to ensure that the skills that are being developed meet business requirements.

Justine Greening: Part of the plan we set out in the manifesto was to establish what we called skills advisory panels. In other words, local employers within regions will look at what the needs are in their skills pipeline, consider them in relation to the 15 skills routes that we have set out and understand how that maps on to the provision in the education system locally. Across the country, that is exactly what we will need, to make sure we have the right number of people coming through with the right skills in the right places; to have an understanding of what is needed in the years ahead; and to know the risks in provision so that we can tackle them early. This is common sense and I think it will bring a significant step change in our ability to have a successful industrial strategy that benefits young people.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Justine Greening: I will make a bit of progress because many colleagues want to speak in this debate once I have sat down.

The Government are committed to having the best lifelong learning for adults in the developed world. We will achieve that by setting up a national retraining scheme.

All these reforms represent real support for people across the country, real opportunity and real ways to tackle inequality. We recognise that access to equality of opportunity—social mobility—is what will lift our country, not some kind of snake-oil populism from the Labour party, backed up by a fiscal black hole that will mean cuts in the very areas that are most important in improving opportunity.

Of course, throughout those reforms we will work hand in glove with British businesses, relying on their expertise, knowledge and leadership—businesses that the Labour party continually castigates as being part of the problem that our country faces, as Labour sees it. We see businesses as critical in driving opportunity and social mobility.

We know that good schools are the engines of social mobility, and they are not just about individual success. Schools are at the centre of every single community. Last week I visited the Kensington Aldridge Academy, in the shadow of Grenfell Tower. I am sure the House will join me in paying tribute to the teachers and staff of all the schools in the area, and indeed those in Manchester affected by what happened after the Ariana Grande concert. They were met with a terrible situation but helped the young people caught up in it with absolute professionalism. Leaders, headteachers and teachers in those areas have been the unsung heroes over recent weeks, along with our emergency services, and I want to put on record again my thanks to them for all the work they have done to make sure that our children are back in school but also getting the support that they need to deal with the experiences they have had. We are committed to ensuring that that support stays in place as those schools continue, when the cameras have gone, to help their students deal with what they have been through.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): With the news today that 95 tower blocks have failed the cladding test, it is clear that hundreds of children across the country, not just in Camden but in other local education authority areas, will experience the disruption of being moved out of their home. What will the Secretary of State’s Department do to help to support schools in areas where that disruption is occurring?
Justine Greening: We have been clear that we are getting in touch with schools that we know are being affected by such challenges. We did a huge amount of work in response to the Manchester atrocities stretching far beyond Manchester into the broader north-west region, and in response to Grenfell Tower. As a result, the Government will have a much better, more systematic understanding of how to respond quickly so that not only are the right links in place between my Department, regional schools commissioners, local authorities and schools, but we can work in a streamlined fashion with local NHS services and educational psychologists. All those things have worked effectively, but we have had to work hard to identify emerging problems and tackle them quickly.

I would also like to take this opportunity to say a big thank you to the mental health professionals who came from all over the country to offer their support following the Manchester attacks in particular. It was much appreciated and enabled us to deal much more effectively with the children who had been affected by the tragedy. Such responses provide the blueprint on which the Government can continue to develop emergency response.

The Queen’s Speech made it clear that the Government are determined to introduce a fairer distribution of funding for schools. We will set out our plans shortly, but, as we outlined in our manifesto, we will make sure that no school has its budget cut as a result of the new formula. We have, of course, given our schools record levels of funding, and in our manifesto we committed to increase funding further. Now that the consultation has finished, we will explain our plans for the fair funding of schools shortly.

More broadly, school improvement and great teaching and teachers are, in practice, the same thing. I had the chance to meet many inspirational teachers and leaders at the Times Educational Supplement awards last Friday. It was a fantastic evening, and it emphasised to me that teaching deserves to be thought of as a high-status profession. We will continue to work hard to crack down on unnecessary workload, and we will ramp up the quality of continuing professional development, centred around a new college of teaching. We will continue to invest in the profession to ensure that we attract the best people. Alongside continuing our reforms on academies and free schools, we are making sure that headteachers get the support they need to improve their schools through the £140 million strategic school improvement fund.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s commitment that no school will see any reduction in funding because of the Government’s fairer funding formula, which is extremely welcome. Will she condemn the propaganda that is still going out from schools and the unions, claiming that there will be vast reductions in expenditure on a per pupil basis?

Justine Greening: I think all parents expect teachers and headteachers to behave professionally. There is space for an important political debate, but I question whether some teachers have pursued it in the right way, given the high status that I want the profession to have in the public mind. There is absolutely a place for debate on the funding going to schools and the reform strategy that will see standards get better, but I agree with my hon. Friend that it has been concerning to see what many people have felt are utterly political messages being put out inappropriately.

We are also committed to ensuring that the whole education system, including independent schools and universities, works together to drive up standards for all our children. Of course, the Government’s 12 opportunity areas are there to deal with complex and entrenched challenges in education in areas such as Blackpool and Norwich. We are backing local leaders in those areas—teachers, businesses, civil society and local authorities—to come together to find solutions to long-standing problems and plan for future skills needs. We want to ensure that home-grown talent plugs the skills gaps. To confront that challenge, we need a powerful alliance of employers, civil society and Government, working hand in hand in every corner of our country. I welcome the huge number of businesses, charities and ordinary people stepping forward to help us to do better for our young people.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Although we all recognise the need to address deprivation, does my right hon. Friend also recognise the need to address the historical injustices for underfunded areas? Will she confirm that she will increase the age-weighted pupil unit block in the funding formula and help to reduce the costs that some schools are facing through the apprenticeship levy?

Justine Greening: As I said, we are committed to introducing fair funding. It is right that we hold all schools to the same standards and the same accountability framework, and it makes sense that we should ensure that children with comparable needs are funded comparably wherever in the country they are. I will set out shortly the details of how we will do that following the consultation.

I will finish my speech. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hooray!”] In many respects I was just getting started, but I am sure the rest can wait for future debates. The Government have done sterling work in narrowing the gender pay gap and advocating having more women on boards, but those efforts cannot slacken and need to be stepped up. We will bring forward new approaches to supporting women in the workplace. The 30-hour childcare offer will help families with the cost of childcare, and our returnship pilots will explore new ways of supporting mothers—it is overwhelmingly mothers—to get back into work. We know from some of the work that is already under way how powerful they can be. Of course, inequality is not confined to gender, and the Government will bring a renewed focus to the ethnicity gap in our workplaces.

The Government have an ambitious agenda for this Parliament: creating world-class technical education, ensuring that there is a good school place for every single child, wherever they are growing up, and tackling inequality in educational opportunity in all its forms. To achieve those goals, we will be resolute in our pursuit of high standards. We are building on a firm foundation, although there is more to do and more to deliver. Our young people deserve nothing less. This nation contains a wealth of talent just waiting to be unlocked, which will create opportunity and success for individuals and a strong and prosperous country that can take on, and succeed in, any challenge.
2.9 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): Let me first welcome you back to the Chair, Mr Speaker, and also the many new Members to the Chamber for today’s debate. I am sure we are all looking forward to hearing some excellent maiden speeches.

I also welcome the Secretary of State back to her place and her new Ministers to theirs. I suspect she may have found herself debating education issues quite a lot during the campaign, not least in her own constituency, but a lot has changed in these few short weeks, so today’s debate might be rather different. In fact, the Secretary of State concentrated more on the Labour party today than on her own Government and the Queen’s Speech. There are more than 2,500 words about education in the manifesto on which the Prime Minister stood those few weeks ago, but barely 50 in the speech he opposed new grammar schools, when that was the issue last week. Maybe that is why the Secretary of State concentrated so much on the Labour party manifesto. What we have heard is not so much a programme but a Post-it note. Although I listened carefully to the right hon. Lady’s opening remarks, I do not think we know much more about her policy now than we did before she stood up.

Let us start with the obvious points. The centrepiece of the new Prime Minister’s education policy was meant to be new grammar schools. I will not rehearse the arguments, but I will just put this observation on the record:

“When people talk about the grammar school issue, I never get people asking the question, ‘Why don’t you bring back the secondary modern?’ And in fact... most children would go to a secondary modern school... if we brought back selection.”

Of course, that is not an original observation. In this case, it is the argument made by the Minister for School Standards, the right hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb), when explaining why he opposed new grammar schools, when that was the Conservative policy under the last Prime Minister. I do not think it was said in this election campaign, so let me be the first to say it: #IagreewithNick. Perhaps the Secretary of State can explain what a hashtag means to her Home Secretary. I also agreed with the Minister for School Standards when he said:

“Now our job is to improve the standards in the three thousand comprehensive schools in this country and I believe it’s not getting rid of the grammar schools that was the issue.”

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Perhaps the shadow Secretary of State could shed a little light on her own policy by responding to a question that has been asked in most of these debates but never properly answered. Would a Labour Government abolish existing grammar schools?

Angela Rayner: I think I have been quite clear that we would concentrate on standards and not structures, unlike this Government, who are ideologically obsessing and wasting billions of pounds—not my words, but those of the National Audit Office about the Government’s fixations.

The question is, will the Government now get on with the job and does the Prime Minister now also agree with Nick? Will the Secretary of State make it clear that there will be no attempts to lift the ban on new selective schools? Will she finally concentrate on solving the real problems—that we hear about time and time again and that we heard about throughout the general election: the crisis in funding and in the teacher workforce—instead of creating more problems for herself?

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The Labour party manifesto talked about a lot of funding for many areas, but does the hon. Lady recognise that making unfunded promises and putting a huge amount of funding into the system has an impact on the economy and on schools? That impact was seen in Greece, which went bankrupt, with 8,500 teachers losing their jobs and schools having no teachers to teach in them.

Angela Rayner: I am absolutely astonished by that, given what has happened over the last 24 hours and the magic money tree that has suddenly been found for a coalition of chaos. I will take no lectures from the Conservative party, especially when the only numbers I saw in its manifesto were the numbers of the pages I was reading.

The Prime Minister also threatened to end universal infant free school meals during the general election. I hope the Government will now confirm that that policy has been abandoned, as part of their full-scale retreat from their own manifesto. Ministers claimed during the election that free breakfasts would be more cost-effective. Their costings left a bit to be desired, though: the original plan would have allowed only 7p per breakfast. I remember that when Labour was in government we got our school meal recipes from Jamie Oliver. The Conservatives must have been getting theirs from Oliver Twist. Even then the new costings were based on take-up of just 20%, so I look forward to hearing a full explanation of their policy on free school meals.

On a similar note, one thing that the Secretary of State has announced today is the Government’s new policy on mental health first aid training in schools. They said they would train the first 3,000 staff for £200,000—£66 per member of staff. At the same time, the charity delivering the policy said it would cost at least £117.25 per person, so the Secretary of State’s figures were out, but only by about £150,000. Having realised that her numbers do not add up, she has now rushed out another U-turn, saying that the £200,000 is for only the first year of the policy. Can Ministers finally tell us how much the policy will cost per year, how many teachers will be trained each year and how she managed to get the policy announcement so badly wrong? It seems a long time ago since the Conservatives were talking about strong and stable leadership. Only one day after the deal for the coalition of chaos was signed, and this Government are even weaker and wobblier than ever before.

Now let me turn to the words that the Secretary of State did get into the Queen’s Speech, which promised reform of technical education. However, she has already legislated for reform of technical education earlier this year, in the Technical and Further Education Act 2017, so can Ministers tell us whether there will be another new Bill on technical education in this Session? Or is the reality that this Government have come to this place with such a threadbare programme that they have been reduced to announcing Bills that they have already passed, in the last Parliament?
The Government had nothing to say on higher education. No wonder they wanted to talk about our policies. It is just weeks since they used a statutory instrument to sneak through their latest rise in tuition fees, while freezing the threshold at which graduates begin to repay their debts. The election came before the scheduled debate and vote on that rise, so I hope the Government will now provide time for that debate on the Floor of the House.

Nor did the Government have anything to say on the even more critical issues of early years education and childcare. At the end of the last Parliament they left early years education and childcare in disarray. They promised an early years workforce strategy but have given no indication of how they will implement it. Providers across the country have told the Government time and time again that the funding they are providing is inadequate, and hundreds of thousands of working parents have been denied the service that they were promised. How many words were there about that in the Queen’s Speech? None whatsoever.

Let me also touch on another issue, which is perhaps more important than any other this week: the safety of our school buildings. The Government had been planning to change the regulations on fire safety in schools contained in “Building Bulletin 100”. Funnily enough, those proposed changes have now been removed from the Department for Education website, but luckily we have a paper copy. The proposed new draft no longer included an expectation that most new school buildings would be fitted with sprinklers, on the basis that “school buildings do not need to be sprinkler protected to achieve a reasonable standard of life safety.”

Perhaps the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government could take the opportunity later to confirm that these proposed changes have now been abandoned for good.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important to carry out a thorough and comprehensive check on the fire safety of every school building in the country? We cannot put too high a price on the safety of our children. In view of the likely costs, does my hon. Friend think that the Government should set up a contingency fund to cover all those costs, as a matter of urgency, so that local authorities do not have to consider cutting other already shredded budgets to find the money to pay for the necessary work?

Angela Rayner: I absolutely agree—indeed, I was intending to deal with that point later in my speech. I hope that the Secretary of State will take my hon. Friend’s comments on board. We know that local government in particular has been hit by the Government’s so-called austerity agenda. The cuts that our local authorities face need to be looked at.

Yesterday, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government told the House that the Government had ordered safety checks to be carried out to ensure that flammable cladding was not used on school buildings. Will he update the House on the results of that survey as soon as possible? If there are schools that use flammable cladding, can the Secretary of State for Education give a clear assurance that the costs will be covered by the Government, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) has requested?

It would also be helpful to know what action is being taken in student halls of residence. Can the Communities Secretary confirm that they are classed as “other residential buildings”, and are therefore subject to weaker requirements for sprinklers? If so, will the Government consider closing that loophole? What action will the Government take to ensure that both university and private halls are checked for flammable cladding?

Let me now turn to the subject of school funding. Yesterday, the First Secretary of State came to the House to announce the Government’s deal with the Democratic Unionist party. Fortunately for them, they seem to have located the magic money tree about which we heard so much during the election. The package included £50 million for schools, to “address immediate pressures”. That is £150 for every pupil in Northern Ireland.

Of course I welcome the Government’s acknowledgement that they were not properly funding schools in Northern Ireland, and the money is to address that; but can the Secretary of State explain why, as schools face billions of pounds in cuts, the Government are doing nothing to address the immediate pressures on schools in England?

The Conservative party manifesto said that the new funding formula would be introduced, and that no school would lose funding as a result—in fact, the Secretary of State said it herself. Achieving that will require an increase in school funding over and above current plans, so, again, it is time for clarity. When will the Department publish a response to the second stage of the consultation on the fair funding formula, and when will the new funding formula be introduced? Will the Secretary of State provide a cast-iron guarantee today that no school will be worse off, in real terms?

If the Secretary of State has been talking to parents and teachers in her own constituency—let alone across the country—she will know that schools are facing severe cost pressures, and that head teachers are being left with impossible choices. I absolutely agree with what she said earlier about the staff and workforces in our schools and public services, but I must say to her that they need more than words. Even given the money that the Government found by scrapping school meals, the Institute for Fiscal Studies—which the Secretary of State likes to quote so often—has found that the implementation of their plans for school spending would mean a real-terms cut of nearly 3% in per-pupil funding.

The Gracious Address referred to a highly skilled workforce in high-wage jobs, but in-work poverty is at a record high, and the UK has the second lowest wage growth in the OECD since 2010. The only country where wage growth is lower is Greece, and that is a direct result of the failure of this Government. Their failure to invest in education will lead to a generation of children not getting the education they deserve, and not getting on in life.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for giving way. [HON. MEMBERS: “Shadow!”] Give us a couple of months.

My hon. Friend has talked about the failure of a generation. Does she know that at the University of Chester academy in Ellesmere Port—a generation of schoolchildren are now being failed because of a second failed Ofsted inspection—the second in four years? The multi-academy trust has also had a damning Ofsted
inspection, but we heard nothing from the Secretary of State about what she intends to do to improve performance in academies.

Angela Rayner: During the general election campaign, I had the honour and privilege of visiting my hon. Friend’s constituency, and he is absolutely right: those concerns are real. I think we saw that played out in the election. We saw that young people came to the Labour party because we had an offer for them. We also saw the direction in which the Secretary of State’s majority went. It certainly did not go in the same direction as mine. I think she needs to take heed of that.

We see the same picture of cuts in public services across the country: budgets cut, services lost and communities losing out. For instance, since 2010, nearly a third of designated Sure Start children’s centres have been lost. Funding for early-intervention services has been cut again and again, and it is the working families of Britain who will pay the price in the end.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): The hon. Lady has mentioned both Greece and cuts. She must be aware that, according to the House of Commons Library, Government spending in 2010 was £715 billion and this year it will be more than £800 billion. That is an increase, not a cut, and it includes record spending on education. In so-called anti-austerity Greece, Government spending is down by 30%, so it is not exactly a model.

Angela Rayner: The hon. Gentleman will also note that we are in trillions of pounds of debt, and that the debt has doubled on the Government’s watch. They like to talk about the economy, but they failed on every single one of the fiscal rules introduced by the previous Chancellor. I will take no lectures on the economy from Conservative Members.

The Secretary of State seemed to suggest that Labour’s record in power, slashed the attainment gap, and saw children from some of the most disadvantaged backgrounds do just as well as their more affluent peers. It certainly was not her party.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Perhaps it is the hon. Lady who is guilty of not telling the House that under the last Labour Government one in three children left primary school without the expected levels of numeracy and literacy, and there was a 3,500% increase in “equivalents to GCSEs” which were certainly not equivalents to GCSEs. That was conning children that what they were learning in schools was fit for purpose.

Angela Rayner: Again, it is clear that Conservative Members like to talk more about the Labour party than about their own record book. [Interruption.] Let me answer the question. Let us just be clear about the position. Where are we now in the programme for international student assessment tables? We are slipping again. It was the previous Secretary of State who said that the Government would be judged according to their standing in the PISA tables, but its status is falling continually, so I will take no more lectures. When the Government talk about, for instance, their free school programmes although they cannot even get the buildings up and running and are spending billions, I think we are seeing a record of shameful waste under the Conservatives.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) and others have mentioned standards. Perhaps it slipped some Tory Back Benchers’ notice last summer that the number of pupils at key stage 2—those who were leaving primary school—who met the requirements in the standard assessment tests had fallen from more than 80% to just 53%. That was absolutely shocking. It was not because the standard of teaching had fallen, or because pupils had become less capable, or because head teachers were not performing well; it was because the Government have been meddling with every bit of curriculum that they can their hands on. That is making standards fall and setting children up to fail.

Angela Rayner rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. From now on, interventions should be brief. A very large number of colleagues wish to contribute, and I am keen to accommodate as many as I can.

Angela Rayner: I absolutely agree with what my hon. Friend has said.

On the Secretary of State’s point on tuition fees, she seems to have misunderstood the way in which the policy was costed. That is hardly a surprise, given that her party is not exactly used to costing its commitments. The extra £2 billion that she calls a black hole would only be a black hole if all universities charged the highest fee level. Under her Government that number is rising again, with no end in sight. But based on actual outlay by the Student Loans Company, we have fully costed an end to tuition fees. Frankly, it is ironic to hear the Secretary of State who scrapped the maintenance grant complaining that we would not be able to undo her policy. This, too, is fully costed, and I am happy to send her a copy of our manifesto to show her just how we will do it. I will even get the next Prime Minister to sign it for her.

The Secretary of State talks about prioritising technical education. Does this mean that the 14% real-terms cut to the further education budget or the billions of pounds cut from the adult skills budget will be reversed? We can all guess the answer to that one. And may I remind her that our manifesto pledged to reverse her cuts to Sure Start? Sure Start and other early intervention programmes have the greatest impact on boosting social mobility for the most disadvantaged. How can she possibly justify cutting hundreds of millions of pounds in Sure Start funding, and the loss of a third of designated Sure Start centres under the Conservatives?

Finally, on helping the disadvantaged, the Secretary of State conveniently ignores the fact that new research shows that students from low-income backgrounds are
most likely to be deterred by higher levels of student debt. Under Labour, there will be no barriers to young people pursuing whatever education they want, be it further or higher academic or technical. It is only her party that, by slashing school budgets while tuition fees skyrocket, is capping aspiration.

Another way is possible. It is the plan set out in the Labour party manifesto—a plan that will invest in our young people to ensure that everyone, whatever their background, can fulfil their potential. It is a plan in which we reverse the cuts to school funding and then protect their budgets in real terms for the lifetime of this Parliament, and in which we provide free lifelong learning so that everyone can retrain and reskill when they need to, free from the fear of a lifetime of debt. It is a plan in which aspiration is encouraged, not taxed, and in which we invest in early years education and childcare, making sure that every child gets the best possible start in life, because social mobility does not start at 11 but in the early years, when interventions make the greatest impact.

This is what Members of this House must ask themselves. Do they stand for cuts to schools and local services, or for investment? Do they stand for the managed decline of further education, or do they support lifelong learning? Do they stand for taxing the aspiration of our young people, or do they stand for allowing every child to fulfil their potential? I know where we stand on this side of the House, and the choice has never been clearer.

2.33 pm

Mr Keith Simpson (Broadland) (Con): In the past eight weeks we have seen a series of major terrorist attacks in this country. We saw the attack here in Parliament in which a police constable was killed. We saw the bombing in Manchester, and then we saw the atrocity in London. I was, until the general election was called, a member of the parliamentary Intelligence and Security Committee, and I want to speak briefly on the subject of that Committee because it is very important and, if precedent is anything to go by, a new Committee will not be established until the middle of October. That will mean that there will have been no scrutiny of the intelligence and security services for between five and six months.

The Committee, of which I was lucky enough to be a member—I hope that I might be put back on it when it is reconstituted—forms an important part of the oversight and scrutiny of our intelligence and security agencies. It is a peculiar Committee, in that it is a Committee of the House but it is not like a Select Committee. It was first established in a very narrow technical sense in 1994, at a time when we had only just publicly admitted that the Special Intelligence Service and the Security Service existed. Its remit now stems from the Justice and Security Act 2013, which set out the organisations that the Committee was to look at, monitor and comment on. It was established that the Committee should report not only to the Prime Minister but to this House. The Committee has nine members: seven are selected from the House of Commons and two from the House of Lords. Unlike Select Committees, there is no public election involved. Names emerge, and the Prime Minister—after consultation with the Leader of the Opposition—formally puts them to the House, where they are voted on.

I would be the first to admit that it is a strange Committee, in the sense that we have to get the balance right between freedom of expression and the right to know, on the one hand, and on the other, the need for the intelligence and security agencies to maintain secrecy. More and more has been put in the public domain, and I like to think that, over the past 18 months, we have produced a series of good reports. There were no minorities; they were all agreed upon. Those reports were based on the evidence that we received from the intelligence and security agencies and from Ministers. We meet in a secure building, and there are no performances as there are in Select Committees. There are no cameras there. The questions that we put to the officials and Ministers in front of us are not easy, as they would be the first to admit. Our task is to hold them to account on behalf of Members and of the public.

I put it to all Members, particularly those on our Front Bench and the Whip on duty, that we can no longer continue with a system in which it takes three to four months to reconstitute the Committee after a general election. In this modern day and age, that is ludicrous. The usual argument is that we have to go through all the same procedures and elections as a Select Committee, but that is incorrect. I urge the Government, and the Leader of the Opposition, to think about reconstituting the Committee before 20 July when we go off into recess. The secretariat of the Committee is drawn from civil servants all across Whitehall, and they are carrying on with their everyday work—they are not sitting there twiddling their thumbs—but they cannot get on with the task of helping the Committee to head in the direction that we, or our successors, would like to take it in.

This is a matter of crucial importance to the House. At the end of the day, it is based on an element of trust. In the past, there have been those who wanted the Committee to take on a similar role to that of a Select Committee. The trouble is that that would cause all kinds of problems because of the desire on the part of the agencies to maintain the secrecy element, although I fully accept that that might change. If we do not go ahead and reconstitute the Committee, it will be failing in its remit to scrutinise the work of the intelligence and security agencies.

As the House knows, all kinds of questions have been raised, particularly after Manchester, about whether the agencies and the police knew about the individuals involved, and whether they had ignored them. I do not know, but my experience of being on the Committee is that the agencies work hard to monitor and find people who wish to carry out terrorist attacks in this country. It is not a question, as one of them put it to us, of trying to find a needle in a haystack; they are trying to find the haystack. This Government and the previous Government put a lot of extra resources into the agencies to make certain that they could recruit more people, but that takes time. In The Daily Telegraph yesterday, the former director general of GCHQ talked about the role of the private sector, and the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary have raised the whole business of social networks and whether such companies are prepared to allow the intelligence and security agencies the kind of information that they require when they are trying to find and monitor terrorists. My plea to the Front-Bench team is
that they think very seriously indeed about reconstituting our Intelligence and Security Committee before the summer recess.

2.40 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Scottish schools finish this week for the summer holidays, and it is only fitting for me to start my remarks by paying tribute to the thousands of teachers, not just in Scotland, but throughout the UK, whose dedication in often difficult circumstances ensures that our young people have the best possible start in life. I want to give a special mention to my friends and former colleagues at Hyndland Secondary School who are watching this afternoon’s debate from The Rock—enjoy your afternoon.

This Queen’s Speech was arguably one of the most important that Members of this House will experience. We sit on the Brexit cliff edge with the UK’s constitutional future under question, and how we proceed will determine the future economic success of these nations. I was expecting bold statements, a clear direction and some reassurance to those working in our higher education sector. Unfortunately, however, we heard none of that. Higher education is often used to describe how great Britain actually is. Our universities are the best in the world and our scientists are the most innovative. However, those hard-fought positions did not arise from great British researchers and innovators, but as a result of the free movement of staff and students, of collaboration, and of rich and diverse ideas from a rich and diverse community. As in other sectors, great uncertainty hangs over our universities, and particular policies have made things difficult in recent years.

I have spoken in this place on many occasions about the need to reintroduce the post-study work visa, which is a particular issue in Scotland. Scotland has been blighted by depopulation for centuries. Emigration is a particular issue in Scotland. Scotland has been the need to reintroduce the post-study work visa, which uncertainty hangs over our universities, and particular and diverse community. As in other sectors, great community. As in other sectors, great uncertainty hangs over our universities, and particular policies have made things difficult in recent years.

I have spoken in this place on many occasions about the need to reintroduce the post-study work visa, which is a particular issue in Scotland. Scotland has been blighted by depopulation for centuries. Emigration is our problem, not immigration. While numbers of international students, what happens to the group of international students, what happens to the cities? More worryingly, when we rely on only one country for our students, what happens to the general skills training. Of course, I have no problem with young people training in particular trades; the narrower range of countries represented in this community. We have a large Chinese student community in Glasgow, and while we of course welcome those students and are delighted that they have chosen to study in Scotland, they generally return to China at the end of their studies. Why is it that we do not have a large Chinese student community in Glasgow, and while we of course welcome those students and are delighted that they have chosen to study in Scotland, they generally return to China at the end of their studies?

We get economic and cultural benefit from those students while they are here, but how much better would it be if we were able to have their expertise at work in our towns and cities? More worryingly, when we rely on only one group of international students, what happens to the sector if political or economic changes mean that they suddenly cease to come? That could have an impact on not only the university sector, but the wider local economy.

I have been told repeatedly that if a graduate’s salary is of an acceptable level, they are able to remain and work, but in Scotland and other areas of the UK, salaries are much lower than in the south-east of England. The reinstatement of the post-study work visa will allow greater economic growth and encourage entrepreneurship. However, with this Queen’s Speech, immigration targets and xenophobia have overruled common economic sense and net migration targets are more important than creating a climate for economic growth. Maybe it is time for immigration powers to be devolved to Scotland.

Mr Harper rose—

Carol Monaghan: Is the right hon. Gentleman intervening?

Mr Harper: On that point, the hon. Lady said that one of the problems facing Scotland is people leaving, and although we have not been as successful as we hoped in reducing immigration to the United Kingdom, it has been running at a couple of hundred thousand, so will she explain why so few of those people have actually wanted to go to Scotland? Could that be connected to the mess that her party is making of government?

Carol Monaghan: The hypocrisy is outstanding. We have heard the leader of the Tory party in Scotland tell us simultaneously that there is too much immigration, too little immigration, and just about the right amount of immigration. The Tory party is completely confused. If immigration powers were devolved to Scotland, we could make choices based on our economic needs.

Another point that I have raised numerous times relates to the fee status of EU students post-Brexit. I am astounded that we still do not have answers to that most basic question. It has been hinted that these students will be considered international students and will pay fees accordingly. It was also suggested to me by a Government Member that EU students will continue to come in the same pre-Brexit numbers after Brexit. I often wonder what planet Tory looks like, but it appears to have little connection to reality. If EU students are asked to pay international fees, this market will almost entirely disappear. It will become the reserve of the rich and privileged of Europe. In Scotland, access to higher education is based on ability to learn, never ability to pay, and we apply that to our EU students as well. In her discussions with the Prime Minister and the Brexit Secretary, I urge the Secretary of State for Education to be an advocate for our European students and push for a deal that will not preclude young Europeans from studying in the U.K.

Turning to funding, and Horizon 2020 funding in particular, the Prime Minister has offered some assurances to the research community, but that misses the point of Horizon 2020. EU funding ensures collaboration across multiple institutions. It means that a tapestry is woven, with each institution able to provide its particular expertise in an area. The funding is important, but the collaborations are what make the magic happen. To lose that will be a great blow to our research base. It would be like having an orchestra made up of only one drummer but with the expectation that it continues to produce a symphony. Whatever happens during the Brexit negotiations, our research community, their collaborations and their free movement must be protected.

People could be forgiven for thinking that the Technical and Further Education Act 2017 was about education and raising skills, particularly in the much-needed STEM area. Indeed, many employers are hoping that that is the case. However, technical education in that Act means general skills training. Of course, I have no problem with young people training in particular trades; the

[Mr Keith Simpson]
issue is that it is being billed as a breakthrough in tackling skills shortages. We know that we have massive shortages in STEM, in construction and in the digital and information and communications technology industry, and Brexit will deepen those difficulties.

Although there is no doubt that some of the Technical and Further Education Act’s intentions appear to be positive, why not be honest and call it “skills education” or have a vision for technical education that centres on actual technical education and goes some way to addressing the skills shortages in specific areas? This seems like a missed opportunity.

I am delighted that grammar schools appear to be off the table for the moment, but I wonder whether the new coalition will bring them back into discussions with the Government. I wait to see what will happen on that front.

Regardless of the Secretary of State’s comments earlier, Scotland is one of the most educated nations in Europe, with only Luxembourg having a higher proportion of people educated to tertiary level. In Scotland we provide routes to higher education through our further education—[Interruption.] New Conservative Members might learn something if they stopped shouting. In Scotland we provide routes to higher education through further education, and many of our young people from disadvantaged backgrounds take full advantage of that. Those numbers are not captured in the UCAS figures that the Secretary of State enjoys referencing.

Tim Loughton: The hon. Lady still has not answered the question. Why has the number of students from less-advantaged backgrounds going to university plateaued in Scotland, in contrast to England? Why is it that, because of Scotland’s tuition fees policy, Scottish students are finding it increasingly difficult to find a place at Scottish universities and are having to come to England?

Carol Monaghan: Maybe the hon. Gentleman missed what I have literally just said. When we consider alternative routes into higher education through further education colleges, in Scotland more young people from disadvantaged backgrounds access higher education than anywhere else in the UK.

It is interesting that the Secretary of State referred to a £2 billion black hole in the Labour party’s costings for higher education, but I can point to a £1.5 billion fund that appeared to become available only yesterday. Brexit is now a serious threat to our higher education, our research and our science community. We now need to take major steps to ensure that they are protected in all the negotiations.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr George Howarth): Order. In order to accommodate as many Members as possible, I will now impose a time limit of five minutes. It may need to be brought down even further later in the debate, but for now it will be five minutes.

2.53 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): At the heart of giving every citizen the opportunity to succeed is the need to ensure that they have access to the best education, and I commend the Secretary of State for the clear vision she set out today, which the Government are following, to ensure that education remains at the heart of this Government’s social mobility policy. We should never forget that good schools are the engine of social mobility.

I slightly take issue with the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), because in my constituency we had to wait for a Conservative Government to get record levels of investment. We did not get it under Labour.

Critical to the role of good schools in social mobility is their delivery of academic excellence. Again, it is good to hear the Secretary of State talking about our education system, which is now on a par with the best in the world in what it is delivering academically. I urge her to stress that that should be at the top of the agenda for every headteacher in this country, regardless of their area.

The Minister for School Standards has done a tremendous job of ensuring that academic excellence is translated into reality through our curriculum and through the Government’s focus, from the start, on using phonics to ensure that we get away from the unacceptable situation in which one in three young people leaves primary school without the basic ability to read. We now have far higher standards. I recently went into Marbel Community Infants School to see the inspiration that young people are getting from their teachers because those young people are able to read fluently much earlier.

The other part of the Government’s focus on academic excellence has been the introduction of the EBacc. I was particularly pleased earlier this year to see the New Schools Network report, which laid to rest some of the myths about the introduction of the EBacc, particularly that it might be reducing young people’s ability to follow arts subjects. The excellent research showed that although young people focus on English, maths, science, a language, history and geography, they are able to include other arts subjects in their GCSE choices. It is important for us to continue that as a country, as our creative industries are world-renowned and we must ensure that that continues.

I will not go into detail on the importance of the other part of the curriculum that the Government will be addressing in this Session—relationship and sex education—although I look forward to hearing more about how that will be developed with the input of the very expert groups that advised me when I proposed amendments to the Children and Social Work Act 2017 on Report.

The Secretary of State touched on technical education and the importance of parity of esteem. I congratulate the Government on their work with the technical sector to provide supported internships for some of the most challenged young people in this country—those with special educational needs. I was privileged to go into my local Basingstoke College of Technology last week to celebrate the first anniversary of supported internships. BCOT is working with local employers to give young people with a learning disability the opportunity to get the sort of supported work experience that will make an enormous difference to the rest of their life.

This is probably the final point I will be able to raise in my short remarks. Hampshire has the third lowest education funding in the country, and we need to see the Secretary of State’s proposed changes, which will mean £14 million of extra funding for our county to try to put right some of the inequities that built up in the past. In Basingstoke 90% of our primary schools are
good or outstanding. We have 1,300 new primary school places, with more than £30 million of extra investment, but we need fairer funding to ensure that the historical inequities are addressed.

2.58 pm

**Lucy Powell** (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome all colleagues, including many new colleagues, to the House—many of those new colleagues will want to give their maiden speech today. I also welcome the Secretary of State, who was re-elected only by the skin of her teeth.

The Prime Minister called the election to offer the country strong and stable leadership, and what has been left is a complete and utter mess for the country. It is an indictment of a terrible general election campaign but also a reflection of the Conservative party’s time in government. School funding was undoubtedly a key issue in the election, as was, latterly, funding for the police and security services. Those issues highlighted a similar concern, which is that the public are fed up to the back teeth with cuts to vital public services—services that are precious to the public—with the same rhetoric coming from this Government.

The school gates campaign was a particularly successful and effective part of the general election campaign, and I pay tribute to the headteachers, the unions, the staff and others for their work in highlighting these issues over many months. It is pretty pathetic of Conservative MPs to blame headteachers for their loss of seats at this election.

**Mrs Miller:** Does the hon. Lady regret that parents were inadvertently left with the impression that funding for schools might be cut, particularly in my constituency, where we were going to see an overall increase in school funding? That was not necessarily always the message that her party gave.

**Lucy Powell:** I do not, because the exchanges we saw earlier today reflect the ones in the election, which showed that Conservative Members had their fingers in their ears about the facts of the matter. Let us just go through some of those facts: before we even get into the fair funding formula, every school in this country will lose between 8% and 9% of its budgets over the course of this Parliament—or this new Parliament and two years of the previous one—because costs have gone up. Although the Government say they are protecting budgets in cash terms, they are not protecting them in real terms, so even the winners from the fair funding formula will still lose 3% of their budgets, whereas the losers will lose more than 11%. Every school in the country is a loser, and Conservative Members still have their fingers in their ears, even after the general election disaster they have just overseen. Those are the facts, and I do not blame any headteacher for telling them to parents.

The Conservatives should blame themselves, because those cuts mean that headteachers are having to make some of the most unpalatable cuts to school budgets. They are having to cut back on teachers, teaching assistants, school trips and extra-curricular activities. Those are the unpalatable cuts that the Government have overseen, which is why at the general election parents around the country said, “Enough is enough.” Perhaps that is why the polling has shown that since the election nearly 750,000 people have said they changed the way they voted in that election because of cuts to school funding. Perhaps it is time now that the Government actually started to listen. Persisting with the failed lines they used during the general election campaign will not cut it, so it is about time that the Secretary of State used her reappointment to go to the Chancellor and the Prime Minister and say that she needs to find the money to meet that shortfall. This is a funding crisis and she needs to deal with it quickly.

Having dug themselves in on school funding, the Government found themselves in the same rhetorical malaise on police resources as they also took centre stage in this election. I wish to take this opportunity to pay tribute to Greater Manchester police and their response to the Manchester terror attacks; to Manchester City Council, whose response was exemplary; to the whole city; and, as the Secretary of State said, to the teachers, headteachers and the staff in our schools who supported the many, many children who, having been at that concert that evening, went and did their GCSE exams the very next day. They all did a great job.

However, the current plans for cuts in police numbers are just too much for Greater Manchester police to bear—they are unsustainable—which is why our chief constable has asked the Government urgently for extra resources for 800 police officers. I hope the Government can find the money from somewhere for that extra resource, because the new threats our country now faces mean that we need them. Again, the Tories’ arrogance and inflexibility during the campaign meant that police cuts were undoubtedly another vote loser for them. What an irony it is, then, that they have now managed to find £1 billion from their magic money tree for their grubby deal with the DUP. Had they found that money a few weeks ago for schools and the police, perhaps they would have had a majority here today—a bigger majority even. Perhaps they will finally learn some of the lessons of the election.

Finally, let me say that it is not all bad news, because one good thing to come out of this election—I know the Secretary of State will share my view on this—is the end to the bringing back of grammar schools. I know it was a policy she was not all that keen on. We are glad to see the back of it and I am sure she will welcome that. However, I urge her and her Government to learn the right lessons of this election and make sure that our public services and education system have the funding they need.

3.4 pm

**Mr Mark Harper** (Forest of Dean) (Con): I know the Minister of State, Department for Education, my right hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Anne Milton), was not able to stay for the rest of the debate because she had an urgent meeting to go to, but I was very pleased to see her in her place earlier; the former Deputy Chief Whip will make an excellent addition to the Secretary of State’s team.

I am also pleased to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), who speaks for the Scottish National party, because while she was on her feet the First Minister caved in and accepted that there will not be a referendum on Scottish independence until after Brexit. The credit should go
both to the Prime Minister and the leader of the
opposition in Scotland; they can share the credit for
having helped to save our Union, which is incredibly
important.

It is also a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member
for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), who, in her five
minutes, spent a great deal of money but did not take a
second to explain how our economy can generate the
money to spend on our important public services. I am
going to spend my remarks dealing with that now. First,
let me say that it is still incredibly important that we
keep living within our means, as countries that do not
do so find that, over time, they are not able to pay for
any important public services. That is why it is worth
reminding the House that when we came into office in
2010 the deficit was 10% and we were spending £150 billion
more than we were bringing in in tax revenue. By the
time of the election, we had reduced the cash deficit by
70% and the deficit as a proportion of the economy by
three quarters, and the debt will start falling as a
percentage of GDP from this period. [Laughter.] I have
to say to Labour Front Benchers who are laughing that
they opposed every single spending cut we made, so the
deficit and the debt would have been higher—incredibly
so—had they been in government.

One thing we hear from the Opposition is that living
within our means did not work, but the important
things like growth and jobs have demonstrated that it
did. Between 2010 and 2016, of the G7 countries our
growth was second only to that of the United States; we
grew almost twice as fast as our nearest neighbour,
France. In 2014, ours was the fastest growing G7 country,
we were joint top in 2015 and again the fastest growing
in 2016. What does that mean for jobs and opportunities
for our young people when they leave school? Three
million more people are in work than there were in
2010; we have a record high employment rate; we have a
better performance than others in the G7 and the OECD,
and almost double the performance of our Eurozone
colleagues. When we came to power, the unemployment
rate among young people in Britain was just under
20%—the same as in the EU and the euro area.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op):
The right hon. Gentleman is making a point about
youth unemployment. Does he agree that it is scandalous
that the work of a young person is so undervalued by
the Conservative party that the living wage does not
kick in until someone is 25? How is it right that a young
person doing a job should be paid less than their
counterparts who are over 25?

Mr Harper: It is partly to do with skills and experience.
Someone who comes straight from school into a job has
to get some training, experience and skills. If the hon.
Gentleman talked to businesses in his constituency, he
would find it interesting to ask them how someone
coming straight from school with no experience and no
work skills should be on £10 an hour. He would find
either that that young person would not get the opportunity
to work or that the business would not be viable. If he
does not believe me, he should talk to some of those
businesses, as that is what they will tell him.

Let me return to the Government’s performance on
unemployment. When we were elected, the unemployment
rate among young people was as bad as it is in the EU
and the euro area, at about 20%. Seven years later, in
the EU and the euro area the unemployment figure has
increased, whereas in Britain, under a Conservative-led
Government, it has gone down by six percentage points.
There are millions of young people who have the
opportunity and social mobility generated by having a
job, either when they leave university or when they leave
school and college and train in an apprenticeship. Even
more impressively, and despite what the Leader of the
Opposition keeps saying—it is not true—during their
time in power income inequality has fallen. The country
has become more equal, not less equal, which says a lot
about the opportunities that this party delivers in
government. This party makes opportunities for our
young people and gives them the chance to succeed.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): My right hon.
Friend is making a number of good points about the
opportunities for young people. Does he agree that, in
Gloucestershire in particular, we have seen a rapid rise
in the number of apprenticeships? There have been
7,000 in the city of Gloucester alone over the past seven
years. Does he absolutely support another great opportunity,
which is to have a health university technical college
serving the people of the whole of our county and
beyond?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr George Howarth): Order.
Before Mr Speaker left the Chair, he did point out that interventions needed to be brief. If anybody finds themselves
using the word “and”, it means that they are making
one point too many.

Mr Harper: What excellent advice, Mr Deputy Speaker.
I agree with my hon. Friend. He has led a number of
successful job fairs and apprenticeship opportunities in
Gloucester. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for
Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) has also helped to introduce a
cyber training centre in Cheltenham to deliver those
extra opportunities for our young people in the industries
of the future.

Finally, let me touch briefly on local services, particularly
social care. Too often when we talk about social care, we
refer only to older people. I want to remind Ministers
that almost half the social care spending in England is
on working age people between 18 and 24. That social
care spending is incredibly important, as it ensures that
those people can be independent and that they have the
opportunity to work, but we need to think about how
we can fund it. It cannot be funded in the same way as
social care for older people, as younger people are not
likely to have accumulated assets. Any form of means-testing
sets up another barrier to work, and I want to ensure
that more of those young people can get into work.

In our manifesto, we pledged to get a million more
disabled people into work. As chair-designate of the
all-party group on learning disability, I want to ensure
that more people with learning disabilities have the
opportunity to get into work and to succeed in the years
to come. I hope that the Minister will bear that in mind
as the Government make their plans for the future. We
have a proud record. The only thing that I regret about
our record is that we did not talk about it enough
during the election campaign. If we had, the Leader of
the Opposition would not have got away with his
irresponsible over-spending manifesto that would have
bankrupted our country. I am glad that the people of Britain saw through it and made sure that they returned this Government to office. We will continue to deliver for Britain as we have done over the past seven years. We have a record of which we can be proud.

3.12 pm

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): The Prime Minister has endured a torrid few weeks—she has gone from Wonder Woman to the Joker in one spectacular electoral pratfall. We see the parlous state of her diminishing authority and of her Government’s capacity to govern in this damp squib of a legislative programme. Apart from the preparations for implementing our exit from the EU, for which almost half the country did not vote and which is a major cause of division and rancour in Britain today, there is little to it, and there is to be no legislative programme at all next year.

When a Prime Minister at the apogee of their power writes the Queen’s Speech immediately after a general election, they should be writing about the big policies and ideas that will take the nation forward and improve people’s lives, but this speech is more about what the Government Whips think they can get away with and about trying to limit the damage to our economy, future prospects and international influence following the UK’s vote to leave the EU—something the Prime Minister does not believe in and did not vote for.

I want to discuss what the Prime Minister could have done in the Queen’s Speech to help my constituents. I am talking about keeping them safe from gun crime, and educating their children. Merseyside police have faced a cut in resources of almost £87 million since 2010, and on current Government plans are being forced to cut a further £18 million over the next three years. They have lost a quarter of their staff—more than 1,000 officers and civilian personnel—and are due to lose 540 more. The challenges they face are great, as neighbourhood policing is largely gone. The Matrix unit, which tackled organised crime so successfully on Merseyside is gone as a single unit, yet we on Merseyside are facing a surge in gun crime, which has seen more than 100 shootings in the past 18 months, including five murders. Chief Constable Andy Cooke blames the impact of these cuts for the increasingly reactive policing his force is having to adopt as a replacement for the highly successful proactive policing for which they are so well known.

There are now more guns circulating on Merseyside, and the injury rate is becoming more serious, with firearms incidents up from 33% to 50%. The community safety initiatives that Liverpool City Council and Knowsley Borough Council provided to divert young people from involvement in crime have dwindled away thanks to a lack of money. Liverpool City Council has lost 58% of its resource, rising to 68% in three years, and Knowsley will have lost 56% at the end of another three years.

In January, I wrote to then Minister of State for Policing, Fire and Criminal Justice seeking a meeting about this worrying increase in gun crime, and it took place on 9 February—indeed, you are here, Mr Deputy Speaker, as was my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd). Although the Minister did not bother to turn up, we were assured by the Under-Secretary of State that a bid for extra resources would be considered sympathetically. The chief constable has recently revealed that the bid has been turned down, yet I have not had the courtesy of a letter from Ministers following up on the meeting of 9 February, or a letter explaining why the bid that was invited has been rejected, which is disgraceful.

Andy Cooke said:

“Have I got sufficient resources to deal with gun crime? No I haven’t...If I had more staff, would I put them to deal with gun crime? Yes I would.”

This Queen’s Speech could have done something about that, but it has not.

As you well know, Mr Deputy Speaker, there is now no academic A-level provision in the borough of Knowsley, part of which is in my constituency and the rest of which is in yours. Since the closure of the sixth form at Halewood academy, young people in Halewood have to leave the borough to access opportunities that should be readily available for every child in their own local community. In areas such as south Liverpool and Halewood, we have a constant battle to increase educational attainment. The Queen’s Speech could have tried to do something about that, but it did not. It does not even guarantee that no school will have its budget cut, as the Tory manifesto purported to do.

I have been asking local headteachers what the new funding formula will mean for their school. Some have already cut teachers and support staff. One of my schools has lost 26% of its teaching staff. Others see redundancies next year as inevitable. Schools are cutting back on the curriculum; one has removed drama and cut back on modern foreign languages and music. All are now having to use school budgets to pay for shared support services, such as special educational needs outreach, educational psychology and family support services, which were once provided by Liverpool City Council. Others are forced to ask parents for money to make their budgets work. This is a catastrophe and will further disadvantage those pupils who already face barriers. This Queen’s Speech will do nothing to help my constituents who need to be safe from gun crime or who want their children to have a fair chance in education. It is the last desperate effort of a Government who seek only to cling on to office. We will make sure that they do not.

3.17 pm

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) and thank her for her contribution. I have had the great privilege of representing the city of Aberdeen, its communities and its people over the past five years—first as a councillor and then as a Member of the Scottish Parliament for the North East Region. I am truly humbled and honoured that the people of Aberdeen South have placed their trust, faith and confidence in me to represent them in this very special place.

I give an unwavering commitment to my constituents that no matter which party they voted for, if they voted at all, I will work hard and tirelessly for all of them to make Aberdeen’s voice heard. In 2014, the people of Aberdeen South and the whole of Scotland voted to reject independence, and this election they have sent the clearest possible message that they do not want a second independence referendum. Although the First Minister
may have paused her plans, she failed to take them off the table. The people in my constituency want the divisions in our country to be healed, not exacerbated, which is why Scotland’s First Minister must get back to her day job of improving our schools and hospitals and supporting our economy to grow.

I would like to thank my predecessors for their contributions to this place. For the past two years, Callum McCaig represented Aberdeen South with enthusiasm and energy. I first met Callum when we were elected to Aberdeen City Council. At that time, his friendly, helpful advice was greatly appreciated. He is extraordinarily capable and I have no doubt he will continue to contribute to Scottish public life. I genuinely wish him all the best for his future.

It would be remiss of me if I did not pay tribute to Dame Anne Begg, who represented the constituency for 18 years with dignity and compassion. Her tireless and passionate advocacy for the rights of disabled people helped improve the quality of life of many people across our country.

Aberdeen is a global city with a global reputation, known the world over as the oil capital of Europe, and as a centre of excellence for innovation and technology. Aberdeen has long made an impressive contribution to the prosperity of the UK and it is the engine room of Scotland’s economy. However, there is far more to Aberdeen than just oil and gas. It is the silver city with the golden sands. Its beauty is unparalleled when its wonderfully sculpted granite buildings sparkle in the sun—when we get to see the sun, that is.

Aberdeen is a vibrant city that is also alive with culture, music and the arts. My constituency takes in the west end communities such as Queen’s Cross, Harlaw, Ashley, Mannofield and Ferryhill. It incorporates the tightly knit communities of Craigiebuckler, Seafield, Airyhall and Braeside. The constituency stretches further westward, following the mighty River Dee to take in the villages of Culs, Bieldside and Milltimber and right on to Peterculter. In the south, it includes Garthdee and Kincorth and goes along to the coastal settlement of Cove. In the former royal borough of Torry, the iconic Girdleness lighthouse, built in 1813, stands tall.

Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to speak in the debate. I want to thank my constituents for electing me to this place and I look forward to being a strong voice for them here. I want to conclude with the city of Aberdeen’s toast: “Happy to meet, sorry to part, happy to meet again—Bon Accord!”

3.21 pm

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): I am so honoured to be here to deliver my maiden speech as the Member of Parliament for Colne Valley. I would like to take this opportunity to thank my predecessor, Jason McCartney, for his work for the constituency over the past seven years and I wish him well for the future.

The beautiful valleys that are my home hold an important place in Labour’s radical history and are closely associated with the luddites, chartists and suffragettes. Colne Valley is in fact the oldest Labour constituency in the country, and celebrates its 126th birthday next month. One of our greatest and wisest Prime Ministers, Harold Wilson, was raised less than a mile from my home and attended local schools. His words when he spoke about Labour:

“This party is a moral crusade or it is nothing”,

ring so true for me now as a newly elected Labour MP.

More recently, the honourable Lord David Clark and Kali Mountford have served as outstanding representatives of my community.

The beautiful Pennine landscape that many Members saw as the Tour de France cyclists scaled the heights is something to be proud of, but it is not just the place but the people who make Colne Valley so distinctive. It is about their creativity, compassion and dry wit. My constituency has a rich diversity, with a vibrant Asian community. Since the second world war, such diversity has enriched our economy and our culture. As a former teacher and headteacher, I took part in the Kirklees schools twinning projects, where black Muslim children and white working-class children shared lessons, food and play. Those children saw no difference in colour or faith but just enjoyed friendship and the joy of one another’s company. Such an experience reminds me of Wordsworth’s words:

“The Child is father of the Man”.

In these testing times of terrorism and radicalisation, young children can give many adults the lessons of forgiveness, tolerance and compassion.

Within the discussion and debate about what is a “good” school, my experience of education and of how children learn and thrive tells me that a culture of targets and tests does not result in a happy, clever or creative child. A whole child approach that cares for their emotional, physical and intellectual wellbeing is needed. Our own head of Ofsted has recently spoken about the need for an education that meets the child’s needs, not the school’s targets.

Colne Valley has some of the best schools and sixth form colleges in the country. The professionals who work there deserve to be supported through adequate funding and ownership of a broad and balanced curriculum. Huddersfield University has just been awarded a gold standard for teaching and leads our areas economic and cultural success. We are well proud of our flagship university.

As a country our media and creative arts are the envy of the world, and in our own Colne Valley, we have hosted filming for “Last Tango in Halifax”, “Happy Valley” and other peak-time popular programmes. Our valleys are vibrant with creativity and we have a vision for not just a northern powerhouse but, more specifically, a Colne Valley powerhouse, leading in technology, culture and arts initiatives. The vision for the valleys is real, but the cuts to our local services are impacting on the most vulnerable in our communities and will make the vision harder to achieve.

Having taught in one of the most deprived areas of the country, I know the impact of poverty on a child’s physical, intellectual and emotional wellbeing. I know the child who will not let go of my hand at the end of the day because there is no heating on at home or food in the fridge. Cuts to our local frontline services are hurting our children and devastating the most vulnerable in our communities. I am committed to campaigning for appropriate funding for our schools, our hospitals and our local services. Such services are the people of Colne Valley’s right and not a privilege.

On a personal note, I am glad to see the increased number of women MPs seated in this Chamber. I do hope, however, that when my granddaughter, Iris, who
is four years old, reaches maturity, she will not view it as unusual for there to be a majority of women MPs fairly representing the population of our country. I am also delighted that we now have four—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr George Howarth): Order. I call Tim Loughton.

3.27 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow two such accomplished maiden speeches and it is a great sadness that the time constraints mean that hon. Members trying to give an account of their constituencies and of their predecessors and also to talk about education do not get enough time to do so. Both were polished, accomplished, witty and gracious contributions and both Members will be great advocates for their constituents. The hon. Member for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker) will, I am sure, be no luddite in the progressive way in which she will represent her constituents, and my new hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson)—one of 12 new Scottish Conservative hon. Friends, I am delighted to say—will be a great advocate for the people of Aberdeen and the majority of people of Scotland who want to stay in the Union that is the United Kingdom we value so much.

Much has been said about what is not in the Queen’s Speech, so I will break that habit and talk about some things that are in it. I certainly commend the eight Brexit Bills. They will give us many opportunities to talk long into the night, so I will not go into any detail here. I will, however, praise the inclusion of the domestic violence and abuse Bill. The Prime Minister in particular has long championed such legislation, and the record of this Government on domestic violence is second to none.

I particularly hope that we make progress on the disproportionate number of young women who are victims of domestic abuse. Some 12% of young women aged 16 to 19 were victims of domestic abuse in the last two years. Domestic abuse is prevalent in teenage relationships. It is an intergenerational blight that affects many young women in particular. Women who were brought up in households where domestic violence was the norm expect it. They think, “Well, that’s what will happen to me, isn’t it?” but it must not. We need legislation and much greater vigilance to drive out domestic abuse wherever it occurs. I saw, as a Children’s Minister, the impact that it has on child abuse, which is nearly always linked with some form of domestic violence. I welcome the inclusion of that Bill in the Queen’s Speech.

I also welcome the mention of mental health, and in particular that of school-age children. Approximately 200,000 young people aged 10 to 17 are referred to specialist mental health services each year. They are just the ones lucky enough to be referred. It is often too late, and too much of the additional funds that this Government have dedicated to mental health does not end up going to deal with mental illness issues, particularly among young people. We have a lot more to do in that area, and I am pleased that the Prime Minister flagged it up as such a priority issue at the beginning of the election campaign.

My main focus today is on the fair funding of schools, which was probably the single largest issue in my constituency during the election. West Sussex, where my constituency lies, is the worst-funded county authority in the country. A pupil in my constituency gets under £4,200 per year, which is way down the bottom of the list. I welcome the additional £4 billion that the Government have offered, but there will still be a shortfall, given the cost pressures coming along the line from pay increases, national insurance and the apprenticeship levy. The cumulative effect of being underfunded for so many years in West Sussex is that many of our schools do not have any further slack that they can take up; they are running on empty. That has to be dealt with as a matter of urgency.

West Sussex MPs have taken our headteachers to see the Minister, and I have invited all the heads in my constituency to a roundtable meeting next month, to see the exact impact of the funding situation at the moment. I obviously welcome the fact that the Secretary of State has consulted on a fair funding formula. Only this Government have done that. We had a second consultation on the fair funding formula, which ended on 22 March, but the general election interrupted it. We must urgently get a resolution through a fair funding formula that does not just tinker with the deprivation figures, rural sparsity figures or prior attainment figures. We must come up with a formula that means schools in my constituency have the basics they need to operate.

We can argue the toss about the pupil premium and all the extras for deprivation on top of it, but this cannot wait any longer. I hope that the Ministers present will take back the message to the Secretary of State that we need, as a matter of urgency, a resolution to this consultation and a meaningful settlement, so that schools in my constituency have fair funding, to give our children a fair start with the rest of the country.

3.32 pm

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I have listened to those on the Government Benches trying to have a go at Labour Members about the cost of our manifesto, but, very interestingly, during the general election they certainly did not give us any figures or cost their manifesto. They must have had a premonition that they would not have a majority after the election; that is the only reason I can think of. The message has not got across to them yet that people are fed up with austerity.

I have visited a number of schools in my constituency, and the message has been the same at each one: they may have to make teachers and classroom assistants redundant. I believe that every child should receive every possible opportunity to succeed in life, regardless of their background. I am therefore disappointed that no clear education legislation is outlined in the Queen’s Speech. There are only vague commitments to allow children to attend good schools.

I hope that the Government have finally dropped their vanity project of introducing more grammar schools. That policy would have served only to increase the divisions in society. Instead of trying to create new schools, we should be focusing on our existing schools to ensure that they are sufficiently funded. That is what will give our children the best opportunities in life. However, despite having pledged to ensure that every child gets the education they deserve, the Government proposed in their manifesto to remove free school meals. I am pleased that that policy has been scrapped, but we must not forget that they tried to introduce it in the first place.
It is under proposals from this same Government that schools are having their funding cut for the first time in 20 years, which will mean teachers losing their jobs and our children being taught in supersized classes.

In Coventry, over £29 million will be cut from the local authority’s education budget, which will mean, on average, £600 less per pupil. One school in my constituency is facing a reduction of £1,600 per pupil. That is simply not good enough. Our children deserve better.

We have seen time and again that this Government are failing the people of this country, whether children at the start of their lives or people at the other end of their lives—for example, by threatening to scrap the pensions triple lock, or by letting down the women who have seen their state pension age increase but received inadequate transitional arrangements.

I will now move on to local services. We have seen a shift in focus, with responsibility moving from central to local government. It is important that local authorities can shape their service provision, but they are having to do so in the face of constant budget cuts. Since 2010, Coventry Council has lost £106 million a year, which represents a 50% cut in Government grant funding. By 2020, the Government will have cut £655 million from the council’s budget. When people have increasingly complex needs, especially in areas such as adult social care and mental health services, Coventry and Warwickshire local authorities expect a deficit of £33 million by 2020-21 in social care. Although we have, I hope, seen the back of the Government’s proposed dementia tax, more must be done urgently to tackle the crisis in social care, and there was no specific mention of that in the Green Paper.

The Chancellor said in his Mansion House speech that, “people are weary of the long slog” and that the Conservatives are listening to people after the election. But is he really hearing what the people of this country need? It is simply staggering that the Government are continuing to pursue an agenda of austerity. Other vital local services are still being cut. The Department for Work and Pensions has announced the closure of 108 sites by March 2018, including the Tile Hill jobcentre in Coventry, which means that claimants will now have to travel for up to an hour to get to a jobcentre. That will be incredibly difficult for many of the more vulnerable users of the jobcentre.

At a time when the gap between rich and poor is widening, it is more important than ever to ensure that we are caring for those who need it the most. Therefore, while I welcome the mention in the Queen’s Speech of the very important issue of domestic violence, let us not forget that 17% of specialist women’s refuges have closed since 2010. That means that women will have been unable to get the help and support they so desperately need. Some 20,000 police officers have been cut, and much has been made in the national press of the consequences. While the Government say one thing, their policies seem to do the exact opposite.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir David Amess): Order. In order to accommodate the large number of colleagues who wish to speak, the time limit is being dropped to four minutes with immediate effect, although I will use some latitude for Members making their maiden speeches.

3.38 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Unfortunately, Mr Deputy Speaker, this is not my maiden speech. I am happy to welcome you to the Chair. It is 34 years since you and I arrived in this place—some would say too long—but we are still surviving. It is my great pleasure to congratulate, as I am sure all Members wish to do, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson), who made a speech that was witty and to the purpose. I am sure that the good people of Aberdeen, like those of Lincolnshire, which abuts Grimsby, will welcome our taking back control of our fisheries, which will be a vital part of the Brexit negotiations.

I think that what people want, particularly young people, is for us to be positive, aspirational and honest. If there is any fault with our Prime Minister, it is that during the general election we were almost too honest in explaining the level of the national debt, but in these debates we have to keep making the point. We have heard many calls for more public spending, but it all comes from hard-pressed taxpayers. I make no apology for reminding the House that the national debt stands at £1.7 trillion. In the five minutes that it was going to take me to make this speech, the national debt will have risen by £443,000—it will rise a bit less in four minutes, but it is still going up. There is no point in talking about cutting the deficit if the national debt keeps rising remorselessly every year.

The job of the Conservative party is to speak up for business, for wealth providers and wealth creators, and for taxpayers, because all this national debt has to be provided by our constituents. Sometimes that is not a popular message.

I have been asked to speak today on behalf of the headmaster of Queen Elizabeth’s High School, a grammar school in my constituency that is providing the scientists, engineers and entrepreneurs of the future. It is a high-performing school, but its budget has been cut by £600,000 in the past five years. Of course I support a fairer funding formula, but we need some equality of fairness throughout the country. It is simply not good enough for us to argue continually for higher levels of public spending to accommodate this or that interest group.

The first honest debate this country needs to have is about our ageing population and the cost of social care. Full marks to the Prime Minister for trying to talk about it. At the moment, we are apparently committed to maintaining the triple lock. We have not yet had a full debate in this Parliament about a future adult social care cap or floor, but we must have that debate. We have to be able to convince our ageing population that we have the resources to care for them, and that we will be humane and honest. The same argument surely applies to the NHS. Sometimes, I am the only person in this place who argues that we have not only to put more money into the NHS, but to be honest about where it is coming from. There is a limit on how much we can pay from general taxation when the top 1% pay for 25% of all spending, so let us be honest in these debates.

Let us be honest, finally, in our Brexit negotiations. Let us not talk about a hard or a soft Brexit. I am afraid that we have to stick to the Prime Minister’s Lancaster House speech. It is not hard or soft Brexit; it is inevitable Brexit. We are leaving the EU. If we leave the EU, we have to leave the single market. So let us be positive, let us be aspirational and let us, as a party, be united.
3.42 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): Everybody happy? Welcome to Westminster. It has been a privilege to start work here and to represent the people of Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill who have sent me here.

I offer some sympathy to Phil Boswell, the man I have replaced, and to his staff. No doubt, Phil and his staff expected a longer time down here than they received. Politics can be risky, as many hon. Members in this House will know better than May—sorry, I meant me. I follow the footsteps of many good people like "Mr Coatbridge", the right hon. Tom Clarke, who served here for 33 years. I would also like to recognise another Lanarkshire man, the late Labour leader John Smith, who was the best Prime Minister we never had. However, the man I have come to follow was a working man who recognised that workers had no voice inside Parliament. This man was also Lanarkshire born and he gave birth to the Labour party. His name lives on today through the Keir Hardie Society, of which I am one of the founders.

Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill, along with the other communities I represent—Stepps, Moodiesburn, Glenboig, Bargeddie, Birkenshaw, Tannochside and Viewpark—were once part of the industrial landscape of coal and steel, like many other communities. But sadly, that is all gone. What is left is not enough. We have poverty and not enough housing. Our generation of children today and tomorrow have no real vision. They are kept on low pay with zero-hours contracts and are told to be grateful if they have a job. There is no opportunity for a house, as they cannot afford it. Our society is failing them, and the gap between the rich and the poor widens every day.

My day job was with Royal Mail Parcelforce, delivering and collecting parcels every day. It was also my privilege to represent my workmates from Glasgow Parcelforce, to whom I was grateful. I represented those workers as a trade union representative of the Communication Workers Union. To workers today, I recommend you join a trade union movement—our strength is in unity. I represent the CWU, and I am proud to be part of the trade union movement.

I will also declare an interest. Royal Mail was not for sale; it was stolen, and I aim to return this great public service to its rightful owners—the residents of the UK. My new job starts now. With the help of my family—Anne, Matthew, Christopher and Paul—and the CWU, my feet will stay on the ground. I am here to represent all my constituents, and I will aim to change society for the better.

There is enough wealth in this country to close the poverty gap and close down food banks. As we enter Brexit, we could build a new United Kingdom—one that cares for all walks of life, one that cares for humanity, and one that shows equality for all. No matter our race, colour, religion or sexuality, we are all equal, and everyone, from cradle to grave, deserves dignity and respect.

I know I have finished, but I am going to make one more point. We have a motto in North Lanarkshire Trade Union Council: "The past we inherit, the future we build", and this I will apply as I stand here for unemployed workers, disabled workers and taxpaying workers, of whom there are many more than the privileged few.

3.47 pm

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) on that speech. It was passionate and intense, and he was quite right: it was his moment to enjoy, and so it should be. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson), who was articulate and informed—that city has an excellent representative. It is a great pleasure to have so many Scottish colleagues around me on the Conservative Benches.

We have only a short time, so let me canter through some of the points I wanted to raise. Rightly, one of today’s themes is education. After all, if we look back just seven years to 2010, one in three children leaving primary schools was unable to read, write or count properly. What that tells me is that, in too many schools under Labour, the standards just were not good enough. Seven years on, the number of children in schools classed as good or excellent has risen by nearly 2 million. That is nearly 2 million young minds now able to flourish, where previously they were struggling under poor standards.

Education is important to the individual, but it is also crucial to the economy. As we leave the European Union, all of us need to rethink what we mean by education, skills and training. That brings me to how we can best strengthen the economy as a whole. There are good measures in this Queen’s Speech on agriculture, fisheries, and spacecraft and other emerging technologies, but we face a broader challenge, which is that productivity in this country is persistently weak. Unless we address that, all our hopes for public services and other matters will simply come to nought.

At the beginning of this debate last Wednesday, I listened to the Leader of the Opposition tell us that the most effective way of increasing pay was strong trade unions and effective collective bargaining. That showed me that his thinking is out of date and blinkered, because the best way to achieve sustained growth and higher incomes is to raise our productivity. If we add 1% of productivity to our economy each year, that will be another £240 billion over the next 10 years—£9,000 per household. That is the way to grow the economy, lift people’s wages and pay for public services.

In the minute or so that I have left, let me touch on one aspect of productivity, namely trade. In recent months we have seen the pound fall and a resurgence in manufacturing, which is welcome. However, as the excellent economist for The Sunday Times, David Smith, has pointed out, we now need to liberalise the trade in services. After all, services are 80% of our economy.
The Bills on trade and customs are good and I welcome the fact that we have a dedicated trade Department focused on that task, but the liberalisation of the global market in services, which is so important to our economy and to jobs, will need a sustained and cross-Government approach if it is to succeed. Clearly, the EU-Brexit process will affect that most immediately, but there is a wider opportunity and I believe that this country should take up the mantle as the champion for open, global markets in services and pursue that through whatever means possible. Get that right and the chance to grow our economy—and, yes, lift people’s living standards—will be all the greater.

3.50 pm

Lesley Laird (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to speak in today’s debate.

Before looking forward, I want to take a few moments to pause and reflect on the maiden speeches made by Members of Parliament who have represented Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath before me. My predecessor Roger Mullin served the constituency from June 2015 to May 2017, and in his maiden speech he quoted Kirkcaldy’s famous son, Adam Smith, who said:

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

That same line was also used by Dr Lewis Moonie, another predecessor, who served this fine constituency from 1987 until 2005. What strikes me about that is that, while so much may have changed in our society, the fundamental challenges remain the same.

It would of course be remiss of me not to mention Gordon Brown, who served the Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath constituency for 10 years from 2005 and who also served this country as Chancellor and Prime Minister—a true and sincere public servant for his constituency and this country. Dr Brown made his maiden speech in 1983, representing the then constituency of Dunfermline East. On that occasion the debate was about social security and proposals to reduce benefit levels—an issue still relevant in today’s society.

The constituency that I am honoured and privileged to represent is Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath, and I thank the people of that resilient constituency for giving me the opportunity to represent them.

What repeatedly strikes me about my area is that it is full of talent and as yet untapped and unfulfilled potential. That potential deserves to be unlocked. My constituency is an area that has known the highs of industrial prosperity through mining, manufacturing, linoleum and shipping, and that now knows poverty and hardship as those industries have slipped away and never really been replaced. It is an area that offers so much in terms of skills and spirit, and it remains a hidden gem in terms of the contribution that it could make to our economy and society. It has character and resilience, shown so strongly through the towns and villages of our mining communities and beyond. Those attributes have seen it continue to hold its ground—and its head high—but it deserves to make better progress.

So I ask myself: what can we all do differently in this House to stop repeating history and that quote and sentiment from Adam Smith? Are we really saying that the many talents in this House cannot turn the tide for our most deprived communities? Are we really saying that our political will does not match the spirit and resilience of the communities we represent?

Today we are discussing education and local services, two enablers that help people in my constituency and others achieve a better life for themselves and their families. For the past five years, I have been an elected councillor in Fife and I know at first hand the life-changing and life-saving services delivered by local authorities. Yet these life-bridging services are being systematically dismantled and eroded, leaving investment in people, communities and infrastructure flawed and fragmented.

It was Winston Churchill who expressed concerns for “the harsh excess of accumulated capital” and the “gaping sorrows of the left-out millions”.

As we discuss these life changing issues today, I put it to the House: is it therefore not our duty to try something new? And what would be the harm in that? So back to the start: the issues discussed by my predecessors in Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath are the issues we are debating today. Are we accepting of the notion that the poor are always with us, or are we prepared to take a different path? Again, what would be the harm in that?

Let me close today by once again quoting Sir Winston Churchill:

“The state must increasingly and earnestly concern itself with the care of the sick, the aged and the young. The state must increasingly assume the position of the reserve employer of labour.”

For the sake of the people of Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath, and communities across the country, I sincerely hope we all seize this moment to stop repeating the mistakes of history and look to find new ways to regain a sense of society and opportunity for all.

3.55 pm

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I start by paying sincere tribute to the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Lesley Laird). I can see from her demeanour that she will sincerely and diligently represent her constituents. I also pay tribute to my new hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson). It is great to have both Members in this House: it sends a clear message to the people of Scotland that a referendum to divide this united nation is most unlikely to happen. I am grateful to see them both in this House.

I would like to start where the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) started, and pay tribute to the teachers and governors in my schools. They do a great job on behalf of our children. I was delighted that the Conservative manifesto pledged an extra £4 billion for education over the course of the Parliament. That is an increase in real terms, so there is no reason why any school budget in England and Wales should decrease. Before I am reprimanded by my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), let me say that I am with him absolutely: we have to live within our means. Austerity only means living within our means.

We in this House have been struggling for too long with an unfair education funding formula. In Gloucestershire, the key stage 3 funding differential means we receive £3,700 per pupil, while the highest spending London authority receives £7,200 per pupil—a difference of
We seem to have become a country that believes we can have our cake and eat it. We want Swedish levels of healthcare, but US levels of taxation to pay for it. We want cheap coffee and fruit, but we are not prepared to have migrants come to this country to serve it or pick it. We want our offices cleaned, our bedsores dressed and our grandparents cared for, but we are not prepared to pay cleaners and carers properly, nor to build homes for them to live in.

In Grenfell we saw the horror of leaving everything to the market. Cost-cutting has a human price. Every single one of us has a housing estate we feel ashamed of. Let us hope there will never be another fire like that at Grenfell, but in every sink estate and in every miserable flat with black mould growing on the walls, children grow up undernourished and unable to achieve their full potential, and people die before their time. It is not a tragedy that will ever get on the front pages of the newspapers, but it is a daily tragedy that we could all prevent. Let us hope we never again hear those words, “Health and safety gone mad.”

We simply cannot get a properly functioning modern society on the cheap. Look at the NHS. Ministers now say that it is all the fault of the public and that we expect too much. I am sorry, but all that my constituents want is a functioning local surgery where they can get an appointment. Unfortunately, the Government’s relentless assault on the NHS has meant that fewer and fewer doctors consider working as a GP in deprived areas or even in the UK at all. France spent £4,959 per head on healthcare in 2014; we spent only £3,935. The point is that we cannot have our cake and eat it. You cannot get a first-class flight if you only pay for economy. We cannot get a Scandinavian NHS if we only pay US taxes.

And let us end the biggest fib of all. We cannot get our national finances back in order by slash-and-burn economics. The Government should know that. After all, they have repeatedly failed to meet their own targets on the deficit and on debt. Deliberately attempting to get the proportion of national income down—deliberately creating a smaller state—is a wrong-headed ideological chimera. It leads to false economies, it has a terrible human cost and it will never get our house back in order.

3.59 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) and for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Lesley Laird) on magnificent speeches—far more magnificent than that of the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson), but I congratulate him too in the generosity of the day. No, it was a magnificent speech, but we saw in the completely different way in which the three of them presented their cases that Parliament is at its best when it is diverse, and it is more so in this Parliament than we have ever seen before.

I truly worry about this country. We face probably the biggest challenge since the second world war, yet we have a Prime Minister who has shown herself to have a tin ear. Her authority, frankly, is in tatters, she has no mandate and she patently cannot carry the country. She is like a massive oil tanker holed beneath the water line. She cannot proceed at pace, she cannot turn around and everyone knows, in this Chamber and in the country, that she is doomed to sink. It is just a question of when.

Could there be any clearer sign of the vacuum at the heart of the Government than this Queen’s Speech? This is not a Queen’s Speech; it would barely qualify as a Queen’s intervention, it is so thin. It’s not worth the vellum it’s not written on.
However, I welcome the college’s commitment to proceed with a retail training facility at the new Mill Green designer outlet village, which will help to train a new generation of retailers. In the meantime, I hope that the college will look at ways of maintaining a presence in the town centre as plans for the campus are developed. Given the level of investment in the campus, it is essential that any future plans make the very most of the excellent facilities there, and, given its position, the plans for the site need to be part of a wider regeneration plan for the town centre.

Similarly, we need to look at the opportunities that the redevelopment of the Rugeley B power station present for the regeneration of Rugeley town centre. As I have said many times before in the House, I want to ensure that we have ambitious, bold and visionary plans for the future of Rugeley and that it can have a really prosperous future.

I turn my attention briefly to the electric vehicles Bill. I welcome moves to increase the number of charging points, and I hope that we will see an increase in Cannock Chase. Although Staffordshire County Council has installed charging points in Stafford in partnership with the local sustainable transport fund and the plugged-in places programme for the west midlands, I am afraid that my constituency is lagging behind. If we want a step change in the adoption of electric vehicles, we must make public charging points more readily available.

Finally, with 69% of voters in Cannock Chase having voted to leave the EU, I very much welcome the legislation that will be brought forward to deliver on the referendum result as the Government set out to get the best possible Brexit deal and build a new relationship with our partners in the EU.

4.7 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): It is a great honour to make my maiden speech following so many eloquent and passionate speakers across the House. It is an even greater honour to do so in an education debate, as a teacher and educationalist and my party’s spokesperson on this issue.

I was reminded by Mr Speaker himself at my swearing-in that some very clever people indeed have represented Oxford West and Abingdon before me. Nicola Blackwood is a capable, generous advocate, and while we disagreed on much, there is one point on which we agree absolutely—that the people of Oxford West and Abingdon deserve and demand the highest level of constituency representation. I pay tribute to the former Member for her genuine, heartfelt commitment to the area, and I promise my constituents that they will always be at the centre of my heart while I am here.

I am sure that Members all remember, before Nicola, the inimitable Dr Evan Harris, who inspired me through his fearless advocacy of progressive, evidence-based arguments, which many others would have avoided. I am now proud to call him my friend. Both of those predecessors were also enthusiastic proponents of science, and as a maths and physics teacher I intend to be just the same.

I may just be the luckiest woman in the world, representing the beautiful, historically important constituency of Oxford West and Abingdon. To the north sit Kidlington and the surrounding villages. Indeed, Kidlington is one of the largest villages in England and proud of this status. Then we have the stunning North Oxford, the home of 10 Oxford colleges and the haunt of many Oxford Brookes students as well. The community there is passionate and active, and I very much look forward to receiving numerous emails and letters replete with footnoted references.

Then we go to the villages further south, large and small, each with its charm and strong community spirit, and last but not least to the ancient market town of Abingdon—some say a contender for the oldest town in England. “Rubbish!” I say. It is the oldest town. Colchester, go away and try harder.

My constituency is a very special area, full of remarkable, talented people, but like all communities we face our fair share of challenges. Flooding, unaffordable housing and under-investment in public transport, notably cycling and buses, feature frequently, but none features more than the A34. Many here will know of the cross-party fight to secure the funding for the Lodge Hill junction. I promise that I will never let up on these local issues or any other. The most recent grassroots campaigns were on the children’s centres in the constituency and the crisis in schools funding, led by parents in the Oxfordshire fairer funding group, which brings me neatly back to the theme of this debate.

I am here because I have a burning passion: that every child, no matter their background, should have a fair chance of making the best of this world. This passion was ignited when I was shocked and ashamed to learn that in this country—this great nation, a member of the G7—that is not the case. I have lived in countries such as Ethiopia, Jamaica and Jordan, where such inequalities might be more understandable, but here we have no excuse. Such inequality is simply wrong, which is why I am so concerned by the Government’s interpretation of fairer funding. I have been a primary school governor for the last two years and have seen the figures for myself. There is a funding crisis—make no mistake—and unless more real-terms funding is found, the next thing to go will be teachers. Fewer teachers there will be fewer of the one-to-one interactions with that struggling student that we all know will make all the difference to them.

I end by asking the House this: is there anything more important than the support and the love that we give to the youngest in our society? After all, one day they may be the oldest. It is an even greater honour to do so in an education debate, as a teacher and educationalist and my party’s spokesperson on this issue. Helping the progress of our children is the most important thing we can do in this House. I ask the House if we can please make sure we give them everything we possibly can to ensure they have a good start in life. As a nation we can take pride in acknowledging

4.11 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) on making such a powerful, gracious and eloquent speech. It was a powerful reminder, if any were required, of the great talent that exists in our teaching profession, which I am pleased to say is now in this House.

I am sure the hon. Lady would agree with Benjamin Disraeli, who said:

“Upon the education of the people of this country the fate of this country depends.”

What applied then applies now. There is no better vehicle for social mobility, social cohesion, cultural appreciation, tolerance, prosperity or, indeed, quality of life. As a nation we can take pride in acknowledging
that there are now a total of 6.6 million young people in good or outstanding schools. That is up by 1.8 million since 2010—an increase of more than 35%. There are now 147,000 more six-year-olds on track to become fluent readers than in 2012. What a remarkable achievement by schools, teachers, parents and governors.

I want to pay particular tribute to teachers in my constituency. They work immensely hard. They follow their calling and give a huge amount of themselves. They include teachers in schools such as St Gregory’s, which takes an increasing number of school children from eastern European backgrounds and in doing so fosters a tolerant and unified society in Cheltenham; Balcarras, which now sends 50% of its pupils to Russell group universities; and Pittville, which successfully addressed challenges in the past and is now going from strength to strength.

What is so remarkable about those achievements is the funding context in which they have been made. For decades now, Cheltenham schools have been significantly underfunded compared with the national average—and not by a small sum, either. In 2014-15, the block allocation for Cheltenham schools was £4,195. The England average was £4,545—a difference of £350—and yet we have Opposition Members such as the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), who made a very eloquent speech last week, complaining that funding in her constituency is planned to rise from just over £5,400 to £5,500. Those are figures that in Cheltenham we could only dream of. They amount to just under 30% more. If I turned up to a meeting of my headteachers in Cheltenham with a promise of an additional 30% in funding, I would be welcomed like Moses.

All that might be tolerable if the cost pressures were manageable, but they are not. Schools are facing increasing cost pressures—salary increases, increases to employers’ national insurance contributions and so on. It is so welcome that the Government are facing up to that injustice. Unravelling the formula and starting from first principles is a task of almost unimaginable complexity. Lesser statesmen than my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education would have run a mile, but she has taken up the challenge and has already delivered meaningful improvements, with £390 million put into the baseline.

However, it is also the case that the current proposal that officials have come up with needs some surgery. Let me deal first with the impact. Although Cheltenham gains overall from the proposals, albeit modestly, the way in which the cake is divided creates distorted outcomes and risks fostering resentment. Some schools, such as All Saints’ Academy and Pittville, do very well, but others actually lose—and those are schools that are located near to each other. All that poses the risk that regional geographic inequity will be replaced by neighbourhood geographic inequity.

Richard Graham: My hon. Friend is making a good point about the way in which the funding system was going to work, but during the general election the Government made it very clear that no school would receive less money than it was currently receiving. Does my hon. Friend agree that that should give all our schools, in Gloucester and elsewhere, enormous confidence in the future?

Alex Chalk: That is precisely the point, and it was a welcome point that was included in the manifesto. I quarrel the Government to ensure—as I know they will—that there is no risk of potential resentment that might lead schools to retreat to the core subjects that they are statutorily required to provide; other subjects might suffer.

What we need is a funding settlement that allows all schools to provide a full and rounded education, not just those that are able to satisfy the criteria for funding uplifts. The core funding element must be sufficient to achieve that goal. We need a funding settlement that consolidates the extraordinary progress that has been made over the last seven years, and lays the ground for still more progress. The prize is great. If we get this right, the future for education in Cheltenham and in our country, based on the work that has already taken place, can become even brighter.

Alex Chalk (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) for the eloquence of her maiden speech. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend. Friends the Members for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) and for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Lesley Laird) for the enthusiasm and commitment that they will clearly bring to the task of representing their constituents, and I congratulate them on their success.

The Queen’s Speech did not contain a single mention of local government or the services that it provides. Since 2010, local government has experienced bigger cuts than any other area of public service—in real terms, there has been a 40% cut in local government spending—but there was not a single mention of the issues. During the election campaign, my constituents expressed concern to me about longer waits to see GPs, about cuts in school budgets, and about delays in police attendances because there are fewer police officers. They also expressed concern about highway safety schemes and improvements that cannot be enacted—there are more than 500 on Sheffield City Council’s list—and about playground equipment that cannot be replaced because there is no money. They mentioned that about two thirds of the libraries in Sheffield are now run by volunteers; in many instances they are run very well, but the permanent staff are not there any more. Of course, they also expressed concern about the crisis in social care funding. The message that we are receiving appears to be “Austerity continues”—unless, of course, you live in Northern Ireland.

There was also no mention of devolution in the Queen’s Speech. There was not a single word about it, although under the previous Chancellor it was a flagship policy, was it not? Are the Government committed to deepening the devolution arrangements that are already in place? Are they committed to extending arrangements to other areas? In that context, I am thinking particularly about the issue of Sheffield City Region. I accept that it is the region’s fault that we have not got further than we have so far, and the last Minister for the northern powerhouse was extremely helpful in that respect, but are the Government still open to new deals?

I have to mention the 100% business rate retention scheme, which features in the Local Government Finance Bill. On Second Reading, the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government—who is
present—described it as a “revolutionary measure”. I always thought that he was an unlikely revolutionary, but he does seem to run away rather quickly at the first sound of electioneering gunfire. What has happened to the measure? Are the Government still committed to it, or have they given up on fiscal devolution as well?

Let me return to the subject of social care funding. Before the election, the Government promised a Green Paper; now they are promising consultation. I think they have probably worked out now that quick fixes in the middle of an election do not work for social care funding. Will they come back to the idea, raised by the Select Committee before the election, of having a cross-party attempt to bring about an agreement that we can all sign up to, so that we can put a permanent solution in place for the future?

I raised the issue of tower blocks yesterday. What are local authorities and housing associations supposed to do if they suddenly find themselves facing great new bills because of the need to carry out urgent and essential work on tower blocks? Local councils and housing associations cannot raise rents; they are restricted by the Government's rules to control them. They cannot borrow more, because they are restricted by a Government cap. Local authorities facing new bills have no mythical reserves to turn to; all they can do is cut the maintenance programmes for other parts of their housing stock. What an awful position for us to get into. We are trying to deal with an urgent problem in tower blocks, and we end up cutting the maintenance for all the other social housing stock. For heaven's sake, Government, come forward with a comprehensive funding arrangement to deal with this problem!

4.20 pm

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): It is with enthusiasm and humility that I rise to make my maiden speech representing the constituency of Ochil and South Perthshire. My enthusiasm is founded on the opportunity provided by being the first Conservative and Unionist representative for my constituency, and the first Conservative or Unionist to represent Clackmannianshire since 1931. My humility is based on the faith that the constituents of Ochil and South Perthshire have placed in me and my party to deliver progress for them during this Parliament.

I pick up the baton from Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh. I pay tribute to her work on equality and international issues and hope to continue raising awareness of those issues in this Parliament. I would also like to pay tribute to Gordon Banks, the first MP for Ochil and South Perthshire, who worked tirelessly on constituents' issues and achieved such success that his dedication is still talked about on the doorstep of Crieff, Alloa and Kinross today.

Ochil and South Perthshire is a large and diverse constituency formed of three distinct communities: South Perthshire, Kinross-shire and Clackmannanshire. It is right to start at Loch Leven in Kinross-shire, with its breathtaking views best observed from the villages of Kinnesswood and Scotlandwell, before moving to Kinross and Milnathort, home of fine local businesses such as Hunters. Unorthodox Roasters and Heaven Scent, as well as Scotland's first children's hospice, Rachel House. Furthermore, Kinross-shire plays host to the current Grand National winner, One for Arthur, so you know who to back in a tight race.

South Perthshire is renowned for its agricultural heritage, boasting crops, livestock and a fine, growing collection of distilleries—namely, Glenturret, Tullibardine and Strathearn. However, it is not just farming and whisky; South Perthshire has also provided one Prime Minister and two “Star Wars” actors. I will let Members of the House decide who provided the greater service to the United Kingdom. South Perthshire's scenery not only wins affections but boasts the Crieff Hydro and the Gleneagles Hotel, providing relaxation and world-class golfing, so colleagues have more than one excuse to visit our constituency. Moreover, with Highland Spring based in Blackford, we can provide not only your whisky but your water too.

As you cross the stunning Ochils, you will reach Clackmannanshire—the wee county with a big heart. Clackmannanshire has a proud industrial past in mining, paper manufacture, mills and breweries. While some industries have now moved on, the Harviestoun Brewery, Diageo and the United GI glass works continue to complement the whisky and water from the north. From the Hillfoots villages to the towns of Alloa and Clackmannan, Clackmannanshire may have earned its name, the “wee county” from its beauty, but it has the landscape, the people and the ambition to show that it is not size but what you do with it that counts.

In such a diverse constituency as Ochil and South Perthshire, connectivity is a key issue. I therefore intend to use my time in this House to improve connectivity for residents, whether it be in the form of rural broadband, mobile phone signal or greater infrastructure investment to better connect our constituency with the rest of the UK. But it is not just roads, rails and wires that my constituency needs; it also requires more social connectivity. We must look to combine inward investment with initiatives to build social capital in areas of deprivation, so that we can in turn improve social mobility.

More and more, our politics seems to be calling on anger and outrage to solve our problems. That is understandable. Anger is an easy emotion, but it masks fear. The rapid changes in 21st-century Britain can make people afraid, but rather than calling for a “day of rage”, I hope to call for “days of courage”. We need courage to face the tests of globalisation and to recognise the opportunities that they provide; courage to face the challenges of identity and nationhood, while recognising the strength of our United Kingdom; and, finally, courage to stand by our political convictions, but to know when it is best to stretch our hands across the aisle to work together for the betterment of our communities.

Clackmannanshire has recently adopted the motto “more than you imagine”. I hope to hold true to that motto, though lofty and perhaps naive, and to work with others in this House so that we can achieve more than we, and certainly the public, have come to expect.

4.25 pm

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham). From his maiden speech, his constituents will recognise that they have a worthy champion, and we were all interested to hear about his knowledge of the area. I was also interested in his knowledge about the Grand National winner. If he has any racing tips before the races are run, perhaps he can let me know and I will not tell anybody else, so that we can keep the price down. I also congratulate all the other Members who
have made their maiden speeches, especially my hon. Friends the Members for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker), for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) and for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Lesley Laird). Along with the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), they demonstrated their interests, their enthusiasm, and the knowledge that they will bring to our debates.

At a time when our country is divided and crying out for a vision for the future and when people are looking for policies that address some of the real concerns in their lives, we have a vacuous Queen’s Speech that contains little to address the country’s real needs. The Government are unclear about how to move forward on Brexit. They have come forward with several Bills, but no clear strategy for this country’s exit from the European Union. They still argue about whether immigration should be the main priority when the country has clearly said that jobs and the economy should be at the forefront of our negotiations. We have a Government that know little about how they should proceed.

Today’s debate is about schools and local government services, but where in the Queen’s Speech is the vision for our schools or our local government? There is none. We can argue about whether we have moved forward and about whether the pace of progress has been as quick as we want—but nobody stands on a manifesto that says, “Let’s make our schools worse”—but where is the Government vision for teacher retention and recruitment? Schools are really struggling to get maths and science teachers. Where are the policies to address the need for ever-better school leadership? Where are the policies to ensure that parents of children with special needs do not have to fight for a statement to get the support that they need in school? All of that is non-existent.

I repeat to the Minister the great plea that I have always made on technical education. For 50 years, Governments of all colours have wrestled with the problem of this country’s skills shortage. It is not just a policy problem; it is a cultural problem in our society. Whatever the rhetoric and whatever anybody says about parity of esteem, skills and vocational education are still seen as second rate. Until we address that as a nation, we will not overcome the problem. I say to the Government and to Parliament that there is a real education crisis in this country, and we should have a national cross-party campaign to deal with it.

I only have 20 seconds left, but the same can be said of local government. It has had its money slashed, but the expectation to deal with the needs in various areas is ever greater. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the deal with my friends from the DUP, let no Minister ever again come to the Dispatch Box and say that there is no money to meet the needs of constituents in my constituency and throughout the country. What we needed was a Queen’s Speech with real policies and real vision; what we got was a vacuous, empty noise of nothing.

4.29 pm

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to be in the Chamber and to hear so many eloquent, powerful maiden speeches. I particularly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham), who clearly showed that he will be a powerful advocate for his constituents in this Parliament. It is a tremendous honour to have been re-elected by the people of Eddisbury to continue representing our area’s best interests in Parliament. During the campaign, my constituents were concerned about questions of school funding and of our economic prosperity in the light of our changing relationship with the EU.

Since first being elected in 2015, I have campaigned tirelessly for fairer school funding settlements for both my local authorities, which are members of the f40 group of the country’s 40 worst-funded councils. I was optimistic that the Government would finally address a source of deep unfairness to pupils in my constituency that has been entrenched for 30 years. Unfortunately, the published formula is not sufficient to address that historical unfairness. I am encouraged by our manifesto commitment to boost schools funding by £4 billion by 2022, and I urge the Government to target that extra funding at areas such as Cheshire, which are undoubtedly underfunded, and to ensure that pupils funded at the very lowest levels in the country receive a fairer funding settlement that brings them in line with those funded at far higher levels.

My teachers are used to delivering more for less, as they have been doing it for the past 30 years. I urge the Government to realise that now is the time to reduce that historical unfairness. It cannot be said enough that investment in education is imperative. The wider benefits for the individual and for society of providing a world-class education system are innumerable, and necessary if we are to equip our young people with the skills and knowledge to work in a global world.

It must be stressed that, to manoeuvre ourselves into a position in which we can properly fund our schools and other public services, we must achieve a well structured, well thought out and orderly exit from the European Union. In that regard, transitional arrangements are imperative and would reduce the economic turbulence that arises from falling off the cliff edge of EU membership.

Last year’s vote to leave the EU can be analysed in a number of ways, but the Chancellor is right to say that the British people did not vote to make themselves poorer, which is why our economic interests must be at the heart of our approach to the negotiations. We need a strong economy in order to invest in education, other local services and our NHS, and to maintain fiscal responsibility. If we are to fall into World Trade Organisation rules, we are very likely to see extremely difficult economic circumstances. Even if we manage to secure a free trade agreement within the two-year period ahead, we risk major shocks to the economy if we do not negotiate an appropriate transitional arrangement.

The importance of providing certainty to business was rightly mentioned in the Queen’s Speech. Whether it be access to markets across the EU, having confidence to invest or the ability to recruit skilled workers, giving business more time to prepare for the significant shift in the economic landscape will give greater stability. It will allow us to retain a close relationship with Europe, with frictionless trade, while we seek to find those new trade deals that others are so optimistic will appear.

4.34 pm

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for calling me to make my maiden speech. I also thank the people of North West Durham for allowing me to be here at all. It is apt that I should be called in this debate because, before entering the
House, I worked with schools, colleges and teachers for nine years and my predecessor, Pat Glass, dedicated her professional and then political career to education. If I can be half the friend and ally of schools in North West Durham that Pat Glass has been, I will be doing very well.

Pat Glass leaves a brand new secondary school as one important legacy of her time here. Even in opposition, she managed to prise funding for a school from the former Education Secretary, which took the energy of a lion hunting a gazelle. I and others are truly grateful for all that she did for the constituency, and I wish her well in her retirement.

North West Durham is the most magnificent of places, and I am truly blessed to represent such a beautiful part of our country. The green, lush countryside is simply breathtaking, peppered with arable, dairy and upland hill farms; the richness of our culture and history is astounding; and the people are hard workers, proud and strong. Some in here would have us in the north painted as uncultured and without finesse—as savages—but people only think that or say that because they do not know our communities or our people. My constituents are the real wealth creators, and they are people who make this nation great. If anyone wants to see one of the world’s finest cultural traditions, they should look no further than Durham miners gala, which, although not in my constituency, is an annual pilgrimage for many of my constituents and is the biggest trade union gathering in Europe. It celebrates the best of solidarity, born of struggle.

North West Durham has a long and proud tradition of industry and skilled work. Consett was dominated by steel production and became renowned for the thick red dust that covered the town—airborne iron oxide from the plant. At its peak in the 1960s the steelworks provided jobs for some 6,000 people. We had lead mines and hundreds of jobs in a thriving textiles industry in Crook. That industry was unfortunately left to decline. Jobs and communities were not invested in and unemployment rose exponentially. Many are still living with the scars of that period today.

Turning to this place, this building is intimidating. It reeks of the establishment and of power; its systems are confusing—some may say archaic—and it was built at a time when my class and my sex would have been denied a place within it because we were deemed unworthy. I believe that the intimidating nature of this place is not accidental. The clothes, the language, and the obsession with hierarchies, control and domination are symbolic of the system at large. But the most frustrating thing has been to sit opposite those people who tell me that things are better, and that suffering has lessened for my constituents. I would like them to come and tell me the people who have been sanctioned that things are better. I would like them to tell the teacher in my constituency who was recently made redundant. I would like them to talk to the 16,500 people in County Durham in receipt of food parcels. I would like them to talk to the nurses, the junior doctors and the firefighters—come and tell them that years of austerity have improved their practice or their profession.

I will end with this: we can choose, in this place, to be self-obsessed, to perpetuate fear and greed, to be a monument to injustice, or this can be a place that elevates equality, facilitates the power of the people, and esteems and properly funds a rich network of public services so that nobody is left in the indignity of poverty.

4.38 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock), who will be a powerful advocate for her constituents and the whole country. I also congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) and for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson) on excellent maiden speeches, along with all the others who have made their maiden speeches today.

I also wish to thank the electors of Stafford for returning me and, even more so, for turning out in such numbers; at 76%, our turnout was one of the highest in the country. One thing I was disappointed about during the election was that the economy was hardly mentioned, and nor were those hard-working people up and down the country who are not on great salaries—perhaps they are working from home, trying to juggle a small business and looking after their family. Yet they, along with all others, are the wealth creators in this country; they are the people on whom we rely in order to have the taxes out of which public services are funded. I hope that in this Parliament they will hear many voices, from all sides, speak on their behalf.

As we have a two-year Parliament, I hope that some of the concerns my constituents put before me on the doorstep can begin to be sorted out. In particular, I am talking about long-term funding settlements for health, social care and education. As I have said many times before, we need to work across parties to sort this out. We have two years now to start to do that—hopefully we will have longer.

Health and social care in my constituency is under great pressure. We are being asked to tackle deficits that are insupportable. Of course efficiencies can be made, but the funding is insufficient. We are asked to remove, potentially, one A&E out of three in Stoke and Staffordshire, but that cannot happen, because the other two could not cope.

In education, we have had a bit of an arms race to say which is the poorest funded county in England. I can say that Staffordshire is one of the poorest. I will not say whether it comes first, second or third, but we are down at the bottom. That has to change. It is a matter not just of a new formula to juggle the numbers around, robbing Peter to pay Paul, but of putting more money in real terms into education. I am not advocating that we increase borrowing to a substantial extent to cover both those areas; we must have additional revenues—potentially slightly higher taxes—to pay for these things. The Liberal Democrats were at least honest in their manifesto, saying that we would have to raise taxes to pay for increased investment in health.

On a constituency point, I will have to oppose one measure in the Queen’s Speech, which is phase 2a of HS2, which goes directly through the villages of Great Haywood, Ingestre, Hopton, Marston and Yarlet. It is unnecessary that it does so. I know that there is a need for capacity. I am not averse to a new line, even one that goes through my constituency, but the way in which this line has been designed is dreadful, and it is because it
has to go at 400 kph. There is no reason for a design to
go at 400 kph; it could be cheaper and better and have
less impact on my constituency and elsewhere in the
country if it went at 300 kph to 320 kph.

On the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member
for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) has said most of
what I would like to say, but let me make just a few
points. First, we want a smooth and sensible transition,
with the economy and jobs put first, as the Chancellor
has said. Secondly, let us look at working together with
others to form a new common market, perhaps based
on the European Free Trade Association. Thirdly, let us
welcome the generous offer from the European Parliament
regarding associate European citizenship—why not? Finally,
we want more student exchanges and more modern
languages.

4.42 pm

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): First,
may I express my gratitude to you, Mr Speaker, for
calling me to give my maiden speech during this important
debate? It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for
Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy).

I feel so truly honoured and humbled to stand in this
great Chamber—the mother of all parliaments—to
represent my beautiful constituency as a Unionist Member
for Belfast South. From the banks of the Lagan as it
weaves through my constituency, we pass the wonderful
people of Botanic, Malone and Stranmillis, the striking
architecture of Queen’s University and Stranmillis college,
the hills of Castlereagh South right up to Carryduff.
With communities in Ormeau, Ballynafeigh, Belvoir,
Taughmonagh, Finaghy and right across, South Belfast
has the most diverse community in Northern Ireland.

I represent a constituency of great depth and beauty,
of arts and academia and of community, history and
celebration. We have many areas of relative wealth, but
also communities with challenges, including educational
underachievement. I promise that I will do my utmost
to represent all within my constituency to the very best
of my ability.

I stand here not just in my own stead, but in the stead
of so many generations of loyal Ulstermen and women
who loved the Union. I think of my ancestors, particularly
of my great grandfather James Sandford who, not just
for his love of Ulster, but for his love of king and
country, went over the trenches of the Somme to the
horror that awaited. So many of my relatives fought for
this country as proud Ulstermen—for freedom and
democracy. Those are the very same freedoms and
country that I will fight and defend with all that I have.

I am very proud to be part of this incredible Union. I
feel not just proud but hugely privileged to be part of
this great democracy that defends our right to private
belief, public opinion, and the sacred and protected
ability to argue, discuss and persuade. Our democracy is
one with the right to all beliefs and views, and the right
to have none at all. I believe that that is the very thing
that makes us great.

I want to take this opportunity to send my sincere
best wishes to my predecessor, Dr Alasdair McDonnell.
He served his constituents well for many years and helped
to make south Belfast what it is today.

Just recently, this House unveiled the coat of arms in
remembrance of Jo Cox. My thoughts are with her
family and friends, who undoubtedly still feel the pain
so acutely.

I also look to my left, and above the door I see the
coats of arms of three more of our colleagues who
were murdered—murdered by terrorism. The one
closest to me is that of the Rev. Robert Bradford, who
represented my constituency of Belfast South and was
murdered by the IRA while serving his constituents in
Finaghy youth centre. I am reminded of the words of
the poet:

“History, despite its wrenching pain,
Cannot be unlived, but if faced
With courage, need not be lived again.”

There is a warning in that sentiment; we must be always
vigilant lest we regress back to the horrors of our
recent past.

I want to stand for all those who feel that they have
no voice, while promoting those determined to build our
economy and improve lives. Let us build on the strong
foundations of the Union, of duty, sacrifice and service,
to celebrate and grow our great and glorious Union. I
look forward to being a champion for south Belfast and
playing what part I can in building a peaceful, better
and brighter future for the Union and for all her citizens.

4.46 pm

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Belfast South
(Emma Little Pengelly) for her maiden speech, which
was made in the finest traditions of the House, and to
my colleagues on the Government Benches as well as
those on the Labour Benches who have made their
maiden speeches with great passion and conviction. It
has made me think about my maiden speech, in which I
talked about education, saying:

“Education holds the greatest hope for a life rich in promise.”—
[Official Report, 3 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 646.]

I stand by those values today. We see the failings of
education exposed in our economy in some parts of our
country and, indeed, in our prisons and our hospitals.
We should always redouble our efforts to ensure that
education is better tomorrow than it is today.

I was very lucky. I went to a local school in my
constituency, a good comprehensive in North East
Hampshire, but not everyone has the chance to do that.
Not everyone has the chance to go to a school where
excellence is encouraged. Although 1.8 million more
children are in good or outstanding schools, we
must also recognise that 1 million are still in inadequate
schools or schools requiring improvement. That means
that we must do better and I am pleased that this
Government, through this Queen’s Speech, will do just
that.

It is not just about money, which was referenced—fairer
funding is absolutely right. It is also about the freedom
to lead, and leadership skills themselves. That is why I
am delighted that more than 69,000 places are being
created in free schools, because across the country we
need to diversify the ability of local communities to set
up schools that are right for them. That is part, of
course, of an overall commitment that I hope will be
honoured to create 600,000 more places by 2021. Some
50 schools will be open by September of this year, and
the Budget earlier this year set out that 110 new free
schools will be opened. I hope that North East Hampshire
will be granted one of these new free schools in due course, because even in our most lovely of constituencies, that which I represent, we need an improved education system. We need diversity in our education system, because some children are still going to schools that are just not good enough. In free schools, we see a way forward. We see that they can be the impetus for change—high-performing schools with almost a third rated not just good but outstanding. This is what we need to drive for.

Siobhain McDonagh: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that no type of school is a silver bullet? What makes the difference is who the teachers are and, particularly, who the headteacher is. Just as council-run schools can be poor, so can free schools and academies. That is a very important lesson to learn.

Mr Jayawardena: I thank the hon. Lady for her comment. Indeed, I said at the beginning of my remarks that leadership skills are critical.

I am pleased that 80% of free schools are being set up due to parental demand or in areas that need new school places—including, I hope, Hampshire in the future.

We need to move further on fairer funding. The Government consultation is a good start. It awarded North East Hampshire £1.1 million more for our local schools, which is excellent news and will deal with the historical underfunding by the Labour party when it was in government. It is wrong that children in Hampshire receive less than those elsewhere in the country. It is wrong that teachers in North East Hampshire get less than those just next door in Surrey, where housing costs and the cost of living are lower.

It is right that the Government continue to strive to make funding consistent and to make it go further, to ensure that everyone gets a fair share. It is right, lastly, to focus on how we get there, which is by ensuring that our economy succeeds in the years ahead. Only with a growing economy can we put the funding into the services that we deserve and that the next generation should be able to expect.

4.51 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I start by congratulating Labour and Conservative Members who have made their maiden speeches today. I remember how intimidating it was when I made mine, and it is a great source of pride to see so many Labour Members giving their maiden speeches today.

In the Queen’s Speech, the Government revealed a threadbare legislative programme, with no majority, no mandate and no legitimacy, propped up by a self-serving deal with the DUP costing at least £1 billion. I welcome the absence of flagship Tory manifesto commitments such as grammar schools, cuts to the winter fuel allowance, cuts to pensions, cuts to universal free school meals and much else. The Conservative party knows that it cannot get that legislative programme through this Parliament.

However, the Queen’s Speech has not gone far enough in shelving Tory manifesto pledges that would damage our country. Nowhere is that clearer than in the squeeze on local services such as schools, nurseries, hospitals, GP surgeries, policing, housing and youth services, as well as local authority budget cuts.

Take the national funding formula, for example. The Government have yet to rule out the £3 billion of cuts to our schools budget. Schools in my constituency stand to lose £905 per pupil—891 teachers across the borough and a cut of £33 million by 2020. Where is the fairness in that, when we face some of the worst child poverty and inequality in the country? Despite the challenges, teachers, the local authority and parents have worked together to transform our schools, since inheriting the worst schools in the country back in 1997, so that they are now the best in the country.

This Government’s vindictive proposals, which seek to take away crucial resources, will set back that achievement and put at risk years of painstaking work to improve educational attainment and promote social mobility. I urge the Government to reverse that proposed cut. Nurseries also face severe funding cuts. Early years education is crucial, yet a number of nurseries in my constituency face closure. I appeal to the Government to think again.

Our police, fire and emergency services deserve not only our praise for their bravery in the light of recent terror attacks and the fire in Grenfell Tower but our recognition through increased pay and investment in those crucial services. That is why I appeal to the Government to reverse the cuts they propose, including the £400 million of policing cuts in London. Despite having lost 20,000 police officers around the country and many police community support officers, we stand to lose many more.

I want to end with an urgent appeal to the Government to make an unambiguous commitment to invest the necessary funds to ensure safety checks in our schools, housing and hospitals and all buildings that require it, in the light of the recent fire in Grenfell Tower where lives were lost needlessly. The Government must act now to strengthen the powers of the housing regulator so that residents never again feel voiceless, as the Grenfell Tower residents did when they warned of the likely dangers to their tower block.

4.55 pm

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): I would like to start by congratulating our new colleagues on their outstanding maiden speeches, particularly my hon. Friends the Members for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson) and for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham).

During the six-week general election campaign, Members on both sides of the House will have had the opportunity to listen to thousands of people. We have all heard their disappointments, hopes and fears. I value the long conversations I have had with many people who provide our outstanding public services, including our nurses, policemen and teachers, and I wish to feed back their thoughts.

One issue that came up consistently was education. I think we must first acknowledge how far we have come in recent decades. I recently read, with some amusement, a Government report that my grandfather, who was a headmaster, had contributed to. It sought to tackle head-on the importance of education for women. It stated:

‘…For girls, too, there is a group of interests relating to what many, perhaps most of them, would regard as their most important vocational concern, marriage. It is true that at the age of fourteen
and fifteen, this may appear chiefly as preoccupation with personal appearance and boy friends, but many girls are ready to respond to work relating to wider aspects of homemaking and family life and the care and upbringing of children."

We have come quite far since the 1960s, but there is further to go.

A significant priority must be a system in which every child has equal access to education, and that involves a system of fairer funding. That is why I am pleased that the Queen's Speech included a commitment to fairer funding. It must mean that those schools that have historically been underfunded for years have their funding increased. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena) has just said, funding is not the only mechanism to ensure future success. We need to ensure that we have enough teachers in training, especially in STEM subjects, and when they join the profession we need to ensure that they feel respected, supported and trusted. In an age when technology is so fast paced, would it not be brilliant if those STEM teachers were linked to businesses that are at the cutting edge of technological innovation in industry, and to businesses that ultimately might give jobs to the students they train?

I think that one way of doing that is staring us right in the face, because businesses are now paying the apprenticeship levy. For the first time, businesses will be actively required to think constructively about their role in training their workforce. The apprenticeship levy potentially goes further. It currently proposes that from next year 10% of the apprenticeship levy can go to a business's supply chain, and what is the start of that supply chain, if not students and thus teachers? If businesses were allowed to use their 10% on supporting teacher training in STEM, that could forge important links between businesses and teaching. It could ensure that teachers had up-to-date knowledge of their sector and subject and were ready to relate that to the workplace. It would enable teachers to train without further increasing their student debt. Now is the time, if ever there was one, to properly engage businesses with learning, and innovation and technology with schools, and to rise to the challenge of how to help to build the next generation, because it is our future.

4.59 pm

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): May I say how glad I am to be back in this place after a very close and hard-won general election campaign? It is wonderful to hear so many brilliant maiden speeches from colleagues in all parties; they are certainly going to give us old-timers a run for our money. I am particularly thrilled to welcome my hon. Friends the Members for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker), for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock), for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Lesley Laird) and for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney), who will make brilliant additions to the House.

In the general election, people in Wakefield rejected the planned cuts to our public services—our schools, hospitals and police. I am delighted that the Government have dropped their mean-spirited plan to cut free school meals for infants. Parents in Wakefield told me how worried they were for the children in our city who rely on that as their only hot meal of the day. It is interesting that although the Secretary of State for Education declined to answer questions from Members on this side of the House, while we have been debating she has slipped out a written answer stating that there will be no new grammar schools during the term of this Parliament. Labour's ban on those drivers of inequality remains in place.

Education has the power to change lives. Most of us here know that because we know that it changed our lives. I am proud to have spent seven years working as a lecturer in entrepreneurship at Cranfield School of Management, which is a brilliant institution. I want every child in this country to get a decent education, no matter where they were born, but the odds are stacked against far too many children in Wakefield. A quarter grow up in poverty and are eligible for free school meals. That is double the national average.

Wakefield Council and our local enterprise partnership have taken steps to tackle the low levels of tertiary education locally with a new £6.9 million advanced innovation and skills centre opening in Wakefield this summer, and Wakefield College has just received a silver award in the teaching excellence framework. Wakefield is on its way, but the planned cuts are making life hard. The area has lost 11 Sure Start centres since 2010, and every 16-year-old who was eligible no longer gets the education maintenance allowance to help them to stay on in college.

I pay tribute to Wakefield headteachers, who are doing so much for our young people despite the £21 million of funding cuts that they will see over the next two years. There will be fewer teachers, bigger class sizes, fewer choices for students taking GCSEs and A-levels, a reduction in vocational courses, less support for children with special educational needs or mental health problems, fewer extra-curricular activities and enrichment opportunities, and less money for textbooks and computers. That is what the headteachers in Wakefield wrote in a letter to parents, asking them to campaign against the Government’s cuts.

I pay tribute to our brilliant headteachers. I visited Clare Kelly at Dane Royd Junior and Infant School in March to present her with a British Council award for the amazing work she does with our local children on languages. They come out learning not just French and Spanish but Chinese, putting those of us who like to think of ourselves as old-school linguists to shame. Another example is Miriam Oakley at Horbury Academy. When I was making a film to go on Facebook about the cuts that her school faces—16 teachers and £550 per pupil—she came out and said, "I thought you were a truant.” That was one of the lighter moments of my campaign; no one has called me a truant for the past 30 years. I also pay tribute to Rob Marsh at CAPA College, which is waiting for a response from Education Ministers on what is going to happen to its award-winning performance arts provision.

I urge the Government to look again at these cuts; they are harming children in Wakefield.

5.3 pm

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): Mr Speaker, thank you for calling me to make my maiden speech in such an important debate. It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friends and hon. Members who have made such eloquent and passionate speeches today.
I am a former supermarket manager: only time will tell if my audience this afternoon is as receptive as my customers were to my prices or, indeed, whether my constituents will now ascribe my performance and contributions as being as fresh as my produce was, although I hope I am not past my sell-by date by the next election.

It is a great honour and privilege to be here as the new Member for Southport. I pay tribute to my predecessor, John Pugh, who retired at the last election. John was a diligent Member for the constituency for 16 years and is understandably held in high esteem. He quickly developed a reputation as a capable constituency MP and I hope to be as well regarded by my constituents as he was. I wish him and his wife, Annette, a happy retirement.

John was a perennial rebel in the coalition Government—he rebelled against the Whip over 30 times. Whether I will have the bravado of my predecessor only time will tell, but be assured that my constituency and my constituents will be at the forefront of my mind whenever I consider parliamentary affairs.

Although Members will have to cast their minds back some time to recall him, I would be remiss not to mention Sir Ian Percival, who served as the hon. Member for Southport between 1959 and 1987. He, too, gained a reputation for being an excellent constituency MP, as well as serving as Solicitor General between 1979 and 1983. I hope that I am able to emulate his civic pride, his dedication to his constituency and his astonishing longevity as Southport’s representative in Parliament.

Southport is far from being the quintessential seaside town. It has a fascinating history, and at one point hosted the exiled Prince Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, scion of one of England’s greatest antagonists, who would go on to be emperor of the French. Legend has it that he was so impressed with the tree-lined boulevard of Lord Street that he would later instruct his architects to make Southport a model for the grandiose Parisian boulevards that are the envy of the world today. Southport’s tree-lined central avenues, arcades and pavement cafés often lead to it being referred to as the Paris of the north, but with this explanation for modern Paris’s provenance in mind, maybe Paris is really the Southport of the south.

Historically part of the county of Lancashire and the royal Duchy of Lancaster, Southport today is on the fringes of Merseyside. In truth though, it is a unique town, which has its own special identity, and its citizens have a strong sense of civic pride. It is famous for its great sands, which stretch far out into the Irish sea, leading to the joke among its residents that, in England, you are never more than 70 miles from the sea—unless, of course, you live in Southport.

Today, Southport’s diligent and hard-working residents find themselves part of Sefton Council, and many of them feel they have too often been taken for granted, as their income is diverted into other parts of Merseyside. Southport’s public services have not been the beneficiaries of Sefton Council’s coffers, much to the chagrin of the town’s citizens. The people of Southport are egalitarian and charitable, but too often they have been taken advantage of, and the town has suffered as a result. I can assure my constituents that Southport will no longer be a soft touch, and I will solicit investment into the town every day I have the privilege of representing it.

Although I will shortly return to a sedentary position, I can assure you, Mr Speaker, that I will often be on my feet championing my constituency and engaging with esteemed colleagues in this Chamber. It is the honour of my life to represent Southport in this House, and I hope to make a notable contribution to its future success.

5.7 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Southport (Damien Moore) on a great speech, and I hope he gets as much pleasure from representing his constituency as I have from representing my own over the last 20 years.

It seems like a lifetime ago, but just before the general election I was given the privilege of asking the Prime Minister a question about my constituent Amy, who was being made homeless and who, with her young daughter, was being housed away from south-west London, in Birmingham. Her daughter represents one of the 118,000 children who are currently placed in temporary accommodation miles from their homes, their schools and the opportunity to have a good education.

Merton is a small borough, and Mitcham and Morden is half of it. Mine is a small south-west London suburban constituency, currently with 9,712 families on its housing register. In the last year, it has had 260 housing vacancies—less than 3% of that number—with almost half of those being one-beds. In the last year, the council has had one four-bedroom property to offer, and one five-bedroom property. As with most Members, housing is the single biggest issue people come to see me about. The Queen’s Speech includes fine words about letting agency fees, which is an honourable thing to legislate on, but the issue that all parties need to address—it is being voiced loud and strong—is the need for more building and more homes at rents that people can afford.

In the just over a minute that I have left, I want to tell Members about just one of the 21 families who came to see me on Friday to talk about housing issues. Southwark Council, which is currently responsible for just under 2,000 homeless families, has accepted that it has a responsibility to house Mr and Mrs Rogas. It said that it would place them in Mitcham, in a flat above a motorbike shop that is accessible via 30 steps. Mrs Rogas is dying. She is under the care of the hospice. She cannot walk. She is confined to an electric wheelchair. To breathe, she needs an oxygen cylinder. I ask right hon. and hon. Members: how can she get up and down those 30 stairs? I could not believe it when I saw it on Friday.

I spent 30 years in the housing industry, including housing associations and councils, but I see people like Mrs Rogas every Friday. I do not blame Southwark—it cannot meet the demand—and I certainly do not blame Mr and Mrs Rogas, but we in this House have a responsibility to those who are most excluded and most poor to redress these ills. We need to do something and we need to do it quickly for Mr and Mrs Rogas, because she does not have a lot of time left.

5.11 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), who told a heart-rending story about housing in London. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Southport (Damien Moore),
My only recollection of visiting Southport is from when I was a student, but perhaps we should gloss over that particular time.

I am delighted to have been returned as the Member for Harrow East for the third time. I thank my constituents for placing their trust in me once again, with an increased vote for the third time in a row. I have the pleasure of representing the most diverse constituency in the country, with three Hindu temples, two synagogues, an Islamic centre, a Sikh centre and a Buddhist centre across the road, and 24 churches, including the only Greek Orthodox church built in this country for more than 100 years. I can therefore claim that my constituency is a real melting pot.

Education is at the heart of that, and I am delighted that the Government saw fit to invest in increasing the number of school places across the piece in Harrow. Fifteen schools have expanded dramatically to meet that demand. We will also shortly open the first state-sponsored Hindu secondary school on a new site, which has been warmly welcomed by the diverse Hindu population across the constituency.

There has been a disgraceful campaign during which the teachers’ unions in particular have claimed—they carried on with their propaganda even after the release of our party manifesto, which increased the amount of funding pledged for education—that there will be a reduction in pupil funding of £543 per head. That is clearly a lie and it should be nailed as such.

Will the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), who is sitting on the Front Bench, confirm three particular issues? First, I ask him to confirm that we will press ahead with the local government finance scheme, which will allow local authorities to retain business rates. That is especially relevant to London, where it will become a devolved issue; Government funding will, in effect, cease and London will raise its own money for its own spending.

Secondly, will my hon. Friend confirm that we will press ahead with our plan to build 245,000 homes a year for the next five years—that figure is greater than that contained in the Labour party’s manifesto—so that a range of homes are made available for social rent, private rent and to buy?

Finally, I was delighted that my Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 was almost the last Act to receive Royal Assent before Parliament dissolved for the general election. The Act, however, requires substantial secondary legislation and the commitment of the Government to make it happen. This is truly a revolution in the way local authorities treat homeless people. It is an absolute disgrace that people are still sleeping rough on our streets.

Will my hon. Friend the Minister confirm in his wind-up speech the Government’s commitment, contained in our party’s manifesto, to ending rough sleeping once and for all over the lifetime of this Parliament? We have to do far more to build far more homes to give people the opportunity to fulfill their potential. Without proper housing, people cannot find proper employment or provide a proper base for their families. I look forward to that great achievement happening under this Conservative Government.
the primary cause for the increased usage of foodbanks and a disproportionate dependency on local services in the voluntary sector, which is at breaking point. It is quite clear to me that it is no longer the broad shoulders of the United Kingdom supporting my constituents; instead, it is far too often the broad shoulders of the Glasgow North East foodbank.

For too long now, it is the most vulnerable who have felt the sharp end of this Government’s austerity programme. Today, sadly, we live in a society in which the middle class are told blame the working class, the working class are told to blame the benefit claimants, and the benefit claimants are told to blame the asylum seekers and refugees. After that, there is no one left to blame. It is only then that the most vulnerable in our society are left isolated, often with no community support.

At a time when hard-hitting decisions are being taken about the nation’s finances, and at a time when there is a smokescreen debate raging about immigration, we must consider how we treat others, both as legislators and human beings. During my time in this House, I will remember the words from the “Book of Micah” in which we are commanded to:

“act justly, walk humbly and love mercy”.

Those are the values by which I will contribute, debate and legislate. I hope Her Majesty’s Government will do the same.

5.19 pm

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) on a wonderful maiden speech. His passion and his determination to serve his constituents well are clear. I look forward to working with him and all the other new Members in this House.

This is my first debate on a Queen’s Speech. My interest in rural schools is well known to my fellow Members. I was pleased to see in the Conservative manifesto a recognition of the importance of rural schools and was pleased to hear my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State mention the importance of fairer funding.

Moving on to technical apprenticeships, in a practical skills community such as mine in Copeland, it is essential that we continue the legacy of world-class skills to move forward. With 32 miles of coastline and the rugged beauty of our fells, we have a lot to be grateful for in my constituency, but we want to see the benefits of the northern powerhouse spread further north. We want to deliver the modern industrial strategy. I therefore welcome the 683% increase in technical apprenticeships and the expansion of the northern powerhouse up the country. I hope the commitment to new nuclear will be a prevalent feature of this Government, because Moorside is essential in my constituency of Copeland.

Mr Speaker: That was such a wonderfully pithy and succinct speech by the hon. Lady that I had not expected it to conclude, but it has done and we thank her for what she has said.

5.22 pm

Mr Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) and, of course, the hon. Members for Glasgow East (David Linden) and for Southport (Damien Moore), who also made their maiden speeches.

It is lovely to come back to the House of Commons 15 years later, because I did my work experience here as a local comprehensive lad. Those opportunities for people from all backgrounds, which allow them to aspire even to be MPs, are vital in an egalitarian society, but they are often lacking in the current curriculum, which has been imposed on many of our schools by this Government.

Every school in my constituency faces cuts and many secondaries face having half a million pounds stolen from their budgets under the Orwellian description of a “fairer funding formula”. It promises that some of the poorest schools in my constituency will lose out the most—not fair at all.

Brighton, Kemptown has the third-lowest enrolment of young people into university, despite having two universities and a music school in the constituency. This contrast of poverty will only get worse unless drastic changes are made. Only yesterday, one of my primary schools had to write to parents saying that teaching assistants would go and classes would be merged to make ends meet. One school has had to resort to asking parents to supply the very paper the children write on. If money can be found for a sweetheart deal with Northern Ireland, a lifeline can be found for the very future of our schools.

I know that my predecessor, Mr Kirby, cared about sports and education. He sat as an honorary vice-president of one of the local football clubs, Whitehawk FC, which is in my council ward. It is a community club that has as much passion, albeit not yet as much success, as one of the other clubs in my constituency—the Seagulls, who have been promoted to the top flight of football for the coming season.

I also want to praise my predecessor for being described as “pure grit” by the “ConservativeHome” website, and in that regard I hope to follow him—I hope to be the grit between the Tory-DUP alliance and its plans for Brexit, which will harm my community. Mr Kirby said in his maiden speech that 500 years after Brighton was invaded by France, we were suspicious of Europe. As we are the headquarters of American Express Europe, I must say that is not the Brighton and Peacehaven I recognise—the place where Queen Victoria set sail for her state visit to France; a city where, last year, almost 70% voted to remain in the EU and that, in the 1930s, hosted international children’s camps and festivals for young people and Kindertransport children, organised by the Woodcraft Folk and Socialist International, as did the towns of Saltdean and Telscombe in my constituency in 1940s. To me, it is a constituency that is open and tolerant to the world and the EU, not suspicious of it.

I spent many years lobbying and negotiating in the EU for the Erasmus programme, because I value what youth work does. However, youth services have been cut to the bone. The Joff and the Brighton Youth Centre in my constituency both defend many young people from turning to extremism, and they are the last line in supporting young people in education. Youth services, underfunded and misunderstood, have become the first victim of local government cuts—austerity that harms the most vulnerable and helps only the most wealthy.
Poor services and housing lead to poor academic attainment, poor health outcomes and a weaker economy, and they limit people’s possibilities. I hope that, like many MPs for Kempston and Peacehaven, I will represent my constituents without fear and without favour. I hope that I will be able to do that across the Floor, so that we build a strong Britain and a strong Brighton through investment, not austerity. I want to start that today, not tomorrow, because my constituents cannot wait any more.

5.26 pm

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Brighton, Kempston (Mr Russell-Moyle). Nobody can doubt his passion and commitment, and I look forward to seeing him display that grit over many months and years to come.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank the residents of Mid Worcestershire for returning me to this place. It is an honour to be a Member of Parliament, and like everybody in the House, I do not take that honour for granted.

There is much to praise in the Gracious Speech. It is a practical and consumer-friendly speech, and I am particularly pleased to see the recommitment to fairer funding, which I shall come on to in a moment. The overall theme of the speech, for me, was the continuation of the successes of the past few years. We can reflect on where we are in 2017: we have the highest employment level in this nation’s history, and unemployment is at a 45-year low. Over the past seven years 29 million people have had a tax cut and 4 million people have been taken out of paying income tax altogether, while the top 1% of taxpayers pay 28% of all income tax. The tax-free allowance has increased from £6,450 to £11,500. At the lowest levels of youth unemployment anywhere in Europe?

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): While my hon. Friend is listing the Government’s great achievements, may I remind him that when Labour was last in government there were 1 million young people not in education, training or employment, and now we have one of the lowest levels of youth unemployment anywhere in Europe?

Nigel Huddleston: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. She makes precisely my point about the recommitment to fairer funding, which I shall come on to in a moment. The overall theme of the speech, for me, was the continuation of the successes of the past few years. We can reflect on where we are in 2017: we have the highest employment level in this nation’s history, and unemployment is at a 45-year low. Over the past seven years 29 million people have had a tax cut and 4 million people have been taken out of paying income tax altogether, while the top 1% of taxpayers pay 28% of all income tax. The tax-free allowance has increased from £6,450 to £11,500. At the same time we have been paying off debt and Government expenditure has increased significantly so that we have record spending on health, education, pensions and disabled people—the last of those is up by £3 billion in real terms since 2010.

Hon. Members will be familiar with the fact that an increasing number of Members on both sides of the Chamber come from rather moderate backgrounds and went to comprehensive schools, including myself and my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena). It is important to remember that we come from quite humble origins, and that education has enabled us to be successful in life. It has been the key to success in my life and has enabled me to do many things. It is my role, and that of many of us here, to give as many people as possible the opportunities that we have had.

Education can be and is the silver bullet. It is vital, therefore, that we have an education funding system that is fair and reasonable to all. Money is not everything, but it certainly helps. If we look at the educational outcomes and the improvements that we have seen in London over the last few years, there is no doubt that the huge amount of money spent there has helped to enable that success, but let us contrast the significant differences in per-pupil funding. For example, in Tower Hamlets the figure is now £6,965 per pupil. That is a fantastic number, but it contrasts sharply with funding in my constituency, which is £4,319 per pupil. Of course there are differences in the socioeconomic make-up, but a difference of £2,600 per pupil is a phenomenal sum. We must therefore focus on fairer funding, because there is nothing honourable and absolutely nothing morally superior in maintaining the blatantly unfair existing system. We therefore must do something about it. I therefore applaud the Secretary of State for Education for at least making an effort to improve things in this area, and will therefore be voting for this element and the many other positive elements in the Gracious Speech when we enter the Lobbies on Thursday.

5.30 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): It is great to be called at this stage and to have had the opportunity to hear so many fine maiden speeches on both sides of the House. I congratulate all the new Members on making them.

The Queen’s Speech was clearly overshadowed by the tragedy at Grenfell Tower. It is a disaster that shocked the nation. Across the country, local authorities are responding with the seriousness that the disaster deserves. My constituency has most of Sheffield’s high-rise housing and the council has acted promptly to check the safety of properties. Indeed, the cladding of one, Hanover Tower in Broomhall, has failed the test. The council has met tenants and taken immediate action, but the issue will cost money to resolve. Beyond that one block, the council is also putting in place the further measures needed to reassure tenants. Across the city it is retrofitting sprinklers in all tower blocks, but the question is: who is going to foot the bill?

Local councils have been the hardest-hit by Government cuts since 2010 across the entire public sector, and those in our big cities hardest of all. Local services across the board have been hit, from youth services to adult social care, with deep cuts deepening affecting local services. It is therefore all very well for the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government to say, as he did yesterday, that local authorities should just spend the money on fire safety and then contact him for help. What we need is a guarantee that help will be forthcoming—a clear statement that the funds needed to put Hanover Tower right will be provided, and a guarantee to fund the sprinkler systems across Sheffield, and indeed the same response across the whole country.

But the problem goes much wider than that. Much of the high-rise in my constituency is in the private rented sector. The council does not own the properties but it has a responsibility for the safety of those living in them, and there are fire safety issues there too. We have seen an explosion in numbers in the private rented sector in recent years, but at the same time, in Sheffield as in so many parts of the country, we have seen a fall,
driven by the cuts, in the number of local government staff responsible for compliance in the sector, causing real risk to people in terms of fire and other issues. Do the Government accept that that is one of the issues that needs to be considered as part of any review of fire safety, not simply in high-rise but in accommodation generally in this country?

In the minute that I have left, let me turn to schools and the crisis they are facing. I have 24 state schools in my constituency. Every one of them has faced challenges in making ends meet over the last few years. Headteachers were right—I am disappointed that they have been attacked in a way they have during this debate—to highlight the combined threat of Government cuts and the new funding formula. From 2015-16 to 2019-20, every one of my schools faces cuts of between 6% and 19%—a loss of 103 teachers. Conservative Members seem to be in denial, as the Government are, about the crisis facing our schools.

If the statement that no school will lose out means anything, it must mean it in real terms. If that is the case, perhaps the Secretary of State could write quickly and clearly to the headteachers in my constituency to tell them that they need not worry about the redundancies that they are planning or the courses that they are proposing to remove, and to give them the guarantee that they want and that all our children deserve.

5.35 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I congratulate all the Members who have made their maiden speeches today. It is great to hear so many Scottish accents, with Scottish seats on the Labour Benches again! It was also special to hear the Geordie accent of my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock), who follows my good friend Pat Glass in this place.

As I said in my own maiden speech seven years ago, I am proud to have been an adopted Teessider for nearly 40 years, but I am even prouder of the public sector workers who have been so brutally treated by the Tories in power over the last seven years. Thousands of them on Teesside have lost their jobs as local councils and hospitals have seen their budgets decimated, while those who remain have had little if any pay increase in recent years. Is this really the way to treat the dedicated public sector workers who clean our streets, care for our elderly, run our school centres, police our communities, heal our sick, repair our public sector houses, and use the shortage of clinicians as an excuse to reduce services. They need to train and recruit the people we need. What we really want in Stockton, however, is the new hospital that was axed by the Tory-Liberal Democrat Government in 2010. The Government do not have the cash—yet they found £1 billion or more to buy the votes of the DUP to prop up their shambolic Administration.

Our education system and our local services have reached a tipping point. Either we invest in them, or they will continue to deteriorate beyond use. The Queen’s Speech offers them nothing.

Yes: this is driven by costs. It is driven by the fact that the Government have failed to train and recruit the consultants we need, and it is driven without the approval of clinicians and the general public, most of whom are being bypassed. The Government are trying to solve the wrong problem. They are trying to beat down budgets and use the shortage of clinicians as an excuse to reduce services. They need to train and recruit the people we need. What we really want in Stockton, however, is the new hospital that was axed by the Tory-Liberal Democrat Government in 2010. The Government do not have the cash—yet they found £1 billion or more to buy the votes of the DUP to prop up their shambolic Administration.

Our education system and our local services have reached a tipping point. Either we invest in them, or they will continue to deteriorate beyond use. The Queen’s Speech offers them nothing.

5.39 pm

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for calling me during the debate on the Gracious Speech.

This Parliament sits at a time of constitutional uncertainty and change. It is a Parliament in the balance, overshadowed by deep recent tragedies. In such an environment, it is with some trepidation that I rise to offer my thoughts. My trepidation, however, is blunted by the knowledge that it is with the authority of my constituents that I stand here. My constituents have placed their trust in me: their trust that I will seek to deliver a more hopeful, fairer, better future.

It is traditional to point out the strengths and character of one’s constituency, and that task is made much easier for me as I represent East Lothian. I have heard eloquent speeches today describing the beauty of constituencies, but rest assured there is only one truly beautiful constituency, and that is my own: East Lothian. It has a history as an arterial route for pilgrims, soldiers, scholars and artists,
and the development of its six towns reflects their connections to the sea, to trade, to agriculture and fishing and to embarkation and de-embarkation spots for soldiers.

The towns reflect the long history of industrialisation. The place where I live, Prestonpans, reflects the industrial revolution and coal mining, evidence of which goes back to 1210, a mere 140 years before the post of the Gentleman Usher of the Black Rod was founded. The distinctive individual characters of the six towns are complemented by the surrounding villages, which carry their own identity. They weave together to create a constituency community that is distinctive, supportive, welcoming, creative, industrious, entrepreneurial and both forward and outward looking. Those are characteristics that I feel I can recommend to the House and to those listening.

Tradition dictates that I should pay homage to the previous MP, George Kerevan, who represented my constituency for two years. I am glad to do so, because it allows me to put right an innocent mistake. In Mr Kerevan’s maiden speech, he omitted to mention Fiona O’Donnell, the MP who had represented East Lothian for five years previously. I am glad to put right that small omission today. As I looked at the previous MPs for East Lothian, I suddenly realised the giant task that confronts me. John Home Robertson and John Mackintosh were giants in the political world: they were pro-Europeans. Indeed, John Mackintosh was an advocate for being Scottish, British and European. As I was looking at what John Home Robertson said in his maiden speech about John Mackintosh, I found words that articulate my trepidation but also give me a rule to live by. He said:

“If we are always open and stick to what we believe in we may not always be able to satisfy our Whips, but in the end we shall earn the respect of our constituents. I believe that they are the people who really matter to us.”—[Official Report, 9 November 1978; Vol. 957, c. 1257.]

Much is spoken of this land’s assets, but I hope we can all agree that its greatest assets are the children and their future. If we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before, and as we stand on the shoulders of giants, we have a duty to give our children the opportunity to build a greater, stronger, fairer, kinder future. History will treat us harshly if we do not step up to fulfil the obligation that we owe to our young. My promise to my constituents and to this House is that I will always be open and advocate for what I believe. I will fight for a kinder, more hopeful and fairer future.

5.42 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), who has made a powerful and eloquent speech on behalf of his truly beautiful constituency, as he put it. I also congratulate the other hon. Members on both sides of the House who have made their maiden speeches today.

I welcome the commitment in the Queen’s Speech to maintaining our 0.7% international development commitment. The new Government—one of whom I welcome to his place today—who are working jointly in the Department for International Development and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

I wish them well. Greater co-operation between the two Departments is to be welcomed, but I hope that this will be a partnership and not the first step towards a takeover of DFID by the Foreign Office. Shortly before the election, the cross-party International Development Committee reaffirmed, on a cross-party basis, the importance of maintaining DFID as a stand-alone Department, and I urge the Government to continue to do so.

The Minister for Africa (Rory Stewart) indicated assent.

I welcome the fact that the Minister is nodding at what I am saying.

In the recent general election, my pledge to my constituents was to seek a fair deal for Liverpool. Austerity has hit all parts of our country, but it has hit cities such as Liverpool the hardest. Liverpool City Council has faced budget cuts of nearly £100 million since 2010. Merseyside police have lost 1,700 officers or staff, and the Merseyside fire and rescue budget has been cut in half. In the next three years, the Liverpool City Council budget faces a further cut of £50 million. To protect social care, the council made the difficult decision to increase council tax by 4.99% this year, but even with that tax increase it is having to cut social care by £58 million. That is a loss of 5,000 care packages, which will affect some of the poorest and most vulnerable people in Liverpool.

Investment in education is vital for social mobility, community cohesion, and our future economy. There is real concern in the schools in my constituency about the impact of the proposed funding formula. The proposal that was consulted upon last year would result in a loss to Liverpool’s schools of £3 million. The Secretary of State today repeated the pledge in the Conservative manifesto that no school will have its budget cut but, as others have said, the crucial question is about whether that is in real terms. Otherwise, it will represent a cut for schools that desperately need to protect their funding. I urge the Government to maintain the deprivation and prior attainment factors in the proposed funding formula, which are vital for schools in some of the most deprived parts of my constituency.

This is not just about schools; we also need investment in our early years education. Children’s centres do vital work, but there are also nursery schools. I have two outstanding nursery schools in my constituency: East Prescot Nursery School, which celebrates its 70th anniversary this week, and Ellergreen Nursery School. I want assurances from the Government about long-term funding for our nursery schools, which do such a vital job.

Finally, I want to discuss the promised major reform of technical education. There is no doubt that it has been a long-term weakness that goes back decades, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) reminded us. Let us look to countries such as Germany and Switzerland, which have done this so much better than us. I say to the Government, “Good luck with major reform of technical education, but you cannot do it on the cheap.” The biggest cuts in recent years have been to 16-to-19 funding and, in particular, further education. As well as investment in our schools and in our crucial early years education, let us invest in FE, because only then will we achieve the promised major reform of technical education.
5.47 pm  

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I am honoured by the support of people from across High Peak that has enabled me to stand here today. As someone commented on my Facebook page:

“I can’t believe that one of our school run mums has been elected to Parliament.”

Well, I have four children and have been a school run mum for over 20 years, and I am proud to bring the views of school run mums to Parliament. As the first woman to represent High Peak, I will bring a different perspective from that of my predecessors. I pay tribute to my immediate predecessor, Andrew Bingham, who served as the MP for seven years and as a borough councillor before that, and I wish him well for the future.

I always said that I would only ever seek to be an MP if it was for High Peak. This north-western tip of Derbyshire, 90% in the Peak District national park, is extremely beautiful, but it is also my home and where I have brought up my children. There is nowhere I would rather live. Between and within the wild expanses of picturesque moorland nestle towns and villages that are vibrant, close and friendly. At the heart of each of those communities are their schools and nurseries. At school, children learn how to make friends, how to stay friends, how to work together, and how to plan and create things together. Those lessons apply not just to the children but to us parents as well. They mean that we school run mums can turn our hand to just about anything. We can organise play dates, childcare, fundraisers and parties, and we can organise campaigns to change things. Our schools and nurseries are not just factories for exam certificates; they create communities.

As I am sure that Members on both sides of the House who represent rural communities will agree, our schools are especially important in preventing rural isolation. That is why so many people across High Peak are very concerned about the enormous cuts facing our schools and our nurseries. The Government may say there is record spending, but when our excellent local schools in High Peak are about to lose over £4 million a year and our children are already in classes of 34 or more, it does not cut much ice to say that we could have lots of money for a free school if we want one.

We have outstanding schools already. Combs Infant School, where my two youngest boys went, will lose over £20,000 under these proposals, equivalent to one of its two teachers. Chapel-en-le-Frith High School is set to lose nearly £600,000, equivalent to 15 teachers. It seems that under this Government schools are punished rather than rewarded for their success, and nurseries too.

The underfunding of the promised 30 hours of free childcare is causing several nurseries in High Peak to consider whether they are able to keep going at all. In Gamesley, where the outstanding nursery’s fully qualified staff contribute so much to the life chances of children in this area of high deprivation, each place costs £5 an hour to run, but funding is being cut to just £4 an hour. It does not add up. No wonder more than half of nurseries are saying that they cannot afford to provide the 30 free hours. I urge the Government to have an urgent rethink of nursery funding before September, before we end up with fewer nursery places, rather than more; fewer children able to get the best start for school; and fewer parents able to work.

The fate of our schools and nurseries was so important to my constituents that they chose to elect a school run mum as their MP. And this school run mum will not fail to stand up for them, and for our schools and nurseries and the communities that need them so much.

5.51 pm  

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the maiden speech of my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George). She is the most forceful, eloquent and committed school run mum I have ever heard in this House, and she will clearly be a great asset not just to our party but to the whole House. I congratulate her on an outstanding maiden speech.

I also associate myself with the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), who mentioned the plight of local authorities as they try to do the right thing about their tower blocks and other housing assets in the light of the terrible tragedy that has engulfed the nation and has led to such heart searching on what we do about our tower blocks and on who funds them.

Southampton has been tremendously responsible in its approach to its tower blocks. A number of programmes for installing sprinklers are already under way, and it wishes to progress them to the rest of the tower blocks, but, given the desperate cuts to local government over a considerable period, it simply will not have the resources—or if it does have the resources, it will be at the expense of many other basic services in the city. It is imperative that we get clarity as soon as possible on what funding will be forthcoming from central Government and the Department for Communities and Local Government to support authorities such as Southampton that are trying to act responsibly and carefully on the safety of their tower block residents. Hopefully those authorities will have Government support in making that happen in a way that allows local government to continue while providing the best safety for residents.

I find it odd that, in this Queen’s Speech, the Government of the day, who were allegedly the victors in the general election, have fled from their manifesto faster than any Government I have heard in this House. The Conservative manifesto’s chapter on education is headed, without any trace of irony, “The world’s great meritocracy”. That chapter does not seem substantially to exist as far as the Queen’s Speech is concerned. That gives me some pleasure, as grammar schools are not to be imposed upon us in the future and school lunches will not be cut. However, that world’s worst manifesto, which was “a long list of punishments for the public,” to use not my words, but those of the right hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps), who is not in his place—I am sure inquiries will be made by his own side about that description shortly—still puts in place a number of changes that are inadequate for school funding. That is what I wish to emphasise in the seven seconds I have left available. It needs more than the distribution of the cake; it needs a larger cake. That is the fundamental point about school funding for the future.

5.55 pm  

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you for this opportunity to make my maiden speech in this important debate, Mr Speaker. As I believe is customary,
I wish to start by paying tribute to my predecessor—this is something I am very glad to do. Graham Allen served our community in Nottingham North with distinction over the past 30 years. He has fought for better jobs, decent housing and the best possible education for our young people. He was a skilled parliamentarian who used all the devices of this place for the betterment of our community. His greatest legacy will be his work on early intervention, securing cross-party support and taking it from a theoretical discipline to one that is already changing the lives of the youngest people in my community. I hope to carry on this work as Labour and Co-operative Member of Parliament for Nottingham North. I and all my neighbours owe Graham a great debt of thanks. He ought to be a freeman of Nottingham or never to have to pay for a pint in Bulwell again, whichever he considers the greater honour.

Speaking of great honours, being the Member of Parliament for Nottingham North is the honour of my lifetime. I am humbled that my neighbours chose me to be their voice in Parliament, and I will not let them down. I am humbled, too, to be a Labour Member of Parliament. I am very aware of the great names that have come before me, and I look forward to proving myself worthy of such exalted company. I am especially proud, during Co-operatives Fortnight, to be one of 38 Labour and Co-operative Members of Parliament this time, and again I look forward to serving the co-operative movement during my time here.

Nottingham has the very best of Britain, so I have pulled out a few highlights. They are not necessarily the ones that Members will find on Wikipedia, as I wanted to make them laugh, especially given the lateness of the hour. Our Old Market Square is one of the best big urban open spaces in the country, so every summer we chuck 100 tonnes—or whatever it is—of sand in there and make a beach out of it, because we are also as far away from the coast as it is possible to get. We have the best public transport outside the capital; we have two top-class universities—I am proud to be an alumnus of one—which have pumped out innovations such as the MRI machine and ibuprofen; we have produced the best British boxer of the 21st century, Carl Froch, as well as the best British boxer of the 19th century, William “Bendigo” Thompson, who was from not too far from where I live; Britain’s best actress, Vicky McClure, is a proud Nottinghamian; we have the oldest inn in England—we know how important that is; and in football our city has won more European cups than London, Paris and Rome—put together. We have the very best of Britain in Nottingham.

However, it is important to reflect on the fact that we have also traditionally had some of the worst of Britain—on health outcomes, results at school and outcomes in the workplace. We should not shy away from that challenge. All our challenges lead back to one point, which is our poverty. Thirty-four years ago, in his maiden speech, my predecessor, Graham Allen, in his maiden speech, remarked that half of those had closed. Thirty-four years on from Richard Ottaway’s speech, none of them are there and they have not been for some time. They were not replaced by the skilled, well paid jobs of the 21st century; instead, what has replaced them is cyclical poverty. We should be angry about that. It is not inevitable and it is avoidable. I am angry about it, which is why I come to this place—I am here to do something about it.

This is what is regrettable about this Government’s legislative plan for the next two years: there simply is not the level of ambition and imagination that my community needs from its Government in order for it to become a better place. A lack of resources is a factor in that, and we have seen disproportionate cuts in Nottingham, but more than that we are talking about the ambition to genuinely create a better Britain that gives everyone a fair shake. Although this Government will not do the things that Nottingham North needs them to do, I will do everything I can, as a Labour and Co-operative party Member of Parliament and trade unionist, to fill this gap. I shall seek to use all the intricacies of this place to highlight our issues. I shall seek to build support for the long-term projects we need to change our community, and I will work and work until we see things get better. That is what I offered to my neighbours and that is what I offer to this place.

5.59 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to be able to speak in this debate and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) and all the wonderful, passionate and eloquent maiden speeches that it has been my privilege to listen to this afternoon.

The Queen’s Speech says that we will invest in schools, ensure that every child has the opportunity to attend a good school and see that all schools are fully funded. The National Association of Head Teachers says that the general election result showed that the public did not endorse many of the Conservatives’ more controversial policy ideas, including expanding selection and ending universal infant free school meals. It is right that those policies have been dropped from the Government’s legislative programme.

The Conservative manifesto contained a commitment to ensure that no school would lose per pupil funding under the formula, and it is vital that that promise is now followed through. However, the House of Commons Library says that the Government’s new funding formula would have “winners and losers”, with 54% of schools seeing a cash increase and 46% seeing a cut.

Figures from the National Audit Office show that, in the Borough of Rochdale of which my constituency of Heywood and Middleton forms a part, our schools are facing cuts of £15 million. On average, our local schools are facing cuts of £550 per pupil, which is equivalent to the loss of 468 teachers across the borough, leading to larger class sizes and increasing stress and disillusionment among those teachers remaining in post.

I have been contacted by many headteachers and teachers in my constituency, who have expressed their real and serious concerns about the impact of the new funding formula on our children’s education. They have told me that they have had to make budget savings year on year, and that now the cupboard is bare. The imposition of any more cuts will give them no option but to reduce the number of teachers. Locally, none of the schools in my constituency is a winner; they will all lose out under
the new funding formula. Nationally, the picture appears to be much the same, with even Tory MPs complaining that these cuts are “entirely unacceptable”.

We must not forget our international obligations. We have signed up to sustainable development goal No. 4, which commits to ensuring that by 2030 all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education.

Last week, the wonderful children at St Vincent’s Roman Catholic primary school in Norden in my constituency invited me to a morning assembly on the theme of “send my friend to school” where they sang and performed brilliantly on behalf of their international neighbours. They reminded me that, at our current rate of progress, sustainable development goal No. 4 will not be achieved until 2084. None the less, it made me very proud to see those children looking outwards, not inwards. Seeing this care and compassion among our young people gave me hope for the future, and I hope that this Government will take note.

Let me briefly touch on the recent election. The Prime Minister recklessly gambled with her majority and lost it. Far from providing strength and stability, we now have a fragile minority Government propped up by Democratic Unionist party votes. I was one of the few MPs who voted against the election—because of voter fatigue. My constituents have had a major election every year since 2014, and at the time the election was announced we were in the midst of the Greater Manchester mayoral elections. I tried to save the Prime Minister from herself but to no avail.

6.3 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab):

Let me briefly touch on the recent election. The Prime Minister recklessly gambled with her majority and lost it. Far from providing strength and stability, we now have a fragile minority Government propped up by Democratic Unionist party votes. I was one of the few MPs who voted against the election—because of voter fatigue. My constituents have had a major election every year since 2014, and at the time the election was announced we were in the midst of the Greater Manchester mayoral elections. I tried to save the Prime Minister from herself but to no avail.

6.3 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab):

First, let me congratulate all Members who have made their excellent maiden speeches today, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris). He has very big shoes to fill, but I know that the experience and dedication that he has shown in local government will stand him in good stead in the days ahead.

Let me state for the record that I have declarable interests in that my wife is the Cabinet member for children and young people in our local authority of Cheshire West and Chester and education is the subject matter under discussion today.

A common concern raised with me on the doorstep during the election was funding for local schools, which I and many other Members have mentioned in the House on previous occasions and again today, but I want to focus today on the lack of accountability in our education system. Earlier this month, the University of Chester’s academy in Ellesmere Port was rated as inadequate by Ofsted, and the sad fact is that that is not the first time the school has failed an Ofsted inspection, having been rated inadequate in 2013. Although there have been improvements since then, we are now sadly back to square one.

We need to do something different, but the way the matter has been dealt with so far demonstrates a lacuna in Government policy towards failing academies. Whether it is an oversight or an ideological attachment to academies that does not concede they could ever have issues with their performance, the devastating reality is that the only prescription to remedy these failings is more of the same. My constituents deserve better than more of the same.

As Members will know, there is no mechanism for an academy to return to local authority control. Academies deemed to be failing or underperforming may be transferred to another multi-academy trust or sponsor, or made subject to other intervention from the relevant regional schools commissioner—who, for reasons I am yet to understand, thinks that Ellesmere Port is in the west midlands.

However, whatever the theoretical options are, I rather suspect that there are not scores of other sponsors queuing up to take over. If one does emerge, what guarantees do we have they will be any better than the current sponsors, that they will have any local knowledge or connection or that they will be accountable to the people they serve? The answer is of course none, yet we have a ready-made answer just waiting by the phone for a call—the local authority, with 90% of its schools rated as good or outstanding, a wealth of knowledge and experience, and, of course, the local connections that I believe will be vital in restoring public confidence in the school.

I know that the vast majority of teachers and support staff do a fantastic job in trying circumstances and that there are many at the academy who are working incredibly hard and doing their best, so it is important to note that this is a criticism not of the staff at the school but of its leadership and of a system that cannot deal with those failings. There is no doubt that if this was a local authority-controlled school an army of DfE advisers would have been in years ago extolling the virtues of academisation. Indeed, I know of one local primary that was positively encouraged to have the university as its sponsor—I am sure it is relieved that it resisted that particular temptation.

But this is the nub: we all want to see school standards improve and the best for our children, but the system designed to drive improvement is currently entrenching poor performance and underachievement. Although the Queen’s Speech has mercifully not included yet another round of tinkering with school structures, its big omission in education was any attempt to deal with the Select Committee on Education’s proposals and introduce a way in which failing academies and chains can be held to account. The sooner that triumph of ideology over reality is corrected, the better.

At the moment, we have a failing school and nobody taking responsibility for that failure. There is not even a governing body at the academy, and therefore no channel for staff, parents or the community to express their views and, critically, no accountability for the serial failings of leadership. The Queen’s Speech says that the “government will continue to work to ensure that every child has the opportunity to attend a good school”.

It is about time that the Government put aside dogma and came up with proposals to actually make that happen. The education of our children is too important for them to continue to be let down in this way.

6.7 pm

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): Let me begin by saying what a pleasure it has been to listen to so many excellent maiden speeches: as the daughter of a Scot, it is particularly pleasing to see so many new Scottish MPs on the Labour Benches. I thank the people of Burnley for bringing me back here again. It is a privilege.
I want to begin by speaking up for children in Burnley. I was pleased to hear in the Queen’s Speech talk of spreading prosperity and opportunity and I want to ask the Minister how Burnley’s children fit into this plan. There are 19,709 children in Burnley and Padiham and, of those, 31.9% are growing up in poverty. In the most deprived wards, that rises to 50%—the staggering figure of a half of all children growing up in poverty. If we are to build the strong economy we all want to see, we need to maximise the economic contribution of all our people. Acting to break the cycle of poverty does not just transform lives; it strengthens our economy, and we cannot afford not to act.

I want the prosperity and opportunity that the Prime Minister speaks about to apply to the children in my constituency. I want it to reach them and I want to ask why the Government’s actions seem not to match their rhetoric.

Education is undoubtedly the key to social mobility and economic opportunity. With that in mind, it is useful to look at what is happening on the ground in Burnley. There are eight state-maintained nursery schools. Every one of them is judged to be either outstanding or good, and all are at risk of closure. All the evidence shows that the first five years of life are so important. It is essential that that provision is not confused with childcare—I am talking about quality education, delivered by qualified teachers to children of nursery school age. Disgracefully, those schools are not protected. I want to thank the teachers and headteachers of the nursery schools in town who champion this cause in children’s interests.

In the Queen’s Speech, the Government promised to “continue to work to ensure that every child has the opportunity to attend a good school and that all schools are fairly funded.” All the children in my constituency have access to good primary and secondary schools, but the so-called fair funding formula will have a damaging and negative effect. Every school has to fund its funding cut by more than £400 per pupil; shockingly, in the poorest parts of my constituency, that figure rises to more than £700. Can the Minister tell me what is fair about that and how it will enhance opportunity and spread prosperity? The reality is quite the reverse. Those budget cuts will mean teacher redundancies, supersize classes in primary schools and a reduced curriculum in secondary schools, all of which add up to fewer opportunities for the children in Burnley and Padiham.

At every stage, it seems that the Government are creating obstacles that hamper social mobility and deprive children of opportunities. This is a criminal waste that is denying opportunity and costing this country dearly. When will the Government understand that children are the future and that an investment in them is an investment in the future of our country?

The Queen’s Speech contained some very fine words, and here are my favourites: “A priority will be to build a more united country, strengthening the social, economic and cultural bonds between England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.” That is a fine sentiment, but then we discovered what really happened—a tawdry little deal and a strange game of “Who Wants to be a Billionaire?” that led to the Government giving one of the constituent nations £1 billion, seemingly on the basis of a confidence and supply deal to prop up the Tories. What sort of message does that send to my constituents and to people across the rest of Wales, and indeed to the rest of mainland Britain? It will not come as a surprise that Members across the Opposition Benches will rightly be asking for that extra £1.7 billion for Wales, and I am sure that other Members will be making similar requests for other parts of mainland Britain.

The Queen’s Speech rightly spoke about the importance of ensuring that people have “the skills they need for the high-skilled, high-wage jobs of the future”. Unlike some in this Chamber, I do not believe that we can poultice-poss the issue of student debt. Our UK manifesto was right to address that, and I am delighted that our Welsh Labour Government have taken practical steps to ensure that students are better supported. Wherever one is on the political spectrum, it is undoubtedly true that student debt of levels that my generation did not see or know benefits absolutely no one.

There are some measures in the Queen’s Speech that I think few would oppose, such as greater action to tackle domestic violence, meeting the NATO 2% commitment and support for the police and security services to tackle terrorism and human trafficking, which is a global concern. However, we need to recognise that we can only implement those measures with proper resourcing. This week’s Economist magazine asks for an honest debate about taxation and cost-effectiveness, and about what we want to fund and how we propose to do it. That is a welcome debate, and in it we must speak up for the dignity of proper state investment for high-quality public services. We must speak up for the measures that were excluded from the Queen’s Speech. What would be wrong about giving, as part of those settlements, a decent bridging pension to the WASPI women—the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign—who were born in the 1950s? I believe that the ideological debate with the penny-pinching, small state ideologues of the hard right, who always have their way, must have its day.

No speech in this Parliament would be complete without a message for the Government on Brexit. Let us have a Brexit that works for the whole nation, not just for the hard right of the Tory party. If we end up with no deal and without proper votes, we are going to be mighty cross.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): It is a great privilege to speak in this debate and especially to enjoy such amazing maiden speeches from across the Chamber. I pay a special tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris), who spoke so well. I am sure he will be a tireless representative for his constituency. I also pay tribute to my electors in the constituency of Clwyd South for electing me for the third time in seven years.

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Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Being called to speak at such a late hour has given me the privilege of hearing so many marvellous maiden speeches, particular that of my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris), whom I have had the privilege of knowing for many years, and who I know will be a strong advocate for Nottingham in this place.
When the Prime Minister went to the country on 8 June, she asked to be judged on her record, and she was found wanting. She should have taken the advice of my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) and not had the election, because what we now have is a Tory party with no majority in this House and a Government propped up only by the votes of the Democratic Unionist party, which, to paraphrase that great poet Robbie Burns, has been “bought and sold with English gold”. Actually, I want to congratulate the 10 hon. Members from the DUP—they are no longer in their places—on securing more resources for their constituencies, because ultimately that is what we come here to do. My fear is that the benefits about to be bestowed upon Northern Ireland will be at the continuing cost of austerity in Stoke-on-Trent.

We have had a Queen’s Speech that, at best, is a thin gruel of legislative programming. It contains 27 Bills, eight of which relate to the process of exiting the European Union, and none of which seeks to deal with the inequalities that are the root cause of most societal problems. Therefore, I will not judge the Government by their actions, but instead hold them to account for their inactions and the political decisions that they have taken or, in the case of this paralysed Administration, not taken.

In Stoke-on-Trent, schools will face a budget shortfall of around £11 million by 2020, so where is the Queen’s Speech is the measure to ensure an equitable, adequate and properly funded fair funding system for all schools across the country? I have met headteachers who are working under immense pressure to deliver the very best for the children in my constituency. Stoke-on-Trent’s young people are rich in talent and with the right support would have a bright future, but that future is being robbed by an uncaring Government. [Interruption.] The Secretary of State may shun from a sedentary position, but it is true.

It is not just in relation to schools that the Government are showing a dereliction of duty. Where are the measures to help parents who go to work with proper, affordable and accessible childcare? The proposal for 30 hours of free childcare is in principle a good one, but the Government are implementing the policy on the cheap. Nursery and wraparound providers in Stoke-on-Trent have told me that it will end up costing them more to provide 30 hours because the amount that the Government are offering per child per hour is simply too little to meet the operating overheads. It is childcare on the cheap, and the Government should be ashamed.

It is not just infants who are being let down; the Government’s silence on further education is also deafening. Although the Queen’s Speech made some references to technical education, it said absolutely nothing about the future of further education. [Interruption.] The Secretary of State may smile, but this is the Queen’s Speech that she struggled to make a case for earlier because there is so little about education in it.

In Stoke-on-Trent we have two fabulous colleges, Stoke-on-Trent College and City of Stoke-on-Trent Sixth Form College, both of which do exceptional work preparing the next generation of Stokies for work. However, the general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, while acknowledging the impact on technical education, said that the Government’s plan “fails to do anything for the rest of post-16 education, which is extremely poorly funded, and where many courses are being cut.”

The list of missing Bills and botched opportunities could go on, but time means that I cannot. The Queen’s Speech is a chance for a Government to lay out their priorities for the coming year. This Queen’s Speech suggests a Government who are out of ideas, devoid of aspiration and, at their very worst, indifferent to the people that I represent.

6.19 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): It has been an absolute honour and a pleasure to hear the maiden speeches from across the House today. Although Tooting is not awash with peaks and flowy rivers, it is very beautiful and I am immensely grateful to the people of Tooting for re-electing me.

Brexit will play a substantial part in the business of the House over the next two years. However, ensuring that we have a well-resourced education system is something that we cannot revisit in two years’ time. Children, parents and teachers need answers now. When I marched with 500 Tooting parents and pupils in May against Government proposals to cut their school budgets, I made a promise to stand up for them in Parliament. Three weeks later, here I am, standing up for Tooting children, Tooting teachers and support staff and Tooting parents.

I will briefly take the House on a journey that children across Tooting will take throughout their education under Conservative proposals. At three years old, parents struggle to find a place in local nurseries able to provide 30 hours of free childcare. At four years old, our children begin full-time education—indeed, my daughter starts school in September—but those who have special needs cannot be catered for due to lack of funding. Many headteachers attempting to provide the best for their pupils in Tooting are having to go cap in hand at the school gates, asking for donations just to pay their staff and keep their buildings in repair. When the donations run out, teachers are using their own money to purchase basics such as books and pens. At 18 years old, our children, Tooting teachers and support staff and Tooting parents.

As graduates, our young people have to decide whether they can actually afford to serve in public service roles. They have to decide whether they can become nurses, knowing that they will potentially have to use food banks, or whether they can become teachers, knowing that their morale will be stripped from them within their first year of working. Poorly thought out Conservative promises versus everyday reality pretty much sums up the Prime Minister’s education proposals—a Conservative promise of a fair funding formula for our schools. Teachers should be teaching, not fundraising; they should be able to get on with their job.

There are schools in Tooting that have not been able to provide cleaning staff, so children have had to clean their own classrooms. Children should be learning, not vacuuming. Who suffers in all this? It is the next generation of children and young adults, whose potential is being curbed before they even have the chance to reach it. [Interruption.] I am enjoying hearing the Secretary of State speaking from a sedentary position when she would not come to speak to parents in Tooting.
Justine Greening: I simply want to set out that the hon. Lady’s party had exactly the same policy on funding to schools that would lose under the funding formula, which was to have no cash losers.

Dr Allin-Khan: Why was the Secretary of State, or any Conservative representative, not present at any of the hustings, the marches or the meetings during the electoral process? It is easy now to stand up in the Chamber where she feels safe among her comrades, but why is she not at the coalface speaking to parents, teachers and pupils? Nine-year-olds were marching against Government cuts. Where was she then? She was invited and she failed to show up.

At what point will the Prime Minister and her party accept that our children deserve more? They deserve a better start in life. Parents should not be worried about the fact that their children will be put in boxes based on their academic prowess at the age of 11. We are stunting their potential before they have even had the opportunity to flourish. Under a Labour Government, my brother and I were able to come from a poor background and have the aspirational hope that the Secretary of State spoke about. Under a Labour Government, we were both able to go to Oxbridge, and I anticipate that similar can be said for others.

It is a Labour Government who will stand up for every single child in this country. A Labour Government will be for the many, not the few. It is a Labour Government who will ensure that we have class sizes in which our children can learn and have opportunities, and who will say that an apprenticeship is as important as going to university and crippling ourselves with debt. A Labour Government will ensure that every single child has the best possible start in life, and I look forward to being part of that Government very soon.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Before I call the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), I emphasise that, of course, the debate can continue until 7 o’clock, but there is no obligation on the hon. Gentleman, or on the Minister, the hon. Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), to continue banging on until 7 o’clock. It is perfectly permissible for them to conclude their no doubt Demosthenian orations before that allotted hour—hint.

6.25 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I get the sense that you would like us to finish sooner rather than later.

We have had a packed debate, and it has been great to listen to the 48 Back-Bench Members, including my hon. Friend the Members for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle), for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham), for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali), for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham), for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead), for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), for Burnley (Julie Cooper), for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones), for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) and for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan); the right hon. Members for Broadland (Mr Simpson), for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper); the hon. Members for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), for Hartford and Stortford (Mr Prisk), for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown), for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena), for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), and for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston); and the hon. and learned Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer).

However, I pay special tribute to all those hon. Members who have spoken in this Chamber for the first time and to their excellent maiden speeches, which show that, whichever part of the Chamber Members sit in, they come here with the right reasons and the right purpose, which is to represent their constituents and their constituencies as best they can. I pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Manchester Central (Thelma Walker), for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney), for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Lesley Laird), for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock), for Brighton, Kemptown (Mr Russell-Moyle), for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), for High Peak (Ruth George) and for Nottingham North (Alex Norris), and to the hon. Members for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson), for Chichester and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly), for Southport (Damien Moore) and for Glasgow East (David Linden). I would merely say that it was 12 years ago, on 23 May 2005, that I gave my maiden speech in the debate on communities, and I stand here 12 years later as the shadow Communities Secretary.

A week is a long time in politics, they say. Well, what a difference seven weeks made. When the election was called, I was virtually laughed off College Green in media interviews. Tory MPs’ tails were up—they were heading for a landslide. They asked for a big majority, but the Prime Minister lost the majority she had inherited. Their response? Well, out went all their policies—to the extent that we had a delayed Queen’s Speech that could accompanied so little content.

This is the first opportunity I have had to speak since the appalling tragedies that shocked many of us over the past weeks. It is with pride, however, that I commend the way the communities of Manchester and London united to show opposition to that violence and hate. I also pay tribute to the heroic response from the emergency services, the NHS and the community following the dreadful tragedy at Grenfell Tower, and to those who provided support to all who lost family, friends and everything they own as the fire tore through their homes.

I know that, within the Labour party, there are staff and elected Members who have been affected personally, and I anticipate that similar can be said for others around the House. I am proud to stand alongside, and pay tribute to, all those who have demanded answers
over the failings that allowed this tragedy to happen. Rather than being torn apart, the community has come together in a remarkable display of human compassion, mutuality and solidarity. I also welcome the fact that the Prime Minister last week recognised the failure of Government in this tragedy, and I look forward to the results of the forthcoming investigation, which I hope will ensure this tragedy is never, ever repeated.

The consequences of a Tory Government are visible to all. They include unrepaired roads, uncollected bins, cuts to adult learning and closed children’s centres throughout England. Less visible, however, are the stresses that have been placed on core services, planning services, building regulation and inspection of commercial properties. A recent study by the Local Government Information Unit found that three quarters of councils had little or no confidence in their financial sustainability, and more than one in 10 believed that they were in danger of failing to deliver legally required services such as those I have mentioned.

Lucy Frazer: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, if only one in 10 believe that they are not capable of delivering, nine out of 10 are managing with some of their financial services?

Andrew Gwynne: The hon. and learned Lady shows a lack of understanding of precisely what is happening in local government. The fact that one in 10 are fearful of the financial future does not mean that 90% are satisfied. I suspect that she will regret making that intervention, because she will know that councils of all political persuasions up and down the country are struggling to make ends meet, and they want an end to Government austerity too.

Although I welcome the fact that the general election demonstrated the strength of public support for the policies of my party, and that it led to the Conservative party abandoning not just some but most of its damaging and unpopular plans, there is now a complete financial and policy black hole.

A 56% cut of central Government funding to local authorities was due to be replaced through new measures allowing local authorities to hold on to 100% of locally raised business rates. Where are those plans now? Local business rate retention was expected to begin in 2019-20. However, due to the lack of a legislative framework to carry the introduction of the policy, many in the local government world now assume that the plans have been kicked into the long grass. This is the third time that I have had to raise this issue. When will the Government provide the clarity that local councils need? Are the plans still going ahead, and are they still going ahead on the timescales previously mentioned? Where is the legislation?

The Minister can intervene if he wishes to answer those points—perhaps he will answer them in his speech—but the fact is that Back-Bench Members on both sides of the House will want to question Ministers precisely on the detail of how their local councils are going to be financed. The Opposition will not let up until we have the absolute certainty of how the revenue support grant is going to be replaced.

The King’s Fund predicted a £1.9 billion funding gap in social care this year, while the Local Government Association estimated a £2.6 billion funding gap by 2020. Once again, the Government had no answers in the Queen’s Speech. Almost half of elderly people are living in inadequate care homes.

Although it seems that the grammar school plans have been abandoned, thousands of teachers and teaching assistants have either already lost their jobs because of the cuts or left the profession early because of this Government’s policies. This is not propaganda. Many schools are due to be worse off under the new funding formula, which will still result in Government cuts of 3% to school budgets, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies.

Since 2010, 455 libraries have been closed. Investment in arts and culture has declined by £236 million. Some councils have been forced to impose cuts of up to 80%, which have disproportionately affected the most deprived areas in this country. In the previous Parliament, the 10 most deprived council areas in England faced cuts 18 times higher than the least deprived councils. If we want a Government for the many and not the few, it is really clear that it will not be served by the party currently sitting on the Government Benches. We need a party that is committed to governing in the interests of the whole country and to making sure that inequality is reversed.

Let us look at what this Government have done. Despite the cuts to all our public services, this Prime Minister has managed to find £1 billion to invest in securing herself a wafer-thin parliamentary majority. Why has the same priority not been placed on investing in our public services? One billion pounds would help to prevent cuts to the police budget and allow us to recruit more police officers across the whole country. One billion pounds could train 45,419 new firefighters. One billion pounds could not only fund the Government’s pledge to create 10,000 training placements for nurses, but allow them to do so without scrapping bursaries.

There is a growing consensus that the austerity project has failed, but this legislative programme promises more of the same—unless you live in Northern Ireland. Urgent action is needed on health and social care budgets, public sector pay and local government funding, yet all those issues were absent from this delayed Queen’s Speech. Local government faces a cliff edge, yet during the election Ministers were unwilling to debate those issues. They remain so detached from those they claim to represent that they are unable to see the looming crisis. This Queen’s Speech was an ideal time for the Government to admit that their 1% pay cap is not working and that public sector workers deserve to be paid a wage they can live on. It was an opportunity for the Conservative party to demonstrate that it had learned from the criticism it received during the election campaign. Sadly, I suspect we will still see nurses using food banks. It was an opportunity for the Government to recognise that not enough money is being invested in our education system. As has been demonstrated in today’s debate, schools that raise concerns about a lack of funding are dismissed as engaging in political propaganda.

It is time to build a country based on hope and shared prosperity. Local government and public sector services will play a vital role in supporting us to do that, enriching communities and creating an environment in which we are able to tackle isolation, division and mistrust: a country for the many, not the few. This is possible only if it is properly funded. We will take no
[Andrew Gwynne]

lectures from this Government. We look forward to the day when we show this Government the door and we get the Government that our public services and constituents deserve and need: a Labour Government for the many, not the few.

6.38 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): This has been a good and wide-ranging debate. I am delighted to have listened to so many fantastic maiden speeches—we have been on a tour of the UK. The hon. Members for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker), for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney), for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Lesley Laird), for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock), for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly), and for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Hugh Gaffney), for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Lesley Laird), for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock), for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly), for Glasgow East (Lesley Laird), for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock), for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly), for Glasgow East (Lesley Laird), for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock), for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly), and for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) all made passionate contributions from the Opposition Benches.

I would like to take this opportunity to welcome my new colleagues: my hon. Friends the Members for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson), for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) and for Southport (Damien Moore). Those two new colleagues from Scotland are just two of our 12 new Scottish Conservative Members, which is great news. It was fantastic to hear the maiden speeches of my hon. Friends. They made serious but entertaining contributions to the debate and showed that they will be excellent Members of Parliament. All the new Members who have contributed to today’s debate have shown, in their own way, that they will bring a range of expertise and views to this House over the coming Parliament.

A strong education offer is essential to unlock talent, to create opportunities for our young people and to equip them with the skills they will need to help us build and maintain a strong economy that generates prosperity for all. Last year, we consulted widely on how to create more good school places and how to ensure that our schools work for everyone. We will continue to build on the constructive conversations we had with higher education institutions during the consultation, so that we can agree what more they can do to raise attainment and increase the number of good school places.

To meet the needs of our growing and rapidly changing economy, employers need access to a workforce with the skills they require. Our reforms to technical education will help businesses, young people and adults to achieve their potential, as T-levels will become a gold standard for technical excellence.

I will go through some of the points that hon. Members have raised about education. Members on both sides of the House raised the issue of school funding, so it is important to start by reiterating what the Secretary of State for Education said earlier. As she said very clearly, the Queen’s Speech was clear that the Government are determined to introduce a fairer distribution of funding for schools. We will set out our plans shortly and, as was outlined in our manifesto, we will ensure that no school has its budget cut as a result of the new formula. My right hon. Friend was extremely clear on that point.

Lucy Powell: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Jones: Let me make some progress and then I will give way.

The hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) mentioned the number of teaching staff being made redundant from our schools. I say to him that there are 15,000 more teachers in our schools today than when his Government left office in 2010.

Lucy Powell rose—

Tracey Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op) rose—

Mr Jones: I will make some more progress before I give way.

In responding to several Opposition Members on nursery school funding, I would like to say how important our nursery schools are. They are a vital part of our childcare sector. We have already committed to an additional £55 million a year to maintain their current funding levels to at least 2020, in recognition that they deal with some of the children from the most deprived backgrounds in our country. I point out to Opposition Members that our manifesto committed us to immediately instituting a capital fund to help primary schools develop nurseries where they currently do not have the facilities for one.

The shadow Secretary of State for Education raised the pertinent matter of school fire safety in her speech. Sprinklers must be installed in new school buildings if a risk assessment means that they are necessary or if they are required under a local authority planning policy. There are no plans whatsoever to introduce any changes that would make fire safety laws for schools less strict than they are already.

Lucy Powell: I want to go back to the Minister’s comments about funding, because he seems to be missing the point. The redundancies that are being made in schools now are a result not of the national funding formula but of increased costs and real-terms cuts happening to schools now. The national funding formula is on top that, and schools will continue to lose out. Can the Minister give a guarantee from the Dispatch Box that no school will lose funding as a result of those real-terms cuts?

Mr Jones: I can, as a result of the formula that has been put forward. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has made that very clear today.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) mentioned social mobility and the importance of education in our primary schools. She said that we now have more good and outstanding primary school places than we did seven years ago. My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) mentioned the importance of tackling domestic violence and welcomed the measures in the Queen’s Speech to do so.

My hon. Friends the Members for Hertford and Stortford (Mr Prisk) and for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling) made important speeches in which they referred to the opportunities that we have as we leave the European Union. In particular, they said that those opportunities are about not just the trade in goods but the trade in services, which is also critical.
The role that local government plays in providing services is also essential to the smooth running of our society. Despite challenging financial conditions, councils continue to deliver, and council tax is expected to be lower in real terms in 2019-20 than it was in 2010-11. Councils have embraced innovation and transformed the way they work to deliver services for their local areas.

**Maria Eagle:** I accept the Minister’s point that councils provide important services, but can he explain why Liverpool City Council will have lost 68% of its resource by 2020-21?

**Mr Jones:** The Government have had to look extremely carefully at funding in a number of areas over the past seven years, because when the Government the hon. Lady was part of left office in 2010, they left behind a deficit of £150 billion—the country was spending £150 billion more than it was earning every single year.

We have also given councils financial freedoms and flexibilities to manage their own budgets. In 2015 we provided them with more certainty and stability through the offer of a four-year financial settlement, and 97% of eligible local authorities have accepted that. It enables them to plan service delivery, transformation and more effective collaboration with local partners.

**Mr Betts:** Will the Minister give way?

**Gareth Snell:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Jones:** I will make some more progress before I give way.

We are also responding positively to help councils meet the cost of increasing service pressures. In the spring Budget we provided an additional £2 billion to put social care on a more stable footing, and allowed relevant authorities the flexibility to raise more income through the adult social care precept. My right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) raised the important issue of social care. The former mentioned the importance of social care for the working-age population and what more we can do to get people with learning disabilities, for example, into work. That is an extremely important aspiration for the Government. The latter talked about what more we can do to deal with the social care challenges that we face, on which the Government will bring forward plans during this Parliament.

**Mr Betts:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Jones:** I will not, because I am just coming on to the point that the hon. Gentleman raised.

Before I cover the details of local government finance, I want to mention the important points made by the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) and my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) about housing, which I think we all see as a critical issue. That is why we are devolving £3.4 billion to the Mayor of London for affordable housing during this spending period and why, to answer my hon. Friend’s question, we are fully committed to implementing the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, a piece of legislation that secured agreement right across the House and on which I had the pleasure of working with him.

To answer the hon. Member for Sheffield South East—this was a point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East and the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish from the Opposition Front Bench—local government devolution is still very much on the agenda. The Government are committed to delivering the manifesto pledge that we made to help local authorities control more of the money they raise and we will work closely with local government to agree the best way of achieving that.

**Mr Betts:** Before the election there was a Bill before Parliament to introduce 100% retention of business rates by local councils. That was due to start in 2019. This is a two-year Queen’s Speech with no mention of that measure. Can the Minister therefore confirm that this measure will now not go ahead in 2019 as planned?

**Mr Jones:** As I have said, we are absolutely committed to allowing local government to keep more of the money it raises locally and we will work with local government to achieve that.

Some of our councils have also been sorely tested in recent weeks, dealing with major terrorist attacks in London and Manchester, and the appalling fire at Grenfell Tower. Our thoughts across the whole House are with the victims and their families, friends and communities. It is essential, as the Prime Minister has said, that the people affected get the support they need. The efforts of the fire service, the police and the emergency services have been outstanding. As the Prime Minister said last week in her statement on Grenfell Tower, we pay tribute to the London boroughs for their fantastic response. That includes a number of chief executives, who are currently working at the new central command centre, as well as the Mayor of London and leading figures from a number of councils outside London.

It is well documented that the initial response was not as good as it should have been, but since then we have acted quickly, working with local authorities on the immediate issues in advance of the public inquiry into the fire. We rapidly provided funding to help the residents affected by the tragedy and we have the Bellwin scheme available to meet the immediate and uninsurable costs of responding to the disaster. We have also guaranteed funding for temporary accommodation for those whose homes have been destroyed as a result of the fire while permanent homes are found. Funding for legal representation for residents to ensure that their voices are heard during the inquiry will also be provided.

We have seen extraordinary acts of selflessness and spontaneous acts of good will associated with these tragedies, which show just how strong and resilient our communities are. We must foster our togetherness and create the conditions for strong local public services to serve our communities. We value the important work that our public sector workers do in delivering these essential public services. This Government’s proposals will strengthen the economy, generate the tax revenues needed to invest in public services and ensure that all our citizens are provided with high-quality public services, at local and national level, at every stage of their lives. I commend this Gracious Speech to the House.

Ordered, That the debate be now adjourned.—(Craig Whittaker.)

Debate to be resumed tomorrow.
Universal Credit: Lowestoft

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

5.64 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I am pleased to have secured this debate, as it provides a timely opportunity to review the roll-out of universal credit in Lowestoft, which is in my constituency.

The full roll-out in Lowestoft began in May 2016. Significant problems have been encountered, with many vulnerable people placed in very difficult situations, and at times the system has struggled to cope. The position is now better than it was six months ago, but significant challenges remain. It is important for lessons to be learned before the roll-out to other areas accelerates this autumn.

Since the turn of the year I have been corresponding regularly with the Minister, highlighting the problems that have been encountered. I am grateful to him for taking those concerns on board, and for introducing measures that have led to improvements. I also thank him for visiting Lowestoft on 21 February, when he met staff from the jobcentre and representatives of Waveney District Council and Anglia Revenues Partnership to hear about the problems that had been encountered, and to hear their proposals for how the roll-out could be improved. That meeting was particularly poignant because the team from the council was led by its leader, Councillor Colin Law, who sadly passed away at the beginning of last month. Colin recognised that many vulnerable people in the local community were being placed in very difficult situations, and although not in good health himself, he was determined to ensure that the Government addressed their needs.

The principal problem with the roll-out has been the delay before claimants receive any payments. That has placed many vulnerable people in difficult circumstances, with no money to pay for the basic necessities of food and a roof over their heads. At the turn of the year my office was dealing with 20 ongoing cases, and when I visited a local food bank at that time, all the people whom it was supporting were there because of delays in receipt of their first payments. A further problem is that when those payments are received, they often do not include the housing element, which leads to a build-up of rent arrears.

The system that has been put in place is digitally based, requiring access to a computer. Many claimants immediately face the problem of either not having a computer or not being readily able to use one. The situation has been compounded by the fact that, initially, the IT systems were not functioning as well as they should have been. Constituents also experienced phone calls not being answered promptly, and then long delays while their problems were addressed. One constituent received very slow and inaccurate responses to his journal entries, and delays in the handling of his subject access request. When his housing element was eventually paid, it was for the wrong amount.

It is important to point out that universal credit requires those working at jobcentres—those on the frontline—to acquire new skills. They are no longer just the labour exchange. They need to be able to identify vulnerable customers at an early stage, to get to grips with housing challenges that were previously the responsibility of local housing authorities, and to work with the central universal credit team in building the universal credit model. All the Jobcentre Plus staff whom I have met are up for the challenge. They are determined to succeed, and it is vital that the Government provide them with the support and resources that will enable them to do so.

In the early stages of the roll-out, there was concern about the fact that the various agencies, including the Department for Work and Pensions centrally and Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, were not properly co-ordinated and working together with Anglia Revenues Partnership and Waveney District Council. In recent months that has improved significantly. The lesson to be learned for the future is that the roll-out will be successful only if everyone works together. There is a vitally important role to be played by the voluntary sector, including Citizens Advice and the local organisations that are helping people into work.

A specific problem in Lowestoft, which has created particular difficulties, is the seasonal nature of employment. That is a problem that will be encountered in other coastal towns, as well as in rural areas where there is seasonal agricultural work. The situation has improved, but challenges remain with housing, which I will come on to in a minute, and particularly with the transition from employment and support allowance to universal credit. At present, no transitional provision is in place for customers moving from income support ESA.

7 pm

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

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

Peter Aldous: I have a constituent who was an ESA claimant. He was required to take part in a work capability assessment. His WCA was carried out, and it was decided that he no longer had limited capability for work and work-related activity. His ESA claim was thus disbursed. His appeal against that decision was successful, but as income-related ESA had been abolished and he had been required to transition to universal credit, he has found himself significantly worse off and facing serious hardship through no fault of his own and with no support to help him through a very challenging time.

Waveney District Council and Anglia Revenues Partnership have also identified the following ongoing concerns. First, universal credit payment delays and cash flow difficulties continue to be a problem for the council in respect of providing temporary accommodation. They urgently need a decision to be made to restore such administration back to councils so that it is treated in the same way as supported accommodation. Secondly, housing benefit recovery in universal credit remains a significant concern. Local authorities and the Local Government Association have proposed that housing benefit debt should be transferred to the Treasury to produce a better outcome for the public finances. Recovery from universal credit will be non-existent, thereby burdening councils with debt that they will not be able to recover.

Thirdly, although universal credit decisions appear to be improving, the housing element is often still being received only in the second or third monthly payment. This is a deterioration compared with national housing
benefit performance. Fourthly, the continuing lack of universal credit management information does not provide an insight to assist councils to manage customers’ and landlords’ expectations. Finally, there are no plans for universal credit to share data with councils about housing benefit cases migrating to universal credit. This is needed for local council tax support schemes, discretionary housing payments and supported accommodation claims.

A further issue that should be highlighted is the fact that since universal credit was rolled out in Lowestoft, the level of unemployment has increased. In May 2015, it was at a low of 2.5%. It stood at 3% when universal credit was introduced in May 2016, and it had risen to 5.1% in May 2017. Much of the increase is due to the fact that, under universal credit, a broader span of claimants are required to look for work than was the case under jobseeker’s allowance. However, this raises the question of whether universal credit is fulfilling one of its objectives—that of better preparing claimants for the workplace and making it easier for them to move into full-time employment. We need to look at that to ensure that it is being adequately addressed.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I sought the hon. Gentleman’s permission before asking him to give way. Does he understand, as many of us do, that the switchover to universal credit is proving very difficult? Does he agree that those who have physical and mental issues need a dedicated helpline to ensure that those vulnerable people do not feel overwhelmed and that they can understand the process of change? Many of them do not.

Peter Aldous: I am most grateful to the hon. Lady for that intervention. I will come to address the concerns that housing associations have mentioned to me. Her point is interesting in that jobcentres have in the past dealt with people who are not in work to get into employment, but now they are also dealing with people who are already in work, which is a major game change for jobcentres to deal with.

There is a concern that universal credit, the objective of which is to bring people closer to the workplace and to prepare them for work, may actually be doing the opposite. People need a secure and stable home life to be able to prepare and plan for regular work. That cannot happen if they are sleeping on the streets, sofa surfing or living in a hostel. Housing associations also face problems and are taking on more staff to liaise with tenants at an early stage to prevent rent arrears from increasing and to limit the serving of eviction notices. That is an added cost that they can ill afford, and they would prefer to be spending time and money on repairs and on building much-needed new homes.

The alternative payment arrangements are in place to help prevent such problems from arising, but in many cases they are not working properly and the process is taking too long. By the time decisions have been made to put in place such an arrangement, the landlords have invariably obtained court orders for possession. It is important to identify at an early stage where it is appropriate to make direct payments to landlords, and the jobcentre in Lowestoft has put in place arrangements to do that. Consideration should be given to changing the system of universal credit staff only communicating about an account with a tenant’s explicit consent. The feedback that I am receiving from both social and private landlords is that a change to allow the landlord to open communications and make a request for an alternative payment would be welcome and positive.

Although I understand that the Government wish to empower tenants to manage their own money, there is an argument that such empowerment involves choice. Tenants should therefore be able to decide whether to have the rent paid directly or for it to pass through their own hands. Again, the feedback I am receiving is that many tenants would prefer their rent to be paid direct.

There is a need for full and proactive engagement with private landlords. That did not happen initially, but the situation is now improving and a local meeting between the DWP Waveney District Council and private landlords is scheduled for 17 July to explore how best to address the problems. Hopefully my suggestions on alternative payments will be on the table for discussion.
The roll-out in Lowestoft has not gone well, but there are signs of improvement and examples of good practice that suggest it should be replicated if universal credit is rolled out in other areas. Lowestoft jobcentre has a vulnerable persons officer, and I propose that additional attention and support is given to those with mental health challenges. The jobcentre works closely with the citizens advice bureau, which provides a money advice service in the jobcentre. There is an officer who liaises with the national universal credit team in the building of the model, and there are good working relationships not only with Waveney District Council and Anglia Revenues Partnership but with MyGo, the new youth employment service promoted by Suffolk County Council. Such joint and collaborative working is very much the way forward and must be promoted and properly resourced.

Consideration should be given to the following. First, the Government should respond to the Public Accounts Committee’s most recent report on the impact of the changes and delays to the universal credit programme on operational costs, staff and claimants. They should also update the Committee on how staff are being enabled to engage in testing and learning processes and to feed back concerns. I appreciate that the general election purdah period has delayed that feedback, but it is important if the universal credit model is to be improved as the roll-out accelerates.

Secondly, there needs to be an initial assessment as to whether universal credit is achieving its objectives of better preparing people for the workplace, making it easier to move in and out of work and improving incentives to work. Thirdly, with the roll-out scheduled to move into more rural areas, work is needed to ensure that both digital services and broadband connectivity are resilient enough to cope and that the system takes account of claimants’ use of the public transport system, which may in places be far from ideal.

Finally, there needs to be more transparency and closer working with all the partner organisations involved in the roll-out. There is a lot of heavy lifting involved, and jobcentre staff cannot do this all on their own if we are to ensure that universal credit customers receive the fair and efficient service that they are entitled to expect and that, up to now, has unfortunately let down a lot of fair and efficient service that they are entitled to expect in the roll-out. There is a lot of heavy lifting involved, closer working with all the partner organisations involved which may in places be far from ideal.

One result of the roll-out of universal credit full service in my hon. Friend’s constituency earlier this year—he mentioned that—is that the claimant count is extended—it is broader—to cover a wider group of claimants than under the old jobseeker’s allowance benefit. This is part of universal credit’s design and ambition to encourage and support more people into work.

My hon. Friend has deep roots in the constituency and community he represents, and I am very aware that he works closely with the local authorities in his constituency to make sure the voice of East Anglia is always heard. I was very pleased to have the chance to visit Lowestoft jobcentre earlier this year—and I mentioned that—accompanied by the leaders of the Waveney and Great Yarmouth councils. I am also aware that he has made subsequent visits to the jobcentre, which I hope he also found useful. That visit was a great opportunity for me to see how we are delivering universal credit in his constituency and to hear at first hand some of the concerns people have had.

I also want to join my hon. Friend in expressing condolences following the death of Colin Law, the leader of Waveney District Council, in May. Councillor Law was a long-standing public servant who made a big contribution to the community he represented, as was manifested in the example my hon. Friend gave of his commitment even into his ill health. He will be missed manifest in the example my hon. Friend gave of his commitment even into his ill health. He will be missed.

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Given the ambition and scale of change that universal credit introduces, there are bound to be issues that arise as the service is rolled out. In particular, there are clearly concerns over the challenges some claimants face when managing a monthly budget for the first time,
but let me assure Members that the Department has already been making inroads on this issue and there are many good reasons to feel positive about the future.

I take the opportunity to highlight how universal credit helps people looking for work in my hon. Friend’s constituency. There is a high level of seasonal work in the Lowestoft area. Before the introduction of universal credit, many people could have been reluctant to take up short-term or irregular work because of the old 16-hour limit with some of the legacy benefits. Since the launch of universal credit, jobcentre staff have contacted the large local employers, leisure parks and holiday resorts, to help generate job opportunities for claimants.

We have run popular job fairs, attended by more than 1,700 claimants, promoting these openings. I know that my hon. Friend has had a lot of personal involvement in running job fairs, and other employability and opportunity events.

Universal credit claimants can now take up work, which may initially be just at the weekend and in school holidays, that builds up to extra hours as the season progresses. Claimants have the flexibility to take on extra hours without worrying about having to stop and then restart multiple benefit claims. Under universal credit, employers in Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth are able to offer extra work at short notice to a workforce that can make the most of those opportunities without the additional administrative burden.

Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth jobcentres were among the first to roll out the universal credit service to all claimant types, which has given us invaluable insight into what works and what we can do better. From my visits and from the correspondence that I have had with my hon. Friend and with the local authorities in his constituency it became clear that we needed to be better at gathering information and improving the speed and accuracy of payments to claimants. It was also clear that we needed to do a better job of speaking with landlords in both the private and social sector about the changes that universal credit would bring.

I am pleased to report that this valuable feedback has helped us introduce real improvements to the way we do things: we have removed delays and data verification that were causing some of the payments to go out late; and we have introduced a “Housing Confident” scheme to ensure that universal credit work coaches talk to claimants about housing and that work coaches are alert to the support that claimants might need. It is about properly understanding the claimant’s needs, and this can extend to providing budgeting advice or, when needed, arranging for direct payments to landlords.

We have made improvements to the service that we offer private and social landlords. Thanks to feedback from landlords, we have made improvements to the way we set up direct payments of rent to landlords with an easier to use application form. That means that we are getting those payments out to landlords more quickly. We are also exploring how we can make it easier for landlords to find out the status of the application for a direct payment and we will be making an announcement about that soon.

Universal credit also brings big improvements for private landlords whose tenants get into arrears. Under the old system, landlords would need to apply for recovery of arrears via a third party deduction, often at a low repayment rate, which could mean a long wait before landlords got back their rent. In universal credit, it is easier and quicker to set up an arrears payment for landlords. In addition, under universal credit, repayment for private landlords can be at a higher rate—up to 20% where claimants can afford it. That means that claimants can get on top of their finances and landlords can get the money they are owed more quickly.

These actions are having results. Our internal figures show that far more claimants are getting the right money on time. We aim to make this information public in the near future. I know that my hon. Friend has acknowledged these improvements in performance.

Jim Shannon: In my previous intervention, I suggested that perhaps a dedicated helpline would be one way of addressing the issues. The hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) responded by saying that some more frontline staff would also be of help. Would the Minister consider both of those suggestions?

Damian Hinds: In response to the points raised by my hon. Friend about the roll-out of universal credit in Lowestoft, I said that I would come on to some of the questions around our customers and claimants—people with particular needs and complex needs. The essential point is that, in jobcentres, our staff see the full range of society and of course we must have the wherewithal to help those people as best we can. That does involve being responsive to different types of people and their different needs. I am confident that our staff do that in the correct way, but can we learn more? Of course we can.

I do appreciate the concern that exists around rent arrears. It is an issue that matters to many people. We have had a chance to debate that matter in a recent Adjournment debate in this House. As I said at that time, there are many complex and overlapping factors at play, and the role of universal credit is by no means the sole factor contributing to rent arrears. Our research shows that the majority of universal credit claimants are comfortable managing their own budget. Furthermore, we know that, after four months, the proportion of universal credit claimants who were in arrears at the start of their claim fell by a third.

Let me reassure the House that there are safeguards in place for claimants. We can advance up to half of a universal credit payment at the start of the claim. Our work coaches talk to claimants about their financial situation and can also refer claimants for support to help them manage their budget.

If claimants do not want to talk about their finances face to face, our new “Money Manager” website, developed in co-operation with the Money Advice Service, gives claimants practical support and advice. There are a number of alternative payment arrangements available, which include paying rent costs directly to landlords but also making more frequent payments to claimants and splitting universal credit payments in cases of domestic abuse. Our research shows that over time, claimants successfully reduce their arrears.

I want to turn to a couple of the other specifics mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney. On emergency and temporary accommodation, we are aware that the transitory nature of universal credit temporary accommodation claims can cause problems to do with the timing of when people will be in temporary accommodation, the assessment period and when the payments are made. We also recognise that this has resulted
[Damian Hinds]

in some difficulties for local authorities and tenants in emergency or short-term accommodation. Our consultation on supported accommodation, which closed on 13 February, asked whether devolving shared accommodation to local authorities might also work as an approach for temporary accommodation. We are considering the responses to that consultation and the joint Select Committee on Communities and Local Government and Select Committee on Work and Pensions report, and we will work with colleagues across Government and in the devolved Administrations to set out further details of our plans as soon as we can.

On the question of claimants with complex needs, we make sure that our work coaches have the flexibility to shape support for individuals in difficult and different circumstances. Work coaches can adjust work search requirements to allow claimants to prioritise solutions to their issues, such as homelessness or addiction. We are also working with our partners to target resources most effectively. Hon. Members will be aware of the range of third-party services and partnership arrangements in place in a large number of jobcentres. We have also appointed vulnerable people officers in jobcentres to deal with claimants who face significant challenges. These officers work closely with the universal credit service centre to identify and resolve issues quickly.

The DWP’s response to the Public Accounts Committee’s report in February 2017 made a commitment to write to the Committee in spring 2017 to set out the impact of the changes to the programme on operational costs, staff and claimants. As a result of the general election, we will now send our response once the Committee has been reinstated. We also plan to publish a range of management information on universal credit later this year.

I recognise, of course, that there are areas for improvement in our service, but with every release of new software and every office that goes live with the full digital service, enhancements are made that improve the experience of using the service for staff, for claimants, for landlords and for our delivery partners. My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney has seen for himself the drive, commitment and passion that so many of our staff, stakeholders and people across the programme have. They want to see this revolutionary welfare reform through, and I am confident that they will.

Question put and agreed to.

7.28 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Wednesday 28 June 2017

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[MR Speaker in the Chair]

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that the private Members’ Bill ballot book is open in the No Lobby today until the rise of the House, when the ballot for 2017 to 2019 will close. The ballot draw will be held at 9 am tomorrow in Committee Room 10. I also remind Members that the ballot for the election of Deputy Speakers is taking place until 1.30 pm today in Committee Room 8. The result will be announced as soon as the count is complete.

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Belfast Agreement: Impartiality

1. Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to comply with the requirement for rigorous impartiality set out in the Belfast agreement.

[900001]

5. Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to comply with the requirement for rigorous impartiality set out in the Belfast agreement.

[900005]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): The Government remain steadfast in our commitment to the Belfast agreement and its successors. I say to her that the Government remain steadfast in their commitment to those agreements and we continue to work with all parties, as I have done over recent days and will continue to do, so that the Government act in the best interests of all parts of Northern Ireland and continue to listen to the concerns of all parts of the community.

Jeff Smith: Over the past few days, a lot has been made about the extra money for infrastructure spending. What assurances can the Secretary of State give that that extra funding will be spent across all communities in Northern Ireland, especially the rural communities in the west? What can he do to help make sure that that happens?

James Brokenshire: The additional funding that has been outlined is for an inclusive Executive to be able to utilise those funds in the best interests of Northern Ireland. That is the most powerful, effective way to deliver on that. That is why I have been using all my time, energy and efforts to see that the Executive are restored. That is absolutely the best way to ensure that the points that the hon. Gentleman rightly makes are seen.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): Is it not the case that in September 2015 there was a crisis in the institutions in Northern Ireland—long before any deal between the Conservative party and the DUP was struck? Is it not also the case that this particular crisis started long before any deal between the Conservative party and the DUP was struck?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend highlights the challenges that we have in seeing the Executive restored and the challenges that have emerged over the course of this year. He is right: it is so important that we focus on that task at hand and see that the time available is used so that the Executive are restored and perform in the best interests of Northern Ireland and all communities across Northern Ireland.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Surely the point is that, given the additional funding for Northern Ireland, the imperative will be on the Executive to reform and deliver for all people there, and to kick-start more private industry there to make the people of Northern Ireland less dependent on the state and to get better receipts back to the UK Treasury.

James Brokenshire: I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend, who makes such an important point about the real opportunity that there is for Northern Ireland. We want to see jobs, growth and prosperity—to see investment in infrastructure and that enterprise-driven economy. There is that opportunity here, and we as a Government want it to be seized and to see Northern Ireland continue to move forward.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I wish the Secretary of State well in his efforts in the coming days to restore the Executive to Northern Ireland. For our part, we are absolutely committed to getting the Executive up and running again. We did not collapse the Executive and we are not setting any red lines or preconditions for a reformation. Will he be assured that our focus is on
ensuring that money for infrastructure, health, education and the rest of it is spent equally and fairly across Northern Ireland, as has been our record in office over the past 10 years in the Northern Ireland Executive?

**James Brokenshire**: I very much welcome the right hon. Gentleman’s statement of his party’s determination to see an Executive restored and, equally, that funds made available are seen across the whole community. This is about infrastructure, including investment in the digital infrastructure that provides the mechanism for prosperity to continue to grow in Northern Ireland.

**Nigel Dodds**: On the issue of rigorous impartiality, of course we are committed to the agreements that we have entered into, as are Her Majesty’s Government. I particularly welcome the statement in the policy agreement that “the Conservative Party will never be neutral in expressing its support for the Union”, and that it “will never countenance any constitutional arrangements that are incompatible with the consent principle.”

We are united on the great principle that we want to strengthen the United Kingdom, and the Secretary of State will have our full support in measures to achieve that.

**James Brokenshire**: The right hon. Gentleman is right that we will never be neutral in our support for the Union. The Government are proud to take that approach. Equally, we uphold the principles of those agreements, particularly the principle of consent, which has underlined and underpinned the activities of Governments over so many years. It is about the rightful balance between support for the Union and, equally, upholding the principle of consent.

12. [900013] Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I have seen the troubles at first hand, so I know that the peace process has been integral to progress since then. I very much welcome the agreement with our friends in the Democratic Unionist party, but what more can the Government do to reassure all the people of Northern Ireland that the agreement will not jeopardise this process? That is the chief concern at the moment.

**James Brokenshire**: My hon. Friend makes a powerful and important point. This agreement underlines our steadfast commitment to the Belfast agreement and its successors. Indeed, I have been working with all major parties in the Executive in recent days to see the restoration of that Executive—one of the key bodies under the Good Friday agreement. That remains such an important outcome to achieve.

**Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is clear that other parties in Northern Ireland have serious concerns about the Good Friday agreement as a result of the deal that the UK Government have done with the DUP. What guarantees can the Secretary of State offer that the confidence and supply agreement does not threaten the impartiality of the UK Government? What assurances can he give us that the Prime Minister’s reliance on DUP votes to remain in power does not compromise his position? Finally, given the sword of Damocles clause—offering support on a case-by-case basis—how can any of us be sure that the UK Government will not be compromised when it suits the DUP?

**James Brokenshire**: The agreement relates to what happens here at Westminster. I am not part of those discussions or the envisaged committee, but there are important reasons for the role I play in Northern Ireland. The hon. Lady makes various assertions and characterisations. It is worth underlining that I have been working closely with the Irish Government in recent days as part of the restoration of the Executive, and they noted in their response that they welcomed the British Government’s commitment to “govern in the interests of all parts of the community in Northern Ireland.”

That principle will guide our actions.

**Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Notwithstanding the commitment to parity in the Good Friday agreement, does my right hon. Friend agree that the military covenant needs to be applied throughout the country, regardless of where servicemen and women live?

**James Brokenshire**: I do uphold the military covenant. The Conservative party has made great strides in rolling it out across the UK, and the Government remain committed to that. We will work with the Executive and all the parties so that the benefit of the military covenant is felt in all parts of the UK.

**Owen Smith** (Pontypridd) (Lab): May I begin by paying tribute to Northern Ireland Members from all parties who lost their seats at the election? I pay particular tribute to Mark Durkan, who served this Parliament and Northern Irish politics with such distinction for so long. I also welcome all new Members from Northern Ireland to the House.

I do not doubt for a minute the good faith of the Secretary of State, and I wish him well in trying to bring about the power-sharing Executive, but he must acknowledge that his desire to look impartial has been compromised by the arrangements with the DUP. I would like to know what advice he gave the Prime Minister. Did he tell her that she was making his life that much harder?

**James Brokenshire**: May I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place? I know the role that he has played previously in Northern Ireland, and I welcome his experience on to the Labour Front Bench. I join him in recognising those who served previously in the House. I pay tribute to his predecessor, Dave Anderson, for the very constructive approach that he took. I would also like to recognise my colleague Kris Hopkins, who, as my Minister, played an extraordinary role. I also recognise my colleague Lord Dunlop. The hon. Gentleman makes the point about Mark Durkan—another colleague who has served in the House—and it is notable that Mark Durkan is reported as saying that there is nothing in the Good Friday agreement that prevents agreements between parties in Northern Ireland and the Government of the Republic of Ireland or the UK Government. It is the principles of those agreements
that we continue to uphold in the actions that we take, and we see nothing inconsistent with the agreement that was reached this week in terms of our actions and the role that we play in Northern Ireland.

Owen Smith: I acknowledge all the points the Secretary of State has just made, but he knows from his experience and mine that trust is absolutely vital in Northern Ireland, and there is a danger that that trust between parties and in the Governments will be eroded over time if one party is seen as having the ear of the Government. Transparency is the key to avoiding that, so can he commit that, in addition to being transparent in the initial agreement, all subsequent agreements and all the minutes of the DUP-Tory co-ordination committee will be published so we know exactly what is going on?

James Brokenshire: This issue of impartiality, and the principle of working across all communities and with fairness to all communities, is one that we steadfastly uphold. That is why I will continue to work and engage with all parties and, indeed, community groups and sectors across Northern Ireland in the role that I uphold. I think the hon. Gentleman has seen from the actions that we have taken in publishing the confidence and supply agreement and the financial statement that sits alongside it that that transparency has been provided.

Power Sharing

2. Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): What progress has been made on discussions on power sharing in Northern Ireland.

10. Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): What progress has been made on power-sharing arrangements in Northern Ireland.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): The overriding priority for the UK Government in Northern Ireland remains the restoration of devolved power-sharing government in Stormont. The UK Government are working with the main Northern Ireland parties and, in accordance with the well-established three-stranded approach, the Irish Government to restore a fully functioning inclusive Executive and Assembly. But time is short. I would urge all concerned to use the narrow window that remains to look beyond their differences and to see that an Executive is formed.

Mr Wragg: Like many Members, I have been assisting constituents who are former members of Her Majesty’s armed forces and who served in Northern Ireland with distinction during the troubles. Will my right hon. Friend tell the House the extent to which disagreement over reforming the unfair legacy case process is a sticking point in restoring power sharing?

James Brokenshire: I think that there is a growing consensus that the next stage needs to be the publication of a consultation around the Stormont House agreement bodies, which are founded on the principle of fairness and proportionality, and it is that that has come through from the discussions that we have had.

Victoria Prentis: Does my right hon. Friend agree that any return to direct rule in Northern Ireland would be a huge backward step and that devolution is really the only good way forward?

James Brokenshire: I do agree with the comments of my hon. Friend. An Executive—an inclusive Executive—acting in the best interests of Northern Ireland is profoundly what Northern Ireland needs and what the people voted for, and that is where our focus must lie.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): The Secretary of State will be aware that the armed forces covenant has been the subject of talks in Northern Ireland because of the lack of full implementation. Does he agree that the party blocking that implementation talks a lot about rights and respect? It needs to do the right thing and stop being a barrier to the support that the veterans in Northern Ireland need.

James Brokenshire: May I welcome the hon. Lady to her position? I am sure that the experience she has—over legacy, and over so many parts of Northern Ireland—will enrich the debate in the House.

We obviously stand by our commitments in relation to the military covenant—wanting to see that felt in all parts of the UK—and we look forward to working with all parties and all communities across Northern Ireland and the UK to see that that happens.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): Will the Secretary of State confirm that the vast majority of the public in Northern Ireland are very interested to see who actually pays and funds the political parties in Northern Ireland? As part of his ongoing discussions, will he therefore have the courage of his convictions and make sure that there is an end to the anonymity of political donations in Northern Ireland?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for making that point, which she has made on a number of occasions in the House. I think she will have seen the commitment in my party’s manifesto over the transparency of political donations. I look forward to moving ahead and seeing that that is actually implemented.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend ensure that the disgraceful treatment of my constituent, Major Dennis Hutchings, and other ex-service personnel will continue to be an important element of his discussions?

James Brokenshire: I recognise the way in which my hon. Friend has championed the cause of her constituent. I know she will appreciate that there are legal proceedings outstanding that mean that I cannot comment in detail, but I hope she appreciates the Government’s desire to see fair, balanced and proportionate mechanisms put in place for dealing with the issues of the past.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): May I associate myself with the generous comments the Secretary of State made about Kris Hopkins, who is a good and decent man? I welcome the Under-Secretary, the hon. Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), my seventh opponent, to the Government Dispatch Box. Unlike all her predecessors, she lacks a little close combat experience, except, of course, from her time in the Whips Office.

We all hope that there is a re-establishment of the Executive tomorrow, but should that not happen, Ministers must obviously be undertaking some contingency planning. What structures would they like to see in place to ensure impartiality in the disbursement of the additional money?
James Brokenshire: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind comments about Kris Hopkins, who served in the House with distinction, including in the role that he played in the Northern Ireland Office.

I hope the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that our focus is on seeing that an Executive is restored. I have endeavoured to be in touch straight away with all the Northern Ireland MPs and those in the House with an interest. We must be vigilant, as I said earlier, and I look forward to further detail from the House with distinction, including in the role that he served in the security situation in Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful. Mr Ranil Jayawardena.

Security Situation

3. Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the security situation in Northern Ireland. [900003]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chloe Smith): The terrorist threat level in Northern Ireland remains unchanged at “severe”—namely, an attack is highly likely. The need for vigilance remains, and I pay tribute to the brave men and women who work to keep communities safe. They will always have this Government’s fullest support.

Mr Jayawardena: Last December, the Secretary of State assured me in the Chamber that he would be unswerving and unstinting in underlining the huge contribution of our armed forces, so will the Minister join me in welcoming the commitment in our manifesto that the bodies envisaged in the Stormont House agreement will be fair, balanced and proportionate to former soldiers?

Chloe Smith: Yes, I do reiterate that commitment in our manifesto. We continue to focus on implementing the Stormont House agreement and creating new bodies that will be fair, balanced and proportionate. The next phase, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has outlined, is to consult publicly on the detail of those bodies’ workings.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): As the Member of Parliament in the west of the Province who takes his seat, may I ask the Minister whether she is aware of the fact that security has been getting worse in the west of Northern Ireland, particularly the north-west? Will she review the problems associated with the bomb disposal team in getting them to the places where problems have occurred?

Chloe Smith: I welcome the hon. Gentleman’s experience in this area and would be more than delighted to meet him to hear more about his specific concerns. As a new Minister, I have endeavoured to be in touch straight away with all the Northern Ireland MPs and those in the House with an interest. We must be vigilant, as I said earlier, and I look forward to further detail from him.

Mr Speaker: There is far too much noise and too many private conversations taking place in the Chamber. There has been extensive interest in all parts of the House in Northern Ireland in recent weeks; there ought to be interest in these matters being treated of in the Chamber today.

Chloe Smith: The short answer is yes. Both I and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will endeavour to ensure that security is at the forefront of all that we do.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Minister will know that many terrorists have been brought back to Northern Ireland to face justice under the European arrest warrant. Will she commit today from the Dispatch Box that this Government will keep that arrest warrant post-Brexit?

Chloe Smith: The right hon. Gentleman will know that all such matters are for negotiation and are in the hands of my right hon. Friend the Brexit Secretary. We enjoy strong working relationships with our counterparts in the Irish Government. We intend to continue that, in the service of all the communities of Northern Ireland.

Leaving the EU: Free Movement of People

4. Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the implications of exiting the EU for the free movement of people between Northern Ireland and the (a) Republic of Ireland and (b) rest of the UK. [900004]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): The Government want to protect the ability to move freely between the UK and Ireland, which is an essential part of economic integration and daily community life. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister confirmed in this House last November, there will be no change, alteration or impediment to movement within the UK.

Stuart C. McDonald: The simplest way to ensure that free movement continues unimpeded across these islands is to accept that there will in reality be no increased border checks or in-country controls on EU nationals after Brexit—any controls occurring in-country. That is what the Home Secretary has previously suggested. Will the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland confirm that remains the Government’s thinking?

James Brokenshire: We want to maintain the common travel area, which has served us so well over so many decades. Equally, we want to work with the Irish Government to ensure that the external border is upheld and strengthened. That remains our focus.

Leaving the EU: Border

6. Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure that there is no hard border with the Republic of Ireland after the UK leaves the EU. [900006]
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chloe Smith): My right hon. Friend made clear in her letter to Donald Tusk that we want to avoid a return to a hard border—nobody wishes to return to the border of the old days—and to maintain the common travel area. That desire is shared with the Republic of Ireland and the European Union, and we shall work tirelessly to achieve it.

Gareth Johnson: Northern Ireland is as much part of the United Kingdom as Dartford, but does the Minister agree that, given Northern Ireland’s unique situation, it is essential that there is a frictionless border between it and the Republic, without ever compromising the security of the whole of the United Kingdom?

Chloe Smith: Yes, I do agree. We all want to see people and goods moving as freely as possible across the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, in the service of a strong economy for those who need it.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Mindful of the worryingly high levels of radicalisation of people in the Republic of Ireland, what assurances can the Minister give DUP Members that the soft border that is important for trade will not become an unsafe border in terms of security?

Chloe Smith: I value the strong working relationship between this country and the Republic of Ireland, which will allow us to focus on the issue raised by the hon. Gentleman. We need to preserve the common travel area and to maintain tariff-free trade with Europe.

Mr Speaker: The Minister has never been more popular.

Economic Development

7. Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): What recent progress has been made on developing Northern Ireland’s economy.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chloe Smith): The fundamentals of the Northern Ireland economy are strong, with growth last year at 1.6%. Unemployment has fallen and employment has risen, but there is much more we must do.

Jeremy Quin: I welcome the additional investment in Northern Ireland’s economy, to address structural weaknesses. May I urge the Government to reinforce their efforts to secure private sector and foreign direct investment?

Chloe Smith: I assure my hon. Friend that we will continue to do that, using our relationships across the globe. It is clear that, despite the progress made in recent years, special circumstances still apply to Northern Ireland. We want a strong economy for all communities there.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The industrial strategy and the national shipbuilding strategy give two key opportunities for the Minister and this Government to assist in building and growing the Northern Ireland economy. Will she facilitate discussions with us and Ministry of Defence colleagues so that we can advance those golden opportunities for our Province?

Chloe Smith: I will be happy to do so.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): Under the terms of the Azores agreement and legislation passed through this House, only a devolved Administration can use their powers to reduce corporation tax, which would have an overwhelming beneficial impact on every citizen in Northern Ireland. Can the Minister guarantee that that will be raised in the talks over the next two days?

Chloe Smith: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will do everything he can to ensure that those talks come to a successful conclusion. The point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson) simply underlines the need to make the reaching of that agreement a priority.

Confidence and Supply Agreement

8. Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect on the peace process of an agreement on confidence and supply between the Government and the Democratic Unionist party.

9. Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect on the peace process of an agreement on confidence and supply between the Government and the Democratic Unionist party.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): This agreement provides stability at a vital time for our country and is in the interests of all of the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland. It in no way changes the UK Government’s commitment to the Belfast agreement and its successors.

Alison Thewliss: We are now in the slightly odd position that each DUP Member is worth more than Ronaldo: I do not know what that says about their footballing skills. Does the Secretary of State agree with Jonathan Powell that it is now impossible for the UK Government to be even-handed in Northern Ireland?

James Brokenshire: No, I do not.

Patricia Gibson: Can the Secretary of State not see that the UK Government’s credibility with the other constituent parts of the United Kingdom has been destroyed following the £1.5 billion bribe for Northern Ireland, subverting the Barnett rules, as the price of staying in office?

James Brokenshire: No, I cannot.

14. Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): Will the Minister join me in welcoming the Government’s commitment to use our high commissions and embassies to promote Northern Ireland as a place to do business, to ensure that Northern Ireland is fully included in any UK-wide initiative to boost exports and prosperity?

James Brokenshire: I strongly support the point that my hon. Friend makes. Northern Ireland is a great place to do business and as a Government we will continue to support that in all ways that we can—and in all other parts of the UK.
The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [900051] Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 28 June.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): The House will be aware that today the Crown Prosecution Service announced charging decisions in relation to Hillsborough. I know from working closely with the families when I was Home Secretary that this will be a day of mixed emotions for them. The House will understand that I cannot say anything further on matters that are now subject to criminal prosecution.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I will have further such meetings later today.

Mrs Murray: Over the past months I have had swastikas carved into posters; social media posts such as “Burn the witch” and “Stab the c***”; people putting Labour party posters on my home, photographing them and pushing them through my letterbox; and even someone urinating on my office door—hardly kind, gentler politics. Can my right hon. Friend suggest what can be done to stop such intimidation, which may well put off good people from serving in this place?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue and she was not the only person to experience such intimidation during the election campaign. This sort of intimidation was experienced—I am sorry to say—by female candidates in particular. I believe that such behaviour has no place in our democracy. She is right: it could put good people off serving in this House. We want more people to become engaged and to want to stand for election to this House. As I stand here and see the plaque dedicated to the late Jo Cox, I think we should all remember what Jo said, that “we are far more united and have far more in common”—[Official Report, 3 June 2015, Vol. 596, c. 675.]

—-with each other than the things that divide us.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I welcome the announcement by the Crown Prosecution Service this morning that it will prosecute six people in relation to Hillsborough. The prosecution, the inquiry and this development happened only because of the incredible work done by the Hillsborough Justice Campaign, Andy Burnham, Steve Rotheram and other colleagues. We should pay tribute to all those who spent a great deal of time trying to ensure justice for those who died at Hillsborough.

Seventy-nine people died in Grenfell Tower. Our thoughts are with the families and friends of those who have died, those still unaccounted for and those who will live with the trauma of this horrific and utterly avoidable tragedy for the rest of their lives. Last Thursday, the Prime Minister said she expected to appoint a judge to chair the inquiry within the next few days. We have not had any further news on that. Will she now update the House on when an appointment will be made, and what will be the timetable for the inquiry?

The Prime Minister: There have been many years of waiting for the Hillsborough families and the different groups who came together, not just the Hillsborough Justice Campaign. The work done by Margaret Aspinall and others has been absolutely exemplary. As I said, today will be a day of really mixed emotions for them, but we all welcome the fact that charging decisions have been taken. That is an important step forward.

The right hon. Gentleman asked me for an update on Grenfell Tower. If I may, Mr Speaker, I would like to update the House on a number of aspects. We all know what an unimaginable tragedy this was, and our thoughts will continue to be with all those affected by it. As of this morning, the cladding from 120 tower blocks across the country, in 37 local authority areas, has been tested and has failed the combustibility test. Given the 100% failure rate, we are very clear with local authorities and housing associations that they should not wait for test results; they should get on with the job of the fire safety checks—indeed, they are doing that—and take any action necessary. The Government will support them in doing that. The Communities Secretary has set up an independent expert advisory panel to advise on the measures that need to be taken. The panel is meeting this week.

On the housing offer, 282 good quality temporary properties have been identified, 132 families have had their needs assessed and 65 offers of temporary accommodation have already been made to families. The payments from the discretionary fund we have made available continue. As of this morning, nearly £1.25 million of payments have been made. In addition, we are giving an extra £1 million to the local consortia of charities, trusts and foundations that have been doing such important work.

On the public inquiry, I expect us to be able to name a judge soon. As the right hon. Gentleman will know, the process is that the Lord Chief Justice recommends the name of a judge. We want to ensure that, as the process goes forward for that inquiry, the survivors and the families concerned are involved. That is the work we are currently doing.

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank the Prime Minister for that answer, but I hope she is able to stick to her promise of everyone being rehoused within three weeks. At the moment, it does not look anything like that target will be achieved. I hope she understands the fear that so many people have living in tower blocks at the present time all around the country. In 2014, the all-party fire and safety group wrote to the Department for Communities and Local Government, warning:

“Today’s buildings have a much higher content of readily available combustible material”.

There have been contradictory messages from the Government. Can the Prime Minister give a categorical answer: is cladding with a combustible core, such as polyethylene, legal for use on high-rise buildings, and was the cladding on Grenfell Tower legal?

The Prime Minister: The building regulations identified the cladding that is compatible with the building regulations and that which is non-compliant. My understanding is that this cladding was not compliant with the building regulations. This raises wider issues, as the House will recognise. It is important that we are careful in how we
talk about this. A criminal investigation is taking place, and it is important that we allow the police to conduct that criminal investigation and to take the decisions they need to take.

There is a much wider issue here, as we have seen from the number of buildings where the cladding, from the samples already sent in by local authorities and housing associations, has failed the combustibility test. This is a much wider issue, with cladding having been put into buildings for decades. There are real questions as to how this has happened, why it has happened, and how we can ensure it does not happen in future. That is why I am clear that in addition to the inquiry that needs to identify the specific issues for Grenfell Tower—what happened in relation to Grenfell Tower and who was responsible—we will also need to look much more widely at why it is that over decades, under different Governments and under different councils, material has been put up on tower blocks that is non-compliant with the building regulations. There is a very wide issue here. We need to make sure we get to the bottom of it and that is what we are going to do.

Jeremy Corbyn: Last Thursday the Prime Minister told my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central ( Hilary Benn) that she would make the results of the Grenfell Tower cladding testing public within 48 hours, and I am not sure she has actually done that with her statement today. As of yesterday—the Prime Minister has just confirmed this—120 high-rise blocks across Britain have had fire safety tests and failed them. What timetable has the Prime Minister set for such tests to be completed, including on schools and hospitals, in every part of the country? What plans does she have to compel the testing of high rise buildings such as private sector office blocks and hotels, which may also have combustible cladding material on them?

The Prime Minister: What I said last week in the statement is that my understanding is that the police were going to make a statement about the cladding material within 48 hours, and I think the police then did make a statement about the position. In relation to the tests, my message is a very simple one. As I said in my answer to the right hon. Gentleman’s first question, what we are saying to people is that this is not a question of waiting for the tests: do not wait until you have a sample in and you know the result of the test; so far, 100% of the samples that have come in have proved to be combustible, so work on the assumption that you should be doing the fire safety checks now. That is what we are telling people to do. We know that parts of the private sector are also doing their work on fire safety checks, but my response to all those who have buildings that are covered by this is: do the fire safety checks with the fire service, take any measures that are necessary to ensure fire safety and the Government will support you in doing that.

Jeremy Corbyn: Since 2010, only a third of new schools have had sprinkler systems installed, so parents are rightly concerned about the safety of their children. In 2013, the Lakanal House coroner’s letter formally recommended that the Government encourage providers of housing and high-rise residential buildings to consider retrofitting sprinklers. Two years later, Inside Housing reported that only 1% of council tower blocks had sprinklers fitted. Can the Prime Minister let us know what the Government actually did to encourage retrofitting during the past four years?

The Prime Minister: The Government did indeed ensure that those local authorities were aware of the recommendation that came from the coroner and they did act on that recommendation. However, if we look at what has happened and the identification of the issues in a number of tower blocks so far, there are various issues that lead to concern about fire safety. If we look at what has happened in Camden, for example, where one of the five blocks was considered to be habitable but four were not, that was not just because of the cladding; it was because of other issues, in relation, for example, to the gas riser.

All these issues raise wider questions about the inspections that have taken place and about residents’ complaints and residents’ voices not being heard. That is an issue that has been raised at Grenfell Tower and it has also been raised in Camden. This is a much wider question. A terrible tragedy took place. People lost their lives who should never have lost their lives. We need to look at what has happened over decades in this country that has led to this position, and that is exactly what we will do.

Jeremy Corbyn: There have been two coroner’s reports. Building regulations have not been overhauled and local authorities, while asked to act on them, have had their budgets cut by 40% during the same period. Under the Prime Minister’s predecessor, fire safety audits and inspections were cut by a quarter and fire authority budgets were cut by a quarter. Can the Prime Minister give an assurance to the House that the further 20% cuts to the fire service planned by 2020 will now be halted?

The Prime Minister: I think that, in his reference to the building regulations, the right hon. Gentleman missed part of the point. It is not just a question of what laws we have; it is a question of how they are being applied. That is the issue. We have building regulations about compliant materials. The question is, why, despite that, have we seen, in local authority area after local authority area, materials being put up that appear not to comply with those building regulations? That is what we need to get to the bottom of. Why is it that fire inspections and local authority inspections appear to have missed that essential issue?

Jeremy Corbyn: I think I can help the Prime Minister with that issue. When you cut local authority expenditure by 40%, you end up with fewer building control inspectors. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. It is pretty bad when people shout. For someone sitting right by the Speaker’s Chair to shout displays, let us say, a lack of wisdom, which should not be repeated. [Interruption.] Order. Every Member in the Chamber must and will be heard, however long the session has to run.

Jeremy Corbyn: I was simply making the point—which seems to have upset a lot of Conservative Members—that when you cut local authority budgets by 40%, we all pay a price in public safety. Fewer inspectors—fewer building
control inspectors and fewer planning inspectors—and we all pay a price. Moreover, those cuts in the fire service have meant that there are 11,000 fewer firefighters, and the public sector pay cap is hitting recruitment and retention throughout the public sector.

What the tragedy of Grenfell Tower has exposed are the disastrous effects of austerity, a disregard for working-class communities, and the terrible consequences of deregulation and cutting corners. I urge the Prime Minister to come up with the resources that are needed to test and remove cladding, retrofit sprinklers, and properly fund the fire service and police so that all our communities can truly feel safe in their own homes. This disaster must be a wake-up call.

The Prime Minister: The cladding of tower blocks did not start under this Government. It did not start under the previous coalition Government. The cladding of tower blocks began under the Blair Government.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about local authority resources, and about changes in regulation. In 2005, it was a Labour Government who introduced the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order, which transferred the requirement to inspect a building on fire safety grounds from the local fire authority, which was usually the fire brigade, to a “responsible person”. The legislation governing fire safety in tower blocks—and this was commented on in the report on the Lakanal House fire—criticised that this did not start under this Government. It did not start under the previous coalition Government. The cladding of tower blocks began under the Blair Government.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Prime Minister’s answer must be heard, and it will be.

The Prime Minister: Laws that took effect in 2006 ended the practice of routine fire service inspections, passing the responsibility to councils. That is why I say to the right hon. Gentleman that we should recognise, across the House, that this is a matter that has been developing over decades, and has occurred under Governments of both colours and councils of all political persuasions. I hope we will say that we should come together and ensure that we get to the answers to the questions about why this has happened over many years, what has gone wrong, and how we can stop it happening in the future.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Understandably, on this most solemn and sensitive of matters, the Front-Bench exchanges have, perhaps inevitably and perhaps rightly, been very comprehensive. I am now keen that all Back Benchers scheduled to take part should have the opportunity to do so.

Q2. [900052] Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): Businesses in my constituency share the Prime Minister’s desire to provide certainty for trade arrangements in the years immediately following our exit from the EU. Can she confirm that any transitional arrangements will be for a strictly limited period and that any suggestion of ever-retreating deadlines or a perpetual status quo would fall short of honouring the decision made by the people of this country to leave the EU?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. For very practical reasons, when we know what the future relationship will be, we may need implementation periods—we made that point in our article 50 letter—to ensure that the practical arrangements can be put in place for that new relationship. But I am very clear that this does not mean an unlimited transitional phase. We are going to leave the European Union. That is what people wanted and that is what we will deliver.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I welcome the announcement of the prosecutions on Hillsborough, and I congratulate the families and all those involved in the many years of campaigning to achieve justice.

The Scottish Secretary insisted that Scotland would see increased funding if the Democratic Unionist party secured money for Northern Ireland as part of a confidence and supply deal. He insisted:

“I’m not going to agree to anything that could be construed as back-door funding to Northern Ireland.”

Did the Prime Minister receive any representations from her Scottish Secretary about the DUP deal, either before or after it was signed?

The Prime Minister: When we look at what has happened in terms of funding for the rest of the United Kingdom, we see that in the autumn statement last year, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor set aside an infrastructure fund of £23 billion. We are putting more money into our NHS and more money into our schools. And of course there is an impact on Scotland as a result of that autumn statement: £800 million extra spending is going to Scotland and, as a result of the Budget, £350 million extra is going to Scotland. I do not remember, when that money for Scotland was announced, the hon. Gentleman complaining that more money should be going to Northern Ireland—but then of course, he is a nationalist and not a Unionist.

Ian Blackford: The Prime Minister’s failure to give a straight answer to that question speaks volumes—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Let’s hear the fellow!

Ian Blackford: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The Prime Minister’s failure to give a straight answer to that question speaks volumes and has succeeded only in piling more pressure on the Scottish Secretary, whose position now looks less secure with every day that passes—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman’s question—I think he is reaching his peroration—must be heard.

Ian Blackford: I will give the Prime Minister one more opportunity: did she receive any representations about the DUP deal from the Secretary of State for Scotland—yes or no?

The Prime Minister: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that I regularly receive representations from the Secretary of State for Scotland about matters relating to Scotland, including regular representations pointing out that if
the Scottish nationalists actually had the interests of Scotland at heart, they would want to remain part of the United Kingdom.

Q9. [900059] Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Given that rail passengers in my constituency are once again facing rail misery with an overtime ban and strike action looming, does the Prime Minister agree that the only way to end the 18 months of rail misery for my constituents and for all passengers on Southern rail is for the unions to stop their strike and get back round the table to resolve this once and for all?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Southern rail passengers have been experiencing unacceptable delays and disruption to their service. An expert report has found that the main cause of widespread disruption was union action, so I say, “For the sake of the passengers, get around the table and solve this dispute.”

Q3. [900053] Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): May I thank the Prime Minister for coming to my constituency during the general election campaign and for making her widely welcomed U-turn on the dementia tax? May I invite her back to Wrexham to make another announcement, reversing her appalling cuts to police budgets, which my constituents want to see the back of?

The Prime Minister: We are protecting police budgets—[Interruption.] Yes. But we are of course making reforms to policing. That is why I introduced the National Crime Agency to deal with serious and organised crime, which actually relates to crime on the streets. That is why we have put money into a new national cybercrime unit to ensure that the police can deal with the new sorts of crimes they are having to deal with. Yes, we are reforming policing, but the key thing is not the number of police on the streets; the key thing is what happens to crime, and crime has fallen to a record low.

Q12. [900062] Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The Grenfell Tower tragedy shocked so many of us because we all believe that there is much that should never have happened. However, to claim ahead of any inquiry, as an Opposition Front Bencher did, that residents were “murdered” by politicians is grotesquely inappropriate. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that our Government will get on with helping to rebuild lives and homes and with progressing critical inquiries with urgency and, above all, non-partisan calm?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. What all of those affected by Grenfell Tower deserve is an inquiry that gets to the truth and provides them with the truth and with the knowledge of who was responsible. We need to do that in a careful, calm and determined way. We also need to use that same calm determination to ensure that we get to the bottom of the wider issue of why materials that have been used in tower blocks around the country appear to be non-compliant with the building regulations. There are real issues here. We are not going to get to the truth by pointing fingers, but we will by calm determination.

Q4. [900054] Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): On the deal that the Prime Minister has done with the DUP, is it true that, on the one hand, she is shelling out all this extra money to secure its support while, on the other hand, she is still giving it taxpayers’ cash in the form of Short money to be in opposition? Is that what we get from this Prime Minister: no pay rise for the nurses, but a double bubble for her friends in the DUP?

The Prime Minister: Let us be clear about what the Government have done in the agreement with the Democratic Unionist party. As a result of the election, no party had a majority in this House—[Interruption.] Yes. The party with the largest number of seats and the only party that can form an effective Government is the Conservative party. That is the right thing to do, and that is what we have done.

Q13. [900063] Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Does the Prime Minister share my concern that 50,000 people were stopped at the controls in Calais last year? That is 150 people every single day, which underlines the fact that we should keep the controls in place. Will she consider the case for investing more in state-of-the-art technology and in more border officers, so that we can win the war against the people traffickers and keep our borders safe and secure?

The Prime Minister: Our Border Force officers are doing an excellent job at the juxtaposed controls and the work they do in his constituency, in particular the work to stop illegal immigrants and human traffickers. We have been investing in the system capabilities, with £108 million invested in new technology in the past two years and with a further £71 million earmarked for that in this current financial year. Of course, there are particular pressures on Dover, which is why we have also invested more money to maintain security there and to ensure that the Calais camp remains closed. We are also making efforts upstream to ensure that we reduce the number of people who are trying to get to the United Kingdom illegally. The Department for International Development is now putting extra focus on the central Mediterranean route, and, as I announced last week, an extra £75 million is going towards humanitarian support there.

Q5. [900059] Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): I know the Prime Minister is well aware of the misery and suffering caused by reckless gambling. Following her own recent experience and the turmoil it has caused to her friends and colleagues, will she now commit to legislating on fixed odds betting terminals, the cause of so much hardship across our communities?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Lady knows, a consultation was undertaken on that particular issue, which the Department for Culture, Media and Sport is considering. It will announce a response in due course.

Suella Fernandes ( Fareham) (Con): In Fareham 63% of voters chose the Conservatives, a share of the vote not seen since 1935. Will my right hon. Friend join me in reminding the Chamber that this side won the election and the other side lost? Will she join me in thanking the good people of Fareham for placing their trust in the Conservatives and reassuring them that she is the best person to deliver a prosperity-led and successful Brexit?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in thanking the good people of Fareham for re-electing a first-class Member of Parliament to this
House to represent them. She is absolutely right, of course, that it was the Conservative party that got the highest percentage share of votes in this election, the Conservative party that got the most seats—56 more seats than the Labour party—and the Conservative party that got more votes. That is why we are an effective Government.

Q6. [900056] Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister confirm that, last week, Britain's four most senior police officers—the commissioner of the Met and the heads of counter-terrorism, the National Crime Agency and the National Police Chiefs Council—all wrote to the Government saying that the counter-terrorism policing and protective security grant is being cut by 7.2%? Does that not show, contrary to what she just told my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas), that her promise to protect police budgets is not being kept?

The Prime Minister: No. As I said earlier, we have protected counter-terrorism policing. We have also put money into an uplift in armed policing. The commissioner of the Metropolitan police has made the point that the Metropolitan police are well resourced and has a wide diversity of tools that it can use in countering terrorism. That is the point. It is not just about the funding; it is about ensuring they have the powers they need to deal with the terrorists—that is what we are determined to ensure.

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): As the Member for Aldershot, the home of the British Army, I was deeply alarmed to hear of the Leader of the Opposition's reported announcement at the Glastonbury festival that, if in power, he would abandon Trident and utterly undermine the security and safety of our country. Does my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister agree that it is only her Government and the Conservative party that can provide the safety and security that our great country needs?

The Prime Minister: First, I welcome my hon. Friend to his place in this House. I am sure that he is going to be, as was his predecessor, a fine representative of the people of the Aldershot constituency. I join him in saying that I think people were shocked to hear that the Leader of the Opposition, who appears to support Trident in public, in private said that he wanted to scrap it. Only the Conservative party is clear about retaining our nuclear deterrent. In the case of the Leader of the Opposition, it appears that he says one thing to the many and another thing to the few.

Q7. [900057] Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The brave men and women in our emergency services have consistently put the safety of others first, especially in response to the terrible events we have seen in recent months. We all pay tribute to their professionalism, which is why I believe it is important that we give them all the resources they need to do their vital job. It is outrageous that in Scotland the police and fire services are required to pay VAT, which has cost front-line services £35 million—

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Cleverly, you are usually the embodiment of calm repose and potential statesmanship—take some sort of tablet, man! Mrs Fellows must be heard.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I shall repeat what I said. It is outrageous that our police and fire services should pay VAT, when that has cost the front-line services £35 million last year alone. Now that the Prime Minister has found the magic money tree, will she extend the VAT exemption to Police Scotland and the Scottish Fire and—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. We have got the gist of it.

The Prime Minister: When the Scottish Government took the decision to merge Scottish police forces into a single force, Police Scotland, they were told that it would lead to VAT being paid by Police Scotland. They were advised that that was the position and they chose to go ahead with the merger.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): Today is the festival saint’s day of St Alban, and his pilgrimage was celebrated on Saturday. What more can be done to protect all persons of faith who are being persecuted for their faith, particularly our students on campuses who are suffering large amounts of anti-Semitism?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to recognise St Alban’s day, as my hon. Friend has. She is absolutely right that this is important. Sometimes we talk a lot about people who are being persecuted for their faith in countries abroad, but actually we need to be very clear that, sadly,
we do see people here suffering attacks, particularly anti-Semitic ones, on campuses. The Community Security Trust does a lot of work with students to provide support, and I am happy that the Government are supporting them. We are also supporting Muslim communities that are suffering from Islamophobia. There is no place for such hate in our society, and we must all work to stamp it out.

Q10. [900060] Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): The current Prime Minister recently visited my constituency. Upon being asked about the precarious situation facing both Dewsbury and District hospital and Huddersfield royal infirmary, she stated that people were “scaremongering”. Will she therefore use this opportunity today to reassure my constituents that all services will be retained at both hospitals, including full accident and emergency provision?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I was asked about Dewsbury A&E, and I can confirm that it is not closing. The service will be open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and the majority of patients will see no change to their service.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): The repeated claim that spending ever increasing amounts of money on overseas aid keeps this country safe has been shown by recent events to be utter nonsense. May I tell the Prime Minister that spending more and more money on overseas aid each year makes us look not compassionate to the public, but idiotic when that money is much needed in the United Kingdom? Will she promise to slash the overseas aid budget and spend it on priorities in the UK? I hope that she does not have a strange political aversion to pursuing any policies that might be popular with the public.

The Prime Minister: I can assure my hon. Friend that I do not have that aversion, but on this issue I do take a different view. It is important that, given the position that we hold and the fact that our economy is one of the largest in the world, we recognise that we can help those around the world. We are seeing millions of people, particularly girls, being educated as a result of the action that we are taking. That is important. I recognise what my hon. Friend has said: we have suffered from terrible terrorist attacks here in the United Kingdom, and our services have also foiled a number of terrorist attacks in recent months and years. It is important that we are able to use our aid money to help ensure good governance in countries so that we do not see the creation of spaces where the terrorists are able to train and incite others.

Q11. [900061] Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I must thank the Prime Minister and most of the Cabinet for visiting Ealing during the election, because my majority went up by 50 times.

Some 53,000 EU nationals reside in the London borough of Ealing, and they would now like some clarity on this “fair and generous” offer, such as how much extra their settled status applications will cost them and why they will not be able to vote in local elections, as they can now.

The Prime Minister: I am grateful that the hon. Lady has described this as a fair and generous offer, as indeed it is a fair and generous offer, ensuring that people can continue here in the United Kingdom and that they will have rights here in the United Kingdom just as UK citizens do.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): A significant number of charities, including those looking after the most vulnerable disabled people in our society, are in fear of imminent closure due to the application of the national living wage to sleep-in shifts and the fact that Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs is insisting on six years’ back pay despite the advice changing only last year. Will the Prime Minister ask HMRC to suspend any actions until we can find a workable solution?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has raised a very important issue, and I know that it is one that he particularly cares about. Of course, it is through the national living wage that we are making sure that pay is fair in all sectors, including in social care. On the specific point he has raised, the Department of Health and other relevant Departments are looking at this issue very carefully, because they want to ensure that enforcement protects low-paid workers in a fair and proportionate manner. We have invested more money in social care—as he will know, there was £2 billion extra in the Budget. We do need to look at this issue on a longer-term basis, but I can assure him that Departments are looking carefully at the specific issues that he has raised.

Q14. [900064] Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Does the Prime Minister think, like her Brexit Secretary, that it will be simple to deliver a free trade deal with the European Union?

The Prime Minister: The Brexit Secretary and I have both said over the past few months that a comprehensive trade agreement will be not just possible but easier than for other third countries negotiating trade deals, precisely because at the moment we are operating on the same basis as other countries in the European Union. Therefore, we are not negotiating from the same position as Canada and other countries from outside the European Union. So yes, I think we can achieve that comprehensive free trade agreement, and it will be good for the United Kingdom and good for the European Union.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that an Opposition leader who claims to be all things to all men and says one thing to remain voters in London and quite the opposite to leave voters in constituencies such as mine is actually no kind of leader at all? Perhaps that might be why voters in my constituency rejected his leadership in the recent election.

The Prime Minister: First, I welcome my hon. Friend to his place in this House. I was very pleased to visit his constituency during the election campaign, and he is absolutely right: what people want to know is what the position of the parties is on the question of Brexit. We are very clear that we want to see the country coming together, because we want to deliver on the will of the
British people, which was that we should leave the European Union. It is precisely what this Government will do.

Q15. [00065] Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I beg the Prime Minister, at this crucial time in our country’s history, to listen to the many friends that we have in Europe and in the rest of the world who fear that we are sleepwalking zombie-like to a disastrous deal with Europe. They have no confidence in the three Ministers in charge of the deal and believe that our country will be deeply damaged, in terms of both our economy and our role in the world, if we do not get our act together.

The Prime Minister: Formal Brexit negotiations have now started. There was a very constructive and positive start to those negotiations, with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union and the Commission’s appointed negotiator, Michel Barnier. We have set up three working groups dealing with key issues initially, including citizens’ rights—I am pleased about that—and we have also started a dialogue on the issue of the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland and that relationship, which is important for Northern Ireland but also for the whole of the United Kingdom. We have set out our objectives. We have published our White Papers. We will be bringing the repeal Bill before this House. We know the plan we have got. The party that does not know what its plan is for Brexit is the hon. Gentleman’s party.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The Prime Minister was crystal clear on Monday that the reciprocal agreements we seek on citizenship should include the people of Gibraltar. On Tuesday, the Spanish Foreign Minister sought yet again to suggest that Spain should have a unilateral veto on that. Will she make it quite clear that this posturing and game-playing is pointless and counterproductive, and that our commitment to Gibraltar is absolute, and perhaps send him a hearing aid?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that issue. This Government’s commitment to Gibraltar has not changed and it will remain.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Suicide rates in Northern Ireland, particularly in my constituency, and issues of severe mental health are some of the worst in Europe, and indeed the developed world, and clinicians and others have pointed to the legacy of 30 years of terrorism and violence and the awful effects of that. Part of the money that we are investing this week will go to mental health care—extra investment in the health service. Is it not time that people recognised that this is delivery for all the people of Northern Ireland, across all sections of the community, and that it is going to help some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged people in Northern Ireland? People should get behind it and welcome it.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I wonder whether the Prime Minister has had an opportunity to see the British attitudes survey published today, which stated that 75% of British people wanted to leave the EU—up 20% from last time. She will, of course, know that more than 80% of the British electorate voted for parties that want to leave the EU. She will also know from her extensive canvassing—and I know personally from mine—that thousands and thousands of people tell us, “The referendum decided the issue. Just get on and leave the EU.” Will she assure the House that she will make that her priority?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. What I have seen across the whole of this country is a real unity of purpose of people. For most people, regardless of how they voted in the referendum, their view is, “The decision has been taken—just deliver it,” and that is what this Government will do.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): With 9 million people in our country lonely all or most of the time, and given that loneliness is as bad for someone’s health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, will the Prime Minister join the hon. Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) and me in encouraging Members across the House to attend the event organised by the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness in Speaker’s House immediately after Prime Minister’s questions to find out what we can all do in our communities to tackle this blight in our society?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady has raised a very important matter, and I commend her and my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) for the work that they have both done as co-chairs of the Jo Cox commission. I indeed encourage hon. Members to do exactly as she has said. She has raised an important issue. We all increasingly recognise the impact that loneliness has on health. We have been able to put some support into the dementia-friendly communities programme, and the Cabinet Office is doing more by putting money in grant funds, particularly to help to tap the skills of volunteers over 50, to look at the issue of loneliness. It is an important issue, and hon. Members should recognise that and the work of the Jo Cox commission.
Point of Order

Mr Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I do not know whether you have been given notice by the Secretary of State for Health of a debate on the introduction of charges for blue badge holders at Chorley and South Ribble hospital, as well as at Royal Preston hospital. That seems to go against everything that we thought—the most vulnerable in society should not be penalised. Have you had any notice of a debate, Mr Speaker?

Mr Speaker: I have not, but I have a sense that by one means or another I will hear further about this matter, possibly today, but certainly in subsequent days, very likely on the Floor of the House and possibly also in conversations between colleagues, conceivably outside the Chamber. I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman—we will leave it there for now.

Debate on the Address

[5TH DAY]

Debate resumed (Order, 27 June).

Question again proposed.

That an Humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, as follows:

Most Gracious Sovereign,

We, Your Majesty’s most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.

Health, Social Care and Security

Mr Speaker: I inform the House that I have selected amendment (i) in the name of the Leader of the Opposition.

12.54 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I beg to move an amendment, at the end of the Question to add:

“but respectfully regret that the Gracious Speech fails to end cuts to the police and the fire service; commend the response of the emergency services to the recent terrorist attacks and to the Grenfell Tower fire; call on the Government to recruit more police officers and fire-fighters; and further call on the Government to end the public sector pay cap and give the emergency and public services a fair pay rise.”.

On occasion, much of what we do and say in the Chamber must seem to ordinary members of the public looking on like something approaching an elaborate game, but the Opposition believe that the amendment goes to the heart of public concerns. We wish to commend the response of the emergency services to the recent terrorist attacks and to the Grenfell Tower fire; we wish to call on the Government to recruit more police officers and firefighters; but above all, we call on the Government to end the public sector pay cap and give the emergency and public services a fair pay rise. As we have seen in recent months, in times of national and personal crisis, it is to public sector workers that the country looks.

We have all seen and read about the firefighters who ran towards danger, into the blaze in Grenfell Tower to save lives. Some of us wondered whether we could have summoned up that courage. We all know about the gallantry and professionalism of the police and the transport police who responded swiftly to the terror attacks. My mother was a nurse, and I know that the dedication and commitment of our public service workers is above price. It is one thing for hon. Members to praise public service workers for their bravery, heroism and effectiveness at times of national emergency, but we need to treat public service workers fairly every other day of the year. That is what the Opposition think, and increasingly that is what the general public think.

Ministers will be aware that the latest British social attitudes survey revealed that eight in 10 people wanted more cash pumped into the NHS; seven in 10 people wanted more investment in schools; and six in 10 wanted
higher spending on the police. I will come on to Ministers’ claims to have protected police budgets later, but the question that Ministers have to answer is: how long will they continue to peddle hard-line austerity? Their targets for closing the deficit are receding ever further, raising the question of whether savage cuts are counterproductive to encouraging growth. How long are Ministers going to pursue austerity when any parent who has a child at school, anybody who uses an accident and emergency department, and anyone who has an elderly relative in need of social care can see for themselves that cuts have consequences, and that there is a human price to pay for Tory austerity?

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I have much sympathy with the points that the right hon. Lady is making, and my colleagues and I will support the Labour amendment this evening. However, can she explain why in Wales, which is run by the Labour party, the number of firefighters has been cut by 20%?

Ms Abbott: It is not for me in this—[Interruption.]—I think that the hon. Gentleman will find that the funding available to the Administration in Wales has been cut.

In her statement to the House last week, the Home Secretary said:

“We have protected the police budget from 2015.”

She went on to say:

“There has been a lot of scaremongering about changes to the budget, and I repeat here, in the House, that it will be protected.”—[Official Report, 22 June 2017; Vol. 626, c. 199.]

The Opposition are aware of the Government claim that the allowed increase in the council tax precept adds funds that will make good any shortfall, but this is a tax increase to provide funds, not Government protection for the budget. I wonder whom the Home Secretary is accusing of scaremongering. Is it Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary, who said in March that policing in England and Wales was in a “potentially perilous state”, as Government cuts lead to investigations being shelved, vulnerable victims being let down and tens of thousands of dangerous suspects at large?

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way so quickly. What she is saying relates particularly to bobbies on the beat. Police are doing excellent work on knife and gun crime, particularly in hotspots; taking away bobbies on the beat has an undermining effect on otherwise excellent police work.

Ms Abbott: The public fully appreciate that community policing and bobbies on the beat are important, not just in respect of knife and gun crime but in providing the first line of connection and communication with the community when it comes to tackling terrorism.

I was wondering who the Home Secretary was accusing of scaremongering. Was it the president of the Police Superintendents Association of England and Wales, who said that

“There are now 34,000 fewer staff working in policing than there were in 2010, including 19,000 fewer police officers”?

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): On the right hon. Lady’s theme, has she heard Cressida Dick, the new Metropolitan Police Commissioner, talk about the need for more resources and say that the Met is stretched? Has she ever heard a Met Commissioner demanding more resources so publicly?

Ms Abbott: Government Members can mock, but Londoners are very concerned that within the overall levels of crime, there is rising violent, knife and gun crime. No, I have never heard the Metropolitan police talk so clearly about funding problems.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Ms Abbott: I need to make some progress.

When the Home Secretary accuses people of scaremongering, she should explain why every stakeholder in policing is saying that there is an increasing problem with Government cuts to policing.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): Can my right hon. Friend tell me whether the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey), who just got up to complain about police cuts, is related to the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton who was in the coalition Cabinet that reduced the number of police officers by 20,000?

Ms Abbott: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that helpful intervention, and I ask the House to focus on the information he has brought forward.

After seven years of Tory government, there are 20,000 fewer police staff, 10,000 fewer firefighters and 1,000 fewer Border Force guards. When the Conservatives came to office in 2010, they immediately cut Security Service personnel by 650; now they expect plaudits when they pledge an increase.

All ordinary public sector workers have faced pay freezes and pay caps, which have made them worse off. Between the coalition’s coming into office in 2010 and May this year, inflation has seen prices rise by more than 15%. In reality, whatever figures the Government want to throw around, public sector workers have had effective cuts to their pensions and seen large-scale job losses because of inflation. They have been asked to do more with less.

The Opposition say that asking the security services, and public sector workers generally, to do more with less is unfair, unworkable and counter-productive. It has led to low morale, difficulties in recruitment and retention—particularly in parts of the country where house prices are spiralling—staff shortages and gaps in services. Those public services are among the most important that any civilised society offers. In his remarks, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) will highlight the effect of austerity and Government cuts on our NHS. The cuts in vital services—the police, the fire services, the Border Force and the security services—have been serious, and they come in addition to the cuts that have already forced out more than 20,000 police staff.
I turn to the counter-terrorism strategy. Labour welcomes the considered approach outlined in the Queen’s Speech; too often, the knee-jerk reaction of Governments has been further legislation. We believe that it is right to review what is happening in relation to the evolving terrorist threat and its many and varied sources and purposes, but the terms of the counter-terrorism review are crucial. Labour believes that the following questions must be addressed. Are there sufficient resources and are they properly directed? Are there gaps in the legislation, or is it catch-all and ineffective? What is the role of community policing in gathering intelligence? Sometimes, Ministers seem to think that community policing has no role in combating terrorism, but we believe that it does.

Is there a danger that communities are being alienated by Prevent, although good work is done under the Prevent badge? Should we review Prevent? How can community engagement be increased, and could we immediately take basic precautionary measures, such as installing barriers to cars and trucks? Should terrorism prevention and investigation measures, or TPIMs, be used more frequently, as Max Hill, the independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, says? If so, should they be subject to better due process?

We believe that some of the answers to these questions are self-evident. If the Government announced today that they were going to introduce more barriers to trucks and large vehicles along some major thoroughfares, we would support them. Advice could be issued immediately to all elected officials not to remove existing barriers, as the Foreign Secretary did when he was Mayor of London. If the Government announced that they were going to halt and reverse the police budget cuts this year, we would support them.

The Government have announced a commission to tackle extremism. We welcome such a commission in principle, although some have suggested that it is being set up because the Government cannot make good on their repeated promises to introduce anti-extremism legislation. We note that there are already laws against incitement, conspiracy and murder. We are told that some perpetrators were known to the authorities.

I was at the Finsbury Park mosque with the Prime Minister, and more than one of the faith leaders raised the importance of a review of the Prevent strategy. In common with many members of the communities involved, we believe that, despite the good work that has happened under Prevent, the strategy needs to be reviewed. It needs not to run the risk of alienating communities; we have to work with all communities. The terror threat confronts us all, and we must all confront it together. If the Government want to discuss with us how we can help engage all communities in the fight against our common threat of terrorism, we will be only too happy to help.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Ms Abbott: I have to make progress.

When I was at the Finsbury Park mosque last week, people there would have been concerned that Government Members do not want to take part seriously in a debate of this nature. I note that there was no promise of further legislation on counter-terrorism. Max Hill has said that the security services already have enough powers. The Opposition concur, and it now seems that the majority of the Cabinet also agree.

Resources remain the key issue in fighting terrorism. The Conservatives have constantly sought to portray Labour as not facing up to the challenges posed by terrorism, but in our communities—in the inner cities and in areas such as London Bridge, Finsbury Park and Manchester—we face up to the day-to-day threat of terrorism and disorder. Nobody takes those issues more seriously than Members on this side of the House. We speak for our communities, and for the parents concerned that their children may be drawn into terrorist activity. We seek to offer practical remedies and support, and to support the Government in strategies that do not run counter to our liberties and community support.

Talking tough on terrorism and antisocial behaviour is cheap. Like all decent services in a civilised society, security costs money. Records show that since 2010, the Tories have proved unwilling to spend what is necessary to keep us safe. We need only look at what has happened to police numbers and Border Force officials, the closures of fire stations and the cuts to fire officers. Labour is prepared to spend the money and commit the resources to keep us safe. In closing—

Several hon. Members rose—

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Will the right hon. Lady give way? Does she want to have a debate?

Mr Speaker: Order. At present, the shadow Home Secretary is manifestly not giving way.

Ms Abbott: I said at the beginning that from some of what we do in this House, it might appear to members of the public looking at us on their television screens or reading the newspaper that some Members of this House see this as a game. Labour is fully aware of the fear and horror with which the public regard recent terrorist outrages and the fire in Grenfell Tower. We are talking about practical measures, real community involvement and, above all, the resources to keep our communities safe.

1.13 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): I agree with one thing that the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) said—that the response from the emergency services to the series of attacks and the tragedy at Grenfell Tower has been truly heroic. The brave men and women of our emergency services were able to suppress their own emotions of fear and anger. As she said, they rushed in to save lives, putting their own thoughts on hold for a while. I had the privilege of meeting the numerous police officers, firefighters and paramedics who were first on the scene in Manchester following the arena bomb, and in London after the Westminster and London Bridge attacks. It is because of their bravery that there are people alive today who might otherwise have perished. The same is true of the Grenfell Tower fire. Lives were saved because of the skills and sacrifice of the brave men and women of our emergency services. We owe them a huge debt of gratitude and we stand behind them.
[Amber Rudd]

Nobody thinks of this as a game. We want to engage and debate with the Opposition because there are important subjects to be discussed. We are all serious about what has happened, what could happen in the future and what steps we need to take.

The shadow Home Secretary raised her concerns about cuts to the fire service. Let me remind the House of some facts. The fire crew at Grenfell Tower was on the scene within six minutes, and more than 200 firefighters responded. Can she really suggest that numbers were inexcusably low? We should also remember that the number of fire incidents has halved in the past decade, but the number of firefighters has fallen by less than 20%. They do an incredibly good job.

The Government do not recruit fire or police staff; chief officers do. It is up to each fire and rescue authority to manage their resources, and to decide who to recruit and when. In fact, some fire and rescue services are reporting an increase in the recruitment of full-time firefighters. Public safety is an absolute priority for the Government. Under my watch, fire and rescue services and the police will continue to have the resources they need to do their important work.

Several hon. Members rose—

Amber Rudd: I will give way in a moment. I just want to address the clear points that the right hon. Lady made about resources.

Let us talk about the police. Since 2015, we have protected the police budget in cash terms. In order to maintain that, it is correct that chief officers have to maximise their access through the precept. To be able to say that we protect it in real terms, I have to draw attention to the police transformation fund. One of the differences between the Conservatives and Labour is that we know that we have to focus on outcomes. That means continuing the business of police reform and continuing to fund it through the police transformation fund. We are most concerned with outcomes—on how to get the best results for victims and communities.

Ian C. Lucas (Wirral West) (Lab): The Secretary of State is of course right to talk about police reform, which is extremely important, but it misrepresents the Labour party to say that we are not interested in police reform. We introduced police community support officers when we were in government, and there was a constant period of reform then. The real point is that the Conservative party have cut budgets since 2015, but since 2010. There has been a massive cut to the police budget, which is affecting my constituents in Wirral.

Amber Rudd: I am delighted to have the hon. Gentleman’s support on police reform, which will continue. He is right that there were cuts between 2010 and 2015 but, as always, we must look at the outcomes. Crime fell by a third during that period.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Will the Home Secretary confirm that the Commissioner of the Metropolitan police, the head of counter-terrorism, the head of the National Crime Agency and the chair of the National Police Chiefs Council have written to her saying that the counter-terrorism, policing and protective security grant will fall by 7.2% in cash terms over the next two years?

Amber Rudd: I have received that letter and I will be speaking to all the individual leaders of those groups. The issue to which they are drawing attention is that they are under tremendous strain because of the events of the past three months. Additional resources are being deployed in order to work on the ongoing investigations into some of the terror events, including the investigation in Manchester. We recognise that and will work with them to see how we can support them.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): The Secretary of State mentioned that there were 20% cuts to fire services across the country. On Merseyside, the figure is much higher. Since 2011, we have lost nearly 300 firefighters—that is a loss of 31%—and a third of fire engines. Both of the only two fire stations in my constituency are closing, which will make the situation less safe for my constituents. Will she look again at the funding for Merseyside fire and rescue service as a matter of urgency?

Amber Rudd: I would ask the hon. Lady: what are the outcomes in her constituency? What is the level of incidents of fire in her constituency? What work are those bodies doing? I would ask her to first look at the outcomes before coming back for more resources.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): My right hon. Friend is presumably not wholly taken in by the shadow Home Secretary posturing as a defender of people’s safety, when, in 1989, she—now famously—signed an early-day motion calling for the scrapping of MI5 and the Metropolitan police’s special branch.

Amber Rudd: My right hon. Friend raises such an important point. It is a sad truth that those on the Opposition Front Bench—not those on the Back Benches, but sometimes those on the Front Bench—have such a poor record on supporting the people who do such great work to keep us safe.

Several hon. Members rose—

Amber Rudd: I will make some progress first, and then I will come back to some interventions.

The Gracious Speech is about building on the Government’s strong economic record so that we can continue to invest in our priorities, such as the NHS and national security. Conservative Members know that it is only with a strong economy that we can fund our NHS, protect our elderly and back Britain’s defences.

The Gracious Speech we heard last Wednesday set out the Government’s legislative agenda for the next two years. It is a programme that will build on our strong record of achievement under the last Government. Crime has fallen by a third since 2010. Legal highs have been banned. More than 900 bogus colleges have been closed. Police and intelligence agencies have been given more powers and tools to keep the public safe. We have an ambitious programme of police reform, on which I am delighted to hear we may continue to get support.
from the Opposition. Some £100 million of funding has been provided to tackle violence against women and girls.

We have a proud record on the NHS. NHS spending has been protected. We have more doctors, more nurses, more midwives and more GPs. Last year, the NHS treated more people than ever before. Now we will build on the foundations we have laid, working even harder to create a Britain that works for everyone. Above all else, this is a Government committed to keeping families, communities and our country safe.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I, like the Home Secretary, want to hear about outcomes. Recently, the west midlands chief constable said that one of the outcomes for police there was that, as police officers are pulled away on to anti-terror alerts and more high-alert policing, call-outs on other crimes have to be downgraded. One of the things that was downgraded—is this the outcome of there not being enough police in the west midlands—was call-outs on domestic violence.

Amber Rudd: The past three months have seen an extraordinary series of attacks, which have put pressure on our police. They have dealt incredibly well with that by having mutual aid coming from different areas to support them. We recognise that there has been a particular surge, but I do not think the hon. Lady’s point—that we need to operate as though there were this level of attacks every three months—holds water. However, I will be engaging with chief police officers to find out whether they have the support we expect them to have, despite the additional work they need to do.

Several hon. Members rose—

Amber Rudd: I am going to make some progress, and then I will come back to some more interventions.

In the last Parliament, we announced a 30% increase over five years in Government spending on counter-terrorism, increasing spending from £11.7 billion to £15.1 billion. We introduced measures to disrupt the travel of foreign fighters. We passed the Investigatory Powers Act 2016, which gives the police and intelligence agencies more of the powers and tools they need to keep people safe and secure.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): Further to my right hon. Friend’s answer to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), does it not increase pressures on the police when there are calls for days of rage and other activities on the streets that pull the police into London and take away resources from areas such as mine in Hertfordshire that have to provide mutual aid?

Amber Rudd: That is a very good point from my hon. Friend. We need to make sure that, at a time when such terrible national events are taking place, everybody gives out the message that we should support our police by having fewer protests of that type.

Several hon. Members rose—

Amber Rudd: I am going to make some more progress.

We also legislated in the previous Parliament to strengthen our response to terrorist financing with the Criminal Finances Act 2017. We have protected overall police funding in real terms since 2015, and we have funded an uplift in the number of armed police officers.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): Last Friday, I and a group of MPs from the west midlands met the chief constable and the police and crime commissioner, and they told us that funding for the police in the west midlands has been cut by £145 million, or 27%. That has resulted in the number of officers being reduced by 2,164, which is a quarter, and the number of PCSOs being reduced by half. It has also resulted in the closure of Dudley’s police station. Will the Home Secretary allow me and a group of my colleagues to come to talk to her about the terrible level of cuts her Government have imposed on west midlands police?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Gentleman puts it so kindly—I am so keen to have a talk on that topic. I assume that the figures he is looking at are from 2010; I have been referring to the figures from 2015, which have been protected in cash terms and in real terms. I would welcome a visit from him—perhaps to my police Minister—so that we can go through the figures and reconcile his thoughts with mine. [Interruption.] I do not think we are going to do that across the House right now.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Home Secretary has just indicated that there is an uplift in the number of armed police officers. Does she recall that, the day I left office as police Minister in 2010, we had 7,000 armed police on the streets of Britain? We now have 5,500—a 20% drop. Will she reflect on the statement she has just made and correct it for the House?

Amber Rudd: I am afraid I do not particularly recall the day when the right hon. Gentleman stepped down, but I stand by what I said, which is that we are funding a significant uplift in the number of armed police. These officers are trained at a different level to those he oversaw as police Minister; they are much more effectively trained, to the high level required for counter-terrorism.

Anna Soubry: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the way we now operate police officers means that the old days of a police officer being an accredited firearms officer have completely changed? Now we effectively have squads of crack officers, who are properly trained in all aspects of serious policing, and who, frankly, do a far better job than we have seen for many a long year.

Amber Rudd: My right hon. Friend is exactly right. In addition to those armed police officers, we are in the process of recruiting security staff—

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): Will the Home Secretary give way?

Amber Rudd: I am going to make some more progress.

We are recruiting over 1,900 additional security and intelligence staff. To combat terrorism, we also work with technology companies to tackle terrorist and extremist use of their platforms. The UK has been leading in
I had with them in March.

terrorism, which they committed to following a meeting the formation of an industry-led global forum to counter leading communications service providers announced driving a global response on this subject. This week, Amber Rudd: I welcome my hon. Friend to the House and thank him for his comments about wanting a much more peaceful world—I think that is something we can all endorse.

Sir Thomas More would have it—we would have no amounts of cash, but effectiveness?

Friend agree that in the perfect utopian society—as Sir Thomas More would have it—we would have no police at all, so it is clearly not about numbers and vast amounts of cash, but effectiveness?

Amber Rudd: I welcome my hon. Friend to the House and thank him for his comments about wanting a much more peaceful world—I think that is something we can all endorse.

Sir Thomas More would have it—we would have no amounts of cash, but effectiveness?

Jonathan Edwards: I have been listening with great interest to the Secretary of State, and she will surely welcome the private Member’s Bill being introduced by my colleague Lord Wigley in the other place, which calls for an independent resource audit for Welsh and English police forces. Will she look at that Bill and offer Government support?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Gentleman for drawing my attention to it, and I will certainly take a look at it. Sir Edward Davey: Will the Home Secretary give way?

Amber Rudd: I am going to continue for a while. We will establish a new commission for counterterrorism to support the Government in eradicating extremist ideology in all its forms. Britain is a wonderfully diverse, inclusive and open country that many people proudly call home. Time and again, we have seen our communities come together, demonstrating unwavering acts of kindness, compassion and support for one another, but it is no secret that there are those in Britain who do not share our values—who do not share our compassionate outlook, and despise our way of life and wish to do us harm. That is what we saw in Finsbury Park, Westminster, London Bridge and Manchester. Extremism cannot just be ignored, and neither can it be wished or explained away. Extremists need to be confronted, and the narratives they use to weaponise people and breed this horrific violence need to be called out and taken head on, not afforded accommodation.

Geraint Davies: Does the Home Secretary accept that talk of Islamic extremism, in particular, is in danger of being misinterpreted as meaning “too much Islam” when in fact, of course, “Islam” is the Arabic word for peace: that the problem is those who pervert, distort and blaspheme in the name of Islam; and that the true Islam was shown by Imam Mohammed, who stood in front of the killer and said that life is sacred? Does she not want to pursue a route that says that the Islamic community should work with us to target those who would distort Islam and correct their interpretation, rather than talk about Islamic extremism, the danger of which is making out that Islam is the problem?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. We all need to choose our words carefully, but we also need to call out what we believe this is. We should talk about radical extremist ideology, whether it is Islamic or far right, but we need to make sure that we are clear that we are equally hostile to both, and will take action where either is doing damage to society.

Dr Julian Lewis: Following up what the hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) said about the use of terminology, does the Home Secretary accept that there is a valuable store of experience from the past in the way agencies tackled the doctrines of fascism and Nazism, and subsequently of Marxism-Leninism, and that questions such as the use of vocabulary mean that we need a specialist agency to co-ordinate this effort in the future as we did successfully in those past instances?

Amber Rudd: I thank my right hon. Friend for his invitation to her to come and visit some of the Prevent North and Stoke Newington referred to, and I repeat my invitation to her to come and visit some of the Prevent initiatives. If people see them for themselves, they will find they do a really positive job in engaging with communities. In addition, the Channel programme, which offers voluntary tailored programmes of support to people assessed as being at risk of radicalisation, has supported over 1,000 at-risk individuals since 2012.

However, as we have, sadly, seen with the recent attacks at Westminster, Manchester, London Bridge and Finsbury Park, the country faces an escalating threat from terrorism—36 innocent people dead, 150 hospitalised, families torn apart, and communities left grieving. The Government must do everything in their power to defeat the scourge of terrorism.

Where we can learn more and improve, we will. That is why, as set out in the Gracious Speech, our counterterrorism strategy will be reviewed. We will look at our whole counter-terrorism approach across Government, police, local authorities and the security services to ensure that they have what they need to protect our country.

If the review finds that further legislation is needed, the House can be assured that we will put this before Parliament. As I announced last week, there will also be a separate review of the handling of recent terror attacks to look at whether lessons can be learned about our approach to these events. This review will be conducted by the police and MI5, and I have asked David Anderson, the former independent reviewer of terrorist legislation, to provide independent scrutiny.

Chris Ruane rose—

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Home Secretary give way?

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Amber Rudd: I thank my right hon. Friend for his contribution. This may be something that the new commission for counter-extremism will want to look at.

Since 2015, we have had a Government-wide counter-extremism strategy, the first of its kind. At the heart of the strategy is a partnership with communities to make sure that we build on British values. We have published a hate crime action plan and funded additional security...
mesures at more than 50 places of worship. We are also supporting 53 civil society groups that are confronting extremism in their communities.

However, defeating the evil ideology of extremism is one of the greatest challenges of our time, and there is much that we must be able to do. That is why we will have the new commission, which will support the Government to identify and eradicate extremist ideology in all its forms. Across society and online, we will work with communities, and public sector and civil society groups, to promote and defend our pluralistic values of democracy, freedom of belief and expression, the rule of law, mutual respect, and opportunity for all. The commission will advise the Government on what new powers might be needed to tackle the evolving threat. Work is under way on the design of the commission, and we will set out our plans in due course.

Turning to the future immigration system, the Gracious Speech included an immigration Bill that will allow the Government to end the EU’s rules on free movement of EU nationals in the UK, ensuring that we have the flexibility to create a fair and controlled immigration system. It will give us control over the numbers of people who come to the UK from the EU while welcoming those with the skills and expertise to make our nation better. What these rules look like will depend on the needs of the UK, and we are considering all the options of our future system very carefully. It is imperative that we understand what the impact could be on different sectors of the economy and the labour market, and that we make sure that businesses and communities have an opportunity to contribute their views on any future system. As now, new immigration rules will be subject to scrutiny by Parliament.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): An issue that has been vexing many of my EU constituents who have been here for many years is whether the Government will admit that such people now face an income threshold if they wish to bring a family member here to the UK. Many of them who are on low incomes—for example, nurses who are in band 5 and on below £22,000—will not be able to bring a family member here. Will the Home Secretary confirm that, and is she going to investigate what impact it will have on public services?

Amber Rudd: The Prime Minister made her statement to reassure her constituents who fall into that cohort that they maintain these rights until at least when we leave the EU—but there will be existing rights in place for all those who can accumulate the five years and those who can, depending on when the cut-off date is, add to them because they arrived before that.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Home Secretary give way?

Amber Rudd: Not now, I am afraid. I am going to carry on because I want to cover some of the other Bills that are going to be introduced in the next two years.

We will also bring forward a domestic violence and abuse Bill. It is truly chilling that, every day, women and girls across the UK are being subjected to the most horrific abuse in their own homes. I am incredibly proud of the work that the Conservative Government have done to support victims, bring perpetrators to justice, and prevent those vicious crimes from ever taking place. In the previous Parliament, we published our strategy to end violence against women and girls. We made it clear that everyone needs to play their part—friends, family, employers, health providers, and the police—and to support this we pledged £100 million of funding. We also brought in domestic violence protection orders and the domestic violence disclosure scheme, and introduced a specific offence of controlling or coercive behaviour.

Our focus on this terrible crime has contributed to improvements for women, but the number of people experiencing domestic abuse is still far too high. Despite record numbers of prosecutions and convictions, there are 2 million victims of domestic abuse every year in England and Wales, and that is 2 million too many. All too often, domestic abuse is not properly understood, recognised or dealt with, and that can leave a devastating impact. Our landmark domestic violence and abuse Bill is one part of our programme of work aimed at addressing this insidious crime.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): Of course the Bill is very welcome, but what can the Home Secretary say to reassure those who fear that the definition that is now going to be produced might not be strong enough to capture the level of emotional and financial abuse that terrorises too many women in the UK today?

Amber Rudd: I know that the hon. Gentleman has done a lot of work in this area. I reassure him and stakeholders who are, I hope, interested in what we are trying to do that we will be consulting widely to make sure that we get the Bill right, so that it delivers the strength of purpose he refers to. The fact that it will create a legal definition of domestic abuse to help us ensure that it is properly understood means that we will not have the same situation of isolated pieces of domestic violence not being added up into a pattern of a really grotesque form of domestic violence that some women have been subjected to.

The Bill will also create a new domestic abuse prevention and protection order regime. A new order to specifically tackle domestic abuse will lead to better protection and
better prosecutions. It will ensure that if abusive behaviour involves a child, the court can hand down a sentence that reflects the devastating and lifelong impact that abuse can have. In addition, it will establish a domestic violence and abuse commissioner, who will stand up for victims and survivors, raising public awareness and holding local authorities to account.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Will the Home Secretary also include in the commissioner’s remit the ability to look at those victims of domestic violence who are subsequently subject to a new form of abuse, namely being constantly returned to court by ex-partners demanding extra access to the children? That is a way to intimidate, bully and impoverish many of those who have the children in their care.

Amber Rudd: Absolutely. That is exactly the sort of issue that I would expect us to look at in the domestic violence Bill, to make sure that that sort of abuse does not take place. We want to be a society where domestic abuse is not tolerated, victims feel safe and supported and perpetrators are punished, and we look out for situations such as that raised by the hon. Lady. Victims deserve the best treatment and justice, and we will make sure that they get it. I very much hope that the Opposition will support the Bill.

Turning to health, as the Government continue to strengthen the economy, we can continue to invest in the NHS, supporting that public service on which we all depend. As we set out in our manifesto, we will increase health spending by a minimum of £8 billion a year in real terms by the end of this Parliament. We know, however, that wellbeing is about being strong not just in body, but in mind. This Government recognise that mental health should be given equal priority to physical health. That is why we will consider reform of mental health legislation and ensure that mental health is prioritised in the NHS. We will look at the Mental Health Act 1983 to make sure that the law is working for those who need support, and we will also publish a Green Paper on children and young people’s mental health, to make sure that best practice is being applied and there is sufficient access to support.

In 10 years’ time there will be 2 million more people over the age of 75. It is essential that they are able to live well and get the care that they need. The Government have already invested an additional £2 billion in social care to relieve pressure, but more needs to be done. That is why the Government are committed to listening to people’s views about how to reform the system. Full plans will be consulted on in due course.

This is a Government with purpose, determined to deliver the best Brexit deal to secure a strong future as we leave the EU.

Anna Soubry: My right hon. Friend will know that there is much concern on both sides of the House about the situation pertaining to women who live in Northern Ireland who seek terminations. They cannot get them in Northern Ireland—it is a devolved matter—and come over to England for them, but find themselves being charged by the NHS. While that is being resolved, will she give an undertaking that access to terminations will not be in any way affected and that women can still come here from Northern Ireland to get them?

Amber Rudd: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are absolutely committed to healthcare for women, and that includes access to terminations.

We are a Government with purpose.

Jonathan Ashworth rose—

Amber Rudd: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will have an opportunity to speak on health at the end of this debate.

We are determined to deliver the best Brexit deal to secure our future as we leave the EU. We are determined to enhance our standing in the world and bring our United Kingdom closer together, and intent on building a stronger economy and a fairer society, taking action to keep families, communities and our country safe.

Stella Creasy rose—

Amber Rudd: I am not going to give way further. The hon. Lady will have a chance to make her own remarks later.

We will be challenging extremism, protecting the vulnerable, giving mental health the attention it deserves and improving social care for the long term, putting ourselves at the service of millions of ordinary working people for whom we will work every day in the national interest, setting out a programme for a Britain that works for everyone.

1.44 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I rise to address matters arising from the Gracious Speech pertaining to security. My hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) will address health matters later.

I will speak to the Scottish National party’s amendment (h), which urges the Government to exempt Police Scotland and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service from VAT without further delay. In addition, the Scottish National party will support the Labour party’s amendment (i). The SNP has consistently opposed the Conservative party’s austerity agenda, and the manifesto on which we won the general election in Scotland indicated that, in these times, the pay cap is no longer sustainable and that we would look at it very closely. I am very happy to lend our support to the shadow Home Secretary. On police and fire service cuts, I am very happy to say that the Scottish Government have not imposed the cuts seen south of the border. I will come to that later.

I want to look in particular at the proposals for a counter-extremism commission; the proposals to review whether the police and security services have all the powers they need; and concerns that I and my party hold about the scope of the repeal Bill, particularly for justice and home affairs issues.

I also want to address the potential impact of Brexit on our security arrangements. The European Union enables European nations to come together not just for the common economic and social good, but to tackle crime and terrorism in the interests of all citizens across Europe. Last year Rob Wainwright, the current, British director of Europol, said that in the event of Britain leaving the European Union it would be very difficult to negotiate security pacts from outside the Europol bloc.
He said that trying to do so would be a “damage limitation exercise”. We have yet to hear any detail about how the Government propose to address that problem. We need to look at it closely.

The Scottish National party has already welcomed the Prime Minister’s recent change in tone and rhetoric following the attack at Finsbury Park. We were very pleased to hear her equate all forms of extremism. We hope that that signals the beginning of a Government approach that will not single out any particular group in our community for counter-extremism or terrorism measures. We believe that measures to counter extremism are very important, but they must not be allowed to create division among our many diverse communities across the UK.

We continue to be very concerned that, despite the Government’s failed attempts to introduce a counter-extremism Bill in the previous Parliament, they have yet to offer any legally sustainable definition of extremism or British values. We are concerned, as I have said previously, that the new plan in the Gracious Speech to establish a commission to look at those matters risks bypassing parliamentary scrutiny and the need for legal certainty on the nebulous terms of “extremism” and “British values”. I was therefore pleased to hear the Home Secretary say in response to a question I asked last week that any commission recommendations will be fully scrutinised by this Parliament.

We have already heard about the Prevent strategy, which has been controversial, and concerns have repeatedly been raised about its implementation. May I respectfully suggest that the UK Government look at how we have implemented the Prevent strategy in Scotland as a model of how things might be improved? Although counter-terrorism is of course a reserved issue, the implementation of policies to counter extremism is the responsibility of the devolved institutions. In Scotland we have worked very hard to recognise that we have diverse communities and that they must all be allies in ensuring that all our citizens are safe. The delivery of Prevent in Scotland has benefited from positive relationships fostered with all communities in Scotland through years of regular engagement. We recognise that the way in which people are becoming radicalised is constantly evolving and changing. We must therefore remain vigilant and refresh our approach accordingly, but we must also continue to work with our communities, rather than against them, in making sure that terrorist messages will not resonate.

I now turn to the question of whether the police and security services have all the powers they need. The SNP believes that they do have sufficient powers at their disposal and that the real issue that the Government should be looking at is whether the police and security services have sufficient resources to fight terrorism. I am fortified in that view by the quote from Max Hill QC, the official reviewer of terrorism, that has already been referred to today:

“My view coming into the scrutiny which we are told the Prime Minister wants to conduct is that we do have the appropriate laws in place, and that essentially the police and security services, and those whose job it is to keep us safe, do have the powers at their disposal.”

It is a crime to incite violence. People suspected of terrorist activity can be stopped and searched. People who aid terrorists are imprisoned and those convicted of plotting an attack can be locked up for life—so we have the powers.

During the passage of the Investigatory Powers Act 2016 in the last Parliament the Scottish National party repeatedly urged the Government to concentrate resources on robust, targeted surveillance of suspects rather than subjecting the whole population to blanket, suspicionless surveillance. During the election campaign, and after the terrible terrorist atrocities in London and Manchester, the Prime Minister rightly faced difficult questions about the resources she is putting into targeted surveillance. She was Home Secretary for seven years and it is clear that her influence still holds sway at the Home Office—for example, in relation to the unrealistic and unobtainable immigration targets that continue to be set. The Prime Minister must face up to her responsibility for cuts to police budgets and police numbers in England, which have been dictated by her party’s narrow austerity agenda. That is why I am happy that the SNP will support Labour’s amendment.

It does not have to be this way. In Scotland, the Scottish Government have increased police numbers and in particular invested in increasing the number of trained police armed responders, while still balancing our budget. We have been able to do that despite the UK Government’s repeated refusal to remove the burden of VAT from Police Scotland. Police Scotland is the only territorial police authority in the UK unable to recover VAT. My Scottish Government colleagues and I have repeatedly raised this issue with the UK Government. I wrote to the Minister about the issue earlier this year. The SNP has tabled an amendment to the Loyal Address calling on the Government to rectify that anomaly, and today we again call on them to do so. They have recently rectified the anomaly for several other national bodies: it is now time to do it for Police Scotland.

Notwithstanding the Tory Government’s failure to rectify that anomaly, the contrast between Scotland and the UK in policing terms could not be starker: 20,000 police officers have been lost in England, but in Scotland we have maintained 1,000 more than the number we inherited when the SNP came into government in 2007. We have also taken steps to increase the number of police officers who are trained to carry firearms. In the days following the Manchester attack, Police Scotland was able to provide the heightened level of police cover, including armed policing, without having to call on the resources of the military.

We have also protected the police resource budget in Scotland, but in England the Home Office has cut the amount it spends on policing by 20% since 2011. It is time for the Conservatives to stop diverting attention from their under-resourcing of the police and emergency services and to follow the Scottish Government’s lead in giving them the resources they need.

I have already said that international co-operation is essential to keep Scotland and the rest of the UK safe from the threats of organised crime, cybercrime and terrorism. In this Parliament, SNP Members will call for continued co-operation across the UK. The SNP will oppose any moves that would seek to use security co-operation as a bargaining chip in Brexit or trade negotiations with our European friends and neighbours. It is too important for that.

The Gracious Speech promised a new law on the protection of personal data, but we will not be able to continue to co-operate with our EU colleagues unless we abide by EU data protection and privacy protection
law. In practice, there will be limits to how closely the UK and the EU27 can work together if the UK is no longer accountable or subject to the oversight and adjudication of supranational institutions, such as—most importantly—the European Court of Justice. We saw at the end of last year that the Court took a dim view of the provisions for data collection and retention in the Investigatory Powers Act 2016, as many of us warned would happen when we considered the Act. If the UK does not comply with EU law on data sharing and privacy protection, our former partners will not be able to share information with us under the laws by which they are bound. That would be a disaster for security co-operation and for business, universities and research.

I am concerned that the Gracious Speech does not mention any specific legislation on the many changes to justice and home affairs, even though the Government have confirmed that the repeal Bill will include powers to allow for changes resulting from the negotiations to leave the EU. It is vital that Ministers and civil servants are not handed vast powers to change our legal landscape without proper parliamentary scrutiny, particularly in relation to security matters. Legislative consent motions must also be sought for justice and home affairs matters, and I am delighted that the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union and the Secretary of State for Scotland have all acknowledged that legislative consent will be sought for the repeal Bill.

Finally I turn briefly to the issue of human rights protections. During the election campaign, the Prime Minister spoke of ripping up human rights to fight terrorism. I suspect the attack on human rights was an attempt to distract from her own security failings and the impact of policing cuts in England. So I renew my request to the Home Secretary to confirm that nothing in the Human Rights Act or the European convention on human rights would prevent a robust approach to terrorism. Will she therefore confirm that there are no plans to “tear up” human rights to tackle terrorism? I would remind her that the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has said:

“Effective counter-terrorism measures and the protection of human rights are complementary and mutually reinforcing objectives which must be pursued together as part of States’ duty to protect individuals within their jurisdiction.”

Terrorism is a fundamental attack on our way of life and of course we must respond robustly and appropriately but it is at such times that human rights must be protected and cherished, not attacked and undermined. With the announcement by the CPS today on Hillsborough, we see the prospect of justice being achieved after many years as a result of the Human Rights Act guaranteeing a proper inquiry into that disaster. If we ripped up human rights, we would undermine the traditions that we all share across the House and play into the terrorists’ plans to undermine our democracy and the rule of law.

1.57 pm

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): I want to start by extending on behalf of all my constituents our most profound sympathy to the victims, and their families, of the horrific events that have recently taken place in Manchester, London Bridge and Finsbury, and the appalling Grenfell Tower fire. I think the whole nation was greatly taken by the Queen’s response after the fire that she was

“profundely struck by the immediate inclination of people throughout the country to offer comfort and support to those in desperate need.”

It is incumbent on us all to measure our language as we deal with these events, and I wish to place on record my deep shock at the words that the shadow Chancellor has recently used—that the fire at Grenfell Tower amounted to murder. That is an inexpressibly appalling thing to say. In a civilised society, there can be no room for such talk. It is not normal, it is not politics as usual, it is disgraceful and it is intolerable. All of us in public life have a duty to measure with care what we say in an era of brutal untruths, and to try to retain the language of reason and proportion.

The Queen’s Speech is a moment for the Government to set out their programme and for the rest of the country to regain its sense of balance. I want, as do my constituents, to see the Government exercise resolution, prudence, integrity and humility at a very difficult time in our affairs. I also want the Government to exercise what Field Marshal Lord Montgomery rightly called “grip”, and to govern effectively and with vigour, determination and energy. I place on record that I think our Prime Minister has all those qualities in abundance and I strongly commend and support her. If the Government manage to do that, my constituents, to whom I am yet again most grateful for their confidence, will be content.

Quite apart from the immense complexities, difficulties and grave uncertainties of the Brexit negotiations, this country has more than its fair share of major issues with which the Government must deal. What is it in our system that seems to mean we cannot arrive at a sane national plan—unlike Denmark, the Netherlands or Japan—that deals efficiently, humanely and decently with care for the elderly in all its complexity? I say to the Government, “Just get on and do it. Work across all the parties, and with all the considerable expertise in this country, to get this done.” Incidentally, I worry very much about the denigration of expertise at all levels when a deeply complicated world demands it more than ever.

There are many issues that can no longer be shirked: reform of care for the elderly; housing policy; prison reform, including the training of prison officers to enable them to do their very difficult job better; skills shortages; and nursing and leadership in the NHS. The Government must exercise their will to see that they are dealt with. The Gracious Speech sets out a good way ahead: promote fairness and transparency in the housing market; tackle unfair practice in the energy market; secure good, properly funded schools, which is a very important issue in Mid Sussex; secure high-wage jobs for the skilled; and get an increasing living wage for those in work. I think our constituents expect us to see to it that is all done, along with an unrelenting effort for the continued building of a strong economy in the safe hands of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor and, more obviously, a return to the Conservative facts of life of enterprise, aspiration, opportunity, wealth creation, sound money, good defence and, above all, the really effective running of our public services.
In my 34 years in this House, I do not think I have ever seen a way ahead that is more complex or difficult for our country, in particular the ongoing, desperately worrying low level of basic educational achievement in too many parts of the country; a separate lack of skills; low wages for too many; geographical economic and wealth inequality; intergenerational inequality; and what I am afraid to say is a very naïve approach indeed to international trade relations. Leaving the single market will obviously restrict us from accessing the world’s most skilled peoples. Unless a good way is found to resolve that, it will further negatively influence our productivity. That is relevant to many of our industries, and of course to our universities, which are widely regarded as some of the very best in the world. My views on immigration are well known, but I have to say that in my judgment, persisting with the inclusion of students in the immigration targets makes no economic sense whatever. Surely it is absolute madness to have halved our student intake from dynamic India to the benefit of America and Germany. Whatever happens with Brexit, we should be wanting to attract even more of those talented young people to our country. This is all of a piece with the need for Britain to retain a global view of the world.

Britain seriously lacks key skills. There is a grave shortage of graduates in engineering and science, which is made all the more acute by the clampdown on immigration. I have to tell my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary that that is already dissuading important young talent from coming to these shores, as any employer of PhDs will confirm. I have a suggestion in this regard: the Government should scrap tuition fees for the core STEM subjects of science, technology, engineering and maths, all of which are critical for our survival as our transition from the industrial to the digital world goes on apace, a fact that hardly seems to have appeared on the Government’s radar.

Finally, may I make a respectful suggestion to the House and to the Government? I think pretty much all of us in this House are deeply concerned about the question of trust in public life. The Government have some very difficult tasks ahead of them. They need to remember that competence generates trust and respect. I want that to be their aim: to secure competent and effective government, and thus the trust of the people who did and did not elect us.

2.5 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): It is good to follow the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames), who always makes a thought-provoking speech. I join the Home Secretary and the shadow Home Secretary in paying tribute to our police force and emergency services, who have dealt with so many difficult incidents in the past few weeks, and in expressing sympathy with the victims of both the terror attacks and the Grenfell fire.

The Queen’s Speech suggests that the Government are carrying on as if, in the words of the Prime Minister, “nothing has changed, nothing has changed.” In fact, very much has changed. The Prime Minister called the election wanting a landslide. Instead, she has a hung Parliament. That means that this hung Parliament has to work differently, and that the Queen’s Speech has to respond differently too. Many Members wish to speak in the debate today, so I will keep my remarks short and concentrate on two areas where the Government need to change course as a result of the hung Parliament delivered to us by the electorate, public services and the approach to the Brexit negotiations.

This week, the Government recognised the importance of investing more in public services in Northern Ireland. They have rightly supported additional investment in schools and hospitals in Belfast, but what about those in Birmingham, Bristol and many other parts of the country? I support the Democratic Unionist party’s request for more investment to stop school cuts in Portadown, but I want to stop the school cuts in Pontefract as well. The DUP is right to request more support for jobs in County Down but what about in Castlford and in other places across the rest of the country?

The Government cannot say to parents, patients and people who need the support of police officers right across the country that, as a result of this hung Parliament, they cannot have more support for their public services—that they will have to face further cuts to their public services, with teachers lost from our schools and services squeezed from our national health service—but those in Northern Ireland can have additional funding. They cannot say to Mark Rowley, Cressida Dick and the other police chiefs doing such a magnificent job in difficult circumstances despite being overstretched that the Government can somehow find £1 billion to support Northern Ireland and to support those in the Government keeping their own jobs, but they cannot provide the additional resources the police and emergency services need to support their jobs at this difficult time.

That is why the Government have to rethink. It would be easy to rethink the police cuts and to decide not to go ahead with the cuts to capital gains tax that the Chancellor has pledged. It would be easy to cancel those cuts and put the investment into additional police officers on our streets. It would be easy for the Government to recognise that if we care about recruitment and retention in our public services—in particular in our national health service, which in many parts of the country is struggling to recruit the nurses and doctors it needs—then continuing with the public sector pay cap will make it harder and harder for our NHS and all our public services to get the talented staff they need. In the end, that will cost all of us, including the Government, more in the long run.

The second area in which the Government need to change course is their approach to the Brexit negotiations. Britain voted for Brexit in the referendum and Parliament has voted to trigger article 50, but the Prime Minister did not win the free hand that she wanted for the Brexit negotiations. She asked for it, but voters said no. That means that the Government need to change their approach to the Brexit negotiations. If we are to get a deal that is not only the best for our country but is also sustainable—one that does not unravel in a year or two years’ time and does not end up undermined because there is so much disagreement, not just in this House but across the country—then there must be an effort to build a consensus around that deal as well, not just to get agreement in Europe but to build that consensus across Britain.

That is why I urge the Government not to keep pursuing the negotiations through a narrow cabal but instead to open up the process—to set up a cross-party
commission to hold the Brexit negotiations or to find other ways to include more voices and more transparency, and to strengthen the powers of the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union, so that this House can properly have its say as well. I know that that means difficult ways of working and will be a challenge to those on both Front Benches, but they, and the whole House and the whole country, will benefit if we find a different way to do this.

Joanna Cherry: The right hon. Lady is making a powerful and persuasive speech as usual. I agree with what she has just said. Would she extend that to giving the Scottish Government and the Welsh Government a place and a say in the negotiations to leave the EU?

Yvette Cooper: I certainly think that the Scottish Government and the Welsh Government, and Northern Ireland too, need to be involved in this commission and this process, because it has got to work for the whole of the United Kingdom. I think that is possible, but only if all parts of the House and those on both Front Benches behave in a different way and recognise the responsibility that has been placed on us by the hung Parliament that we have been given. That means, too, that the great repeal Bill that the Government want to put forward can no longer be a Bill that simply accretes powers to the Government through Henry VIII powers, because in a hung Parliament the legislature simply cannot hand over huge power to the Executive. The legislature itself must be involved in those decisions, step by step along the way.

The right hon. Member for Mid Sussex was right when he said that the course before us is more complex than anything he or I can remember at any time. With a hung Parliament we will have to work differently, but that has to start with the Government. I urge them to start today by changing course on public services and, as the amendment before us asks, on public sector pay and supporting our public sector workers, but also by changing course in the approach to Brexit, in a way that can build consensus, not division. That ought to be the spirit of what the Prime Minister has said.

2.12 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the eloquence of the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), and an honour to be re-elected once again to represent the lovely New Forest East constituency.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr George Howarth): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the right hon. Gentleman, but I should have announced that there is now a time limit of six minutes, which I think he was aware of, in order to accommodate as many people who want to speak as possible. Dr Lewis, your six minutes start now.

Dr Lewis: I have at least benefited from a few extra seconds as a result.

There is plenty to welcome in this Queen’s Speech, from the prioritisation of mental health to the forthcoming visit of Their Majesties the King and Queen of Spain, which will give us all a chance to show that our friendship with that great country is as enduring and immovable as the Rock of Gibraltar. I will touch, however, on two other aspects of the Queen’s Speech, and they will not come as a surprise to colleagues who know of my areas of speciality.

The first is the reiteration of the Government’s pledge to continue to meet the NATO commitment to spend at least 2% of national income on defence. I am sorry to say that it is not enough. One of the things that the Select Committee on Defence managed to establish, through a great deal of hard work and original research by its professional and dedicated staff, was a comparison over the decades of what happened to defence with a graph showing something very different for other high-spending subjects. We found that in the early 1960s we spent similar sums—about 6% of GDP—on welfare and defence. Now we spend six times as much on welfare as we do on defence. In the mid-1980s we spent similar sums—about 5% of GDP—on education, health and defence. Now we spend two and a half times as much on education and nearly four times as much on health as we do on defence. In every year from 1981 until 1987, at the height of east-west confrontation, we spent between 4.5% and 5.1% of GDP on defence, yet even after the cold war had finished, even as late as the financial year 1995-96, we were spending 3% of GDP on defence—a total that does not include things such as war pensions and Ministry of Defence civil service pensions.

Mrs Moon: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr Lewis: I will happily give way to my fellow former member of the Defence Committee.

Mrs Moon: I thank the former Chairman of the Select Committee for giving way. He, like me, was at a dinner last night at which it was pointed out that at 2%, without pensions and all the other bizarre add-ons that the Government add to get this country to 2%, France will be spending £6 billion on defence; Germany, when it gets to 2%, will be at £70 billion. We are at £36 billion. How can we hold our heads up high and say that we can defend ourselves with sums like that?

Dr Lewis: The hon. Lady is a staunch defender of everything to do with the defence of this country, and she is absolutely right. It is a measure of the management downwards of our expectations that we are supposed to ring the church bells in triumph at our not falling below the bare minimum that NATO members are supposed to achieve. We really have to rethink this. We really should be looking at 3% of GDP, and not this bare minimum of 2%.

I want to turn mainly to what is said in the Queen’s Speech about the creation of a commission for countering extremism,

“to support the government in stamping out extremist ideology in all its forms, both across society and on the internet, so it is denied a safe space to spread.”

That implies, although it is not explicit, that the new body will be some form of executive agency. I want to hear from the Front Bench that that will be the case, because we are approaching a key point: it looks likely that the territory seized by ISIL/Daesh will be retaken from it. That will rightly be hailed as a considerable
achievement, but we need to remember that only a few years ago no one had heard about ISIL/Daesh, and everybody was overwhelmingly concerned with al-Qaeda. It was unusual for a terrorist organisation to seize territory, because by doing that, ISIL/Daesh gave up the advantage of invisibility, which is what most terrorist organisations make maximum use of. However, I venture to suggest that when it has been removed from its territory and its moment has passed, there will be other groups that take its place, perhaps fighting in different areas and perhaps not trying to seize territory. This will go on and on, as long as there is no effective response to the underlying ideology.

This is not the first time that there has been talk of commissions of this sort. Back in 2013, David Cameron had a taskforce on tackling radicalisation and extremism. On that occasion, too, evidence was taken, but I believe that any future successful plan needs to draw on the similar threats that we faced and overcame in the past.

As I said in an earlier intervention, huge agencies were called into existence to counter other totalitarian ideologies. This rather massive book was never really meant to be published. It is called “The Secret History of PWE”. PWE was the Political Warfare Executive, and the book is a classified history of all the work that it did to counter fascist and Nazi ideology. It was published as recently as 2002. Another organisation, the Information Research Department at the Foreign Office, worked on a grand scale to counter the poisonous ideology of Marxism-Leninism.

What we need today is an organisation that is equally wide-ranging, equally proficient, and equally capable of answering the thoughtful interjection of the hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) on the subject of the vocabulary that we should use—whether we should use the terms “Islamic”, “un-Islamic”, or simply “violent extremism”. We need an agency to do that. Until we have such an agency, and until it operates to scale, groups will continue to crop up to implement the ideology, and we do not want that to happen.

2.20 pm

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): It is always a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis). He mentioned the new commission for countering terrorism. I look forward to debating the issues surrounding the commission with him and with many other Members, and to listening to what the Government have to say. This is a very important initiative, and we need to get it right.

As the House debates any issue relating to security and home affairs, not just today but in the coming weeks and months, we must recognise what has happened in the last few weeks. There have been the terrorist outrages in Manchester, at London Bridge and at the Muslim Welfare House in Finsbury Park, and, of course, there has been the tragedy at Grenfell Tower. Those issues, and how the House responds to them, will be a measure of whether Parliament is serving the British people properly.

Having read the Queen’s Speech, I want to address some of those issues, and others that will occupy this Parliament. I intend to concentrate on three themes: sovereignty, security and regulation. Let me begin with sovereignty. As we debate the issues surrounding Brexit, we must bear in mind that criminals, terrorists and organised crime do not recognise borders. They love borders: they can hide from justice, and seek succour. How we as a country keep our people safe and secure will be partly determined by how we work with other countries. In the European Union we developed, over time, a set of organisations, policies and systems that was keeping our people safe: Europol, Eurojust, ECRIS—the European Criminal Records Information System—the Schengen information system, and the European arrest warrant. Those systems and policies help our people. They catch terrorists, they catch rapists, they catch murderers. As we debate our relationship with those very important crime-fighting systems, we have to get it right.

During the Brexit debate, some have said, “We will still be part of those organisations: do not worry.” Well, I do worry. I visited Europol in 2009, and met Rob Wainwright, the head of Europol, a Brit and a former MI5 agent. He led, and leads, the organisation very well, but after Brexit, it will not be a Brit who is leading it. Over a period during the setting up of those institutions—those crime-fighting mechanisms—the British Government, and parties of all colours, were at the centre of the development of rules for them. We will not be, after Brexit. I worry greatly about how those mechanisms will evolve. These are very important discussions. I also worry about the Government’s position on the European Court of Justice, which manages issues relating to the European crime-fighting institutions. I think that the rejection of the Court is a serious mistake on the Government’s part, and that they will come to rue it.

When it comes to security, yes, those European co-operation systems are fundamental, but so is the need for more police. We heard from the shadow Home Secretary about the mess that the current Government have made in the police. We have heard from the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Cressida Dick, that the situation is serious. The Government can quote figure after figure, but if they look at what is happening in our constituencies, they will know that cuts are affecting police on the ground. Since May 2015, my constituency has lost nearly 10% of its police officers, which is having a big impact: crime is going up in my area. The Government must stop these police cuts.

As we heard from the right hon. Member for New Forest East, the proposal for a commission for countering extremism prompts many questions. Will the commission be independent? Will it be accountable to the House? Will it reach out to all groups who want to help the Government fight extremism, and will it look at all causes of extremism? Common sense suggests that extremism must have multiple causes, including terrorist groups recruiting and the activities of hate preachers, but there is one cause on which I want to focus briefly, and that is Islamophobia.

Islamophobia is rife in our country, and we do not speak out against it enough. British Muslims play an incredibly important and positive role in our society, but that is rarely recognised, in the media above all. The reporting of some newspapers makes it appear that British Muslims are the enemy within, and the House should speak out against the press barons who allow such reporting. Just a few months ago, a headline in The Sun read “1 in 5 Brit Muslims’ sympathy for jihadis”. The press regulator said that that was “significantly
misleading”, but the headlines still come. “British Muslims are killing our troops”, according to one newspaper. Other headlines read “Britain goes halal” and “Muslims tell us how to run our schools”. Those are outrageous headlines, and they are irresponsible. I hope that when the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary meet newspaper editors, that issue will be No. 1 on their list, because if we are not countering Islamophobia, we are not working against one of the issues that are creating extremism.

My last point concerns regulation. We must challenge the way in which we debate regulation. Regulations are not always bad; many are superb. I am afraid that Conservatives have an ideological block about some regulations. I was once told by the former Member of Parliament for Brentwood and Ongar that regulations were communist. I told him that “Thou shalt not kill” was a good regulation—and it was introduced before the time of Marx or Lenin.

2.26 pm

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey).

When the national health service was launched in July 1948, it was launched on the basis of three core principles: that it should meet the needs of everyone, that it should be free at the point of delivery, and that it should be based on clinical need and not the ability to pay. Those principles continue to serve us very well; they are supported across the House, and they have been reinforced by the NHS constitution.

The extraordinary success of the NHS and public health provision lies in its delivery of increased life expectancy. Many people who now survive into adulthood would not have done so when I qualified as a doctor, some years ago. However, that extraordinary success hands us the key responsibility and challenge of ensuring that we can continue to provide and to meet the needs of everyone in the coming decades. The right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) spoke of the importance of joint working across the House. Given that we now have a different parliamentary arithmetic, I agree with her, and I would extend that to the way we talk about funding of health and social care.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): Last week I was told by Pauline that her mum, 79-year-old Sheila, who has dementia and heart failure, suffers from seizures and is unable to eat, go to the toilet or dress on her own, has been denied a funded place in a care home. Does the hon. Lady agree that that is a scandal that needs to be resolved?

Dr Wollaston: The hon. Lady has made a very important point. We will all see similar cases in our surgeries. However, we will not resolve the problem by having constant arguments about how we are going to do so. What we must do is agree, across the House, on how we are to provide long-term sustainable funding. I commend the House of Lords Select Committee on the Long-term Sustainability of the NHS for its work on the provision of long-term sustainable funding for health and social care. I welcome the commitment from Ministers in the
I welcome the progress that we have made on reducing the use of cells as a place of safety for those with serious mental health problems. Their use is wholly inappropriate and I hope that we can make further progress on that. There is much more that we can do to improve mental health care, but we have some excellent proposals in the five-year forward view. This is all about implementation, and I urge the Secretary of State to do everything he can to ensure that the money reaches the frontline, that and that we make further progress on improving the mental health of young people and adults alike.

2.34 pm

**Sir Kevin Barron** (Rother Valley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), who chaired the Health Select Committee in the last Parliament.

It is now widely accepted that the adult social care sector in the UK is in a state of crisis. Over recent years, funding has fallen and demand has risen, and the sector has not kept pace. The Queen’s Speech has failed to address the long-term funding issues behind this crisis that are currently overwhelming not only the social care sector but the NHS. Our hospitals and surgeries are full, social care is on its knees and staff are working under impossible conditions in a system struggling to cope. The Government’s choice to provide less funding than the health service needs is compromising safe staffing levels. They talk about providing extra funding, but this is set against the backdrop of enforced savings in the NHS that are far in excess of the extra money that they tell us, in every debate, that the NHS is going to get.

It is wrong and counterproductive to look at social care simply as care for the elderly. Nearly 33% of all the people receiving long-term social care in 2015-16 were under 65 years of age. They account for almost 50% of the expenditure, at almost £4.6 billion a year. Working-age adults with a learning disability accounted for 33% of the total expenditure, at almost £6.6 billion a year. We need to recognise the full cost of social care in this country and decide how those costs are going to be met. In the fading final few months of the last Labour Government, tripartite talks took place between Labour Ministers, Conservatives and Liberal Democrats about how to meet those costs. Two Members who have spoken today—the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) and the hon. Member for Totnes—have emphasised that we need, as a nation, to take control of this. If any example is needed, it is the shambolic mess that the Conservatives got into during the general election campaign. Was there going to be a cap? Was there not going to be a cap? We need to take national action on this, and the sooner the better.

As a past officer of the all-party parliamentary group on smoking and health, I urge the Government to publish the new tobacco control plan. We have been waiting some 18 months for it now. A great deal was achieved under the previous plan: progressive tobacco control legislation was introduced; smoking rates among adults and children have fallen below the target levels; and rates of smoking during pregnancy are very nearly below 10%, which is a huge improvement on a decade ago. This is 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.

**Mrs Main:** Does the right hon. Gentleman share my concern that those improvements might start to tail off, now that the EU tobacco directives include vaping, because it is becoming more and more difficult for people to take up vaping and get themselves off cigarettes?

**Sir Kevin Barron:** As I was saying, we have gone much further than the European directives have told us to do. My understanding is that the new tobacco control plan will have vaping in it. NHS England has told us that vaping is 95% safer than using cigarettes, and it is not a way to get into cigarettes. Some 2.8 million smokers have voluntarily gone on to vaping, which is 95% safer, and we need to ensure that the action plan for tobacco recognises that fact. More will need to be done to support vaping, perhaps in public places as well.

**Gloria De Piero rose—**

**Sir Kevin Barron:** I will give way, for the last time.

**Gloria De Piero:** I declare an interest, as a vaper. Vaping is healthier and safer, but is this not also an issue of social justice? It is far cheaper to vape than to buy cigarettes and, as we know, it is poorer people who are most likely to smoke.

**Sir Kevin Barron:** Yes, indeed it is. Some people say that they do not like vaping because the products are produced by tobacco companies, but that is wholly wrong. I have had a running battle with the tobacco companies for decades in this place, and it is wholly wrong to use attitudes to vaping in that way.

**Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

**Sir Kevin Barron:** Very quickly.

**Vicky Ford:** I just wondered whether the right hon. Gentleman was aware that the European tobacco products directive, which makes things more difficult for vapers, was introduced by a British Labour Member of the European Parliament. At the time, the Conservatives in the European Parliament made the exact point that it would restrict vaping.

**Sir Kevin Barron:** I am very aware of that. I am also very aware that vaping is good for the public health, and I support it.

Moving on, one area where the NHS has contributed to smoking cessation is through the huge network of community pharmacies across the UK, which was treated shoddily by the previous Government. In January this year, the all-party parliamentary health group, which I chair, launched an investigation into the Government’s community pharmacy reforms, and the report showed that the reforms have dented confidence in the sector and raised questions about the Government’s commitment to developing community pharmacy services. The APPG heard, however, that community pharmacy remains well placed to address some of the NHS’s biggest challenges, and we made recommendations that will hopefully strengthen the sector’s ability to serve its patients and mitigate some of the negative impacts of the reforms.
[Sir Kevin Barron]

The overriding priority, though, is for the community pharmacy sector and the Government to come together again to develop and realise a shared vision of clinical services in community pharmacies. I hope the Government will take heed of the report and work constructively with the sector.

The reforms have been made and, as we all know, there has been a massive decrease in the money going into NHS pharmacies, and we need to take stock of that. The Health and Social Care Act 2012 gave the Government—Governments of all sorts—responsibility for reducing health inequality in this country and to promote public health and population health. Running down our pharmacy sector and community pharmacies is not the way to do that. Those health professionals should be helping to improve population health to keep pressure off the NHS, but we are not doing that very well at the moment.

I see that I just have a minute left, so I want to say that nearly all of that work is performed by our superb staff in the NHS, but we are all aware that staff morale across the NHS remains low. The situation has been worsened by real-term cuts in pay through this Government’s public sector pay cap. Current estimates state that over £4.3 billion was cut from NHS staff salaries between 2010 and 2016. These are the people who treated the victims of terror attacks and the dreadful fire in London just a few weeks ago. I think the electorate said in the general election, “No more of this.” The Government should remove the pay cap in order to retain and attract staff, resolve the workforce shortage and ensure safe patient care. I will be supporting the amendment if it is put to the House tonight.

2.42 pm

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron), who made some extraordinarily sensible points. May I take this opportunity to associate myself, on behalf of my constituents in East Devon, with the earlier tributes paid to the victims of Grenfell Tower and the terrorist attacks? I also pay tribute to the extraordinary work of the emergency services and to NHS staff for their incredible efforts.

In the 2017 Gracious Speech, the only mention of social care, to which I will dedicate my speech, was:

“My Ministers will work to improve social care and will bring forward proposals for consultation.”

That is in line with the revised section of the 2017 Conservative manifesto, but no more details have been announced about the Green Paper or when it will be published. When it is published and goes out to consultation, it is vital that elderly people, who do not always have access to the internet, are given fair chance to respond and to put their views forward. I, too, believe that the recent election showed how worried people are about their future healthcare needs. While the system needs to be fixed, it is incumbent on the Government to have a frank and honest consultation on how we fund and provide social care for the most vulnerable in our society. The issue has been kicked into the long grass for too long, so I have two offers to make to the Government this afternoon.

Over 850,000 people in the United Kingdom are living with dementia—equivalent to the entire population of Devon—and that number is expected to double in the next 20 years. Over 12,000 people in Devon are living with dementia, 4,500 of whom are in East Devon. The number of over-65s in Devon will increase from 195,000 in 2015 to 264,400 in 2030—an increase of 35.5%. Seventeen per cent. of the UK population is over the age of 65, compared with 24% of the Devon population. Some 2.38% of the population is over the age of 85, compared with 6.25% of the population of Budleigh Salterton in my constituency. In other words, with those ageing demographics, the rest of England will look like Budleigh Salterton in 2050. East Devon has over 6,500 people over the age of 85 and about 40,000 over the age of 65, so my offer to the Government is this: if we want to get long-term social care right nationally, look at what the country will look like in 2050, which is what towns such as Budleigh Salterton look like now. If we get it right in Devon, we will get it right across the country. As a Devon MP, I am offering—I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) will also agree—to act as the guinea pig for getting social care right in this country. That is offer No. 1.

Offer No. 2 builds on what some of us tried to do with the Prime Minister some months before the general election when a cross-party group of us went to see her to talk about long-term care. We thought that the issue should be apolitical and that we should finally build on early reports to get things right. Our efforts were not taken up at the time, but in the new spirit of things following the election I believe that we would all be prepared to work together to make the offer again. Where better to start than to build on the “Fairer Care Funding” report—the Dilnot report—of July 2011, which contains many good things, not least a cap, but it also omitted other things, such as some form of insurance to cover the cap. We should leave nothing off the table, but a cross-party group should steer the Government forwards on this matter.

Those are my two offers. As a humble Back Bencher, I will work with other Back Benchers to get social care right in this country, and I offer up Devon, particularly East Devon, as the guinea pig or template for trying to get a social care system that is properly integrated with the rest of the NHS. If we get it right there, we will get it right across the nation, and everyone, including our electorates, will be enormously grateful to us.

2.47 pm

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): I primarily want to talk about the state of GP services, with particular reference to a temporarily closed surgery in Trimdon village in my constituency, to try to make a point about the crisis in GP services. While the closure is only temporary, the surgery will open again next month with limited services.

I want to start with a few words about the national picture. One in four patients now wait a week or more to see a GP or do not get an appointment at all. We are 10,000 GPs, 3,500 midwives and 40,000 nurses short of the number we need. Against a target 3,250 GP training places for 2016-17, Health Education England said that only 3,000 were filled. The number of GPs in this country dropped by nearly 100 in the year to September 2016,
and in three years’ time the NHS will have 1,200 fewer family doctors than predicted because there is a struggle to fill training places. There has been a huge drop in the number of GPs in training. In 2016, 92 GP practices closed and 34 were merged with other practices. A survey of 2,000 GPs found that two in five plan to quit in the next two years. Since 2014, there has been a 150% rise in patients being forced to move practices due to record levels of closures—that is 265,000 people. Although the Government want to recruit 5,000 more GPs by 2020, one in three GPs are considering retirement in the next five years—about 10,000 doctors.

That is part of the background that has led to the temporary closure of the GP surgery in Trimdon village. The surgery is one of four operated by Skerne Medical Group—the other three are in Sedgefield village, Fishburn and Trimdon Colliery. The surgeries are very busy and service some of the most deprived areas not just of the county but of the country. In a letter to the registered patients who use the surgery in Trimdon village, Skerne Medical Group announced that the surgery would need to close on 21 June 2017 due to “unprecedented circumstances with our clinical team and the continued difficulties in recruitment.”

Eighty-eight per cent. of residents in the area are registered with Skerne Medical Group, and the GP group has told me that the building housing the surgery in Trimdon village is not fit for purpose, which for me is a reason not for closing but for upgrading the premises.

I also understand that the GPs are preparing to expand their facilities in Sedgefield village, which is good news for the residents of Sedgefield, but I do not see why, if investment is due in Sedgefield, it cannot be due in surgeries such as in Trimdon village, especially when, considering the indices of health deprivation, Trimdon is one of the 10% most deprived areas of England and Wales—Sedgefield village is not. There is still a great need for Skerne Medical Group to keep the surgery open in Trimdon.

The House of Commons Library has provided me with figures on the amount and kinds of prescriptions issued to the residents of Trimdon. More prescriptions are distributed in Trimdon than in 95% of areas of England. Furthermore, prescriptions for gastrointestinal drugs—issued for ulcers, for example—are 48% above the national average. Prescriptions for drugs for cardiovascular issues are 50% above the national average. Prescriptions for drugs for breathing difficulties, including asthma, are 55% above the national average. Prescriptions for antidepressants, some of which are issued for chronic pain, are 51% above the national average, and prescriptions for painkillers themselves are double the national average. More than 40% of Trimdon’s population are over the age of 50, which is well above the average for the rest of the UK. Trimdon has an ageing population with chronic health problems.

I say this to Skerne Medical Group: “I know the issues, and I know you offer the best service you can, but I do not believe the closure of the surgery in Trimdon is temporary or not, will help the situation. Especially when there are expansion plans for the surgery in Sedgefield, surely the needs of Trimdon are also great.”

If the surgery in Trimdon is not fit for purpose, it must be made so. I can understand the problem with the shortage of GPs, because that is an issue not just for this practice but is happening all over the region and the nation. I know that the closure of the Trimdon surgery is temporary and that it is to reopen in July, offering only a limited service, but Skerne Medical Group came to see me about a year ago to say that it wanted to close the surgery permanently, which I said I would oppose all the way.

How can a village that is in the 10% most deprived areas of the country be left without a GP surgery physically situated in the heart of the community? Of course the medical group has other surgeries, but forcing an ageing population with high levels of chronic illness to use those other facilities will put pressure on those surgeries, extending waiting times even further. The crisis in GP provision must be looked at nationally, because it is now starting to affect people who really need that support and help.

2.53 pm

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I wish to speak briefly on the Gracious Speech as my first modest contribution to the proceedings of this House. Before I go on, I pay tribute to my predecessor, Peter Lilley, who served in this House and served his nation for 34 years. Most hon. Members on both sides of the House will be aware of his distinction in high office, serving under the premierships of Margaret Thatcher and John Major, of his huge intellect and of his knowledge on a range of subjects. But they may be less aware of the genuine affection in which he is held by the people of Hitchin and Harpenden, which I know from every single day of the general election campaign, and of how effective he was as a local constituency MP, in addition to all the offices he held. I am inspired by his example.

I thank the people of Hitchin and Harpenden for sending me to this House. Hitchin and Harpenden, and all of our villages in between, are not just physically beautiful and historic, with a landscape and character unique not just in Hertfordshire but in England and this great nation as a whole; the people are what really make this place special, and my constituents are special, in a very good way. They are kind, open, tolerant and sometimes challenging—they do like writing letters—and it is a great honour to represent them here in this House.

I come to this House with no gilded lineage but as a child of immigrants. My mother, born in Britain but growing up in Nigeria, became a pharmacist. My father, born and bred in Nigeria, is now an NHS doctor. Both came to this country in the 1980s in search of a better life. In particular, they believe that a good-quality education is key, not just for giving a child—an individual—a decent start in life but as the foundation of the future health and prosperity of our society as a whole. They worked incredibly hard and sacrificed a lot—some might say too much—to pay for the best education that Britain could offer, and I was immensely fortunate in that. It was, indeed, an amazing start in life.

And it is education that I believe to be at the heart of everything. I believe we can do better. During the election campaign there was a lot of debate in my constituency, and I know in many others, about whether school funding is adequate and about the excessive bureaucracy that teachers still have to put up with. I happen to think that we need more of the former and less of the latter, but the debate on education needs to be bigger than that, more fundamental.
[Bim Afolami]

Are we truly preparing our children for the second industrial revolution we are living through, in which we do not know what jobs will be like in 10 years, let alone 20? Some hon. Members, on both sides of the House, obsess about the type of school, whether it be comprehensive, grammar or private, but should we not focus more on outcomes than on the form? How do we significantly raise both the morale and the standards of teachers everywhere in every school? I promised my constituents that I will bring a relentless focus to that area, and I intend to do so every single day I am in this House, and it starts with fairer funding for every school. In many areas, yes, that will mean more resources.

I enter this House at a time when we face serious challenges as a nation—not just Brexit or, indeed, health and social care but the challenge of creating the most dynamic, productive and technologically advanced economy in the world. Education is central to that challenge because it is our future. The world-class human capital produced by our education system needs to be combined with financial capital investment, with better infrastructure and with a more competitive, simpler tax system for individuals and businesses. That is what a 21st-century, new economy looks like.

Although all Conservatives believe in world-class education and a dynamic, forward-thinking free market economy, we must also consider the type of society we are building together—a just society that, in the words of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, works for everyone. That means zero tolerance of discrimination. That means making sure that our increasingly diverse society of all creeds and races is more cohesive. That means that the poorest among us deserve the right to live not just in decent and, yes, safe social housing but that they also have the right to aspire to own a home of their own. These are the challenges of our age. These are the challenges that we need to meet. I look forward to working with colleagues on both sides of the House on meeting those challenges in our time.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I very warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) on a maiden speech that was both eloquent and self-assured. It was a contribution of the highest quality, and the reaction of colleagues bears testimony to the truth of what I have just said. In welcoming the hon. Gentleman to the House, I wish him every success in the course of his parliamentary career.

Colleagues, before we continue the debate I have a short announcement to make. The House will know that the election of Deputy Speakers took place today and that the ballot was closed at 1.30 pm. The counting has now finished. Before I announce the results, let me thank, and thank effusively, I hope on behalf of all colleagues, the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) and the right hon. Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) for public-spiritedly serving as temporary Deputy Speakers during the debates on the Queen’s Speech. They excelled themselves in that role, they are great public servants and I think the House is extremely appreciative of what they have done. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”]

Let me also take this opportunity to pay a warm personal tribute to Natascha Engel. Natascha unfortunately lost her seat at the general election, but she served with real commitment and effectiveness as a Deputy Speaker in the last Parliament. That, of course, was service coming on top of a period of great distinction as the first Chair of the Backbench Business Committee. In all, Natascha served in this place for 12 years, and we thank her for the quality and commitment of her service. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”]

I shall now announce the result of the ballot that was held today for the election of Deputy Speakers. Mr Lindsay Hoyle was elected as Chairman of Ways and Means. Mrs Eleanor Laing was elected as First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means. Dame Rosie Winterton was elected as Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means. I congratulate all three colleagues who have been elected, and I greatly look forward to working with them. I also want to thank the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) for contesting the election, and for all that she has done and continues to do in this House, not least in the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association work which she enthusiastically, and to great effect, undertakes. I am sure we are all going to hear a great deal more from her in the years to come in this Chamber. The results of the count will be made available as soon as possible in the Vote Office and will be published on the internet. I hope that we can have one last expression of congratulations, with a suitable, “Hear, hear!” to victorious colleagues and thanks to the hon. Member for City of Durham, after which I am keen to proceed with the debate. Well done! [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”]

3.3 pm

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): May I begin by paying tribute to my predecessor, James Wharton, who showed a strong commitment to international development and worked hard for his constituents? I also wish to thank the Member of Parliament before him, Dari Taylor, who served Stockton South tirelessly for 13 years and was a formidable advocate for our community.

Some of my colleagues have been excited to see another doctor in the House. Members have told me about their bad backs and other problems that confidentiality and common decency prevent me from divulging, but I am afraid I have bad news for them: I have left my prescription pad at home. However, they can join me in keeping fit at my 6 am boot camp if they want. I am a big physical activity enthusiast, and I hope to encourage colleagues to lead active and healthy lifestyles. So Mr Speaker, I invite you and other hon. Members to set your alarms for tomorrow morning.

Stockton South is a diverse place with a proud history, a strong community and vast potential. It includes a large part of the town of Stockton, a vanguard of the industrial revolution and the birthplace of some of the finest ships to set sail. Innovation and industry have been a cornerstone in Stockton since the first tracks were laid for the Stockton to Darlington railway, and that is still evident in many of the businesses across the constituency. Today, Stockton shows strong leadership in regional arts; we are proud to provide sanctuary to refugees; and we have a vibrant voluntary sector and good-quality schools.
Stockton South also includes Yarm, which has a healthy small business community; Eaglescliffe, which has the leading manufacturing business, Nifco; Ingleby Barwick, which is home to many public servants, among others; and Thornaby, which has a proud history as an RAF base, protecting Teesside’s industry during the second world war. Thornaby was the place where Margaret Thatcher walked over the rubble that was once the Head Wrightson steel foundry—her infamous “walk in the wilderness”. The people of Stockton South have asked me to dispatch Thatcherism into the wilderness.

The diversity and tolerance among people of all faiths, beliefs and backgrounds in Stockton South is to be cherished, but, sadly, there is also diversity in terms of wide health and socioeconomic inequalities that cannot be tolerated. The life expectancy for people in some parts of my constituency is 10 years less than for those in others—10 years’ difference in life expectancy at birth. As a family doctor, every day I have seen too many people who have been left behind: people battling mental health problems, besieged by loneliness, and people with learning disabilities who have preventable illness. This holds people back and drains their potential. Not only is it unjust, but it is damaging to all of us. When a person’s health becomes so poor that they cannot work or someone’s father dies a premature death, we all lose.

Sadly, the people who have the most to gain from preventive healthcare are the people least likely to have their cancer screen or their diabetes check. We must challenge this so-called “inverse care law”, whereby those most in need are least likely to access healthcare. We need the most effort to be made to improve the health of the most vulnerable. We should invest in making pregnancy and the first 1,000 days of life from conception safer and better for people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. That is where the evidence tells us the greatest gains can be made. We should remodel our healthcare system so that prevention is given the status and resource now afforded to our treatment services. Prevention really is better than cure.

This Queen’s Speech did not have anything to say about health inequalities or about our lack of investment in public health. Every single person who cast a vote in this election wanted so much more from this Queen’s Speech, and they have been let down. The parents who told me they will have to wait three years for their child to get an assessment for autism—they wanted improvements. The families of people with dementia, worrying about the cost of care—they wanted clarity. The hard-working nurses facing 10 years of pay caps—they wanted fairness. An inspired and rejuvenated electorate have sent us here to create change. What an opportunity we have to listen to their voices. From many ordinary mouths came one extraordinary message: we must listen and we must act.

3.9 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in response to the Gracious Speech, and to follow both the hon. Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams) and my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami)—two new Members. I have to tell the hon. Member for Stockton South that, having ruptured my Achilles twice in the last two years, I will be probably be looking at a pass note for the 6 am boot camp, but it is always reassuring, particularly for me, to have another doctor in the House.

May I also praise my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden for his contribution? His constituents will be reassured by his words today, including none other than Dora Scott, a constituent in Kimpton who is in her 90s and who also happens to be my aunt. We will both be keeping an eye out for him.

In the time that I have, I wish to focus on social care and its impact on health. Bexhill and Battle perhaps has a higher proportion of retired people than many other constituencies, and that requires me to speak up on their behalf. All politicians tend to do this when they sit on the Government Benches, but I urge us to get some form of consensus on this pressing issue for all our retired constituents.

It causes me great concern that despite the extra money that the Government put into the social care system, radical reform is absolutely required. I absolutely welcome the £2 billion that the Government put in earlier this year, but that remains unfunded, due to the failure to get the tax system to pay that extra amount. I also welcome the 3% levy on council tax bills, but in my constituency, where there is a smaller proportion of council tax receipts, it falls to people to pay even more. That concerns me for another reason that was prominent in the election campaign: intergenerational fairness. Is it right, for example, that my younger constituents, who do not have a home of their own, are saving as hard as they can, are paying private rent and cannot afford a deposit, are paying more and more on their council tax bills, which means that a home of their own is even further out of sight? We must look at not just funding, but radical reform, which brings me to the manifesto on which we stood.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman mentions funding. Does he think that England should see a change in the Barnett consequentials as a result of the Northern Ireland deal—the grubby deal or the protection money that has been offered to the Democratic Unionist party? I am talking about £30 billion to £40 billion for England, which would help greatly in the case that he mentions.

Huw Merriman: When I looked at the winter fuel allowance and the amount of money that we would put back into health as a result of the changes, I was concerned that, under Barnett, some of that money could end up funding Scotland, when Scotland already has the ability to make those decisions about funding. My concern is that as we devolve ever more powers to Scotland, we are not also asked to devolve ever more finance as well.

Let me come back to my main thread. With respect to social care, consensus and intergenerational fairness, I think that we should consider the ideas in my party’s manifesto. Those ideas were worthy of more thought than was afforded to them by the Opposition parties. I also found it incredibly distressing that our vulnerable constituents were receiving election literature through their letterboxes saying, “Under the Conservatives, you will be forced to sell your home in order to go into residential care.” That was put out by the Liberal Democrats, when, in fact, our manifesto was changing that current
practice. They were completely misinterpreting the position—and, worse, to a group in our communities who are particularly vulnerable to that type of scare tactics.

Let me turn to pensions. Representing a constituency such as mine, I absolutely agree that we need to look after those on pensions, especially those who have been on fixed incomes and have not had much of a return over the past few years. It is true to say that the triple lock has ensured a 22% increase in pensions, whereas earnings have only risen by just over 7% and prices by only 12%. Again, we must look at intergenerational fairness and ask ourselves how we can ensure that, as well as equipping our elderly and retired constituents to ensure that they can continue with good means, we also look after those who will ultimately fund them.

I am absolutely delighted that this Government are pushing ahead with the consultation exercise. When it comes to contributions to social care, we should ask those who can afford it to take some form of individual responsibility. They should make those payments themselves; otherwise we will effectively see the taxpayer subordinated to those who end up inheriting under the system. Yes, I agree that those people have worked hard all their lives to create their nest egg and for their house, but ultimately I want to ensure that people have the best-quality social care, and that will not happen unless we reform it.

I ask all Opposition Members to think about intergenerational fairness, and to ask those people who can afford it to make more of a contribution, which means that those people starting off on the ladder, who have to think not only about buying a property but saving for their advanced age, have that opportunity as well. Without taking that type of adult decision, we will never get any further in reforming social care.

In my last 30 seconds, Madam Deputy Speaker—congratulations on your return—I make a plea on behalf of my schools. At a school hustings, at which there were candidates from all three parties, I told pupils that there was no point in getting something today, because they, more than any other generation, would have to pay for it tomorrow. Despite what has been said about our party’s popularity with the young, more people in that school voted for the Conservative candidate than any of the others, because they recognised that we have the policies to deliver for them, as well as for those who are retired.

3.16 pm

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I congratulate you, Madam Deputy Speaker—and my right hon. Friends the Members for Chorley (Mr Hoyle), and for Doncaster Central (Dame Rosie Winterton)—on your election to a fantastic role in which you will support the Speaker. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) on a confident maiden speech. He made a good impression on the House today, and I am sure that he will do so again in the future. I welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams) and congratulate him on his maiden speech. He will bring great knowledge to this House. As his seat was a Labour gain in this election, I am particularly pleased to see him in his place.

This was the eighth election that I have fought in Delyn constituency, and the seventh that I have won, so I am certainly pleased to be back. I have never gone into an election knowing that I would win, and this one was particularly tough. It is important that, having returned to this House, I represent all the people of my constituency and ensure that the issues that are important to them are raised.

The Prime Minister called this election on Brexit. The Queen’s Speech is largely about Brexit, but the issues that my constituents brought up on the doorstep were anything but Brexit, most of the time. They were arguing about jobs, security, public spending, austerity and, particularly, security and policing. I wish to focus on the latter, not least because in the middle of this general election campaign we had the horrific events in Manchester, Borough Market and, latterly, Finsbury Park. We also remember the incident in this House earlier this year, when a brave police officer lost his life defending our liberties.

It is important that we focus on security and policing, and I will touch on four areas. I want to know how the Government intend to increase police numbers and change their policy—an issue also raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper). Our focus on policing has changed following those incidents and the acceptance that austerity has been a difficult challenge for the community. I want to know what progress is being made in improving the number of armed police. I want to know what happens in relation to Eurojust, the European arrest warrant and Europol, to which the Government have not made any commitment in discussions to date. I want to know what plans they have to look at terrorism legislation as a matter of course. Policing has changed dramatically over the past seven years of this Government.

We know the figures, but they are worth repeating: we had 144,235 police officers on the streets of Britain in 2010. We have lost 21,376 officers since then. We had a reduction of over 6,000 police community support officers in that period. The number of firearms officers, which the Home Secretary seemed to trumpet in her contribution earlier this year, has reduced by over 1,337 in that period.

Those reductions are important because we need to focus on how we re-embed the police in this country. Police on the ground help reassure communities, help strengthen neighbourhood policing, and help with the big challenges of terrorism. Police embedded in the community pick up intelligence and recognise some of the challenges of vulnerable adults—challenges posed by both the fascist right and, at the other end of the spectrum, extremist Islamist terrorist potential. That policing on the ground makes a difference. Looking at the current challenges, we should never forget that police officers, in their reduced numbers, are significantly stretched.

Mrs Moon: My right hon. Friend, having served as a Minister with responsibility for policing, will remember the inputs of the Ministry of Defence police in providing security and stability for much of our most important national infrastructure. Is he aware that there is to be a £12.5 million cut in Ministry of Defence policing in this year, which means that fewer armed police officers will be available to support Home Office police?
David Hanson: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I want to challenge the Government, in the winding-up speeches, to say what the Government mean when they talk about an uplift in the number of armed police officers. We have a downlift of more than 1,500 armed police officers.

I praise the speed and effectiveness of the response in London, and indeed in Manchester, but the events in London happened within one mile of a significant concentration of armed police, here in central London. If those events had happened in some parts of the country, there would have been great difficulty in effectively getting an armed police response at the speed that we would expect, and that was delivered by brave police officers here in London.

More police officers are now reporting sick because of stress. The number of police officers who have taken sick leave each year has increased by about 1,500 since 2010. That is because they are under pressure, because they do not have the numbers that there were in the past. It should also be remembered that police officers do not do 24-hour shifts. Police officers take holidays. Police officers sleep. Police officers have time off. Those police officers whom we have are very thinly stretched.

We should also recall that the police officer cohort is ageing; nearly 50% of officers are now in the higher age range. Unless we recruit effectively and speedily, we will not have the level of policing that we would wish to see in our community at large.

I mentioned the European arrest warrant and the European matters that we face as part of Brexit. On Monday, in answer to a question that I asked her, the Prime Minister said,

“As regards Eurojust, Europol and the European arrest warrant, those will be matters for...negotiations”—[Official Report, 26 June 2017: Vol. 626, c. 321.]

I am very sorry; they should not be matters for negotiation. They should be things that we, as a United Kingdom Government, are committed to participating in in the future. We need the European arrest warrant, Eurojust and Europol to ensure that we tackle crime, stop terrorism, bring back to this country people who have committed heinous offences here, and export to other countries people who have committed heinous offences there. I want a commitment from the Government as soon as possible that they will commit to the European arrest warrant, Eurojust and the European security co-operation measures that make so much difference to our lives and our security. We shall be voting against the Queen’s Speech tonight, and we are right to do so until we get clarification on those key issues.

3.23 pm

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): All Members will have their own examples of mental health casework. Often, those constituents will have attended an advice surgery or sent an email for help about a different problem entirely. It could be housing; it could be employment or welfare; it could even be a problem involving the criminal justice system. But it soon becomes clear, after a few questions and a little bit of probing, that the underlying problem is one of undiagnosed—or unsupported—mental illness.

Poor mental health weakens people’s life chances, and many of the effects of deprivation further aggravate the impact of mental illness. Sadly, an increasing proportion of cases from our surgeries involve children suffering from poor mental health. I welcome the Green Paper on children and young people’s mental health, and I am pleased that the Government have committed £1.4 billion for child and adolescent mental health services by 2020. That is absolutely the right thing to do. It will transform mental health treatment for children and young people.

We all need to ensure that it is properly directed and spent in those areas where it was intended to be spent, because it is a shocking fact that one in 10 children in this country have a diagnosable mental health condition.

I am pleased that the Prime Minister launched the expansion of the mental health first aid training scheme in secondary schools yesterday. It is essential that we do more to deliver early intervention to support people’s mental health, rather than relying so heavily on acute mental health services once conditions have deteriorated, sometimes to the point of psychosis. It is the difference between treating an illness and just tackling the immediate symptoms—a distinction that would be so obvious for physical health that surely nobody would argue against its existence. That means ensuring that training for GPs allows them to identify mental health conditions in patients who present with a completely different illness, and ensuring that continuing professional development allows GPs to keep up so that more senior GPs also have the necessary understanding of mental health. It means securing access to successful programmes such as Improving Access to Psychological Therapies—introduced by the previous Government and continued by this one—and other talking therapies, where alternatives to drug-based treatments are appropriate.

I am pleased that the Mental Health Act 1983 is to be reformed. It was doubtless introduced with the very best of intentions and has certainly had many beneficial effects, but in too many cases the starting point seems to be that it treats people with mental illness as threats that need to be contained, rather than as patients who need treatment and support. Of course, there are times when people need to be detained, for their own protection or that of those around them, but then the focus must be on medical treatment rather than, effectively, imprisonment.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): In terms of providing that support in the right environment, would my hon. Friend like to show some appreciation of the Government for the mental health hospital that recently opened just down the road from my constituency? It is a £40 million investment, and will go a long way to providing that kind of support in the local community.

Mike Wood: I absolutely agree. As part of the increased capital investment that the Prime Minister announced earlier this year, the £10 billion capital investment for the national health service will mean not only that new buildings such as the one to which my hon. Friend referred—the new hospital in Sandwell in the west midlands is an example—become more common, but infrastructure such as the new urgent care centre at my own local hospital in Russells Hall is provided so that our NHS can become more effective.

The Secretary of State should take great pride in the changes that he has introduced to guidance on section 135 and 136 powers, which mean that a safe place should usually be a place where patients can receive medical help, rather than the default position of a police cell.
It is time for those changes to be given a statutory footing, and I hope that the new Bill will deliver that. There should be parity of esteem so that people with mental health conditions receive the same respect and equivalent status, and are treated with the same dignity, as people with physical health conditions. It is a positive step that that has been legislated for, and I hope that we will see more and more efforts to make sure that that commitment becomes a reality for constituents who receive treatment for mental health conditions.

If I may briefly speak of my own experience of the health service. As some hon. Friends know, I received rather more direct and personal experience of our hospitals, GPs and outpatient clinics than I had planned at the beginning of the year. I should like to place on record my thanks to the doctors, consultants, nurses and support staff who were all absolutely fantastic in keeping me alive so that I am here now. It has also given me the chance to work with the UK Sepsis Trust and the formidable Ron Daniels. I hope that during this Parliament the Secretary of State will have a chance to look at calls from the trust for simple measures that it is estimated would save perhaps a quarter of the 44,000 lives that are lost as a result of sepsis every year in the UK. They include instigating a national registry to record accurately the true burden of sepsis, raising awareness nationally, and looking at commissioning levers to deliver best practice and reinforce that.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I call Dr Philippa Whitford.

3.31 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker, and my congratulations, too, on your re-election.

I echo what the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) said when highlighting the fact that across all four NHS services the biggest challenge is the increased demand from an ageing population, with huge and growing workforce challenges. That has been aggravated by Brexit. There has been a 95% drop in nursing applications from the EU, along with a prolonged 1% pay cap. Members have rightly paid tribute to the emergency services after the terrorist attacks and the appalling Grenfell fire. It is now time that we met the rhetoric with a decent salary.

It is a bit strange to combine a debate on security with a debate on health, but when I made my maiden speech two years ago during a Queen’s Speech debate I highlighted to the Government the fact that their first priority was the security of their citizens, not by replacing weapons of mass destruction but by providing the security that comes from knowing that there is a roof over your head and food on the table. It also matters what kind of roof it is. The people of Grenfell were failed by local government scrimping and saving on cladding and sprinklers, and by successive UK Governments, who did not act on previous warnings. The issue of cladding and sprinklers was first raised as a result of a fatal fire in my constituency in 1999, when a disabled man lost his life. That was 18 years ago.

Anna Soubry: Does the hon. Lady not agree that it is absolutely imperative in the wake of this terrible tragedy that we wait to establish the facts? One fact that we know is that the local authority had almost a quarter of a billion pounds in reserves, which is a good indication that it was not about scrimping and scraping. There may well have been other serious failures, but we await the full public inquiry, and we will then establish all the facts.

Dr Whitford: I am not saying that the local authority was scrimping and saving because it did not have money; it was because it was not spending the money. It used cheap panels and it did not put in sprinklers. Some 600-plus buildings across London and England are covered in panels that clearly contain flammable materials. We hear from Camden that fire doors were missing, despite millions of pounds having been spent. As Ben Okri says in his poem, there has been a focus on surface and appearance rather than on the substance of such buildings and the protection of people who live in them.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I always listen to the hon. Lady with care and respect, but I appeal to her to look at the evidence base before making the remarks that she has. Words are important. We have established an inquiry that will establish the facts and make recommendations. Until then, with the greatest respect, I think that her remarks are premature.

Dr Whitford: The hon. Gentleman may feel that my remarks are premature with regard to Grenfell, but they are not when it comes to Lakanal, Irvine or other terrible fires that were clearly shown to relate to cladding and where sprinklers could have made a difference.

We have been repeatedly warned over the past 18 years and we have not taken action. The people in Grenfell died not only because of fire regulations, but because of inequality. They lived in the richest borough in the richest city, yet they were among the most poor and vulnerable. That tower stands like a black monolith shadowing the whole city and this place. The people in it were not well served.

We see people dying in Grenfell, suddenly—the drama and the horror. Yet people die of inequality, poverty and deprivation all the time. There is a 20-year gap in longevity between the richest and poorest, both in life expectancy and healthy life expectancy. Some 1,400 children under 15 die every year as a direct result of poverty—that is like the roof of a secondary school collapsing on them every year. If that happened, surely we would take action.

Anna Soubry: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr Whitford: For the last time.

Anna Soubry: I echo the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison): I have a lot of respect for most of what the hon. Lady says. However, does she agree that no one side in this place has an exclusive hold on the moral things that guide us? All of us come into this place to make life better for all our constituents. The eradication of poverty runs deep to the roots of conservatism as it does elsewhere in this House.

Dr Whitford: If the right hon. Lady had listened to what I was saying, she would have heard me say “UK Governments”. I talked about a period of 18 years, which involves not one but repeated Governments, who have been complacent and not taken action.
The children who die because they are born into poverty die of low birthweight, chronic illness, suicide, road traffic accidents and—poignantly—house fires. Children who live in poverty suffer from hunger, malnutrition, cold and damp houses, and chronic illnesses. They lose their chance to succeed at school and to have the life opportunities that a lot of us take for granted.

The number of children living in poverty is now approaching 4 million and is expected to reach 5 million by the end of this decade; that is an indictment on everyone in this House. On average, 28% of UK children live in poverty, but that average hides the inequality across the UK. There are wards in the north of England where the figure reaches the high 40s—nearly half of the children in such areas grow up in poverty. Those children will not have decent life chances—and if we think that money is being saved, we are wrong: we will be picking up the pieces later in their lives when they end up with addictions or in the criminal justice system.

We need to tackle the situation now. The biggest driver of ill health is poverty and the biggest driver of poverty is the decisions that we make. We had welfare Acts in 2012 and 2015, and that was when child poverty stopped falling and started to rise. We need to change the situation. As the Prime Minister keeps saying, we have a responsibility to every single person across this country, and that includes children.

Vicky Ford: It is great to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is the hon. Lady aware of the figures released by the Office for National Statistics today? Of the 28 EU countries, the UK has the fifth lowest rate of child poverty. There is more to be done, but surely that is a very good start.

Dr Whitford: That may come down to a matter of definition. Last year, this House had a Government who were trying to get rid of child poverty by simply putting a line through it with a pen and removing the title from the Social Mobility and Children Poverty Commission. They wanted to abandon the Child Poverty Act 2010 and the commitment to end child poverty, and to stop measuring income because—oh, let’s face it—the money within a family does not contribute to poverty.

Joanna Cherry: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Dr Whitford: I am sorry, but I am running out of time. We all have a responsibility to the children across the United Kingdom to invest in their future and not to allow them to be cast aside, or we will pay the price later. This needs to change now. That is how to change health and to protect NHS services.

3.40 pm

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): I am delighted to see a fellow Scot in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker; many congratulations. It is also an honour to follow the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford).

It is an honour to speak for the people of the constituency of Gordon. My constituency was formed in 1983 and has since been superbly represented by two Members. Malcolm Bruce represented Gordon from 1983 until 2015. He was an able and well-admired Member of Parliament, becoming a member of the Privy Council in 2006. He was knighted in 2012 and became a life peer in 2015 as Lord Bruce of Bennachie.

I also pay tribute to my immediate predecessor and former First Minister of Scotland, Alex Salmond, who was elected to represent Gordon in 2015. He was first elected in Banff and Buchan in 1987, served at both Westminster and Holyrood and was a parliamentarian for 30 years—30 years as a public servant dedicated to his cause. I wish him all the very best.

The traveller through Gordon starts in the hills of the west, first chancing to Huntly, the home of the Gordon clan. Heading east, they experience the howes and valleys, taking in the Garioch and Inverurie, on to Ellon and the coast at Newburgh and Balmedie. This is good, productive land on a scale that can compete, dominated by family farms. The constituency takes in large parts of the north of the city of Aberdeen. Expanding rapidly during the boom years, it has shown remarkable resilience. It is industrious and has adapted to lower oil prices, and I look forward to the city region deal linking the city and shire.

Gordon has a diverse and resilient economy driven by locally grown entrepreneurs. It is an area of enterprise and employment, where the number of registered businesses has grown from 4,500 to 5,200 over five years. Having seen downturns in the North sea before, many supply companies have moved their focus to exports outside Europe: exports of personnel with expertise developed in the North sea, technology built and manufactured in the north-east and unique engineering techniques applicable to other industries. Offshore oil and gas is focused on efficiency. It is a long-term investor and needs stability.

The downturn in oil and gas has taught us to promote other industries, such as tourism, which was long neglected. Gordon is rich with castles, stunning and bracing beaches and access to limitless outdoor pursuits. The area is well served by hotels and restaurants and very well served by golf courses, even one owned by the President of the United States. Industry, however, has been hurt by punitive business rates in the north-east. During the oil boom, there was a froth of high rents. Business rates increases of 100% to 200% are not unusual and coincide with a fragile recovery. The business sector recognises that it must contribute, but excessive rates damage employment, investment and sentiment, and we are at risk of displacing jobs. The Scottish Government committed that every penny raised locally would stay local. It was none other than my predecessor, the former First Minister, who made this change to regional finances. I ask that the north-east regional councils get to keep the extra funds raised, allowing councils to mitigate the business rates rises if they so choose.

All three of the north-east constituencies of Scotland are geographically dominated by farming. Farming in Scotland is the bedrock of the food and drink industry, which turns over £14 billion a year. It accounts for 19% of total manufacturing, and supports 360,000 jobs. As that bedrock, agriculture deserves our support to achieve efficient production and a fair share of the high street price.

In the light of today’s debate, I implore the Minister to highlight the plight of health provision in Gordon and the north-east of Scotland to his counterpart in the Scottish Government. Aberdeen Royal Infirmary serves 600,000 people. We depend on its continued expertise; it is of the utmost importance that it preserves its international
reputation as a teaching hospital. In the last few years, it has been at risk of playing second fiddle to the hospitals of Glasgow and Edinburgh.

The people of Gordon would ask us to respect the geography—it is three to four hours’ travel time to the central belt—and to look again at the shortage of doctors and nurses in the north-east. Gordon, like so many other areas, has an ageing population, and I would encourage the Minister to bring the debate out into the open on how we best prepare for demands on our services in the future.

Gordon and the whole north-east makes a huge contribution to the Scottish and UK economies, paying for the services we all depend on. It is not an area of privilege, but an area of hard work, an area of new start-ups and reinvention, and an area of enterprise and employment. Gordon is an outward-looking constituency, a confident area and an area of optimism and growth, ready to embrace opportunities, including Brexit. Through the democratic process, Gordon has fiercely defended its place in the United Kingdom.

I would suggest to Opposition Members that this country needs to talk up its opportunities, talk up its contribution to the Scottish and UK economies, paying our services in the future.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I warmly welcome you back to your place in the House, Madam Deputy Speaker. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) on an excellent maiden speech, and welcome him to the House—I am sure he will serve his constituents extremely well.

I welcome the focus, prioritisation and investment in the Queen’s Speech in regard to mental health—parity of esteem must be achieved. I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests and to my background in psychology.

In Scotland, we have a mental health Minister. We also have continued prioritisation and someone who will lead that forward. I am extremely happy to be named the mental health spokesperson for the SNP in this House, where we are also prioritising the issue of mental health.

A number of decades ago, in the 1990s—unfortunately, that shows my age—I started as a young psychologist in the NHS. At that time, patients could wait for up to a year to receive treatment, which was absolutely ineffectual. They came with their problems, one year after those problems had started, but their problems had often changed or multiplied. So I welcome the fact that we have been trying across the United Kingdom to establish waiting times. That is an important step forward for all.

Time is crucial in the delivery of services. It is extremely important that additional funding goes to those on the frontline—to clinicians. Most reviews since the 1990s that I sat on as a clinician sought to increase the number of management staff in our NHS, but it is extremely important that funding goes to the frontline and to the key professionals who will deliver the services—in relation to mental health, that has to be mental health practitioners. I would welcome some words from the Secretary of State about ensuring that staff on the frontline are prioritised when funding is produced.

Dr Whitford: Does my hon. Friend recognise the impact that Brexit will have on staffing? We have a 95% fall in EU nurses registering to come here, and up to 60% of doctors in a General Medical Council survey said they would go back. That would obviously threaten staffing in the north-east—an issue the hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) raised.

Dr Cameron: As always, my hon. Friend makes an excellent point, which goes to the crux of this. With Brexit looming, we must ensure that our NHS and our social care services continue to be adequately resourced and staffed. Those are crucial issues, which I would certainly wish to be taken forward.

In recent weeks, I have been contacted by a concerned psychologist stating particular worries regarding funding for their profession. If we are going to place mental health as a priority at the core of what we do, then surely we have to ensure that funding for the placements of clinical psychologists continues. I would very much welcome comment and reassurance from the Secretary of State in that regard.

On services for people who have autistic spectrum disorder, very many constituents with families come to see me who are concerned that their children may merit a diagnosis of autism but still continue to find that the situation can be difficult. I am sure, given the background reading that I have done, that it is the same right across the United Kingdom. Diagnosis as early as possible is absolutely crucial to ensure access to services so that children can meet their full potential. What level of funding will be made available, and will any be ring-fenced for diagnosis, particularly for those with specific needs such as autistic spectrum disorder?

In child and adolescent mental health services, there is a real issue of demand at the current time. Prevention is absolutely key, as is early detection. That means that teachers will have an important role, alongside parents, and they must have a point of contact in primary care that they can reach in order to ensure that treatment and support can be taken forward. There is concern from professional bodies in relation to in-patient beds being made available within the locale. I have recently been reading reports saying that one patient from Somerset—a child—was sent for care in the highlands, 587 miles away. Use of out-of-area in-patient beds has apparently risen by 40% from 2014-15 to 2016-17. That must be addressed. The knock-on effect of slashing mental health beds may be that the A&E bed figure lists are down, but we need particular investment in mental health beds and ring-fencing of money for mental health beds and services.

The very important aspect that we sometimes forget is mental health support for carers. Carers often feel at the very forefront of a crisis when that crisis happens. We must look at services and funding to protect carers to ensure that they have access to the support that they need at their greatest time of crisis.
Public sector pay has been discussed widely across the House today, and obviously pay recommendations must be reviewed. Many nurses and allied health professionals have been receiving a pay level which, given inflation, has meant that they have been, in effect, receiving a pay cut. This has to be taken forward positively. We cannot just rely on our crucial health services at the time of need; we must also walk the walk by ensuring that we pay them effectively and fairly, and give them the justice that they deserve.

3.53 pm

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): It is delightful to see you back in your rightful place, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is also a delight to follow the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), because I too want to talk about mental health services, particularly those for children.

It is sadly the case that many young people have very troubled existences in school, and it sometimes takes quite a long while to get a diagnosis that they are suffering from mental health problems. I am sure that over the years all colleagues will have seen desperate parents coming into their surgeries to raise this issue. As a parent myself, I can honestly say that there is nothing more desperate than feeling that one’s child is friendless, singled out, left out, and somehow missing out on what should be one of the happy periods of their lives.

I suggest to the Secretary of State that as we go forward with child mental services we look at how we can seamlessly integrate them with the schooling that children are receiving, or often missing out on as a result of their conditions. Parents who come to visit my surgery tell me that too often there are two silos where they are raising the same issues and problems—the school system and the child mental health services system—and they are having to do so over and over again because there is no transference of knowledge about the individual’s case. Parents have been put in the dreadful situation of being pursued by a school because it thought that the young person was truanting, when in reality they were unable to leave their room because they could not escape the utter mental trauma they were experiencing. It took a huge amount of work to ensure that that young person got some degree of education at home.

The way forward for many of our services is for them to integrate with others. I make the plea that child and adolescent mental health services be better hooked up with educational services. Different groups of professionals should not be prevented from discussing matters with each other, because that makes the situation worse. If a child or young person is experiencing a period of ill health, bad health or a crisis, that information should be seamlessly conveyed to the school. I know that there are all sorts of issues to do with protection of privacy, but if a young person’s opportunities to gain educational qualifications are slipping away and it is impossible for them to be home schooled or receive tutor support at home because of a lack of dialogue, we need to address that. That is why I am pleased about the proposed Green Paper, which will address how families can access information about mental health and treatment for loved ones, and how the Mental Health Act has been implemented on the ground.

We should look at the issue across the board, including the role of pharmacies. Many of us spoke in the debate on that subject in January. There is an argument that pharmacies should be encouraged to do more and not just be paid for the number of prescriptions they dispense. I repeat that we need to bring different services together. Some hon. Members have talked about loneliness and others about dementia. I am absolutely certain that pharmacies can play a part in the seamless transition I have mentioned by providing not only drugs and other forms of care but a listening service. I want pharmacies to do much more and for them to be encouraged to integrate more with other aspects of social and GP-led care in areas such as mine, where the National Pharmacy Association has its headquarters.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Lady has outlined the importance of pharmacies. Does she agree that money should be set aside for frontline GP services? One way of doing that would be for them to work closer with pharmacies to ensure that they can give an all-inclusive picture when someone visits their GP.

Mrs Main: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. Some people have described the Queen’s Speech as thin, but I think it touches on key points and gives us a chance to flesh things out and submit our views on what should happen. I want pharmacies to provide more support to other services than they do at present.

The West Hertfordshire Hospitals NHS Trust, which provides acute care services in my area, has been struggling for a considerable period, but I pay tribute to it, because it is now turning around some of its problems. I visited it recently and I am pleased to say that it now has a complete hold on hospital-acquired infections and has refurbished and upgraded some wards. The Herts Valleys clinical commissioning group has also launched a new community perinatal mental health team, which is starting to work with families. I believe that visionary approaches can be taken, using current resources, to ensure that we get the most out of our national health services.

It is a shame that this place focuses on the negative. I was frankly shocked to hear the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford)—this is how I understand what she said, but she can correct me if I am wrong—seem to support the claim by the shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), that families and individuals had been “murdered” by political decisions over recent decades. That was an atrocious comment for him to make in public at Glastonbury.

Dr Whitford: rose—

Mrs Main: I will give way in a moment, because I am sure the hon. Lady wants to respond. In these difficult times, it is deeply irresponsible to whip up resentment in political groups—the shadow Chancellor said that this had happened over decades—when we do not have the results. Building Research Establishment in my constituency is doing the panel testing, and we should have a period of reflective calm. There are still unidentified remains in that building, and it is deeply irresponsible to pass judgment on what caused the fire. I do not think it should ever be acceptable to suggest murder without any evidence—it is a very harsh thing to accuse people of.
Dr Whitford rose—

Mrs Main: I will give way to the hon. Lady, as I am sure she would like to distance herself from the concept of murder.

Dr Whitford: If the hon. Lady had paid any attention, she would recognise that I did not use that term, and I talked about Governments. The fire in Irvine in 1999—18 years ago—identified the issues with cladding and sprinklers. That is many Governments ago and a long time in which this place has not taken sufficient action on tower blocks.

Mrs Main: In this period of deep distress and anguish, when many things remain to be found out and many lessons to be learned, it behoves us all not to use this as a political football. I hope that in future we will stop doing so.

I am delighted that the Queen’s Speech has a real focus on mental health, but I make a particular plea to the Secretary of State to work with education services and child and adolescent mental health services to ensure that young people do not end up, during troubled periods in their lives, missing opportunities to gain the qualifications and make the friendships and relationships they need. It is a tragedy that young people feel so isolated. When they reach adulthood, the continuity of services drops off a cliff, with no pick-up from adult mental health services. We should take seriously the need for a seamless transition to wellness for young people, and I am pleased that the Government have decided to spearhead that campaign.

4.1 pm

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): I congratulate you on your election today, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The Queen’s Speech set out no strategy and no answers to solve the crisis of both staffing and funding in the health service. Back in the 1980s and 1990s, when the Conservatives were in power for so long, we saw a massive crisis, and that has been repeated under the Conservative Governments of the last seven years. There is not enough funding and not enough staff. The Government have done nothing to solve the crisis, but it needs funding.

Take trolley waits, for example. A recent Library paper says that in 2012–13 there were 152,754 trolley waits, and in 2016–17 there were 563,901. That is a disgrace, and it shows that the NHS needs to be funded properly. We have talked about the GP crisis, and the Library paper says that the estimate for this year is that the number of GPs will fall—although the number is now calculated differently. In my constituency and others, people cannot get to see a GP when they want to, and there is a real crisis in GP practices.

NHS deficits are still a problem and are estimated to be at least £7 billion. Some commentators claim that not even that figure is high enough to be correct. More than 100 NHS trusts have a deficit—when I last spoke to the chief executive of Warrington and Halton Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, the deficit was about £5 million. We know the stress and worry the staff face because they do not have the resources they need.

Clinical commissioning groups have not been mentioned much, but the Government fragmented the health service through the Health and Social Care Act 2012 and it is unclear where to go for a decision or to get something done. I have regular meetings with my clinical commissioning group, and it has a serious funding problem, as do many CCGs. What will the Government do about that? I ask the Secretary of State, who is in his place, why Halton CCG is mainly working in collaboration with Warrington CCG and not with the other CCGs in the local health economy, as it should. I have already raised that problem with the CCG, but it has not done anything about it. I hope that the Secretary of State will look into that.

The Care Quality Commission said clearly last year that social care was at a tipping point. The delays have been discussed many times in the House, and the Secretary of State knows that I have raised them. The Library paper states that delayed transfers were 24.5% higher in 2016–17 than in 2015–16, and 64% higher than in 2011–12. This is a real problem. The Government, despite talking about a Green Paper, have still not come forward with a strategy. There needs to be proper funding for local councils—my council has had £57 million cut from its budget—and proper funding for the NHS and the health economies of each area.

Education is the other big issue that is raised with me. Again, the Government have not set out a strategy, and the Queen’s Speech does not address it in the way it should be addressed. There are cuts taking place. I have been talking to headteachers in my constituency and they are making cuts as we speak, particularly in teaching assistants, but some are talking about cutting teachers as well. This mess is best summed up by reading an extract of a letter from a headteacher in my constituency:

“At my school, we manage the budget prudently and we have rising numbers so have received similar funding for 17/18 as for 16/17. In fact there has been a small increase of just over £1,000. Despite this, without any planned increase in spending on teachers or resources, I am unable to balance the budget. The increased costs for areas such as Employers NI, pension contributions, apprenticeship levy, salaries and utilities has meant that I don’t have the capacity”—

I stress this—

“to set a balanced budget without making reductions and using our carry forward. For 2018/19 the school will almost certainly need to undertake a re-structuring programme to reduce staffing costs. This will inevitably impact on the teaching and learning, at a time when we have increasing pupil numbers.”

I talk to teachers and headteachers on a regular basis and I know the stress they are under. It is not just an issue of better pay—although, of course, they would like more pay—but one of workload, which is a key factor in the problems and stress they face. I want to put on the record my praise for teachers and their work. The Government’s proposed new funding formula will see huge cuts in all but one secondary school in my constituency. That will not address the problem; it will make it worse. The new funding formula is not up to scratch.

Finally on education, further education colleges have been cut and cut over the years. We talk about apprenticeships and the need to ensure that we have the skills to improve our productivity, but some of our further education colleges, which can deliver them, have the funding they need to do so. We cannot achieve an improvement in productivity and skills without that.
In the few seconds I have remaining, I want to talk about defence and security. We have heard about police numbers. My constituents tell me that they want more police in their community and on the streets. We have specialist security, police and intelligence teams, but my constituents want more police officers on the street.

The Government have cut and cut the armed forces. We now have our smallest Army since the Napoleonic wars. At a time when there is so much stress in the world and so many challenges, that is appalling. The Government should increase the amount of money available for our security and armed forces.

4.7 pm

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): It is good to see you back in your place, Madam Deputy Speaker.

We have been treated to a range of excellent maiden speeches from my hon. Friends the Members for Gordon (Colin Clark) and for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami), and the hon. Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams). They obviously have the measure of this place already, because not one of them is left in the Chamber, but in his absence, I reassure the hon. Member for Stockton South that we can never have too many doctors in the House.

I welcome the commitment in the Queen’s Speech to improving social care, and I welcome the plans for a consultation. All of us who have gone through the general election process—certainly on the Government Benches—will be aware of the importance of this issue. We may even recall the 2015 manifesto commitment, on which we stood, to implement something that looked a little bit like Dilnot. Most of us at the time thought that was a jolly good idea.

Our public services are all about pooled risk. That is what the NHS and our social services are all about—in everything, it seems, except for dementia and other chronic and long-term conditions that require ongoing care. For most of us, they will not actually be that expensive. Mercifully, for most of us dementia care will not be expensive. It is a condition that affects us right at the very end of our life and very few of us will require institutional care. For a few of us, however, it will be expensive. For those people and their families it will be a matter of huge importance, as many of us, particularly those of us on the Government Benches, found out a few weeks ago to our great cost. It seems reasonable that we should indeed have a Dilnot-style cap on our liability for these extraordinary costs that affect a few of us—a number of our families. It is surely right that we should do so, and I have no doubt that that will come out loud and clear in the consultation.

I very much welcome the commitment to mental health in the Queen’s Speech. I am particularly interested in mental health so far as it relates to the criminal justice system. It is welcome that we should be revising the Mental Health Act 1983. It has been a good piece of legislation and has served us well, but it is due for revision and updating. Some 10% of women and 30% of men in the criminal justice system have had some involvement with mental health services, or had to access acute mental health services prior to their incarceration. Ninety per cent. of people in the criminal justice system have some form of mental health problem. That is a huge indictment not, I would suggest, of the service, but of all of us. It is absolutely right that in our general attempt to reduce the rate of incarceration in this country, which is far too high, we focus particularly on the people in the prison system who have serious and significant mental health problems.

I very much welcome the focus on general practice articulated by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and his Ministers. The service, it has to be said, is under pressure. It is certainly running hot, and my worry about the medical workforce—GPs, hospital doctors and nurses, and everybody who works in our NHS—is that we risk allowing the well of good will not just to get low but to run completely dry.

It is absolutely right that we should now look at removing the cap on pay for public sector workers, and that we should think in particular about those working in our health services. These people give far more back to the service than we give to them, in terms of the package, and those of us who go into medicine, healthcare or social care understand that. We do it because we want to give something back. We are altruists, but that only goes so far. When we have to support our families, pay the mortgage and deal with everything that bears down on people in their working lives, it is pretty rotten to see salaries increasing, rightly, in the general economy but not in the public service. It is absolutely understandable that the Government, as a big employer, should seek to contain cost. As an evangelist for reducing our deficit, I will support that, but there comes a point—I welcome the Government’s indication that it is rapidly approaching—when we have to look at pay settlement for those who work so well for us in the public sector.

I am absolutely obsessed by outcomes in healthcare; the Secretary of State will know that, because we have discussed it. Healthcare outcomes in this country languish behind those of countries with which we can reasonably be compared, and I do not mean the OECD average. I mean countries such as France, Germany and Holland. On Britain’s disappointing position in the league tables, we must do more to improve on things such as bowel cancer and cervical cancer, on which we are overtaking France and Germany respectively. We need to do that right across the board. I am left with the conclusion that because money, inputs and outcomes are causally related, we have to get the funding right.

I hope very much that the Government will consider again the proposal put forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) and my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) that we should achieve consensus through a cross-party commission on this issue, so that we can discuss, in the NHS’s 70th anniversary year, how to get sustainable funding for our NHS and make sure that this great national institution is fit for the next 70 years.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. It will be obvious to the House that a great many people still wish to speak. I have to warn the House that after the next few speakers, I will have to reduce the time limit on speeches to four minutes. I so appreciate the good wishes that everybody has given me on my re-election this afternoon, but I realise that I will not get any more now. That is fair enough; we will try to get everybody in. Still with six minutes, I call Gill Furniss.
4.14 pm

**Gill Furniss** (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): Thank you for calling me, Madam Deputy Speaker, and congratulations on being back in the Chair.

During the election campaign, I spoke to many doctors, nurses and other NHS professionals in my constituency, as well as service users, and listened to what they said about the state of our NHS and social care. At each and every meeting, I listened to people, many of whom felt demoralised by the state of the profession after seven years of this Tory Government. From longer waiting times to missed A&E targets to the cancelling of operations to record numbers of nurses leaving the profession, the NHS has suffered greatly since 2010.

The anger and frustration felt during the election campaign were reflected in the result: a vote that reduced the number of Conservative Members and wiped out the majority of the Government. The public have simply rejected the Tories’ austerity agenda. I hope I shall be forgiven for being hopeful—like many others—that that would be reflected in the Queen’s Speech, which, instead, reflected a continued total disconnect between the Prime Minister and Government and the wider public.

The Queen’s Speech failed to begin to tackle the issue of chronic underfunding in our NHS. Among the top 10 economies in the EU, the UK spends the smallest proportion of its GDP on health: 9.8%, compared to a 10.4% average. If the UK only half-matched the EU average, there could be 35,000 extra hospital beds and 10,000 more GPs, and the cuts in public health budgets could be reversed.

After the election, the Prime Minister and her Ministers appeared to be listening to the electorate when they were reported to have said that austerity was over. Sadly, that was just Tory rhetoric, and far from the reality. Only this week, secret cost-cutting plans drawn up by the Tories were leaked, suggesting shocking details that could pose further danger to our NHS. Reports suggest that NHS managers are being told to “make difficult choices” to curb overspending in a drive to cut costs. Full details of those plans have not been announced; in fact, I do not believe that the Secretary of State had any intention of announcing them before the leaks occurred. Instead, they are being worked out secretly behind closed doors. They could lead to even longer waiting times, rationing of care, job losses, and ward closures in hospitals. I am deeply concerned about what that could mean for my constituents, and I ask the Government to disclose the plans fully for the purpose of public scrutiny. The NHS belongs to the public, and should therefore be accountable both to Members of Parliament and to the public at large.

As for pay, while workloads have increased, nurses have been handed a 1% pay cap for seven years in a row. That does not even cover the rise in inflation. During the election campaign, the PM said that nurses went to food banks “for a variety of reasons”. I suggest that the only reason is that the Government have made them £3,000 worse off since 2010, while continuing to give tax breaks to the richest.

We know that their current conditions are causing more staff to leave the NHS out of desperation. Many of those vacancies are left unfilled. According to the Royal College of Nursing, there are 40,000 registered nurse vacancies in England, and an average vacancy rate of 11.1%. The rate has doubled in the past three years, and we are seeing the effects in NHS hospitals up and down the country. Furthermore, the Government’s shambolic approach to Brexit has created a feeling of uncertainty among EU nationals. No wonder the number of applications from EU nurses to work in the UK has plummeted by 96% since last year.

Nurses and doctors are not crying wolf when they warn us about the health and safety issues that are arising from the lack of proper staffing levels. Has the Secretary of State made any assessment of the impact of the drop in applications on the NHS, and, if so, what action does he propose to take to ensure that it does not affect the health and safety of patients?

The proposal in the Queen’s Speech for an immigration Bill provides no details to reassure those EU citizens currently living in the UK. Labour has been calling for all their rights to be guaranteed since the referendum was decided. I concede that the Prime Minister has finally made an offer for EU citizens, but it is a half-hearted one at best, containing little clarity.

I welcome any suggestion that would help and support the NHS, and I therefore welcome the Government’s commitment to reforming mental health legislation to give it greater priority. However, last Wednesday the Prime Minister gave no assurances that no mental health trust would see its budget cut this year, as 40% of them did last year. If the Government want to be taken seriously, they must back their rhetoric with the financial support that is needed. They have not done this. It is clear that the Prime Minister will find the money to cling to power, but not to secure mental health spending.

Finally, the debacle over the dementia tax revealed that this Government will gladly force the most vulnerable, particularly those suffering from long-term debilitating diseases such as dementia, to cover their own social care bill entirely. Surely we need to merge health and social care to get the best results, but we must pool the risk and not let the most vulnerable fend for themselves in old age.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** To make a maiden speech, I call Alex Burghart.

4.20 pm

**Alex Burghart** (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. How very nice it is to see you back in your rightful place.

I am honoured to stand before the House as the newly elected Member for Brentwood and Ongar, that most beautiful constituency in the most beautiful county of Essex in this, our most beautiful country. At the heart of our community is the Brentwood-Shenfield-Hutton conurbation, a very hive of Thatcherite prosperity. We have the UK headquarters of Ford, a major BT office, many hundreds of people who work hard in the square mile to feed and fuel the City, and a large number of small, medium and large enterprises built by the sweat of local people. We have high employment and high home ownership. We have good schools. I would not say that our mission should be to make the rest of the country more like Brentwood and Ongar, but there are certainly parts of the country that could benefit from being more like it.
Brentwood is surrounded by the numinous beauty of the much-neglected Essex countryside, which contains many wonderful rural villages. I think just of one: Greensted by Ongar. It is mentioned in the Domesday Book, when it had 44 families and 520 pigs, which makes it slightly larger than it is today. It also has a small wooden church, which is unremarkable but for its beauty and its age, both of which are very great. You see, it is the oldest wooden church to be found anywhere in the world. It was built in the mid-9th century, and it is a somewhat stirring thought that some of those families mentioned in the Domesday Book might have shared the space that we can occupy today.

Such things matter to me not because I am a sentimental old fool—although I am—but because I was for a long time a student and a teacher of medieval history. One of my friends was kind enough to suggest that that was the perfect training for becoming a Conservative MP, and in that they may have been right, but perhaps not in the way they intended. I see a great many resonances between that period and our own. Let us take the peasants’ revolt of 1381, which started on the high street in Brentwood. It was a rebellion against vexatious taxation levied by a distant, overbearing Government. I warn the House that my constituents’ attitude to taxation has changed very little in the intervening 636 years.

I think also of the writings of the Venerable Bede, who said that in the mid-7th century, the East Saxons formed a great friendship with that great man of the north, King Oswiu. In our own time, the people of my constituency formed a great friendship with another great man of the north: Sir Eric Pickles. For 25 years, he was a great servant of his constituency, his party and his country. He was much loved, and he will be much missed. Sir Eric and I are alike in some ways. He and I are both great defenders of a property-owning democracy. But we are not alike in all ways. He is a great man and a great Yorkshireman, to boot, whereas I am a mere novice and a man of Wesssex.

I was born in Dorset, the son of two state school teachers who taught me everything I needed to know about the importance of hard work, of family, of education and of home. While those are all things that are important to my constituents today, I suspect that they were important to the people of my area in the mid-14th century and, who knows, maybe in the mid-7th century. I would not go so far as to say that they are everything, but we are nothing without them. That view has been reinforced in me through my work with the Centre for Social Justice, which was founded by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), and by my work in the Department for Education on the Munro review of child protection, which was established under the aegis of my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton).

Wherever in our country we find an absence of work, wherever we find families who have been broken by poor mental health, addiction or domestic abuse, wherever we find children failing in schools or families struggling with home life, we find the social problems that are so knotty. They are the challenges of our time, and the best of way tackling poverty and those problems is by tackling the root causes. We have a good record of that in government: we have record employment; we have 1.8 million more children in good and outstanding schools; we have a troubled families programme that helps 400,000 families with complex problems to get back on their feet; and we have a huge programme of house building. But there will always be more to do in this area. This House will face many challenges in this Parliament—historic challenges. To quote a former Prime Minister, we will “feel the hand of history upon our shoulders.”

Who knows—but we may at times find its hand on other bits of our anatomy. The challenge of social justice is something that will continue throughout this Parliament and beyond, and I am here to try to do my part and to serve my constituents.

4.26 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Madam Deputy Speaker, thank you for choosing me to make my maiden speech in this debate, which is of such crucial importance to our nation’s future. It is a pleasure to follow the entertaining speech of the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart). It is a particular honour for me to have the privilege of representing Edinburgh West 20 years after the late Donald Gorrie first won the seat for the Liberal Democrats. He was a great servant to the area, first as a councillor, then an MP, and then an MSP. He was succeeded by John Barrett and then Mike Crockart, who was replaced two years ago by my immediate predecessor, Michelle Thomson. I am sure that her powerful, moving speech on International Women’s Day, in which she revealed her own teenage trauma, was an inspiration to many.

Now it is my privilege to serve the communities of Edinburgh West. I know that each of us is confident of our constituency’s uniqueness, but few sights can compare with the majesty of our three bridges across the Forth. Whether arriving in Edinburgh West by land, rail or air, those three bridges seem somehow to encapsulate the essence and history of British engineering and its success. From the stark red girders of the 19th century Firth bridge, now a world heritage site, to the distinctive 1960s architecture of the road bridge, to the striking 21st-century sleekness of the soon-to-be-completed—we are promised—Queensferry crossing, all were created along the route of Queen Margaret’s 11th-century crossing, from which the community in their shadow takes its name: South Queensferry. It is just one of our many socially and culturally diverse communities, which include, in the west, Newbridge, Ratho, Ratho Station, and Kirkliston. Then there is Branton, Cramond, Muirhouse, Davidson’s Mains, Blackhall, Drumbrae, Drylaw, Corstorphine, and Murrayfield, whose stadium is of course home to Scottish rugby union, where we look forward to greeting the other nations of the United Kingdom—often with trepidation.

However, Edinburgh West is also home to one of Scotland’s most celebrated couples: Tian Tian and Yang Yang. The UK’s only giant pandas. Some Conservative Members may be relieved that, since the general election, they are no longer outnumbered in Scotland by the pandas. I reassure them that I sympathise; they are not alone.

The constituency is also a key driver of the region’s economy, which is dependent on European trade and European citizens who work in the health service and other sectors and who now find that they are under
that will be as part of this United Kingdom. Have no truck with independence, and are determined preference is to remain at the heart of the EU, they will last month, to stand up for the constituents' view, promise I made on the doorsteps of Edinburgh and protects our human rights. And I will remain true health. I will work on their behalf for the open, tolerant issues that affect their lives, their livelihoods and their neighbours. I promise to be their voice on the campaign tirelessly to improve the lives and welfare of

rebuild its historic public hall, and many others who Corstorphine community, which is currently working to

along St John's Road.

I intend to dedicate my time here to working with groups that take on those challenges, such as the award-winning Tenants and Residents in Muirhouse, the Corstorphine community, which is currently working to rebuild its historic public hall, and many others who campaign tirelessly to improve the lives and welfare of their neighbours. I promise to be their voice on the issues that affect their lives, their livelihoods and their health. I will work on their behalf for the open, tolerant society I believe in and that offers opportunity for all and protects our human rights. And I will remain true to the promise I made on the doorsteps of Edinburgh West last month, to stand up for the constituents' view, as clearly expressed in two referendums and the recent general election, that although their overwhelming preference is to remain at the heart of the EU, they will have no truck with independence, and are determined that that will be as part of this United Kingdom.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I thank all Members for the support that has been given in the election of Deputy Speakers. Like Mr Speaker, I pay tribute to Natascha Engel, who will be missed on both sides of the House.

4.31 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): It is good to see you back in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I start my four minutes by paying tribute to the amazing maiden speeches we have heard this afternoon from my hon. Friends the Members for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami), for Gordon (Colin Clark) and for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), and the hon. Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams). It is great to follow the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine).

I will focus my short time on social care and the pay cap. I will not go over the same ground as my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), because she echoed everything I wanted to say. My message to Ministers is that the consultation is not just about how we fund social care, because we will be missing a trick if we just do that. We need to consider the structure of social care and the population we aim to serve. When the system was set up many, many years ago, with the NHS looking after healthcare and local authorities looking after social care, the population we were caring for was very different. We now look after a much older population who have many comorbidities who need multiple services. We are now looking after patients who are living with diseases that people used to die from; those patients often die from something else completely. It is a different population, and we need to structure the service around their needs and what works best for them.

I declare an interest in the pay cap. Having worked as a nurse from 2010 to 2015 under the pay cap, I know exactly how difficult it is and how challenging the finances are. Most nurses I know work in their hospital bank to supplement their wages. Let us look at the issue seriously. On the whole, nurses were initially very understanding of the pay freeze, but we are now seven years into this, with no end date in sight. We need to support nurses and all healthcare professionals in this situation because, unless we do, the £3.7 billion that we currently spend on agency fees will only increase as people vote with their feet. Nurses make life-and-death decisions on every shift. It cannot be right that they are paid, on average, £34,000—the Royal College of Nursing disputes that figure, saying that the real figure is £26,000 a year, as most nurses are paid, on average, in bands 5 to 6—yet hospital managers, who make important but not life-threatening decisions, are paid on average £45,000 a year and senior managers are paid £75,000 a year. We need to look at the pay structure for nurses, as well as the pay freeze.

I have a final point to make. When the Labour Government were in control they had a great opportunity in 2004 to deal with that situation under Agenda for Change, but they wasted that opportunity. They wanted to reduce the wage bill by £1.3 billion and they downgraded nurses from the General Whitley Council to the Agenda for Change, but they wasted that opportunity.

My plea to Ministers is that the consultation is not just about how we fund social care, because we will be missing a trick if we just do that. We need to consider the structure of social care and the population we aim to serve. When the system was set up many, many years ago, with the NHS looking after healthcare and local authorities looking after social care, the population we were caring for was very different. We now look after a much older population who have many comorbidities who need multiple services. We are now looking after patients who are living with diseases that people used to die from; those patients often die from something else completely. It is a different population, and we need to structure the service around their needs and what works best for them.

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4.35 pm

Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): I wholeheartedly support the vibrant campaigns to save our precious NHS and social care that are going on around the country, not least in South Tyneside. These are some of the noblest causes our country has. These things are under threat from austerity, and I want to raise a few issues today.

First, it is disgraceful that on the 69th anniversary of the NHS we are talking about the possible downgrading and closure of my local hospital in South Tyneside, but that is exactly what is happening. Next week, a bogus consultation exercise will start—it is one that we know only too well from our experience in the area. In Jarrow, we had an NHS walk-in centre used by 26,000 people a year, but it closed following the very same Mickey Mouse consultation exercise. The same is now going to happen to South Tyneside hospital. This week, there was a crowded meeting in the Jarrow Alberta club,
which was organised by the Save South Tyneside Hospital group, who are demanding that the hospital stays open. There is only one reason why the hospital is under threat—Tory Government cuts.

Secondly, we are experiencing a national crisis on social care—it is a crisis caused in Downing Street and a crisis that can be solved in Downing Street. One word explains why our elderly and vulnerable are left unwashed, unfed, neglected and frightened; once again, it comes down to cuts—Tory Government cuts. Local councils have seen their grants cut by up to 50%. As the leader of South Tyneside Council, Iain Malcolm, has said, “Adult social care is at a tipping point”.

Thirdly, let me deal with the issue facing cystic fibrosis sufferers. More than 10,000 people suffer from that life-threatening condition, half of whom will die before their reach the age of 30. The drug Orkambi has the potential to change that, and it is available through health services around Europe. It is recognised in this country by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, but it is not recognised by this Government, because, once again, of cuts, cuts, cuts.

I know people are going to be saying, “Where do we get the money from?” I will tell them where we can get it from. We can get it from the same magic Tory Government money tree that can give the Democratic Unionist party a £1 billion bung to save their necks in office. We can find it from the same magic Tory Government money tree that gave the top 1% of richest people in this country tax cuts. We can get it from the same magic Tory Government money tree that gave the richest 2% of estates in this country a tax cut. And we can get it from the same Tory Government magic money tree that gave the top 5% of richest corporations in this country tax cuts. That is where we will get the money from. I look forward to voting against this Queen’s Speech tonight and voting for a Queen’s Speech that will bring fairness to this country.

4.39 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): It is good to see you again in your place, Mr Deputy Speaker. The new Parliament gives us an opportunity to renew a commitment to address the significant challenges Great Britain faces. Following the general election, the majority of people I meet want us to work together to address these challenges in the interests of everyone. That is certainly the case as regards health and social care. People expect, want and deserve our commitment to work together to ensure that they get the care, respect and compassion they deserve.

This is an immense subject, and there will be many more opportunities to debate how healthcare, the NHS and social care are supported to meet the increasing demand. For now, I wish to refer to just a few areas using the experience in west Cornwall and Scilly in my constituency of St Ives. It is imperative that we increase efforts to integrate services. In Cornwall and on Scilly, GPs and healthcare workers have drawn up impressive locality plans that bring together services, which promise to improve patient care and to make better use of resources so that more people can be treated. However, progress is slow, as these efforts are frustrated by processes and external managers.

I have raised in this House before the Edward Hain community hospital, which was closed due to fire safety concerns in February 2016. Despite considerable local will and determination, the community beds remain closed even though hundreds of patients have been resident in urgent care hospitals, which is not the best place for them or good for the hospitals concerned. The community hospital remains closed because no one NHS body will take responsibility for reopening the beds.

Let me move further west and slightly overseas. On St. Mary’s on the Isles of Scilly, there is a united effort to integrate health and social care. However, progress is painfully slow. The islands have a community hospital and a council-run care home. Patient care would be even better if those services were brought closer together. There is widespread agreement to do that, but islanders became dangerously close to losing their care home because of a lack of progress towards that integration and shared service provision.

There is an urgent need to integrate services so that patient care and use of resources are further improved. There is also a need to train, support and pay adequately our care and support workers. That will reduce the pressure on urgent care as we will be able to improve care in the community.

Cornwall council, our local authority, received an extra £12 million from the Treasury in April, yet three months on, the council has not made it clear how it intends to use those additional funds. It is vital that the council gets on and addresses that issue.

It is also important that, during this Parliament, considerably more is done to remove the pressure on health and care services. Prevention, improved education and understanding expectations are key to that. Healthcare specialists, GPs and consultants have made it clear to me that much more must be done to provide education for us all so that we are empowered to look after our own health and well-being long before we present to an NHS provider for treatment. That is true for diabetes, which is a condition that has such an impact on people’s lives. Better education, better use of community pharmacy and specialist health professionals and advancement in technology offer a brighter future for people with this condition and I urge the Government not to lose sight of their ambition to deliver these measures for those who suffer from diabetes.

In my constituency, I have found that people are unclear about where to turn for diagnosis and treatment. As a result, they present to urgent care centres when another service may be more appropriate. A great service could be delivered and considerable pressure on urgent care reduced if we can give, during this Parliament, greater clarity on who people should turn to when they are in need of care.

4.43 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): It is a pleasure, Mr Deputy Speaker, to see you back in your place. All is well with the world when you are back in the Chair.

May I begin by congratulating new Members from across the House on their maiden speeches, particularly our new friends from different political parties who are representing constituencies in Scotland?
[Stewart Malcolm McDonald]

My remarks will primarily focus on defence and international security. I am sure that I am not the only Member of this House who was dismayed by the fact that defence got so little attention during the election campaign, which explains why defence has been given such a poor showing in the Queen’s Speech, adumbrated by the fact that not a single Defence Minister has appeared at the Dispatch Box in the past five days.

That said, I should like to start on a note of consensus. I think that we can work with the Government on the Bill on flexible working for the armed forces. There is much to be welcomed in the fact that the Government are now looking at that seriously, as it is a model that works elsewhere in the world. Our manifesto committed to making the case for having an armed forces representative body on a statutory footing—something that is the norm in countries such as Germany, the Netherlands and Denmark. Our serving personnel should be properly represented within the military, and with defence policy decision makers. We look forward to making that case here in Parliament.

I should also like to express our continued frustration at the lack of a national shipbuilding strategy. In the previous Parliament, the Government continued to move the goalposts and avoided being up front with the country on what was happening here. Despite continual attempts by hon. Members on both sides of the House, the Government continued to duck and dive. Well, the time for ducking and diving on the national shipbuilding strategy is over. If it is not written, get it written. If it is written, the Government need to get it published.

More fundamental was the grave omission from the Queen’s Speech of a new strategic defence and security review. The previous SDSR was based on the premise that Britain would still be a member of the European Union. Given that it has not taken Brexit into account, its risk analysis, and ultimately its conclusions, surely require updating with some considerable urgency.

We will also hold the Government to account on their actions abroad. On Monday the Defence Secretary gave a very helpful briefing on the current situation in Syria, which I thank him for, but we remain concerned about the deconfliction lines between Russia and the coalition forces. We would also like to hear a bit more about what the Government are doing to tackle the poison of Daesh online.

There is something more profound that we would like to see change, and that is the defence posture of the United Kingdom Government. We would like to see not only a shift away from the militaristic projection around the world that relies on Trident, but a shift towards defending our own waters and those in the Icelandic gap and the high north. This is a massive dereliction of duty on the Government’s part in keeping their citizens safe, and it is also a dereliction of what we owe our allies. It was the former United States General and NATO Supreme Allied Commander, Europe, Philip Breedlove, who described the north Atlantic as NATO’s lifeblood and the transatlantic link. So I plead with the Government to please face up to their responsibilities in the high north.

I do not have time to cover everything, but however long we are here for, I will be sure to get round to it.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): All of us must listen and learn, and on one lesson I take from the recent election is that we on the Government Benches must explain our values to a new generation and explain why our approach gives people opportunities and a chance to make the most of their lives, and funds the public services we care about. We must get on with the job we have been asked to do, see through a good Brexit, heal divisions in our society, sort out housing, set out how we will fund public services sustainably, and tackle the sense people have of being overlooked too often by those in authority.

In this Queen’s Speech, the patient safety Bill, creating an independent body to investigate patient safety, should help achieve exactly that for the NHS. It should give people a safe space to speak up, driving a stronger culture of listening and learning—applying lessons from the airline industry—so that patients are less likely to suffer the consequences of mistakes.

The commitments on mental health, along with the £1.4 billion of extra funding for children and young people’s mental health announced in the last Budget, address one of the great concerns across society, particularly among young people. I particularly welcome the introduction of mental health first aid training for teachers, so that more children get mental health help at school.

Providing social care as more people—thankfully—live longer is one of the great challenges we face as a country, and one that, I am afraid, Labour shirked in this election. We committed an extra £2 billion in our last Budget, but we know that is not enough for the longer term, and it is time to have the conversation about the contract between generations—about whether younger people, struggling right now to afford a home, to buy or even to rent, who are likely to work for more years than their parents, should really be the ones to pay for older people’s care.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I was surprised to hear the hon. Lady mention the references to social care in the general election campaign. Does she support what the Conservatives put forward, and the abandonment of the cap on care costs that they had previously committed to implementing?

Helen Whately: I hope that we will consult on a cap, but I welcome the fact that we took the issue head on and came up with a plan that would fund and improve social care to address exactly the point that I am referring to. We need to make sure that it is not the younger generation—people of working age—who fund much of the bill for social care.

As with social care, we face growing costs for the NHS, and the Government have put more money where it is needed—an extra £8 billion more annually by 2022 compared with this year. We can do that because we have a strong economy—3 million more jobs since 2010; rising wages; and unemployment at its lowest for over 40 years. That economic growth changes lives for the better, and it pays for public services.

While I differ from the official position of the Democratic Unionist party on issues of equality and women’s rights, I thank DUP colleagues for their support and responsible
approach in helping us to make sure that we have a Government. That is in contrast to the Opposition, who made it clear in their manifesto that they would put our economy and British livelihoods at risk. People voted for change in the election, but they did not vote for a socialist revolution. Britain deserves better. We should be an open, optimistic and united country: a great place to do business, with a strong economy that pays for world-class public services, where everyone has the chance of a decent job and a better life and people contribute their fair share because we all have a stake. I urge Members from all parts of the House to come together in the national interest and back the Prime Minister to get on with the job.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I call Jess Phillips.

4.51 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker—rightfully returned. I rise in this debate about health and security to speak about how the two things collide. I am pleased to see in the Gracious Speech that there is going to be a domestic violence and abuse Bill. I await the details of what exactly that means and look forward to working with the Government on the real action that is needed. I think I speak for every victim of domestic violence when I say that practical action and resources are what is needed, not more words written on goatskin.

No one will be surprised to hear that domestic violence is damaging to a person’s health. There has always been an argument, and it remains the case, that the Department of Health must do more to join the fight to tackle the issue, which for many years has been the poor relation. The fight has been left to local councils and the Home Office. I hope that tomorrow we will get to vote on real action by the Health Secretary that will really help vulnerable women in the United Kingdom—I am talking about the inequality that exists when it comes to abortions in this country.

I do not needlessly conflate the two issues of domestic abuse and abortion. Creating a world where women control their bodies and their lives is the beginning, middle and end of tackling violence against women. I have met hundreds of women who were kept pregnant as a pattern of their abuse. I remember one case where a young woman was held down by her husband’s brothers while he raped her to get her pregnant, thus ensuring her captivity. I have met victims of human trafficking brought to this country for their ability to bear children and reap the financial benefits for their slave owners. “The Handmaid’s Tale” is not a dystopia to me: I have met women whose wombs kept them captive. I will never forget sitting on the domestic homicide review of Natasha Trevis, a 22-year-old Birmingham mom of three murdered by her partner. During his trial it emerged that he learned of Natasha having an abortion after it was “let slip” by a social worker in the days leading up to the murder and was seen as the key motive. No one can tell me that the desire to control a woman’s reproductive rights by this man was not an act of abuse. She was 22 and on her fourth pregnancy.

The state must never collude with this abuse, let alone perpetrate it. By turning some women away from having abortions in any part of the UK we make a political act to control their bodies. We do not have to be culturally or religiously sensitive to our devolved nations or their persuasions. The Health Secretary has a real chance to help women who travel to this country by offering them safe, free abortions here in England. We would not tolerate other cultural practices such as female genital mutilation, so why do we tolerate this? Today I am here simply to ask for a change in health policy in this country. I want our NHS in England to provide a safe haven to the women of Northern Ireland.

While we are talking about wombs and how some want to tell women what they can and cannot do with theirs, I wanted to give a shout-out to my mate Ruth, a midwife. While the rest of my mates were chatting on WhatsApp last night about “Love Island”—Marcel, totally for the win—she was working a night shift as a midwife. She trained as a nurse first, then as a midwife; she has worked for the NHS for 19 years. For every hour she worked last night, like every night, she was paid £12.09. My baby took two hours to be born. I nearly died in those two hours and so did he, but both of us are here to tell the tale. I think that is worth more than £24.18. It seems that Ministers do not agree.

4.55 pm

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): It is always difficult to follow such a powerful and passionate speech, but I will do so because I feel just as passionately about what I am going to talk about—the draft patient safety Bill, which I truly believe will do a great deal to assist my constituents and all of us who care about patient safety. I hope that it will embed a new culture of learning lessons in the NHS.

I am deeply concerned about how the NHS is often defensive when something goes wrong. It is not always transparent; the medical profession can be very hierarchical. Believe you me, as a former senior civil servant and Government lawyer, I know about hierarchies—not least from when I worked at the Ministry of Defence. The NHS is much worse than many of the organisations for which I have worked. It is right that we should focus on outcomes, not inputs.

Anybody who has ever met me will know that I talk about the Horton general hospital within about a minute of starting a conversation, but there may be a few new Members who have not yet heard that my hospital, in which I was born, is under threat; I reassure them that in Banbury we talk of little else. I am proud to have been re-elected with an increased vote share to continue the fight for all my constituents. Most of my constituents accepted the Conservative message that to have a strong NHS we must have a strong economy. But however they voted, I will continue to fight to save the Horton on behalf of them all.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Victoria Prentis: No.

Last week, I visited the Grange primary school, where I met seven and eight-year-olds. They had grasped the two main issues: we are worried about the safety of
poorly babies and about mummies who have to spend up to two hours in the latter stages of labour in their cars going to the John Radcliffe hospital. Those children reminded me of my seven-year-old self: I, too, made a speech in defence of the Horton general hospital in my primary school a few minutes’ drive from where I was last week. It is noticeable that the pupils grasped some of my concerns about patient safety better than some of the members of the clinical commissioning group, whose meeting I also attended last week. The children understood how quickly babies can become high-risk during labour. I have many reasons for losing sleep over the safety of the mothers giving birth in my constituency, and we have significant challenges in the year ahead.

In the minute remaining to me, I shall quickly discuss governance issues. Yesterday, we heard that the chief executive of the CCG would be retiring, as will the clinical lead. I am concerned that the architects of the transformation process will be disappearing halfway through it. I really beg them to stop the consultation process at this point and start again—regroup. Let us listen to patients. We have a problem with recruitment. As I have said before in this place, for want of a nail the shoe was lost. I am concerned that the lack of two obstetricians means that thousands of women in my constituency will be unable to give birth close to home.

In Banbury, Bicester and the villages that I represent, we concentrate on doing the right thing. Our companies adapt to the challenges of Brexit. We are building five times more houses than the national average. We need healthcare that is kind, safe and close to home. The draft patient safety Bill will strengthen our resources to fight for the Horton general hospital, and I really welcome its inclusion in the Gracious Speech.

4.59 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): It is good to see you back in your place, Mr Deputy Speaker. Indeed, it is rather good to be back in mine after everything that has happened.

Those of us who occasionally glance at Twitter while we are listening attentively to speeches in the Chamber may have noticed that the Government appear to have told the media today that they may be relaxing the pay cap that has been strangling public sector workers for many years. The Minister was gracious enough to look at the badges that many of us are wearing, although he has declined to wear one. Given that we have heard no announcement, I do hope that he may be about to let the House know what the policy will be for the millions of public sector workers.

Margaret Greenwood: Does my hon. Friend agree that the issue of low pay is really sapping morale in the national health service, and that we really should do something about pay in the NHS in this, its 70th anniversary year?

John Woodcock: Absolutely. The cap is not only unfair to those workers who are just scraping by; it is becoming a barrier to delivering the first-class care that patients need.

Given the way this is being done, the Government are beginning to look like they are, to quote the now Lord Lamont, “in office but not in power.”—[Official Report, 9 June 1993; Vol. 226, c. 285.]

Now, I have not been one to lavish unnecessary praise on our Front Benchers over the past two years, but it increasingly looks like the Opposition are driving the agenda in this country on behalf of people who are, frankly, sick of the way in which they have been taken for granted by the Government, and who gave that message strongly at the ballot box. It is so important that the Government put this right. Lord Lamont’s speech back in 1993 could have been made today. Back then, he said:

“There is something wrong with the way in which we make our decisions...there is too much short-termism, too much reacting to events, and not enough shaping of events.”—[Official Report, 9 June 1993; Vol. 226, c. 284-285.]

That is exactly what is happening now. The Government have lost their authority and are drifting. There are some welcome consequences—for example, the hateful message, “Bring back foxhunting”, is absent from the Queen’s Speech, and grammar schools have gone by the wayside—but this is no way to run a country.

My constituents want to know the future of the NHS sustainability and transformation plans. In my area, Lancashire and South Cumbria has more than £300 million of cuts on the table. If those cuts were applied proportionately to Furness general hospital in my constituency, we could lose our prized A&E and our hard-fought-for maternity unit. These cuts are not sustainable and are not in the long-term interests of the country. We need a Government who will take a grip for the long term and not be buffeted by pillar to post by events.

I end on an issue on which I hope there is consensus between Members on both sides of the House: the domestic violence and abuse Bill. It is really good that this has been brought forward, but it is concerning that, after the Government talked this measure up, it will now appear in draft form. If that means that the Government will take the time to get it right and bring forward the strongest Bill possible, that is all well and good, but when the Government’s majority is propped up by another party that does not share the culture and world view of many of the Conservative Members whose views I respect on issues such as women’s rights, which the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) mentioned, I have to wonder whether there is some nervousness about what the definition of abuse will be.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price) indicated dissent.

John Woodcock: The Minister shakes her head, but will she tell me whether that definition will take into account the full need to deter the horror of financial control and emotional abuse, as only a strong definition will? If it will, the Government can rely on full and hearty support from Labour Members. If it will not, we will push them to finish the job properly.

5.4 pm

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock). It is also a pleasure to be back in this place, and I thank the good people of the Yeovil constituency for sending me back here.
It appeared to me during the election campaign that people in the south-west really did understand what was at stake, and in my patch they voted overwhelmingly for the return of a Conservative Government and against any change to the Government. In part, that was because we will have high-quality public services only if we have a strong economy and a sensible plan for delivering those services.

I am very proud today to wear the tie of Yeovil district hospital, which is one of our nation’s vanguards when it comes to trying properly to integrate social care with healthcare. That has to be one of the main planks of a policy that will allow us to provide a high-quality service to our older generations in the future. Things are going very well: the hospital is performing according to its targets, its waiting times are down, and although things are challenging there, morale is actually very good.

I welcome the idea that there might be a bit more flexibility in how we pay our people, because recruitment and retention is a big issue in primary care, acute care and social care, and that is a major challenge for us. We have to look at the overall packages, and we have to incentivise good behaviour in our hospitals and in the whole sector.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): While the hon. Gentleman is talking about recruitment, will he comment on the fact that although the Government scrapped the nurse bursary, saying that they would fund an extra 10,000 nursing places, they have so far not funded a single nursing place?

Mr Fysh: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. When it comes to the student loans system, I am keen to make sure that loans are made at a reasonable interest rate. Broadening the availability of loans and training places is also massively important, and I want to come on to that.

In Yeovil, we have a potential project to train more nurses and healthcare professionals locally. I would like to put in a plug for Yeovil College, which wants to set up a new facility to do that in conjunction with the district hospital. It is only by doing that that we can attract good people to the south-west to take part in this massively important work.

Another part of attracting people is having affordable housing. We have heard how some on public sector salaries—and on private sector salaries—find it hard to afford private market housing. That needs to be a major focus of the Government going forward. It is absolutely one of our values in the Conservative party to try to create more housing in the right places at the right price, so that young people can get on the housing ladder and take part in society.

With our ageing population, we will need to spend more money on our public services in general. We have serious challenges on that front, but the difference between the Government and the Opposition is typically that we want to plan properly for how to pay for those things, whereas the Opposition just think we can spend the money and borrow more and more. That is just not the case, and I for one will always try to come up with things that we can do.

We should be looking at the pension system. I see no reason why those who are very wealthy in retirement should have the same entitlement to a state pension as those with less money. I think we could save about £4 billion or £5 billion if the very wealthy did not have the same entitlement, and I am very happy to share that idea with Ministers.

All this depends on our having a very constructive and smooth approach to the Brexit process. That will clearly be a focus of this Parliament, and we need to make sure that it happens correctly. We need to work together on both sides of the House to make sure that we get a good Brexit that we can be proud of in the future. Compromise will be needed on both sides.

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): The issues that I wish to discuss encapsulate how the Health and Social Care Act 2012 is, day by day, weakening the fundamental foundations of the NHS; they include disparities in salaries and pay rises, lack of scrutiny and accountability, severe deficiencies in financial governance with regard to public moneys, and an emerging culture in which bosses feel they can act with impunity.

When I asked the Prime Minister about pay rises given to the Liverpool clinical commissioning group board, that information caused uproar and disbelief in health circles and among the wider public. While frontline staff were subject to the pay cap, the board gave themselves increases of between 15% and 81%. The chair got a 50% increase, taking him to £150,000; a practice nurse got 62%, taking her up to £65,000; and the chief executive and the finance director got 15% each. The board had only two non-exec directors: one was paid £105,000—a 42% increase—while the other got £55,000, a 25% increase. Deloitte’s limited-scope review confirmed that there were serious failings in governance, conflicts of interests, and payments to the board and non-exec directors that fell outside existing guidance. Only the chair of remuneration has resigned. The whole board who gave themselves these pay rises have not been held to account at all.

I alerted Simon Stevens to a cavalier attitude to contracting, including in the Liverpool Community Health NHS Trust break-up, in which the CCG insisted on a clinically unsustainable contract figure of £77 million, and then hid behind weak, low-ranking NHS Improvement employees. The conduct of the CCG in these matters fell well below that which would be required in commercial circumstances and should be investigated.

I alerted NHS England to the CCG’s handling of the SSP Health surgery contracts. One of the failing practices was allocated to the CCG chair’s practice. Several other surgeries went to Primary Care Connect, an organisation that did not even exist when the bids for these surgeries were opened and had only one director, who happened to be a former GP member of the governing body. I have had complaints from right across the city about how this was handled. The CCG is cutting clinical funding to vital organisations, telling them, “Don’t talk about it because you’ll be biting the hand that feeds you.”

Stella Creasy: My hon. Friend is describing an absolutely shocking case, which is about the treatment of NHS workers in her constituency. She talks about people being told not to talk about it. Today we have heard this Government say that they have heard our message about the importance of proper pay in our NHS, and now they are trying to shut that down because they are
frightened about the reaction on their Back Benches. Is that not a terrible indictment of how they intend to run our country?

Rosie Cooper: It is a terrible indictment; the NHS is doing exactly these things. The CCG employed a senior administrator, paid them £70,000, and then seconded them to the GP Federation—a private company. While giving itself huge pay rises, cutting cash to organisations, and making unilateral financial decisions that threw NHS organisations into crisis decision making, it still found £14,000 to sponsor a “women of the year” dinner. NHS England has indicated that the financial governance is poor, but not fraud, because the Health and Social Care Act was so loosely written in this regard. I ask the Secretary of State: whether the Government intend to tighten the rules to prevent such outrageous decisions being made ever again. Highly paid auditors who passed each year’s accounts without qualification did not notice. The ultimate accountable body is NHSE; so far, it has investigated remuneration governance, not governance generally, and it has taken no action against the accountable officer, the finance director and the board, who have shown them themselves to be failing in their duties. To me, this says institutionalised dishonesty bordering on corruption.

Sadly, I believe that the NHS is now so used to fudging and muddling that not sticking to the rules is becoming acceptable practice. We need to recalibrate our response to bad behaviour and make sure that the people who show it are held to account. We need an independent, systematic investigation into Liverpool CCG—and indeed the wider Liverpool health economy. Will the Health Secretary ensure that Liverpool CCG is independently investigated, and that any failings are openly addressed to ensure that this cannot and is not happening elsewhere in the country? After all, this is our taxpayers’ money.

5.15 pm

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): I am honoured to follow that amazing speech by my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper). To say that addressing the corruption of Liverpool CCG should be a Government priority is an understatement. It is an example of privatisation by stealth and corruption that has no place in this country.

Throughout today’s debate there has been a lot of talk about British values, but what do we mean by British values? Do we mean the bravery of those doctors, nurses, firefighters and police officers who ran to help those being attacked by terrorists? Do we mean those who ran into Grenfell Tower to help people at a time of distress? Do we mean those who show it are held to account. W e need an independent, systematic investigation into Liverpool CCG should be a Government priority is an understatement. It is an example of privatisation by stealth and corruption that has no place in this country.

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Many believe TB has been eradicated here. That is not the case, and there are thousands of cases annually in the UK. Some 40% of those cases occur in London, and most affect people born outside the UK. It is a disease that hurts the least well-off because of poor housing, overcrowding and poor health services. They are seven times more likely than the better-off to contract TB.

International and British efforts have been ineffective in developing modern treatments, and there is still no effective vaccine for adolescents and adults. The current treatments are seriously deficient; they require six-month pill regimens, the treatment is painful and patients can often develop side effects, such as temporary paralysis, which deter them from completing the course. That exacerbates the issue of antibiotic resistance, a serious problem in this country across the whole health sector.

Currently, treatment for drug-resistant TB involves a gruelling two-year course of 14,000 pills—they can have severe side-effects, including permanent deafness—as
well as eight months of intravenous injections. It is little
wonder that less than half of those who start treatment
complete the course. But it is not just under those trying
circumstances that the completion rates for courses of
antibiotics are unacceptably high. Too often, patients
will feel better and not quite finish their course of
antibiotics. That is driving the epidemic of resistance, a
horrible and present threat to the way we do healthcare
in this country. I hope that the Government will look at
how we can ensure that patients are properly educated
about the treatment they are taking.

While internationally we are focused on Brexit, I
hope that the Government can take steps to ensure that
we are not ignoring this serious issue; to ensure that no
more lives are lost to this ignored killer; and to reassure
we are not ignoring this serious issue; to ensure that no
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5.23 pm

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I,
too, congratulate you on your election, Mr Deputy
Speaker. I also pay tribute to the many excellent maiden
speeches we have heard this afternoon.

I thank the people of Kingston upon Hull North for
returning me to the House for the fourth time. The
Prime Minister started this election on a “strong and
stable” mantra, but she ended it “just managing”, getting
by with the best help money can buy from her friends in
the Democratic Unionist party.

I campaigned for re-election on the basis of my
record as a constituency Member of Parliament, and a
manifesto that I believe was much like a modernised
version of Labour’s 1945 programme, combining hope
and radicalism with a patriotic commitment to the
security and unity of our nation. Labour lost the election,
but that combination will see our day come again.

Large parts of the Tory manifesto were dropped from
the Queen’s Speech, with no dementia tax; the retention
of the pension triple lock; no means-testing of the
winter fuel allowance; the retention of free school lunches,
a policy first pioneered in Hull; and no return to the
1950s on grammar schools or even to the 1850s on
foxhunting. However, many more cuts to schools, our
local NHS and local policing. Recent events show that we
need to look again at the magnitude of the cuts to our emergency services over
the past seven years. As a Hull MP, I appreciate
the value of these services. In 2007, just 10 years ago, we
had floods in Hull and I recall how important the work
of the police and the fire service were. What happened
at Manchester Arena, London Bridge, Grenfell Tower
and even in New Palace Yard reminds us how vital these
services are, which is why tonight I will be supporting
the amendment to the Queen’s Speech to scrap the cap
on public sector pay. The Government seem to be in
some confusion about their position on the cap. I hope
we do not see another omnishambles from the Government
over this Queen’s Speech.

On other Government policies that need to be dropped,
I hope we will see the end of the gerrymandering
scandal of cutting the size of this elected House under
the false guise of cost, while increasing the size of the
elected other place. Sadly, the Gracious Speech did
not include any reference to the WASPI women’s fight
for transitional help, or to those affected by the
contaminated blood scandal, the worst treatment disaster
in the history of the NHS. Today, we finally saw some
individuals charged for the Hillsborough disaster. After
Andy Burnham’s brilliant valedictory speech in the
Commons exposing the extent of criminal behaviour
in the contaminated blood scandal, we wait to see whether
the Government will do the right thing and order an
inquiry into what happened.

I noticed mention in the Gracious Speech of further
legislation on High Speed 2. As a Hull MP, I find this
rather galling. Tory Ministers recently blocked Hull’s
privately financed rail electrification scheme—our High
Speed 1. The space industry Bill poses the real possibility
of commercial space travel happening before the Selby
to Hull rail line gets electrified. I wonder what will
happen to the northern powerhouse as the Government
find £1.5 billion for the new Northern Ireland powerhouse.
If Hull were to have the same treatment as Northern
Ireland, we would get an extra £209 million of funding:

5.27 pm

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to
follow my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon
Hull North (Diana Johnson) and to take part in this
very interesting debate. There has been a very strong
message from this Chamber on public sector pay. One
great advantage of general elections is that the voters
tell us what they want to talk about. The Prime Minister
may have wanted to have an election on Brexit, but on
the doorstep public sector pay was a huge issue in my
constituency, and, I suspect, in constituencies up and
down the country.

The strong message from the campaign was that the
country has had enough of inequality. I am a member
of the Nationwide building society. Its chief executive
receives £3.5 million a year, on top of all the
additional support he receives. This is a building society,
not a bank, and a mutual organisation that I support
and am a member of. I do not have a bank account,
because I do not like banks very much at all, but
the chief executive of my building society receives
£3.5 million a year. We have been talking about hourly
rates of £9 and £10 an hour for midwives who save
people’s lives. The message for Government Members,
regardless of which way they vote this evening, is that
this is coming: this argument has been won. I urge
the Government to reconsider their position and do what
those of us on the Labour Benches want them to do,
because they will have to make up their mind and do the
right thing in due course.

In the short time available, I would like to focus on
criminal justice. This was another massive issue in my
constituency during the election. The message from my
constituents is that they recognise that community policing,
which the Labour Government carried forward
magnificently when in office, introducing police community
support officers and funding police officers in every
ward of my constituency, has been undermined since
2010 by the huge cuts to police budgets that were
introduced first by the coalition Government. I listened
with some hilarity to some of the observations made by
Liberal Democrat Members about the dreadful police cuts. They had Cabinet Ministers in the Government that implemented them, so I listen to their arguments with some incredulity. I want to see the re-establishment of proper community policing, not only in Wrexham but up and down the country.

There is one area that I want to highlight for the Home Secretary in the short time available. She referred to the legislation on legal highs that was introduced in 2015 and which has already been amended once. I have a message for the Home Secretary: it is simply not working, and there is a crisis with legal highs in many town centres up and down the country. We need to look at that in the Queen’s Speech as a matter of urgency, because unless the legislation is amended huge amounts of public money will be spent on trying to enforce legislation that is simply incapable of doing the job for which we drafted it. Will the Government therefore please go away, look at the issue of legal highs and the legislation that has already been passed, redraft it, consult, reach out, recognise that they do not have an overall majority, speak to the people who want to try to solve the problem and work with the Opposition to resolve this important issue?

5.31 pm

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): It will surprise no one that there is a close link between poor mental health and problem debt—it will probably surprise no one that I wish to talk about it either. Three times as many adults with mental health problems report debt or arrears than those without mental health problems. The debt charity StepChange recently asked its clients how debt affected them. Over half said they had been treated by their GP or a hospital for debt-related physical or mental health problems. Whatever the root cause, that combination can have devastating consequences for people’s lives, resulting in a vicious downward spiral of worsening debt and worsening mental health.

One thing that the Government could have done in the Queen’s Speech was to introduce a statutory breathing space for those in problem debt—a period of protection against further interest, charges, collection and enforcement action for up to one year while people seek help with their debts, hopefully from a free debt advice agency. That would help them to stabilise their financial situation. It is not a controversial proposal—it was in our manifesto and the Conservative manifesto—so it is really disappointing and quite puzzling that it did not appear in the Queen’s Speech. I hope it will appear in some form later on.

A breathing space would be a win-win for everyone. Creditors would get a greater proportion of their debt repaid. For the state, a breathing space would help to mitigate some of the £8.3 billion cost of problem debt to the public purse, which includes £1 billion in health costs, by reducing demand for debt-related health services. For the individual, the chances of recovering from financial difficulty would be greatly improved, through delivery of the right support for people when they need it most. Household debt is high by historical standards and consumer borrowing is heading towards levels not previously seen. I hope that the new Government will address this seriously. A breathing space would be a really good place to start.

I would also like to mention something that came up before and during the election when I visited schools in my constituency. Under the funding formula, 89% of my primary schools are losing money, as is every secondary school. I spoke to one young pupil, aged 11, who said, “What’s going to happen to our nurture unit?” This is where pupils who are stressed or having a bad time at home can go to take time out and be supported. That is one of the first things that could be cut by the loss of £116,000 to that school. The demand on NHS services will surely go up if such units are forced to close in my constituency. The pupils are aware of these units: that young man called it the heart of his school. To take the heart out of that school would indeed be wrong.

There is another notable lack: the WASPI women. Women working in the caring professions who expected to be able to retire are carrying on beyond their expected retirement age rather than enjoying the happy and healthy retirement that they anticipated.

Good health involves more than just NHS services. Access to advice and information, the ability to live debt-free, support from schools for children who need it, and the possibility of timely and affordable retirement all reduce pressures on the health service, and on other services. I hope that the Government will take that into account when considering their legislative programme.

5.35 pm

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): Let me begin by thanking the great people of Dudley North for sending me here to speak up for them. I promise them that I will work as hard as possible to represent them and speak up for them for the duration of the current Parliament, and that I will keep the promises that I made before the election, including a promise to speak up for patients and staff in Dudley.

Today I want to set out my concerns about a new £5.5 billion contract to provide health services in Dudley for the next 15 years. This proposal is completely unprecedented in the NHS. On Friday 9 June, Dudley’s clinical commissioning group issued a contract for what it calls a multispecialty community provider, which will be worth between £3.5 billion and £5.5 billion. It will provide a range of services, including community-based physical health services, some existing out-patient services, primary medical services, urgent care and primary care out-of-hours services, adult social care services, mental health services, learning disability services, end-of-life care, and activities currently carried out by the CCG. The closing date is as soon as 19 July, and the new contract will run, incredibly, from April 2018 until 2033. What sort of organisation issues a contract for 15 years? A contract of this size and length has never been tried anywhere else in Britain. It is being advertised abroad, and I understand that anyone can bid for all or part of it.

I have tabled 60 parliamentary questions, asking the Secretary of State—I am delighted to see that he is present—to meet me and people from Dudley, to discuss the proposal. I plan to send a survey to local residents to find out their views, because I do not think that the consultation carried out so far has been in any way adequate.

I definitely want to see an NHS that focuses on patients, and makes it simple for patients and their families to find their way around. I think that the present NHS is
too fragmented, and confusing for patients and their families and carers. Far too often people are told to speak to someone else, or to consult another department or organisation, and there are obvious difficulties for older people moving from hospital to social care. However, it worries me that what is being proposed has not been tried anywhere else, and I should like to know more about the risks associated with such an approach.

For example, how is it possible to predict what will happen over the next 15 years in the light of all sorts of issues—the impact of new healthcare technologies, new drugs, workforce changes, public spending, and three general elections? I want to know how local people will be involved in the new organisation. What say will they have in healthcare in Dudley over the next 15 years? How will staff be affected? Will they all be transferred to the new organisation? Will the organisation that wins the contract be able to sell it on after a few years, and what would happen to the staff if it did? Could healthcare businesses such as UnitedHealth Group or Virgin Care bid for part or all of the contract? I am also worried about the impact on our local hospital, Russells Hall. What would happen if another provider won a major part or all of the contract? Could that undermine the other services provided at the hospital, given that hospital finances are so interwoven?

I am asking Ministers to answer the questions that I have asked as a matter of urgency, so that local people have all the details before the deadline falls in just over a fortnight. I am asking the Secretary of State to meet me, and people from Dudley, to listen to our concerns about the impact on our local hospital, Russells Hall. What would happen if another provider won a major part or all of the contract? Could that undermine the other services provided at the hospital, given that hospital finances are so interwoven?

5.39 pm

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Like my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin), I begin by thanking the good people of my constituency for returning me to this place. I pledge to continue to work as hard for them as I can.

We lost two good people of Walthamstow during the election period, and I want to pay tribute to them for their work in our local community: Eleanor Firman, who was a passionate campaigner, and Councillor Nadeem Ali, who had so much to give the country and whose life was brutally cut short. Both of them would have been joining me to look at this Queen’s Speech and asking what it could do for our local healthcare services. They would both have been passionate advocates for our campaign for the future of Whipps Cross hospital, 40% of whose buildings were built before the NHS came into existence. It treats 450 people every day at its A&E, the highest figure in the country. If ever there was a group of NHS workers who deserved a pay rise, it is the nurses and doctors there. That is why I and many others on the Opposition Benches are rightly furious when we hear the Government saying that they have got the message but see that they are not acting.

Over the past seven years, we have seen how austerity has torn the social and economic fabric of our country, and we can now see how threadbare things are. We look at the Queen’s Speech and see a need to echo the call for investment in policing. We have a massive amount of gang crime in Walthamstow, and the cuts that the Government are talking about simply will not help. Many of my constituents have raised deep concerns about education and school funding cuts, as they see teachers having to buy goods for their schools. They see the rising levels of personal debt and, like my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue), they are worried about that. They also see the sustainability and transformation plans ruining our NHS.

What is missing from this Queen’s Speech is as important as what is in it. The Government say that they are committed to equality; but many of us know that the fight for equality is not just about defending existing rights but about the advances that need to be made. It is women from Northern Ireland who will pay the price for the coalition deal that the Government have made unless we in this House speak up. The ruling in June this year was very clear that those women were being discriminated against as UK taxpayers in their access to abortion rights. The Secretary of State, whatever his personal views on the matter, has the ability to provide the funding to enable those women to access services here. Thousands of women have to travel from Northern Ireland, and I do not understand why a decision made in Belfast should influence what happens in my hospital in Walthamstow or in other hospitals across this country.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I respect the hon. Lady’s genuine interest in this subject, but it is important for the House to recognise that this is not a matter for Belfast; it is a matter for NHS England.

Stella Creasy: The hon. Gentleman and I are on the same side in agreeing that it is for English and Welsh MPs to decide what happens in English and Welsh hospitals. The Secretary of State needs to listen to the opinions of Members on both sides of the House and act accordingly.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that the cost of an abortion for women from Northern Ireland, at around £900, is dividing the women who have money from those who do not, as well as adding greater stress for women having to make that difficult decision?

Stella Creasy: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. The fact is that those women are UK taxpayers contributing towards the cost of the NHS, yet they are unable to use NHS services at all when they are in England. That is the issue we have to resolve. I put the Secretary of State on notice: if he does not change his mind, there are plenty across this House who will support legislation to change it for him. I ask him to do the right thing and ensure that we have equal access to abortion for every UK taxpayer.

The same principle about what is missing from the Queen’s Speech applies to Brexit. I support calls to ensure that membership of the single market is on the table when we negotiate with our European counterparts. With 750,000 jobs in London alone dependent on it, and one in 10 of my neighbours being European nationals, the idea that we would take those issues off the table before we even start talking to our European counterparts seems crazy. The Secretary of State for Brexit says that Brexit will be as complicated as a moon landing. Certainly, many of us thought that he was on another planet, but the Government have to think again about crashing back down to Earth and damaging the economy and the lives of the people of this country through their approach to Brexit.
This country is clearly at a crossroads. There are divisions on many different issues, and there is no doubt that Britain is facing some real horrors. We have seen the horrific events at Grenfell Tower, and the terrorist attacks at Finsbury Park, London Bridge and Manchester. We have a choice: we can either offer this country hope and certainty about what happens next, or we can continue to be divided. We on the Opposition Benches are clear that those who argue that we cannot settle our divisions on many different issues, and there is no doubt that other Members will join me in doing so.

I put on the record my thanks to them, and I am sure many of the doctors and nurses who treated the people from Grenfell Tower are EU citizens, which is what I want to focus on today. In February, I voted against triggering article 50 because I did not feel that EU citizens had been reassured about the security of their ability to stay in this country. Since the vote, I have submitted freedom of information requests to NHS trusts that reveal the extent to which our local NHS system is already suffering from high stress and anxiety as they go through a burdensome application process. I want to quote a nurse, Karen, who is 40 years old. She says:

"Before the Brexit vote, we used to have hundreds of applicants in nursing. Now, we barely see 50. All staff are tired and worried about what will come next. In my department, 60% of nurses are EU citizens and already five of them have handed in their notice. I am an EU citizen myself and I’m already making plans to leave the UK for good. The healthcare system will collapse and I don’t want to be part of it."

Whichever Member laughed while I was reading that out should be ashamed of themselves.

The Prime Minister needs to offer some kind of security to EU nationals. If she does not, the healthcare system will be in serious jeopardy. I will continue to fight in this House for the 17,000 EU nationals who live in Hampstead and Kilburn, many of whom work in the Royal Free and have shown how dedicated they are to our health system in this country.

A Commons Library report from April underlined the horrific events at Grenfell Tower, and the terrorist attacks at Finsbury Park, London Bridge and Manchester. We have a choice: we can either offer this country hope and certainty about what happens next, or we can continue to be divided. We on the Opposition Benches are clear that those who argue that we cannot settle our divisions through democracy at the ballot box are wrong. I believe that there is a responsibility on all of us to show every community that their concerns will be heard, and that their causes will be equally valued and listened to. It is certainly my intention to do my bit during this Parliament to make that happen. That is why I have tabled my amendment, and I am so pleased that Members throughout the House have supported it. I hope that Members will continue to listen to the arguments, put personalities aside and start looking at good policies, because the people not only of Walthamstow and Northern Ireland but of Great Britain need and deserve nothing less.

5.48 pm

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): I have three points to make on health and social care. I was just reflecting on the fact that when I retired from Parliament in 2010 following boundary changes to the Selby constituency, I followed the example of Sir John Major and went straight to the cricket. In my case, it was Headingley, not the Oval, and I was quickly reminded of my new status in life. I had a pint of beer in my hand as I walked in front of the packed grandstand and this big Yorkshire voice boomed out from the back saying, “Ey, lad, you can’t put that on expenses now, can you?”

I am now pleased to be representing Keighley as the seventh Labour Member to do so. I will not be following the example of the second such Labour MP, who crossed the Floor to the Conservatives in the 1940s to shouts of, “You dirty dog,” which were ruled out of order by one of your predecessors, Mr Speaker, but I will try to live up to predecessors such as Bob Cryer and Ann Cryer, who are legends. Indeed, I now share with Bob Cryer one claim to fame: the House of Commons Library tells me that we are two of the three Members of Parliament on either side of the House since the war who have represented two different marginals with majorities of fewer than 500. I also thank Kris Hopkins, my predecessor, for his service to the House. As an MP for Keighley and as a Minister, he served with the same distinction as he did as a soldier for our country.

I have three quick points. First, Airedale general hospital is the institution that unites my diverse constituency—from the multi-faith communities of Keighley through Brontë country and Haworth to Ilkley—and the hospital is under strain. Last year, the Care Quality Commission said simply that it did not have enough doctors. The hospital has a really good reputation, but we are looking to the next Budget. The Secretary of State for Health will be judged on how much money he can extract from the Chancellor for the health service.

Our social care is in crisis. Age UK says that I million over-65s do not receive the care they want. Many of the big care providers are under financial strain, so I hope the Secretary of State has a plan in case one of them keels over in the next few months. I visited the Hollycroft care home in Ilkley, which is due to close. Four Seasons, which manages the care home, assured me that all the workers would get three months’ pay, but it now seems...
to be going back on that—I hope Four Seasons revises its opinion. In short, we need to value all care workers more, we need to pay them more and we need to provide more training and more career paths.

Finally, on the financing of social care, my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron) referred to the discussions in 2010, which are where the solution lies. One in six of us will require social care during our life, and the now Mayor of Manchester said in 2010 that we can either fund it individually or we can fund it collectively, perhaps by levying 10% or 15% on all estates. No doubt the likes of Lynton Crosby would say that is a death tax, but who cares about his opinion now? Certainly not Conservative Members. We need to be bold and collectively insure ourselves by financing social care for the long term. It is not a death tax; it is a tax that would give life to those of us who need social care later in our lives and enable us all to be sure that we can pass on a great part of our estate to our children, or to whomever we want.

I look forward to making further contributions in this House. I feel that I am in the centre of power on these Benches, next to the Democratic Unionist party.

5.52 pm

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): It is a great honour and privilege to be called to speak in this House, and that privilege has been given to me by the people of South Antrim. The area is very dear to my heart. I was born and reared there, and it is in my blood.

Many Members have spoken today of the wonderful constituencies they represent. Well, they obviously have not seen South Antrim, which most definitely is a wonderful constituency. It stretches from Lough Neagh right through to the Bann. We have a wonderful river, a six-mile water that runs through three of our major towns: Templepatrick, Antrim and Randalstown.

I am a Ballyclare man through and through. For those who do not know anything about Ballyclare, some people say there is only one road in and one road out; well, I can tell the House that those are very important roads to me. The area I represent has a number of small villages that were built up around what was a very extensive linen industry. Unfortunately that industry no longer exists, but our strong and vibrant agricultural businesses are a key employer in the area. Those businesses need help to ensure that they are there for the future.

I pay tribute to my predecessor, Mr Danny Kinahan. Danny and I, though we were on opposite sides, were the best of friends during the election. I do not know whether Danny will still say that now that I have taken his seat. It was somewhat of a battle, and we knew it would not be an easily won seat. When we won, I congratulated Danny on the way he fought his campaign. I have spoken to him since, and I can say we will remain friends. That is a good way to be, because political life is somewhat daunting, in that people receive their P45 in public, on a stage, and it is not always a pleasant experience.

Before that time, I worked for the then MP for South Antrim. Dr William McCrea, who served the constituency well for many years. I want to pay tribute to the hard work that William and Danny have put in, and I hope to continue it; indeed, I vow to do so. We want to focus on a number of areas. Danny was working on areas associated with the military, which I feel very strongly about; I want to ensure that we do not have a witch hunt against our military in relation to issues that are going on.

The constituency I represent is very strong on the Union, which is why it has always returned a Unionist. I am a great believer in the Union, as we benefit from the liberties that we gain by being part of the United Kingdom. We should hold on to that dearly, and I, as a Unionist, will fight to ensure that we do.

I have listened to many speakers this afternoon, and I have enjoyed the maiden speeches. Some of them were a lot more articulate than mine, but I can say that I speak with fervour for the area I represent. I have a great love for it, and I have worked for it as a councillor and as a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly—I resigned my seat to be here. I can only say that it has been an honour and a privilege to represent the area, and I will do so again to the best of my ability.

5.56 pm

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): First, let me pay tribute to the hon. Member for South Antrim (Paul Girvan) for an eloquent maiden speech. He speaks with true pride for his constituency; it is clear that he is very proud of the community he comes from and now represents in this House. Secondly, I wish to thank my constituents for returning me as their Member of Parliament for the second time in 13 months. We are a little election-obsessed in my constituency, although I am hoping for a period of calm, as I am sure are my constituents. Serving in the House of Commons is the greatest honour imaginable, and I am extremely grateful to my constituents for returning me to this place.

In recent months, some of the most dreadful tragedies of modern times have been met with the resolve of those in our public services, who, through their bravery and skill, have surely saved far more lives than were lost. The emergency services in my constituency are world-class. Although they are often strained by the budgetary cuts of this Government, my constituents often remark on how hard-working and friendly our local police, fire and ambulance services are. They have my utmost gratitude and support for protecting our towns and villages, and I am proud to share the same community as them.

I was disappointed that the only mention of the emergency services in the Gracious Speech was in a vague allusion to police powers. We should not take our emergency services for granted, but under this Government I feel that has become the norm. Instead of heaping praise on the police, fire and ambulance services, and listening to their expert advice on how they could be better supported, this Government have cut to the bone at every opportunity. The fire service, whose heroes have been recognised again in the recent Grenfell fire, has seen 10,000 personnel and 41 stations cut since 2010. The police, to whom we personally owe our lives and health for keeping us safe during the Westminster attack just beyond our gates, have seen 20,000 officers cut in that same period. Our armed police, who during the London Bridge attacks neutralised the situation in minutes, have been reduced in number by 1,000.

We live in unprecedented times, and the first half of 2017 will be recorded in history as a time of tragedy for our country. I challenge any Member to stand before this House and say that they believe the Government
have best supported our emergency services to tackle such events; the services themselves clearly believe they have not. The Police Federation has made it clear that the police are struggling under Government cuts, saying that there is no ignoring the fact that the police simply do not have the resources necessary in the light of recent events. Previously, as Home Secretary, the Prime Minister accused the Police Federation of “crying wolf” over the impact of the Government’s cuts. Clearly, the Government believe that they know better than the police.

The Fire Brigades Union has made it clear that firefighters do not have the resources that they need. It says that cuts have put the public at risk, which is evidenced by the increased number of fire deaths. It says that firefighters could soon lose their lives as a result of cutbacks, and that many no longer feel safe or supported. The Government believe that they know better than the fire service and have pressed on with austerity measures regardless.

In the Gracious Speech, there was no indication of increasing resources for emergency services. Instead, the Government signalled that there would be legislation to paper over the cracks with increased powers. I will wait until the Bill is debated before giving my further thoughts on increasing police powers, but I am concerned that yet again, this ignores the lack of funding and resources.

Only last week, the Home Secretary conceded to this House that police resources are very tight. Austerity may initially have been driven by ideology, but now that even the Home Secretary understands the strain, it is only dogma that continues to drive implementation of the cuts. It does not have to be like this, and under a Labour Government, it would not be. As long as the Government ignore our emergency services and their cries for increased resources, they cannot pretend to protect our country.

6 pm

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): I am delighted to follow my good and hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore). It is a pleasure to make my first speech in the new Parliament. It is a privilege that I feared might elude me, going into the snap general election. I was trailing in the polls, and had a majority of just 428. The betting odds were 10:1 against me. Returning to Westminster, one of my so-called hon. Friends went so far as to call me Lazarus Lynch, returned from the dead, politically at least. Having increased my majority from 428 to 5,376, despite the odds, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Prime Minister for carefully selecting Halifax as the place where she launched her manifesto. She parked her tanks firmly on my lawn; however, not only did those tanks misfire, but the engines seized up and the tracks completely fell off, giving me the chance to continue my work, standing up for the good people of Halifax.

With that in mind, there is a lot to do, and the Queen’s Speech failed to provide answers of any substance, but I wish to focus, in the short time that we have today, on our emergency services. My community, as well as those up and down the country, has never been so aware of the invaluable work that those services do. Over the past few weeks, with the terrorist atrocities in London and Manchester and the Grenfell Tower tragedy, we have seen the emergency services at their very best. It is a workforce of which we as parliamentarians, and as a country, can be incredibly proud, but it is a workforce that is tired and that we have let down.

The emergency service workers whom I know and whom I have spent time shadowing are pragmatic, and know just how vital their work is, so they get on with the job. However, there are fewer of them than ever before; they are asked to work harder and are stretched thinner, and as a result of the public sector pay cap they are paid less than they should be. It is surely time that we ended the public sector pay cap, which is demoralising our emergency services. The starting salary for a police constable is £19,700 in some forces, and £22,000 for a firefighter. The weight of the work that we ask them to undertake, and the risks that go with it, are not, I am afraid, reflected in their pay.

Emergency service workers face enough risks as a consequence of their job without a small group of shameful individuals making their job even harder by deliberately seeking to assault them. I launched my “Protect the Protectors” campaign last year, after having to call 999 while out shadowing the police. The lone officer I was out with found himself surrounded by an angry mob when a routine call very quickly escalated.

Many emergency service workers who have been subject to horrendous assaults while at work described feeling like they had suffered an injustice twice: first at the hands of the offender, and then again in court when sentences were unduly lenient. As the ballot for private Members’ Bills is taking place this week, I very much hope that I might be in a position to retable my ten-minute rule Bill from last year, which would seek to ensure that sentences for assaulting emergency service workers and NHS staff reflected the seriousness of the crime. I make this plea: if any hon. Members are drawn in the ballot and would like to discuss the Bill further, please let me know.

Crucially, we must restore numbers. The police and crime commissioner in West Yorkshire, Mark Burns Williamson, and Chief Constable Dee Collins last week joined the growing number of PCCs and chief constables taking the unprecedented step of admitting that reduced numbers are affecting frontline capabilities. West Yorkshire police has lost 1,200 officers since 2010, which is a 20% reduction of the force. The Home Secretary talks about an uplift in firearms officers to respond reactively to the threat of terrorism, but those officers just come from elsewhere in frontline policing, which again reduces the numbers in response policing, neighbourhood policing and policing elsewhere on the frontline, and makes proactively stopping terrorism even tougher. Chief Constable Dee Collins is extremely concerned about the impact that the loss of officers is having on neighbourhood policing in particular.

Finally, a police officer recently asked me why there is not an emergency services covenant, in the same spirit as the armed forces covenant. I very much hope that the Secretary of State will consider that request and respond to that officer in his reply to the debate.

6.4 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I thank the people of Wirral West for returning me to this place.
We learn from this Queen’s Speech that the Government intend to do nothing to stop the fragmentation and undermining of the national health service that the last Conservative Government pursued with such determination. In my constituency, many are very concerned about Cheshire and Merseyside sustainability and transformation plan’s shortfall of just under £1 billion and what that will mean for the service. The Government could have chosen to address that, but instead they have left services in Wirral and elsewhere across England to struggle to maintain levels of care. Board meeting papers of April 2017 show Wirral University Teaching Hospital NHS Foundation Trust with an operating deficit of £11.9 million in 2016-17. The effect is being felt by patients and staff, and targets for A&E waiting times, bed occupancy rates and GP referrals are being missed.

Staff morale is rock bottom across the NHS, bringing with it recruitment and retention problems. We have seen junior doctors striking and looking for work abroad. The Royal College of Nursing criticised the Prime Minister’s failure to scrap the public sector pay cap in the Queen’s Speech, and warned that failure to do so will result in an historic ballot of 270,000 nursing staff, signalling a summer of protests by nurses. But it is not only clinical staff who deserve fair pay. In my constituency, NHS administrators from the Wirral Community NHS Foundation Trust are seeing their roles downgraded from band 2 to band 1, which would mean they are paid below the Living Wage Foundation’s voluntary living wage for the first five years of employment. I recently met some of the women affected and they told me of how clinical staff, some on band 7, are being required to carry out some of their administrative tasks. That cannot be an efficient or effective way to run a service. It is an attack on the pay and conditions of administrative staff who play a vital role in the delivery of safe patient care. Hardworking clinicians should receive the full administrative support that they need to deliver care, from staff who should be valued for the important part that they play in the delivery of services in our NHS.

In addition to the cuts and rationing of the STP programme, the Government have quietly ushered in further initiatives, putting the squeeze on the national health service. The Naylor report recommends the accelerated sell-off of NHS land and buildings. The capped expenditure programme undermines the very founding principles of the NHS and requires senior health managers in 14 areas of England to think the unthinkable and impose strict spending limits in their areas. That will result in longer waiting times, closure or downgrading of services, job losses, ward closures and rationing of care. Essentially, the Government are no longer saying, “Do more with less.” They are just saying, “Do less.” Less care and fewer treatments will lead to poor health outcomes for our nation.

While the Tories’ NHS privatisation agenda has been clear for years now, their policy on adult social care, announced in the manifesto just a few weeks ago, demonstrates their approach to social security. Instead of pooling risk and developing a collective response to shared societal problems, they are replacing that approach with an ideology of, “Sort yourselves out. You’re on your own because this Government won’t help you.” Labour Members take a different view. We would restore and protect the national health service and establish a national care service of which we can all be proud.

During the general election I heard from hospital consultants from Arrowe Park hospital, the Royal Liverpool and Alder Hey, and their shocking testimony revealed a picture of overstretched staff in an under-resourced service. One consultant I spoke to said he felt that in future only the rich will have access to doctors. That is indeed a bleak vision for the future of the NHS from people on the frontline, and the Government must now take responsibility. I urge Conservative Members to change course, restore our NHS as a public service and give NHS staff the reward they truly deserve. Today we are asking colleagues to vote to end the public sector pay cap. In the light of all that public sector workers do for us, that is the very least they deserve. We owe it to them, but we also owe it to ourselves and the next generation. As we approach the 70th anniversary of the founding of the national health service, our finest social institution, let us cherish it, protect it and show how we value the staff who work in it.

6.8 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): May I first thank the people of Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney—the constituency where I was born, raised and still belong—for doing me the honour of re-electing me to represent them in this place?

As we come to the last days of debate on this year’s Gracious Speech, it is difficult to find positive things to say, mainly because the speech is devoid of detail. Clearly, this is no reflection on Her Majesty but a reflection on the shambles of the Government who are camping out on the Government Benches. The speech is indeed a threadbare document, which has highlighted the Tory party’s inability to put forward a proper programme of government.

We know that the Tory-led Governments since 2010 have promoted the mantra of austerity. We know that austerity is a political choice. After seven years of austerity, we know only too well the effect that it has had on our communities and our public services. As a former county councillor, I have seen at first hand what the Tories’ austerity agenda has done to local services—services such as leisure centres, libraries, south centres, Sure Start centres and many, many more have been cut or closed as a result of Tory austerity. Under the previous Home Secretary, who is now Prime Minister, since 2010 we have seen police numbers cut by 20,000. South Wales police and Gwent police, who cover my constituency, have, like other forces across the country, lost police officers from the frontline. That has had a huge impact on the police service and its ability to deliver a visible assurance to many communities. The police have got on with the job, because they are professional people who serve our communities, but the service that they provide is under huge pressure. Something that has all but disappeared is neighbourhood policing. In my constituency, the ability of the police to provide effective neighbourhood policing teams in our communities is just not there.

A few years ago, most electoral wards had a police constable and possibly two police community support officers not only to engage with the community and solve low-level crime and deal with nuisance behaviour, but to gather intelligence about the issues brewing in the areas that they covered. That does not happen anymore, and the teams that once covered one electoral ward now...
cover five or six wards, so the level of engagement is minimal. Some may say that neighbourhood policing is not important and that there are higher priorities—they may have a point—but in many communities the lack of neighbourhood engagement and reassurance from the police is coupled with cuts in youth service provision or leisure services, so once again, as in the 1980s and ‘90s, communities have to manage disaffection and disengagement among some of our young people—and other sections of the community, for that matter.

Taken alongside the other concerns of 2017, including Brexit, low wages, zero-hours contracts and the rise of food banks—all issues on which the Tories have failed to act—we are beginning to see a bleak picture, which is why I support the amendment introduced by the shadow Home Secretary.

Finally, I would like to express concern about the deal between the Tory party and the DUP. We have been told over the past few years that there is no money to invest in public services, yet money has been found to cut inheritance tax, income tax for the top earners and corporation tax, so money is available when it suits. There is no clearer example of that than the latest deal with the DUP. The Tories are so desperate to cling to power that they have offered up to £1 billion to cover Northern Ireland over the next two years. This is great for Northern Ireland, but the same should apply across the United Kingdom. In Wales, we have seen the Welsh budget cut by 8% since 2010. Public services are suffering and the communities that I represent, many of which are deprived, are among those that are the hardest hit.

Furthermore, the deal does nothing to safeguard the Union of the United Kingdom. In fact, it helps to sow further division. The Conservative and so-called Unionist party has done more to put the Union at risk over the past two years than at any other time in my memory, and that is deeply regrettable.

6.12 pm

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): First of all, it is good to be back after two years’ enforced sabbatical. I thank the 50.5% of my constituents who voted for me, and the 49.5% who did not: I wish to serve them all. I also wish to declare an interest. In my two years’ enforced sabbatical, I spent 18 months on a voluntary basis visiting other legislatures, Parliaments and politicians to discuss the issue of mindfulness, and I was also paid for a six-month period to do that.

I shall begin with some stark statistics. The World Health Organisation says that by 2030, the biggest health burden on the planet will be depression. We are heading that way, as we have a crisis in mental health in this country and across the western world. A parliamentary question that was answered some years ago revealed that 32.3% of young people between 15 and 25 have one or more psychiatric conditions. Some 90% of prisoners have psychiatric conditions when they enter prison, and 78% of students, according to the National Union of Students, suffer from stress, anxiety or depression. Those are terrible statistics, but the most worrying statistic of all is that in 1991, 9 million antidepressant prescriptions were issued; last year it was 65 million. There has been a huge increase in the issuing of antidepressants in this country.

There are alternatives. Improved Access to Psychological Therapies—IAPT—was introduced in 2008. It is a runaway success, but it needs more funding. Mindfulness was approved by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence in 2004 for repeat-episode depression—in other words, the worst type of depression has the best response to mindfulness. Yet its take-up within the national health service has been minimal. I urge the Minister to look at why.

The hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) made an appeal to her hon. Friends to look to the expertise in the House to help develop mental health policy in this place. I urge Health Ministers to look at the “Mindful Nation UK” report, which was put together by the all-party parliamentary group on mindfulness. At its launch 18 months ago, there were three Conservative Ministers: the sports Minister, the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch); the former mental health Minister, the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt); and a former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan).

There is consensus on this issue. I urge the Minister to work on this consensus, across all parties, on the important issue of mental health and mindfulness. I am talking about not only helping people who may be unbalanced to get back to a balanced position but about human flourishing, which mindfulness can help with. Our report considered mindfulness in education, the criminal justice system, the workplace and healthcare. Mental health should not be in a silo. Policy should be developed across the piece.

I welcome the inclusion of mental health in the Queen’s Speech, but Ministers and the Prime Minister will be judged on deeds, not words. We need the money to take forward these measures.

6.16 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): I thank the people of Bradford West for re-electing me and putting their faith in me by sending me back to the House. I want to echo the words of many of my colleagues over the last two weeks and pay tribute to all the victims affected by the horrible acts of violence we have seen. I also pay tribute to our emergency service personnel and the tremendous job they do for us on a daily basis.

In the Queen’s Speech last week we got the first glimpse of the Government’s proposal to have a commission on counter-extremism. Although we will all be interested to see the make-up of the commission and more about the proposal, I cannot help but feel that it may be a way for the Government to devolve responsibility for some of the more difficult decisions that need to be made and more difficult questions that need to be answered.

As we move further into the space of what the Government term “non-violent extremism”, I urge that any proposal ensures that the 15 points raised by David Anderson QC in his 2015 annual report are fully considered. They form a very sound basis on which to assess the reasonableness of such a move. Given that the Government are still falling short of finding a full and encompassing legal definition of extremism or hate speech, the further attachment of counter-terrorism policy to safeguarding, community cohesion, integration and thought is an area in which we should tread extremely carefully, with extreme sensitivity and great oversight.
As the Joint Committee on Human Rights said in the previous Parliament, we should legislate only where there is absolutely need or a clear gap. However, I have concerns, as do many others, that we are still failing to learn the lessons of our current programmes. Community cohesion cannot be forced from the top down; we need to empower communities to find their own solutions, and Prevent has become toxic. We must protect against the alienation of those who should be most prominent in tackling extreme views. The issue is not just about engaging, but listening to and hearing their concerns: we need to treat them as motivated by our shared goal of a safer, more secure nation.

Here in the UK, Muslim communities have suffered a number of terror attacks and hate crimes: from the brutal murder of Mohammed Saleem and Mohsin Ahmed to the terror attack in Finsbury Park, and from petrol bombs thrown at many mosques to the verbal and physical assaults of Muslims—Muslim women in particular. Let us not pretend that Muslim communities do not share the same goals. Let us work together, incorporating the concerns of all, to build a stronger strategy to keep ourselves safe and secure. The Government still resist a new full and independent review into the successes and failures of the Prevent programme. I call on them to change that position.

We must recognise the need to protect police budgets. Further cuts are simply not sustainable. My region has lost nearly 20% of its police officers and, although the force may be recruiting now, it is still far short of where it once was. Crime is changing, but community policing is essential. It is how we build trust in police forces. Local knowledge is paramount to rooting out extremism. With this must come a renewed commitment to having representative police forces. With the police service only being 5.5% black and minority ethnic, it is still in no way reflective of the communities it serves, and that presents barriers to local engagement.

As the Government propose to introduce a digital charter, I encourage them to revisit the report by the Select Committee on Home Affairs at the end of the last Parliament. During those sessions, it became evident that the large social media companies had failed to tackle the issue of hate and extremist content on their platforms. The charter may be a welcome tool, but we must recognise the need to protect police budgets. Further cuts are simply not sustainable. My region has lost nearly 20% of its police officers and, although the force may be recruiting now, it is still far short of where it once was. Crime is changing, but community policing is essential. It is how we build trust in police forces. Local knowledge is paramount to rooting out extremism. With this must come a renewed commitment to having representative police forces. With the police service only being 5.5% black and minority ethnic, it is still in no way reflective of the communities it serves, and that presents barriers to local engagement.

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6.20 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): It is good to be back.

It was 10 minutes past 8 in the evening on Friday 19 May when I realised the election campaign was going to get a whole lot more interesting than I thought it would be when it was called. I was sitting in a room in a public school outside Guildford, taking part in BBC Radio 4’s “Any Questions?” programme. The first question from the audience was whether the Government were taking the support of pensioners for granted with the pronouncements they had made a few days earlier on the funding of pensions and social care. Listeners to the radio will not have heard this, of course, but in that room I could tell that the audience did not need to wait for the panel to pronounce before they made up their minds on that question. The sense of indignation and outrage was palpable. In that moment, I knew that if that was the feeling of those small “c” conservative voters in the heart of Tory Surrey, the electorate were most certainly on manoeuvres in this election and that the outcome would be a lot more unpredictable than any of us had imagined.

Of course, the policy of making people pay for their social care to the point of their own impoverishment was quickly qualified and taken off the table but, as we all know, perception is everything in politics, and the damage was done. That ill-fated policy was one of the reasons that a Government with a majority went into an election and lost it. We are promised in the Gracious Speech that there will be a review of social care and, presumably, its funding. I am concerned that the thinking behind that ill-fated policy is still alive and well on the Conservative Benches, and that it may yet come forward as ruminations continue on public policy in this area, so I will spend this brief time dismissing that thinking and saying that it should not form part of our thinking.

There is a perfectly coherent and legitimate point of view on the political right that says that the funding of public services should be transferred from the state to the individual. It is wrong and I disagree with it, but I understand the point of view. To my mind, that point of view is invalidated and becomes incoherent and unjust when we say that it will be applied only to people who contract debilitating and incurable diseases, because we are then talking about the epitome of double jeopardy. If you were talking about the poor, the disabled, the poor and disabled, then you could put the cost on the state, but not those who can go out and earn a living. We are talking about people who have the misfortune to become ill. We would be saying that they will not only suffer the pain and worry of that, but that they will be forced to fund their own care to the point of losing their savings so that they and their families will become much poorer than they would otherwise be. That seems an outrageous suggestion, and that was what lay behind the indignation of the audience in that room.

We do not know which of us will fall ill and which of us will remain healthy. That is why every civilised society turns for answers to the concept of social insurance, where we all pay in with the hope that we will not need to draw down on the policy, but with the expectation that, if we need to, the care will be there and we will not have to pay for it ourselves by becoming poor. That principle must underpin any review of social care funding. People will throw their hands up, aghast at the potential cost. But the Scottish National party Government in Scotland, with support from other parties, have maintained for 10 years free personal care for the elderly. That service is provided for 77,000 older people in Scotland. To do that across the UK would perhaps cost £7 billion or £8 billion, which is a very large amount of money—1% of our gross national product—but that is the question we are presented with as this review continues.

6.24 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): It is an honour to contribute to the debate on the Queen’s Speech. I am so delighted to be back in this place, and I thank the people of Batley and Spen for returning me with the best mandate目前国内, since 1966. Having experienced two elections in the last year, I would like to put it on record that I am itching for a third so that Labour can finally be the party of government.
As I learn more about my role as an MP, I am very excited to hear my first Queen’s Speech. Sadly, it was not a grand, sweeping statement about the destination of our country, but more a postcard from the edge—a flimsy echo of the Tory manifesto, short on vision and lacking ambition.

While there is a lot to say about what was not in the speech, I will choose two topics to discuss: extra support for the NHS, and carers. Yesterday, we heard the Secretary of State admit that a privatised service was not up to scratch, leaving hundreds of people in harm’s way. We have heard about nurses visiting food banks, and now there is news that the Government might be about to renge on their promise to fund 10,000 extra nursing places.

The A&E in my constituency is still set to be downgraded later this year, and concerns remain about the future of Huddersfield A&E, with the entire Kirklees area potentially being left without a 24/7, fully functioning, fully funded and dedicated A&E. I am extremely grateful to the voting public for the fact that there are now four Labour MPs in Kirklees, and we are united in our mission for a better NHS that listens to the needs of the people it serves.

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to stop the STPs in their tracks right now so that we can prevent the dangerous downgrading of hospitals and the loss of our accident and emergency centres?

Tracy Brabin: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. One of the highlights of the general election campaign was when the shadow Health Minister came to Batley and Spen, where he launched the Labour manifesto on health and said that, on the first day of a Labour Government, we would pause the STPs and seek consultation.

Of course, the decisions made by CCGs and trusts across the country are born out of the fact that they need to deliver more on tighter and tighter budgets. Recently, I was informed that surgery for my constituents will soon be delayed by up to six months if they smoke, or for a whole year if they are overweight, with a high body mass index. Now, of course, we do need to improve public health, and 14% of adults in north Kirklees smoke, while 24% have a BMI of over 30, but we must be able to do better than denying care at the point of need. As a local paper pointed out, some of our incredibly talented local rugby stars have a high BMI. Surely we are not going to deny professional sportspersons surgery on health grounds.

While I am opposed to these changes, I hope Ministers understand that these decisions are having to be made because of their austerity. They are the ones asking our CCG to make £15 million in savings this year, after it already made £11 million in savings last year. The people of this country, and the people of Batley and Spen, have had enough, and it has to stop.

The omission of any mention of carers in the Queen’s Speech is enormously disappointing. Our country has an army of unpaid carers—some 6.5 million—and I would like to take this moment to praise these selfless people, who often do more and go further, without recognition or seeking a reward.

Recently, one of the 10,843 carers in my constituency—a woman about to retire, who is looking after her 35-year-old disabled daughter—asked me to help her with a problem. Her carer’s allowance—a sum of £62.70—had been stopped because she is now eligible for a state pension. When I asked whether she had phoned the relevant authorities to check whether it was correct, she said she had, but she was told it is not something that often comes up, because most people her age with disabled children had given up and stuck them in a home. I find this brutal and unfeeling, not to mention lacking in common sense, especially when we consider how much the state would have to pay if this lady’s daughter was cared for in a home. In Kirklees, the average residential care cost is £520 per person, per week.

That raises the question of why the Queen’s Speech said nothing about protecting our NHS or looking after our amazing carers. The only answer is that it was not a Queen’s Speech for us, the people, where our leaders have a vision to improve lives and to build a better country that includes kindness, tolerance, generosity and humanity; it was a political manoeuvre to protect those in power, and I cannot commit to supporting it. While for me this might mean three elections in 18 months, I say bring it on, because to me it could not be more obvious: this country needs a Labour Government.

6.30 pm

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): I imagine that those sitting on the Government Benches and their new helpers in the DUP would usually find the security day in the Queen’s Speech debate part of their natural territory, but the lack of defence-related issues in either their grubby deal or the Queen’s Speech itself shows how much we have moved away from being what could be called a normal Parliament.

From my perspective as the newly re-elected MP for Dunfermline and West Fife, this week has been a very proud week indeed, as the largest ship ever built by the Royal Navy, HMS Queen Elizabeth, left Rosyth in my constituency for the first time to begin her sea trials. She is testimony to the men and women in Rosyth who played a part in her construction. The Queen Elizabeth and the Prince of Wales, along with the Goliath crane, have become part of the West Fife skyline. There is also sadness that the Queen Elizabeth will be leaving us, but no doubt she will be back very soon for adjustments following the sea trials and refits into the future.

The carriers are a great way to measure the current state of the MOD, central as they are to the stated aims of the strategic defence and security review. This capability will involve the deployment of many of the UK’s premier platforms and people: the Type 26 frigates, the Type 45 destroyers, the Astute class submarines, the P8s, and, not least, the F-35Bs that will fly from the flight decks of the carriers. In the previous Parliament, I asked many questions about the composition of the carrier group and the platforms that make it up, and I intend to continue that during this Session—not that I often get an answer from the Minister. The Government have been exceptionally vague on the individual elements of the carrier group and whether they will even be able to deploy both carriers simultaneously.

The time constraints imposed on me today mean that I will not be able to go into all the issues around the deployment of the carriers. However, three issues need...
to be discussed in future debates: first, the manning levels within the Royal Navy; secondly, the problems around the F35B; and, thirdly, the Government’s ongoing failure to deliver a shipbuilding strategy. First, on manning, as in the NHS, a 1½% pay cap is having a detrimental effect on the ability of the services to keep the personnel they need in post. The Royal Marines are already being sacrificed for this. The submarine service is allegedly 25% short of full manned strength. We can see that this is far from being an abstract debate.

The F-35Bs represent the most expensive military procurement project in the world. Each F-35B plane costs about as much as 10 DUP MP votes in this place, so it is a great investment from the Government in making sure that this works. The workers in Govan need the reassurance that they can continue their work on the Type 26 frigates. First, there were 13 ships, and that was then reduced to eight, with five Type 31 frigates added in. The Parker report failed to inform us that the shipbuilding strategy would be published, and we now have something quite different. I think that the Minister is in the process of announcing three frigates, but we will wait to see how that comes out next week.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Is it not incumbent on all of Scotland’s elected Members of Parliament to hold the Government to account on the roll-back of all of Scotland’s elected Members of Parliament to 6.35 pm; ensure that we have a fighting force fit for this century.

Across Scotland who depend on MOD contracts to humanly possible come to our constituency, but we cannot forget the workers on the Clyde and elsewhere. The Rosyth workforce, to make sure that as many jobs as possible come to our constituency, but we cannot forget the workers on the Clyde and elsewhere. The Rosyth workforce, to make sure that as many jobs as possible come to our constituency, but we cannot forget the workers on the Clyde and elsewhere.

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Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Is it not incumbent on all of Scotland’s elected Members of Parliament to hold the Government to account on the roll-back of that promise of the 13 ships that were supposed to be built on the Clyde and in Scotland?

Douglas Chapman: Certainly every single MP who represents a Scottish constituency should be fighting for these ships, fighting for these jobs, and making sure that commitments given in previous years are upheld and delivered in full.

In conclusion, I will fight my hardest on behalf of the Rosyth workforce, to make sure that as many jobs as humanly possible come to our constituency, but we cannot forget the workers on the Clyde and elsewhere across Scotland who depend on MOD contracts to ensure that we have a fighting force fit for this century.

6.35 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): On behalf of Her Majesty’s Opposition, may I associate myself with the tributes paid by Members on both sides of the House to the extraordinary efforts of our public servants who have been tested in recent weeks and months and who never faltered? They make us proud, and we pay tribute to them today.

It is my happy task to congratulate the six hon. Members who have made their maiden speeches today. My hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams)—a Labour gain in the general election—will bring to our debates considerable clinical experience from which we will all benefit. As someone who recently ran the London marathon, I may join him for the 6 o’clock boot camp to which he has invited us—but only if the Secretary of State comes along as well.

We also heard fine maiden speeches by three Conservative Members, each of whom follows in the footsteps of parliamentarians who have made immense contributions to public life. On the basis of their maiden speeches, the House will be confident that all three of them will also make a huge contribution to public life in the years ahead.

May I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), who made an excellent maiden speech? I believe she also made a point of order earlier this week, so she is quickly finding her feet in this place.

The hon. Member for South Antrim (Paul Girvan) made an excellent speech. He said that he was worried that he was not articulate, but he was incredibly articulate. He talked about his concerns for the agricultural industry in his constituency. Given how valuable his vote is going to be in the House of Commons, I think he will get the investment he will be calling for.

A number of retreads also made fine speeches. It is my pleasure to welcome back to the House my hon. Friends the Members for Keighley (John Grogan) and for Vale of Clwyd (Chris Ruane) and the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey).

An immense number of Members spoke in the debate. I cannot do justice to all the contributions, so I apologise in advance, but a few of them interested me. The right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) made a typically fine, gracious and thoughtful contribution. I was interested to hear him say that he believed we should abolish tuition fees for certain subjects. He is almost a Corbynista, it would seem. We will send him a “Jez We Can” T-shirt in the post.

I mean no discourtesy to the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire), but I did not realise that he is now on the Back Benches. I remember his time as a very good Foreign Office Minister. He made a very thoughtful speech, and on that basis I think he deserves to be elevated back to the Front Bench. The hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) made a typically thoughtful contribution. I hope that in the coming weeks she will be suitably elevated to a position that enables her to speak more widely on NHS matters.

Members of my own party also made some excellent speeches. My hon. Friends the Members for Dudley North (Ian Austin), for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) and for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) all talked about the disastrous fragmentation of the national health service and raised deeply serious concerns about the way in which outsourcing takes places. I hope that the Secretary of State will respond to them when he sums up. It is noteworthy that more Labour than Conservative Members spoke in this debate. When it comes to the NHS, it seems that Tory MPs know they can no longer defend the indefensible.

With that in mind, may I pass on my personal congratulations to the Secretary of State on his reappointment? I did not expect to see him in place—I am not sure whether he expected it either. When an anonymous Tory MP learned of the Secretary of State’s reappointment, they were said to be baffled and told The Huffington Post:

“Jez was the most toxic thing on the doorstep among public sector workers.”

I do not know whether that Tory MP is in the Chamber tonight, but if they are, let me tell them that we are delighted that the Secretary of State is still in place, and we will be reminding public sector workers in every constituency of that.

I also wish to send my warm regards to David Mowat and Nicola Blackwood. They were dedicated public servants, and I would be grateful if the Secretary of State could pass that message to them.
We have a national health service with waiting lists close to 4 million; 26,000 people waiting for more than two months for cancer treatment; 560,000 people waiting on trolleys in corridors; the 18-week target downgraded and abandoned, a move in breach of the NHS constitution and the 2012 regulations; and vacancies for 40,000 nurses, for 10,000 GPs and for 3,500 midwives. We have seen applications for training plummet following the axing of the bursary, and today the Secretary of State stands accused of reneging on his promise to fund new nurse training places.

What was in the Queen’s Speech for the NHS and social care? Nothing, and no attempt was made to rise to the challenges that our NHS faces.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Health and social care integration is prized on both sides of the House. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is jeopardised by Government plans to base it on pounds and pence, and social care integration is prized on both sides of the House. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is jeopardised by Government plans to base it on pounds and pence, and the 2012 regulations; and vacancies for 40,000 nurses, for 10,000 GPs and for 3,500 midwives. We have seen applications for training plummet following the axing of the bursary, and today the Secretary of State stands accused of reneging on his promise to fund new nurse training places.

What was in the Queen’s Speech for the NHS and social care? Nothing, and no attempt was made to rise to the challenges that our NHS faces.

Jonathan Ashworth: I welcome my hon. Friend to his place, and he makes a valid point.

We will engage constructively with the Government on mental health, but if they genuinely want to improve mental health provision, why not ring-fence the money going to CCGs and end the scandal of the raiding of child and adolescent mental health budgets to plug wider gaps in the NHS?

We welcome the measures on patient safety, and we will engage positively with them.

During the election, in secret, the NHS was told to carry out something called the capped expenditure process. Up and down the country, local NHS bosses were asked to “think the unthinkable”—rationing of treatment, cuts to services and the closing of wards. I challenge the Health Secretary to tell us, here and now, when he learned of the capped expenditure process. When did he order the NHS to introduce it? When did he sign off the plans? Why was the NHS told to keep it secret? I challenge him to abandon the capped expenditure process and give the NHS the money it needs.

The Gracious Speech ignored hard-working public sector workers. For seven years they have been expected to do more and more on less and less. Nurses have been forced to use food banks to make ends meet. The Health Secretary told the NHS Confederation that he had sympathy for underpaid NHS staff, but sympathy will not put food on the table. Nor is it good enough for the Prime Minister’s press spokesperson to brief the lobby after Prime Minister’s questions that the issue is under review, but then say three hours later that the policy has not changed—a U-turn on a U-turn. The Government cannot even do a U-turn competently. What a shambles. It could be described as weak, unstable and chaotic. Public sector workers deserve a lot better.

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This is a self-defeating policy. To all the Conservative Members who have spoken out and said that public sector workers deserve a pay rise, I say we can give them a pay rise tonight if those hon. Members join us in the Lobby. The Gracious Speech should have been an opportunity to take action to support our hard-pressed public sector workers. Instead they will get nothing, and No. 10 has confirmed today that the policy has not changed. A pay rise for nurses, paramedics, police officers, firemen and women—for all public sector workers who live in all our constituencies—is fair and affordable. It would also mean Barnett consequentials for Northern Ireland. On behalf of the 5 million public sector workers, including the 1.2 million in the NHS, I proudly support our amendment and urge Conservative Members to join us in the Lobby tonight.

I also want to mention the paramedics who arrived on the scene at London Bridge. They arrived minutes after the incident. Gunfire was still happening and they thought they were being fired at, but they walked straight into that gunfire. When I met them, they said they were just doing their job, but I think that shows that there is no such thing as “just a job” in the NHS; it is a vocation. On behalf of the whole country as well as this House, I want to thank them for showing us the NHS at its best. I want to record the fact that it is not just in times of tragedy that our NHS is there for us; it is there seven days a week, 24 hours a day.

We have had a good and wide-ranging debate this afternoon. I congratulate, as the shadow Health Secretary did, the Members who made their maiden speeches; we heard some fantastic ones. I start with my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami). It is great credit to him that his mother is a pharmacist and his father is an NHS doctor. It is marginally less credit to him that he became a lawyer, but only marginally. He spoke with great passion and fluency about the importance of education. It was an excellent and moving first contribution to this House.

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I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Colin Clark), a notable Conservative gain in the election. He spoke with great eloquence about the attractions of his constituency, including the 1.2 million in the NHS, I proudly support our amendment and urge Conservative Members to join us in the Lobby tonight.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) for his excellent speech. A teacher of medieval history, he taught us about the 9th century church in his constituency and the need to learn the lessons of the peasants’ revolt against excessive taxation. I can assure him that on the Conservative Benches we do not need to learn those lessons; we have reached enlightenment.
I thank the hon. Member for South Antrim (Paul Girvan) for his beautiful panegyric to his stunning constituency. He spoke very powerfully against witch hunting in the military and very powerfully in favour of the Union; both positions will have strong support on the Government Benches.

I also want to thank the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine). She talked about the majesty of the three bridges across the Forth. For a couple of my teenage years, I grew up under one of them. She was absolutely right to want to reassure EU citizens working in the NHS of the vital importance of their role. I hope the Prime Minister’s comments this week will give them reassurance that we are seeking a deal that gives them the same rights to live and work here as UK citizens.

I apologise for not being able to mention all of the many other contributions, but there were some important themes that I want to touch on. A number of Members talked about the possibility of developing a more cross-party consensus on difficult issues around health and social care. The right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) spoke powerfully on that point, as did my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) and my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main). I would make that point. Governments of all colours always seek to get consensus on difficult policy issues, and this Government are no different. However, it takes two to tango, and we have had two elections in a row that the Labour Opposition have tried to turn into referendums on the NHS. If those on the Opposition Front Bench are willing to use as a new MP, I am sure. His passion for dealing with health inequalities came through loud and clear, and did him great credit.

I also want to thank the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Debbie Abrahams). She talked very powerfully about the need for a cross-party consensus on difficult issues around health and social care. The right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) spoke powerfully on that point, as did my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) and my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main). I would make that point. Governments of all colours always seek to get consensus on difficult policy issues, and this Government are no different. However, it takes two to tango, and we have had two elections in a row that the Labour Opposition have tried to turn into referendums on the NHS. If those on the Opposition Front Bench are willing to use as a new MP, I am sure. His passion for dealing with health inequalities came through loud and clear, and did him great credit.

I want to mention what my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) said about his battle against sepsis. Everyone in this House, on all sides, is delighted that he won that battle, but how typically selfless of him to use his speech to talk about the 44,000 people every year who do not win their battle against sepsis. We will look carefully at what he said about a national sepsis registry. I also thoroughly agree with what my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) said about leadership in the public sector and the NHS. I look forward to more discussions with him about that.

On security, the shadow Home Secretary basically tried to turn an argument about public safety into an argument about austerity. However, I would gently say that for a shadow Home Secretary to protest about austerity in policing when she herself wanted to cut MI5 and the Met’s special branch, and when her leader wanted to cut the armed forces, is patently absurd. What she never mentioned is why we got into austerity. However, I would gently say that for a shadow Home Secretary to protest about austerity in policing when she herself wanted to cut MI5 and the Met’s special branch, and when her leader wanted to cut the armed forces, is patently absurd. What she never mentioned is why we got into austerity in the first place: a global financial crash, made infinitely worse by profligate spending and a failure to regulate that for a shadow Home Secretary to protest about austerity in policing when she herself wanted to cut MI5 and the Met’s special branch, and when her leader wanted to cut the armed forces, is patently absurd. What she never mentioned is why we got into austerity in the first place: a global financial crash, made infinitely worse by profligate spending and a failure to regulate the City of London by the last Labour Government.

The shadow Health Secretary, the hon. Member for Leicestor South (Jonathan Ashworth), spoke eloquently about the NHS.

Ian Austin: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr Hunt: I am going to make some progress. The shadow Health Secretary talked about underfunding of the NHS. He did not, of course, mention the new £43 million emergency floor at Leicester Royal Infirmary, which opened in April and is benefiting his constituents. There are indeed funding pressures in the NHS as we deal, like all countries, with the pressures of an ageing population, but they would be a whole lot worse if we had followed the advice of the Labour party in 2010.
[Mr Hunt]

and cut the NHS budget; or followed the advice of the Labour party in Wales, which did cut the NHS budget; or followed the advice of the Labour party in 2015, when it promised £5.5 billion less than the Conservatives. The difference between this side of the House—

Jonathan Ashworth rose—

Mr Hunt: I will just make my point. The difference between this side of the House and the other side is not the desire to fund the NHS, but the ability to fund it through a strong economy, and that is exactly what we did. By 2014, we had created 2 million more jobs and the fastest growth in the G7, and what was our first priority? The NHS. Its budget has gone up by £6 billion in real terms since 2014. That is a 7% rise, and it is £2.6 billion more than the Labour party promised in 2015.

Jonathan Ashworth: Our advice was to put an extra £7 billion into the NHS this year, but will the Secretary of State tell me whether he thinks it fair that the people of Northern Ireland will receive an extra £1 billion—which I do not begrudge—while there is not a penny piece of extra investment for the English NHS? Is that fair?

Mr Hunt: Let me tell the hon. Gentleman that our manifesto was very clear: it referred to an extra £8 billion for the NHS, funded by the strong economy that Labour can never deliver.

When the hon. Gentleman talked about problems in the NHS, and problems in care in the NHS, it sounded as if all those problems had started with the Conservatives. He did not mention the most challenging and difficult problem that his party left behind: the legacy of atrocious care at Mid Staffs, Morecambe Bay and many other trusts. Unlike the last Labour Government, we did not sweep those problems under the carpet. We did the opposite: we introduced the toughest inspection regime in the world. Thirty-five trusts went into special measures, and 20 exited from those special measures. Wrexham Park, George Elliot, Hinchingbrooke, Cambridge, Morecambe Bay, Tameside and East Lancashire went from special measures to good standards. The proportion of NHS patients who say that their care is safe has never been greater.

Stella Creasy: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Secretary of State has just announced a consultation on abortion in English hospitals, but as far as anyone is aware, no such consultation exists. Can you inform us whether there will be a written statement on any such consultation? Given that Members on both sides of the House are concerned about the issue and no information has been given, and whether we will be allowed to test the will of the House on the matter?

Mr Speaker: That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 309, Noes 323.

Division No. 1

[6.59 pm]

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniuzzi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Garden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette

Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyte, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Davey, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martin
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Olivia
Elliott, Julie
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Fellows, Marion
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth

Mr Hunt]
699 700

28 JUNE 2017

Tellers for the Ayes: 
Nic Dakin and Jeff Smith

Tellers for the Noes:

Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
MacNeill, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Andy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McNally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonagh, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
Mclnnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrough, Anna
Meams, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Graham
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex
O’Hara, Brendan
O’Mara, Jared
Onasanya, Fiona
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Piddock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Rehman
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christine
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robinson, rh Mr Geoffrey
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruang, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Ryan, rh Joa
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sherman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Streering, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, Mr Paul J.
Swinson, Jo
Tami, Mark
Thewliss, Alison

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Fletcher
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew C.
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Breerton, Jack
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair

Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timm, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamsson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Wishart, Pete
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Dockerty, Leo
Dockrell, Julia
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Ordered, the debate be resumed tomorrow.

Question accordingly negatived.

7.15 pm

The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Tellers for the Noes:
Andrew Griffiths and Mrs Heather Wheeler

Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, rh Sir Oliver
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evenneth, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
François, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, rh Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Hallon, rh Robert
Haller, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollebone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jennick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczyński, Daniel
Keeble, Mr Christopher
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lever, Andrew
Lewer, Andy
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Mr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, Mr John
McLoughlin, rh Mr Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, rh Mrs Sherryl
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Mike
Penrose, John
Perce, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Philp, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Purseglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Sheb betting, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Smith, Rosy
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelmen, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Street, Mr Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Syms, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tohurh, Kelly
Tolman, Justin
Tollman, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shalish
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whatley, Helen
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggins, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Sammy
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Mrs Heather Wheeler
School Funding Formula (London)

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

Mr Speaker: If, inexplicably, there are right hon. and hon. Members who do not wish to hear the debate on the school funding formula in London, I hope that they will courteously leave the Chamber quickly and quietly, so that we can all listen to the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable).

7.16 pm

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Mr Speaker, may I express my appreciation for being able to speak from these Benches again, after a two-year lapse, and to take advantage of the real privilege we have of being able to raise an Adjournment debate matters of acute concern to our constituents? I wish to raise the issue of school funding, which proved to be one of massive importance during the election campaign, not just to me and my constituents, but to many others.

Let me give some examples of the kind of problems that have surfaced. I have visited three primary schools in the past week, one of which has already had to seek a parental contribution of £120 a head from each parent in order to balance its budget. Another had to put a proposition to the parents to go on to part-time schooling for one day a week, but that has subsequently been withdrawn in favour of a parental contribution and redundancies. This pattern is now being repeated throughout my borough and many others.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I can confirm that we face exactly the same issues in the London Borough of Sutton, and I believe that every secondary head has written to me expressing concerns, for instance, about requiring schools to cut back on the A-level options that are available. Does my right hon. Friend hope, as I do, that the Minister for School Standards will respond positively and set out how London can benefit from the bonanza that was available to the Democratic Unionist party in the past couple of weeks, so that we can see the right level of funding in our schools as well?

Sir Vince Cable: My right hon. Friend anticipates a point I was going to make, but he is absolutely right to say that this problem is widely shared. Several elements have contributed to this anxiety in the schools sector, one of which is that we have had flat or falling funding in nominal terms per pupil, certainly over the past couple of years—it is a small fall but it is significant. Much more seriously, there has been a very big increase in costs. Costs that were previously borne by central Government are now being offloaded on to individual schools. Some of them are obvious ones, such as national insurance contributions, which have added a couple of percentage points to the payroll—that is 80% of the cost of a typical school. The increase in pension contributions is another.

One particularly bizarre item causing considerable puzzlement in schools is the apprenticeship levy. I can perhaps claim some authorship of the original ideas behind the levy, from the coalition years, but none of us ever intended that it would apply to schools. The training of teachers, and indeed other professionals, does not go through an apprenticeship route. It appears that this is being introduced because people in maintained schools are regarded as council employees, and of course the whole direction of Government funding is to move in the opposite direction. In addition, there is a completely bizarre distinction between academies and non-academies. I wonder whether the Minister, in discussions with his colleagues, can lift what is not a massive but an extremely irritating and, at the margin, onerous burden on schools. It is something that would help significantly, and the burden is clearly inappropriate.

The consequence of these changes, together with the new funding formula that the Government have mooted, is very significant indeed. The National Audit Office has estimated that, between 2014-15 and 2019-20, which is when the funding formula comes in, there will have been an 8% real cut overall in English schools. The Education Policy Institute, which has done a parallel study and is broadly in favour of the principle of the funding formula, notes that the cut is something in the order of 6% to 11% in the narrower period of 2016-17 to 2019-20, with more than half of primary and secondary schools facing cuts of that magnitude.

Let me take the discussion very specifically to the funding formula, which is how I couched this debate. I have no objection—I do not think that any of us possibly could have—to the principle of trying to achieve fairness in the allocation of funds. It is a perfectly desirable objective. Although there is never likely to be much of a consensus on this, striving to achieve better fairness in distribution is a perfectly acceptable philosophical principle. I am not coming here to make a particular whinge about my own Twickenham constituency and borough, because, as the figures net out, we are not significant losers. Indeed, on some calculations, there may be a small gain, but that is not the case in many parts of inner London, which will be hit very severely. None the less, there are some very serious problems with the funding formula as it is due to be applied, and I just wanted to raise them with the Minister in the hope that he can give us some confidence that they will be addressed.

My first concern is that, clearly, it is much easier to introduce a new funding formula when budgets overall are flat or rising than when they are falling. It is a simple matter of common sense. Some secondary schools in my constituency face 3% real cuts to meet the funding formula. If that were done at a time when their budget was flat and others were rising, one can see how they could accommodate it, but imposing on already very stressed financial budgets real cuts as a consequence of the formula is just making this deeply, deeply unattractive.

The informed estimate is that if the Government were to bring in the funding formula while ensuring that no school actually loses in absolute terms, it would probably cost them £335 million. That sounds a lot of money, but, as my right hon. Friend has pointed out, in relation to some of the other transactions of the past 48 hours it probably is not all that significant. Can the Minister clarify a commitment, which I think was made in his party’s manifesto, that the Government will ensure that no school is absolutely worse off as a result of the formula? That would certainly help to lubricate the whole process.

My second concern is different and has nothing to do with money. It is about the centralisation of decision-making that is a consequence of this new formula. At present,
there is a significant degree of flexibility for local authorities in moving money within the funding blocks, particularly within the school block. That enables local authorities to take account of local circumstances. In my particular case, we have a significant number of problems in the secondary sector. This involves a significant number of outer borough pupils, the fact that we have a large number of pupils who go into the private sector at 11 or thereabouts, and more challenging demands on the secondary sector. There is an understanding locally that, effectively, there should be a cross subsidy from primary to secondary. That is the result of local circumstances, and people understand that and accept it. Under the funding formula, such local, particular concerns can no longer be taken into account. One of the practical consequences in my area is that the secondary schools, which have particular needs, will be very savagely hit, because the cuts will fall on them disproportionately. As I understand it, there will be very little capacity in the Department for Education or with regional commissioners to handle the kind of local negotiation that would be required to take account of such particularities. I ask the Minister to try to ensure that as we move to a new funding system, it does not become hopelessly over-centralised. There is a real danger that we have a Soviet style of financial allocation that takes no account of local circumstances.

My third concern is about special needs and disadvantaged pupils who fall within the special educational needs block. As the Minister knows, funding for that at a local level is a complete mess. Local authorities are not funded up to anywhere remotely near the level that is required to meet the special needs of statemented pupils. The new plan system, which was passed in the last Parliament, requires substantial funding, which is simply not available. Local schools are having to use out-of-borough private providers of special needs education, which is often very high cost. Indeed, one of the things the Government should think about is a Competition and Markets Authority referral for some of these institutions.

Whatever the reasons, local councils have run up very large deficits on their special needs budgets. They are having to use school block money in order to support it. Many schools are in great difficulty as a result of the extra cost involved, and a pass-the-parcel system is developing with special needs, which is deeply unhealthy, and completely inimical to good schooling.

A fourth concern I have about the proposals as they currently stand is that all kinds of perverse incentives are built into the rather complex formula that the Department has evolved, one of which is that it penalises high achievement. I happen to represent a borough where 50% of schools are regarded as “outstanding” and the other 50% “good”. It is a very high achievement area. Parents have very high expectations: schools deliver. Under the formula, high achievement will be penalised, and the funding is being redirected to schools in which there is low achievement. One of the utterly perverse consequences is that schools in London, particularly in inner London—areas such as Hackney, Lewisham and Lambeth, which 20 or 30 years ago were regarded as
The anachronistic way in which funding is distributed across the country is not fair and is in need of reform, so over the past six months I have spent a lot of time meeting teachers, headteachers, parents, guardians and hon. and right hon. Members to discuss fairness in the school funding system. As a result of those conversations, I have never been more convinced of the need to grasp the nettle and address the unfairness of the current funding system. The data that are used to allocate funding to local authorities are over a decade out of date. Over that period, for example, the free school meals rate has almost halved in Southwark and has more than doubled in Dorset, but the funding that each local authority receives has not responded. It is not right that local authorities with similar needs and characteristics receive very different levels of funding from central Government. That results in a situation where, for example, a school in Barnsley would receive 50% more funding, with no other change to its circumstances, if it were situated in Hackney. That is not a rational, fair or efficient system for distributing money to our schools.

That is why the Government have gone further than any previous Government in reforming school funding, and why the Queen’s Speech made it clear that we are determined to introduce a fairer distribution of funding for schools. In doing so, we will ensure that all schools in England are funded on a consistent and transparent basis that reflects local needs. We will set out our plans shortly, and, as outlined in our manifesto, we will make sure that no school budget is cut as a result of the new formula. That will be particularly important for six schools in the right hon. Gentleman’s constituency. In his absence, I feel strongly that schools with characteristics receive very different levels of funding from central Government. That results in a situation where, for example, a school in Barnsley would receive 50% more funding, with no other change to its circumstances, if it were situated in Hackney. That is not a rational, fair or efficient system for distributing money to our schools.

In March 2016, we launched the first stage of our consultation on the national funding formula. We asked for views on the principles that should underpin it and its overall design. Those principles included using robust data to ensure that funding is matched to pupil characteristics and the importance of transparency in the way in which funding is allocated. Over 6,000 people responded and there was widespread support for reforming the current system and for the principles that we set out, including the issue that the right hon. Gentleman raised of low prior attainment, which he queried. Allocating extra funding for pupils who begin school behind their peers is, I believe, absolutely right. There is no perverse incentive, because it is the child’s attainment in the predecessor school that is relevant: nursery school if they are going to primary school, or primary school if they are going to secondary school.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): It is absolutely right, of course, that we should invest in pupils with low prior attainment, but does the Minister agree that that should not be at the expense of schools that, for whatever reason, are performing below the criteria on outperforming English as an additional language or free school meals? They should have the funding they need to provide a full, rounded, liberal education.

Nick Gibb: I accept my hon. Friend’s point. We have had many discussions on these and other issues—regarding not only schools in his constituency, but 350 schools across the country. I feel strongly that schools with children who come from deprived backgrounds, with all the challenges they bring, should receive extra funding through the formula in addition to the money that comes through the pupil premium. I also strongly believe that we need to ensure that children who start school behind their peers catch up. Funding, I hope, will help ensure that they do. My hon. Friend is right, however, that we want to ensure that schools without any of those characteristics are properly funded. We can do that when a strong economy is generating the revenue to pay for those funds.

Bob Blackman: One of the issues that the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) did not raise was rising rolls, particularly in London. The birth rate and the influx of people coming to London with young children require schools to accommodate more children, but the money lags. Will the Minister consider that aspect? If schools are not going to lose out overall, the per-pupil funding will be crucial in London to make sure that money goes to the schools as rolls rise.

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: as pupil numbers rise, so funding for schools will rise as well, because it is based on a per-pupil approach. We are steering record amounts of school funding—£41 billion this year—and that is set to rise further as pupil numbers rise.

In December last year, we launched the second stage of the consultation on the detailed design of the formula. As part of the consultation and to ensure maximum transparency, we published detailed illustrative impact data for all schools and local authorities, and that enabled us to hold a truly national debate during the three months of the consultation. During that period, as I said, I met parents, teachers and governors. Both the Secretary of State and I met hon. Members across the House. We received more than 5,000 letters on the national funding formula and held more than 10 debates in the House. We received more than 25,000 responses to the consultation itself.

Tom Brake: I thank the Minister for meeting me and the heads of Wilson’s School and Carshalton High School for Girls a few months ago. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) said, irrespective of what the Government do about the funding formula, significant funding pressures come from the apprenticeship levy, pensions, national insurance and the additional recruitment costs that schools face because of the shortage of teachers. How will the Minister address those cost pressures?

Nick Gibb: The right hon. Gentleman has anticipated my comments, as he did his right hon. Friend’s. I will come to those issues. On the apprenticeship levy, schools can use apprenticeship levy funds not only for training support staff, but for training teachers. We are developing a teacher apprenticeship and the Government have asked Sir Andrew Carter to help develop a high-quality teaching apprenticeship to enable schools to draw down funding available through the apprenticeship levy.
We will publish our response to that consultation in due course. We will build on the strong support for the basic objective of reforming the current system as well as addressing the detailed issues and concerns raised throughout the consultation. We remain committed to working with Parliament and bringing forward proposals that will command consensus.

The right hon. Member for Twickenham raised the issue of introducing a national funding formula at this moment. We felt that at a time of constraints on budgets it was even more important to introduce such a formula to ensure that the unfairnesses are ironed out—more important than when budgets are rising.

Not only do we want the system for distribution to be fair; we also want to ensure that every school has the resources it needs to deliver a world-class education for every child. We have protected the core schools budget in real terms since 2010. We have given record levels of funding for our schools, and we set out plans to increase funding further in our manifesto, as well as continuing to protect the pupil premium to support the most disadvantaged pupils in our schools.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Nick Gibb: I will not.

We recognise that schools are facing cost pressures and we will reflect on the message that people sent at the election about the funding of our schools. We also know that how schools use their money is important in delivering the best outcomes for pupils. We will continue to provide support to help schools to use their funding in cost-effective ways. The Government have produced tools, information and guidance to support improved financial health and efficiency in schools. Those tools are available in one area of the gov.uk website.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I am a school governor at a local primary school in my constituency. You say that we need help to find efficient ways of spending the money in the school. I have to tell you, from personal experience, that, as a group of experienced governors, we have done absolutely everything we can to be as efficient as we possibly can. The next thing to go will be teaching assistants and teachers. I have respect for what you say but—I am sorry—I just do not think that any more tools will help. What would help is more money. That is what we need.

Mr Speaker: Order. May I just say very gently to the hon. Lady, who is already well and truly making her mark, that the word “you” implies the Chair, and I have not made any statements about any of these matters?

The hon. Lady is new, but extremely articulate, and I know that she will get to grips with these things very quickly.

Nick Gibb: I understand the hon. Lady’s point, but there are ways in which we can help schools to become more efficient with the available tools, such as reviewing the level of efficiency, investigating levels of expenditure against other similar schools and other benchmarking tools that are on the website. The best way for schools to know what is effective is to share best practice. There are case studies on the gov.uk website, showing, for example, how a school in Leicestershire supports other local schools to develop a strategic three-year budget plan and thinks through its staffing model to best meet the curriculum. It also shows a school in Barnsley that has made significant savings by introducing a more efficient working pattern for support staff, and a school in my county of West Sussex that used a data-led approach to designing its curriculum and strategic staffing plans.

Earlier this year, we introduced a schools buying strategy to support schools to save more than £1 billion a year by 2019-20 on their non-staff expenditure. The strategy includes the introduction of school buying hubs, which are regional units designed to communicate with and provide procurement support to all schools in the area. The hubs will provide expertise and specialist advice on procuring and managing catering and cleaning contracts, for example, to help to deliver better value in school buying. Alongside procurement advice, they will provide market intelligence, help with complex contracts, and promote local collaboration and aggregation.

The Government are building a digital buying platform to enable schools to compare prices more easily and to access a wide range of suppliers. School business management is an important and increasingly skilled profession. To support school business managers and help them to share their market knowledge, we will provide support to create new school business manager networks in areas of the country where they do not already exist. We will also create a network leaders forum to bring together leading members of the many networks, creating face-to-face opportunities to share knowledge and best practice on a national basis.

We will also provide schools with more access to better national deals. We have introduced a new deal on multifunctional devices—printers and photocopiers—this year. On average, schools could save more than 40% by using this arrangement, and up to 10% by making use of our national energy deal. The Department will work closely with schools—including the school the hon. Lady is a governor of—and suppliers to ensure that deals are easily accessible to schools and tailored to their needs.

Improved procurement will help free up resources available for teaching pupils, but to maximise these resources, it is also essential for schools to deploy their staff effectively and efficiently. This can be achieved through reducing unnecessary workload—that is where the Government have a key role to play—and making use of the full set of resources on the gov.uk website that support schools’ efficiency and financial health.

We are continuing our extensive work with the profession, teaching unions and Ofsted to challenge unhelpful practices and reduce workload, so that teachers can concentrate on teaching, not bureaucracy and paperwork. In February, we published the findings of the 2016 teacher workload survey, an update on how we are meeting our commitments to tackle workload, and details of further steps we will take, including an offer of targeted support. Earlier this year, we also published the school workforce planning guidance to help schools to make well-informed decisions about their staffing structures, and schools should always carefully consider their individual context and the mix of staffing roles they require.
In summary, this Government will continue to support England’s schools by providing more funding than ever before, by making sure that the funding is distributed fairly and to where it is needed most, and by helping schools to achieve more with that funding, with a focus on sustaining and improving the rapid progress our children and young people are making under this Government.

Introducing fair funding will be an historic and necessary reform—the biggest change to school funding for well over a decade. Thanks to the determination of this Government to address issues of unfairness in our society, we will have a clear, simple and transparent system that matches funding to children’s needs and the schools they attend. It will enable all schools, regardless of where they are situated in the country, to provide the very best education for pupils and an excellent education system.

*Question put and agreed to.*

7.46 pm

*House adjourned.*
House of Commons

Thursday 29 June 2017

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Free TV Licences: Over-75s

1. Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What plans she has to ensure the continuation of free TV licences for over-75s for the duration of this Parliament.

Karen Bradley: The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): Before I start, may I remind the House that, as per today’s Order Paper, I plan to make a statement on the proposed merger of 21st Century Fox and Sky after business questions. Therefore, I will not answer any questions on the subject during oral questions this morning, but I will be happy to do so at the Dispatch Box later.

The BBC has agreed to take on the full cost of the over-75s concession from April 2020. In return, the Government have agreed to transfer policy responsibility for the concession to the BBC, and that was taken forward in the Digital Economy Act 2017.

Mr Speaker: As it happens, I must say to the Secretary of State that the specific statement is not referenced on the Order Paper at all. There is a reference to “Ministerial Statements (if any)”, and that is the extent of the information previously divulged, but we are always grateful for a bit of additional, which the right hon. Lady has just provided and we take note of the gravamen of her point.

Mr Cunningham: Given that the BBC was not responsible for welfare policy and that this was not part of the Conservative manifesto, will the Secretary of State tell us when the BBC did become responsible for social policy, particularly for welfare?

Karen Bradley: I apologise for my inadvertent error and oversight. I meant to say that the statement is referenced on the annunciator, rather than on the Order Paper.

As part of the negotiations for the BBC charter, the BBC agreed to take on the over-75s licence fee. That was agreed as part of an 11-year charter, with which I think all parties were happy.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): The Secretary of State will be aware that there are also black and white television concessions. I learned this morning that some 300 people in Wales have black and white television licences. Will she confirm whether she has any plans to change that concession?

Karen Bradley: I have no plans to do that at this stage.

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): Mr Speaker, it is very good to see you back in the Chair. I welcome back those on the Front Benches, and all new and returning Members.

Page 66 of the Conservative party’s manifesto says that “pensioner benefits, including free…TV licences” would be continued “for the duration of this parliament.” That is until 2022. Is that still a commitment?

Karen Bradley: The manifesto ensured that we were clear that we would respect the decisions that had been taken, including in the Digital Economy Act. Policy responsibility for that concession will move to the BBC from 2020 and I would expect it to continue with the concession.

Tom Watson: The Government cannot guarantee free TV licences beyond 2020, as the Secretary of State has just said, without reopening their deal with the BBC. She appears to have no wish to do that. It raises the question of why on earth it was in the manifesto in the first place. Was it inserted against her wishes? Was it a cynical promise she knew she would break? Or was it just a typographical error?

Karen Bradley: The manifesto is ensuring that the concessions are available. I would expect that the BBC would continue with the concession post 2020.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Given the grossly inflated salaries the BBC pays some of its top managers and presenters, and the appalling fact that it is still a criminal offence, as opposed to a civil penalty, not to have a TV licence, is not ensuring that over-75s continue to get their TV licences free of charge the very least the BBC can do?

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. He will know that, from this year, when the BBC accounts are published they will show the salary levels of all talent being paid more than £150,000. That is a welcome increase in transparency.

Leaving the EU: Creative Industries

2. Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on the creative industries.

The Minister for Digital (Matt Hancock): We want the best deal for Britain on leaving the European Union. The creative industries are some of the UK’s greatest strengths, and we want them to continue to thrive.
Martin Whitfield: Given the importance of the creative industries to East Lothian—a major film location for films such as “The Railway Man” and “The BFG”—and the money they bring to the local economy, what discussions have been held with the Scottish Government regarding the impact of Brexit on the creative industries? What assurances can he give that the investment in the creative industries will continue after Brexit?

Matt Hancock: I have every confidence that the creative industries, which are one of our great strengths right across the country, including in Scotland—I was in Edinburgh on Monday talking to Creative Scotland and others—will continue to go from strength to strength, and we are determined to get a Brexit deal that works for them.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): As the Minister knows, global businesses invest in the creative industries here because of the talent pool and attractive production tax credits that exist for video games, TV and films. Will he ensure that, outside the EU, the UK remains the leader in Europe for talent and attracting investment?

Matt Hancock: Yes.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) has an exactly identical question, and I would call her if she were standing—

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op) rose—

Mr Speaker: And she is, so I will.

11. [900084] Tracy Brabin: Thank you so much, Mr Speaker. I have question 11, but it is a similar question.

Figures from Screen Yorkshire show that Yorkshire’s fantastic film and TV industry has grown faster than that anywhere else in the UK. Much of this commendable growth has been generated by the European regional development fund-backed Yorkshire Content Fund, but the absence of a post-Brexit plan creates insecurity and could lead to job losses. What assurances can the Government give the industry that projects supported by European funding will not be left to wither on the vine?

Matt Hancock: European funding has been part of the success of the film industry. The Treasury has already made it clear that that European funding will continue up to 2020, but that is only one part of this. The tax credits mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins), the Chairman of the Select Committee in the last Parliament, have played an incredibly important part. However, I would agree with the hon. Lady that, just like Scotland, Yorkshire is benefiting enormously from our booming film industry.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): The growth of Dovetail Games in my constituency is a prime example of the UK’s flourishing creative industries.

Could the Minister outline the support he plans to give to help creative hubs continue to develop over the exciting years ahead?

Matt Hancock: Video games are one of the most exciting areas of growth in the creative industries, doing an incredible thing for UK exports right across the country—in the south-east and all the way up to Scotland—and we will continue to back them.

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (SNP): Newspapers and the media are very much part of our creative industries, so, as we leave the EU, could the Minister explain what the Department’s policy is on the future of section 40 and Leveson 2, both of which are very relevant to the industry as it, too, prepares for Brexit?

Matt Hancock: As the hon. Gentleman knows, Conservative Members are strong supporters of the newspaper industry, especially local newspapers, which do not need extra costs from certain proposals. Given that we are such strong supporters of the newspaper industry, we have a consultation out on this issue, and I am sure he will look forward to the answer.

Mr Speaker: I leave others to judge whether the question was altogether apposite. I judged it orderly, but one thing is for sure: it was certainly creative.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): In Scotland, as the Minister knows, we have a strong, innovative and vibrant creative sector, which is worth £4 billion to our economy and which employs 75,000 people, many of whom are EU nationals. With Brexit looming, what assurances can the Minister give the industry in Scotland, and indeed across the United Kingdom, that this country will still be able to attract and keep the creative talent that is so vital for the industry to work, perform and exhibit in this country free from unnecessary barriers?

Matt Hancock: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we have set out that we are seeking to do a deal to ensure the future of European Union nationals resident here. We are also open to the brightest and the best from around the world. But the single most important thing for keeping the creative industries thriving in Scotland is remaining part of the United Kingdom.

Tennis Tournaments

3. Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Whether she has made a comparative assessment of the number of ATP Futures and Challenger-level tennis tournaments held in the UK and in other European countries. [900076]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): I have not made such an assessment, but the Lawn Tennis Association currently reviews the number of Challenger and Futures events held in this country, working with the Association of Tennis Professionals, the Women’s Tennis Association and the International Tennis Federation. Mr Speaker, I am sure you and the whole House will agree that British tennis is in its healthiest state for many years. I am sure the whole House will also join me in wishing all our
British players—our juniors, and our wheelchair, male and female stars—all the best ahead of Wimbledon next week.

Toby Perkins: Mr Speaker, I am sure you will also join me in wishing Alex Ward, Jay Clarke and Marcus Willis well as they attempt to qualify for Wimbledon today, but professional tennis does not begin and end at Wimbledon, and the number of professional Futures tournaments in Britain has gone down from 23 in 2013 to just six last year. Does the Minister agree that the number of Futures tournaments is crucial to supporting British players to make it in the professional game, and will she join me in urging the LTA to hold the number of tournaments that most of our European competitors do and to increase the number of tournaments for men and women next year?

Tracey Crouch: One of the frustrating things about being Sports Minister is that we do not get to make all the decisions that people want us to make. I agree that if we are going to encourage talent to play tennis at the highest level, we do need to have the right level of international events. That is an issue for the LTA. In the meantime, my job is to make sure that we get the right money going into the grassroots of that sport in order to ensure that we continue to grow that talent.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah, another tennis enthusiast—Rebecca Pow.

Rebecca Pow: Thank you Mr Speaker. We share, as you mention, an interest in tennis. I am a great believer that playing tennis can set one up well for life, with all its skills—including rapid reaction skills, which we see demonstrated from the Speaker’s Chair every single day. In Taunton Deane, the Taunton tennis centre offers tennis to those of all ages and ability, with cardio classes and classes for wheelchair users, and holds up to grade 3 tournaments. Does the Minister agree that while it is important to grow the game at the top level, it is also really important to encourage people in at the grassroots level, not least for the health and wellbeing spin-offs for the whole nation?

Tracey Crouch: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend, of course, on every point that she made. She is absolutely right. She is a regular advocate for the benefits of tennis. We have invested £8 million into the Lawn Tennis Association to grow the game, and we will continue to do so. She regularly champions Taunton and all its sporting events. The women’s world cup is being hosted in Taunton this weekend, and I wish them the very best of luck.

Mr Speaker: Excellent.

BBC Licence Fee

4. Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Whether she plans to bring forward proposals to change the BBC licence fee.

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): The Government will maintain the licence fee funding model for the BBC for the duration of the new 11-year charter period.

Gavin Newlands: We welcome the additional £30 million investment for the digital BBC Scotland channel, but even this funding does not come close to the £320 million raised in Scotland. The new channel aside, how can the Secretary of State, along with BBC, seriously say that Scotland gets its fair share? Is not now the time to ensure that Scotland can properly invest in our sector and talent to make more programmes such as “The Town That Thread Built”, further highlighting why Paisley should be UK City of Culture 2021?

Karen Bradley: I met the director-general and chair of the BBC on Monday and discussed this very matter with them—ensuring that the BBC does contribute to nations and regions appropriately. The hon. Gentleman will know that the new BBC board, which has a non-executive director from each of the home nations, is incorporated such that it can ensure that those voices are properly heard.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that broadcasters, particularly those in receipt of licence fee money, should confront rather than cosy up to politically motivated websites that purvey fake news?

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend makes a very important point, and I am sure it will have been heard by those he refers to.

BBC Investment: Nations and Regions

5. Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): What discussions she has had with the BBC on its plans for future investment in the nations and regions.

Karen Bradley: With them—ensuring that the BBC does contribute to nations and regions appropriately. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The creative industry is one of our great strengths in this country. It can bring high-quality, high-value jobs to the nations and regions. As I said in answer to the previous question, I met the director-general and the chair of the BBC on Monday to discuss exactly that point.

Stephen Doughty: The Secretary of State will be well aware of how proud I am that Cardiff South and Penarth is home to the Tardis, Torchwood, Cwnderi, Holby City’s A&E department, and so many others. We have had fantastic investment from the BBC in both the city centre and my constituency. Does she agree, however, that there needs to be more focus on ensuring that jobs and opportunities go to local people, particularly those living in deprived communities around those industries? We need to be getting everybody into the creative industries, which are a way of growing our economy.

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The creative industry is one of our great strengths in this country. It can bring high-quality, high-value jobs to the nations and regions. As I said in answer to the previous question, I met the director-general and the chair of the BBC on Monday to discuss exactly that point.

12. Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): BBC Radio has begun a commissioning process to tender 60% of eligible network radio by 2022, and
there are concerns that programmes currently produced at MediaCity could be lost to our region. What assurances can the Secretary of State give that regional voices will be protected in the tendering process?

Karen Bradley: I agree with the hon. Lady. MediaCity is such a great success story. The fact that more people are employed in MediaCity at Salford quays than in its heyday as a major port is a great example of how creative and new industries can bring wealth to the nations and regions. As I said in answer to a previous question, I have discussed the matter with the chair and director-general and will continue to do so.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Over the election campaign there was minimal coverage of Northern Ireland constituencies, which for many underlined the view that the BBC’s regional coverage in Northern Ireland is sub-par. What can be done to increase the resources for the BBC’s engagement with Northern Ireland representatives, to ensure that they match those of other regions across the United Kingdom of Northern Ireland and Great Britain?

Karen Bradley: I refer to my previous answers. If the hon. Gentleman has concerns about the coverage during the election period, I urge him to put them to Ofcom, which is now the BBC regulator, so that it can look into them.

Regional Funding: Arts and Culture

6. Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to ensure equitable regional funding for arts and culture.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (John Glen): The Government want everyone to have the best access to arts and culture, wherever they live. That is why I am delighted that 60% of the national portfolio organisation funding announced by the Arts Council this week and 75% of lottery funding from 2018 will be invested outside London.

Lilian Greenwood: May I begin by congratulating the hon. Gentleman on his first appearance on the Front Bench? He will know that austerity has forced midlands local authorities to cut spending on culture, so Arts Council England’s announcement that it is investing extra money outside London is very welcome and I am delighted that it will support City Arts, Primary, Dance4, Nottingham Playhouse and other organisations in our city, which the Minister is welcome to visit.

European Union funding has also been transformational—I do not think that Nottingham Contemporary could have been built without it—so will the Government guarantee to replace that regional support for the arts when Britain leaves the EU?

John Glen: The Government see the value of collaboration in arts and culture funding. She is right to point out that this week’s announcement is excellent news for Nottingham and Nottinghamshire. I will do all I can, working with the chief executive and chairman of the Arts Council, to ensure that the sector’s priorities are addressed across this country.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I warmly welcome the new Minister to his place. What advice does he have for smaller regional museums such as Congleton Museum, which has an exciting expansion opportunity for which it needs to secure grant funding?

John Glen: Congleton Museum has already done extremely well to be awarded £65,000 to buy the hoards of Cheshire. There are a number of grants available and I would be happy to work with my hon. Friend and any other Member and give advice on how to secure those funds.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): Ashfield, like many former coalfield constituencies, receives way below the average in lottery funding. Is not it time that the lottery publish not just how much money it spends in each constituency, but how many tickets are purchased in each constituency, so that we can see whether the poorest areas are subsidising the richest?

John Glen: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady for that interesting point. I will be happy to discuss it further with her and see if we can move that forward.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I welcome this week’s announcement of more funding for the arts and museums largely in Nottingham city, but did the Minister hear me mention this week the potential for a mining museum in my constituency of Mansfield? Will he meet me to help us further celebrate that heritage and culture and see whether we can make progress on that?

John Glen: I welcome my hon. Friend to his place and congratulate him on his election to the House. I gently point out that seven of the new joiners in Nottinghamshire are outside the city itself, but I will be happy to meet him to discuss what can be done to assist him in his plans.

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): I very much welcome the Arts Council’s decision to increase funding outside London, but the Minister must be aware that many brilliant institutions such as the People’s History Museum are primarily dependent on local authorities for funding. Will he consider following the Arts Council’s lead and give us back some of the money that has been slashed from local authority budgets, so that we can start to fund again some of this country’s most innovative cultural institutions?

John Glen: I listened very carefully to the hon. Lady. Of course, some local authorities do see the value of investing in arts and culture and make a massive contribution, alongside the Arts Council grants, to extending their footprint, but I am happy to look into the case that she raises.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The Minister will be aware that Doorstep Arts is a home-grown theatre and arts company resident at the Palace theatre in Paignton and has just become the first organisation in Torbay to be part of the Arts Council’s national portfolio. Will he join me in welcoming that and the £382,000 of funding that it will receive from the Arts Council over the next four years as a result?
John Glen: I shall be delighted to do so, and I would be happy to visit my hon. Friend’s constituency to see some of the excellent work that he has been doing with the tourism sector.

**Digital Infrastructure**

7. Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to ensure that digital infrastructure meets the needs of the economy.

**The Minister for Digital (Matt Hancock): May I welcome the hon. Lady to the House? Some 93.2% of premises in the country now have access to superfast broadband, and we are on track to deliver access to 95% by the end of the year. Our universal service obligation will ensure that every premise can have access to high-speed broadband by 2020.**

Liz Twist: Slow and poor-quality broadband is seriously hampering a number of businesses in my constituency, from rural Rowlands Gill to the industrialised Tees Valley trading estate, as I am sure it is in other Members’ constituencies. What plans do the Government have to ensure that 100% of areas have access to high-speed, high-quality broadband?

Matt Hancock: I absolutely understand the frustration of people running businesses in the hon. Lady’s constituency and others. Getting access to high-speed broadband up to over 93% has been a big and positive task, but we clearly want to make it available to all premises in the country. That is why we legislated for the universal service obligation, and I look forward to ensuring that it happens.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Thanks to the Government’s commitment to providing high-speed broadband to rural areas, 8,432 more homes and businesses in my constituency are on high-speed broadband since 2015, but 10% are still not. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that the cap in the important universal broadband service obligation will be high enough to ensure that high-speed broadband reaches the most rural areas in my constituency?

Matt Hancock: It is clearly incredibly important to ensure that universal access to broadband reaches as far as possible. Of course, there are technologies that do not require a physical line, such as fixed wireless broadband, which we can use in really rural areas.

8. [900081]Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): On Monday we were all pleased to learn that the people of Northern Ireland are to benefit from another £150 million of investment in digital infrastructure, which is necessary for the development and growth of their economy and is welcome news. On Tuesday, we learned from Which?, the consumers’ association, that the poorest average connectivity speeds in the whole country are in Orkney and Shetland. When are we going to get our cash?

Matt Hancock: Of course, as the right hon. Gentleman knows, we have put enormous investment into the north of Scotland and the islands to expand both fixed broadband and mobile phone connectivity. It is a great pity that the contracts to get broadband to Scotland were signed more slowly than those for England and Wales, and I am afraid that was because we devolved responsibility to the Scottish Government.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): Despite superfast broadband access being a requirement for new estates such as Willow Road in Norton Canes, the infrastructure has not been put in place there, meaning that residents have the speeds of a decade ago. What measures are being put in place to ensure that new estates have superfast broadband?

Matt Hancock: It is simply ridiculous for any new estate to be built without decent broadband connectivity. It ill behoves any developer to build a development without the very best connectivity. The big developers have said that they will put fibre broadband into any group of more than 30 houses, and it is now the law that new developments must have superfast broadband. I am happy to work with my hon. Friend and others to make that happen, because it must happen.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Given the increasing intensity of cyber-attacks and the threats to our national infrastructure, it was frankly shocking to see no mention of cyber-security in the Queen’s Speech. Will the Minister confirm that the Government’s cyber-security strategy relies on a scheme that claims to be a badge of assurance for thousands of businesses and institutions, but is in fact based on outdated technology, redundant hacking approaches and—astonishingly—was itself hacked last week?

Matt Hancock: No, I do not recognise what the hon. Lady says. Cyber-security is incredibly important, and that is why we brought in and put together the National Cyber Security Centre, which has been leading on those issues. The laws we have are largely the laws that we need on cyber, which is why there was no need for a law on cyber. For Labour Members to try to make party political noises out of something that is incredibly important is a terrible thing. All businesses should look at it, and I would say they should implement it. For Labour Members to try to make party political noises out of something that is incredibly important for our country shows that they simply have not got what it takes.

Louise Haigh: I am very generous so I will give the Minister a chance to correct the record. Is it the case that the Cyber Essentials scheme has been designed to be an extremely good scheme, that the 10 Steps to Cyber Security make absolutely no reference to encryption or to the hashing and salting of passwords, that the take-up of both schemes has been exceptionally low, particularly from small businesses, that neither scheme makes reference to the Cloud, and that the Cyber Essentials scheme was hacked last week?

Matt Hancock: That ill becomes the hon. Lady, given her normally reasonable approach. The Cyber Essentials scheme is incredibly important for improving cyber-security. All businesses should look at it, and I would say they should implement it. For Labour Members to try to make party political noises out of something that is incredibly important for our country shows that they simply have not got what it takes.
9. **Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to encourage participation in sport by young people.

[900082]

17. **Justin Tomlinson** (North Swindon) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to encourage participation in sport by young people.

[900090]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch):** The Government are committed to ensuring that all children and young people have the best opportunities to engage in sport and physical activity. Between 2016 and 2021, we will invest more than £194 million in projects to increase children’s capability in and enjoyment of physical activity.

**Tracey Crouch:** Given my brazen attempts to steal school sport from the Department for Education on a number of occasions, I can only tell the House that we have a strong cross-governmental approach to the matter. The past 18 months have seen the publication of two landmark strategies, which include the sport strategy and the childhood obesity plan. We continue to work closely with the Department for Education, and a range of other Departments, on those strategies.

**Tracey Crouch:** My right hon. Friend is far better at lobbying the Treasury than anybody else in this House. I congratulate Harlow gymnastics club on its 10th anniversary. I see that it runs a number of exciting initiatives, including the wonderful Head over Heels programme for the under-fours. Given that Harlow has slightly lower than average activity statistics, anything that the gymnastics club and other sports clubs can do to improve them is very welcome.

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the Chancellor of the Exchequer? If it is not, may I suggest that she start soon? This was not just in our manifesto; it was also in the Democratic Unionist party’s.

Karen Bradley: I have been lobbied on this matter on a number of occasions. As the Member of Parliament who represents Alton Towers, I have, as I am sure the right hon. Gentleman can imagine, been lobbied on it on a number of occasions. It is, of course, a matter for the Treasury, but we continue to have conversations.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend welcome the appointment of Alex Mahon as the new chief executive of Channel 4, who I hope will bring a fresh approach? Will she confirm that it remains the Government’s view that the distinctiveness of Channel 4 will be enhanced by its being relocated outside London?

Karen Bradley: Yes I do and yes I can.

T2. [900067] Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Victims of phone hacking were given a cast-iron promise by this Government to have a full inquiry into the offences, but the Government are now trying to jettison Leveson 2. Why should the public have confidence in other public inquiries when the Government cannot keep their promises on previous inquiries?

Karen Bradley: The first part of the Leveson inquiry took place six years ago. Many things have happened since that time and many changes have taken place. The manifesto was clear, but there is a consultation process which I, as Secretary of State, have to go through.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): This House never intended vulnerable people in less-well-off areas to lose £100 several times a minute on fixed odds betting terminals. When will we have the opportunity to bring the stake down to £2?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): Mr Speaker, I know that you always encourage brevity in topical questions, so I apologise for giving a tediously processy response. Although we launched the review in October 2016, purdah interrupted the final stages of our consideration of the evidence received and the subsequent internal cross-Government process of approval and sign-off, so I am afraid we are back at the start of the process. As a consequence of that taking at least 12 weeks, I would not expect any further announcement until October at the earliest.

T3. [900068] Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): Croydon, with its vibrant Tech City, the redevelopment of Fairfield Halls and its unique street art scene, is fast becoming the new cultural hub of the south-east. Has the Minister lobbied for continued access to, or equivalent funding for, the £1 billion Creative Europe programme post-Brexit, which is such an important source of funding for the creative arts?

The Minister for Digital (Matt Hancock): I have visited the tech scene and some of the creative hubs in Croydon, so I agree with the analysis that it is an extremely exciting place, and we are working on the question that the hon. Lady has raised.

Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): A number of parents in my constituency are worried about the safety of their children online. Will my right hon. Friend update the House on what steps are being taken to make the internet a safer place?

Matt Hancock: As my hon. Friend will know, this is an incredibly important matter. Any parent knows the perils of young people growing up in the internet age, as well as the massive opportunities that it brings. The digital charter that Her Majesty announced as part of the Queen’s Speech will bring together those concerns and issues and ensure that we can lead the world in providing the right balance between freedom and security online.

T4. [900069] Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): This month is the 10th anniversary of the floods in Hull, when the local BBC radio and television played such an important part in communicating with the local public. I understand that there are further discussions about cuts of up to £15 million to BBC services in England. Is the Secretary of State as worried as I am about the effect that that could have on the local community and democratic resource in all our constituencies?

Karen Bradley: I recently visited Hull as the city of culture. It is an absolutely fantastic place to be and I would encourage all hon. and right hon. Members to visit this year. Perhaps I could speak to the hon. Lady outside the Chamber about the issue she raises.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Further to the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), does the Secretary of State agree that moving Channel 4 from London to Bradford or Leeds would give it a much better perspective on life? Instead of being stuffed full of London Labour luvvies, it might benefit from being moved to gritty West Yorkshire.

Tracey Crouch: My hon. Friend has made his pitch for a location for Channel 4; perhaps he would like to make the same pitch to the board and management of Channel 4.

Mr Speaker: I am sure the hon. Gentleman will require no encouragement whatever.

T5. [900070] Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Further to my earlier question to the Secretary of State, there are concerns that the tendering process for BBC Radio could lead to a weakening of pay and terms and conditions. Will the Minister join me in asking the BBC to reconsider that figure and the impact it could have on people’s employment?

Karen Bradley: We are determined that it will have exactly the opposite effect, but I will of course meet the hon. Lady to discuss that.

Andrew C. Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Will the Minister join me in sending good luck not only to the British and Irish Lions this summer but to Scotland’s women’s football team? They have done what the men’s team have painfully failed to do for 19 years and qualified for an international football tournament, in which we will meet England on 19 July.
Tracey Crouch: The one thing I will say is that I hope the women’s football match between Scotland and England will be far more thrilling than the men’s match was.

T6. [900071] David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Further to the point raised by the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), will the Minister get a move on and get a grip on the crack cocaine of gambling—the fixed odds betting terminals? Shettleston Road, Tollcross Road and Baillieston Main Street in my constituency are awash with bookmakers, and we need action on this sooner rather than later.

Tracey Crouch: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to the House. I share the frustration of many people across the House; I have been dealing with this issue as a Minister since I walked into the Department in 2015. We must ensure that we have a proper evidence-based response to the issue of stakes and prizes. We are in the process of analysing that, but I should also point out that powers on the issue of FOBTs have been devolved to Scotland.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): On Sunday I will be in the lovely village of Doddington, where Olympic gold medallist Georgie Twigg will be opening a new cycle path from her home village to Lincoln, enabling people young and old to get out, enjoy the countryside and improve their fitness. Georgie Twigg and the rest of our women’s hockey team have achieved great success. What is the Secretary of State doing to ensure that more young women can get involved in sport, so that we can see more of the same in future?

Karen Bradley: I share my hon. Friend’s enthusiasm for the women’s hockey team, having been honoured to be at the semi-final in Rio, where we had that glorious experience. Georgie Twigg will be opening a new cycle path in Doddington, where Olympic gold medallist Georgie Twigg will be opening a new cycle path from her home village to Lincoln, enabling people young and old to get out, enjoy the countryside and improve their fitness. Georgie Twigg and the rest of our women’s hockey team have achieved great success. What is the Secretary of State doing to ensure that more young women can get involved in sport, so that we can see more of the same in future?

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Mr Speaker: I wish them very well, and I hope that we will have an update from the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) in due course. In fact, I feel sure that we will.

ATTORNEY GENERAL

The Attorney General was asked—

European Convention on Human Rights

1. Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the future status of the UK as a signatory to the European convention on human rights.

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): The Government have committed the United Kingdom to remaining a signatory to the European convention on human rights for the duration of the Parliament.
Paul Blomfield: I thank the Attorney General for his answer, and I am reassured by it, but, as he will know, earlier this week the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights described the Prime Minister’s comments after the appalling attack on London Bridge as “a gift” to every despot “who...violates human rights under the pretext of fighting terrorism.”

Will the Attorney General recognise the danger of playing politics with human rights, and accept that the Government need to desist from doing it?

The Attorney General: The hon. Gentleman will not be surprised to hear that I do not accept that that is what is happening. What I think the Prime Minister was saying is something with which I would expect every Member of the House to agree, namely that human rights involve a balance: there is a balance between the human rights of all the different people in our society. Everyone has the most important human right of all, which is to live their life unabated by those who wish to do them harm through terrorism. What the Prime Minister was saying—rightly in my view, and, I hope, in the hon. Gentleman’s—was that we must ensure that that balance continues to be struck correctly, and that is what we will do.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The Court behind the convention has tens of thousands of cases outstanding, and many of the so-called judges have no legal qualifications at all. Do not those two stark facts undermine the credibility of that organisation in upholding human rights at all?

The Attorney General: I think my hon. Friend and I would agree that the Court in Strasbourg could sensibly reform and improve, but he will also recognise that we in this country do not rely solely on that Court to protect our human rights. Our Government and our courts do that too, and do it very effectively.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): Does the Attorney General not agree that, although the Strasbourg Court may need reform, it has done excellent work over the years in putting forward the case for human rights in central and eastern Europe? The uncertainty of Britain’s position will give succour to regimes such as those of President Putin in Moscow and the President of Belarus, which is not a signal that the British Government should be giving.

The Attorney General: I applaud all those who work to promote human rights, whether in a court or elsewhere, but it is important to understand that the European convention on human rights itself permits derogation in certain circumstances. The hon. Gentleman was, I think, a member of a Government who sought to do that in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. It is certainly within the hierarchy and system of the European Court of Human Rights that that should be allowed, and we need to ensure that the balance I described earlier is maintained.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. The right to the peaceful enjoyment of property is a valuable safeguard in the convention. Does the Attorney General agree that the Serious Fraud Office has a strong and growing reputation for upholding that right, and will he clarify his plans for the future?

The Attorney General: I certainly think that the Serious Fraud Office has an important role to play in doing what it can to deal with economic crime, as of course do other agencies. As for the future, we are looking carefully at how we can improve performance in tackling economic crime across the whole range of organisations that do that work.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): During the election campaign, the Prime Minister said that she was going to rip up human rights in order to fight terrorism. Can the Attorney General confirm that he has advised his Cabinet colleagues that there is nothing in the Human Rights Act 1998 or in the convention on human rights that would prevent the Government from taking a robust approach to terrorism, and that this plan to rip up human rights will be shelved?

The Attorney General: No, the Prime Minister said nothing of the kind. Let me read out exactly what she did say, which was that “we should do even more to restrict the freedom and the movements of terrorist suspects when we have enough evidence to know they present a threat, but not enough evidence to prosecute them in full in court. If our human rights laws stop us from doing it, we will change the laws so we can do it.”

That seems eminently sensible, and something we should all agree with.

British Nationals: Foreign Armies and Militias

2. Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): What the Government’s policy is on the prosecution of British nationals who enlist to fight in foreign armies and militias.

[900093]

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): All cases in which offences may have been committed under terrorism legislation are considered on their own merits by experienced specialist prosecutors in the Crown Prosecution Service counter-terrorism division. Prosecutions will go ahead when there is sufficient evidence to provide a realistic prospect of conviction and a prosecution is required in the public interest.

Robert Jenrick: At least 100 British citizens, including my constituent Aiden Aslin, have been to Syria and Iraq to fight with Kurdish peshmerga forces against Daesh. Those individuals who have returned to the UK have found themselves in a state of legal limbo, as neither the CPS nor local police forces seem to be able to reach a judgment on whether the Terrorism Acts should apply to them. Will the Attorney General’s office give greater guidance and support to those police forces? No individual deserves to be left in legal limbo.

The Attorney General: I commend my hon. Friend for the persistence with which he has raised the case of his constituent. I know that he understands how difficult this is. Each case is different, and each case must be considered on its own merits by the police and then, in due course, by the CPS. On the question of guidance, he will understand that it is difficult for politicians to set
out guidance to apply to each individual case. He will also know, however, that cases in which the effect of terrorism is felt abroad rather than in this country often require my consent, and I will think about whether I could give any specific guidance on what criteria I would take into account when considering the public interest element of such cases.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Many of my constituents would be surprised to learn that anyone who goes to Syria to fight is not tracked or tagged when they get back. Also, is the Attorney General aware of the real concern about how many people slip in and out of this country on borrowed or forged passports?

**The Attorney General**: Yes, I do understand that. The message we must all try to give is that anyone who is attracted to the idea of going to fight in Syria or Iraq must be dissuaded from doing so, partly because of the personal risk that the hon. Gentleman describes but also because the picture is exceptionally complicated, and organisations that appear to be on the side of the angels may not in fact be so. It is important that everyone understands the legal and physical risks that they are running by doing that sort of thing.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): What assessment has he made of the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on the protection of human rights in the UK?

**The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright)**: The United Kingdom has a long-standing tradition of ensuring that our rights and liberties are protected domestically and of fulfilling our international human rights obligations. The decision to leave the European Union does not change that.

**Alison Thewliss**: The repeal Bill White Paper is vague in the details of the human rights protections currently afforded to us all by EU laws and regulations. Will the Attorney General instruct a full independent audit of human rights protections originating from the EU and publish the results?

**The Attorney General**: The hon. Lady will have to wait until the Bill is published, but she will then be able to study it in detail, and the House will be able to discuss it in detail. However, she will appreciate that the principle behind the Bill is that we will transfer European rules and regulations into domestic law wherever it is feasible and sensible to do so. They will become domestic law at that point, and they will be enforced and upheld by our own courts. That is a sensible way of doing it.

**Mims Davies** (Eastleigh) (Con): Human rights and the scaremongering around them came up time and again on the doorsteps of Eastleigh during the election campaign. Does the Minister agree that it is simply scaremongering and that leaving the EU will not change our human rights?

**The Attorney General**: I agree with my hon. Friend. Leaving will not make a difference to how human rights are defended in this country. It is worth remembering—I am sure she made this point on the doorsteps—that this Government have a good record in the defence of human rights, both domestically and abroad. It was this Government that put forward a modern slavery Bill, which was not just the first in this country, but the first in Europe, and Conservatives in Government promoted the idea of sexual violence in conflict being something that the world must take seriously. We are proud of that record, and we will continue with it.

**Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): The Government’s proposals, published this week, on non-UK EU citizens after Brexit suggest that they, and not British citizens, will need documentation to access public services. In other words, that means an identity card for some, but not for everyone. How can that possibly be consistent with the European convention on human rights?

**The Attorney General**: We have to work through the practicalities. It will be important to understand how people demonstrate that they are who they say they are, but I do not accept that that will lead to a system of identity cards. The hon. Gentleman will recall that Conservatives in government got rid of the Labour idea of having identity cards in the first place.

**Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): Human rights are defended by the European Union, but they were not invented by the European Union. As my right hon. and learned Friend has already said, this country has a good record in upholding them. Would he be interested to know that still only nine EU countries, including of course the UK, permit gay marriage?

**The Attorney General**: My hon. Friend is always interesting—no less so on this point. He is right. Both sides of the House should accept that human rights are important and must be upheld, but our courts, our judges and our Government are perfectly capable of doing that job, which they have done very well for a long time.

**Crown Prosecution Service: Action against Terrorism**

4. **Sir Henry Bellingham** (North West Norfolk) (Con): What steps the Crown Prosecution Service is taking to support action against terrorism.

**The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright)**: Terrorism prosecutions are dealt with by a specialist unit within the CPS, and there is close working between the CPS, the police and the intelligence services from the launch of an investigation until the conclusion of a trial.

**Sir Henry Bellingham**: While the 400 or so radicalised British Muslims who are still fighting for ISIS in Syria are naive, many of them pose a great danger to the UK. We know their names, so what steps are being taken to prepare for prosecutions?

**The Attorney General**: My hon. Friend is right. We have to pay close attention to each of those individuals. He will understand that prosecutions will not always follow in all those cases, but the number of prosecutions in terrorism cases has increased significantly. There were 79 trials last year, compared with 51 trials the year
before, and we are remarkably good at convicting in those trials, which have a conviction rate of something like 86%.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Since 2010, the CPS has lost 2,400 staff—a third of its workforce—and 400 prosecutors. Is the Attorney General confident that he can meet the ever-growing complexity of the terrorism cases that are coming through now?

The Attorney General: Yes, I am, and so is the CPS. The resources that it has available to deal with counter-terrorism are increasing and, as I have indicated, the conviction rate in terrorism cases is high. Indeed, the conviction rate across all offences has remained remarkably stable over the period that the right hon. Gentleman describes.

Public Disasters: Independent Advocate

5. Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the role of an independent advocate to act for families after a public disaster. [900097]

8. Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential merits of appointing an independent advocate to act for families after a public disaster. [900100]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): It is of paramount importance that bereaved families and injured people are properly involved and supported following a disaster, which is why we announced in the Queen’s Speech that we will establish an independent public advocate to ensure that involvement and provide that support.

Diana Johnson: Will the independent advocate be able to act for those affected by the contaminated blood scandal? What exactly does the idea of “assistance” and “support” mean? Does it mean a publicly funded lawyer for each family affected?

The Solicitor General: I thank the hon. Lady for that point. This of course depends very much on how quickly we as a Parliament can pass the necessary legislation. It is certainly the Government’s intention that the independent advocate gets on with their work as quickly as possible. On the specific point, each case will depend upon its merits. Of course, legal aid is already available for families with regard to certain procedures, but I think the benefit of having a consolidated advocate will be to address the very questions she asks. I look forward to these issues being debated carefully when the necessary legislation is introduced.

Jo Stevens: Will the Solicitor General confirm that if families who live in high rises, but who, thankfully, have not suffered the same disaster that Grenfell Tower has, wish to bring any legal action on health and safety grounds, they will be entitled to legal aid?

The Solicitor General: Again, the hon. Lady asks a general question about the merits of particular cases. If indeed there are grounds—for example, a judicial review procedure might be appropriate in particular cases—that application can be made. The important point in the context of this question is whether we can do more for families and bereaved relatives. I think we can, and the precedent set by the horrific events at Grenfell will allow us all to learn important lessons: that families have to be put first.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Can the Solicitor General help us on the practicalities? What discussions has he had with the Bar Council and the Law Society as to how an independent advocate or advocates might be identified; what levels of remuneration will be available, so as to ensure that there is proper equality of arms in representation; and by what means families will be able to give proper and fully discreet instructions?

The Solicitor General: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. It is vital that we get these details right as we develop the policy. It is clear, certainly to the Government, that having quality advocacy so that the right documents are obtained and a proper challenge is made at all stages of the process is important, and it is what we seek to achieve. Therefore, fulfilling article 6 has to be at the heart of this.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): What assessment has the Solicitor General made of the efficacy of having an independent advocate after a tragedy such as Grenfell in trying to get to justice and truth for the victims, when this is coupled with the rather unhelpful remarks of the shadow Chancellor, which seem to be clouding the whole issue?

The Solicitor General: It is vital at solemn and serious times like this that we all exercise our right to free speech responsibly, and that we are mindful that criminal investigations are ongoing, as well as concurrent inquests and, of course, the public inquiry. All of us have to make sure that we pass that very high test, and I am afraid that the shadow Chancellor failed in that in his remarks this week.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I am sure the Solicitor General would agree that it is vital that the independent public advocate has the powers needed to carry out the role. I pay great tribute to the work of the Hillsborough families over many years, but he will be aware that key to that were the findings of an independent panel in overturning the first inquest verdict. Will the independent public advocate have the powers to appoint an independent panel if they see fit to do so?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman raises a very germane point, and we all need to bear the Hillsborough precedent very much in mind. I am keen, and the Government are keen, to ensure that the independent advocate has as powerful and as meaningful a role as possible. Each case will depend on its merits, but I am certainly prepared to look at all details, including the one he raises.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Does the Solicitor General also agree that it is crucial that there is full public confidence in the role of the independent public advocate? As such, the role should be subject to appropriate scrutiny. Will he also promise that the independent...
public advocate will place reports before this House on an annual basis, so that Members can look carefully at the work in detail?

The Solicitor General: Like many other appointments of this kind, I can envisage the sort of accountability that the hon. Gentleman mentions. The publication of annual reports is a regular and common occurrence. Again, it is a particular point that we will consider very carefully indeed.

Hate Crime: Aggravated Offences Regime

6. Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of the aggravated offences regime on the level of successful prosecutions for hate crime.

7. Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of the aggravated offences regime on the level of successful prosecutions for hate crime.

8. Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of the aggravated offences regime on the level of successful prosecutions for hate crime.

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): The Crown Prosecution Service has taken a number of steps to improve its prosecution of all strands of this type of crime, including the aggravated offences, and that includes the delivery of vital face-to-face training. Its hard work in this area has resulted in significant increases in the use of sentencing uplifts in all strands of hate crime.

Kate Green: In 2014, the Law Commission proposed that disability hate crime should be given parity with other hate crimes in relation to aggravated offences and to so-called stirring-up offences. In November 2016 in a debate in Westminster Hall, the Solicitor General said that the Government were reviewing that report. Will he update the House on when the Government will make a decision, as it is of great importance to disabled people?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Lady knows that I have had a long-standing interest in disability hate crime. The Government are particularly interested in the strand of work conducted by the previous Home Affairs Committee. We are looking to its successor Committee to carry on that work. We want this House to play its part in the response to the Law Commission recommendations, and we very much hope that, as soon as possible, we can craft a suitable response to get the law right.

Imran Hussain: As has been stated, the Law Commission has previously called on the Government to review hate crime legislation. Will the Government bring forward proposals for the review to ensure that the legislation is effective and sufficiently broad in scope?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman is right to press the Government on those issues. My concerns are twofold: first, we need to get the existing law properly used and enforced by way of training and the actual use of it by the police and the Crown Prosecution Service; and, secondly, we need to get the response to the Law Commission recommendations right. I want to ensure that this House passes laws that are properly enforced. Too often in the past, we have been too quick to pass laws that have then failed the expectations of those who deserve protection. He is right that we will be looking at that as soon as possible.

Melanie Onn: Reports of hate crime rose by 57% following Brexit. CPS staffing budgets have more than halved since 2010. Is the Attorney General therefore confident that the CPS is adequately resourced to deal effectively with these reports and ensure that victims of hate crime do indeed get justice?

The Solicitor General: I can reassure the hon. Lady that the trends in relation to the prosecution of hate crime continue to increase, particularly with regard to racially and religiously aggravated hate crimes. The increase in the past year was 1.9%, which means that more than 13,000 cases are now being prosecuted. That is reflected across the piece when it comes to homophobic crime and disability hate crime. There is no bar at all to the CPS’s pursuing these cases and marking society’s condemnation of this sort of criminal activity.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Will my hon. and learned Friend tell the House what action the Government are taking to prevent the spread of hate crime via social media?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. May I reiterate that the law shows no distinction whatsoever between hate crimes that are committed offline and those that are committed online? Just because somebody hides behind a pseudonym and pursues hate online does not mean that the police and the CPS will not track them down and prosecute them, as we have seen notably in cases involving several Members of this House, who have been the victims of appalling hate crime.

Michael Fabricant: Twitter is against my hair.

Mr Speaker: Unless I misheard him, the hon. Gentleman chuntered from a sedentary position that Twitter was against his hair—[Interruption.] And that that constitutes
coming to the police, but that is an acceptable way to report crime because it means that more crimes can be prosecuted.

Mr Speaker: Order. We have run late. I want to accommodate the Member with the last question on the Order Paper, but no other.

Burglary: Sentencing

10. Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the extent to which sentencing of people convicted of burglary has been unduly lenient.

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): Last year the Attorney General and I referred 11 cases for burglary as unduly lenient and achieved an increase in sentence in seven of those. Only the most serious types of burglary offence currently fall within the unduly lenient scheme, but we have recommitted in our manifesto to extend its scope and we will work with my right hon. Friend the Lord Chancellor to implement that commitment.

Mr Robertson: I thank my hon. and learned Friend for that answer and for the welcome news. Only 10% of first-time burglars receive immediate custodial sentences. Does that not encourage them to carry on their crimes? Burglary is quite a serious crime; will he have a look at that statistic?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is right to say that burglary is a serious crime. It is a crime against the person, not just against property, because it affects people’s wellbeing. I am glad to tell him that since the introduction of the revised Sentencing Council guidelines on burglary in 2012, the overall level of sentencing for burglary, in terms of prison and length of sentence, has increased. That should give his constituents some encouragement that the courts are handing out the appropriate punishment for this serious crime.

Mr Speaker: Order. Before we come to business questions, it might be helpful to the House if I announce my selection of amendments to be potentially voted on much later today. I have selected the amendment tabled by the official Opposition—amendment (l), if memory serves, in the name of the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell).

As colleagues will be intimately conscious, being fully familiar with all these matters, I have a right to select up to two further amendments under the terms of our Standing Orders. I can advise the House that I have selected amendment (d) in the name of the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) and others, and amendment (g) in the name of the hon. Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) and others. I hope that that is helpful to the House.
Business of the House

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

29 JUNE 2017

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business for next week will be:

MONDAY 3 JUNE—Second Reading of the Air Travel Organisers’ Licensing Bill.

TUESDAY 4 JUNE—Second Reading of the European Union (Approvals) Bill, followed by a motion relating to the allocation of Select Committees, followed by general debate on the Chris Gibb report: Improvements to Southern Railway. At 7 pm the House will be asked to agree all outstanding estimates.

WEDNESDAY 5 JUNE—Proceedings on the Supply and Appropriation (Main Estimates) Bill, followed by a motion to approve the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007 (Extension of Duration of Non-jury Trial Provisions) Order 2017, followed by a general debate on Israel and Palestinian talks.

THURSDAY 6 JUNE—General debate on exiting the European Union and global trade.

FRIDAY 7 JUNE—The House will not be sitting.

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for 6 July will be:

THURSDAY 6 JUNE—Debate on global education before the G20 summit, followed by a debate on the seasonal agricultural workers scheme.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the business. I am not sure that she is aware that although she has allocated a debate on the Gibb report on Tuesday, there is a Westminster Hall debate on Wednesday at 9.30 am on the same report. I do not know whether that is a typo or whether she just wants to punish Back Benchers.

I send the condolences of Her Majesty’s Opposition to all Scottish National party Members on the death of Gordon Wilson, who was their leader from 1979 to 1990 and was the Member of Parliament for Dundee, East from 1974 to 1987. We send our condolences to his family and friends.

It was a great get-together in the Chamber on Saturday, as Jo’s family and friends gathered together to unveil that beautiful plaque. I thank you, Mr Speaker, and your office for making it such a memorable day and all Members from both sides who turned up. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern), who organised the plaque. You were at Prime Minister’s Question Time yesterday, Mr Speaker, and Brendan was right when he said that it was noisier during PMQs than when there are children in the Chamber.

I am grateful to the Parliamentary Digital Service, who worked over the weekend to stave off the cyber-attack. Will the Leader of the House allow time for a debate on restoration and renewal and will the Gibb report be debated on two separate days? Will she allocate the Tuesday to the Opposition?

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union said that he hoped that we would not be a cynical Opposition and that we would support him, but it is not the Opposition’s job to put sellotape on a minority Government. As “Erskine May” helpfully points out, the Opposition’s task is “to direct criticism of the government’s policy and administration and to outline alternative policies.”

It is this Government who are unpatriotic and have caused uncertainty.

Let us remember that the previous Prime Minister resigned and walked away, that the current Prime Minister wanted a bigger majority and now has a minority Government, and that that minority Government are pulling in separate directions. First, a Minister says that the cap on public sector pay may be lifted, then No.10 refutes that. The Chancellor has to leave the country to set out his position because it is opposite to the positions of the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union and the Foreign Secretary. We on this side have an alternative: we will take the country’s result and turn it into a new relationship with the EU, in a new model that puts the economy, jobs, peace, security and opportunity for our citizens at its core.

That is Europe, but what about here? Local government finance faces uncertainty. The revenue support grant will be phased out in 2020, but the consultation on business rates ended on 3 May 2017. Given that the next Queen’s Speech will be in 2019, will the Leader of the House say how we will find out what the policy is and when we will scrutinise local government finance? Local government needs stability.

Two High Court judgments have overturned Government policy. The High Court has ruled that the benefit cap was unlawful; Mr Justice Collins said that it was causing “extreme hardship”. Some 20,000 children and many single parents have been hardest hit by this heartless policy. Irrespective of whether the Government will appeal, may we have an urgent debate on the judgment? When will the Government report back on the Cridland review of the state pension age?

The Government’s plans do not meet the court order to cut air pollution in the shortest possible time. Some 40,000 people die prematurely from air pollution. Do we not deserve time for debate on that failure of Government policy?

There has been nothing about fair funding for schools or how much will be available. During the election, a school governor told me that their school managed to stave off making a teacher redundant this year, but what will happen next year? A head told me that she needed extra funds because sometimes she cannot make room even for young people living on the same street as her school. When will the Government bring forward new proposals on the discredited funding formula? The Government have become a minority Government because they are so far removed from the reality of people’s lives.

You may not know, Mr Speaker—you will be busy next week as it is Wimbledon fortnight; you must be pleased that your deputies have been elected—but it is the 20th anniversary of the first Harry Potter book, “Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone”. I suggest a new book—Harry Potter and the Magic Money Tree. The Opposition say to the minority Government, “Expelliarmus!”

Andrea Leadsom: That was a tour de force, covering a range of areas, and I thank the hon. Lady for it. To deal specifically with her first question about the order of business, only this morning I received a note from my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) pointing out that in last week’s business
questions he had asked for time to discuss the Gibb report, which the Government were pleased to give as many colleagues have raised the issue with us, and so, as I understand it, he will withdraw his request for time in Westminster Hall. I hope that that is a happy outcome for all colleagues who want to discuss the severe problems that many rail commuters have had with Southern and on other railways too.

I join the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) and send commiserations from this side of the House to the Scottish National party and all the friends and family of Gordon Wilson, a man who really did serve his country well. On the subject of the unveiling of the plaque for Jo Cox, I also thank Mr Speaker for the wonderful opportunity of being in the state apartments yesterday with the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness, which is a subject dear to my heart. I have a project in my own constituency to bring communities together through coffee mornings to try to stem the tide of loneliness, and all hon. Members should be delighted that in Jo Cox’s memory we will renew our efforts to tackle it.

I also add my congratulations to those of the hon. Lady to the staff of the Parliamentary Digital Service. They really did work 24/7 over the weekend to protect us, and the great news is that they achieved that. As I understand it, they did about six months’ IT development work in three days, so they have put us in a stronger position than we were in before. I know that all colleagues will want to send their thanks for how they dealt with that and prevented serious harm from being done.

On restoration and renewal, the Commissions of both Houses are looking at the proposals and at what is to be done, and we hope to make some announcements in due course.

The hon. Lady then moved on to her opposition to the Government and her sense that it is not a legitimate Government, but I would point out that the Conservatives won the general election. It is not only our right but our constitutional duty, in the interests of the country, to bring forward a strong Government with support from colleagues in the Democratic Unionist party.

The Government have a very strong programme to achieve a successful Brexit that will create jobs and opportunity and will be a global force for free trade, but we also intend to introduce measures to improve and restore good mental health in this country, to make real the issue of parity of esteem, and to protect people from domestic violence and from stalkers. That is very important social legislation. Our economic programme, too, will build some of the industries of tomorrow, to make this country a world leader in electric vehicle technology, in autonomous vehicles and, of course, in space flight—building spaceports and being at the heart of new satellite technology, which is absolutely vital for the devolved Administrations. Finally, on the subject of security and keeping people safe—the first duty of Government—we will introduce more measures to stamp out extremism and enhance global working on counter-terrorism. Those are many good and worthwhile pieces of legislation that I hope all colleagues will be able to support.

**James Duddridge** (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): May we have time for a debate on accident and emergency services, specifically those in Southend, to assure constituents that any decision on A&E will be clinically led?

**Andrea Leadsom**: My hon. Friend is right to mention local A&Es, as they are very dear to all our hearts. He will know that decisions about A&Es are clinician-led and he might wish to request an Adjournment debate on the specifics of his local situation.

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing what there is in the way of business for next week. May I say how grateful we are on the SNP Benches for the kind words that have been expressed about Gordon Wilson? He loved this place and I know that the words expressed here today will be a great comfort to Gordon’s family and friends.

What a meagre business statement this is. From a quick scan, it looks as though there will be no votes at all next week and, given that the Government secured a majority of only 14 last night, we can see why they will not regularly want to test the will of the House. They are already a zombie Government inhabiting a minority wasteland, unable to impose themselves or even to give the nation the relief of their just being gone. There is much to debate, primarily and particularly the grubby deal that has been stitched up with the Democratic Unionist party, which demonstrates the worst excesses of pork barrel politics. In fact, this deal would give pig-based receptacles a bad name.

You decided that I could not secure an emergency debate under Standing Order No. 24, Mr Speaker, but I would have thought that the Government wanted to rush to the House to debate the deal. Members must be able to scrutinise, ask questions and debate what is going on. The deal turns the normal funding arrangements of the nations of the United Kingdom on their head. It is unbelievable that a deal of such significance and importance could be passed without any debate and scrutiny in this House.

We urgently need a debate on the role of the Scotland Office in all this. The Department is now run by a Secretary of State without a shred of credibility who has failed to stand up for vital Scottish interests. He says one thing about our funding arrangements under the Barnett formula one day and is contradicted the next. He is about as much use as Emu without Rod Hull. The Scottish National party will continue to fight for vital Scottish interests. After this week, we know that all the new Scottish Tories will be nothing more than apologists and Lobby fodder for this chaotic Conservative Government.

**Andrea Leadsom**: Where to start? First, the Secretary of State for Scotland without a shred of credibility who has failed to stand up for vital Scottish interests. He speaks up for Scotland in every Cabinet meeting, and he is the strongest advocate for the Barnett formula. He called for transparency on the deal with the DUP, as have the Scottish nationalists, and they have had that; it is absolutely clear.

Let us be clear that the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), in his desire to see Scotland walk away from the United Kingdom, wishes to walk away from the Barnett formula, so it is extraordinary that he is now calling for the arrangements with the DUP to be Barnettised. The Scottish nationalists want to walk away from the formula, but that would not be in the interests of Scotland at all. Unfortunately, the Scottish Government appear to spend all their time talking...
interested in governing Scotland properly and contributing
clear. Is it interested only in independence or is it
of Art—the list goes on. The SNP really needs to be
V&A in Dundee and £5 million for the Glasgow School
Aberdeen, £53 million in Inverness, £5 million for the
everything. The UK Government have invested in city
will be aware that the Barnett formula supports funding
people.

Andrea Leadsom: This is an incredibly sensitive and
important issue. To be very clear, it is my personal view
that every woman should have the right to decide what
happens to her own body—that is very clear. The question
of women from Northern Ireland accessing abortions in
England is not one of whether they should have that
access; it is a question of devolution and the fact that
health is devolved to Northern Ireland. Therefore, it is a
question of who should pay for it. What I can tell hon.
Members is that the Department for equalities and the
Department of Health are discussing and looking very
closely at this issue today.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): This
week it was announced that surgery for my constituents
who smoke or who are overweight will be restricted—in
some cases, for up to a year. May we have a debate in
Government time about the potential impact of this
decision on my constituents’ health and mental health,
and about the legacy of NHS rationing such as this?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a very important
point, and she may well want to apply for an Adjournment
debate on it. She will appreciate that this issue is very
much clinician led, but I nevertheless urge her to take it
forward in an Adjournment debate.

Mr Shaiyes Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): In
days, there has been absolute misery for thousands of
motorists in my constituency, which has been caused
by work that is being carried out by Highways England.
I wrote to Mr Jim O’Sullivan, the chief executive of
Highways England, for an explanation, and it has taken
a week for me to receive a standard acknowledgment
letter saying that I will get a substantive response within
the next 15 days, by which time the works will be over.
Given that the decisions taken by Highways England
impact on millions of people throughout the country,
may we have a statement from the Transport Secretary
as to whether this “couldn’t care less” attitude from
Mr O’Sullivan and his organisation is an acceptable
way to go forward?

Andrea Leadsom: I can well imagine what an irritation
this is for my hon. Friend’s constituents. I would certainly
not be happy with an acknowledgment and then the
pledge of a proper reply within two weeks. Many public
sector organisations respond very quickly to requests
from Members of Parliament, and I hope that Highways
England will have heard his remarks and will give him a
very quick answer.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Last week, rumours
circulated in Wallasey that Kingsway Academy, which
is in Leasowe in my constituency, was going to close. We
have now managed to establish that there are plans to
close it, perhaps by the end of July. This will throw our
whole education system in Wallasey into disarray, and there are 400 pupils whose future is currently completely obscure. We do not know where they are going to be, and parents of any pupils do not know whether they should buy uniforms for the school. The school is part of a multi-academy trust that has not communicated any of this at all. May we have a debate on public accountability among multi-academy trusts? If this had been a local authority school, there would have been a two-year consultation period instead of this chaos.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am quite sure that the hon. Lady will have raised this very loudly in her own area, and it is absolutely right that she should. In order to bring forward the question very quickly, I suggest that she seeks an Adjournment debate.

**Mr Nigel Evans** (Ribble Valley) (Con): May we have an early debate about the importance of police stations in local communities? Police stations are a place of security, safety and sanctuary for many people, and being able to just drop into them is vitally important. In Lancashire, there are proposals to close 10 police stations, including my own in Clitheroe. May we have an early debate so that we can say how important it is to keep these police stations open?

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend raises another important point about expectations in local areas. I have seen in my own area closures of police stations. The police have made a very strong case that people do not tend to drop into police stations very much, and that they can therefore use their time better by not having manned police stations. However, I completely sympathise with the reaction of local people that such closures are never good. I encourage him to seek an early Westminster Hall or Adjournment debate on this. In particular, if he wants to write to me, I will pass on his concerns to the right Department.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** To the apparent envy of some of his hon. Friends, I call Mr Alan Brown.

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker. In my short time in this place, so far I have seen the Secretary of State for Scotland fail to get any money from the Exchequer for open-cast coal restoration, while he has done nothing to get any money for the Ayrshire growth deal, and now we have seen Scotland completely bypassed in the deal with the DUP. Can the Leader of the House make a statement outlining his personal achievements for Scotland and why she thinks he should continue to represent Scotland?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I reiterate what I said earlier: that the Secretary of State for Scotland is a huge advocate for Scotland. Having been an Energy Minister and Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, I can absolutely assure hon. Members that he has spoken up for energy in Scotland. He was very diligent in looking at measures for the oil and gas sector in Scotland, which is absolutely vital. He was very supportive of the city deals for Glasgow and for Aberdeen. He has been an enormous advocate for the Scottish agriculture and fisheries sectors. That is just speaking from my own personal experience. He is a superb advocate for that nation and Members should be delighted to have him.

**Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): May we have a debate on the issue of toxic cabin air syndrome, which has reportedly killed and caused serious illness to many crew on aircraft—my constituents and others around the country?

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend raises a point that I think we have all read about in the newspapers and that would certainly be worthy of debate. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate. A Back-Bench debate in the first instance would be very important.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): This week my postbag has been swollen by a large number of very well-written letters from the pupils of Whiteness Primary School in Shetland, who have been studying the topic of slavery, especially child slavery, across the world. Given that general debates seem now to be finding fashion with the business managers, will the Leader of the House make time available to discuss how we, as a country that meets the 0.7% overseas target, might do more to tackle this across the globe?

**Andrea Leadsom:** Of course, it was this Government who introduced an Act that seeks to stamp out human slavery. We take a world-leading role in stamping out modern slavery. The right hon. Gentleman is right to point out that we do commit to overseas development aid, which goes in great part to supporting efforts to stamp out human slavery. He raises an incredibly important point. I am certainly sympathetic to it and will raise it with the Chief Whip.

**Richard Benyon** (Newbury) (Con): Many right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House await with great eagerness the Government’s 25-year plan for the environment. I know that this is a matter of great interest to my right hon. Friend and I very much hope that she will tell us that it is going to be published and that there will be a statement to the House when that happens.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I absolutely praise my right hon. Friend for his contribution to protecting and enhancing our environment. Our manifesto made a commitment to the 25-year plan and we remain fully committed to it. The great repeal Bill will bring all EU environmental legislation into UK law, and our ambition is to be the first generation that leaves the environment in a better state than we found it. I am very proud that the Conservative party remains committed to that outcome.

**Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Today’s *Times* says: “Thousands of people die each year as a result of breathing air that is officially considered safe”.

The British Medical Association thinks that we should have air pollution monitors at the roadside. May we have a debate on improving air quality standards?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman is right to raise a very serious public health issue. A consultation is under way on measures to improve air quality, but that relates to reaching a certain level of air pollution. This Government’s longer-term aim is for almost all vehicles
to be zero-carbon by 2050. That is a real solution, and in the short and medium term we will set out measures to tackle the problem of air quality.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): Following on from the comments of the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), I look forward to welcoming my right hon. Friend to the best constituency in England at any stage in the next fortnight.

Will my right hon. Friend ask the Transport Secretary to come to this House and make a statement on Crossrail 2? The Department has been considering the business case for a substantial time and the constituents of Wimbledon and London are keen to understand the Government’s commitment to the project.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I was shocked by the complete lack of clarity on school funding shown by the Secretary of State for Education on Tuesday. The claim by the Leader of the House that the funding formula for schools is fair simply will not ring true in my constituency, where school budgets have been squeezed year on year and our fantastic boys’ secondary school, Forest Hill School, has a deficit of £1.3 million. May we please have a proper statement and a debate on school funding before the summer recess?

Andrea Leadsom: I welcome the hon. Lady to her place and wish her every success in her new role. We are proud of the top-line achievement that there are now 1.8 million more children in good and outstanding schools than in 2010, but she is exactly right to point out that there are pressures on school budgets. That is being looked at very closely by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education, and I will happily take up the issue with her.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Given the Prime Minister’s commitment to more capital spending in the NHS, may we have a statement on capital spending? Although Harlow’s Princess Alexandra hospital has excellent staff and provides an excellent service, we are in desperate need of a new hospital because of failing infrastructure and sewage coming into the operating theatres.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend raises a very important point for his constituency and I think it would be worth raising it in an Adjournment or Westminster Hall debate. If he wants to write to me, I would be happy to take it up with the Department of Health.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): When can we debate early-day motion 85?

Andrea Leadsom: This is a sensitive subject, and there are strong views on all sides of the argument. I share the hon. Gentleman’s view that presumed consent would be life-changing for many people waiting for organ donations. I will certainly raise the issue, but of course he could secure a Westminster Hall debate to highlight it. I am sure that will be in his mind.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): May we have a debate on the need to restrict postal voting? Not only has it helped people vote more than once in elections, but in certain parts of Bradford it has been known to be abused for a considerable time, and I might add that it has effectively deprived many women of the vote in those communities. I hear Opposition Members pooh-poohing his comments, but it behoves us all to stand up for democracy. Nobody should want double voting to be available to people, or for one person to vote on behalf of their entire family or people who are no longer with us. I absolutely agree that we should have a debate on the subject and ensure that democracy continues to prevail in this country.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): The M62 upgrade would be the great northern powerhouse project, connecting Lancashire with Leeds in Yorkshire, with two lanes going into Yorkshire and four lanes coming into Lancashire. When will Ministers recognise the importance of that project and start talking about it? When will they start talking up the northern powerhouse, and funding it as they seem to be doing for the Northern Ireland powerhouse?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman has raised his point loud and clear. He will know that it was this Government who created the term “northern powerhouse” and who, more importantly, have funded it with hundreds of millions of pounds and continue to support it. His words are now on the record, and I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport will be interested to hear them.
Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Yesterday at Prime Minister’s questions my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) bravely raised both the personal impact of online abuse and the direct effect that it had during her campaign and those of many other female candidates across the UK. As the previous chair of the all-party women in Parliament group, may I ask the Leader of the House to make time for a debate on the issue so that the House can express its disgust at such direct abuse? We must not let it put off the women leaders of the future coming to this House.

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. The number of colleagues who were genuinely scared for their personal safety during the recent general election campaign was a total disgrace. There was the appalling, disgusting behaviour of the defacement of offices and posters, and the constant tearing down on social media of colleagues’ efforts to get elected. It is an appalling indictment of our society that such things have been allowed to happen, and I certainly think that the House will want to take the matter further.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House provide some Government time for a statement on the development of the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon? The project was omitted from the Queen’s Speech. She knows about it, and it is no use her blaming previous Energy Ministers or Environment Ministers, for that was she.

Andrea Leadsom: I accept my involvement in the Hendry review, which was designed to ensure that the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon gets a fair hearing. That report has made its findings clear, and the Government are looking at it carefully. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the project would be a significant expense, but it also has enormous potential, so it is right that we look carefully at its value for taxpayers’ money. A review is ongoing, and there will be a statement about it in due course.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I have given notice of a question to the Leader of the House—I hope that she has done her homework on it—but I am not going to ask it, because something more important has come up. It has been brought to my attention—I don’t hope that she has done her homework on it—but I am not going to ask it, because something more important has come up. It has been brought to my attention—she will be aware that the number of colleagues who were genuinely scared for their personal safety during the recent general election campaign was a total disgrace. There was the appalling, disgusting behaviour of the defacement of offices and posters, and the constant tearing down on social media of colleagues’ efforts to get elected. It is an appalling indictment of our society that such things have been allowed to happen, and I certainly think that the House will want to take the matter further.

Andrea Leadsom: I am always delighted that my hon. Friend likes to throw in a googly, so I thank him for that. He raises an incredibly important point for our democracy. We must get to the bottom of people deliberately voting twice, which I understand is illegal. We need to investigate that and ensure that parliamentary democracy, for which this country has been famous—this is indeed the mother of all Parliaments—upholds the rights of one person and one vote.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Given that there will be no Welsh questions before the recess, may we have an opportunity to question the Secretary of State for Wales on the Floor of the House about what he has been doing since the Government’s announcement of the deal with the DUP to ensure that Wales is not short-changed?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will be aware that Wales has also benefited from a number of projects outside the Barnett formula. I will certainly pass on her comments to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and seek an opportunity for the hon. Lady.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): In recent years, my constituency has benefited from Government support but, as my right hon. Friend will be aware, coastal communities continue to face particular challenges. May we have a debate on those challenges, and on how the Government will continue to support coastal areas?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is right to say that coastal areas suffer from unique problems, and we have had fruitful Westminster Hall debates about the particular issues that face such communities. I am delighted that those communities also have the advantage of fabulous fish and chips, which I was pleased to enjoy with him in Grimsby during the recent general election campaign. He raises a good point, and he should apply for a Westminster Hall debate so that he can raise those issues properly.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): For the third time in a fortnight, my constituents are having to put up with the noise, nuisance, litter and mess caused by illegal Traveller camps on parks and public open spaces in Dudley. That is completely unacceptable, but when I talk to the council and the police about the situation, they tell me that they need more powers to deal with it. May we have an urgent debate in Government time so that we can get to the bottom of the issue? We need to provide local authorities with the powers that they need to deal with this problem once and for all so that my constituents and their children can start to use parks and play areas once again.

Andrea Leadsom: I think the hon. Gentleman might have raised that point last week—[Interruption.] No, but it was raised very recently. We all share the same concern about the impact of this problem on our local areas. If he would like to write to me, I would be happy to take the matter forward. I would be sympathetic to a debate in Government time, but I am sure that he will also be looking at the option of a Westminster Hall debate.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Following a meeting with a constituent, I learned that the number of children who are home schooled in Warwickshire has more than doubled since 2012. There is consensus that home schooling is on the rise across the country, which leads to concerns that checks on quality may not be as rigorous as they might be and that some children might not be getting the education they deserve. May we have a debate on the future of home schooling?

Andrea Leadsom: To raise standards, the Government have sought to provide a wide range of schooling options. I pay tribute to the many families who provide excellent
home schooling for their children when there are issues such as bullying, particular needs and so on. My hon. Friend is right that checks must be carried out to ensure that children do not drop out of sight. Local authorities have a statutory duty to check that all children are receiving a proper education, and they have recourse to the law if that is not found to be the case. My hon. Friend could raise the matter to good effect in an Adjournment or a Westminster Hall debate.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On 23 June, two bombs were detonated in Toori market in Parachinar in Pakistan; 84 people were killed and many were injured. That was the third bomb this year and 115 people are now dead. The deceased remain in the streets, with their families unable to bury them, and another attack is a very real risk. Protections must be put in place to prevent further loss of life. Pakistan is clearly trying to restrict news of what is happening and is not letting the world outside know. May we have an urgent statement on how we can give the people of Parachinar in Pakistan the help that they need right now?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises the very important issue of those three recent attacks. The UK and Pakistan have a shared interest in addressing and reducing the threat of terrorism. We are committed to working together to combat, in a human rights-compliant manner, the terrorist threat and the extremism that sustains it. This will help to reduce the threat to the UK and UK interests. If he would like to write to me on this point, I will certainly take it up with the relevant Department.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to talk about the importance of keeping people safe. May we therefore have a statement and some action from the Secretary of State for Transport regarding the threat to commercial and military aviation from the use of drones by private individuals and commercial organisations?

Andrea Leadsom: We will all have seen recent press reports of close shaves, and this certainly seems to be an increasing challenge. If my hon. Friend would like to write to me on this point, I will certainly take it up with the Department for Transport.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The National Audit Office says it will cost nearly £7 billion to get existing school buildings up to scratch, yet the Government are spending money hand over fist on developing free school sites, including four in London that have cost more than £30 million each. Should we not have a debate in Government time about how we manage the capital budget for schools so that all our pupils can be in schools with decent sports facilities and playgrounds, rather than in old office blocks that are not fit for purpose?

Andrea Leadsom: I remind the hon. Lady that 1.8 million more children are in good and outstanding schools than in 2010—[Interruption.] Opposition Members tut but, for parents, a decent education is absolutely essential in a globally competitive world. She makes a good point about the fabric of buildings. It is not as important a point as the quality of education that our children are getting, but I would be very happy to take it up for her if she would like to write to me.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I welcome the debate next week on the Chris Gibb report. Will my right hon. Friend secure a statement from the Secretary of State for Transport on ensuring that the line that runs through my constituency and supports east Sussex and Kent will be electrified so that all our network will be modern and up to date?

Andrea Leadsom: I will happily take that point up with my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary. Next week’s debate will enable colleagues to make key points about the quality of rail transport and I encourage my hon. Friend to attend it.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): May we have a debate in Government time on the injustice of the minersworkers’ pension scheme, which has seen Government coffers swell by billions of pounds due to the unfair 50:50 surplus split? More cash needs to go to ex-miners and their widows.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will know that this has been debated a number of times in Parliament. There was a long-standing agreement on sharing the surplus, but if she would like to write to me, I will happily take up the issue again with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I and my constituents are passionate about reversing the 2013 downgrade of night-time accident and emergency at Cheltenham general hospital, but the trust has made it clear that recruiting middle-grade A&E doctors is difficult. May we have a debate on improving incentives and conditions for such staff so that my constituents can have the hospital they deserve?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises the important matter for his constituency of his A&E. I encourage him to apply for an Adjournment debate to discuss the specifics.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Yesterday I asked the current Prime Minister to confirm that all services at both Dewsbury and District hospital and Huddersfield royal infirmary would remain open, including full A&E services. She replied that A&E at Dewsbury would stay open, but omitted to mention the significant downgrade, and strangely she ignored Huddersfield royal infirmary. Will the Leader of the House provide Government time for the Prime Minister to come to the House and either reassure local people that services are safe, or apologise for her comments about scaremongering when we were just highlighting that services were under threat?

Andrea Leadsom: I am not sure that I fully understand what the hon. Lady is saying. She says that the Prime Minister gave reassurance to—[Interruption.] What I heard the Prime Minister say was that Dewsbury A&E was under threat, but if the hon. Lady would like to write to me on that point, I can try to understand exactly what she would like to happen.
Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): May we have a debate in Government time on the disposal of local authority assets? Shortly after the election was called, it emerged that Harrow Council had sold the freehold on the Hive to Barnet Football Club. Barnet Football Club rides roughshod over local people, and no one was consulted about the sale whatsoever. Barnet Football Club illegally plays its first team matches at the Hive. It has ignored planning rules, breaching them on several occasions, and imposes misery on all the residents around the stadium on match days, so may we have a debate in Government time on this issue?

Andrea Leadsom: It sounds like my hon. Friend has had a pretty tough time with a local issue, which would of course be an ideal subject for an Adjournment debate.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): On 2 December 2015, the House passed a motion concerning air strikes on Syria that specifically targeted Daesh assets. It did not involve targeting any other actor in that region, so it was with some surprise that I heard this week the Defence Secretary claim his unwavering support for US air strikes to target the Syrian regime. The Foreign Secretary went one further in April, stating that the assumption of parliamentary approval needed to be tested. Can the Leader of the House do two things: provide us with an urgent statement on Government thinking about changing the nature of the conflict; and ensure that there is a debate and a vote in this House before mission creep sets in?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises very important questions for the Ministry of Defence, and I can draw his attention to the fact that we have Defence questions on Monday 10 July.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Following the Government’s welcome announcement that farm payments will continue until 2022, may we have a debate on exactly how they will be allocated? Many farmers in Brecon and Radnorshire are concerned about the mechanism that will be put in place and whether the administration of the payment will ensure that they are paid on time.

Andrea Leadsom: Farm payments are a subject very dear to my heart, as an ex-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and I have worked closely with my hon. Friend, who is a great spokesman for farmers in his constituency. The important point about the continuation of the single farm payment is to ensure a smooth transition for farmers right across the UK to a new agricultural policy when we leave the EU. The arrangements for that transition will be consulted on and discussed, but I cannot give him the specific outcome as yet.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Notwithstanding our view of the Government’s relationship with the Democratic Unionist party, will the Leader of the House assure us that either the Prime Minister or the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland will come to the House at the earliest opportunity next week and make a statement about the outcome of the talks that are taking place today in Northern Ireland? Those talks are of crucial importance to the whole United Kingdom. If they fail, we will see a restoration of direct rule, and if there is a restoration of the Executive, which we all hope for, there will still be serious questions to be asked. Parliament needs to discuss this as a matter of urgency.

Andrea Leadsom: This is an absolutely key issue. As the hon. Gentleman points out, today is the deadline for new Ministers to be appointed, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is working flat out to try to encourage that, along with Irish politicians and, of course, members of the Northern Ireland potential Executive. All parties in Northern Ireland are working very hard to try to ensure that we get an arrangement signed today.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): The real impact of police cuts can be measured by the rising tide of gun crime across Merseyside, where there have been 100 shooting incidents in the last 18 months and 10 in this month alone. Merseyside’s chief constable has said that he has “never known a situation” in which a police force has been so stretched “to the limits” as Merseyside’s is today. The people of Merseyside need urgent action from the Government and proper funding for the police. Can we expect a statement from the Home Secretary, or a debate, so that we can rid our streets of gun crime?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an incredibly important point about policing. As the Prime Minister said yesterday, police budgets have been protected. There has been a big increase in investment in intelligence, counter-terrorism and attacking cybercrime, for instance, to try to ensure that the police have all the tools that they need to do the job, but of course the Home Office will be listening carefully to what is said about particular issues. It sounds as though there is a very specific issue in Merseyside, and the hon. Gentleman may wish to raise it during Home Office questions.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Given that the former Member of Parliament for Leigh presented the House with evidence of criminal behaviour in the contaminated blood scandal, may we please have a statement from the Secretary of State for Health about what action he will take now that that evidence has come to light and when a full inquiry will be set up?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry to have to ask for further details, but I shall be happy to take the matter up with the Department for Health if the hon. Lady would like to write to me about it.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): Like many Members, I have had occasion to sign off referrals to ombudsman services. In most instances, the determinations—matters can only be accepted or rejected—are sufficient for my constituents, but they cannot be appealed against. May we have a debate in Government time on the working of ombudsman services, and, in particular, on what recourse constituents may have if they believe that full or essential details concerning their case were not fully taken into consideration when the determinations were reached?

Andrea Leadsom: I have a lot of sympathy with what the hon. Gentleman says, having myself come across cases that seemed to have extraordinary outcomes. I think that this would be an ideal subject for a Select
[Andrea Leadsom]

Committee inquiry—it is the sort of issue on which evidence really does need to be provided. I am also conscious that different ombudsmen deal with different types of activity. While the matter seems ideal for a Select Committee inquiry, I am happy to talk to the hon. Gentleman separately if he thinks that another route would be better.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Residents of Coventry and Warwickshire are concerned about building on the green belt. May we have a debate in Government time, or a statement, to clarify the Government’s policy on the green belt, and, more important, to clarify the position in respect of the planning authority and the regulations? A blame game is going on at present: one group blames the local authority, and the other—the local authority—blames central Government. By the way, I have applied for an Adjournment debate on the subject.

Andrea Leadsom: That is excellent. I am so glad that the hon. Gentleman has done that; it saves me from the laughter that we would hear in the House if I were to suggest it.

This is a very thorny issue. Of course we all want more people to be able to live in and own their homes. There is a balance to be struck between protecting the green belt and building to ensure that people can aspire to have homes that are fit for purpose. However, the Government are committed to protecting the green belt. I am very glad that the hon. Gentleman has applied for an Adjournment debate, because I think that that is the ideal way in which to raise such issues.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): Research carried out by the Trussell Trust indicates that mental health problems affect nearly a third of households that use food banks, and 50% of such households are classed as having a disability. May we have a debate on cuts in disability benefits and the terrible impact that they are having by plunging our most vulnerable people into extreme food poverty?

Andrea Leadsom: We all applaud the work of food banks. There are a couple of them in my constituency, and they and their volunteers do a fantastic job.

The important topic that the hon. Lady raises would lend itself to a Westminster Hall debate. The issues of food bank use and the reasons why people go to food banks are very complex, and it would be valuable if we were to get to the bottom of all the factors involved.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The Government shook their magic money tree this week to find a £1 billion bung for Northern Ireland. May we have an urgent statement from the Chancellor on when that magic money tree will blossom again to enable my constituents to benefit from the full funding of the Edinburgh city regional deal?

Andrea Leadsom: From my recollection, it is the Government who said that there is “no magic money tree”, but it was Opposition Members who were expecting a crock of gold at the end of the rainbow.—[Interruption.]

I said gold. This Government are seeking to create an economy that is booming and that takes us away from the problems we were left with by the profligate spending of the last Labour Government, followed by a global financial crisis that left this Government with the worst economic situation since the second world war. The reality is that we are making progress, but the job is far from done. We can choose either to sort out the deficit and live within our means or to leave the enormous debt that results from that deficit to our children and grandchildren. This Government are making the sensible choice to provide fairness between the generations by dealing with our deficit and tackling that mountain of debt in a fair way.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): This week is breastfeeding week, and last week was breastfeeding in Scotland week. May we have a debate in Government time on the societal barriers to breastfeeding and on how the Government could better support and invest in support services for women and families so that they can make informed feeding choices?

Andrea Leadsom: I am extremely sympathetic to that topic. Breastfeeding is unquestionably best for the baby, but it is equally important that all mothers have the opportunity to make an informed choice based on the information that is given to them. I completely support the hon. Lady’s ambition to remove barriers to breastfeeding, and I will certainly take up the matter with the Chief Whip, but this is also an ideal subject for a Westminster Hall debate.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I am somewhat concerned that friends of the Leader of the House appear to have told the Business Insider news site today that dozens of Conservative MPs are appealing to her to run for the Conservative leadership again. I hope that this will not distract her from her duties as Leader of the House, including looking at how we can improve the procedures for private Members’ Bills and Friday sittings. I was unsuccessful in today’s ballot, but it is important that the 20 MPs who were successful should get a fair chance to air their issues without being subjected to the juvenile filibustering tactics of a few Tory Back Benchers.

Andrea Leadsom: In answer to the hon. Lady’s first point, it is absolutely right for this country and for this party that we get behind Theresa May, who is doing a great job as Prime Minister, and I am absolutely committed to her remaining as leader of our country for as long as she wishes to do so. I want to be very clear about that.

On the hon. Lady’s second point, as I mentioned to the previous leader of the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), the Standing Orders set out the number of private Members’ Bills in any Session; it is then a matter for the usual channels to discuss whether there is a possibility to flex that. I am very sympathetic to her view that we should enable Members to have a fair hearing, and she will be pleased to see that a number of her colleagues came in towards the top of the private Members’ Bills ballot. We look forward to hearing from them. I congratulate all those Members who will be introducing private Members’ Bills and I look forward to working with them.
Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Dundee has the busiest food bank in Scotland, and we have seen an almost 10% increase in the use of food banks in Scotland in the past year. Even the Tory MSP Brian Whittle admitted in the Scottish Parliament last week that this Government’s benefit rules are forcing families to turn to food banks. May we please now have an urgent debate on the UK Government’s cruel and callous social security system, which is pushing more families into ever more desperate situations?

Andrea Leadsom: Again, I thank all those who work in food banks for what they do. It is important that we recognise the amount of volunteering and the generosity of people who donate to food banks. As I said in answer to a previous question, the reasons that push people to food banks are complicated. A debate in Westminster Hall to try to get some of the evidence would be valuable, and I would support him seeking to hold such a debate.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): NHS Improvement seems to be struggling to provide the required timely and effective support to the Northern Lincolnshire and Goole NHS Foundation Trust to bring about the sustained improvements at Scunthorpe general hospital that everybody wants. May we have a statement about the performance of NHSI in bringing about improvements in the health service?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises another important local point about a local hospital service, and I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate on that topic. As for the broader point about the performance of NHSI, if he writes to me, I can raise it with the Department of Health.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The Leader of the House has heard pleas from both sides of the House for the Secretary of State for Education to come here to the House and explain what she is doing to tackle the funding crisis in education. Does she think our calls for a debate on the regional schools commissioners are a particular anomaly in a country where the Government have abolished the regional structures?

Andrea Leadsom: Yes, the hon. Gentleman is right. Several colleagues have raised concerns about education, which the Secretary of State will have heard. I will certainly discuss that with her. She is of course looking closely at some of the issues, and the Government are determined to ensure that more children have the opportunity of a good school and a decent education. She is looking closely at the funding formula not only to make it fairer, but to try to ease the burdens on schools. I am sure that she will be making statements on all those issues in due course.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Vale of York clinical commissioning group has been continually underfunded. As a result, it has fallen into deficit and is now being punished further by being put into the capped expenditure process, meaning that it will have to make further service cuts. May we have an urgent statement from the Secretary of State for Health on the capped expenditure process?

Andrea Leadsom: Again, the hon. Lady raises an important local matter for her constituency. If she applies for an Adjournment debate, a Health Minister will of course respond to it, which should give her the answers she seeks.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Government Members have quite rightly been quick to praise the efforts of our emergency services as they responded to the Grenfell Tower disaster and the terror attacks across the country over the past few months. Yesterday, however, we saw a public sector pay hokey cokey in Downing Street and the Scottish Tory MPs giving the Prime Minister a majority to stop efforts to end the pay cap, which is ending in Scotland. May we have an urgent debate in Government time on fairer public sector pay?

Andrea Leadsom: The Government have been consistent on the subject of public sector pay that the decisions will be taken in the light of recommendations from the independent pay bodies.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is nice to see you back in your position, Mr Speaker. Congratulations on your re-election. Dark times are usually funded by dark money. Does the Leader of the House agree that it is time to shine a light on political funding by supporting the publication in full of all political donations made in Northern Ireland? If this is a Union of equals, it is time to publish or be damned.

Andrea Leadsom: I think the hon. Gentleman is making some accusations, so if he would like to write to me, I will be happy to take them up. I am not specifically aware of exactly to what he is referring.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House ensure that we have an urgent debate in Government time on ensuring that councils, such as Lewisham Council, receive adequate funding to cover the costs of appropriate fire safety checks, removal of cladding, installation of sprinkler systems, and any other associated costs to guarantee that our residents remain safe?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises the absolutely key priority for this Government, which is of course at the moment to deal with the horrors that have ensued at Grenfell Tower, and to ensure that all residents who live in similar towers or other buildings that could suffer from the same problems with cladding are properly looked after. We therefore need to allow the fire inspections officers to do their work and to make recommendations on what is required for each building; it will not be a one-size-fits-all, but she can rest assured that the Government remain absolutely committed to keeping all residents in high-rise towers safe.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): May we have a debate on antisocial behaviour associated with off-road bikes, quads and mopeds? Some of the parks and estates in Sheffield are like scenes out of “Mad Max”, with masked riders riding around and blighting the lives of local residents. May we therefore have a debate, in Home Office time, on whether the police have the powers and resources to tackle this issue?
Andrea Leadsom: I am very sympathetic about the local nuisance, as I have experienced it in my area, too; I have every sympathy for what the hon. Lady says. This matter of course lends itself to a Westminster Hall or Adjournment debate, but she has raised it in this House and people will have heard her support for that.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Having been unsuccessful in securing a Westminster Hall debate, may I ask the Leader of the House for a statement or debate on the future of Glasgow’s jobcentres and the Department for Work and Pensions estate across the UK? Given that the public consultation is closed, does she agree that we should end the seven months of uncertainty for users of social security services?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that in order to give a more efficient and cost-effective service the question of where jobcentres are located is being carefully considered, taking into account the travel needs of users; we are trying to review jobcentres. He will also know that he can apply for Westminster Hall and Adjournment debates every week, so he will get lots more opportunities to keep trying for such a debate.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Next month sees the first parliamentary by-election of this Parliament, when the 10th Baron Walpole will be replaced as a Cross-Bench peer in another place. The electorate for that by-election is 31 people. May we have an early debate on how to stop this nonsense? Will the Government support Lord Grocott’s Bill to do just that?

Andrea Leadsom: The House of Lords is looking at its own procedures and has its own review into its own practices. We should allow it to continue with that.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): Although my constituents have endured years of disruption as a result of the London Bridge station rebuild, draft timetables published by Southeastern recently suggest that they will not see the improved service they were promised following the completion of the works. May we have a debate about what is needed to give rail passengers in south-east London the service and the franchise they deserve?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises yet another good point about the service to rail passengers, who seem to have a tough time. I am sure he will doubtless use the opportunity of a debate on the Gibb report next week to raise that matter then.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): May we have an urgent statement from the Government on the National Audit Office report on the Hinkley Point C nuclear power station development? The NAO’s damning report says that it is “risky and expensive”, “not value for money”, and a cost to the consumer, the taxpayer and other energy developments. Does the Leader of the House not agree that it is time the public saw an end to this overcharging white elephant?

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely do not agree with the hon. Gentleman. It is absolutely right that we have transparent discussion in this place, but he will be aware, as he knows quite a lot about energy matters, that about 20% of our electricity is always provided by old nuclear power stations, many of which are to reach the end of their useful life in the next 10 or so years. It will be very important for electricity security that we have in place a new nuclear power station to replace that. Nevertheless, he may well wish to raise that issue in a Westminster Hall debate.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): What the Leader of the House said earlier about private Members’ Bills is great and, as one who has a minor interest in this matter, it would be good to know when we will start debating them. Surely to God, as the Government have nothing in their programme and are allowing themselves two years to do it, should we not have double the number of days allowed for private Members’ Bills in a single session? So, we would like 26, please.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman knows far better than I do about the Standing Orders of this House, so he will be aware that they set out the number of private Members’ Bills. I congratulate him on drawing the No. 1 slot and look forward to working with him on that. As I said in my opening reply to the shadow Leader of the House, this Government have a very full programme not just on Brexit, but on social reform, economic progress and prevention of extremism. There is a lot of work to do. This Government will remain focused on that, but we are absolutely sympathetic to the requests of colleagues for further time to be given for private Members’ Bills.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Saturday marks Paisley’s annual Sma’ Shot Day, which is a celebration of the town’s radical past, particularly of the political battles between its weavers and their employers. The first ever Weave festival has been organised around Sma’ Shot Day, celebrating Paisley’s distinct cultural and political identity. May we have a debate on the UK City of Culture 2021 competition, so we can learn more about why Paisley’s bid should and will win?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman has just helped his own bid, so I congratulate him on that. The matter certainly lends itself to an Adjournment debate or a Westminster Hall debate.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): My constituent, Bashir Naderi, came to the UK more than 10 years ago as a child refugee from Afghanistan after seeing his father murdered by the Taliban. The Home Office tried forcibly to move him back there last year and is attempting to do so again this year. May we have a debate on the inhumane Government policy of child refugees being removed when they reach the age of 18?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sure that the hon. Lady will have raised that matter with the Home Office, and I encourage her to continue to do so. I completely understand that support for child refugees is absolutely vital. This Government have provided a home for many child refugees and will continue to do so. On the specific case she raises, I encourage her to continue to liaise directly with the Home Office.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): In recent weeks, I have been very proud to become the president of my home town football club, Blaenavon Blues, and
have seen at first hand the work that volunteers do, particularly with young people. May we have a debate on the contribution that grassroots football makes to our communities?

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his elevation. I am sure that that is great news. The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport is in her place and will have heard exactly what he has said. If he would like to progress the issue of grassroots sport, which is very important for all of us, I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate or a Westminster Hall debate on the subject.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): On Friday, I visited a very vulnerable constituent whose child benefit had been removed by the Child Benefit Agency at the advice of the Home Office. The only way that she can get her child benefit back is to get her passports, which are being held by the Home Office. May we have a debate in Government time about bureaucracy and the lack of internal communication in Her Majesty’s Government?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is raising a specific case. He needs to raise it with the Home Office, and possibly with the UK Border Agency if there is an issue about where the passports are. We all deal with similar issues in our constituencies and I know that, right across Government, officials and Ministers are very sympathetic to these cases and do try to expedite them.

21st Century Fox/Sky Merger

11.58 am

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): I came to this House on 16 March to confirm that I had issued a European intervention notice in relation to the proposed merger between 21st Century Fox and Sky plc on the grounds of media plurality and commitment to broadcasting standards. The EIN triggered a requirement for Ofcom to report—initially by 16 May but extended to 20 June—on the media public interest considerations and for the Competition and Markets Authority to report on jurisdiction. I issued a statement last week to confirm that I had received those reports and undertook both to publish them today and to come to the House to set out my minded-to decision on the next step in this process, which is whether to refer the merger to a fuller phase 2 investigation.

In line with my commitments, I am today publishing both documents, copies of which will also be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses. I will also be publishing later today the letter to both parties with my decision, which I sent them this morning. Separately, Ofcom is today publishing its fit and proper assessment of the merged company. This reflects its ongoing responsibility as the independent regulator under the Broadcasting Acts to monitor who is fit and proper to hold a broadcast licence.

Decisions made by the Secretary of State on media mergers under the Enterprise Act 2002 are made on a quasi-judicial basis. I want to be very clear about what that means. When taking a quasi-judicial decision, I am tightly bound. I must take my decision only on the basis of the evidence that is relevant to the specified public interests. My decision cannot be based on opinion, speculation or conjecture. Any decision I take must be objectively justified by the facts before me. I must set aside wider political considerations going beyond the scope of the legislation. I must act independently and follow a process that is scrupulously fair and impartial. This is what I am doing.

On the question of whether the merger gives rise to public interest concerns in relation to media plurality, Ofcom’s report is unambiguous. It concludes:

“The transaction raises public interest concerns as a result of the risk of increased influence by members of the Murdoch Family Trust over the UK news agenda and the political process, with its unique presence on radio, television, in print and online. We consider that these concerns may justify a reference by the Secretary of State to the Competition and Markets Authority”.

On the basis of Ofcom’s assessment, I confirm that I am minded to refer to a phase 2 investigation on the grounds of media plurality. The reasoning and evidence on which Ofcom’s recommendation is based are persuasive. The proposed entity would have the third largest total reach of any news provider—lower only than the BBC and ITN—and would, uniquely, span news coverage on television, radio, in newspapers and online.

Ofcom’s report states that the proposed transaction would give the Murdoch Family Trust material influence over news providers with a significant presence across all key platforms. This potentially raises public interest concerns because, in Ofcom’s view, the transaction may increase the ability of members of the Murdoch Family
Trust to influence the overall news agenda and their ability to influence the political process, and it may also result in the perception of increased influence. These are clear grounds to warrant a referral to a phase 2 investigation, so that is what I am minded to do.

There, is, however, a statutory process that I must follow. I am required by legislation to allow the parties the opportunity to make representations to me on this position before I reach a final decision. I will now do that and have given them until Friday 14 July to respond.

The second question concerns whether, after the merger, the relevant media enterprises would have a genuine commitment to broadcasting standards. Ofcom is unequivocal. It concludes:

“In light of Fox’s and Sky’s broadcast compliance records and taking account of our separate assessment of whether Sky remains fit and proper to hold broadcasting licences following the transaction, we do not consider that the merged entity would lack a genuine commitment to the attainment of broadcasting standards. Therefore, we consider that there are no broadcasting standards concerns that may justify a reference by the Secretary of State to the Competition and Markets Authority”.

Ofcom’s approach sought to measure commitment to broadcasting standards by reference to breaches of regulatory codes. It found that Fox’s compliance with the UK’s Broadcasting Code is in line with comparable broadcasters. Nor did Fox’s compliance record in relation to overseas broadcast jurisdictions—where Ofcom’s analysis focused largely on the EU—give cause for concern.

I also asked Ofcom to consider the effect of any failure of corporate governance on this public interest consideration. Ofcom did this in the context of its separate assessment of whether Sky would remain fit and proper to hold broadcast licences following the transaction. It concluded that behaviours alleged at Fox News in the US amount to significant corporate failures. However, these did not, in its view, demonstrate that the merged company would lack a genuine commitment to broadcasting standards. In reaching a view, I have to be guided only by the evidence before me. As such—based on the Ofcom report—I am currently minded not to refer to a phase 2 investigation in relation to a genuine commitment to broadcasting standards.

As required by legislation, I am giving the parties an opportunity to make representations in relation to media plurality grounds, where I am currently minded to refer for a phase 2 investigation by the Competition and Markets Authority. In the interests of transparency and of ensuring that all the evidence has been considered, I will also invite wider representations on the question of commitment to broadcasting standards, where I am currently minded not to refer to a phase 2 investigation.

Parties responding to the consultation should not simply duplicate any representations previously made to Ofcom. Instead, responses should be limited to setting out any new and substantial evidence and any comment on Ofcom’s overall approach. While there are strong feelings among both supporters and opponents of this merger, in this quasi-judicial process my decisions can be influenced only by facts, not opinions, and by the quality of evidence, not who shouts the loudest. The invitation to make representations will open today and close on Friday 14 July, and it can be found on the DCMS website.

Under the process set out in the Enterprise Act 2016, it is open to the parties to propose undertakings in lieu of a reference to the CMA for a more detailed investigation—in other words, the parties may seek to avoid a phase 2 reference by proposing remedies to address the public interest concerns that have provisionally been identified. The decision as to whether or not to accept undertakings in lieu is for the Secretary of State alone.

However, somewhat unusually, the parties proposed a set of undertakings to Ofcom, and Ofcom commented on them in its report. The proposed undertakings centred around Fox maintaining the editorial independence of Sky News by establishing a separate editorial board, with a majority of independent members, to oversee the appointment of the head of Sky News and any changes to Sky News editorial guidelines. They also include a commitment to maintain Sky branded news for five years with spending at least at similar levels to now. Ofcom’s view was that these remedies would mitigate the serious media plurality public interest concerns. It also suggested that the remedies could be further strengthened.

Last week, the parties—without prejudice to my decision today, which they learned about only this morning—formally submitted undertakings in largely the same terms to me. In accordance with the legislation, if I still intend to refer the merger after having considered representations from the parties, I am required to consider whether or not these remedies are appropriate. Given that the parties have offered these undertakings and that Ofcom have commented on them, I have taken an initial view. I can confirm that I have, today, written to the parties indicating that I am minded not to accept the undertakings that have been offered. While Ofcom suggests that they may mitigate its concerns, it is for the Secretary of State to decide whether they sufficiently mitigate—or, ideally, fully remedy—what are serious public interest considerations.

I note that Ofcom’s report says:

“we recognise that behavioural undertakings can be difficult to monitor and enforce and that there are areas in which the proposed undertakings could be strengthened.”

It cites questions regarding

“the ongoing arrangements for the appointment of the independent members of the Sky News Editorial Board and the period of Fox’s commitment to maintaining its investment in Sky News”. I also note the guidance of the Competition and Markets Authority, which, in the context of competition cases, says that undertakings in lieu are appropriate where the remedies are

“clear cut...effective and capable of ready implementation”,

and that, in ordinary cases, it is

“highly unlikely to accept behavioural remedies at phase 1”.

I have given the parties 10 working days—until Friday 14 July—to make representations on the minded-to decisions that I have reached. If I receive further offers of undertakings as part of those representations, I will keep the House informed about how I intend to structure the statutory process that I must follow when considering them.

As I have set out, I will now take representations on my minded-to positions. The call will remain open for 10 working days and I will then consider the evidence received before coming to a final decision on both grounds. To be clear, the minded-to decisions that I have outlined today are not my final decisions.
Before I close, I want to say a word about Ofcom’s “fit and proper” assessment. This is a matter for Ofcom, as the independent regulator, and my understanding is that it will publish its report today. I have seen the report and know that many Members in the House will want to comment on it. However, given my current quasi-judicial role in the merger, I will not be commenting on the findings. It is rightly not for Government to determine who should, and should not, hold TV broadcasting licences. Ofcom has an ongoing duty to ensure that all UK broadcasters are fit and proper to hold TV broadcasting licences. I am clear that if any evidence comes to light, it is for Ofcom to take account of that evidence.

I trust, as before, that this update is helpful to right hon. and hon. Members and that this statement gives an opportunity to debate this important issue while respecting the limits of what I can say, given my ongoing quasi-judicial role in relation to this merger. I commend this statement to the House.

12.9 pm

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement, albeit in redacted form, which, quite honestly, Mr Speaker, is utterly ridiculous.

This decision was delayed as a result of the unexpected general election campaign. I hope that the Conservative party found those weeks as productive as we on the Opposition Benches did, but nothing about this decision is a surprise. It is the old playbook. The Secretary of State has known all along what she wants to end up doing, but she has to follow the established dance steps, so let me make a prediction now. The parties have proposed some pretty minor undertakings in lieu. They always knew that they were not going to be enough to satisfy Ofcom, so the Secretary of State will demand extra conditions, as a result of which she will get written up as a tough operator. The parties will offer something new, which they always had in their back pocket, the Secretary of State will accept them, as she always planned, and this merger will go ahead.

Let me tell the Secretary of State the problem with Murdoch’s undertakings in lieu—not just these undertakings in lieu, but any undertakings in lieu that have ever been offered by the Murdochs. They are not worth the newsprint they are written in. Ask Harold Evans or James Harding about the guarantees of editorial independence at The Times and The Sunday Times. Can the Secretary of State name any undertakings in lieu that the Murdochs have ever made that have been respected?

If the current rules mean that James Murdoch can pass a fit and proper person test, given everything we know about his and his companies’ behaviour over phone hacking, and giving everything we know about Fox’s behaviour over the ongoing sexual harassment scandal in the United States, that says more about the rules than it does about Mr Murdoch. It is clear that the rules need to be reviewed, and if the current Conservative government will not do that, the next Labour Government will.

This company has been found guilty of significant corporate failure, yet this bid process can still go ahead. In fact, over the next 12 months, the Labour party will be reviewing media ownership rules in the UK, and let me put the media barons on notice: the days when citizens of other countries can dominate our media markets while paying their taxes overseas have to end.

The truth is, the world is changing and it is time the Conservative party realised it. We have seen what looks like an implicit bargain between the Conservative party and the Murdoch empire over recent years. The Conservatives would give Murdoch what he wanted—the Sky deal, stopping section 40, blocking Leveson part 2—and Murdoch would deliver Theresa May the landslide victory she craved. Well, it has not quite worked out that way, has it? Rupert Murdoch has not delivered his side of the bargain, has he? His papers may have done their best to urge a Tory landslide, but he just could not follow through. He is not what he was. It was not The Sun won it. The country saw through him. The Sun told Britain: “Don’t chuck Britain in the Cor-bin”. Britain chucked the Tory manifesto in the bin instead.

Please let me give the Secretary of State some friendly advice: Murdoch was not any use to them. They do not need to be any use to him anymore. If I was speaking to the Minister outside the Chamber, I would say to her: “At long last, you’re free. You can do the right thing.” One way of signalling that freedom would be to go ahead and order part 2 of the Leveson inquiry. Notwithstanding Ofcom’s fit and proper assessment, the only way to get to the bottom of the corporate governance issues that are at the heart of the decision is for the Secretary of State to hold part 2 of the Leveson inquiry. She should get on and order it now. She does not have a mandate to drop Leveson 2.

Meanwhile, let me ask the Secretary of State this. Given that this autumn James Murdoch is facing a civil trial in the High Court over new allegations of hacking and blagging at The Sun, and destruction of evidence, does she think that she could come out of this process with egg all over her face? How can the process possibly proceed with these cases hanging over them? Before she makes her final decision, will she guarantee to let the House know what the Prime Minister discussed with Rupert Murdoch at their private meeting in New York last year?

Karen Bradley: I am disappointed by the hon. Gentleman. I have come here to be fair and proper in a quasi-judicial process, and he has chosen to make it party political. That is a shame, and I think it is very cynical of him.

The hon. Gentleman should judge me on my record. Throughout this process I have been scrupulously fair and I have looked at the evidence and analysis available to me. He should not prejudge any decisions that I will take; I will take them on the basis of the evidence and analysis that is given to me and that I see, and I will make an appropriate judgment based on that evidence. I hope that he will give me credit for the fact that so far I have done that, and I will continue to do that.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): May I commend my right hon. Friend for the scrupulous way in which she is following the advice she has been given while giving the maximum opportunity for interested parties to comment at each stage? Would she also agree that the only thing on which the Opposition spokesman was correct was that when it comes to plurality, it is becoming increasingly obvious—and the general election bears...
Karen Bradley: My right hon. Friend, who has significant experience in this area and a great track record, is absolutely right. During the general election in particular, we saw the power and influence of social media companies, which simply do not have to abide by the same rules of impartiality, fairness and checking sources that the mainstream media do. I thank him for his comments about the approach I have taken to this merger. Whatever final decision I take, I will take it on the basis of the evidence, but I want to make sure we are as transparent as possible, because there is great public interest in this issue. I want to make sure that whatever final decision I take, it is understood by the public and respected.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement. As the Ofcom report rightly reflects, the public have serious concerns about the concentration of media ownership in fewer and fewer hands. We welcome the fact that the Secretary of State is minded to refer this to the Competition and Markets Authority on the grounds of diminishing plurality in the UK media. In doing so, she will have bolstered public confidence that recognising plurality and diversity are vital components of an independent media.

In her statement, the Secretary of State said that the guarantees received from Fox about editorial independence do not go far enough. Will she outline what she is looking for from Fox to guarantee that independence of editorial standards? Although she said that it is not for the Government to decide who holds a broadcast licence, is she satisfied that the current arrangement, whereby it is left solely to Ofcom to decide who holds a broadcast licence and who does not, is sufficiently robust to ensure public confidence in the process?

Karen Bradley: If I can take the hon. Gentleman’s latter comment about the fit and proper person test first, I think it would be extraordinary to be in a situation in which Ministers had any form of say over who held a broadcasting licence. It is right that that lies with Ofcom and if he has questions about the Ofcom process and its report, when he sees it, he should address those questions to Ofcom so that it can give him the comfort he needs.

The hon. Gentleman asks what undertakings I am looking for and, again, it is not for me to prejudice that. I have set out today that I am giving all parties 10 working days to come forward—that is, interested bodies that wish to make further representations on the matter of commitment to broadcasting standards and media plurality, as well as the parties themselves—on the matter of further undertakings they wish to make or other matters concerning my minded-to decisions. At that point, I will make a further decision.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) mentioned media plurality. What consideration has been given to the world in which we live today, where most people increasingly get their news on services such as Facebook? And what about the future of the television market—we are talking about the merger of two television companies—becoming dominated by the increasing power and financial influence of companies such as Netflix and Amazon?

Karen Bradley: If my hon. Friend looks at the Ofcom report, which should now have been published, he will see the consideration that was given. One point of concern about the Fox-Sky merger is that the media company is unique among media organisations in having positions in broadcasting, radio, newsprint and online. He is right that we are in an ever-changing media landscape. We need to be cognisant of that when we are looking at how best to ensure that the public receive a wide and diverse range of accurate and fair news.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): I welcome the Ofcom report recommending a referral to the CMA on grounds of plurality, and I urge the Secretary of State not to do a grubby deal with the Murdochs. We know their history. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) who spoke from the Front Bench said, they break every undertaking they make, from The Times to The Wall Street Journal.

May I also ask about fitness, propriety and broadcasting standards? I do wonder what it takes to be declared unfit and improper to hold a broadcasting licence. Ofcom has apparently found a second significant corporate failure on the part of the Murdochs. Given the Secretary of State’s responsibilities for broadcasting standards, is she not worried that this entity has been found responsible for a second huge corporate failure at Fox News, after News International?

Karen Bradley: I suggest that the right hon. Gentleman puts his comments about fitness and propriety to Ofcom, which is rightly the independent regulator. He will see its report later today. It ill behoves him to use the word “grubby” about the work that we will do. If undertakings are given and if, as a result, I am minded to consider them, there will be a full statutory public consultation on those undertakings so that we can be as transparent as possible and there can be no allegations of anything being grubby at all.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I am glad that the Ofcom report recommending a referral to the CMA on grounds of plurality, and I urge the Secretary of State not to do a grubby deal with the Murdochs. We know their history. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) who spoke from the Front Bench said, they break every undertaking they make, from The Times to The Wall Street Journal.

The petitions and campaigns to which my hon. Friend refers have been considered as part of Ofcom’s work. He will see in the report that Ofcom has considered more than 51,000 responses as part of its work. He is right that, in my quasi-judicial role, I am obliged to look at the evidence and analysis before me. I said in my statement that shouting the loudest is not necessarily the way to get the result one wants. We are looking for new and substantive evidence that may make a change to the decision.
Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Is it not the case that the internet companies that have been referred to are essentially aggregators of news, rather than independent providers, and that a company that is the leading supplier of newspaper content, the second leading supplier of radio content and the third largest supplier of television content is, indeed, a major threat to plurality, precisely as the Secretary of State’s regulator has advised her?

Karen Bradley: I welcome the right hon. Gentleman back to the House. He is right in his assessment that much internet news content has been previously written and owned by other providers. In response to his comments on media plurality, that is why I am minded to refer for a phase 2 inquiry.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): I remind the House that it was not just the News of the World that was guilty of phone hacking. The Mirror was found guilty too. Back to the subject of evidence, and following on from the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell), the Secretary of State will know that a number of identical emails have come, quite properly, from organisations such as 38 Degrees. In her statement, she drew a difference between evidence and perception. Is it not evidence that is now required?

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend is right that evidence is what is required. I am sure that there will be more email campaigns. I assure him that my inbox is full to bursting with identical responses from around the world, but emotional perception is not evidence. Evidence is needed to enable me to make a decision in a quasi-judicial way.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): The Secretary of State asks us to judge her on her record, which I will happily do. So when will she keep the promises that were made to the victims after the Levenson inquiry; announce Leveson 2 and implement section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013, which was passed almost unanimously by both Houses and, disgracefully, has still not been implemented by the Government?

Karen Bradley: We have had a consultation on the next steps regarding the second part of the Levenson inquiry and section 40, and I will publish the responses to that consultation. As Secretary of State, there is a process I need to go through in order to take anything further. We need to remember that the Levenson inquiry was in 2011. Many things have changed in that time. We have to think about how best to support local press and have a free, fair and vibrant local press. I will look at all those points when I consider the consultation responses.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): I fully recognise the Secretary of State’s quasi-judicial role. On the doorstep during the election campaign, constituents raised with me their concerns about and perceptions of bias across various media and online platforms. They were also concerned about value for money and plurality. Does the Secretary of State agree that this referral will give the public confidence in what they can actually take as media rather than pure conjecture?

Karen Bradley: I had similar conversations on the doorstep in my constituency and in other parts of the country. It is important that we have a transparent process that the public can have full confidence in.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): If the Secretary of State had sat in the High Court day after day, as I had to do as one of the victims of phone hacking, she would have heard endless examples and evidence—yes, real evidence heard in court before a judge—of the corruption that the Murdochs deliberately perpetuated in the British political system. The truth of the matter is that she cannot possibly now make a proper final judgment on whether the Murdochs are proper people to have any broadcasting licence in this country unless she hears more evidence in court in Leveson 2.

Karen Bradley: The point is that that evidence was heard in court and Ofcom has looked at it as part of all the work it has been doing. I suggest that the hon. Gentleman takes up his points on fit and proper people with Ofcom.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I thank the excellent Secretary of State for making such a clear statement to the House. However, 14 July cropped up as the date by which responses could be given, and it occurred to me that we are going into recess shortly after that date. Will she assure us that we will not get a final decision while the House is not sitting? As my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) said, the subject of media bias came up a lot on the doorstep, but I am afraid that, for me, it was media bias by the BBC, which my constituents suggested should be called the “Brussels Broadcasting Corporation”.

Karen Bradley: I am acutely aware of the parliamentary timetable. I hope that the date of 14 July will enable me to have enough time before the House rises to come back to the House with any further updates. I will endeavour, as I have throughout the process, to ensure that the House is updated before anybody else.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Sky TV is the largest employer in my constituency. Will the Secretary of State ensure, in any considerations and discussions she has, that the jobs of workers in both organisations are given full and proper consideration? Further to that, she seems to know what is not good enough for the process, but my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) tried to elicit from her what will be good enough. She must know that. Surely that information should be written down and published. Then, when the evidence is presented, it should be put forward so that we can have confidence in the process.

Karen Bradley: I do, of course, recognise the issue with regard to people working for these organisations, and we need to be mindful of that. In many ways, that is why it is important that decisions are taken as promptly as possible, in order that uncertainty does not persist and pervade. But it would not be right for me in any way to try to set out today what I think would be appropriate or not; it is for the parties to come forward with their representations, and for me to make a decision as to whether they are appropriate to stop a phase 2 referral.

Mr Geoffrey Robinson (Coventry North West) (Lab): Is the Minister aware that what troubles us about her statement is her total failure to see the most obvious link between, on the one hand, the fit and proper test and, on the other hand, regular arrangements with
those involved that might lead to some diminution in the influence of market share and make these things acceptable? The second can only depend on the first, and unless these people are fit and proper, they will never maintain the regulations. We know the first is not there, so why would the second be?

Karen Bradley: I am sorry if the hon. Gentleman does not understand the process. In the process for the media merger, I have a quasi-judicial role to ensure that the public interest test in the Enterprise Act 2002, introduced under a Labour Government, is fully met and that media plurality—the issue that he raised—is dealt with. The fit and proper persons test is an ongoing test for the independent regulator, Ofcom, and I suggest that he refers his comments to it. On the commitment to broadcasting standards, many of the same issues are considered as for the fit and proper persons test, and he will see in the report exactly what Ofcom says. If he has further evidence and further substantive comments to make, I suggest that he makes them as part of that process.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement. I am sure that she, like other right hon. and hon. Members, will be reflecting on the contrast between broadcasting regulations and what exists online, where we have a burgeoning source of news that now has a huge impact. However, does she agree that our regulatory structure means that even a hypothetical Fox News UK would have to be very different from that of its US sibling?

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Any broadcaster in the United Kingdom has to comply with the broadcasting codes and our standards, and those codes are very different from those that exist in other countries.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the Minister’s statement. The test is that the merger must be fit and proper, but there are many concerns that it falls into neither category. There are doubts that the new service will be impartial. Is it right that one body controls so much of the media output? Too much control in the hands of too few is truly a danger.

Karen Bradley: That is why I am minded to refer to a phase 2 inquiry, to ensure that we have full confidence in whatever decision I finally take.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): In coming to its view on the commitment of those involved to broadcasting standards, did Ofcom take account of the new civil case on phone hacking, in which the judge has required James Murdoch to surrender his personal laptop?

Karen Bradley: I would have to ask the hon. Lady to wait for the Ofcom report and to look at that. However, I remind her that the duty on Ofcom in terms of fit and proper persons is an ongoing duty; it needs to be constantly reviewed and reflected on, and that is for Ofcom to do.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Are we not indebted to our predecessors who sat in this Chamber in 1927, who determined that the broadcasters should have a duty of balance in their news? As a result of that, we trust the broadcasters to a greater extent than we trust the prostituted popular press, which tried a campaign of character assassination against the leader of my party in the election. Rightly, viewers and readers trusted what they saw on the BBC—the reality—rather than the propaganda. But are we not now in a new position, where fake news is a real threat to us, and what determines opinion is botnets, algorithms and artificial intelligence—activities that are entirely invisible and outside all the controls we have? Do we not need a new charter for all news?

Karen Bradley: We announced in the manifesto—and it was in the Queen’s Speech—that we are looking to construct a digital charter, which will look at the way people access information on the internet. The hon. Gentleman is right: we were all—certainly on the Government side of the House—victims of what appeared to be an echo chamber. People would put something completely vile, inappropriate and false on social media, and it was reinforced and repeated time and time again. That is simply not acceptable; it is a matter I have raised with the social media companies, and I will continue to do so.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): The Conservative party has blocked Leveson 2. How can we respect the quasi-judicial role of the Secretary of State when she is closing off the hearing of additional evidence that was promised by the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, to the victims of phone hacking?
Karen Bradley: These are two very different matters, and I am bound by the evidence and the analysis before me.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I am sure the Secretary of State sees through some of the “Baa, humbug!” of those on the Labour Benches, considering that their former leader warned the bed of this media mogul and ultimately became a godparent to James Murdoch’s stepsister. Given that some of us have been hacked by the Daily Mirror and by journalists from the BBC and Belfast newspapers, we take all of that with a great pinch of salt. However, may I congratulate the Minister on the way she has conducted herself today and on the handling of this report? I look forward to being able to make representations to her. Will MPs be able to meet her personally, or will we have to write to her to make our case?

Karen Bradley: I am always happy to meet hon. and right hon. Members from across the House, but I would also suggest that, in this process, the hon. Gentleman makes his representations through the official lines so that we can ensure that they are all properly accounted for.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Just before we come to points of order—this is intended to be helpful to the House—I just mention that, a matter of only minutes before the intended resumption of the debate on the Queen’s Speech, I observed that many, many hon. Members who have applied to speak in the debate are not currently present in the Chamber. I know the Whips are doing their best to ensure that that situation is addressed at once. [Interruption.] I know that the hon. Lady is gesticulating from a sedentary position to indicate that she is present; there is nothing particularly unusual or unexpected about that, and we are most grateful to her for her presence. It is not necessary for everybody who is present to signal that he or she is present; I am referring to those who are not present. But it might be helpful to new Members, in particular, if I make the point that, although all sorts of things can change over a period, and very beneficially for Parliament—I am very keen on beneficial and progressive change where the case can be made for it—it is a very, very, very long-established convention and courtesy in this place that Members who wish to speak in a debate should be present for the opening speeches and hear them, and should also be present for the winding-up speeches. People should not just wander in when it is convenient to them; that is, frankly, disrespectful to other colleagues and to the House as an institution. I hope that if there are now points of order of which I have, in response, to treat—this is not the purpose of the points of order—that will provide a welcome opportunity for people who have not yet arrived to scuttle their way towards the Chamber, and having scuttled their way towards the Chamber, they should stay in the Chamber.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your guidance on how we might compel the Government to respond to the Cridland review on the increase in the state pension age. You will be aware that the Government are already in breach of their own Pensions Act 2014. They should have reported on 7 May and failed to do so. Given the real mess that they made of the increase in the state pension age of women—the so-called WASPI women—this needs to be dealt with as a matter of urgency. Can you inform me of any information that you have about when the Government might be reporting on this, or offer some guidance on how we might encourage them to do so?

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order, but I am sorry that I am not able to provide her with satisfaction at this juncture. I have not been advised of any intention on the part of a Minister to make a statement on that matter. If it were imminent, I should rather expect, in the ordinary course of events and on the basis of past evidence, to have been so notified. However, the hon. Lady has drawn attention to her very real concern about this matter, of which I hope that Members on the Treasury Bench will have taken account.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am not really one to talk about dress sense, Sir, but I noticed yesterday that a Member was allowed to ask a question in the Chamber without wearing a tie. I have no particular view on that, but have the rules on it changed?

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Women don’t have to wear a tie.

Mr Speaker: The short answer to the hon. Gentleman is that this is something provided for, if memory serves, in the conventions and courtesies of the House. The traditional approach was that a Member—effectively, as was implied by the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), a male Member—would be wearing a tie. [Interruption.] There is absolutely no obligation on female Members not to wear ties if they so choose. I think the general expectation is that Members should dress in business-like attire. So far as the Chair is concerned, I must say to the hon. Gentleman, although I fear this will gravely disquiet him, that it seems to me that as long as a Member arrives in the House in what might be thought to be business-like attire, the question of whether that Member is wearing a tie is not absolutely front and centre stage. So am I minded not to call a Member simply because that Member is not wearing a tie? No. I think there has always been some discretion on the part of Members not to wear ties if they so choose. I think the general expectation is that Members should dress in business-like attire. So far as the Chair is concerned, I must say to the hon. Gentleman, although I fear this will gravely disquiet him, that it seems to me that as long as a Member arrives in the House in what might be thought to be business-like attire, the question of whether that Member is wearing a tie is not absolutely front and centre stage. So am I minded not to call a Member simply because that Member is not wearing a tie? No. I think there has always been some discretion on the part of Members not to wear ties if they so choose. I think the general expectation is that Members should dress in business-like attire. So far as the Chair is concerned, I must say to the hon. Gentleman, although I fear this will gravely disquiet him, that it seems to me that as long as a Member arrives in the House in what might be thought to be business-like attire, the question of whether that Member is wearing a tie is not absolutely front and centre stage. So am I minded not to call a Member simply because that Member is not wearing a tie? No. I think there has always been some discretion on the part of Members not to wear ties if they so choose. I think the general expectation is that Members should dress in business-like attire. So far as the Chair is concerned, I must say to the hon. Gentleman, although I fear this will gravely disquiet him, that it seems to me that as long as a Member arrives in the House in what might be thought to be business-like attire, the question of whether that Member is wearing a tie is not absolutely front and centre stage. So am I minded not to call a Member simply because that Member is not wearing a tie? No. I think there has always been some discretion on the part of Members not to wear ties if they so choose. I think the general expectation is that Members should dress in business-like attire. So far as the Chair is concerned, I must say to the hon. Gentleman, although I fear this will gravely disquiet him, that it seems to me that as long as a Member arrives in the House in what might be thought to be business-like attire, the question of whether that Member is wearing a tie is not absolutely front and centre stage. So am I minded not to call a Member simply because that Member is not wearing a tie? No. I think there has always been some discretion on the part of Members not to wear ties if they so choose. I think the general expectation is that Members should dress in business-like attire. So far as the Chair is concerned, I must say to the hon. Gentleman, although I fear this will gravely disquiet him, that it seems to me that as long as a Member arrives in the House in what might be thought to be business-like attire, the question of whether that Member is wearing a tie is not absolutely front and centre stage. So am I minded not to call a Member simply because that Member is not wearing a tie? No. I think there has always been some discretion on the part of Members not to wear ties if they so choose. I think the general expectation is that Members should dress in business-like attire. So far as the Chair is concerned, I must say to the hon. Gentleman, although I fear this will gravely disquiet him, that it seems to me that as long as a Member arrives in the House in what might be thought to be business-like attire, the question of whether that Member is wearing a tie is not absolutely front and centre stage. So am I minded not to call a Member simply because that Member is not wearing a tie? No. I think there has always been some discretion on the part of Members not to wear ties if they so choose. I think the general expectation is that Members should dress in business-like attire. So far as the Chair is concerned, I must say to the hon. Gentleman, although I fear this will gravely disquiet him, that it seems to me that as long as a Member arrives in the House in what
maximum term is eight years or two Parliaments. There is a good reason for this Standing Order, because the Committees are greatly benefited, and the House benefits, I believe, from refreshing those who take on these powerful positions. If there are to be any exceptions made, or any claims made for exceptional circumstances, will you ensure that the full Standing Order is respected, and that no changes will take place unless they are approved of through a debate in this House?

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. The Standing Orders are of course our rules, and by those rules we must all abide. I am familiar with the Standing Order to which the hon. Gentleman refers. My recollection of it is that there is a limit of two Parliaments or eight years, whichever is the longer, on the period for which the Chair of the same Select Committee can serve as its Chair. I certainly intend to interpret that rule in the proper way. If a decision comes to me to make in respect of a particular case, I will make it. Subject to any advice I might receive from the Clerk of the House, I have absolutely no objection whatever to making any such statement or clarification in the Chamber. That might be helpful to the hon. Gentleman and to other Members who are interested in this matter.

Debate on the Address

[6TH Day]

Debate resumed (Order, 28 June).

Question again proposed.

That an Humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, as follows:

Most Gracious Sovereign,

We, Your Majesty’s most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.

Economy and Jobs

Mr Speaker: I advised the House earlier of the selection of amendments that I have made, but I appreciate that some Members were not present. I am very happy now, because I think it would be helpful to the House, to repeat that selection. I can inform the House that I have selected amendment (l) in the name of the Leader of the Opposition, which will be moved at the start of the debate, as well as amendment (d) in the name of the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) and amendment (g) in the name of the hon. Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna), which will be moved formally at the end of the debate.

12.46 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I beg to move an amendment, at the end of the Question to add:

“but respectfully regret that the Gracious Speech fails to end austerity in public services, to reverse falling living standards and to make society more equal; further regret that it contains no reference to an energy price cap and call on the Government to legislate for such a cap at the earliest opportunity; call on the Government to commit to a properly resourced industrial strategy to increase infrastructure investment in every nation and region of the UK; recognise that no deal on Brexit is the very worst outcome and therefore call on the Government to negotiate an outcome that prioritises jobs and the economy, delivers the exact same benefits the UK has as a member of the Single Market and the Customs Union, ensures that there is no weakening of cooperation in security and policing, and maintains the existing rights of EU nationals living in the UK and UK nationals living in the EU; believe that those who are richest and large corporations, those with the broadest shoulders, should pay more tax, while more is done to clamp down on tax avoidance and evasion; call for increased funding in public services to expand childcare, scrap tuition fees at universities and colleges and restore Education Maintenance Allowance, maintenance grants and nurses’ bursaries; regret that with inflation rising, living standards are again falling; and call on the Government to end the public sector pay cap and increase the minimum wage to a real living wage of £10 per hour by 2020.”.

As of this year, Mr Speaker, I have been in the House for 20 years, just as you have. Never in all that time have we seen such a threadbare scrap of a document as this Queen’s Speech. But let us be grateful for small mercies: it is a pleasure to note what has not been mentioned in this vacuous notelet. Despite their being promised in the Conservative manifesto, we have had no plans for legislation to end the triple lock, we have heard nothing about legislation to end winter fuel payments, and we have heard no legislative plans for the so-called dementia tax. There is nothing of the policy to take food from the
mouths of infants and young primary school children, and even the flagship grammar schools policy seems to have been ditched from the Queen’s Speech. I would therefore like to thank the millions of voters who rejected the Conservatives because they have prevented the Tories from implementing the full cuts that they promised. I thank all those people who called a halt to the barrage of cuts that the Tories were intending to introduce. Regrettably, the Government have instead been reduced to a grubby back-room deal in an attempt to cling on to office.

The result is that we have a Queen’s Speech devoid of content which offers no solutions to the pressing issues facing our country. The Queen’s Speech says:

“My Ministers will strengthen the economy so that it supports the creation of jobs”.

The reality is that we are witnessing, to quote the Governor of the Bank of England, the weakest UK business investment in half a century, and the growth of insecure, low-paid, low-skilled jobs, with nearly 1 million people now on zero-hours contracts.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I am very surprised that the shadow Chancellor talks about jobs, because every single Labour Government in history has left government with higher unemployment than when they came to power. We have lowered unemployment and got more people into work. How can he possibly suggest that it would be better to have Labour?

John McDonnell: I would check the hon. Gentleman’s facts, but let me say—[Interruption.] I suggest he goes back to other Labour Governments who increased employment in this country as a result of direct state investment: the Attlee Government in particular, and the Wilson Government.

The issue for many of us is the quality of those jobs. The fact is that we now have people in employment who literally cannot fend off poverty. Two thirds of our children who are living in poverty are in families where people are in work. That is the quality of some of the jobs brought about by this Government.

The Queen’s Speech promises “to invest in the National Health Service, schools, and other public services”, but that could not be further from the truth. The reality is that spending per pupil remains set to fall, the jobs of police officers, firefighters, border guards will be cut, and the NHS is “already at breaking point” and has been promised no new money. Those are not our words, but those of the British Medical Association.

In various interviews over the past fortnight, the Chancellor has bemoaned the fact that he was hidden away during the election campaign and that his record on the economy was not the central plank of the Conservative campaign. I agree with him. I wish he had been more to the fore in the campaign, with his record more widely exposed, because if that had been the case, Labour would be in government now.

I do not believe that the right hon. Gentleman has been afforded his proper place in history. For those hon. Members who were not in this place 10 years ago, let me explain that prior to 2010 the Chancellor was the shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury. In that role, as an ardent neoliberal, he was the architect of austerity. It was he who designed the detailed economic programme rolled out by his mentor, George Osborne, after 2010, and he has been at the heart of every austerity Cabinet throughout this period.

In the Chancellor’s recent Mansion House speech, he referred to his Government’s austerity record as one “of which we are proud.” The foundation of the Chancellor’s record is its adherence to neoliberalism and trickle-down economics—a theory that argues that if we cut the taxes for the rich and the corporations, and if we turn a blind eye to tax avoidance and tax evasion, somehow the wealth will trickle down to the rest of society. This Chancellor has certainly cut taxes for the rich and the corporations. Corporation tax, capital gains tax, inheritance tax and the bank levy have all been slashed by this Chancellor. Independent analysis of Office for Budget Responsibility costings demonstrates that the tax cuts introduced by the Conservatives on those four measures alone since 2010 will have cost taxpayers more than £70 billion between last year and the end of this Parliament.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): As the right hon. Gentleman well knows, history tells us that increasing corporation tax actually leads to reduced tax revenues. Were he in government, his plans would mean that corporation tax revenue would fall. If he were in a position to do so, how would he make up that shortfall in Government revenue?

John McDonnell: The argument we heard was that corporation tax cuts would lead to a large-scale increase in business investment in our economy, but business investment fell last year for the first time since 2009. It remains lower than that in the rest of the G7 countries, with the exception of Italy. Corporations are now sitting on more than £580 billion of earned income that they are not investing. Some have been exposed as using that earned income in share buy-outs to boost performance statistics and therefore boost bonuses. That is the product of the corporation tax cuts.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

John McDonnell: In due course.

Let us look at how seven years of austerity has contributed to the grotesque and widening levels of growth inequality in the UK. A report last year by Credit Suisse found that the richest 1% of people in the UK now own almost one quarter of the country’s wealth. The Sunday Times rich list told us that the richest 1,000 families in the UK had more than doubled their wealth since the financial crash.

Anna Soubry: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that, because of Conservative policies, some 4 million people in this country who are at the lower end of the wage scale no longer pay any tax at all? This is the party that reduces taxes for the less well-off.

John McDonnell: It is a party that has used the taxation system to cut corporation tax, capital gains tax, inheritance tax and the bank levy, which has meant a redistribution from the poor to the wealthy.
The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): Will the right hon. Gentleman just clarify for the House what the standard rate of capital gains tax was under the last Labour Government and what it is now?

John McDonnell: This is a Government who want to cut corporation tax from 28%—[Interruption.] I thought the right hon. Gentleman was referring to corporation tax. Remember who the capital gains tax cut is going to: the 60,000 wealthiest families in this country. That is what this cut is all about.

Mr Hammond: Will the right hon. Gentleman just tell the House what the rate was under the last Labour Government and what the basic rate is now?

John McDonnell: When it comes to—[Interruption.]

Mr McDonnell: I am sure that the Chancellor will fill us in on the details when he makes his speech. The reality is that when it comes to cutting taxes, what we have seen over the past seven years is the rich being treated to tax cuts while the poorest in society have seen their services demolished in front of our eyes. The increasing levels of poverty in our society are a direct result of the redistribution of wealth from the poorest to the richest under this Government.

Several hon. Members rose—

John McDonnell: I will give way in due course.

Let us measure the impact of that record of tax cuts on the rest of society. It is important that we do so, because the Queen’s Speech promises more of the same. This could have been the Queen’s Speech that ended austerity once and for all, but it certainly does not do that.

This is the record that the Chancellor says he is proud of. Is it a matter of pride for the Chancellor that nearly one and a quarter million food parcels were handed out in food banks over the past year? Are we proud of the 134% increase in the number of people in temporary accommodation this year? How can anyone be proud of the fact that more than 77,000 households—an almost 8% increase on last year—were in temporary accommodation this year? How can anyone be proud of the 1.2 million households on waiting lists and 70,000 of our children sleeping rough in this country? There are now 1.2 million people in temporary accommodation and 70,000 of our children sleeping rough in this country? There are now 1.2 million people in temporary accommodation and 70,000 of our children sleeping rough in this country?

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend share my dismay at the growing rate of child poverty in the UK? Has he seen the prediction by the Institute for Fiscal Studies that by the end of this Parliament, on the current trend, the rate will by well over one third—even higher than the catastrophic level that the Labour Government inherited in 1997?

John McDonnell: We are returning to a society of grotesque inequalities and poverty among some of the most vulnerable. How can anyone claim that as a proud record?

Is it a record to be proud of that the Chancellor’s cap on public sector pay has contributed to wages falling by 10% since 2008? We have witnessed the longest fall in wages on record. Nearly 6 million people earn less than the living wage. People were shocked when the Royal
The College of Nursing revealed that nurses’ pay had fallen by 14%, which has forced some nurses—to rely on food banks.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): In Ashfield, average weekly earnings are below the national and regional average. The Government have made attempts to help to create and protect jobs, such as through the regional growth fund, but not a penny of that money has gone to my constituency. Is it any wonder that so many of my constituents feel that the Government have forgotten them?

John McDonnell: We talk about people being left behind, but it is whole communities across the country that have been left behind.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman is making the case for spending more money. His party’s manifesto included pledges to spend billions more, and that money would be borrowed. What does he have to say to homeowners who would face higher

John McDonnell: By wanting to invest for the long term to turn our economy around and grow it, I was following the advice of a whole range of economists. I also took into account advice that was provided to us from quite a surprising source:

“Now is a good time to invest in genuinely productivity-enhancing infrastructure, and to take advantage of low borrowing costs and our ability to borrow”—that was the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Is it something to be proud of that the UK is the only major developed country that has seen economic growth but falling wages? Yesterday we had the absolute chaos of W-tunnels, S-bends or whatever they have been described as from No. 10 and the Treasury over hints that the pay cap was to be scrapped. It was a disgrace that the coalition of the Tories and the Democratic Unionist party last night voted down our amendment to support public sector workers simply securing a fair pay rise. I will be happy to give way to the Chancellor if he will confirm whether the pay cap is to be lifted and if public sector workers will now get a fair pay rise. Would he like to respond? No. We need that assurance as soon as possible. Ministers are quick to praise the devotion and bravery of our emergency services in the aftermath of tragedies, as we have seen in recent weeks, but last night they could have extended their generosity to giving those brave, conscientious men and women the decent pay rise that many of them need if they are to be lifted out of poverty.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend will be aware that both the International Monetary Fund and the OECD have said that there is a relationship between inequality and growth—namely, the more inequality, the less growth. Does he not agree that it is not just unfair but unwise to pursue a policy that has led to Britain having the greatest inequality in Europe, rising at the fastest rate? If we were fairer, there would be a bigger cake with fairer shares for all.

John McDonnell: Virtually every mainstream economist now, and most mainstream economic institutions, argue that a fairer society is more economically efficient and more sustainable in the long term. That is not what the Chancellor’s supposed record of pride has delivered.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Is the shadow Chancellor aware that 25% of posts in the national minimum wage compliance unit are lying vacant? Is that not one reason why minimum wage compliance is so weak?

John McDonnell: The hon. Gentleman currently chairs the Public and Commercial Services Union parliamentary group, which I previously chaired, and we have campaigned on that point for seven years. If we cannot staff up the unit that is meant to carry out inspections and ensure compliance with the minimum wage, how can we expect the minimum wage to be paid fairly?

Let us look at the desperate state of our public services. How can anyone in government take pride in the fact that spending per pupil is set to fall by 8% by 2019-20? More than 46,000 children’s operations have been cancelled over the past four years. Police numbers have been cut by 20,000 since 2010, firefighter posts have been cut by 10,000, and 20,000 soldiers have been cut from the Army. A record of pride? I don’t think so.

So we have a Government who cannot feed their people, house their people adequately or protect their children and older people from poverty. They cannot ensure that when people go to work they earn enough to live on, and they cannot maintain our basic public services. They are a Government who do not deserve to remain in office.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Does the shadow Chancellor agree that it is a scandal that local authorities that have retained their council stock—the Government and the Opposition agree, post-Grenfell, that we need more council housing—are faced with having to pay back money because of the bizarre and byzantine housing finance rules, even though they have built houses? Does he agree that we need to get rid of that scandal as soon as we possibly can?

John McDonnell: The housing situation in our country is in dire straits because of the lack of building. That is why in the popular Labour party manifesto, we promised to build 1 million new homes—half of those to be council houses—and to free up local governments to perform their traditional role of putting roofs over the heads of local people.

All this suffering by ordinary people under austerity, so as to protect the rich and the corporations, has been for what? By the Government’s own metrics it has significantly failed. The Government promised that the deficit would be eradicated in five years, but now it will be 15 years at best. They have added £700 billion to the national debt, leaving £1.7 trillion of debt for future generations. In the first quarter of this year growth fell to 0.2%, and inflation has now increased to 2.9%. Last year saw the slowest rate of business investment since 2009. Unsecured debt per household will reach a record high this year.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): During the election, Labour made more than £105 billion worth of promises. If the right hon. Gentleman were to be Chancellor of the Exchequer, when would he expect the deficit to be repaid?
John McDonnell: Interestingly, Labour was the only political party that published a costed programme. I repeat: the only numbers in the Tory manifesto were the page numbers—nothing more. We will send the hon. Gentleman a copy of the costing booklet—I thought he had already received it but clearly he has not. We increased our expenditure by £48.6 billion, and that is covered by a range of revenue sources, all of which are identified and advised on, and ensure that day-to-day expenditure is covered. The IFS told us that we would comply with Labour's fiscal credibility rule, reducing the overall deficit over a rolling five-year programme, and reducing the debt within that period.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

John McDonnell: I will come back to the hon. Gentleman.

It is not only the Labour party that highlighted the consequence of the Tories' failed economic approach. Last week the Governor of the Bank of England warned of “weaker real income growth”. He spoke about “markedly weak investment” and “rapid consumer credit growth”. Worryingly, he warned that the extent to which the UK’s current account deficit has moved closer to sustainability “remains open to question”, as we continue to rely on what he describes as the “kindness of strangers” to fund us.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): The shadow Chancellor mentions comments by the Governor of the Bank of England. Like the shadow Chancellor, the Bank is concerned about the rise in household debt, which is now 142% of GDP, with unsecured borrowing rising 10% just last year. Does the shadow Chancellor share my concerns that household debt reflects the falling real wages that we have seen under this Government, and that it spells problems for the future and households being able to sustain current levels of spending?

John McDonnell: I will come on to that. Household debt is at a record level. Why? Because wages are so low, yet housing costs, and other costs with inflation rising, are biting hard for working families. It is no wonder that they have to resort to increased levels of debt just to get by. Those are the JAMs—the “just a bout managing”, who were supposed to be protected in the last Budget.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Does the shadow Chancellor understand the very basic economic point that the ability to borrow relies on confidence? If the individual institution that is lending someone money has no confidence that they will be able to repay it, the interest rate will go up. If we do not have the correct economic policy in place for the correct borrowing, we will end up with higher interest rates.

John McDonnell: I am not sure that that adds to the sum of human knowledge.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): In response to the intervention from the hon. Member for Solihull (Julian Knight), does the shadow Chancellor think that the Tory Brexit mess has been good for confidence in the UK economy, or less good for confidence in the UK economy?

John McDonnell: Sometimes we can be bemused by interventions from Government Members, and I find it bemusing that they have got us into a Brexit mess, they have called an unnecessary general election, they have an unstable Government, yet they talk to us about confidence!

Let me quote a few other comments and I will try to move on quickly—I see you are getting worried about time, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Bank of England’s chief economist said last week that 7% of our entire workforce could be on zero-hours contracts within a decade. The director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies called the low wage growth in this country “completely unprecedented.” The IFS also referred to “unacknowledged risks to the quality of public services” under the Conservatives, and judged that their austerity plans would be so harsh as to be potentially undeliverable.

What is the Government’s response? It is a Queen’s Speech devoid of any serious measures to address the economic challenges facing this country and the pressures that ordinary people and our public services are under. Austerity will continue to impact on our schools, our health service, emergency services, and people’s living standards. In the autumn Budget it will be interesting to see how the Chancellor covers the black hole derived from his last disaster of a Budget. We are aware of at least £2 billion, and according to some commentators it could grow to anything up to £7 billion. It would be particularly helpful if the Chancellor explained today how he covers the cost of the £1 billion grubby bribe to the DUP to keep his party clinging on to office. That is £100 million a vote. If I were a Tory Back Bencher, I would want to start negotiating a slice of that action.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that his party has a lot to tell us about grubby bribes in the form of letters to terrorists to get them off their murder charges and so on? What is grubby about money put into the infrastructure of Northern Ireland to promote jobs, or money going into the health service in Northern Ireland or the education system? What is grubby about that?

John McDonnell: I will tell the hon. Gentleman what I think is grubby.——/Interruption. Sorry—I thought he was sitting on the Government Benches; I didn’t realise. What is grubby is that if we were to abide by the rules of our system, and the Barnett formula in particular, England would get an additional £59 billion, Scotland £6 billion, and Wales £3 billion. After the miraculous discovery of funds for the DUP deal, in future I do not expect to hear much more about magic money trees from the Government Benches. One billion pounds was found for the DUP, but there is nothing to address the fundamentals of our weak and precarious economy, which as my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) said, is now faced with the challenges of Brexit.

Increasingly, people are waking up to the fact that a Government lacking—who can I call it?—a strong and stable leadership, are incapable of securing a deal that protects our jobs and economy. There are divisions at the top of Government, a Cabinet divided, and rows between members of the Government and their own negotiating team are breaking out on a daily basis as they position themselves for their own leadership challenges.
As a result, we witness weekly changes of direction in the Government’s negotiating stance, including even by the Chancellor. Only weeks ago the Chancellor was threatening no deal, walking away to set up the UK as a tax haven off the coast of continental Europe. Now it is reported that he is potentially looking to the customs union, and a long and uncertain transitional period. Only months ago, he went along with the Government prioritisation of immigration control over the protection of jobs. Now he claims to want a jobs-first Brexit.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): It has taken the right hon. Gentleman 33 minutes to get to this country leaving the European Union, which is the defining issue affecting our economy. He talks about divisions. He might want to think about the 100 Members of his own party who have been through the shadow Cabinet during the course of the previous Parliament. He might also want to ask questions about the lamentable performance of his leader, and his Back Benchers might want to ask him questions about his lamentable performance in the EU referendum last year. If they felt that strongly about Brexit, they would have defended our membership of the EU.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I hope to say it.

John McDonnell: It was a great speech, though. I am quite used to throwing red books about in this place. I will send the right hon. Lady a copy of the manifesto my party is united behind.

James Cleverly: United!

John McDonnell: Yes, united behind. I am proud to say it.

The failed and deeply unpopular austerity programme, the deeply divided rudderless Cabinet, the directionless Brexit negotiation strategy and a contentless Queen’s Speech surely confirms it is time for this Government to now go. It is time for change. Our amendment addresses the change that is needed. As the Labour party demonstrated during the general election campaign, there is an alternative. We can address the deep-rooted problems our economy faces. The Labour party has forged ahead with a serious credible alternative to the Government’s failed approach. Our society can afford decent public services. We are the fifth-richest economy in the world. If we have a fair taxation system, we can end the cuts to schools’ budgets. We can end the horrific sight of children sleeping on chairs in hospital corridors. We can end the bedroom tax and the punitive benefits sanctions regime. We can do that, as the IFS confirmed, while remaining on target to eliminate the budget deficit in accordance with our fiscal credibility rule.

It is not just about a fairer taxation system. We need a Government to invest what is needed to secure our future: not the derisory numbers floated by the Chancellor in the autumn statement with so little to back them up, but a serious, long-term vision of the economy that tackles the regional disparities and the changes taking place in the labour market. We need a Government committed to driving up productivity by increasing investment, as demanded by the CBI and many others, and to delivering a serious industrial strategy. It is a transformative programme that we look forward to implementing in government shortly.

This Queen’s Speech does nothing to solve these problems. It confirms a Government isolated from the real world in which our people live. Labour’s amendment today sets out the alternative our country so desperately needs. I urge all hon. Members to support the amendment.

1.23 pm

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): I welcome the opportunity to respond to this debate, to set out our economic record since 2010 and our plans for Britain’s future, and to comment on Labour’s plans for our economy.

This Government have a job to do, and a large part of that job over the next 18 months or so will be focused on securing a Brexit deal that is good for Britain and helps to deliver the strong economy that will underpin our public services, create jobs and support our living standards. Of course our country and our economy face some significant challenges. I shall set out today how we intend to address them. However, we also have within our grasp some significant prizes and we need to ensure that we are able to seize them.

I have listened for the past half hour, as have my right hon. and hon. Friends, to the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) talking Britain’s economy down. It is clear that he has, and Labour has, no credible plan for addressing the real challenges this country faces. His solutions, such as they are, would put most of those prizes beyond our reach.

Alison McGovern: With all due respect to my right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor, does the Chancellor think it is more likely that the trouble we have in the British economy is due to the shadow Chancellor’s words or to the mess the Conservative party has made so far of the Brexit negotiations?

Mr Hammond: If the hon. Lady bears with me, she will hear how what we have done since 2010 has strengthened the fundamentals of the British economy. If she is asking me whether the decision the British people made last summer to leave the European Union—and the uncertainty that that has inevitably created as we negotiate our way out of the European Union—adds uncertainty to the economic equation, self-evidently it does. That is why we are seeking to progress the negotiations as rapidly as possible to restore certainty for business, investors and citizens as quickly as we possibly can.

Listening to the shadow Chancellor and the Leader of the Opposition reading their election manifesto, it is clear that the Labour party has given up any pretence of a claim to fiscal credibility. Just two years ago, in the 2015 general election, Labour at least pretended that its figures added up. It would pay for its giveaways, so that its plans would not bankrupt the country. Not any more. The current lot are clear that not only would they hike taxes, but they would embark on a massive expansion of borrowing and subject the country to a catastrophic programme of ideologically driven, productivity-sapping, investment-destroying nationalisation on a scale that the country has not seen since the 1970s.
Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): If the Chancellor is so proud of his economic record, why did the Conservatives not discuss it during the course of the election campaign? Is it possibly because, after seven years of this Government, the Prime Minister stood before the electorate resembling that great baddie from “The Chronicles of Narnia” promising always winter but never Christmas?

Mr Hammond: I have not got to it yet, but the hon. Gentleman will hear an elaboration of our record since 2010 in just a moment.

I was talking about the 1970s, a decade when the lights literally went out, when inflation was in double digits, the country was crippled by strikes and bullying-union power, and the Labour Government were forced to go cap-in-hand to the IMF for a bailout. The pretence of fiscal credibility is gone from Labour’s offer. The new pretence is that the cost of its spending spree would fall on someone else—the rich, corporates and foreign investors—but it would not. The cost would fall, as it always does when Labour gets its hands on the British economy, on ordinary people trying to get on with their lives.

If the Shadow Chancellor would put down “Das Kapital” for a few minutes and read an elementary economics textbook, he would understand why. Take Labour’s proposed corporation tax hike. The IFS analysis is pretty straightforward. The right hon. Gentleman quoted the IFS, but it said that “much of the cost is likely to be passed to workers through lower wages or consumers through higher prices”.

The IFS is not alone. The shadow Chancellor’s predecessor, Mr Ed Balls, agrees. He says:

“The argument from this Labour manifesto that only the rich will pay, I don’t think it stacks up. From opposition, you can say, ‘Don’t worry, someone else will pay’—but you can’t do that in government.”

He might have added, “not if you seriously aspire to be in government”.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): Will the Chancellor give way?

Mr Hammond: I will in just a moment.

Here is the inconvenient truth for the Labour party about corporation tax. We cut corporation tax to the lowest rate of any large developed economy and two things happened. The private sector created 3.4 million new jobs—something, by the way, that the Labour party used to care about in the old days—and in the process we raised an additional £18 billion in corporation tax to fund our vital public services. That did not happen by magic. Lower corporate taxes attract more investment, more investment creates more jobs and more profits, and more profits deliver higher taxes. It is not very complicated.

Helen Whately: Is it not the case that if we are to have the public services that we want for our constituents, we have to have a strong and growing economy? It is very simple.

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is exactly right. There is no short cut and there is no free lunch. There is only the hard grind of improving the productivity and growth potential of our economy to build the sustainable public services that we want for the future.

John Mann: As the Office for Budget Responsibility confirmed to the Treasury Committee following the Chancellor’s recent Budget, all his tax projections are predicated on an extra 1 million new immigrants entering the country and working over the next five years. Can he confirm that that is still his plan?

Mr Hammond: It is the OBR that makes the projections and it has been quite transparent about what its assumptions are about both trade and immigration.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): If I can bring the Chancellor back to pay and public services, yesterday his Department and Downing Street were briefing the press about the public sector pay cap. To what extent was he aware of that, did he sanction his officials to carry out those briefings, and does he now support an end to public sector pay constraint?

Mr Hammond: Just to be clear, there is no change in the Government’s position. Our pay policy has always been designed to strike the right balance between being fair to our public servants and being fair to those who pay for them. That approach has not changed and we continually assess that balance.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Consider Wayne Marques, the hero police officer who fought off three terrorists, the firefighters who ran up burning stairwells to save frightened families, and the nurses and doctors who then battled to save lives: how can the Chancellor begin to justify holding their pay down, squeezing the living standards of Britain’s best?

Mr Hammond: As I am sure the hon. Gentleman knows, after the financial crisis, public sector pay ran substantially ahead of private sector pay, and we are only just moving back to the point where public and private sector pay have moved back into balance. [Interruption.] It is not rubbish, it is a fact, so the suggestion that there is a backlog problem for public sector workers is simply not true. As I have said, the Government’s policy remains unchanged.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Hammond: I will make a little progress and then I will give way to some more colleagues on both sides of the House.

On this side of the House at least, we continue to believe that the most effective way to protect and support ordinary families is to ensure that they have jobs, and that is what we have done, in spades. The flaw in Labour’s tax plan is not just that it will hit those whom Labour claims to support; it is that it will not raise anything like the revenue that it is claiming. Labour says it will raise taxes by £48.6 billion without anyone earning under £80,000 paying a penny more. The Institute for Fiscal Studies—which the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington quoted rather selectively—has examined the credibility of that plan. It found that Labour

“certainly shouldn’t plan on their stated tax increases raising more than £60  billion in the short run, and more likely than not they would raise less than that. They would certainly raise considerably less in the longer term.”
So before we even turn to Labour’s spending plans, there is already a black hole of £8.6 billion a year and rising on the taxation side alone.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): Is it not even worse than that, in that the IFS said that there were £58 billion of uncosted promises in Labour’s supposedly costed manifesto?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is exactly right, and if he bears with me, I shall continue.

That black hole of £8.6 billion a year and rising in taxation will have to be filled by raising tax on ordinary people, and that was just the manifesto. Since the Leader of the Opposition got his new suit, he has been out and about, flinging spending commitments with gusto to anyone he comes into contact with—another £9.5 billion of unfunded commitments for each year of this Parliament. Added to the hole in Labour’s tax plans, that is an additional £90 billion over the course of the Parliament that has to be raised in taxation on ordinary working families.

Let me say that again for the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington: £8.6 billion a year of under-recovered tax, according to the IFS, and another £9 billion plus a year that his right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition added in additional unfunded commitments after the manifesto was published. In short, that is the Opposition’s approach to the type of tough decisions that have to be made every day in government about prioritising limited resources—“Should we do x or should we do y?” His answer is just yes: more everything for everyone, and all of it for free—a catastrophic recipe for economic and fiscal disaster.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): In the 10 minutes or so that my right hon. Friend has been speaking, our national debt has increased by nearly £900,000. Will the Chancellor continue to speak up for hard-pressed taxpayers and make the point that, for all this talk of austerity, the debt is still rising? We have to look after the pennies, otherwise we will be up Queer Street.

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The debt is still rising, but next year, for the first time in 20 years, we expect to see it beginning to fall as a percentage of GDP—a remarkable achievement after the trashing of our economy by the Labour party in government.

Chris Stephens: On tax revenues, was it appropriate—during a general election in which four political parties represented in this House were campaigning against HMRC office closures—for Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs to negotiate a contract during purdah for new regional centres?

Mr Hammond: If HMRC has negotiated a contract during purdah, it will have taken advice on whether that was compatible with purdah and will have received guidance from the Cabinet Secretary. It perhaps says something about the way that the purdah rules work that I was not aware of that until the hon. Gentleman just mentioned it, but I can assure him that HMRC will have taken proper advice.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Perhaps I could seek your guidance. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) has just exposed, the Government and the Chancellor did not know about a decision on HMRC offices and jobs. Would it therefore be in order for him to come to the House as soon as possible and make a statement on the HMRC closures and the jobs in our constituencies?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): The hon. Lady has cleverly used her point of order to make the political point that she wished to make. I think she knows, as the House knows, that it is not a point that I can answer from the Chair. If, however, she is endeavouring to bring the Chancellor to be held accountable to the House, then I can tell her that that is exactly the process that we are currently undertaking. The Chancellor of Exchequer is here, and I am sure that the hon. Lady will be able to make her point in debate later in the day.

Mr Hammond: I give way to the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman).

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I want to ask the Chancellor a question that I think he does know the answer to. Does he agree with the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin), who said yesterday that some tax rises will be needed in this Parliament to maintain the quality of public services, or will he stand at the Dispatch Box and rule out any tax rises?

Mr Hammond: I read the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin), and I am sure that what he said will prove to be a very important contribution to a debate that we will have, and should have, in the House. I welcome that.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Hammond: Let me make a little more progress.

All that is before we even get to the £500 billion borrowing splurge that Labour has promised us over the next 10 years—£250 billion over the course of a Parliament.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Hammond: I will in just a moment.

Then there is the nationalisation programme. Let me explain these plans, Madam Deputy Speaker, because they are important. The Labour party wants to nationalise gas and electricity, water and Royal Mail. They would borrow a fortune to do it, and it would deliver no economic benefit whatsoever.

First, a Labour Government would have to buy up the shares of publicly listed companies on the stock exchange. Taking over just the single largest company in each sector would cost close to £44 billion, and the Government would have to pay a market premium on top, because a programme to buy the shares would drive up the price. Moreover, the taxpayer would take on those companies’ debts; that is another £26 billion. So that is £70 billion of public debt. When the Labour Government were done with the publicly listed companies,
they would have to strike deals with scores of private investors and funds to buy the rest. All told, we are looking at more than £120 billion. [Interruption.]

The right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington says from a sedentary position, “You do not understand. It is a financial transaction, so it does not need any money, and it does not require us to go out and borrow any.” He is simply wrong. Financial transactions add to public debt—[Interruption]—and that is before we even get to the railways, which he has been chuntering about. I have deliberately left the railways out of my equation, because his proposals for those are more complex.

John McDonnell: The right hon. Gentleman fails to understand that we will gain an asset when we take over the railways. It will give us an income that will cover any borrowing costs, and as the franchises drop out, it will be cost-free.

Mr Hammond: So the proposition is this: would I entrust an asset to the right hon. Gentleman? Would I lend him the money to buy that asset, on the assumption that he would be able to produce an economic return by operating it? Let me ponder on that one, Madam Deputy Speaker.

John McDonnell: It will be managed by the people of this country, in whom I have confidence, not by the profiteers whom the right hon. Gentleman represents.

Mr Hammond: Let us test that proposition. When these industries were last in public ownership, who were they managed by? They were managed by intervening, interfering politicians and their buddies in the trade unions.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): My right hon. Friend has dealt with amendment (l). Let me now turn to a non-party-political initiative, led by the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) and me, and by most other Members on both sides of the House, and the discussions that we have been having with the Government about the question of the women in Northern Ireland and whether only the poor should be denied lawful abortions. Is there anything that the Government can say about that?

Mr Hammond: That takes me slightly away from my line of attack, but I know that the issue is of great importance to Members on both sides of the House, and that my colleagues on the Treasury Bench have been seeking a solution. I understand that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Women and Equalities either has made or is about to make an announcement in the form of a letter to Members explaining that she intends to intervene to fund abortions in England for women arriving here from Northern Ireland. I hope that the House will consider that to be a sensible way of dealing with the challenge.

Stephen Timms: That was a very neat move by the right hon. Gentleman. I cannot resist giving way to him.

Mr Hammond: I am very grateful. This time, I want to raise the subject of amendment (g). I commend the Chancellor for his efforts to explain to Cabinet colleagues that having your cake and eating it is not an option available on the Brexit negotiating table. Very hard choices will have to be made. Does the Chancellor agree that, given the scale of what is at stake in Brexit, the option of remaining in the single market must at least stay on the table?

Mr Hammond: I think that there is a genuine misunderstanding in some of the debate. When we leave the European Union, we will leave the single market and the customs union. That is not a matter of choice, but a matter of legal necessity. The question is not whether we would be in the single market or in the customs union; the question is what kind of arrangements we could negotiate as part of a close partnership with the European Union that would allow our businesses to continue to trade with the EU and the EU’s businesses to continue to trade with us, so that the prosperity benefits of close trade with our European Union neighbours could continue. I am committed to trying to find a deal that will allow that to happen.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Hammond: The hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) was first, so I will give way to her.

Hannah Bardell: I thank the Chancellor for giving way. I hope that he will be able to follow up my point of order and the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) about HMRC contracts, because the issue is very important to our constituents.

Is it not the case that we have a Prime Minister who disagrees with herself about Brexit, and that—as we now know from the “six jobs” former Chancellor—the whole Cabinet disagrees with the Prime Minister about the status of EU nationals? How on earth can we trust the Tories to run the country, let alone negotiate Brexit? This madness must end.

Mr Hammond: I will come back to the hon. Lady on the subject of her point of order, and to the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens). My understanding is that an issue arose during purdah which involved the risk of immediate financial loss to HMRC, and that under the purdah rules it was able to engage in a negotiation to try to prevent that loss to the public purse. I will, however, write to the hon. Lady, and to the hon. Gentleman, setting out exactly what happened, and I will put a copy of the letter in the Library of the House.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Hammond: Let me just finish answering the hon. Lady’s question.

I wake up every morning and read the newspapers—[Interruption.] Don’t count your chickens. Let me say to the hon. Lady that I do not always recognise the debate that is raging in the media as an accurate
characterisation of what is really going on. The media are desperate to create conflict where there is not necessarily any at all.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Hammond: I will give way to the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), and then I must make some progress.

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to the Chancellor for giving way to me a second time. I think he has presented a range of procedural barriers that could be overcome in a negotiation to ensure that Britain remains in the single market and the customs union, as other non-EU members do. Does he accept that anything less than membership of the single market and the customs union will not give Britain as good a deal as the one that we currently have? He knows that that poses a risk to our economy, and one that none of us in the House should entertain.

Mr Hammond: No, I do not agree with that. I think it is perfectly clear that it should be possible to negotiate an agreement with the European Union that provides for mutual, reciprocal access to each other’s marketplaces, and for frictionless arrangements for goods crossing the borders. That would not be membership of the single market or membership of the customs union, for all sorts of legal reasons, but it could have, to a very large extent, the same effect over a transitional period. I think that that is possible to achieve.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP) rose—

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con) rose—

Charlie Elphicke rose—

Mr Hammond: I will give way one more time, to the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil)—and then I will give way to a couple of my hon. Friends.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I am grateful to the Prime— to the Chancellor. In fact, he is indeed a probable future Prime Minister, given that his is one of the serious voices in the current Cabinet. If his wish does not come true in relation to the single market, when does he think the UK Government will U-turn on the issue? Economic gravity is going to take the UK Government in that direction, whether they like it or not at the moment.

Mr Hammond: I have just explained to the House—and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman heard—that it would not be legally possible for us to leave the EU and stay in the single market. It is simply not an option.

Jeremy Quin rose—

Charlie Elphicke rose—

Mr Hammond: I am happy to give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin).

Jeremy Quin rose—

Helen Goodman: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I am sorry to interrupt, but the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) wishes to raise a point of order.

Helen Goodman: I wonder whether I could give the Chancellor of the Exchequer an opportunity to correct a false statement that he just made. Turkey is not in the European Union, and it is in the customs union. The legal barriers that the Chancellor is creating simply do not exist.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I should say to the House, for the benefit of new Members, that there is a difference between an intervention in a debate and a point of order. The hon. Lady is being clever in using her wisdom about how the House works, but she knows that that was not a point of order, and that it is not something that I can answer. What she really wants to do is intervene on the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

For the benefit of new Members of the House, let me make it clear that a point of order should not be used to make an intervention that the Chancellor has not taken. The Chancellor is perfectly capable of choosing the interventions that he wishes to take. He has taken many, and I am sure that he will take many more.

Mr Hammond: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham.

Jeremy Quin: I am most grateful that the Chancellor is now taking my intervention. May I take him back to the discussion on amendment (l)? About six interventions ago, he was patiently explaining to the shadow Chancellor the risks to cashflows of nationalising all these wonderful businesses and the huge cost to the taxpayer that would result. I hope that the shadow Chancellor has been suitably educated. Will my right hon. Friend also educate the shadow Chancellor on the point that the total amount of our debt will have an impact on our borrowing costs? They are high enough already, but they could get a lot worse. The shadow Chancellor’s friends who run the Greek and Portuguese economies know about high borrowing costs.

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The shadow Chancellor often talks about borrowing costs being low and about this being an ideal time to borrow more, but if he ever got his hands anywhere near the levers of power, with his programme of massively increased borrowing, we would soon see our debt interest costs soaring. That would mean yet more of our hard-earned taxpayers’ money being paid to the lenders.

Let me summarise where I have got to on Labour’s programme. The shadow Chancellor has a small problem with arithmetic. The Institute for Fiscal Studies found a £2.2 billion arithmetical error in his manifesto costings. We have identified a £90 billion black hole in Labour’s spending plans that would have to be funded by higher taxation on ordinary families, £250 billion of planned borrowing, and £120 billion—and some—for the nationalisation, which would all be added to our debt.

So, just as our national debt is about to start falling as a share of GDP, the Labour party wants to add at least £370 billion to the pile.
Rachel Reeves: The Chancellor seems to be more interested in talking about what is in the Labour manifesto than about what is in his own Government’s Queen’s Speech. Is that because there is so little about the economy in the Queen’s Speech, or is it because he does not believe in it?

Mr Hammond: No; it is because I am about to come to it. The shadow Chancellor talked about his programme, and I wanted to make the simple point that, for all the rhetoric about somebody else paying, it is always the same with a Labour Government: it is always ordinary working people who pay, through higher taxes, higher prices and fewer jobs.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Hammond: I am going to make a little progress.

The truth is that the shadow Chancellor sees failure everywhere, while I see a fundamentally robust economy rebuilt from the ruins of Labour’s great recession. It is an economy that now needs to navigate successful transition out of the EU and into a deep and special partnership with our EU neighbours, and to realise the great potential of a technological revolution ahead, in which British universities and British companies will play a leading role.

I see a country that has achieved great things together since the last time Labour had its hands on the levers of power. In Labour’s last year in office, our economy shrank by 4.3%. In 2016, it grew faster than any major advanced economy bar Germany. Back in 2009, millions feared for their jobs and their futures. At that time, the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington predicted that under our plan—[Interruption.] He should listen to this. He predicted that under our plan unemployment would rise by 1.2 million as we suffered a double-dip recession and a decade-long depression. Since then, 2.9 million net new jobs have been created, our employment rate is the highest on record and our unemployment rate is at a 40-year low. In 2009, our deficit was at a post-war high. Since then, we have got it down by three quarters, while also taking 4 million people out of income tax in the last Parliament and cutting income tax in the last Parliament and cutting income tax.

James Duddridge: May I echo my right hon. Friend’s comments and relate them to Southend? Business in Southend is booming. Businesses are being created, particularly alongside Southend airport in the new business park that the Government have part-funded. We have a success in Southend—this is working there. Would he like to come back to Southend, as he did a number of years ago, to see how business is booming and the impact of his positive policies?

Mr Hammond: I am always happy to go to Southend, but the story that my hon. Friend tells is being repeated everywhere, while I see a fundamentally robust economy.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The figure of £1,400 is what Northern Irish women were having to spend to get an abortion here in England, so it is welcome that the Government are now saying that they will correct this injustice. However, the Chancellor will know, as everyone knows, that the devil will be in the detail. Will he therefore make a commitment on behalf of the Government to meet me and representatives of organisations such as Marie Stopes, the British Pregnancy Advisory Service and the London Irish Abortion Campaign to look at how we can turn this into a reality, so that those women in Northern Ireland who have finally had their voices heard today can use these services as soon as possible?

Mr Hammond: I say to the hon. Lady: please read the letter that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Women and Equalities has sent out. We will be giving additional funding to her Department so that she can make a grant to the external organisations that will provide those services. I think that the hon. Lady will be satisfied when she has read the letter and understood the details. If she is not, I will be happy to meet her.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Will the Chancellor make one further clarification, because there seemed to be some misinformation during the general election campaign? On tax avoidance, which Government have passed more than 50 measures, taken the base erosion and profit shifting process forward, published one of the world’s first public registers of beneficial ownership and reduced the tax gap to the lowest level in living memory? And which previous Government did precisely nothing?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend makes a good point. The shadow Chancellor likes to talk about tax avoidance, but the Labour Government did nothing to deal with it—[Interruption.] Well, let me phrase it differently for the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), who takes offence at that. He was a member of that Government, and they left £150 billion on the table. That is how much we have taken through clamping down on tax avoidance and evasion—[Interruption.] And before the shadow Chancellor stands up, I will tell him—he did not know the answer—that under the last Labour Government, the main rate of capital gains tax was 18%. Under this Conservative Government, it is 20%, with a 28% rate on residential property and hedge fund managers.
It was increased under George Osborne and then cut back again. Let me remind the Chancellor of the Financial Times survey that found that the measures on tax evasion and avoidance introduced by Gordon Brown were 10 times more effective than anything that this Government have done.

Mr Hammond: Let me do the maths. Hmm, it would be £1.5 trillion that they raise. Perhaps one of my hon. Friends will check down the back of the Treasury Bench in case the previous Chancellor hid that away down there. As usual, the right hon. Gentleman is talking absolute nonsense.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Will the Chancellor give way?

Mr Hammond: I want to make a little progress, but I will give way in a moment.

I have set out our record, but the British people did not get where they are today by admiring their achievements. We have work to do: we have to negotiate our future relationship with the EU; we have to enhance our global competitiveness through raising our productivity; we have to rise to the challenge of sustaining our public services in the face of demographic pressure; we have to address the needs of our population for affordable routes into home ownership; and we have to show the courage and vision to grasp the opportunities ahead. We will meet those challenges head on, as we have always done, with a plan that builds on the strengths of our economy, not one that denigrates them.

Let me say something about our public services and their funding. We all value our public services and the people who provide them to us. Health and social care, education, roads, local authority services, police, fire and rescue, defence and the many, many other services we enjoy all form part of the vital fabric of our society and contribute to the vibrancy of our communities. The challenge of funding those public services is accentuated by the changing age profile of the population, which necessitates a proper debate about how to make the funding of public services sustainable not just next year, but over the decades of demographic change to come. We have to be clear about the choices and what they mean because there are no free lunches or money trees in the real world, and all decisions have consequences.

There are three ways for the Government to increase spending on public services: higher taxes, higher borrowing or higher growth. Higher taxes have a cost in terms of business investment, economic growth and take-home pay. Conservatives are instinctively in favour of keeping taxes as low as possible so that business can continue to create high-quality jobs and hard-working people can keep more of the money that they earn. That is why we reject Labour’s manifesto plan, which would, according to the IFS, take taxation to its highest ever peacetime level. The right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington is not listening, but—[Interruption.] Pay attention. If he wants to make the case for higher taxation to fund public services, will he at least ask voters whether they want to pay higher taxes to fund public services, not whether they would like someone else to pay higher taxes? As Ed Balls reminds us, in the real world, it is ordinary people who pay.

When we already have an eye-watering amount of debt, higher borrowing makes our economy vulnerable to future shocks. With £1.7 trillion of national debt outstanding and an annual interest bill of £50 billion, even at the current low rates, we should be reducing debt, not increasing it. However, borrowing means something else, too. It means that we are asking the next generations—our children and our grandchildren—to consume less in their lifetimes to pay for our consumption today. That is simply not fair; it is the opposite of sustainable.

Mark Pawsey: The Chancellor rightly mentions the interest bill. Will he tell us what would happen to interest rates if the Opposition’s policies were introduced? What would be the impact on the average family’s income?

Mr Hammond: As I have already said, if it were ever to look like the shadow Chancellor was anywhere near having his hand on the lever of power, I suspect that his programme, given what we know about his values and principles around the management of the economy, would lead to a pretty sharp rise in interest rates.

We must continue the job of getting our public finances back in order, over a sensible period of time, so that we are living within our means. The shadow Chancellor referred to the decision in my first autumn statement to push back the date on which we will reach fiscal balance. I made that decision to protect our economy during a period of uncertainty due to our exit negotiations from the European Union, therefore giving ourselves a little more headroom to respond should the economy need support. I would have thought that the right hon. Gentleman welcomed that measure.

The only fair and sustainable way to fund better public services, higher real wages, and increased living standards—[Interruption.] I say to the Opposition Front-Bench team that that is absolutely not the way to do it. The only fair and sustainable approach is to increase economic growth through higher productivity. Our plan will support our public services and living standards.

Jonathan Edwards: Based on the rosy picture that the Chancellor has been endeavouring to portray this afternoon, will he explain why Britain has the worst-performing economy in the G7 under his watch?

Mr Hammond: The hon. Gentleman is wrong. Last year, the British economy was the second-fastest growing in the G7 after Germany. In the year before that, our economy was the second-fastest growing after the United States.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): And this year it is at the bottom.

Mr Hammond: Well, we are only one quarter into this year. I do not want to get techy, but the first quarter data are always subject to the largest revision, so let us wait and see. The OBR maintains its forecast for economic growth of 2% this year.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con) rose—

Charlie Elphicke rose—
Mr Hammond: I will give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) and then to my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke). I will then make a bit of progress.

Alex Burghart: The Chancellor went to school in my constituency and will be aware that my constituents are concerned that we maintain our excellent record on job creation. What would be the impact on job creation of a sizeable hike in corporation tax—say to 26%?

Mr Hammond: As I have already said, it is clear that reducing the corporation tax rate has led to a flow of investment and the creation of millions of new jobs, which I welcome. That is the way forward for this country, not the obsolete 1970s policies of the Labour party.

Charlie Elphicke: The Chancellor is being incredibly generous in taking interventions. Obviously we will be leaving the European Union in two years’ time. He hopes for a transitional deal, and we all hope that it goes smoothly and well, most of all on the Dover frontline. Does he agree that it is important that Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs and the Government are ready on day one for the challenge and for every eventuality?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We do not know what the outcome of our negotiations with the European Union will be, but we have to be prepared for every possible eventuality, particularly at the port of Dover. I hope that when hon. Members across the House look at the great repeal Bill, which will prepare us to deal with whatever situation we find ourselves in in March 2019, they will think carefully about that situation.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Hammond: I have given way a great deal and I need to make some progress.

Our plan will build an economy that shares prosperity and opportunity across all parts of the United Kingdom. It will do that through a Brexit deal that supports British business to go on creating jobs and prosperity as we leave the European Union, and to drive productivity to fuel economic growth that supports quality public services and rising living standards. We will do that through investment in infrastructure and skills, by ensuring the flow of capital to growth sectors, by promoting R and D in our businesses and our universities, and through an industrial strategy that will at last begin to tackle the blight of regional disparity. We are a Government committed to delivering that plan, doing the hard miles, negotiating the right deal, taking the tough choices, eschewing the easy answers favoured by the Opposition, and taking the hard decisions that will set Britain on course to seize the prizes and achieve a brighter, global future. I commend the Queen’s Speech to the House.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Before I call the spokesman for the Scottish National party, I ought to draw the House’s attention to the fact that 64 hon. Members have indicated to me that they would like to speak within the next three hours. The Chancellor and shadow Chancellor are vying for arithmetical progress, but anyone who can work this out will know that we need to have a time limit. The initial limit will be six minutes, but later in the day it will be considerably less than that. There is no time limit on the SNP spokesman, Kirsty Blackman.

2.10 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and welcome to your seat—it is good to see you back there. I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak on behalf of the SNP, but I am disappointed that none of our amendments was selected today. We set out in them our demand for VAT payments. We would also like the Government to halt the austerity agenda—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. If Members are leaving the House, they must do so with courtesy to the hon. Lady.

Kirsty Blackman: Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. We demand that this Government stop pursuing austerity—the electorate gave them that message and we again reiterate it. We also asked in our amendments that proper transitional arrangements be put in place for WASPI women and that the UK take the action it should take to contribute to reducing the refugee crisis across Europe. The SNP will support the amendment standing in the name of the hon. Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) and we will also vote in favour of the amendment standing in the name of the Leader of the Opposition, but I wish to stress that we believe the only way we can get the exact same benefits of being in the single market and the customs union is by being in them.

This is my first opportunity to speak as the SNP’s economic spokesperson, and it is a huge honour to hold this position. This is the third Queen’s Speech debate that I have seen in my time as an MP, and I want to take
Members back two years, to my first Queen’s Speech debate, when the then Chancellor, George Osborne, said that “the latest forecast is that the UK will be the fastest growing of any of the G7 economies”. —[Official Report, 4 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 797.]

He also took the opportunity to reflect that everyone had predicted a hung Parliament, yet the Conservatives had won a comfortable majority—how things have changed.

After seven years of ideological and callous cuts, in the first three months of 2017 the UK’s growth was lowest of the G7 economies, joint with Italy—so much for this “long-term economic plan”.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Today, the Chancellor made great play of productivity in the UK, but a London School of Economics growth commission report pointed out that the lack of a comprehensive, coherent, long-term industrial strategy from the UK Government had contributed to “poor productivity performance”, harming the nations of the UK. Is it not time that the UK Government and this Chancellor got to work on actually doing something to correct the problems they have caused for the economies of the nations of the UK?

Kirsty Blackman: I agree with my colleague that this is too little, too late. In the time that a British worker makes £1, a German worker makes £1.35, and not enough has been done. I understand that the industrial strategy is being consulted on, but it has not received very favourable responses compared with previous things that have been done in relation to industrial strategy. I hope to see major changes in the industrial strategy as it goes forward, so that it becomes more fit for purpose.

At this election, the Conservatives failed to bolster their majority and have had to sign a grubby deal with the DUP in order to get a majority. It was so grubby that it did not meet the tests that the Secretary of State for Scotland set out for it. It is back-door funding for Northern Ireland, and it was so grubby that the Prime Minister refused to even sign it.

The Conservatives like to portray themselves as being good with the economy and trusted with it. It is therefore distinctly irony that, after they have had seven years in government, if we ask people in the street, they will tell us that they are feeling the pain of a decade of wage stagnation; they are feeling the effects of rising inflation—rising faster than the Chancellor predicted in his spring Budget; and they are looking at how they can make ends meet in their household budgets. That is the reality for people, but the Conservatives fail repeatedly to understand this. They stand there and talk about the just about managings, the long-term economic plan and how great the economy is, but people are not feeling those things—that is not the real-life, lived experience of people in the UK.

Jonathan Edwards: The Tories also like to portray themselves as the party of the Union, but does the Barnett-bypass deal for the DUP not fundamentally undermine United Kingdom pooling and sharing resources?

Kirsty Blackman: I absolutely agree; if Northern Ireland is getting £1 billion or £1.5 billion or however much it will be tomorrow, the other nations of the UK should get similar. Our manifesto contained a commitment for extra money for the NHS in England, because we believe that the English NHS should have more money, and that would generate Barnett consequentials for the NHS—or for spend—in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland. That is the way we think this should have been done.

On the Conservatives’ economic record, Members should not just take my word for it. They should take the word of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, which described this situation as “dreadful”, projected that child poverty would rise to 30% by 2021-22, and laid the blame squarely on the impact of tax and benefit reforms; they should take the word of the Resolution Foundation, which reported that the Tory Government’s tax and social security policies will drive the “biggest increase in inequality since Thatcher”;

they should take the word of the Bank of England, which reported that consumer credit has risen at annual rates above 10%; they should take the word of StepChange Debt Charity, which reported that 22 million people in the UK are not confident that they are saving enough to cope with unexpected bills or a drop in income; and they should take the word of Money Advice Scotland, which, in a damning statement, reported:

“More and more people within the money advice sector already attest to the growing prevalence of debts that are directly related to living costs. People who are borrowing not out of recklessness, but because their level of income cannot sustain a socially acceptable standard of living”.

That is what the Tories are presiding over.

Hannah Bardell: I welcome my hon. Friend to her position; she is making a very powerful and convincing speech. Does she share my concern that much of this country’s growth is based on consumer debt, and that the UK has one of the highest rates of consumer debt in the EU? Is that not an economic train crash waiting to happen?

Kirsty Blackman: Absolutely. I think we will see increasing problems with that, and I shall come on to that later.

During the election campaign, the UK Government seemed unclear about the causes of poverty, so let me enlighten them: poverty is caused by people not having enough money.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): If the hon. Lady is against consumer debt, which we all agree we are worried about, why is she so comfortable with public sector debt?

Kirsty Blackman: They are totally different things, and I am surprised that I have even been asked that question. The level of consumer debt is a massive problem for the economy, because people are going to be hit when this bubble bursts—that is what we saw happen in 2008.

Several hon. Members rose—

Kirsty Blackman: I am going to make some progress.

Nothing in the Queen’s Speech or in the fiscal or monetary policy direction will alleviate the problems people are facing. We demand that in order to stimulate growth the UK Government invest in infrastructure
and public services—not just in Northern Ireland, but across the nations of the UK. This morning, the Institute of Government released a report that said that “weak processes are leading to the wrong projects and contested decisions, wasting both government time and taxpayer money.”

The UK Government need to improve the systems in place to make infrastructure decisions so that the right ones are prioritised.

We demand that the UK Government properly secure the rights of EU nationals. Given that those who choose to live here unarguably contribute to reducing the deficit, reducing immigration will hit the public purse. The lack of access to workers will also cause issues for many industries—I know that the Chancellor is pretty onside with that argument.

Charlie Elphicke: My concern, and I think that of many of us on the Government Benches, is that a massive increase in public sector debt will cause interest rates to rise, which will then put pressure on families who have too much household debt. That is why it is really important that we act with fiscal prudence—to keep interest rates down.

Kirsty Blackman: What we are proposing is not a massive increase in public sector debt, but targeted public sector spend in order to increase economic growth.

We demand that the UK Government put in place a proper living wage—a living wage that people can actually live on, not a pretendy living wage. We also demand that the living wage is in place for those aged 18 and above, not just for those who are over 25.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Is the hon. Lady aware that the only international measure of the generosity of living wages is the Big Mac index? Under that index, our minimum wage is the second most generous in Europe, after Luxembourg.

Kirsty Blackman: The national living wage that has been put in place by the Conservatives does not provide enough to live on. It does not matter how generous it is compared with other places; what matters is whether people can live on it.

Mr Philip Hammond: The hon. Lady says that she wants to see a targeted increase in spending. Can she confirm that the Scottish Government will use their powers under the Scotland Act 1998 to raise taxes in Scotland to increase spending in Scotland?

Kirsty Blackman: We have already done so.

In this time of mass instability, we need the UK Government to support a monetary policy that encourages investment in places that will create direct growth, and quantitative easing has not achieved that since the first wave was put in place. That matter needs to be considered as a matter of urgency.

We need a UK Government who will fight for single market membership to ensure that all companies in the UK have the potential to grow, export and create skilled jobs.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I am glad that, in this debate on the economy, we are mentioning the single market at last, but what about the digital single market in which we are building a future? The innovation required for small and medium-sized businesses will be thwarted if this Government withdraw us not only from the single market, but from the digital single market.

Kirsty Blackman: I understand that the digital single market has the potential to create massive revenues for the nations of the UK. It would be a travesty if we were not to remain a part of that.

We need a UK Government who will tackle gender inequality properly. We eagerly await the proposed legislation on this, and we will press the Government to ensure that it is incredibly robust. The Scottish National party has led the way on this: in Scotland, we have a gender-balanced Cabinet; and in Westminster, we have a gender-balanced leadership team. To overcome gender inequality, this Government must tackle the structural causes of discrimination that are so embedded in our culture.

Hannah Bardell: On the matter of gender equality, does my hon. Friend share my concern that when the First Minister of Scotland brought forward legislation for a 50:50 gender balance on public boards by 2020, the Conservatives in Scotland opposed it?

Kirsty Blackman: That does not make me feel confident about the gender equality legislation that is coming forward, but we can only hope that this Government do things differently to their colleagues in Scotland.

We have never had a female Chancellor of the Exchequer or a female shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer. Today, I proudly stand here as the first ever House of Commons female spokesperson on the economy. That demonstrates just how far we still have to travel to achieve true gender equality.

Mr Robert Sym (Poole) (Con): I just point out that Margaret Thatcher was shadow Chancellor under Ted Heath.

Kirsty Blackman: I apologise for that oversight. I did check the facts, but obviously not well enough.

To best protect our workers, we need a UK Government who recognise the importance of trade unions and want to secure their rights, rather than systematically dismantle them. As we leave the EU, the protections for workers will be reduced, because we will lose the oversight of the European Union. We need to ensure that workers have the protection that they need and deserve.

Successive Tory-led Governments have caused untold harm to the nations of the UK: they have increased inequality; created spiralling household debt; presided over drastic reductions in people’s savings; reduced access to in-work benefits; closed jobcentres, which has reduced the opportunity for people to get back to work; and attacked the vulnerable, the sick and the disabled. Those people who are most in need in the nations of the UK have been worst served by this Government.

This Government have consistently failed to support policies that recognise the problems that millennials face. Generation Y are set to be poorer than their
parents. Everybody who was born after 1955, which I understand is when the Chancellor was born, is set to be poorer than their parents’ generation. We are seeing wealth accumulation by the age of 30 decrease, and that is storing up problems for the future. There are major issues for millennials, and the Government have not moved fast enough to recognise the difference in the level of home ownership, in the age that people have children, in the social structure, and in the way that millennials are coping economically. Our economic policies have not moved towards making things better. They also have not taken into account the massive levels of student debt. As an aside, it is a pretty terrible fiscal policy to have people paying off their student debt until, eventually, it gets written off, with most of them never managing to pay it all back.

The people who live in the nations of the UK cannot cope with another unfettered Tory Government. A message was sent to the Tories at this election that said that we cannot be dragged out of the single market. An end to single market membership means the loss of 80,000 jobs in Scotland and £2,000 per person. That would be an economic travesty. Given that the Tories have already presided over a decade of wage stagnation, spiralling household debt, decreasing household debt, decreasing household savings and the drastic dismantling of the social security safety net, I do not see how the nations of the UK can cope with the drastic economic hit that will come as a result of Brexit.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. On account of the very large number of would-be contributors to this debate, the largest proportion of whom I am keen to accommodate, there has to be a six-minute limit on each Back-Bench speech, with immediate effect.

2.28 pm

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I shall oblige you, Mr Speaker, by falling within the limit. I want to speak briefly about the way the measures in the Queen’s Speech will contribute to the economic success of the west midlands, a region with a growth rate of more than 5% in the past two years. In fact, the growth rate of the borough of Solihull, containing my constituency, outstripped that of China at more than 7%—it is certainly an example of what the Chancellor called a fundamentally robust regional economy.

Without question, the stellar performance of the car industry has contributed to that success, but other branches of manufacturing have benefited as well. In turn, that has resulted in record low unemployment among the young people in my constituency. Some 6,000 of them have obtained apprenticeships, which has allowed them to benefit from some of the 100,000 new jobs created in the borough of Solihull alone since 2010.

The focus in the Gracious Speech is on an industrial strategy that will spread good practice, help to improve living standards and productivity, and ensure that the benefits of growth are shared. The manufacturing renaissance in the west midlands was boosted by regional growth funding, but the promise of the extra £23 billion for national productivity investment will boost it further. The shortage of skilled labour in our region is holding back many young people from taking advantage of the jobs that are being created across the area. So I am delighted that the second pillar of the industrial strategy puts the emphasis on skills. The inclusion of a new system of technical education will benefit some of the 50% of youngsters who do not go to university, helping them to get well-paid jobs by learning STEM subjects, which employers value so highly.

On the council estate in my constituency a new engineering academy has opened and there is a new campus for my college of further education, which has two new streams of apprentice engineers for automotive and aerospace. I had my preconceptions challenged when I visited it because I found that the engineering apprenticeship students were 50:50 men and women. And I do mean women. Many of them had missed out on their education while they had their kids, and had come back to secure a qualification that would obtain them a well-paid job. They explained to me that the night shift in the car factory was a good solution to fitting work round their family responsibilities. They get back home to take their kids to school, get a bit of kip, get up again, pick their kids up from school, give them tea, oversee their homework, then their mum comes in and sleeps overnight.

It might surprise the House to hear, and I set the challenge to a visiting Secretary of State, just how much someone can earn as an experienced car production worker. The salary can be £60,000 a year, which allows someone to get a mortgage for the average house price in the west midlands of £183,000. One of the women said to me, “I can earn much more like this than stacking the shelves in a supermarket.” That for me is a clear example of aspiration. In time we will definitely reduce income inequality and change lives for the better through education-led regeneration. It is small wonder that Solihull College has been awarded a gold rating by the teaching excellence framework.

In my role as Second Church Estates Commissioner it is my job to link up what happens in both Houses of Parliament. I would like to share with the House what the Archbishop of Canterbury said in his contribution to the Queen’s Speech. He saw the importance of sharing growth across the whole economy. The Church of England is well placed to help; it is the largest provider of primary education. He sees it as particularly important that we raise the standards of education in schools, to give children all over the country the opportunity to take up the kind of jobs that I have just described.

As a member of the all-party parliamentary group for inclusive growth, I believe that the current rise in populism internationally reflects the challenge that Governments in all advanced industrial nations face in tackling the impact of globalisation. So I welcome the Government’s commitment to raise the living wage and the impact of raising the tax threshold, which has lifted so many people out of paying tax altogether.

There are new challenges on the way, with the digitisation of the economy, and we will need to demonstrate that technological progress can support rising living standards for all. My concern in listening to the shadow Chancellor is that the success of regions such as the west midlands would be put at risk by his plans if they ever became a reality, and that is why I am a supporter of this Queen’s Speech and the architects of our economic success.
Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): It is a privilege to follow the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman).

The Queen’s Speech debate after a general election is a chance to reflect on what we heard during the election. That is particularly important given the result we have just seen. Let us be honest across the House—we were all a bit gobsmacked by the result. Jon Snow went on television the day after the election and said, “I know nothing”, and I think that probably applies to many of us.

Having heard the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who has departed, I am bound to ask, “If it is all going so well, why did it go so badly?” In other words, the result has departed, I am bound to ask, “If it is all going so nothing”, and I think that probably applies to many of us.

Those are not my words but the words of the Prime Minister in her party conference speech.

If we look at the remarkable turnaround that took place during the election campaign, we can blame the social care policy, we can blame the Prime Minister, but I think it is deeper than that. The tide is going out on a certain way of running the country—large inequality, the next generation seeing their chances diminish, and permanent austerity. The crucial point about the campaign—I think Conservative Members know this—is that the Prime Minister who stood on the steps of Downing Street as the agent of change became the agent of the status quo. The reality is that my right hon. Friend the leader of the Labour party became the agent of change. That is why we saw the change that we did in this election.

The question about this Gracious Speech is whether it shows that the Government understand the lessons of the election campaign. Listening to the Chancellor, one would think that it had all gone brilliantly and the Conservatives had got a landslide majority, as they had planned. They did not. I look at the Gracious Speech and ask this question. Does it include an attack on the burning injustices that the Prime Minister promised in her words in Downing Street? Is there the transformation in life chances that she promised? Is there a determination to stand up to the most powerful as she promised? The answer, to coin a phrase, is no, no, no. We do not see any of that in this speech.

I want to make some positive suggestions about how Members across the House, working together, can rectify the gaps in the Queen’s Speech, and I will make three in the time I have. The first—it will not surprise hon. Members to hear me talk about this—is on energy prices. I do not normally read The Sun—people might recognise that, but on 9 May I read something that caught my eye. It said:

“If I am making this promise: if I am re-elected on June 8, I will take action…by introducing a cap on unfair energy price rises…It will protect around 17 million families.”

That is brilliant, I thought. That is my policy, more or less. It was from the Prime Minister. Then I look at the Queen’s Speech—where has it gone? Where is the price cap legislation? All we have is a consultation and a letter to Ofcom—a U-turn on the U-turn, which happened yesterday as well.

Let me put it this way: 84% of people supported parties with a price cap in their manifesto. Not a soft cap but a hard cap. It was proposed by the Labour party and the Conservative party. So let us do it. I welcome the intervention by the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) in the Queen’s Speech debate when the Prime Minister spoke.

Secondly, the Prime Minister says that she cares about insecurity. Zero-hours contracts may have started under the last Labour Government, but let us be honest about the situation. The number has gone from 168,000 in December 2010 to 900,000 by the end of last year. If we care about insecurity, it is unfathomable that we are not acting on this. We heard it from our constituents on the doorsteps. We heard that sense of insecurity; it is part of the explanation for the result of the general election.

Thirdly, the Chancellor of the Exchequer talked about corporation tax. We have cuts in corporation tax still to come that will cost £5 billion over the next few years. If there is no magic money tree, is it really the priority that Apple, Starbucks and other companies should pay 17% tax when ordinary families in Britain pay 20%? Why? Where is the fairness in that? Where is the sense of tackling the burning injustice that the Prime Minister talked about?

I want to end on this thought. Ever since 2015 I have stopped believing opinion polls—people will not be surprised to learn that. I make an exception in the following case, which is not about voting intention. I was reading the newspapers on 9 May, and people were asked by Ipsos MORI whether they thought that the country was rigged to the advantage of the rich and powerful—76% of people in Britain agreed and just 16% disagreed. The question for all of us, whether we like it or not, left and right, is what is our answer to that. For my money, the next election will be decided by who has the compelling vision to meet that desire for change. On the evidence of this Queen’s Speech, the Government have no answers and it will be up to Labour to provide them.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for calling me to speak in this important debate on this very important topic. It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband); he will not be surprised to hear that I do not agree with everything he said, but I agree with his main point at the end—that it is up to politicians in the House to set out a compelling vision for how they are going to solve the big problems of the age.

Clearly, the economy—the continuing need to clear the deficit and pay down the debt—is one issue, but there are many others, some of which were tackled in last week’s Queen’s Speech. After my intervention on the shadow Chancellor, he kindly offered to send me a copy of his manifesto. I do not need that, but I was sad not to see any reappearance at the Dispatch Box of the “Little Red Book”. I do not know whether he still reads it regularly, but it may have been a guiding influence in the preparation of that manifesto.
John McDonnell: George never gave it back to me.

Nicky Morgan: I am sorry that his copy has not been returned; somebody watching this might do him that favour.

It is worth remembering that the economy underpins everything that any Government or Ministers want to do. Job security is fundamental to overall security for individuals. The Chancellor mentioned in his remarks the part of the Queen’s Speech that talks about the Government strengthening the economy so that it supports the creation of jobs and generates the tax revenues needed to invest in the NHS, schools and other public services. The “so that” is important. I describe myself as a one nation Conservative—that is how most on the Government Benches would describe themselves, I think. That means policies that work for the whole nation, for people of all ages, all backgrounds and all educational experiences, including those working very much in the public sector. The Chancellor also rightly talked about the importance of making tough choices for the future, thinking about intergenerational unfairness but also about sustainable funding for our essential public services.

The challenge on the Government Benches is to explain—not just here, but to our constituents and the country—why we are intent on balancing our budget as a country, why it is not right to pile debt on the next generation and why we need to clear the deficit. Sometimes we are too ready to talk about numbers and throw millions and billions of pounds around, without remembering that there are people working hard to pay their taxes to allow Ministers to have money to spend on various things.

The Chancellor rightly talked about the progress made in the past seven years: 4 million people taken out of paying tax completely and 31 million paying less tax. The key distinction between the Conservative and Labour parties is that we believe that people should keep more of the money that they earn: the Government do not always spend money wisely, and people should be left to make their own decisions about how they spend and what they spend on. The Chancellor also rightly highlighted the jobs created in the past seven years—2.9 million jobs secured since 2010. He also mentioned that income inequality was at a 30-year low.

I turn to my second point. It took the shadow Chancellor 33 minutes to get on to the important topic of Brexit, which will be the defining issue for this House over the next few years. If we do not deliver a successful exit from the European Union, our constituents will have something pretty negative to say when we next knock on their doors. I agree with the Chancellor that people did not vote last year to become poorer. I am tempted by amendment (g), although I will not support it because I do not think the drafting is right. However, it is important that the Government know that Members on both sides of the House want to hear more, sooner rather than later, about proposed transitional arrangements. If we are not to be a member of the single market or the customs union, how do we get the same access or benefits? How do we avoid a negative impact on our GDP as a result of our departure?

I welcome Government moves to address issues raised in amendment (d) this afternoon, about the access of women from Northern Ireland to abortions. That reflects what the right hon. Member for Doncaster North was talking about: building a broad consensus in this House on issues that we all care about and that our constituents tell us they care about. Frankly, there needs to be a lot more of that in this Parliament.

The next thing I welcome in the Queen’s Speech is the emphasis that the Prime Minister has rightly put, from the first days of her premiership, on tackling the mental health challenges in this country. Poor mental health is estimated to cost our economy £100 billion per year. We have to do better than that.

This is going to be an unusual Parliament. My party is in an unusual and unexpected position. We can provide the stability and certainty for the country, but we will need to build a consensus on the issues affecting this country. The challenges are continuing to grow a successful economy; leaving the European Union; tackling extremism; and addressing the issue of housing—and that is only a brief selection.

2.45 pm

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan).

Our economy is still too imbalanced and London-centric—too reliant on the services sector and still not adequately skilling up the next generation for not only the economic challenges ahead but the technological advances that will affect a huge number of jobs. It is also hampered by failing markets such as the energy market, which hurts consumers and businesses.

In no policy area is that imbalance more acute than infrastructure investment. Last year, the Institute for Public Policy Research reported that while London receives £1,870 per head on infrastructure spending, Yorkshire and the Humber receives £250 per head. For a 10th of the cost of Crossrail—about £150 million—a new east coast mainline spur and railway station at Doncaster Sheffield airport could be built. That would bring an extra 6 million people to within one hour’s travel time of the airport. That is how the Government can help to rebalance our economy.

The Finningley and Rossington regeneration route scheme, now known as the Great Yorkshire Way, already demonstrates what good local infrastructure can achieve. Phase 1 of the Great Yorkshire Way link road has heralded the iPort development, a £400 million inland port project and one of the UK’s largest logistics developments. It includes manufacturers and companies such as Fellowes and Amazon. By the end of 2017, the iPort will support 1,200 jobs as Doncaster becomes a logistic gateway for the north, connecting the Humber ports to road, rail and airports. Despite all that, there was no mention in the Queen’s Speech of developing local infrastructure projects—no acknowledgment about the lack of balance not just between the north and south, but often between the east and west. That is a great disappointment.

The Gracious Speech includes bills on automated cars, electric vehicles and satellite technology. I am sure that that is right, but today a third of my constituents—and therefore potential businesses—do not have access to superfast broadband. Forget about satellite technology; they just want decent broadband. Talk about the superhighway—we just want to be on the highway. The Government’s delivery has clearly faltered on this. We have
had many statements to this House, and the problem needs to be addressed with urgency. As the right hon. Member for Loughborough said, this is what gets under the skin of our voters: all they hear is about yet another initiative, when current initiatives are not being delivered on the ground.

It is important to mention Brexit. I want a clear commitment for Doncaster’s businesses. The Government could say now that their aim is a period of no change for business: no shocks, no cliff edges and no sudden rewriting of the terms of trade—a smooth exit from the European Union. I do not accept that anything less than full membership of the single market is a hard Brexit, which is why I cannot vote for amendment (g). What we need is certainty and tariff-free trade, and a very clear acknowledgment that we will maintain many of the existing regulations and frameworks as well as longer transitional plans beyond the cut-off date as we leave. To assist, for cross-party support, I would suggest putting my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) on the negotiating committee.

I hope that the Government will use their trade Bill to ensure that robust measures are in place to tackle unacceptable trading practices, such as the dumping of steel, and to ensure that there are robust remedies that the Government will back, acting as the champion and guardian of British business once we leave the EU. But the essential component of this strategy should be skilling up our talent while upskilling those already in work. Why, in 2017, has the UK not got the workforce we need? Why do we continue to rely so much on imported workers when we could be training more of our own? If we are ending free movement as we know it, it will prove to be a hollow promise to voters if the Government have failed to address the challenges.

Finally, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) said, the Prime Minister must deliver on that promise, and she could start by giving the green light to the bid for a university technical college for Doncaster, which would transform the lives of the next generation of engineers, designers and manufacturers, providing them with the skills they need to do the jobs they want and, more than that, providing local employers with the workforce they need. I urge the Prime Minister once again to back the bid and get a new technical college built in Doncaster.

This could have been a better Queen’s Speech, but it will be remembered for the many issues the Government have ducked or sidelined. Just when we needed a detailed plan for jobs and the economy, we got an unnecessary general election and a paper-thin legislative programme. Governments should do so much better. That is what our country deserves.

2.51 pm

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): I want to highlight four aspects of the Queen’s Speech that are particularly welcome. It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint); with my first point, I want to strike a consensual note and agree with her. We need to continue investment in the nation’s infrastructure. I was particularly pleased that the Queen’s Speech included a recommitment to legislate for the full network of HS2. To stop the project after part 1 would be a false economy. If we cannot move our people and goods around quickly, efficiently and safely, both within these islands and in order to connect with our key markets overseas, we will lose out to our competitors, who are investing heavily in infrastructure.

I agree that it is about not just investment in London and north-south investment, but east-west investment. My passion for east-west communications lies a little further south than the right hon. Lady’s. I want to see the early completion of the east-west rail line that will connect my constituency to Oxford and Cambridge and will form an important part of the nation’s rail infrastructure. That infrastructure will rebalance the economic growth around the country that we all want to see, and I welcome the Government’s commitment to that in the Queen’s Speech.

Related to that is my second point, which is about the welcome commitment to a modern industrial strategy. We had the White Paper before the general election and we must ensure that the UK is a world leader in fast-emerging new technologies. Of particular interest to me is the intelligent mobility market. The Transport Systems Catapult in my constituency forecasts that that market will be worth £90 billion by 2025, and we must ensure that we get a large slice of it if we are to maintain our competitive edge in the world.

That policy and many others like it link to a lot of other areas. We need to invest heavily in our skills agenda because we are not producing enough young people with the necessary skills. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) said, that is the welcome second pillar of the industrial strategy.

The world of work is going to change. Many jobs that are currently done by people will be carried out by machines in the not-too-distant future. We urgently need to reskill our workforce to ensure that we can take advantage of new technologies and give people the jobs of the future. If we do not, we will face serious social challenges.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: If we retrofit new technology on old systems, we create a double problem for the future. How will the Government deal with that? Will they retrofit to the past, or will they look to places such as Estonia or Japan, which were building new and efficient systems nearly 50 years ago while we were living in the dark ages?
Iain Stewart: I invite the hon. Gentleman to look at the innovation in my constituency, including the development of smart city technology, in which we are world leaders. I invite him to stop off in Milton Keynes when he next travels north so that we can show him what we are doing.

Developing the intelligent mobility network touches on other areas of Government policy, so I urge Ministers to take a holistic view. It links with cyber-security, data protection and an effective trade policy. Our need to develop and export intelligent mobility technology is just one example of why we require a global independent trade policy, and that is the third part of the Queen’s Speech that I applaud.

Brexit is only one aspect of the work of the Department for International Trade, and I praise what my right hon. Friend Secretary of State for International Trade is doing to ensure that we seek out and develop our trade markets right around the world. Our country has underperformed in this sphere for decades. The world does not owe us a living. If we do not get out there and sell our goods and services, we will lose out—we will not generate the wealth the country needs. That will not just come to us; we have to be out there. The measures in the Queen’s Speech to improve our trade performance are incredibly welcome.

For my final point, I return to the fact that the world does not owe us a living. We must create wealth to generate the resources to fund the public services that we all want. I thank the Opposition for their general election manifesto because it reminded me why I am a Conservative. They believe in taxing entrepreneurship, innovation and success; we believe in letting people create the wealth that the country needs. It is not austerity; it is living within our means. It sounds so seductive to make generous spending pledges right around the country and to suggest that only a tiny number at the top will pay, but that does not work. Lady Thatcher has been mentioned once or twice in this debate, and she never said truer words than, “The problem with socialism is that you eventually run out of other people’s money to spend.”

Our goal must be to maximise entrepreneurship and wealth creation. We tax it at lower levels and at fair levels. I do not want to see tax avoidance—I want big corporations such as Google, Apple and Starbucks to pay their fair share—but do not choke the entrepreneurial spirit. The Opposition’s policy would result in higher taxes for everyone as the wealth creators go elsewhere. It would create a vicious downwards spiral. The only alternative would be to tax ordinary people more and to borrow more. Do not forget that we spend £46 billion a year on debt interest payments—more than on housing, transport and public safety. What right do we have to live beyond our means and pass on that burden to the next generation? When the Leader of the Opposition and Jon Snow were at Glastonbury, did they tell the young people there that the result of Labour’s policy would be that they would pay?

2.59 pm

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): One of the more depressing features of the election just passed was the complete neglect of any serious discussion of economic policy, and I mean not just taxing and spending, but the basic issue of how we raise productivity, living standards and investment. Indeed, The Economist acknowledged that it was only we on these Benches who addressed the issue at all.

There is an underlying malaise, not just in this country, but in other western economies. The long-term legacy of the 2008 financial crisis destroyed Government budgets and killed business investment, and it has depressed living standards. In this country, we were only just beginning, two years ago, to emerge from that tunnel, but now we have, superimposed on that problem, the self-inflicted pain of Brexit. There will be different views in the House as to where Brexit is going to lead economically, but it is already clear, a year after the vote, that there are some tangible economic consequences.

The first is that we have already seen the biggest devaluation since the second world war in trade-weighted terms, and that has fed through into a cut in real earnings for workers over the last year. We have seen a drying-up of business investment such that what is sustaining the economy now is personal credit. I remember speaking in the House 10 years ago about the rise in personal debt and the instability that it created. It then got up to 150% of GDP; it is now 140%, and it is rising again. It is different now—it is not mortgage debt, but short-term credit—but that illustrates the extent to which whatever growth we have is now sustained not by investment but by unsustainable forms of consumption. The other impact we are already beginning to see—I see it as somebody who represents a university and big national research institutions such as the National Physical Laboratory—is that all the research collaborations we had with Europe are now falling apart because of lack of confidence.

Rather than just dwell on the negatives, however, I want to speak a little about a bit of the Queen’s Speech I do agree with. Following on from the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart), I want to ask where we are going on industrial strategy. I applaud the fact that the Prime Minister endorsed industrial strategy—I do not know whether that was her personally or her now-disgraced special advisers, but it was good news that she adopted the issue—but what puzzles me is what is actually happening beyond the endless consultation.

Two years ago, there was a functioning industrial strategy—things happened. That was not just because of the Liberal Democrats’ role in the coalition; before that, Peter Mandelson and Michael Heseltine had created some of the building blocks of industrial strategy. Two years ago, we had a whole series of sector operations building up supply chain mapping, doing joint long-term investment planning and thinking about long-term manpower requirements. We had 11 sectors, and then the creative industries and the railway supply chains. It was a very active and positive process.

I would like to know from Ministers what is actually happening now. Do these things still function? Do Ministers still go to them? Will they report to the House on what they are actually doing? There are some genuinely good things going on. The hon. Member for Milton Keynes South talked about the catapult network. I am delighted it survived the last round of cuts, unlike things such as the accelerometer which business wanted but was cut. It is good that things such as that have survived, but I hope the Government will set out exactly where this is going.
May I pose some specific questions about industrial strategy? One of our success stories was around aerospace. The leakage of the supply chain to France was stopped. We had a big £2 billion co-investment programme with the private sector to keep the Airbus wing sector in Britain. However, Airbus has indicated that, because of the loss of the single market and customs union processes, it may well decamp to France. Have the Government had any assurances at all from that company that it will stay here and build its supply chains in the UK?

Linked to that, in relation to the automobile industry, what agreements have the Government reached with companies other than Nissan? It is encouraging, obviously, that the biggest producer has indicated an intention to stay and that it will be given full offsets for any loss of customs union and single market privileges, but what has been said to Jaguar Land Rover, BMW, Volkswagen and Toyota? How many of those companies have been given concrete assurances about their ability to trade? When I was in government, I negotiated with General Motors, keeping its production in Ellesmere Port and Luton. Quite explicitly there was an assurance that Britain was part of European supply chains. Are those going to continue?

Another area in which the Prime Minister made a very helpful intervention was in suggesting that we need to look again at the takeover rules for companies, because we had a near miss with the Pfizer takeover which fell through, and which we discouraged. We need to strengthen the rules to protect our science base, but nothing in the Queen’s Speech indicates that the Government want to proceed with that. If we are going to succeed as a country, we need long-term collaboration with business, and a proper framework of long-term stability and security, but that is badly missing from Government policy at present.

The Conservative party came into government in 2010, and Eddie George, the then Governor of the Bank of England, said just before that election that whoever took on the challenges of the British economy would probably be destroyed politically for a generation. Yet we took on the challenges of the British economy, at that point in coalition with the Liberal Democrats, and we took tough decisions, but on the whole we took the British people with us. Here we are, after two general elections, still standing on the right side—the Government side—of the House, so evidently we have managed to win the argument with the British people. I do understand, though, that several years of difficult economic decisions have their legacy on people and families, and the Government have to pay heed to that. Clearly, we are going to need to have a think about pay policy and a number of other things in future.

Since 2010, we have not only managed to reduce the deficit very substantially—we know the important reasons for that—but created well over 3 million jobs and taken many of the lowest-paid out of the tax system. The Government have done a very good job, and this is the worst time to turn round and say, “Let’s change policy.” We have to stick to the policy that we have because it has proved that we can grow and we can create jobs, and ultimately that will lead to higher living standards—perhaps not as fast as people want, but we are on the right track and we have to stick the course. Particularly with the uncertainties of Brexit, which a number of hon. Members have raised, the Government’s economic policy is perfectly sensible. We have a little more flexibility in our plans than we did prior to Brexit, but that is perfectly sensible since there are a number of uncertainties that the Government are going to have to deal with. The economic policies of this Government are good and we are stuck to, but perhaps we ought to do a lot more to persuade the British public that what we are doing is right. I think that people have forgotten the deficit that we had in 2010, forgotten that we are still borrowing a lot of money, and forgotten the task that we still have ahead of us.

I rather approve of the Queen’s Speech. It was a short Queen’s Speech. I wish I had seen shorter Queen’s Speeches in my time in this House, because if the British Parliament and British Governments have a mania, it is for legislating. If legislating made us richer and more prosperous, we would be the richest country on earth. Time and again I have seen British Governments introduce legislation similar to that of the previous Government so that they can rebrand what they were doing. What I want to see from this Government is good government, not masses of legislation. If they want to make changes, they have to look at legislation passed not only by the Conservatives but by the coalition and, indeed, by Tony Blair during his years in office. There is an awful lot of legislation already on the statute book that can be used as levers of power. We do not have to keep on reinventing the wheel and jamming up this place with lots of legislation.

As somebody who once or twice, or three times, has been in the Whips Office, I do not think that legislation is the answer to all our prayers. If we are going to be a successful economy in the future, sometimes we need not to legislate but to change people’s attitudes—to change the way they do things and the way they think. That is an element of leadership. If we keep a stable economic policy and limit the amount of legislation, and stay the course and continue as we are doing, we will deliver for the British people the outcome that they want.

This modest Queen’s Speech is the first of probably another three or four Queen’s Speeches, because the arithmetic of this Parliament means that we could last five years in government. Although there has been lots of speculation that there might be an election in one, two, three or six months, there is a job to do. We have to get on with the negotiations with the European Union and with nursing the economy back to health. The Conservative party is certainly up for that.
There is a job of work to be done. The Queen’s Speech will deliver for two years and some very important legislation has to go through—a lot of it. I suspect, on Brexit, on the Floor of the House. There is certainly a lot of work we can do to hold the Government to account, and I am sure that many of us on the Back Benches will do that. I say stay the course with the economy; do not legislate too much; bat for Britain in this important debate. I pay tribute to all Members who have made their maiden speech this week. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Poole (Mr Syms).

It is indeed outstanding to take this seat back for Labour—it was the most marginal seat in the 2015 election—and to be the first woman to hold it. Now I am the person to continue the long and proud tradition of Labour representation in Gower. I am privileged to follow in the footsteps of D. R. Grenfell, Ifor Davies, Gareth Wardell and, more recently, my good friend Martin Caton. I would also like to pay tribute to my predecessor who served the constituency to the best of his ability.

My Italian family name is embedded in the Gower constituency. The introduction of café culture to the people of south Wales comes predominantly from the families of Bardi. And yes, you have me to thank for ice cream. Moreover, it was in cafés such as Albert’s in Gorseinon and Station café in Pontarddulais that the community spirit grew. The freedom of movement and opportunities afforded to my forefathers is close to my heart. I will fight for those rights to continue, not only for my child but for the children of Gower and Wales.

Gower is unlike any other constituency in the United Kingdom, with its peninsula in the south being the first in the UK to be designated an area of outstanding natural beauty, in 1956. The fact that Conservative Members wish to allow fracking under that fragile landscape goes against all sense and the wishes of my constituents. Fracking does not just affect the countryside or the surface site of the frack; it would occur underneath towns and villages, including old industrial areas of Gower and estuary areas.

While the peninsula is internationally recognised and renowned for its farming, scientific importance and beauty, it is a diverse constituency, reaching far into former industrial heartlands, such as Clydach, and further into the proud Welsh-speaking areas of Garnswllt, Felindre and Craig Cefn Parc.

It is a constituency wrought by the devastating impact of post-industrialisation, and unemployment remains stubbornly high. It is a constituency that has borne the brunt of the Conservative party’s policies. And it is a constituency that on 8 June said, “Enough is enough.”

I am honoured to be part of a large team of Labour women MPs, with whom I share many similar life experiences. The role of women in society today should never be underestimated. We are here and we represent all women, including grandmothers, carers and single mothers. We are the women with supportive, strong mothers standing by our side, and I thank my mum for doing for that for me, which has put me here today. I say to all 4,000 1950s WASPI women in Gower who have dedicated their lives to working and supporting their families and who have been hit by pension inequality: I will fight for you.

Looking to the future, I urge the Government, following the Hendry review, to invest in Gower, to invest in Wales and to invest in renewable energy by getting on with it and signing off on the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon.

I also urge the Government to strengthen the May 2015 access to banking protocol and provide my constituents with the banking facilities that they deserve in Pontarddulais and Clydach.

I would like to end with a story that warmed my heart recently. A very close friend of mine saw that the terms “Gower” and “Ton” had been searched for more than 20 times on her daughter’s iPad. When questioned, her daughter said to her, “Isn’t it amazing that we live somewhere where anyone can become an MP? You don’t have to be rich, you don’t have to go to a posh school, you just have to work hard.” With more than 20 years as a teacher, I know that Amelia’s words ring so true for the schoolchildren of Gower, Wales and the United Kingdom, because ambition is critical.
and, of course, talking, because as we start the incredibly complex negotiations with the European Union, we need to make sure that we are ready.

That is why I argue strongly that, having taken this first step, we need to do three things. The first is to be bold. We must be bold in ensuring that we create alliances across the continent of Europe and across the world, not just with friends and with central Governments but with individuals—mayors, MPs and people representing communities that will be affected by Brexit, in many ways as much as we will. We need to hit at the micro level, because at the macro level we represent 8% of European trade, but at the micro level we represent a hell of a lot more in towns in Sweden, in villages in France and in communities in Spain and Italy. We need to make sure that the representatives of those places are on our side, because Brexit is not just about Britain; it is about Europe, so they must be part of the conversation too.

The second thing we must do is be open. Some people will rightly chide the elements of the campaigns that were negative, harsh and at some points, let us face it, bordering on racism. I am delighted to say that most people on the campaigns, including those I opposed, argued for an open, welcoming Britain—a Britain that welcomes people like the parents of the hon. Member for Gower, who came here and made a contribution to our community, and not just ice cream. The past seven years of Conservative Government have seen businesses succeed from that openness, with 1,000 jobs a day and an amazing improvement in the economy. However, that improvement is not without effort or challenge, which is why we must be honest when we mention things such as the seasonal agricultural workers scheme as a solution. Yes, it is a bit of a solution, but in reality we need such a scheme for the NHS, for tourism, and for any number of different engineering and educational places, to ensure that we do not pay for Brexit with a failing economy. I know that many people who voted to leave will agree that such openness is necessary.

The third point is that we must be honest with our people that the complexity and uncertainty we are facing today are likely to continue for a little longer. We must be honest that in reality we cannot guarantee that at the end of 18 months we will get a deal, or that our negotiating partners will agree to the terms for which we are asking. We must be honest about that, because if we are not we cannot expect those who create jobs and make wealth in our society, and those who invest, employ and grow companies, to take decisions. I ask very much for those three things.

If I may, I will also ask for one more thing, which is that we look at Brexit as a reality, not an ideology. Too often, I have felt myself back in a theology lecture hall hearing about the way to heaven, to Jannah, or to the Elysian fields, but Brexit is not paradise. Brexit is made for the people and it is an opportunity for which they voted; it is not the people who are made for Brexit.

3.21 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), and I agree with him that Brexit is not paradise. I am also pleased to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), and I congratulate her on a powerful and passionate maiden speech that was appreciated across the House. As she reminded us, we have just had an extraordinary election campaign. Several Members who used to sit on the Government Benches and were looking forward to benefiting from the anticipated Conservative landslide are no longer here, and the voters passed judgment on seven years of Conservative economic policy. Partly, no doubt, that involved the Conservative failure on the deficit, which was supposed to have been eradicated by 2015 although it was nowhere near that. More than that, however, it was about the impact of Conservative policies on the lives of ordinary people, and in my short contribution I want to highlight two areas: first, the troubling increase in child poverty that we are seeing, and secondly, the explosion in food bank use.

In 2009, with all-party support, George Cameron—[Laughter.] George Osborne—I think some of us still remember him—and David Cameron supported legislation that I took through the House which obliged the Government to work towards eradicating child poverty by 2020. Once the 2010 election was out of the way, that commitment was discarded, and subsequently the Government simply repealed the legislation and took it off the statute book. Child poverty was falling until 2010, and relative child poverty after housing costs came to about 27%. After 2010 it plateaued, and then it started to go up. It is now more than 30%, and the Institute for Fiscal Studies projects that by the end of this Parliament it will be more than 35%, and rising steeply. If that projection is correct, the level of child poverty will be higher even than the disastrous level that the Labour Government inherited in 1997, and I wish to underline for the House just how troubling an outcome that would be.

Secondly, among the most visible consequences of the policies of the past seven years has been the extraordinary growth in the use of food banks. People received emergency food parcels from Trussell Trust food banks on 40,898 occasions in 2009-10. Last year, it had gone up to 1.18 million—an almost thirtyfold increase in seven years. Every single one of the 400-plus Trussell Trust food banks is based in a church. They have done an extraordinary job and I praise them unreservedly, but the Government should not be off-loading their responsibilities in this way. The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) hosted an event this morning at which the Trussell Trust published research by Oxford University and King’s College London, which shows that “households using food banks are three times more likely to contain someone with a disability than other low income households” and that “The people using food banks are groups who have been most affected by recent welfare reforms: people with disabilities, lone parents and large family households.”

It reminds us that entitlements for those groups were cut again in April—after the research was carried out. In the case of new claimants of employment and support allowance in the work-related activity group, they have lost another £30 a week. We were promised “full compensation” for that cut. In fact, there has been no compensation at all.

Economic policies since 2010 have made life very hard for many people—that is what the election result tells us—but Brexit threatens to make matters a good
deal worse. That is why I welcome the distinctive tenor of the Chancellor’s contributions to the discussions, and his telling observation about having one’s cake and eating it, which I think we can see as a retort to the Foreign Secretary’s comments. I must say that the position the Chancellor is setting out is certainly in marked contrast to that of the Brexit Secretary and the Prime Minister. I urge him to continue to point out the economic consequences of the hard Brexit his Cabinet colleagues favour. It is also why I am supporting amendment (g)—I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) for tabling it—to highlight the crucial importance for jobs and prosperity in Britain of not ruling out membership of the customs union and the single market. We will not get barrier-free access to the single market if we are not members of the single market, despite the promises Ministers are making. It is vital for jobs, growth and prosperity in the UK.

3.27 pm  
Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and to follow the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms). We do not always agree on politics, but we do agree on football, with the club given away, to some extent, by the name of his constituency. As a fellow London MP, I recognise some of the issues he always raises in a measured fashion. It is also a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), who made a most powerful and compelling speech. I am tempted to say that I will adopt all of it and then sit down, but I will say just one or two more things.

I woke up on my birthday on 24 June last year to the most miserable birthday I have ever had, because my judgment was that my country had taken an erroneous step. It was, however, a democratic step and as a democrat I respected it—although I campaigned, as my hon. Friend and many others here did, for a different result. I support the Queen’s Speech because it seeks to give effect to that decision in a practical and measured fashion. That is our obligation now as Members of this House. That was well-encapsulated by the Chancellor’s speech which opened this debate. I share his analysis, both in his remarks here and in his Mansion House speech a short time ago—of the approach we should adopt.

I am tempted by the wording of amendment (g), as was my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan), but like her I do not think it works in practical terms, and we must deliver within the framework of the Queen’s Speech. However, it is important that the Government recognise the need to be practical, business-like and above all pragmatic in the way we deliver our exit from the European Union. That is why the Chancellor is right to stress that Brexit must be based first and foremost on protecting Britain’s economic interests and jobs.

In my constituency, 36% of the voters are employed in the financial services sector and related industries, and the same is true for many London Members of Parliament. The financial services sector is sometimes maligned, but it is actually a source of great wealth for this country. It is a jewel in our national crown, and in my judgment it should be protected as our highest priority. Whatever sensible arrangements are needed to protect it, they must come first. We must take a practical approach, rather than, as my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling said, a theological approach.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): If we are talking about protecting jobs in our constituencies, the major employer in my constituency is Ford. I am absolutely determined to protect the jobs at Ford, but the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders has made it clear that retaining the benefits of the single market—and tariff-free and customs-free trade—is essential for those jobs. How will we have that if we carry on down the Brexit route laid before us so far?

Robert Neill: It happens that before I came into this House I contested the Dagenham constituency on two occasions. It rather fought back, but that experience gave me some knowledge of the motor industry. The hon. Lady is absolutely right, and perhaps I can link her point to mine.

In relation to both financial services and manufacturing, particularly when there are complicated and cross-national supply chains involved, it is critical that we have sensible transitional arrangements that are, wherever necessary, as lengthy as they need to be. Many financial services contracts, be they derivatives, insurance or legal contracts, are written over a period of years. Those who enter into them must have the certainty that the legal obligations that they are undertaking can be enforced right the way through the life of those contracts, otherwise they will not invest in or enter into them.

This is not just about avoiding a cliff edge at the time; it is about not having a disincentive to invest in those areas, be it financial services or cross-border manufacturing, that are important to us. Indeed, manufacturing is still a great asset to this country, but our financial services sector is one in which we run a significant surplus with the European Union. Although we will undoubtedly develop opportunities in other markets, it remains a key sector for our activity and we must therefore keep the closest possible access.

I do not think that we can leave the European Union and remain in the single market, simply as a matter of law, but the Chancellor is right to say that we should seek to remain as close as we can. That is what we need to achieve. That has to be the primary task of Brexit, in a pragmatic, business-focused, non-ideological way. I hope that we can try to find a way forward across the House to achieve that, because although the fact of leaving the European Union was on the ballot paper, the nature of our leaving was not and neither was the nature of our future relationship. That is where this House can constructively and legitimately play a role in assisting Government to deliver on the basic requirement to respect the will of the British people. That is what we must do.

There are other things in the Queen’s Speech that I want to touch on briefly. I welcome the fact that work is still being done on courts reform and mental health. In my 25 years as a barrister and more recently, when I had the honour for the last two years to chair the Select Committee on Justice, it has struck me forcefully that mental health is overlooked. That has appalling consequences for individuals and their families and creates real pressures on our social services, our local authorities, our police forces and our criminal justice and prison systems. The Prime Minister has emphasised that, which I welcome.
I am sorry that there is no legislation to introduce a statutory purpose for prisons, or to place the role of the prisons ombudsman on a statutory basis, but there may be time for that in due course. I am glad to learn that the Lord Chancellor, whose appointment I welcome, is committed to proceeding with much of the rest of the prison reform agenda. We must take our opportunities. Let me also say, as an unashamed one nation Conservative, that we must do so with a sense of optimism that means believing in aspiration and helping to pull people up and improve their lot. That is what the Tory party is about—that is what the party that I joined is about—and that is why I want to see this Queen’s Speech deliver.

3.35 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It is a pleasure to take part in the debate, as I pick up the baton carried so ably by my friend Eilidh Whiteford to speak for my party here on social justice. I know that Eilidh will be desperately missed, not just by SNP Members but throughout the House. Her stellar work on a private Member’s Bill to ratify the Istanbul convention brought her much praise on both sides of the House, and we all wish her well for her future endeavours.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) on her excellent maiden speech. I do not think that she is still in the Chamber, but she made a fantastic speech.

Social justice issues will once again be at the heart of this Parliament as the UK Government continue to justify their failing austerity policy and, when we leave the European Union, matters such as the working time directive, maternity rights and other workers’ rights are sadly no longer secured at EU level. Our challenge will be to ensure that those hard-won rights are not watered down in any way, and that our workers enjoy at least the same rights as those on the continent. I hope that the two main parties of opposition can work together more closely to put the maximum pressure on this fragile Government and on the Prime Minister, whose coat appears to be held on the shoogly peg by Brexit. I am disappointed to learn that Labour Members are, apparently, to be whipped to abstain on the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) on the single market. That is a sad reflection of where the party is at present.

Austerity is a political choice which has failed, and it has failed in terms of the Government’s own economic targets. That failure comes at the price of the people, in Airdrie and Shotts and elsewhere, who have suffered as a result of cuts: disabled people whose employment support has been reduced, the WASPI women who, at the end of a working life of employment injustice, now face pension injustice; and working families who are seeing their tax credits cut. All the social security and public sector cuts that have stretched families and services for the last seven years have failed to deliver what was intended. Perhaps we may now see the UK Government come to realise that fact, and change course.

During the election campaign, the SNP pledged to review the 1% public sector pay freeze in Scotland, which was a hugely welcome step. That appears to have prompted some movement in the UK Government: the to-ing and fro-ing and the hokey-cokey that was going on in Downing Street yesterday. At first Downing Street was briefing that the cap would end, and we could see the relief felt by Tory MPs. Then the sources U-turned on the U-turn, and now we are back as we were—and last night the Scottish Tory MPs shamefully gave the Prime Minister the majority that she needed to maintain the pay cap, without question. The whole sorry episode lasted barely three hours, and it highlights the chaos that lies at the heart of a Government who are leaderless, rudderless and clueless. They clearly want to review the public sector pay cap, so what is going on? Get on with it!

It is time for a proper assessment of the impact of the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 to ascertain the damage that has been done to families across these isles. It is time that the Government finally ditched the need for the disgusting rape clause by ditching the two-child rule for tax credits, and it is time that justice was finally delivered for the WASPI women.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): There is currently a great deal of talk about the position of women in Northern Ireland in relation to abortion. Is my hon. Friend aware that when women in Northern Ireland want to avail themselves of the exemption under the rape clause, the third party to whom they refer themselves must hand the case over to the police? That puts those women at risk.

Neil Gray: I was not aware of that, and nor, I imagine, were most other Members. It is another sting in the Tory Government’s shameful rape clause, which puts women in such a horrendous position.

Austerity is a political choice, as is evidenced by the Prime Minister’s not only very conveniently stumbling across her long-lost magic money tree, but finding its branches sagging under the weighty £1 billion-worth of DUP fruit. It is just a shame that the new Scottish Tory MPs—and, indeed, the Scottish Secretary—have not been quite so diligent in picking the low-hanging fruit for Scotland’s benefit, as the Democratic Unionist party has done for Northern Ireland. They have failed their first test by blindly following the Prime Minister without question, and that will be hard to erase from the memories of the electorate in Scotland.

On the Bills that we might see during this two-year Session, we know that this will be a Brexit-dominated Parliament, but it appears that the Prime Minister is not only hanging by a thread over Brexit but allowing her Government to be consumed by it, with little else getting done. It is time we heard more and saw greater action from this Government on inclusive growth and on ensuring that the economy works for everyone. Indeed, just this week, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation held a conference on inclusive growth in Scotland, which led to some interesting information becoming available. Dr Andrew Fraser, the director of public health science at NHS Health Scotland, said:

“We know that rising income inequality in the UK cost us 9 percentage points in the growth rate of GDP per capita between 1990 and 2010—that’s approximately £100bn. Taking action on inequalities is not just the right thing to do—it’s the economically sensible thing to do.”

I could not agree more, and I hope that we shall see greater preventative spending allocated in future UK budgets to help to tackle some of the deep-rooted inequalities being faced across this isle.
Angus Brendan MacNeil: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Neil Gray: I will give way one last time.

Mr Speaker: There is a considerable shortage of time, so the intervention must be brief.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Perhaps my hon. Friend will remember the years past when people here used to deride Iceland and Ireland, post-crash. They are very quiet now, when those countries have three to four times the growth of this country. Of course, Iceland and Ireland did not choose the mega-austerity cult that the Tories here at Westminster have chosen.


Far greater priority needs to be given to committing public funds to good quality social housing, just as the Scottish Government have done. I want us to be able to go even further than their commitments for this Parliament, and that requires political will here too. This decade has been the worst for wage growth, according to the Resolution Foundation, and we need to stop the rot. We also need to move away from the idea that the social security system is a burden to society: it is a safety net for all of us. When we move the political narrative in these areas, we will finally be in a position to tackle the social exclusion and inequalities that cost us all, socially and economically. That is my aim in this Parliament.

3.42 pm

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray). It is a great privilege to address this House as the newly elected Member of Parliament for Chichester. The name Keegan is usually associated with footballing greatness where I grew up in Liverpool. However, the House may be interested to learn that the last person with the same surname in this place was in fact my late father-in-law, Denis Michael Keegan. He was a Conservative MP in the ’50s, and he made his maiden speech in support of the abolition of the death penalty—a noble cause, as I am sure you will all agree.

My predecessor, Andrew Tyrie, served this House and the people of Chichester with great distinction for 20 years. Andrew is best remembered for his strong chairmanship of the Treasury Select Committee, asking probing questions to bankers in the wake of the 2008 banking crisis without fear or favour. In Chichester, he is remembered for defending our A&E facility at St Richard’s hospital—a cause that I will continue to champion.

I am very lucky to represent Chichester. It is set in the beautiful South Downs national park, and we have something for everyone: a historic, vibrant cathedral city with a world-famous theatre; the thriving town of Midhurst, the home of Cowdray Park; car and horse-racing at Goodwood; sailing at Bosham, Itchenor, Birdham and Dell Quay; and our vibrant fishing community in Selsey, which we look forward to growing, alongside our farming and agricultural businesses, as we leave the European Union.

Chichester also faces challenges, with demands for more housing and the pressure this places on our local infrastructure. One of the greatest challenges is the seriously congested A27, and I will work with the councils and community groups to get the best solution to this long-standing local issue. Ninety-one per cent. of pupils in my constituency attend a good or outstanding school, but we need to ensure proper funding to build on that record.

Today, we are debating the economy, and it is vital that we preserve the strong economic foundations that this Government have put in place. One success has been our approach to apprenticeships, and I strongly believe that that route into the workplace has many benefits for young people today. I grew up in Huyton in Knowsley and went to the local comprehensive school. I left school at 16 and started work as an apprentice in a car factory in Kirby. General Motors invested in me, sponsored my degree, and gave me the life chance that enabled me to have a successful international business career in the tech sector for the next 27 years. Today, there is a false narrative about multinational companies and the contribution that they make to our society. Our country needs the inward investment and the jobs that such companies bring, and young people in particular benefit from the high-quality apprenticeships and graduate programmes that they offer. We need their investment if we are to fund the public services we want.

The digital revolution that we are seeing in the world today is reshaping industry. The biggest taxi company in the world does not own any taxis, and the biggest hotel provider does not own any hotels. Our young people need digital skills, so I welcome the Government’s focus on technical education, as we must prioritise such skills in academic and vocational qualifications. The digital revolution is fundamental to our country’s competitiveness as we leave the EU and can also help us to solve the productivity puzzle. We must embrace the change. The digital revolution that we are living through represents a profound change in our economy, but we may only recognise that in hindsight. The employment prospects of future generations depend on us stepping up to these 21st-century opportunities. I am here today because of the life chance I had at 16. Everybody deserves that chance.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. In congratulating the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) on her maiden speech, I want to say two things in the name of transparency. First, I inform the House that the hon. Lady is the godmother of two of my children. Secondly, although it has been declared in all the appropriate places, I nevertheless take this opportunity to declare to the House that her husband Michael—my very good friend of 32 years—generously contributed to each of my last three election campaign funds in the Buckingham constituency.

3.48 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): It is an honour to follow such a brilliant maiden speech. The hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) represents one of the most beautiful constituencies in the country and was a great credit to it this afternoon. She betrayed her grasp that all politics is local; she quite clearly has her eyes set on making a significant contribution to the national debate, with all the benefit of her life experience.

I want to speak in support of the amendment tabled by Opposition Front Benchers, but given that we all find ourselves in a new hung Parliament, I first want to
set out four or five areas in which it should be possible for us to work across the House on some shared challenges in the years ahead. I want to pick up where my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) left off by discussing the surging levels of inequality and injustice in this country, which are contributing to such instability in politics not only in our country, but across the western world.

The Opposition have talked for some time about the challenges faced by what we used to call the squeezed middle, and the Prime Minister has talked about the challenges confronted by just managing families. It pleases no one in this House that working families are about £1,400 a year worse off than they were before the crisis. The Chancellor and the shadow Chancellor were absolutely right when they pointed their fingers at the core of the problem: the challenge of productivity bedevilling our economy. The fact that the rest of the G7 can finish making on a Thursday night what it takes us until the end of Friday to get done will hold us back from having rising living standards, unless we get things sorted. The level of productivity growth in our economy is worse than it was in the late 1970s, when we used to call the problem the “British disease”.

While there are four or five areas in which we can make significant progress, there was very little reference to them in the Queen’s Speech. If we are to become a richer country, we patently need to become a smarter country. Unless we spend more on science and on research and development, it will be impossible for our economy to become more productive. We spend just 1.3% of GDP on research and development, which is well behind the 2.3% spent across the rest of the OECD and the 3% spent by economies such as Germany, South Korea and Israel, which all have significant manufacturing sectors that are bigger than ours. The Government set out a long-term target for 2.3%, but they should be more ambitious and we should be debating now how we lever in more private sector investment through good public sector investment, safe in the knowledge that public investment crowds in private investment.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I just want to let the right hon. Gentleman know that our manifesto commits to raising research investment to 3%, which I am sure he would welcome.

Liam Byrne: But without a timeframe, unfortunately. The manifesto sets a timeframe for achieving 2.3%, but not that longer-term ambition.

Secondly, moving from the supply side to the demand side, we need a faster rate of growth. The previous Chancellor, George Osborne, sought to try to close the deficit, but with 90% of that achieved through spending cuts, our economy was put in a place where wage growth began to slow. If we want fiscal policy to do more and if we are now going to celebrate across the House austerity being over, we will need a grown-up debate about tax. I think we have overdone things on corporation tax, and for this simple reason: the investment that has gone into our economy since the crash has been dwarfed fivefold by the amount that companies have put in the bank to sit there and do nothing. As the shadow Chancellor said, companies are now sitting on nearly £600 billion in cash. As we cut taxes and hand money back to big multinationals, they are putting much more of it in the bank, where it is doing nothing, than they are spending on creating new jobs. That is why we must have a much more grown-up debate about who needs tax incentives and who does not.

Thirdly, we have to look at not just public investment but private sector investment. Our capital markets are not patient enough and do not invest in long-term growth, but sadly the debate about patient capital stalled at about the time the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) left office. We need a new debate about how we encourage more long-termism in the City and elsewhere, including in our banking sector, because at the moment we do not have it. Back in the 1950s, shareholders held on to their shares for an average of six years, whereas now the figure is six months. We need to encourage longer-term horizons in the boardroom.

Fourthly—there was something in the Queen’s Speech about this—labour markets have to become more skilled. There is good ambition for T-levels and I welcome the apprenticeship levy, but the truth is that in Birmingham, one of our great cities, there are still only 120 young people on apprenticeship paths that take them up to a degree level of skill. That is inadequate, and it holds back places such as my city. We should be devolving the apprenticeship levy as far as is possible. Crucially, we should also be reversing the swinging cuts we have seen over the past few years to our further education sector, because our colleges are the bridge between lower and higher-level skills, and they need more support.

Fifthly, we need a new debate about enterprise in this House. I heard the speech made by the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart), but the reality is that, according to the House of Commons Library, all the tax cuts over the past few years have not stopped 1 million people leaving entrepreneurial activity. Why are we not expanding the start-up loan scheme? Why are we not making sure that every person who leaves school knows how to start a business? Such practical things could make a difference.

The final area in which we need change is about not just corporate governance rules, but the powers that we give to local authorities. I do not criticise the deal that the DUP struck. All I would note is that we are talking about an average of £244 per person in Northern Ireland, which is 15 times more than under the devolution deals that have been granted to other local authorities. If we in the west midlands had a Northern Ireland-sized deal, we would have £657 million coming into our area each and every year. I therefore urge the Secretary of State to be an awful lot more ambitious.

The great George Orwell once wrote: “The world is a raft sailing through space with, potentially, plenty of provisions for everybody.” Some people have done well since 2010—the stock market is up 40% and the property market is up 25%—so let us use this new wealth to make sure that there is wealth for all in the years ahead.  

3.55 pm Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I rise to speak on this final day of the Queen’s Speech debate and will start by showing my appreciation for the news that we will now pay for abortions for women from
Northern Ireland who come to England to have them. I thank the Minister for Women and Equalities, my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening), and the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) for helping to make that happen.

Although our Prime Minister called the general election with honourable intentions—I believe that she felt it would allow her to enter Brexit negotiations with the strongest hand possible—our campaign displayed what I have feared for a while: the gap between people’s lives and the lives of decision makers in here has grown too wide. We failed to convey the message of empathy and compassion that the Prime Minister so emotively displayed in her first speech outside No. 10. We failed to demonstrate the determination and optimism for this country that are inbuilt in Conservative DNA.

Knocking on doors, I asked my constituents to put their trust in me—and they did, for which I am very grateful. I also promised them that I would make sure that my party did not veer too far to the right and that their concerns would not be disregarded. They—and I—want affordable housing, decent school funding, an NHS and social care system equipped to deal with our ageing population, a secure post-Brexit economy, an outward-looking, globally collaborative country and a welfare state that supports the vulnerable. The heartbreaking thing is that I know that we can and will deliver all of that; we want all of that, but we did not demonstrate a positive vision of how we would deliver it.

This party must change. We must put people at the heart of everything that we do. We must listen and build our policies from the ground up, be flexible, dynamic, modern, collaborative and, above all, compassionate. Financial and economic competence is not enough. I want a Conservative party that people want to vote for rather than a party that they feel they have to vote for. That is also the Conservative party that this country wants, too. Right now, we are a long way away from that, but we have said that we have listened and that we will learn.

One of my unswerving goals since becoming an MP has been to change how people feel about politicians. I want an honest, transparent, collaborative, respectful and positive kind of politics. I can barely put into words my anger at the deal that my party has done with the DUP. We did not need to do it. I cannot fault the DUP for wanting to achieve the very best deal for their residents of Northern Ireland, nor for their tough negotiating skills, but I must put on record my distaste for helping to make that happen. Although our Prime Minister called the general election with honourable intentions—I believe that she felt it would allow her to enter Brexit negotiations with the strongest hand possible—our campaign displayed what I have feared for a while: the gap between people’s lives and the lives of decision makers in here has grown too wide. As Omega, is in the process of major redevelopment.

We must keep creating well-paid and secure jobs, because that is the heart of everything. We must build even more affordable and council homes. We must properly fund our welfare state to support the vulnerable. We must carefully release those public purse strings to lift the pay cap where we can for nurses and those on the frontline of our public services. We must respond to the financial challenges in our schools and the NHS and fund them. We must also be unafraid to look at how we tax higher earners and, yes, the triple lock on pensions.

We must all put party politics aside and work cross-party to find a solution for social care, to find the right path to Brexit and security for EU nationals living here. We must do all this and more to regain the trust of the electorate, and that is what I hope Conservatives will do.

4 pm

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for calling me to make my maiden speech. I congratulate all the newly elected Members who have made their maiden speeches. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen).

I am delighted and honoured to be the new Member of Parliament for Warrington South—my home town. On this very proud occasion, I give thanks to my parents, my wife Aleeza and all our family for their prayers and support. I thank all the electors of Warrington South, regardless of who they voted for, and I thank all my supporters and campaign team for their unstinting work in our victory on 8 June.

Recent events in England have caused a serious loss of lives, tearing families and communities apart. Those responsible stand to be utterly condemned. I represent a town that suffered two terrorist attacks in 1993 and I say that our nation remains united—we stand together in our determination to ensure that humanitarian and democratic principles prevail.

My predecessor, David Mowat, served in Parliament for seven years and for a year as a junior Health Minister. As a councillor and as Warrington mayor, I met David frequently. He was steadfast in his support for Warrington and courteous to his constituents and he supported many Warrington charities. I thank David for his public service and wish him all the very best for the future.

The name Warrington South does not accurately describe my constituency. Warrington South covers both south Warrington and west and north-west Warrington. It has excellent communication routes with ready access to the motorways, west coast mainline, regional railways and Manchester and Liverpool airports.

My Warrington South constituency is home to the Warrington Wolves, nicknamed The Wire because the town was once one of the leading producers of steel wire. The former RAF Burtonwood site in the north-west of my constituency was a United States air force base during world war two, and in 1948 was the launching point of the famous Berlin airlift. The site, now known as Omega, is in the process of major redevelopment.
Chapelford village, built on part of the site, has provided new homes. I am extremely proud to serve as a councillor for this area.

Today’s theme for the Gracious Speech debate is the economy and jobs. The Government’s programme is bereft of measures that will address the harm caused by austerity, growing poverty, educational inequality, homelessness, public services at breaking point, the crisis in social care and more. Since 2010 Warrington council has suffered over £100 million cuts.

The Government must stop further cuts to local authorities. I pledge to work with my council colleagues in their drive to provide high-quality services for the people of our town. I am also looking forward to working closely with my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) to improve services in our town and tackle the issues that matter to our residents. Schools in my constituency are already seriously underfunded. A top priority for me will be to oppose any attempts by the Tory Government to downgrade or close any NHS services in Warrington.

Mr Speaker, 1950s-born women have had their state retirement age put back three times. This injustice needs addressing in this Session of Parliament. We have an overstretched police force doing a demanding job often in very dangerous circumstances. Having more frontline police is what will make communities safer. I add my tribute to the bravery of PC Keith Palmer, who gave his life in protecting Parliament. I send my sincere condolences to his wife and family.

In my mayoral year of 2016-17, I launched many community and business initiatives. My “Breaking the Barriers” initiative brought mainstream religious and non-faith groups together to work for the common good of Warrington; I commend the initiative to the House as a model for promoting community cohesion. I used my business and banking experience to create “Circle—The Future”, which aims to make Warrington an entrepreneurs’ hub. I started the mayor’s achievement awards, recognising the work of unsung heroes. I shall change the name to “Warrington South achievement awards, recognising the work of unsung heroes. I shall change the name to “Warrington South achievement awards” and continue to give recognition to people who make a difference in my constituency.

On a different note, just before the 2015 general election Chancellor Osborne promised Warringtonians free travel over the Mersey Gateway bridge in Halton and the existing Runcorn bridge. This January, a junior Transport Minister broke that promise. If it is right to remove tolls on the Severn bridge, it is only right that Halton bridges should be toll free.

I have stood for public office five times, and each time I promised to serve in the interests of every elector. I repeat that promise and add that I will make Warrington South constituents proud.

Mr Speaker: The time limit for speeches must be reduced to four minutes, with immediate effect.

4.6 pm

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid) on his maiden speech and his gracious tribute to his predecessor.

When I read the Queen’s Speech, I see the essence of the Government’s economic policy—to continue to improve the public finances. Government is about taking the right and the hard decisions for this country. Improving the public finances, often disingenuously called “austerity”, is not a political decision, but the key to prosperity. There is nothing intrinsically economically sound about a nation with a budget deficit of 11% spending £1 of every £4 it borrows on interest payments—money that should be spent on investing in public services and the future of this country. I therefore support the continuation of the commitment to apprenticeships and T-levels.

As we have seen the deficit fall over the past seven years, we have been able to use the money to make sure that we take the lowest paid out of tax and to create the national living wage and an environment in which 2.9 million more jobs have been created. Investment and extra taxation are coming in and being reinvested in the public sector.

The opportunity to govern is nothing unless it is used as an instrument for good. In closing the deficit—and not only through the measures in the Queen’s Speech—the Government will have the opportunity to do good. We have all stood on the doorsteps in the past few weeks during the general election, which exposed intergenerational tendencies that we have not seen in decades. The normal pact that a new generation will be wealthier than the one preceding it has broken down.

Given the Government’s sound economic policy, we now have chances to create Conservative solutions to some of the problems. We do not need to follow the snake-oil politics of the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), but we do need to consider why it is acceptable for interest payments on student loans to be 6.1% when the market rate is something less than 1%. A Conservative solution is to say, “That’s a market distortion—let’s attack it.” Let us do that in several ways. One way is surely to allow new entrants into the student loan market, to ensure that the level of loan payment is brought down.

It is the instinct of everybody in the country to own a home or rent one in the area they choose. In the 1950s, Supermac built homes for all; in 2020, the challenge for the Prime Minister is to become “Supermacy”, to ensure that this Government build a million homes in the next five years. We can do that with Conservative policies. I see the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on the Front Bench; I hope he will continue to espouse changes to planning laws, to free things up. I hope that the public sector and private sector become involved. Let us have tenure-free building from housing associations and let them free up some of the rent provision so that they can build more.

Anyone who has read anything about the first industrial revolution will understand that it was local capital that built homes, that built industries. Let us use local institutions, the local enterprise partnerships, to fund infrastructure bonds and project bonds to build those houses and build the infrastructure this country needs so that at the next general election, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) said, it will be the Conservative party that offers that vision of hope and aspiration and that yet again offers the ladder of opportunity for all.
4.9 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): We will support the Government on the Queen’s Speech this evening—[HON. MEMBERS: “Ah!”]—not because of what the shadow Chancellor described as some grubby backroom deal: it was not a backroom deal, for a start. It was published in this House. Everyone knows what the deal was; it was a deal we struck with the Government because the Government wished to have the influence of our votes. I suspect that the Scottish nationalists, had the party that lost the last election tried to approach them to form a coalition, would have done exactly the same. Let us make that clear.

We support many of the things in the Queen’s Speech. We support the fact that the Government are committed to the Union, while the alternative is committed to breaking up the Union and, indeed, has supported parties in the past that have tried to break up the Union by violence.

Secondly, we support the Queen’s Speech and the Government because we share the same values when it comes to leaving the European Union. We support the stance that the Government have taken in their White Paper on leaving the single market, leaving the customs union and ensuring that we are free from the diktats of Europe and free to make deals with those parts of the world in which economies are expanding. It makes sense to do so, and the Queen’s Speech is committed to that.

Thirdly, we support the Queen’s Speech because we share the same economic values as the Government. We do not wish to see the kind of fiscal irresponsibility proposed today by the shadow Chancellor, in which hundreds of billions of pounds will be borrowed. He then has the cheek to say that he does not want to create a burden, and that one of the reasons young people are voting for his party is that they do not want to be burdened with debt in the future. Who does he think will pay back the billions that will be borrowed for the madcap schemes that his party proposes? Of course we support fiscal responsibility.

Indeed, this Queen’s Speech is not vacuous, as it has been described. There are good supply measures in it. To enable our country to compete, we need a system that produces people who have skills. We need infrastructure that enables the economy to work smoothly. We need an industrial strategy and we need sound finance.

For all those reasons, we believe that this Queen’s Speech is worth supporting. It plots a way forward, and it has a responsible attitude to the future of the economy. Of course, there will be times in the future when we will disagree with the Government, but then a lot of their Back Benchers disagree with them anyway. Indeed, we have already seen that the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) disagrees with them over the deal being struck with the Democratic Unionist party.

We are committed to supporting a Government who are committed to the Union, committed to the defence of this realm and committed to growing the economy. For that reason, we will give them our support tonight.

4.14 pm

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): It is an immense pleasure to talk about the economy in today’s Queen’s Speech debate, because before I entered the House, only two short years ago, my day job was creating jobs. We need to remember that our local economies are driven by people’s confidence in creating jobs, particularly in small businesses, which have not been spoken about much today.

Bury St Edmunds is a great place to do business with a thriving small business sector that is outpacing the national average. The Conservative party’s job is to drive quality jobs. I welcome this Queen’s Speech to inspire entrepreneurs—I have been employing people—but the shadow Chancellor’s picture was one of gloom, high tax, borrow and spend. That is not the right way to deliver jobs in any economy. Bury St Edmunds is in the top 20% of economically active constituencies and it reflects a sound economy.

The UK employment rate is nearly 75%. Unemployment is 4.6%—the lowest since 1975—but 690 people in my constituency do not have a job. We need to get them one. We are here to create the right environment and opportunities, and to break down barriers so that everybody can show their talents and abilities. The number of women in work is at an all-time high, which is to be celebrated, but the number of women-led firms is not high enough. We need to work hard to ensure that more women lead firms and become the entrepreneurs of the future.

The Government’s commitment to further progress on narrowing the gender pay gap is welcome, as is our lead on the national living wage. We must be attuned to something that the Labour party often is not—that wage costs are often the highest costs for a business. It is often the case that the more a business raises wages, the lower its profit margin and, therefore, the lower its corporation tax return. All the talk saying that everything can be solved by corporation tax rises is nonsense. We must have an eye to what we force businesses to do. A constituent of mine in her early 60s said, “Please do all you can to stay in power for the next year to give lots of people job security.” She is paid only just about the national living wage but she says that she would rather earn that in a steady job than be on jobseeker’s allowance. She said that she is not poor and she is not the rich elite, but she looks to us to provide security.

We need to ensure that the climate is right and that people have the right skills so that employers and employees thrive. I am pleased that the industrial strategy is bold and follows growth. It is good that we should invest 2.4% of GDP in research and development. As my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) said in her excellent maiden speech, we need to look to the future, not back to the past. We need to ensure that we actually inspire when we see opportunities, such as in our further education colleges. I want West Suffolk College in my constituency to be one of the leading institutes of technology, driving opportunity and connecting business. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) said, strong entrepreneurial leadership from our local enterprise partnerships, councils and colleges will drive prosperity.

We have a positive economic message. We want a thriving economy. I do not want our children paying off our debts. I want them to own houses, have great jobs, raise families and have careers.
4.18 pm

Gerard Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful for the opportunity to give my maiden speech in this lively debate. It is an honour to be standing here, representing the good people of Rutherglen and Hamilton West as their Labour and Co-operative MP. It is a pleasure to follow excellent maiden speeches across the House, particularly those of my hon. Friends. The Members for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) and for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid), and the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keeghan).

I begin by paying tribute to all those affected by recent events in London and Manchester, painful and shocking tragedies that were truly felt right across the country. One of my constituents, Piotr Chylewska, was seriously injured in the Manchester bombing, and is one of the last survivors to be discharged from hospital. I am pleased to say that Piotr is making good progress and I am sure that Members across the House would like to join me in wishing him well. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] I thank Father Paul Morton, the St Bride’s parish in Cambuslang and the wider community for the support they have shown Piotr. It is that coming together in times of adversity that is a testament to our shared values—values that I see examples of every day in my wonderful constituency of Rutherglen and Hamilton West.

In my home town of Rutherglen, coffee shops such as the Black Poppy collect and distribute toiletries for the homeless. In Blantyre, we have public houses like the West End Bar supporting generations of families affected by Chernobyl. We have community councils; proud Lanarkshire institutions that give generously to charity, like Equi’s Ice Cream in Hamilton; social enterprises like R:evolve Clothing; residents’ associations, churches and community development trusts like Healthy n Happy; and too many more organisations to name in the time I have. We have a diverse mix of decent people, all coming together and helping to make our communities better places to live, one small act of kindness at a time. They are the everyday heroes, and I thank each and every one of them for the job that they do.

My predecessor, Margaret Ferrier, was a strong advocate in this House for human rights across the world. I have no doubt that she cared as deeply for my constituency as I do. In her maiden speech, she spoke of working together in a spirit of collaboration, and although it will not be surprising that I have few fond memories of previous Conservative Governments, let me say, as the first gay married man to represent my constituency, and in that spirit of collaboration, that I welcomed the equal marriage legislation passed under the 2010 coalition Government. I look forward to the continued advancement of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex equality in this place and across the whole United Kingdom.

In reading the speeches of my predecessors, I was struck that the occasion of a maiden speech is an opportunity to leave a message for the future. I hope my successors and I will be able to look back and have at least one fond memory between us of the current Government. Unfortunately, initial impressions suggest I may be disappointed. Having served as a local councillor, I have seen at first hand the effects of Government austerity on the communities in my constituency—real consequences for jobs, services and the local economy. When I hear stories of people using candles to heat and light rooms in their home, of disabled people unable to put on their own socks and shoes losing Government support and being found fit to work, and of siblings in their 20s sharing a bedroom because they have nowhere else to go—stories not from the pages of history, but from real life in my constituency in 2017—I wonder, where is the deal for them? If Conservative Members are truly to be a Government of all the nations and regions of the United Kingdom, it is time to start acting like it. It is those individual lives—the everyday heroes—that I want to focus on in this place.

It has been an exciting and somewhat unexpected journey for me, from Gorbals boy to Member of Parliament via Rutherglen and Blantyre. In this era of fixed-term Parliaments, the great irony is that I have no idea how long I will have a seat in this place, but my pledge to the people of Rutherglen and Hamilton West is that I will make every day count.

4.22 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I congratulate everyone who has made their maiden speech today—we have heard some excellent speeches.

If you will indulge me for a moment, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a brief dedication to my predecessor, John Taylor, who sadly passed away during the campaign. I am sure many Members of the House will have happy memories of John, who was a thoroughly decent man and a very good friend to me.

John and I would often talk about the economy, and about Solihull and the growth we have seen there. That growth is not to be taken for granted. Often, people suggest that Solihull is prosperous so it can afford to pay more in tax, and that sort of thing, but the reality is that Solihull is built on entrepreneurship. Since 2010, we have seen a 60% fall in unemployment, and in 2015 we had a GDP growth rate faster than China’s.

However, about 10 days out from the date of the general election, I started to get calls from local businesses that had become deeply concerned as they saw the polls narrow. The reason for their concern was the uncosted spending plans of the Labour party. Their real concern was that everything in the economy is based on the public finances and that without proper public finances and confidence, interest rates rise, and we end up with credit crunches and repossessions, which really feeds through to the real economy.

We should remember that controlling the public finances is not a left versus right cliché about a generous welfare state against a low-tax economy. Putting our public services on a sustainable financial footing is about making sure they are still here in 20 years’ time and addressing the intergenerational injustices built into our current funding model.

It is well known in policy-making circles that there is a time bomb under the welfare state. Our ageing population means that we will be supporting more and more claimants on the system on the back of a proportionally shrinking working-age population. This is not sustainable. Moreover, we not only continue to finance social spending through debt, heaping fresh burdens on the next generation, but hurt living standards today as interest rates rise and squeeze real incomes. On top of that, the Government have to employ cost-controlling measures such as the public sector pay cap, putting even more pressure on
produce regulations to protect our environment, and the workplace, give us a multitude of rights at work, rules. These are EU laws that outlaw discrimination in globalisation. If we have mere access to the single zone. It provides a framework of rules that protects argument. The single market is more than a free trade more difficult to end years of austerity.

£31 billion hit to the public finances, making it all the forecast that leaving the single market could cause a argument for this. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has across Britain will be worse off and revenue to the inferior to membership. If we leave the single market, in my view, access to it is both different from and properties. However, large multinational companies work across borders to maximise their profits and reduce these protections, and one national Government cannot take on the power of these people alone. We need only look at the example given this week by the European Commission in slapping a record £2.1 billion fine on Google because it has been seeking to rig the marketplace in its favour. In the end, the social justice arguments are clear.

There are three main arguments advanced against this. The first argument is that we cannot restrict immigration while being in the single market. That is rubbish. We can restrict immigration now, but we choose not to. The second is that the state aid rules will stop us having proper industrial strategies. Tell that to Germany, which has an investment bank, or France and the Netherlands, which use procurement to protect their industries.

The final issue is that of sovereignty and of us being a rule receiver and not making the rules. If we want to access the single market, we will have to comply with its rules. If we are a member, at least we have influence. I say to the Government: yes, they can look at other counties—Norway and the rest—as a guide, but we are the United Kingdom. We are the fifth biggest economy in the world, the second biggest military power, the home of Shakespeare and we created the world wide web. Let us be ambitious and get the best deal for future generations in this country.

4.30 pm

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): It is a pleasure, as ever, to follow the hon. Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna). He and I were both on the remain side of the EU referendum campaign. I accept the determination of my constituents, who voted to leave the European Union, and that it is incumbent on me, this Parliament and this House of Commons to do our very best to make a success of leaving the EU, rather than simply hoping that it will all go away. Whether we like it or not, we have to implement the democratic mandate.

Streatham, of course, is a long way from the frontline of Brexit, but Dover, which I represent, is on that frontline. For centuries we have been the gateway and guardian of this kingdom. It is at Dover that our border security matters most. Dover is the gateway to Europe and, indeed, to England. That is why it is so important that we make sure that Brexit is a success and that we plan now, so that on day one of leaving the EU we are prepared for every single eventuality.

As we have heard, the Chancellor hopes that there will be a transitional agreement, and so do I. I hope that we will have a smooth and easy move out of the European Union—I hope it will all go really well—but we need to be prepared for every single eventuality. Let us not hope that it will all go wrong, but hope that it will all go right. Let us do our bit to make sure that it goes right, because it is our countrymen and women, and our children and their children, who will suffer if we do not.

That is why it is so important that we are ready on day one, and why I have gone to great lengths and efforts with industry groups, including the port of Dover,
the Road Haulage Association, the Freight Transport Association and many others, to consider how we can make sure that customs arrangements work as we leave the EU, so that we are prepared for every single eventuality.

We need to make sure that, whatever happens, our economy remains strong and that it works not just for big business and establishment institutions, but for everyone in this country, because too often it has not. We need to consider restructuring things. How do we get our kids the finance to get on the housing ladder? How do we ensure that all that money tied up in buy-to-let goes into the real economy and gets invested in business and enterprise so that we have a more efficient and productive economy and give the nation a pay rise as well as more jobs?

How do we ensure that the economy is fair? Is it an affront, is it not, when a cleaner pays more in tax than the big business whose offices she cleans? That is why I have spent so much time since I was elected to the House making the case that the tax system should be fair and that everyone should pay their fair share. That is important and it is an affront when it does not happen.

We need to make sure that the least well-off have fair access to finance, that they are not preyed on by payday lenders or by banks charging egregious fees, and that they have access to branches in their own communities.

Finally, we need a resilient economy, by which I mean not just that it needs to be a success on the Dover frontline from the point of view of Brexit; we need an economy that works for the whole country, and economic policy that leads to a renaissance in the regions and success for the whole country.

4.33 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to make my maiden speech as the new Member for Bath.

Let me first of all pay tribute to my predecessor, Ben Howlett. He served his constituency with great diligence and I thank him for the contribution he made to our wonderful city. In particular, Ben Howlett understood the progressive and liberal spirit—with a small l—that makes up the fabric of Bath, and he campaigned with conviction to remain in the EU and on voting reform. As a keen supporter of electoral reform, I want to continue his work and I hope we can make some progress during this Parliament.

Of course, many Bath citizens remember Don Foster, the MP for Bath from 1992 to 2015, with special fondness. For 23 years he was Bath’s No. 1 supporter, representing the city with infectious energy, and bringing people and communities together.

Today, 29 June, would have been my mother’s 97th birthday. She was born in Hamburg into a half-Jewish family and experienced directly the persecution under the Nazi terror. I was lucky enough to be born into a different Germany—one heavily scarred and with an immense feeling of guilt, but determined never again to go down into the abyss of fanaticism, racial intolerance and exaggerated national pride. It is testimony to the open-mindedness of the people of Bath that they have elected as their new MP a woman who was not British-born. I feel deeply humbled and very honoured.

Whenever I mention that I live in Bath, the immediate response is, “Bath—what a beautiful place.” Yes, Bath is a beautiful place, but like many other cities it is suffering from a housing crisis and stretched public services. In 2016, average house prices in Bath rose by more than £100 a day, making it almost impossible for people on an average income to rent a decent family home, let alone buy their own home. Making sure that we share prosperity among all people in Bath will be my particular focus.

Under current Government proposals, two out of three schools in Bath will have to lay off staff in September. As a former secondary school teacher, I know all too well how challenging it is to teach and learn effectively in very large classes. I will stand up for all young people in Bath to make sure that they receive the education they deserve.

Whether we like it or not, this Parliament will be absorbed by Brexit. Last year nearly 70% of my constituents voted to remain in the EU, and I am here to make sure that their voices are heard on Brexit. The Brexit debates have only just started, and I look forward to taking a full part in those debates, and indeed in all the business of the House.
whole country is going to benefit from HS2, my local residents should not have to make the sacrifices that they are being asked to make. We need to work together to ensure that the benefits that the whole country will get do not mean that my constituents are affected so dramatically. We need to have those benefits, but not at the expense of my constituents.

4.39 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I will be brief, but before I make my very short points, I want to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy). She was appropriately named by her parents—she is a star.

I want to make two points about how the Queen’s Speech relates to the economy. First, we have significant challenges ahead, particularly in relation to productivity, so on that I agree with the Chancellor of the Exchequer. The productivity crisis we face is a red flag that demonstrates what Tory economic policy has done to our country. At its heart, it is the cause of our wage crisis. The fact that productivity has flat-lined has meant that people have been unable to earn more. There is a simple route out of the productivity crisis: pay attention to the needs of the economy and do more on skills. The Tories have deeply damaged colleges and further education. The T-levels mentioned in the Queen’s Speech are just a pointless rebrand of an existing system that has already failed further and adult education.

Secondly, we have to take the issue of immigration head on. It was a factor in the general election, but the Queen’s Speech contains nothing to deal with people’s concerns about security. If Conservative Members want to deal with the deficit, they cannot afford their current immigration policy. I say to my own party that the only way to deal with austerity is to accept that immigration is good for this country, not bad. As my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) said, we cannot deny our country’s history. Immigration has made my family and this country strong; I will not be ashamed of it.

4.42 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I will speak briefly and apply some austerity to my speech. We keep hearing the word “austerity” and the idea that somehow austerity is a choice—[Hon. Members: “It is!”] Austerity is not a choice; it is a mathematical reality defined by the level of our debts and, more importantly, the level of our liabilities. If anybody doubts that, they should look at the table from the OBR that shows predicted public spending 50 years hence. It forecasts an increase on current prices of £1.56 billion, which is the size of the entire NHS budget plus £10 billion. If anyone thinks that that money is going to fall from the sky, they are deluded.

We are making a choice on austerity. Our choice is to save our children and grandchildren from an age of terrible austerity, which is what will happen if we do not take the right and difficult decisions. I will vote for the Queen’s Speech to support the only party that has in its DNA and in its heart—yes, its heart—a passionate belief in generational fairness and sustainable economics for the future.

4.43 pm

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I want to dwell for a moment on how we treat those people who are on the lowest pay. When I was a Minister, I became aware that the underpayment of the minimum wage was endemic in the care sector. I got HMRC to do an in-depth investigation into the sector, and I now have the results: £2.5 million of underpaid wages in the care sector. That is a disgrace. In the case of one provider, more than £1 million was underpaid to the lowest-paid people in our country. We cannot continue to operate our public services on the backs of poverty wages for our lowest paid workers. That is a disgraceful way to proceed. It is all very well for the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) to talk about the benefits of austerity, but its impact on some people’s lives is unacceptable.

That leads me on to the fact that we are continuing to cap the pay of our public sector workers, including in the NHS, which in reality means a pay cut for nurses and very many other people. The impact of that is unacceptable. We need a long-term settlement for the NHS and the care system. The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) made the point that in this Parliament, instead of making grubby deals, we should be working across the House to settle those issues once and for all and to ensure that there is a long-term settlement for the NHS and care that does not involve exploiting the lowest-paid people in our country.

4.45 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I know that I am against the clock, so I will be as quick as possible, but I want first to thank all Members who have taken part today. In particular, I thank those who have given their maiden speeches: my hon. Friends the Members for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid) and for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Gerard Killen), and the hon. Members for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) and for Bath (Wera Hobhouse). I know that they will make their mark on this place over the years to come.

The Queen’s Speech was sadly threadbare, evading all substantial questions of policy and doing nothing to undo the failed economic policies of the past. Lest we forget, this was the Government who told us seven years ago that we were all in this together—that unleashing excruciating financial pain upon people, public services and businesses, and allowing our once proud industrial communities to be sent into managed decline, while slashing taxes for the wealthiest, was a necessary evil and that we would all be better off in the end. However, we now live in a Britain where the top fifth receive 40% of total income, while the poorest fifth earn only 8%—a Britain reliant on foodbanks and, as the Bank of England cites, with “worrying levels of rapid consumer credit growth” among those borrowing simply to make ends meet, and it is set to get worse. As we have heard from the IFS, “earnings will be no higher in 2022 than they were in 2007”, based on current forecasts.

The UK has one of the highest levels of regional inequality in Europe. Fifty-four per cent of future transport spending is due to take place in London, by comparison with the north-east, which will receive only 1.8%, and
the picture is no better when we look at income inequality. For example, people in London earn £134 more a week than those in Yorkshire. So what have the Government set out to rebuild our fractured economy? Their industrial strategy Green Paper was criticised by the Select Committee on Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy this year, which stated that it lacked clarity and political will. Sadly, the Government compounded such criticism by simply inserting the abstract words “industrial strategy” in the Queen’s Speech, like some sort of game of rhetoric bingo.

The Queen’s Speech went on to state that the Government “will work to attract investment in infrastructure”.

Again, there were no details. I am afraid that the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy might be in for a shock, as the Governor of the Bank of England stated yesterday that Britain has experienced the “weakest … business investment in half a century”. Frankly, it is not surprising, when the Government have done little to foster a fertile business environment. Simply slashing the headline rate of corporation tax alone does not constitute creating a good business environment. Businesses need high-quality infrastructure, both physical and digital, but public investment has been woeful.

Businesses also need a highly skilled workforce, but the Government have cut real-terms school funding, scrapped the education maintenance allowance and imposed huge cuts to further education funding over the past seven years. Businesses also need long-term stability, not huge hikes in business rates—relief for which has still not materialised, months after the event—or what is, quite frankly, a reckless and dangerous approach to leaving the EU. It is perhaps no surprise, therefore, that the letter of support for the Conservative party from leaving the EU is, quite frankly, a reckless and dangerous approach to still not materialised, months after the event—or what?

Sadly, the Government compounded such criticism by simply inserting the abstract words “industrial strategy” in the Queen’s Speech, like some sort of game of rhetoric bingo.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): It is a pleasure to respond to this excellent debate on the Queen’s Speech. Two years ago, I had the same honour in the very same debate, and it fell to me to respond to the first words spoken in the House by the new Member for Batley and Spen, in her maiden speech. She said then that “we… have far more in common… than things that divide us.”—[Official Report, 3 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 675.]

That heartfelt observation, and injunction, will live forever in the Chamber, through the shield above her place. It is a reminder that should guide us, particularly in this new Parliament, in which the electorate have required a certain humility from every party. The message from the electorate is that they want Conservative leadership—which is why we won more votes and more seats than any other party—but a leadership that seeks to establish common ground in the country and in Parliament. That is what the Queen’s Speech, and we, in the manner in which we govern, seek to do.

In the limited time that I have, I shall respond to what has been said in the debate, and in particular to the maiden speeches—for this is an historic and important day for those Members and their constituencies—before saying something about the theme of jobs and growth.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), who made a brilliant first contribution. The fact that an ex-apprentice from Merseyside has made a speech of that calibre will be a great inspiration to apprentices throughout the country, and it is a pleasure to have her here. She fills big shoes in following Andrew Tyrie, our former colleague, but she is clearly a woman of good judgment, because she has made a very wise choice as a godparent, if I may say so.

The hon. Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid) was appropriately generous in his tribute to my very good friend David Mowat, the previous Member, who did fantastic work in the House for his local community. Warrington has suffered terrorist attacks in the past, and the knowledge of that community that he gained as its mayor will make a big contribution to the House. He will find that the best progress in Cheshire is made when colleagues work together. That is certainly my experience.

The hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) also made a notable contribution. She said that she had helped to bring the café culture to Gower by supporting the ice-cream parlours that her family had brought to the area. I was a customer of those ice-cream parlours when I was campaigning for her predecessor of happy
memory. As the son of a milkman from Middlesbrough, I share her enthusiasm for dairy products, and her view that people from all parts of the country should see no limits to entering this place.

The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Gerard Killen) was self-effacing in his remarks. He said that he would make every day count, and I hope that he will. He has made history by being the first—as he put it—gay married man to represent his constituency. I hope that he will find other ways to achieve great note and a long-lasting legacy in the House.

Finally, I welcome the contribution of the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse). Many people all over the country will admire her family history, and the fact that the daughter of a refugee should find sanctuary in this country and come to represent the city of Bath. The city has a history of representation by independent-minded people, and I hope that the hon. Lady will continue that tradition.

Let me say something about the two Back-Bench amendments that you have selected today, Mr Speaker. First, I should like to thank the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) and her colleagues. She has brought an injustice to the House and we will put that injustice right. For reasons that she understands, we are unable to pass the amendment as it is drafted, but she and I have. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and other Members have been persuasive, and I hope that she will not press it so that we can be united in protecting the rights that she correctly defends.

The hon. Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) made a truncated speech, and we understand the reasons for that. He wants a good deal from Brexit that involves a parliamentary vote and transitional arrangements, and that respects the devolved Administrations and protects rights. So do I. But he adds to that list membership of the single market. Does he not recall that, only three weeks ago, he was running on a programme promising to leave it? That is quite a big thing to forget. It is a bit like forgetting that he does not have confidence in the Leader of the Opposition.

The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Gerard Killen) was self-effacing in his remarks. He said that he would make every day count, and I hope that he will. He has made history by being the first—as he put it—gay married man to represent his constituency. I hope that he will find other ways to achieve great note and a long-lasting legacy in the House.

During this Parliament, Opposition Members, who hid behind the supposed unelectability of their leader, can hide no longer. Are they going to stay silent while the leadership of their party advocates an approach that they all know perfectly well would be ruinous?

In this battle of political ideas, it is we on this side of the House who will make the case for the policies and the values of the common ground that the British people—and many on that side of this House—know are essential for prosperity. We believe in an enterprise economy in which businesses can compete, succeed and provide for the people of this country. We believe in well-paid jobs and decent public services, and in a welfare state paid for by what we earn rather than by what we can borrow. We are proud of the fact that, in Britain today, more people have jobs than ever before in the history of our country. This is what we propose to do in this Queen’s Speech and how we intend to govern: living within our means; creating good jobs that pay people well; investing in the future by working with businesses to keep Britain competitive; boosting the power of our great cities, towns and counties in all parts of the United Kingdom; implementing the will of the British people to leave the EU in a way that is orderly and sensible; and being a beacon of free trade and internationalism. That is the programme that we have set out in this Queen’s Speech and not one part of it can be undone if Britain adopts the high-cost, high-tax, socialist ideology that is now the programme of the Opposition.

We vote tonight not just on a programme of legislation, but on a fundamental approach to the future of this country, and I commend this Queen’s Speech to the House.

Question put. That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 297, Noes 323.

Division No. 2] [4.59 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Alin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniacci, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Ben, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben

Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burton, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbourn, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowen, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Crawley, Angela
Cragh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martin
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneise
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliot, Julie
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrell, Paul
Fellows, Marion
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Mr Mark
Hendry, Drew
 Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoeby, Kate
Holien, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Hug, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Azizal
Kilner, Gisard
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lee, Mr Karen
Leslie, rh Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Linden, David
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Steward Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorin, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Milliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex
O’Hara, Brendan
O’Mara, Jared
Onasanya, Fiona
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Piddock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Stammer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, Mr Paul J.
Tami, Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Wishart, Pete
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes: Nic Dakin and Jessica Morden

NOEs

Barclay, Stephen
Barron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Breereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Caims, rh Alun
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishi, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Therese
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glynn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Dooley, Leo
Dockerill, Julia
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Dover-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Fraser, Mike
Fysh, rh Mr Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garner, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillian, rh Mrs Cheryl
Gibbons, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Gymah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Haffenden, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rob
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hermon, Lady
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollon, rh Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howard, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jack, rh Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, Dr Arajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Mr Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczyński, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Mr Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leasom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Philip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Sir Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Merrion, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Mr Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Moris, Mrs Anne Marie
Moris, David
Moris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Offerd, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Philip, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Priek, rh Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, rh Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Smith, John
Smith, Rosalyn
Somers, rh Sir Nicholas
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Symes, rh Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tohur, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Whittaker, Craig
Question accordingly negatived.

Mr Speaker: I call Stella Creasy to move amendment (d).

Stella Creasy: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am grateful to all the Members who have supported the rights of Northern Irish women to have equal access to abortion. I am delighted by today’s announcement from the Government and satisfied by the commitment that I have had from the Minister responsible to work with the sector. On that basis, I am happy not to move the amendment today. Let us send a message to women everywhere that in this Parliament their voices will be heard and their rights upheld.

Mr Speaker: We come next to amendment (g).

Amendment proposed: at the end of the Question to add: “but respectfully regret that the Gracious Speech does not rule out withdrawal from the EU without a deal, guarantee a Parliamentary vote on any final outcome to negotiations, set out transitional arrangements to maintain jobs, trade and certainty for business, set out proposals to remain within the Customs Union and Single Market, set out clear measures to respect the competencies of the devolved administrations, and include clear protections for EU nationals living in the UK now, including retaining their right to remain in the UK, and reciprocal rights for UK citizens.”—[Mr Umunna.]

The question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 33), That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 101, Noes 322.

Division No. 3] [5.15 pm

AYES

Ali, Rushanara
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Berger, Luciana
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chapman, Douglas
Cherry, Joanna
Ciwyd, rh Ann
Coffey, Ann
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crawley, Angela
Creasy, Stella
Davey, rh Sir Edward
Day, Martyn
Dent Coad, Emma
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Doughty, Stephen
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes: Heidi Alexander and Marion Fellows

Linden, David
Lloyd, Stephen
Lucas, Caroline
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Mc Nally, John
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McGovern, Alison
McKinnell, Catherine
Monaghan, Carol
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Murray, Ian
Newlands, Gavin
O’Hara, Brendan
Owen, Albert
Phillips, Jess
Saville Roberts, Liz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy

Adams, Nigel
Afotiam, Bim
Afrjie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Breereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brookshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Shuker, Mr Gavin
 Siddiq, Tulip
Slaughter, Andy
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Swinson, Jo
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Timms, rh Stephen
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith
West, Catherine
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Wishart, Pete
Woodcock, John
Zeichner, Daniel

NOES

Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damarion
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dockey, Julia
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin

Tellers for the Noes: Mrs Heather Wheeler and Marion Fellows

Zeichner, Daniel
Division No. 4] [5.32 pm

**AYES**

Adams, Nigel
Aloli, Bin
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriet
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, rh Sir Paul
Pincher, Christopher
Poultier, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Purseglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shellbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Souby, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, ob
Stewart, Rory

**NOES**

Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Sym, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tohurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Sammy
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

**Tellers for the Noes:**
Mrs Heather Wheeler and Andrew Griffiths

**Question accordingly negatived.**
Main Question put.

**The House divided:** Ayes 323, Noes 309.
Cairns, rh Alun
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérése
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, PhD
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, rh David
Docherty, Leo
Dockerill, Julia
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francis, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Mr Nasr
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert

Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greene, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Har, Simon
Hayes, Mr John
Healey, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hermon, Lady
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, rh Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jack, rh Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kanski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Philip
Lefford, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, rh Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Merron, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murroin, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Prithi
Patterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Philip, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Purseglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, rh Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swaney, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Syms, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Toffled, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevielyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Sammy
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mrs Heather Wheeler and Andrew Griffiths
De Piero, Gloria
De Cordova, Marsha
Day, Martyn
Davies, Geraint
David, Wayne
Davey, Sir Edward
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Davey, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniacci, Tonya
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowen, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Craddock, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Davey, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria

Hug, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Aftab
Kelly, Gerard
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laid, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lee, Ms Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Linden, David
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Stobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorris, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morgan, Layla
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex
O'Hara, Brendan
O'Mara, Jared
Onasanya, Fiona
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Piddock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reyes, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheeran, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, Mr Paul J.
Swinson, Jo
Tami, Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thomberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I am very grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for giving me permission to hold this important debate on the Floor of the House, because Kettering general hospital is perhaps the No. 1 issue for local people in Kettering.

This year, Kettering general hospital celebrates its 120th anniversary. It is one of the few hospitals that has been on the same site for 120 years. It is a much-loved local hospital. Thousands of local people have been born there, repaired there and, sadly, died there. Everyone has a special place in their heart for the hospital.

Some serious issues, however, need to be addressed. I welcome the Minister of State to his place to hear those concerns and respond. I am very grateful to him for making a personal visit to the hospital in April to meet the staff, including doctors and nurses, and also to my hon. Friends the Members for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) and for Corby (Tom Pursglove), whom I also welcome to their places in the Chamber. The Minister’s personal attention to Kettering general hospital is noted and much appreciated.

I thank all the staff at the hospital—the nurses, the doctors, the ancillary staff, the managers and the directors—for the wonderful work that they do. It is a massive team effort, with almost 4,000 people working on the site. There are just short of 600 beds in the hospital, and tens of thousands of patients go through the doors every year. Indeed, that is one of the issues that I want to remind the Minister about. Kettering general hospital is perhaps the No. 1 issue for local people in Kettering.

The local population is not only growing in size but ageing rapidly. It is wonderful that we are all living longer, but the number of people over 75 in Northamptonshire is likely to go up by 33% in the next five years from 54,000 to 72,000. People over 75 bring with them a wealth of experience, but I think most of them would admit that they are not as young and fit as they used to be, and they require increasingly detailed medical interventions, often for multiple issues rather than just one. That is a real challenge for the hospital to get to grips with.

In the past 10 years, the number of in-patient consultant episodes in the hospital has gone up by 27%. Attendances at the accident and emergency department have gone up by 23% in the past five years, and some 83,000 people a year are now coming through the A&E, which was built 20 years ago to cope with an influx of 40,000 people a year—less than half the number who currently visit. Out-patient attendances at the hospital have risen by almost two thirds in the past 10 years.

Mr Speaker: As I am often moved to remark, I do so again. If, inexplicably, there are Members now leaving the Chamber because they do not wish to hear the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) expatiate on the merits of his local hospital—I know that it is a considerable feat of imagination to suppose that anybody would wish to absent him or herself from the Chamber—please do so quickly and quietly so that the rest of us can enjoy, at least for a period, the Einsteinian intellect and Demosthenian eloquence of the hon. Gentleman.
Local people increasingly say to all three hon. Members from the area, “We love our local hospital, but what new investment and new facilities are being provided so that it can cope with the growth in the local population?” I ask the Minister that question directly this evening on behalf of those residents.

Our clinical commissioning group is still one of the most underfunded in the country. This year it crept up to 5% below the target funding. It has been worse in the past, but it is still pretty bad. Will the Minister urge those responsible to ensure that health funding is prioritised in areas of rapid population growth such as north Northamptonshire? Without that, we simply will not be able to cope.

The car parking situation at Kettering general hospital is critical, as the Minister experienced at first hand when he was caught in the traffic jam outside the hospital on his visit. It is good news that there will be 240 new spaces in the car park by the end of this November, and although that problem is difficult to fix, it is relatively straightforward compared with meeting the medical needs of the growing local population.

I must stress that, as the Minister will know, the hospital is now in special measures, which is not a happy situation. It is the result of a Care Quality Commission inspection in October, after which the CQC gave the hospital an “inadequate” rating in November, triggering the special measures. There have been a series of unannounced and focused inspections since—I think the last one was yesterday—and we await further news on when the CQC anticipates the hospital might come out of special measures. I welcome the special measures provisions provided by the Department. It is absolutely right to make sure that a hospital in some difficulty receives special attention. If that requires it being labelled “special measures” then so be it, but we must provide the help and assistance that such hospitals need.

It is not all bad news at Kettering general hospital. We must remember that it is treating a record number of local people with increasingly world-class treatments. It is hitting all its cancer targets. Its infection control, having some years ago been the very worst in the country, is now extremely good. The A&E target, which has been among the bottom 10 in the country, is now rapidly improving. I hope that figures to be announced soon will show that it is in the top third of type A A&Es.

My hon. Friends the Members for Wellingborough and for Corby would agree with me that one of the key priorities at the hospital is the provision of an urgent care hub. This is a fairly simple concept that requires funding of £20 million to £30 million. The idea is this: 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 A&E department, which, as I have said, is now more than 20 years old. Those services in a one-stop shop urgent care hub on site would enable the 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 and it is what we would like to see introduced at Kettering to relieve pressure on clinicians in the A&E department.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Hollobone: Well, it is very difficult for me to choose, but since our younger and fitter colleague was faster on his feet I am going to give way first to my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove).

Tom Pursglove: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. I entirely share his sentiment about the importance of developing a new urgent care hub at Kettering. Would he be keen to visit the Corby urgent care centre with me and, I hope, my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone)? Given that this is a first-class facility, clear lessons could be learned and taken forward when we move towards trying to develop the new urgent care hub. It is a class-leading facility that is hugely popular with local people. I would love him to come and visit it with me.

Mr Hollobone: I am very grateful for that most kind invitation. I have visited the urgent care centre and I would be happy to do so again. I offer my hon. Friend my 100% support as he advances the importance of the urgent care centre with local funding bodies. He knows that he can always rely on me to support him in his endeavours. I am happy to give way to my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone).

Mr Bone: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way to the older and more experienced Member from Northamptonshire. I congratulate him enormously on securing the debate and on how he is speaking so powerfully for Kettering hospital. The one bit of the triangle that is not there is an urgent care centre or minor injuries unit at the Isebrook hospital in Wellingborough. That is part of the plan approved by several Ministers from the Department of Health. I have great trouble getting commissioners to engage with that, but we need it to relieve pressure on the A&E at Kettering.

Mr Hollobone: As so often in this place, my hon. Friend speaks words of great wisdom and insight. He represents his constituents extremely well in repeating that point. The current draft sustainability and transformation plan for Northamptonshire is simply not good enough, because it does not place enough emphasis on developing the facilities my hon. Friend is speaking about. Effectively treating people nearer to where they live so they do not have to come into Kettering general hospital makes sense. It would be better for the patients, it would mean that they received more appropriate treatment closer to home, it would be more cost-effective and it would relieve pressure on Kettering general hospital. I therefore urge the Minister, with the contacts he has with NHS England, to pay close attention to the development of the STP in Northamptonshire, which is not good enough yet. It needs to place more emphasis on primary care, urgent care centres and local facilities, as my hon. Friends the Members for Corby and for Wellingborough have both mentioned.

The A&E department at Kettering general hospital is under huge pressure, the bulk of which comes from the lack of bed space. Ninety-eight per cent. of people who
present at Kettering A&E with minor injuries are seen within the target, while 96% of those who are not admitted to the hospital are seen within the four-hour target. However, somewhere between only 60% and 90% of those who require admission to the hospital are hitting the target. The problem is the number of beds occupied by people whose treatment has been completed but who have not yet been moved to rehabilitative or local social care.

There have been problems with that in Northamptonshire, which I have raised before on the Floor of the House. However, I am pleased to say that I understand that closer co-operation between the hospital and the local county council is likely to mean that the better care funds allocated by the Government will be used more effectively, so that people can be moved more quickly out of the hospital and into more appropriate care in their local communities. This is an urgent priority, but I understand that we are about to see some rapid improvement.

Having said that, even if Kettering general hospital does everything right, I have to tell the Minister that I am being told that it has a structural deficit of £10 million a year. That means that even if it does everything right and meets all the targets that the Government set, the way in which the health service is structured in Northamptonshire means that it can do no better every year than to have a deficit of £10 million. In 2015-16 the deficit was £11 million and in 2016-17 it was £25 million. This year it is likely to be £20 million, so things have clearly not worked as they should have, but I have to tell the Minister directly that even if everything worked right, there would be a structural deficit of £10 million, which is clearly not sustainable. That needs to be looked at.

There has recently been a problem with referral to treatment targets. In the past, waiting list data have not been recorded correctly at the hospital. Everyone is agreed about that, and I am pleased that the Care Quality Commission is investigating and has referred agreed about that, and I am pleased that the Care Quality Commission is investigating and has referred the matter to NHS Protect. I think everyone agrees that NHS Improvement is investigating and has referred the matter to NHS Protect. I think everyone agrees that NHS Improvement is investigating and has referred the matter to NHS Protect. I think everyone agrees that NHS Improvement is investigating and has referred the matter to NHS Protect. I think everyone agrees that NHS Improvement is investigating and has referred the matter to NHS Protect. I think everyone agrees that NHS Improvement is investigating and has referred

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an outline business case, which, in the NHS approval system, is a necessary precursor of any significant capital investment.

A mobilisation meeting was held only last week to discuss the preparation of the outline business case, which is a welcome development. The initial draft of the outline business case is expected to be shared with NHS Improvement in August. The current intention is for the trust board to approval a final outline business case by the end of the year, provided it is satisfied with the progress that has been made, before a formal submission is made to NHS Improvement. I hope that that gives my hon. Friend some idea of the pace of the process. I am talking about a period of months, but I am afraid that that is the nature of the world we are in. It must be ensured that all appropriate internal procedures are followed correctly in order to give the proposition the best prospect of success.

The business case is intended to create a long-term solution for the hospital: a 10 to 15-year proposition that will take into account the significant increase in house building envisaged in the local plans, and the accompanying population growth to which my hon. Friend referred. In the meantime, the trust has put in place as a temporary facility a modular unit—a Portakabin—which we visited a couple of months ago. The outline business case will include plans to replace it with a permanent structure in due course.

More immediately, I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in welcoming the solution to the current challenge, which was very evident to me when I visited, that faces staff and patients trying to gain access to the hospital. The challenge of finding somewhere to park for anyone arriving by car was such that I had to be plucked out of the queue waiting to get into the car park by the chief executive herself, who had come to find me. Otherwise I might have spent my entire allotted time for the visit trying to get into the car park. The good news, as my hon. Friend has identified, is that work begins next week on the construction of the second level of the car park. The additional tier will provide an extra 240 spaces. I am told that the work will be completed by mid-November, which sounds like pretty pacey progress. This will cost some £1.3 million over five years, and the funding has been found by the trust from its own resources, which is very welcome.

My hon. Friend made reference to various pressures affecting the hospital. NHS England is working closely with the two local clinical commissioning groups to ensure that local care homes, general practices and the ambulance service are supported to care for patients outside the hospital, when that is appropriate. That is designed to help to reduce pressure on the hospital, and it was referred to in the interventions from my hon. Friends the Members for Corby and for Wellingborough.

In the longer term, the draft Northamptonshire sustainability and transformation plan, which was published last December, proposes an early focus on improving the urgent care system to reduce the pressures on A&E. Part of that will include introducing more front-door clinical streaming at Kettering general, with plans to put in place a seven-day discharge capability to help patient flow through the hospital. However, I have heard the comments in this debate about the quality of the STP, particularly from my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough. The STPs are being assessed by the Department of Health, and we will be making some comments before the summer recess on their relative attributes. We will see where Northamptonshire comes out in the context of the others.

Tom Pursglove: As part of that work in the Department, will the Minister take away from this debate the significance of the Corby urgent care centre to our local health economy, particularly in the context of how it relieves the pressure on Kettering A&E? Will he also acknowledge that there are significant healthcare needs in the Corby community that that facility helps to address?

Mr Dunne: I was not going to allow my hon. Friend the Member for Corby to leave without passing comment on the Corby urgent care centre, so I shall do that now, as he raised the matter so specifically. As we have heard, the STP does not perhaps place as much emphasis on what is to happen outside the acute hospital setting as hon. Members would like, and I shall take that away.

One of the issues that we need to address is the urgent care centre in Corby. As I understand it, the current service expires at the end of September. A new contract will be let as a caretaker arrangement for the ensuing 12 months to ensure that the existing facility continues, thereby allowing time for the CCG to engage with the public about the future shape of urgent care services in Corby, which will help to inform the development of the STP plan for the long term. The intent is that public engagement will lead to a proposal for an enduring longer-term contract to be procured in the next calendar year—during 2018—which will take into account the additional population around Corby. As we have already heard, the population is extensive around Kettering, but that is not unique to that part of north Northamptonshire. I am reassured by the CCG that the temporary arrangement will continue to provide the highest standards of patient care and safety for Corby’s population. My hon. Friend should not be concerned; this is a short-term contract extension that is facilitating a much longer-term solution.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kettering referred to the better care fund and how services are being provided in the community beyond the acute setting. As he knows, the fund supports programmes not only at Kettering general, but at Northamptonshire general. The better care fund and what we are describing as the improved better care fund—a similar pot of funding for the current financial year—are being used to fund both non-elective admissions and discharge to support at Kettering general, which is aimed at relieving pressure on the hospital.

My hon. Friend mentioned the special measures regime, which was the immediate trigger for my visit in April, the time of the publication of the CQC report that rated the trust as inadequate. I was pleased that he welcomed the introduction of special measures, because they provide an opportunity for focus across the NHS on areas that have been rated as not performing as we would all like. The evidence thus far is that trusts that go into special measures have a significant impact on improving performance within a hospital. I see that as a positive step, and I was pleased that he welcomed it. NHS Improvement has agreed an initial
package of support. It has allocated an improvement director who will be working with the trust from next month. NHSI is also setting up “buddy trust” arrangements with highly rated trusts.

6.17 pm

House adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 9(7)).
Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Child Sexual Abuse Inquiry

1. Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): Whether she has held discussions with the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse since the withdrawal of the charity Survivors of Organised and Institutional Abuse from that inquiry.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): May I take the opportunity, first, to welcome the new shadow Front-Bench team—the hon. Members for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), for Derby North (Chris Williamson), for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) and for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan)? They are welcome indeed.

I agree that it is regrettable that Survivors of Organised and Institutional Abuse has withdrawn from the inquiry. The inquiry is making good progress, in line with the plan it published last year. This is evidenced through public hearings and other events with victims and survivors. I retain my confidence in this independent inquiry to deliver its important work, to get the truth and to learn lessons for the future.

Lisa Nandy: I thank the Home Secretary for that, but this is now really serious: this is the fourth victims’ group that has left, and today we have had the Sutton review, which reads like a total whitewash and suggests that no lessons have been learned by the inquiry or by the Government that set it up. What message does she think that sends to everybody in this country who is currently relying on a public inquiry to deliver justice for them?

Amber Rudd: I ask the hon. Lady to reconsider her view. The inquiry has said that the group can always come back if it wants to, and I ask her to think again about the people who are already being helped by the inquiry. There are 60 to 80 people whose experiences and attacks have been referred to the police, which may lead to prosecutions, and there are up to 1,000 people whose lives have been changed and who are getting the answers that they want. Those are real differences, which I ask the hon. Lady not to underestimate.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Last year, the inquiry attracted some unhelpful headlines on the back of its internal workings and certain personalities, since when, I am glad to say, it has been getting on with its important work. But we were promised an interim report and greater transparency, particularly after the Home Affairs Committee sittings, so when might we expect those?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and I remember well giving evidence about this very matter when he was the acting Chair of that Committee. Like him, I have confidence in the new inquiry chair, Alexis Jay; she is getting on with the job, and as I said to the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), we are seeing real action and real results from the progress that is being made. I have been told that we will get an interim report during 2018.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Does the Home Secretary have any concerns about the fact that the police have announced that they are going to curtail annual checks on people who are on the sex offender register, when it is growing year on year?

Amber Rudd: I refer the hon. Lady to the fact that different police chiefs are taking different positions on this, depending on their experience in their particular communities. If she has a particular concern about the situation in her community, I encourage her to come and talk to myself or the police Minister in due course.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Does the independent inquiry have a role in considering the outcome of the £1 million, two-year Operation Conifer—the inquiry into the allegations against the late Sir Edward Heath? If it does not, who does?

Amber Rudd: That is a matter for local policing. It is up to local operations to decide how they will proceed with that matter; it is not for the inquiry. The inquiry is making its inquiries, having the truth sessions and then referring, where appropriate, to the police.

Special Constables

2. Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): What financial support is in place for special constables.

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): Since 1831, special constables have made a genuinely valuable contribution to local policing. That is why we should keep under regular review what the Government do to support that work.

Robert Halfon: Will my hon. Friend congratulate the 358 special constables in Essex, and congratulate Essex police on their push to encourage even more people to become special constables? Will he consider making it easier for councils to offer council tax rebates to special constables so that we can give something back to those who serve in our communities?

Mr Hurd: I thank my right hon. Friend for that. He has been a tireless champion for volunteering, and for special constables in particular. He represents a county that, through the leadership of police and crime...
commissioner Roger Hirst, is showing real leadership in trying to encourage more special constables. At the moment, we provide access to insurance for legal expenses. There is provision for out-of-allowance expenses, and there is provision in law for discretionary benefits such as discounts on council tax, but I am happy to meet my right hon. Friend to discuss how we can go further.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she is taking to tackle extremism in their communities.

Mr Speaker: In welcoming back the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew), I am informed that during his enforced and involuntary absence he has become a doctor of philosophy, upon which the House wishes to congratulate him, I am sure.

Dr Drew: I had to do something with my wasted years. I welcome the police Minister to his place. We all congratulate the specials on the work they do, which is of course first-rate, but it seems to me from my experience—I am going out with the specials on Friday, so I am sure they will tell me in no uncertain terms whether I am right—that being in the specials is no longer an entrance point to the full-time constabulary. Is there a reason for that? If it is because of problems of release or of financial support, will the Minister look into that and do something about it?

Mr Hurd: I add my voice to the congratulations to the hon. Gentleman, with whom I used to serve on the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; it seems like 1,000 years ago. I would be concerned if what he says were true. It is not what I hear and not what the data tell me about the number of specials who go on to become regular police officers, but I will keep it under regular review.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): As a former special constable—I am sure that will not be the last time that is mentioned from this Dispatch Box—I saw at first hand the dedication and bravery of our frontline officers, but I also witnessed a collapse in morale as the Government ignored warnings over jobs, pay and resources, and this has only gotten worse. Only last month at the Police Federation conference, the Home Secretary dismissed the concerns of an officer who told her how pay cuts had left him struggling to put food on his table. Does the Minister agree with the Home Secretary or the Police Federation?

Mr Hurd: I thank the Minister for that answer.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sarah Newton): We will establish a commission for countering extremism to reinforce current efforts to tackle extremist ideology in all its forms wherever it occurs. Already, through the 2015 counter-extremism strategy, we have taken steps to protect children from the threat of extremism, taken action on hate crime, and provided protective support for places of worship. We are also supporting civil society groups to tackle extremism in their communities.

Andrew Bowie: I thank the Minister for that answer. Ten years ago last week we saw the terrorist attack on Glasgow airport, and since then we have sadly seen instances of extremism and terrorism in Walsall, Exeter, Manchester, Yorkshire, and of course here in London. What is being done with the devolved Administrations, as well the combined authorities and regions, to ensure that extremism, and therefore terrorism, has no place in the United Kingdom?

Sarah Newton: I very much welcome my hon. Friend to his place. I am sure he is going to make a significant contribution here at Home Office questions, as well as serving his constituents. He is quite right to point out that there is simply no place in our society for extremism or terrorism. In launching the counter-extremism strategy in 2015, the Government agreed with the devolved Administrations that they were not going to be part of the strategy at the time, but we continue to work with them. As we carry on working with them on setting up the commission for countering extremism, we will consult them widely. It is very important that we work together and learn together to keep the whole of the United Kingdom safe.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): Last year, Twitter suspended 125,000 accounts that were linked to global terrorism, but millions of videos of such material remain on the internet. In Germany, companies can be fined up to €43 million for failing to take down illegal videos. When do the Government intend to introduce legislation of that kind?

Sarah Newton: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to point out the vile hatred that is being spread on the internet. I am pleased to report that the action we are taking is regularly enabling thousands of images to be taken down. We leave no stone unturned, and the Home Secretary is working closely with all the bodies responsible for the internet to make sure that we take more action to remove every vile piece of hatred from it.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Will the Minister set out what the Government are doing to tackle anti-Semitism on campus, where the activities of hard-line groups often create an intolerant and intimidatory atmosphere for Jewish students?

Sarah Newton: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the issue of anti-Semitism. There is no room at all in our society for hatred of anyone based on their faith, race or ideology. The Government have put a safeguarding responsibility on universities and schools to make sure that they protect young people from being exposed to vile hatred and radicalisation.
Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): May I press the Minister on the answer she gave to the former Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz)? Social media giants remain the command and control platform of choice for extremists. I wrote to the Home Secretary on 29 March to ask whether she was considering similar laws to those in Germany and in Ireland, where a new watchdog is being created to police social media giants, or indeed proposals similar to those in the US Senate, such as the Feinstein Bill, which would require social media giants to report terrorism content. Governments around the world are taking action; when will this Government follow suit?

Sarah Newton: I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that the Government are taking action by leading the international efforts to make sure that internet platforms take their responsibilities seriously. The Home Secretary has made it absolutely clear that nothing is off the table. We are considering all options to make sure that the vile ideology and hatred that is pumped around the internet is stopped as soon as possible.

18. [900133] Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Maajid Nawaz is a former constituent of mine whom I once visited in prison in Cairo, where he was being held because of alleged terrorist activities. Is my hon. Friend aware that he has completely turned his life around and is the founder of Quilliam, an organisation dedicated to tackling extremism in the UK?

Sarah Newton: That is really good news. Of course, the Government want to work with the Quilliam Foundation and any other organisation that seeks to stand up to extremism and terrorism and fight against evil ideology, to keep us all safe in our country.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for her welcome. A working and workable definition of what extremism means is central to any effective strategy for tackling extremism. Can the Minister assure me that the new commission set up to tackle extremism will construct a definition that is not only statutorily robust but will be effective?

Sarah Newton: I not only welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place but very much welcome his views. The whole purpose of setting up the counter-extremism commission is to see what more we can do and what further steps we can take. I think we all understand what our shared British values are, and our strategy is making good progress. Of course, one of the commission’s actions will be to look at the definition that the hon. Gentleman mentions.

Police and Fire Services: Collaboration

4. Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to encourage greater collaboration between the police and fire services.

Amanda Milling: Staffordshire’s police and crime commissioner, Matthew Ellis, has identified savings of at least £3.6 million a year from the integration of police and fire services, and he has committed them to bolstering frontline services in each of those two areas, as well as to investment in preventive measures, especially relating to fire. Does my right hon. Friend agree that such integration should progress where there is a strong local business case for it?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is right. Where there is a strong business case and collaboration can improve outcomes and save money, which can then be used for the frontline, it should be encouraged. I welcome the good work that she has been doing with Matthew Ellis to deliver just that.

James Duddridge: Roger Hirst, the Essex police and crime commissioner, has moved himself and his staff into fire HQ, saving £1.5 million, and has identified a further £23 million of potential savings in governance. What more can be done to encourage such excellent work in Essex and across the country?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for giving me another great example of the sort of collaboration that we are trying to encourage to improve outcomes and save money that can be used on the frontline. I congratulate him on his good work with his PCC, Roger Hirst, and wish them well in that new endeavour.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Both police officers and firefighters have told me that they are increasingly called to assist residents experiencing a mental health crisis, so I was very concerned when the collaboration in Nottinghamshire, which saw a mental health nurse based in the police control room, was axed in May because of a lack of funding, even though the scheme was described as successful and valuable. What discussions has the Home Secretary had with chief constables and chief fire officers about how best to support their staff who are dealing with members of the public experiencing mental health problems of that sort?

Amber Rudd: I share the hon. Lady’s view about how important it is to ensure that people with mental health crises or difficulties are treated differently. If she wants to write to me about the particular example she has set out, I will certainly look at it, but I am proud of the work that the Government have done to reduce the number—I think by nearly 80%—of young people with a mental health crisis ending up in police cells. The more we can do to address that, the better.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): The Merseyside police and fire services already collaborate closely and are looking at ways of collaborating further.
Does the Home Secretary accept that the scale of her Department’s financial cuts to the police service and the fire and rescue service in Merseyside makes that job much more difficult?

Amber Rudd: It is a good thing that we have protected police funding from 2015 to 2020. I admire enormously the work that the police and fire services do, and we will continue to look at how better we can support them. One of the ways that we have heard about today—I know that Merseyside has led on this too—is through collaboration, which will allow stronger working, better outcomes and money saved for the frontline.

**Police Recruitment**

5. Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): What steps she is taking to ensure the recruitment to the police force of people with the skills required to tackle modern crime.

Amber Rudd: One of the ways that we have heard about today—I know that Merseyside has led on this too—is through collaboration, which will allow stronger working, better outcomes and money saved for the frontline.

The Minister for Security (Mr Ben Wallace): The Government’s programme of reforms is aimed at ensuring that the police workforce is flexible, capable and professional. Agile enough to adapt to changes in crime and society. We established the College of Policing as the professional body for policing, and its new policing education qualification framework is designed to ensure that policing is fit for the future. In addition, innovative recruitment schemes are widening the talent pool, bringing in people from a diverse range of backgrounds.

Peter Aldous: Tim Passmore, the police and crime commissioner for Suffolk, is recruiting more officers. To help Suffolk police with that task, will the Minister consider expanding the direct entry scheme and introducing more flexibility in salaries and promotion within ranks, so that officers are better able to progress their careers and are not continually moving into new roles when promoted?

Mr Wallace: We are already encouraging more police chiefs to take advantage of the direct entry scheme. There are a range of innovative examples around the country, including the chief constable in Durham, who is going direct to Sheffield University. As my hon. Friend says, it is also important to recognise police who are already serving, and that is why we fully support the advanced practitioner programme, which is being piloted in eight forces and encourages police to continue to specialise for a longer career, and rewards that effort.

Mr Jayawardena: Will the Minister join me in commending Hampshire constabulary on its great specialist entry detective programme, which is helping people find jobs that they want to do in the police service, bringing new people in and keeping the people of North East Hampshire, their property and their families safe?

Mr Wallace: I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to his force. It is really important that in the 21st century we recognise that policing has changed and that people who can contribute to delivering safe streets and investigations come from all over—from education opportunities in universities and from within forces and other public sector bodies. That is why direct entry is one key and enhancing careers is another.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): Given the falling numbers of uniformed police officers in Lancashire—down 700 since 2010—what reassurance can the Minister give to my Muslim constituents, who are fearful for their own safety and that of their families in the light of recent attacks on mosques and the horrendous recent acid attacks?

Mr Wallace: I am grateful to the hon. Lady who, like me, is a Lancashire MP. I speak regularly with the chief constable of Lancashire and his officers. They have put in place lots of measures to ensure that hate crimes do not impact on the community. It is important to note that since 2010 crime has fallen in Lancashire. It is not simply that crime has remained high and police numbers have been cut. The police are doing an amazing job facing today’s challenges with the resources they receive.

We have to remember that we have to live within our means.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Given the fact that 21,000 police officers have been lost in the past seven years, whether it is modern crime or traditional crime, and given the pressures that police chiefs recognise, how many police officers does the Minister intend the Government to recruit this year?

Mr Wallace: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, the number of police required in each force is down to the chief constable of each force. He should recognise, because in 2009-10 he was doing a similar job to me, that, owing to the changing nature of policing, we have seen an increase in funding for the National Crime Agency and specialist policing to tackle those areas. That goes alongside normal day-to-day policing. Back in 2015, in recognition of the importance of the beat constable, we on the Government Benches protected police spending. We were able to deliver that because we had a firm economy.

**Community Police Officers**

6. Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): What plans she has to increase the number of police officers in the community.

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): The hon. Gentleman will know, I am sure, that direct resource funding for the South Wales police force, which covers his constituency, will be up 5% in 2017-18. He will also know that decisions on the size, composition and deployment of the police workforce are operational matters for individual chief officers and police and crime commissioners.

Kevin Brennan: Ministers should be given credit for making sure that they leave no cliché left unsaid in their attempt to defend their actions in relation to the police force. Can the Minister remember a time when a Conservative Government have been so unpopular with police officers—apart from when the current Prime Minister was Home Secretary?
Mr Hurd: I know from my time shadowing the hon. Gentleman that he defers to no one in his admiration of a good cliché. What I would say to him is what I hope any Policing Minister for any Government of any colour would say, which is that public safety is the No. 1 priority for any Government. As he heard from the Minister for Security, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wyre and Preston North (Mr Wallace), we have protected police spending in real terms since 2015 and increased spending in areas of specialisation. Now, in the light of the terrible events that have shocked us all, it is quite right that we go through a process of reviewing, with police and crime commissioners and colleagues from all parts of the House, what resources are needed to be absolutely sure that the police have the resources to keep us safe.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): The Minister will be aware that motorbike and moped crime in London is on the increase. We need community officers who can be aware that motorbike and moped crime in London is on the increase. We need community officers who can keep us safe.

Mr Hurd: As a fellow London MP, I totally agree. In fact, I heard it directly the other day from a sergeant with whom I was walking the beat in London Bridge. As my hon. Friend knows, it is a requirement of local police chiefs to set the operational priorities. It is our responsibility to make sure they have the resources they need to meet all the risks they see.

Mr Hurd: I hope the hon. Gentleman knows that we are extremely sensitive to that point. As I said in my remarks, we are very aware that the pressure put on the police is a result of recent terrible events, not least the one in Manchester, has required a surge of police effort and fantastic collaboration between forces, but we now have to sit down rationally with police and crime commissioners and police chiefs, to really understand and test assertions about pressure on police forces and to make sure that they have the resources they need to keep us safe.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Our west midlands police have done a fantastic job in cutting crime and doing more with less. Will the Minister ensure that the police funding formula is reformed to deliver a fair deal for the west midlands?

Mr Hurd: I thank my hon. Friend for his comment. I hope I can reassure him that a lot of work is being done to ensure not only that the police have the resources they need, but that they are allocated fairly across all forces. No final decision has been taken on the fair funding formula, but I am happy to sit down with my hon. Friend and colleagues from all parts of the House who have concerns about the resource allocation for their forces.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): During the Queen’s Speech debate on security last week, the Home Secretary said she was more worried about outcomes than police numbers, so will the Minister tell the House how the Home Office measures and values the outcomes of community police officers?

Mr Hurd: Ultimately, what matters most is the trend in crime, which the right hon. Gentleman knows from experience is what unsettles our constituents most. Public safety is the No. 1 priority, so the ultimate outcome is the crime statistics, and I am sure that he will join me in welcoming the long-term decline that we have seen since 2010.

Fire Prevention and Safety

7. Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): If she will discuss with Cabinet colleagues reviewing fire prevention and safety regulations, banning the use of flammable material in cladding and ensuring that fire inspections are not outsourced to private firms.

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): The Secretary of State, who I believe is making a statement on Grenfell Tower this afternoon, has established an expert advisory panel to provide independent advice on any immediate measures that may need to be put in place to make buildings safe for residents following the Grenfell Tower tragedy.

Bill Esterson: Survivors and relatives of the victims of the Grenfell disaster are concerned at the proposed scope of the public inquiry, as the Minister knows, but does he agree that Departments, including his own, should act now to address many of the concerns raised? They include the safety of building materials, the resilience of the fire service across the country, the enforcement of regulations and a lack of trained professionals to carry out fire inspections as thoroughly and often as are needed.

Mr Hurd: The Grenfell tragedy, which should never have happened, and subsequent events, in terms of what we are learning about the safety of buildings, mean that there is a system failure, which has been allowed to build up over too many years. It is imperative that we do not just wait for a public inquiry, but that we get on with the work of reviewing not just regulation, but the whole system of enforcement and management of risk, and that we lead on that and are informed by an inquiry.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): I, like all Members, have been inundated with emails from constituents demanding immediate changes to fire regulations. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important that we look at what changes are needed to the fire regulations, but also at what changes are needed in the implementation of existing regulations, so that tragedies such as Grenfell do not happen again?

Mr Hurd: I do agree with my hon. Friend. And his question allows me to build on what I was saying before. There has been a system failure, built up over many years, and we need to address it as a matter of urgency and with rigorous analysis underpinned by evidence. As part of that we will of course look at whether the regulations are effective, but my instinct is that the biggest failure has been in the system of enforcement, inspection and risk management.
Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Detective Superintendent Fiona McCormack, who is conducting some of the inquiries, has said that the insulation has proved “more flammable than the cladding”.

Has the Home Office had representations from the police or the fire service on this? Does the Minister sit on the Government’s taskforce and, if not, has whichever Home Office Minister does raise the testing of the insulation with the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government? If not, will they do so urgently and call for testing of insulation to be done?

Mr Hurd: I can assure the right hon. Lady that both the Home Secretary and I have sat on the regular Cobra meetings that have addressed this, and I sit regularly on the sub-group as well. The right hon. Lady is right; of course, testing the cladding was the priority, but it is becoming increasingly clear that this is not just about the cladding. There is a significant issue with insulation and fitting, and there are considerable questions to be answered about safeguarding and risk inside buildings. That is what we have to understand better and informed by the police investigation and the public inquiry about what exactly what has happened, but we also have to get on with the business of stress testing our current systems.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): Banning flammable cladding is clearly a no-brainer. It should never have been used in those buildings, and nor, indeed, should any other flammable materials. As we start to beef up the rules and regulations, will my hon. Friend ensure not only that best guidance is spread around all local authorities in the United Kingdom and action is followed, but that we work with other Governments in other countries that contain tower blocks, so that the tragedy that has befallen the people of the United Kingdom will never befall another country?

Mr Hurd: I entirely agree with that sentiment, which was expressed very powerfully. The materials, particularly the panels, were not compliant, and should not have been used on those buildings. We must now re-examine systematically, using all the best evidence available, the landscape of policy and regulation—both the regulation itself, and what is meant to happen in respect of building inspection.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): The concerns about fire prevention and safety are vital issues, but does the Minister agree that we should not lose sight of the immediate plight of the survivors of the Grenfell Tower fire, their families and their community? Does he understand that one of the factors preventing people from coming forward, either to obtain the help that they need or to provide the information that we need, is concern about their immigration status? I know he has said that their papers will not be checked, but will he consider announcing an immigration amnesty for the survivors of Grenfell Tower? Otherwise there will be people who have died whom we will never know about, and too many people who need help will not receive it.

Mr Hurd: The right hon. Lady is right. That is an issue, as I know from conversations that I have had and will continue to have with survivors. One of our big problems is not being able to identify fully who was in the building on that night, and concerns about immigration status are part of that. We have communicated some advice which was meant to reassure, and we are reviewing with people closer to the community whether that advice is sufficient.

Avon Fire and Rescue Service

9. Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of funding for Avon fire and rescue service.

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): I hope the hon. Lady will welcome, as I do, the fact that fire incidents in Avon have fallen by a quarter since 2010. Avon fire and rescue service will receive stable funding for 2019-20, and the Government consider that to be a fair settlement.

Kerry McCarthy: The service has lost £5 million of funding in recent years, and 200 frontline firefighting jobs have gone. Meanwhile, the police and crime commissioner is saying that the police are being pushed to their limit and have been asked to cut a further £20 million, which simply cannot be done. Must we wait until an incident in Bristol—an incident like the Grenfell Tower fire, or a terrorist attack—brings home to the Government just how much pressure those services are under?

Mr Hurd: I understand the point that the hon. Lady has made, but resources must be allocated in the light of risk, and, as I have said, risk has fallen in Avon since 2010. Obviously we cannot be complacent about that, and I have clearly signalled that there will be a profound re-examination of fire safety and risk, but I return to the point that I made about police resources. I am very committed to engaging with police authorities and police and crime commissioners, so that I can really understand their concerns about resources and ensure that any decisions are based on evidence rather than assertion.

Immigration Rules: Agriculture

10. Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on the effect of immigration rules on the seasonal agricultural workforce.

The Minister for Immigration (Brandon Lewis): I spoke to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs about this issue only last week. I know that he is engaging with the National Farmers Union, and I shall meet NFU representatives and my right hon. Friend shortly to discuss it further.

Helen Whately: Every summer farmers in my constituency require thousands of workers to pick their delicious fruit, but only 705 people in the constituency are unemployed and claiming jobseeker’s allowance, so it is very difficult for the farmers to recruit enough workers locally. Will my right hon. Friend consider a permit scheme for seasonal agricultural workers?
Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes a very good point about the excellent fruit that those workers pick in Kent. In terms of quality, it is almost up there with the blackcurrants in Great Yarmouth. While we are still full members of the European Union farmers can benefit from the free movement of labour, but my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I will continue to discuss with the sector what will be done after we leave the EU.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): As the Minister knows, agriculture is devolved and stringent immigration rules could have a particular impact on the Welsh food production sector. Does he agree that, if there is to be, regrettably, a Brexit outside the single market, there would need to be a geographical visa system to protect key sectors of the Welsh economy?

Brandon Lewis: We are determined to ensure that we have an immigration system that continues to encourage the brightest and the best, and to ensure that all our sectors are able to flourish and thrive. However, I am not going to predict the outcome, or what we will be doing once we leave the European Union, after those negotiations.

EU Citizens in the UK

12. Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What steps she is taking to reassure non-UK EU citizens resident in the UK about their legal status after the UK leaves the EU.

The Minister for Immigration (Brandon Lewis): On 26 June, we published and laid in Parliament, and the Prime Minister outlined, a paper that outlines our offer for EU citizens. We want to ensure that they have certainty about the future. We have a fair and serious offer that we are confident will lead to a good agreement with our colleagues and partners across the EU.

Alan Brown: As someone who is married to an EU national, I can assure the Minister that right now EU nationals do not feel any certainty from this Government. Does he agree with the organisations British in Europe and British in Europe that falls short of the offer that the EU made on 12 June?

Brandon Lewis: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will join me and colleagues in making it very clear that anyone from the EU who is working and living here at the moment can have confidence about the future. The offer we have made about settled status gives them that certainty. I hope that he will encourage not just his other half but all others on the matter. We ask him to bear it in mind that the offer we have made will mean that anyone from the EU who is settled here will have the same rights as any UK citizen. That is a fair and serious proposal.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the Prime Minister has made a very sensible offer and that this matter could be settled tomorrow if it were not for the EU’s intransigence?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend, as ever, makes a very good point. The Prime Minister has made a fair, full and serious offer that gives European citizens, once they have settled status, the same rights as a UK citizen. I am hopeful that we and our partners across the EU will be able to reach an early agreement on that.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Minister talked about giving confidence to EU citizens. Given that just under 30% of applications currently being made for EU permanent residence cards are being turned down, what assurance can he give the House that the new application process set out in the White Paper will not lead to the same outcome? Will those EU citizens who are refused under that new process be required then to leave the UK?

Brandon Lewis: What I would say to the right hon. Gentleman is that we outlined just last week in laying the paper that we want to ensure that, when we announce the system next year, it will be a simple, clear system, probably making use of digital technology, so that the 3 million Europeans who are living and working here, contributing fantastically well to our culture and economy, are able to go through that process as swiftly as possible.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): As my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) has highlighted, it is bizarre that the Prime Minister expects the EU to reciprocate an offer that falls short of the offer that the EU made on 12 June. Can the Minister confirm that the Prime Minister expects the EU to water down its offer? If so, how does he think that will reassure British nationals living abroad, never mind EU nationals living in the UK?

Brandon Lewis: I will say two things to the hon. and learned Lady. First, just last week, I met one of the Ministers from the Department for Exiting the European Union and representatives of British citizens living abroad to go through with them the position we have taken. Secondly, the Prime Minister is right to ensure that the people who are living in the UK who gain settled status have the same rights as a UK citizen. I do not think any UK citizen would expect any more or less from the British Government.

Joanna Cherry: The point is that the EU offer would give EU nationals living in the UK and British nationals living abroad more rights than the Prime Minister’s offer. One thing the Minister could do to reassure EU nationals living in the UK is to state that access to the national health service will be considered sufficient by the Home Office to fulfil the requirements for comprehensive sickness insurance. That was the cross-party recommendation of the Exiting the European Union Committee in the previous Parliament. What or who is stopping the Home Office from implementing that recommendation now?

Brandon Lewis: It is the EU that is stopping that, and if the hon. and learned Lady has a proper read through of our proposals, she will see that that is an issue we are looking forward to dealing with as we leave the European Union. It is right that we as the UK Government are saying that people have the same rights as UK citizens.
Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): The Prime Minister’s recent remarks on the status of EU nationals were too little, too late. The Government have failed to reassure long-standing EU nationals living here and have failed to prevent the brain drain of much needed staff in high-value industries and academia, and of students. Will the Minister clarify the position of EU students studying in the UK who will be part-way through their courses when we leave the EU?

Brandon Lewis: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his new position.

This offer applies to all EU residents. If they are in this country and want to take settled status, they will be able to do that. That is an offer that will be open to everybody across the European Union, so in that sense it makes no change to the position of students.

Family Rights

14. Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): What steps she is taking to protect the family rights of UK citizens married to non-EU citizens.

The Minister for Immigration (Brandon Lewis): The requirements we have in place promote not just family values but integration, while also striking the right balance to ensure that we take into account the burden on the taxpayer as well, so we have a fair balance between family, integration and the taxpayers’ position.

Ronnie Cowan: My constituent Paul McMillan, a medical student from Port Glasgow, is unable to be with his American partner because of the minimum income requirement on spousal visas, which stands at £18,600 and is due to rise. He has decided that because of the UK Government’s increasingly hostile attitude towards immigrants, on completing his studies he will emigrate from Scotland to be with his partner. Scotland will lose not only his future medical expertise but the expertise of his partner, a qualified social worker. Considering Paul’s situation, will the Home Secretary abandon plans to increase the minimum income requirement?

Brandon Lewis: If the hon. Gentleman wants to write to me about any specific case, I will be happy to have a look at it. As a general point, however, it is right that we look at making sure that everybody across the UK has the same position to deal with, so that the system is fair and that it is also fair to taxpayers, so that someone bringing a member of their family to this country can afford for them to be here. I also point out to the hon. Gentleman that the figure of £18,600 is several thousand pounds below the median wage in Scotland.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Under the freedom of movement rules, EU citizens are currently not obliged to meet that minimum income threshold if they wish to bring in family members. However, UK citizens do have to meet a minimum income threshold, which the Supreme Court has said causes hardship and ignores the rights of children. Is it not therefore fair to say that this new regime proposed by the Government means that EU citizens will lose their current rights to family life and that it represents a levelling down?

Brandon Lewis: I think the right hon. Lady has slightly misunderstood the situation. If somebody from the European Union and their family are here, they will have that ability to have settled status. If they have not been here for five years but they stay for five years, they will be able to attain that right. I also point out to her that family life cannot be established here at the taxpayers’ expense. That is perfectly right; family migrants must be able to integrate. That is what our family immigration rules achieve, and it is an approach that the Supreme Court has endorsed.

Topical Questions

T1. [9000105] Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): There is substantial interest in the House about this Government’s policy about removing counter-terrorism online, and I want to update the House briefly.

Last week in Ottawa, we secured support from Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the US for the Government campaign to take terrorist material offline. Together, we announced that companies including Facebook, Google, Microsoft and Twitter would form a new global industry forum to tackle terrorist use of the internet. We made it clear that hateful content used to recruit and radicalise should not be allowed on their platforms and must be removed faster and more proactively. The commitment from fellow “Five Eyes” members to a shared approach and their backing of a new industry group is a vital step forward. I plan to travel to the west coast of America to continue discussions with major technology companies and to see what progress they are making on the forum, and I will share these findings. The key to successful action here is to make sure that we have a truly global initiative engaging other countries and the international headquarters of these businesses.

Martyn Day: The Scottish Affairs Select Committee, the Scottish Chambers of Commerce and the Institute of Directors have all said that Scotland requires a different immigration policy for its unique demographic needs. Will the Home Secretary consider the report by Professor Christina Boswell of the University of Edinburgh that evaluates the options for a differentiated approach to immigration policy in Scotland?

Amber Rudd: I do not think that we should have a different immigration policy for different parts of the United Kingdom, but I do think that we should have a fair, open and inclusive immigration system that will attract the brightest and the best, the right students and the people who are legitimately coming here to join their families. We will ensure that when we consult stakeholders and businesses over the summer, we have Scotland and other parts of the country in mind.

T3. [900107] Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): In the light of the recent cyber-attack on Parliament and the National Crime Agency’s announcement that, because of under-reporting, the scale of cyber-crime is significantly underestimated, will the Secretary of State outline the specific steps that the Government are taking to tackle this threat?
The Minister for Security (Mr Ben Wallace): Through the national cyber-security programme, we are investing £1.9 billion in cyber-security. We are investing in the National Crime Agency, the National Cyber Crime Unit and the National Cyber Security Centre, as well as the regional organised crime units at local level to ensure that there is a regional response. We have also given an extra £10 million to improve Action Fraud’s response to constituents. At the same time, the Government are trying to consolidate and ensure that there is a consistent message in Cyber Aware so that all colleagues and members of the public understand what they need to do to keep themselves safe online.

Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): Following the wholly avoidable tragedy at Grenfell Tower, will the Home Secretary tell us why the review of the building regulations, which was promised by Gavin Barwell in the wake of the deadly Lakanal House fire, has failed to materialise? Mr Barwell was the Housing Minister at the time; did he suppress the review?

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): I do not think there is any evidence that our former colleague suppressed any review. There was plenty of work ongoing into the simplification of regulations. I say to the hon. Gentleman, as I have said before, that the Grenfell tragedy should never have happened, and what we have found out since about the fire safety of the building means that we have to do a root and branch review not only of the regulations but of inspection and risk management.

Mr Hurd: As my hon. Friend knows, we have done a lot to cut police targets and bureaucracy so that they can focus on what really matters. Post-arrest administration has not been raised to date in my meetings with the police, but I will ensure that I raise it in any future meetings.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sarah Newton): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising this question. We did meet; I met her and the other Merseyside MPs, and I have met the chief constable, Andy Cooke. I can absolutely confirm that the National Crime Agency and the regional organised and serious crime units are giving a great deal of support to help to tackle the appalling increase in gun crime in Merseyside. We will continue do everything we can to support the police there.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): When I spent some time on the night shift with the local police, they told me that when they arrest a person they spend most of the remainder of the shift filling in forms relating to that arrest. The police obviously have to be accountable when depriving somebody of their liberty, but that system can surely be speeded up.

Amber Rudd: It is a very good question. I am aware of those numbers. We have made it clear to the countries that currently provide a home to those children—largely Italy and Greece, but some are in France—that we are ready and stand able to take those additional children. We will continue to engage with those countries to try to do that. Part of the issue is that some of those children have already settled in the country where they are, but we remain engaged with those countries to see what else we can do to help those children. Where we can, we would like to bring over those who have not settled and whose interests are truly best served by coming here.

The Minister for Immigration (Brandon Lewis): We implemented the Immigration Act 2016 to make illegal working a criminal offence so that the profits can be seized as the proceeds of crime. The Act also introduces new, stronger sanctions against employers of illegal workers. There is a balance to be struck in ensuring that people are checking whether someone has a passport, if they are from the EU, or has leave or the right to work here, if they are not from the EU. If businesses have done those checks, they are in a position to defend themselves against any action, which is appropriate.
Mr Hurd: I refer the hon. Lady to what I said before. The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government is making a statement this afternoon, and the Prime Minister has made several statements about the way forward in reviewing regulations, guidance and the whole inspection and risk-monitoring regime, which will include guidance on sprinklers. As the hon. Lady will know, sprinklers have different applications in different locations; there is no one-size-fits-all approach.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Yesterday evening, Gatwick airport had to close its runway on several occasions, leading to the cancellation of quite a few flights, owing to the irresponsible use of a drone. Will the Minister say whether the Government will consider reviewing the use of unmanned aerial vehicles around airports?

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the dangers that drones can pose to aircraft, but drones are also used illegally to supply drugs to prisons and are used by terrorists and criminals further afield. That is why this Government set up a group chaired by me and the Ministry of Defence about a year ago to look at measures that we can put in place not only to deal with the technological challenge that drones present, but to ensure that we counter drones in a way that fits with the idea of an open society in which law-abiding citizens can continue to use drones for their pleasure or for their work.

T6. [900113] Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): The prohibitive cost of testing for novel psychoactive substances is causing considerable expense to police forces in enforcing the current law. The present law on novel psychoactive substances simply is not working, so will the Home Secretary follow the Welsh Government’s example and work with her Cabinet colleagues towards making that a UK-wide policy?

Sarah Newton: I simply do not agree with the hon. Gentleman. The Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 has proved to be an incredibly useful tool for police officers and detecting crime.

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend is right, and he has raised the issue before. That is why we have given some extra funding to Action Fraud to improve the process of managing the triage. At the same time, through the national cyber strategy, we are starting to see money going into the investments we require. Working with senior police leadership, whom I met last week, we are

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Having lost more than 800 police officers and almost a quarter of its funding, Northumbria police have just announced that they are closing every single Newcastle police station front desk outside working hours. Given all the reassurances we have heard today, why is Northumbria police still being obliged to make operational decisions based on cost cutting, and not on preventing and detecting crime?

Amber Rudd: I say to all colleagues on both sides of the House that we have protected police spending—

Oral Answers to Questions

3 JULY 2017

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T7. [900113] Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): West Yorkshire police are still reeling from cuts dating back to 2010, when they lost 20% of their force. Will we look again at the way police stations are being closed? There are still cuts in police funding and police stations are being sold off. That is preventing the service from being what it should be. Will we look again at those cuts?

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend is right, and he has raised the issue before. That is why we have given some extra funding to Action Fraud to improve the process of managing the triage. At the same time, through the national cyber strategy, we are starting to see money going into the investments we require. Working with senior police leadership, whom I met last week, we are
also trying to make sure that the response from forces to cyber-crime is consistent because, as he knows, it is very inconsistent at the moment. For too long, some forces have thought that cyber does not belong to them while other forces have done a very good job. We want to make sure that there is a consistent response right across the board.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): My right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) pointed out that 30% of applications for permanent residence are turned down, to a large extent because of the complexities of the process. Would it not be sensible to simplify the process now, instead of waiting until next year for the new system?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. It is correct that the system we are currently using is not the one that was designed for leaving the European Union and for allowing EU members here to apply for settled status. That is why my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced that we will be providing a new system, which will be available by the end of next year; we are allowing people to make sure that they get additional information as it comes along and that their name is registered so that they get sent that information, but we need the time to build that system. We are confident it will be ready by the end of next year and provide a streamlined, effective online system for those applications to go through.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): In last month’s birthday honours list, Alex Murray, who until very recently was Solihull’s police commander, received an OBE for his work. Will the Minister join me not only in congratulating Alex, and indeed all police in Solihull, who do such a tremendous job, but in recognising the need for a fair funding settlement for West Midlands police?

Amber Rudd: I am delighted to congratulate Alex Murray on his well-earned OBE—and all the other police officers and constables whose work was so rightly recognised. Perhaps we could also, from this House, recognise the good work that has been done by all police and emergency services, particularly over the past three and a half months, given the tremendous strains there have been on the work they have been having to do.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The provision of accommodation for asylum seekers is the responsibility of the Home Office and its contractors. What recent discussions have they had to ensure that such accommodation complies with fire prevention and safety regulations?

Brandon Lewis: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. I visited some of those centres just last week, when I raised that very issue. I am writing to all suppliers across the country to raise that point, to make sure that they are fully aware of their duty of care and work to make sure that fire safety is of paramount importance for them.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry but we must move on; demand has exceeded supply, as is very often the case in this place.
Energy Price Cap

3.36 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy if he will make a statement on the Government’s intention for an energy price cap.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): Following a two-year inquiry, the Competition and Markets Authority found that energy customers on standard variable tariffs were paying on average £1.4 billion a year more than would be the case in a competitive market. That is completely unacceptable, so my party’s manifesto committed to introduce a safeguard tariff to extend the price protection currently in place for some vulnerable customers—those on pre-payment meters—to more customers on the poorest-value tariffs. The energy regulator, Ofgem, has the powers necessary to impose such a price cap without delay, and I wrote to its chief executive on 21 June to ask it to use its powers to do so. Today, the regulator has replied and announced that it will work with consumer groups to take measures, including extending the current safeguard tariff for those on pre-payment meters to a wider group of consumers, and move urgently to implement these changes.

I welcome this initial proposal—it is a step in the right direction—but I will wait to see the actual proposals turned into action to cut bills, as the test of whether the regulator’s changes go far enough is whether they move sufficiently to eradicate the detriment to consumers that the CMA identified. I remain prepared to legislate if they do not, and I hope that such legislation would command wide support across the House.

Dr Whitehead: I thank the Minister for his response. Does he recall that during the election his party placed the promise of an overall cap on energy prices at the centre of its manifesto? Indeed, does he recall the Prime Minister stating:

“I am making this promise: if I am re-elected on 8 June, I will take action to end this injustice by introducing a cap on unfair energy price rises. It will protect around 17 million families on standard variable tariffs from being exploited with sudden and unjustified increases in bills”?

Does the Secretary of State accept that Ofgem’s response to his letter of 21 June on energy prices falls far short of implementing that promise and that, although there are welcome suggestions on safeguarding tariffs and capping warrant charges for the installation of pre-pay meters, those measures would affect only 2.5 million customers, leaving more than 14 million SVT customers completely unprotected from price rises over the next period? Will he confirm that his letter did not ask Ofgem to consider introducing a general price cap? Will he tell the House why it did not, even though the chief executive officer of Ofgem confirmed earlier this year that it would have the discretionary power to implement an energy price cap?

Does the Secretary of State intend to pass legislation to require Ofgem to introduce a price cap, or is he now content to let his firm election promise of a cap fall by the wayside? If so, what does he have to say to the 17 million people on standard variable tariffs who thought that relief from rip-off price rises was on its way but will now feel completely betrayed by this policy U-turn?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his questions. I hope he will see that I answered many of his points in my initial response to the urgent question. He will share my view—indeed, I think it is his view, too—that we should act as soon as possible to provide relief to consumers. That will require Ofgem to use its powers. It has powers that it can use immediately, and I have encouraged it to do so.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned my letter. I am sure that, as he was hoping to come into government, he studied the prospective use of the powers, so he will know that legislation requires me to ask Ofgem for advice. I did so under exactly those terms and Ofgem has responded by saying that it will work with consumer groups to identify how far the protection should go. I have been clear that I want the detriment of £1.4 billion a year to be eradicated. It is a test of Ofgem’s responsiveness that it should use its powers to that end. The constituents of Government and Opposition Members will look to the regulator to make use of its powers to prevent the continuation of such an unacceptable situation, which involves more than £1 billion a year.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy what the true level of a cap should be.

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend has done great work with many Members from various parties to establish that there is an appetite and need to tackle the problem exposed by the CMA, which has been going on for too long. In response to my letter, Ofgem has said today that it will work with consumer groups and come forward with a range of responses. I will look at them closely, as I know my hon. Friend will, and I am sure that the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee will, too. I have said clearly that the test of the adequacy of the responses is that they address the clear detriment that the authorities have identified.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The UK Government really lack strategy right across the energy sector. The £20 billion Hinkley Point C project will add to future household bills, mention of energy was sadly lacking in the Green Paper that was published before the election, and now there is this lack of a joined-up approach to an energy cap. Will the Secretary of State confirm the Government’s plans to protect the 14 million people who will not be covered by the current proposals? Of the £1.4 billion that the CMA has said is going to the big companies instead of staying in consumers’ pockets, how much will be returned to consumers under the measures that are being introduced? He said that he might consider legislation, but what is his timescale for reviewing what is happening and deciding whether there is a need to act? Will he ask Ofgem to determine what the true level of a cap should be?
Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman talks about energy strategy, and it is right that the Government have taken a decision—this was ducked by previous Governments for decades—to renew our nuclear power stations that are coming to the end of their lives. He will know that the SNP Government in Scotland agreed to extend the lives of nuclear power stations there, and he will also know about the impact of our success on renewable energy, specifically offshore wind, in Scotland. I have had fruitful discussions with colleagues throughout Scotland, especially in the remote islands, about the future possibilities for that.

On Ofgem’s response to my letter, I have set out clearly that it has said it will work with and consult consumer groups, and come up with a range of options. The £1.4 billion detriment has to be eradicated, and that is the test of whether the proposals are acceptable. I am sure that the House wants to scrutinise them as much as I do.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): My right hon. Friend inherited a system that relies increasingly on dear energy, which drives up household bills. Is there anything that he can do to bring a greater amount of cheaper energy into the mix so that bills reduce in five or 10 years’ time?

Greg Clark: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We need to ensure that we meet our important climate change commitments at a competitive cost—for consumers and for businesses—and that we obtain the industrial benefits from having a supply chain in this country. That is exactly why we devote a chapter of the industrial strategy Green Paper to future plans to make the most of the clean energy transition in all respects.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Having seen the recent report, surely it is safe to say that wind and solar will be the future for low-cost energy, but there was a Duke Ellington song called “How long has this been going on?” The fact is that this has been going on too long—this exploitation of people who cannot avoid paying above the price. Is it not about time that markets means that it is possible for suppliers, especially the dominant ones, to identify the customers who are the least likely to switch. As my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) said, they are often among the most vulnerable. It is unacceptable to use that regulation to an answer that puts money back in people’s pockets, rather than taking it out?

Greg Clark: In response to the first part of the hon. Gentleman’s question, I welcome, as he does, the huge progress that has been made not just in the deployment of renewables, but in the cost reductions that we have seen. That process has created jobs across the UK, especially in coastal towns. I had the pleasure of opening the Siemens wind blade factory in Hull, which created 1,000 good jobs. However, he is right that the detriment has been going on too long, which was why the Government asked the CMA to investigate the industry root and branch. It has identified £1.4 billion of detriment, and I have made it absolutely clear that that detriment needs to be returned to the pockets of consumers.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): May I tell the Secretary of State that the latest data show that 2,687 households in my constituency are estimated to be in fuel poverty? That is 6.6% of all households. What more can be done to identify these vulnerable groups and ensure that they have the best advice and information about switching tariffs? The suggestion that people search online is not the way forward. Perhaps it would be more helpful to have a better dialogue between the consumer and the energy provider.

Greg Clark: I agree with my hon. Friend. One feature of the energy market is that the poorer someone is, the larger the proportion of their income that they spend on energy. That is why it is imperative that vulnerable consumers should not be required go on the internet every few months to check that their tariff has not defaulted to a much higher one. That was the reason for my letter to Ofgem, and it is why I want its response to be vigorous. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that an aspect of the wider set of policies is to make it easier for consumers to know the price of energy and how much they consume, and smart meters are being introduced to help more people to do that.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Has the Secretary of State seen the analysis and evidence of former independent energy regulators who say that the consumer detriment pointed to by the CMA in this market was based on seriously flawed methodology? If he has not, will he look at that and report back to the House?

Greg Clark: I have seen that. This two-year inquiry conducted by the CMA identified £1.4 billion of detriment, which is a huge amount of money. When our constituents see the difference—it can be up to £100 a year—that they pay for a dual fuel bill by being on a dual fuel tariff, they know that that is significant amount.

The CMA said that suppliers have “unilateral market power” over their inactive customer base and could exploit their position by pricing their SVTs above a level that could be justified. That cannot go on.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it will take more than easier switching to encourage a fairer energy market in this country?

Greg Clark: A response is required from the regulator; this is a regulated industry. The development of modern markets means that it is possible for suppliers, especially dominant ones, to identify the customers who are the least likely to switch. As my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) said, they are often among the most vulnerable. It is unacceptable to use that information to sting them, and regulation has to catch up with that.

Mr Speaker: I think it is time that we heard again from the good doctor—Dr David Drew.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): It is my lucky day today, but I am sure it will not continue. I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

As much as we welcome the attempt to deal with fuel poverty, the Secretary of State must realise that there is an adverse effect on renewables at the margins, which will not come forward because of this fairly blunt pricing structure. Will he look into that and ensure that there is still a drive forward for renewables?
Greg Clark: We are seeing a big increase in the deployment of renewables as the price comes down, as the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) said. The effect of the overcharging—the abuse—is not a return to consumers, and this is not about the increased deployment of renewables. In the analysis of the CMA, the practice results in profits that are higher than they would be in a competitive market and relative inefficiency on the part of the suppliers. Consumers should not be paying for either of those.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Many energy consumers, particularly those on low incomes, do not pay their energy bills by direct debit, but they get huge increased charges from many of the energy companies when they do pay, even when they do so on time. Will my right hon. Friend look into this and make sure that people who do not pay their energy bills by direct debit get a fair energy bill?

Greg Clark: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. As I said, the poorest 10% of households spend 10% of their household expenditure on energy, whereas the richest 10% spend 3% of theirs on it. We need to look particularly at the conditions of more vulnerable consumers to ensure that they are not disadvantaged. My right hon. Friend mentioned one of the ways in which they are.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Are we not tinkering at the edges and doing a little bit of window dressing? I think that we all agree that the energy market appears to be dysfunctional. We saw that best at the beginning of this year when there was an increase in tariffs across the board that bore no relation to wholesale prices, but had everything to do with the exchange rate, particularly that with the euro, as most of our domestic companies are actually based in France or Germany. The big six are essentially operating as a cartel, not in the interests of the consumer.

Greg Clark: I am not sure that I would give them the excuse of exchange rate movements. The Competition and Markets Authority has said that suppliers have unilateral market power over this part of their customer base. This is a regulated market. Ofgem has the powers to introduce and extend the price gap, and my view is that it should use those powers now.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Going back to switching, does the Secretary of State think that more needs to be done to make it much easier to switch, particularly for our more vulnerable constituents?

Greg Clark: I agree with my hon. Friend. While there should certainly not be barriers in the way, it also should not be necessary for people to spend every evening on the internet checking whether their bill has gone up by an outrageous margin. If people are loyal to a brand, it is not unreasonable for them to expect to be treated reasonably, especially as that brand may be a trusted brand. The regulator should enforce that.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): We produce far more electricity in Wales than we use, yet we pay the highest electricity prices in the British state. More than a third of our households are in fuel poverty. Does that not suggest that Westminster control over Welsh energy policy is not working?

Greg Clark: No, it is one of the reasons why this investigation was commissioned and why what I have asked Ofgem to consider and enact will be particularly important to the hon. Gentleman’s constituents in Wales.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming Ofgem’s proposal to consult on more measures to help microbusinesses?

Greg Clark: I do welcome that. We have talked about household consumers, and for many very small businesses, their energy bill is also an important component of their costs. In my request for advice, which it was technically necessary to make to Ofgem, I asked for that advice to apply to microbusinesses as well.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The usual vested interests—the big six—were on the airwaves this morning advising consumers to switch their energy supplier, but if consumers really want to see a change to this rip-off of energy prices, do they not have to switch Governments?

Greg Clark: No, it was this Government who referred the whole industry to the Competition and Markets Authority. When the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) was Energy Secretary, I urged this measure on him, and he rejected it flat, so it is this Government who have exposed the level of the detriment, and it is this Government who are acting to put a cap in place to prevent this abuse—that did not happen under Labour.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): As welcome as a price cap will undoubtedly be, does the Secretary of State agree that the real key to bringing down prices for consumers is the liberalisation of the energy market through the digitisation of the energy system, storage in front of and behind the meter, and a demand-side response?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend, who is well informed about such issues, is absolutely right. The opportunity that smart meters bring is that people can have much more knowledge and control of their energy use, and use that to get the best deals available. That is why the roll-out of smart meters is such an important part of our reforms to the energy market.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): But does the outcome of the CMA inquiry not tell the Secretary of State, as a reasonable man, that this is the end of the road for the system? Privatisation did not work, the regulatory system has not worked, and we have had to have a CMA inquiry. What is needed is a fundamental reappraisal and change of this whole energy edifice?

Greg Clark: I am surprised to hear implicit support from the hon. Gentleman for the programme of nationalisation of this sector that the Labour party stood on. The billions of pounds that that would cost would not be the most important use of funds. This has been a regulated industry since privatisation many years ago, and the regulation needs to function better than it has.
Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): I have been listening carefully to my right hon. Friend’s answers. Am I right to understand that he would not be satisfied with a final solution from Ofgem that continued to cross-subsidise some customers out of a kind of loyalty premium paid by those who, even if not vulnerable, did not switch?

Greg Clark: This is a wake-up call for the industry. A model in which consumers who are known not to switch can be milked to pay a subsidy for other consumers in an unfair way—the CMA identified “unilateral market power”, which enables firms to exploit their position—has to come to an end.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): While I welcome proposals to make it easier to switch away from poor deals, does my right hon. Friend agree that Ofgem needs to go much further than it suggested in its letter to him this morning to protect consumers from exploitation?

Greg Clark: There is a clear expectation that I want the detriment that the CMA has identified to be tackled once and for all. Ofgem has said that it will consult consumer groups, and I hope and expect that those consumer groups will share my hon. Friend’s analysis.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming Ofgem’s acknowledgment regarding the ability to put a cap in place? Should we not urge it to use the power fully?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is right, and the proposal to consult consumer groups and to go beyond the CMA’s remedies—at least what the majority report of the CMA recommended—is welcome. As I said, that is a step in the right direction, but I would want to see this put out in detail and implemented before I would be satisfied with it.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Speaking as someone who represents an industrial town, has my right hon. Friend, as part of the wider debate on these issues, had the opportunity to assess what impact nationalising the energy companies would have on household and commercial energy bills?

Greg Clark: I have indeed. The impact of finding the billions of pounds necessary to take these industries into public ownership would not only be a disaster for our public finances, but the destruction of investor confidence in a whole range of industries that we need investment in.

Mr Speaker: I call Julian Smith. I mean Julian Knight.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I did not think that I could have been behind someone else, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: You are not a senior Government Whip, Sir, but at least you are a Knight.

Julian Knight: I was a BBC News consumer affairs reporter for five years, and during that time I saw the havoc that can be wrought by pre-payment metering. Does my right hon. Friend agree that practices such as rip-off emergency credit, which makes a payday loan look reasonable, need to be brought to heel, and that we should welcome Ofgem’s proposal to extend the current safeguard tariff for consumers on pre-payment meters?

Greg Clark: It can only be a matter of time before my hon. Friend enjoys the position to which you referred, Mr Speaker.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It has been the practice of this Government to intervene when there are abuses, especially of vulnerable people in the way in which he describes. That has happened with pre-payment meters, but the approach needs to go much further.

Mr Speaker: We are most grateful to the Secretary of State and to colleagues.
4.1 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the political situation in Northern Ireland.

As the House will recall, following the resignation of Martin McGuinness, the then Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland in January, an election took place to the Northern Ireland Assembly on 2 March. Despite intensive discussions in the three weeks following the election, the Northern Ireland parties were unable to reach agreement on the formation of a new Executive. In order to facilitate further discussions between the parties, Parliament passed legislation immediately prior to Dissolution extending the period in which an Executive could be formed until 29 June. Last Thursday—29 June—I made a statement in Belfast setting out that while differences remain between the parties, progress had been made and that it was still possible for a resolution to be achieved. I urged the parties to continue focusing their efforts on this, with the full support of the UK Government and, as appropriate, the Irish Government. In that regard, I want to recognise the contribution of the Irish Foreign Minister, Simon Coveney, and his predecessor, Charlie Flanagan.

In the past few days since the passing of the deadline, some progress has continued to be made, including on the most challenging issues, such as language, culture and identity, but gaps remain between the parties on a defined number of issues. The Government remain committed to working with the parties and the Irish Government to find a way to close these gaps quickly in order to reach an agreement that will pave the way for the restoration of devolved government. The Prime Minister has been actively involved, following on from her meeting with each of the parties, including speaking to Arlene Foster and Michelle O’Neill on Friday night. I continue to believe that a deal remains achievable, and if agreement is reached, I will bring forward legislation to enable an Executive to be formed, possibly as early as this week.

But time is short. It has been six months since a full Executive were in place to represent the people of Northern Ireland. In that time, it has been civil servants, not politicians, who have made decisions on spending. Without political direction, it has not been possible for strategic decisions to be made about priorities in areas such as education and health. This has created pressures that need to be addressed, and it has led to understandable concern and uncertainty among businesses and those relying on public services alike, as well as the community and voluntary sector. This hiatus cannot simply continue for much longer.

There is no doubt that the best outcome is for a new Executive to make those strategic decisions in the interests of all parts of the community in Northern Ireland. It should be for a new Executive to make swift decisions on their budget and make use of the considerable spending power available to them. While engagement between the parties continues and there is prospect of an agreement, it is right that those discussions remain our focus. At the same time, we will not forget our ultimate responsibility as a Government to uphold political stability and good governance in Northern Ireland.

I made a written statement in April that sought to provide clarity for those civil servants charged with allocating cash in Northern Ireland, to assist them in the discharge of their responsibilities. Some £42 million in resources flowing from the spring Budget and budget transfers from the last financial year remain unallocated, and they are intended to provide an incoming Executive with the room to decide how they should best be spent.

If we do not see resolution in the coming days, however, it will become urgent that we reflect further on whether clarity is required for Northern Ireland permanent secretaries about the allocation of those resources. In that situation we would also need to reflect carefully on how we might allocate funding made available to address immediate health and education pressures, as set out in last Monday’s statement on UK Government financial support for Northern Ireland, recognising Northern Ireland’s particular circumstances. If no agreement is reached, legislation in Westminster may then be required to give authority for the expenditure of Northern Ireland Departments through an appropriations Bill.

From my conversations with the head of the Northern Ireland civil service, I know that we have not quite reached that critical point yet. But that point is coming and the lack of a formal budget cannot be sustained indefinitely. Similarly, decisions on capital expenditure and infrastructure and public service reform in key sectors such as the health service cannot be deferred for much longer.

One area on which there is much consensus, however, is the need for greater transparency on political donations. In line with the commitment set out in the Conservative party’s Northern Ireland manifesto at the general election, I can confirm that I intend to propose legislation that will provide for the publication of all donations and loans received by Northern Ireland parties on or after 1 July 2017.

All of that reinforces further the importance of the parties coming together and reaching an agreement. It sets out, too, some of the hard choices we face if uncertainty persists. I am also conscious that, with the deadline now passed, I am under a duty to set a date for a new election. I will continue to keep that duty under review, but it seems unlikely that that would of itself resolve the current political impasse or address the ultimate need for political decision making, however we proceed.

As the Government for the whole United Kingdom, we will always govern in the interests of all those in the United Kingdom. Therefore, if resolution were to prove intractable and an Executive could not be restored, we would of course be ready to do what is needed to provide that political decision making in the best interests of Northern Ireland.

I am clear, however, that the return of inclusive, devolved government by a power-sharing Executive is what would be profoundly in the best interests of Northern Ireland, and that will remain our overriding focus in the crucial days ahead.

The UK Government will continue to govern in the interests of everyone in Northern Ireland by providing political stability and keeping an open and sustained dialogue with the parties and with the Irish Government, in accordance with the well-established three-stranded approach.
I stand ready to do what is necessary to facilitate the quick formation of an Executive once an agreement is reached, and that is where our focus should lie. I commend this statement to the House.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement and for his welcome efforts to keep me regularly updated on progress in the talks. I know that the Secretary of State, the Irish Foreign Minister, Simon Coveney, and all the parties have been working hard to try to narrow the gap on the outstanding issues, in particular on languages, culture and identity. I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State has not come here today to say that the shutters are coming down on the talks and I admire his sustained—if slightly surprising—optimism that a deal might be done this week.

People in Belfast and across Northern Ireland will have heard his contention that there remains the prospect of a deal. If that is achieved, he will enjoy the Opposition’s full support in putting in place whatever legislation is necessary to enable the Executive to reform and the Assembly to meet. But there will be legitimate frustration among many Northern Ireland citizens that fully six months after the Executive broke down, and little more than a week before the marching season reaches its apogee on 12 July, we remain at this impasse. There will also be some scepticism about the likelihood of his surmounting it in a few short days.

Hard questions must now be asked about what more the Government can do to assist the parties in moving forward. It is encouraging that the Prime Minister picked up the phone on Friday night to the leaders of the DUP and Sinn Fein. But I invite the Secretary of State, in the new spirit of free speech that seems to be abroad in the Conservative party, to agree with me that the Prime Minister could do a bit more. He could tell her to get on a plane to Belfast herself. I am sure that Arlene Foster would not mind lending the Prime Minister her plane for the weekend.

History tells us, on both sides of the House, that the direct involvement of the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach can sometimes help to bridge the divide in Northern Ireland and move things forward. It is a surprise to me that the Prime Minister continues to seem reluctant to take personal responsibility to break the deadlock. In fact, I think many in Northern Ireland would feel that the current Prime Minister has a particular duty to take some personal responsibility and get more involved because it was her decision to call an election in April that lengthened the hiatus and has taken us so close to 12 July, and her reliance on the DUP—a legitimate reliance, given the arithmetic of the House—that is being cited by other interlocutors in the talks as part of the reason for the impasse.

I agree with the Secretary of State that the hiatus simply cannot continue for much longer, but I would like to hear more from him about what he will do to resolve it. If it is not with greater hands on involvement by the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach, as I and others have suggested, does he think there is a role for a new independent—and perhaps international—chair for the talks, with fresh eyes and a new mandate? That too has been an important means of shifting things in the past.

I noted the coded warning that the Secretary of State gave, rightly, that if a way forward cannot be found, he will have to bring forward further budgetary transfers to give extra clarity and certainty to the Northern Ireland civil service. That may well be necessary and, if so, he would again enjoy our support, but I am not sure that it would provide much of a spur to the parties, because they are used to this limbo land after the last six months. I know he agrees with me that it is profoundly unsatisfactory for strategic decisions to be put off and for Northern Ireland to be in the hands of unelected civil servants, no matter how competent and well intentioned they are. An appropriations Bill may prove to be a bigger spur, but some—as the Secretary of State knows—will see that effectively as a return to direct rule. I am sure that that will be a position that he will wish to avoid and I would urge him to take all possible steps to avoid it.

I welcome the decision that the Secretary of State has taken today to legislate for publication of all political loans and donations received by parties in Northern Ireland after 1 July. That is an important step in normalising the politics of Northern Ireland, although it may strike some as ironic in the light of the recent deal with the DUP. Does he intend that the thresholds that will apply to that legislation will be the same as apply to donations and loans in the rest of the UK? Will the same requirement apply that all donors are registered voters in the UK?

Finally, I am sure the Secretary of State agrees that Northern Ireland needs its Assembly and Executive up and running as soon as possible. There is no greater illustration of that than the fact that we are now entering the Brexit negotiations in earnest. Northern Ireland effectively has no voice at that negotiating table; certainly not one that reflects all the traditions, culture and heritage of Northern Ireland. There is an absolute imperative to get the Executive back on their feet and to restore Northern Ireland’s voice. I am sure he will join me in urging all Members to urge all parties to make sure that that happens as soon as possible.

I certainly join the hon. Gentleman in underlining that core message. I appreciate and welcome the support he has given to the Government in trying to reach a point where agreement is concluded and we are able to move swiftly in this House. I appreciate the opportunity we have had to discuss these issues over the last few days and I will certainly maintain that dialogue with him.

The hon. Gentleman raises a number of points. He highlights the frustration of many people in Northern Ireland that no deal has been concluded thus far. A theme that I know binds us together is how we can achieve that conclusion, with an inclusive power-sharing Executive of locally elected politicians getting on and making decisions in the best interests of Northern Ireland.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the engagement of the Prime Minister. She has been involved throughout the process. She met all the leaders of the political parties in London and has maintained contact throughout this time. As I indicated, in recent days she has, as she has previously, spoken to the leaders of the two main parties. He will recognise that particular interventions may not necessarily have the desired outcome. From his previous involvement in Northern Ireland he will know of occasions that did not lead to the outcome he wished for at the time, in places such as Leeds Castle, for example.

Different solutions and scenarios present themselves in...
[James Brokenshire]
different cases. A defined number of issues remain outstanding and we need to give them our focus and attention, rather than extending out and changing the whole dynamic. We will continue to keep matters under careful review. Resolution is possible if the willingness is there. It is with that urgency that we must approach the days ahead.

There is opportunity here. I spoke about the additional funding that could be available to an incoming Executive to enable them to act and to take strategic decisions. It is profoundly in Northern Ireland’s interest for locally elected politicians to do that.

I will write to the hon. Gentleman and set out further details on transparency issues relating to political donations—I think that is probably the best way to do it—and I will put a letter in the House of Commons Library. I will also introduce legislation spelling that out so that everyone will be able to see the next steps very clearly.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Consistent with what I said to the House last week, I am keen to uphold the tradition that Members wishing to take part in exchanges on a statement should be those, and only those, who were here at its start. I do not wish to embarrass individuals. A couple of Members who came in late are, very graciously, not standing, but that is not uniform. Those who came in late and are standing should not be doing so. It is quite wrong to wander in halfway through a statement and then expect to be called. Some people might even think it a tad arrogant, but there we go.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): Regardless of the difficulties or disagreements among the parties in Northern Ireland, should not those issues be sorted out within the Assembly and the Executive, and not in this place? Or is it the case that one party, or maybe more, is actually looking for a rewriting of the rules?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his continued focus on Northern Ireland, following his chairmanship of the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs in the last Parliament. I think all parties are focused on seeking an outcome and ensuring a functioning Executive, rather than fundamental changes to the rules. That is where we should focus our attention, because as he suggested, that is where I think he realises that decision making should happen—within Northern Ireland, within the Assembly and within the Executive, acting in the best interests of Northern Ireland.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is disappointing to say the least that a deal has not been made and that the proper governance of Northern Ireland cannot restart. Does the Secretary of State accept that his party’s deal with the DUP makes reaching a deal more difficult? Does he consider the link between his ministerial colleague, the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), and the Constitutional Research Council, which made the questionable Brexit donation to the DUP to be an additional and unwelcome complication? Why did it take three years from the consultation on increasing the transparency of political donations in Northern Ireland to get to a position where the Government are now announcing that they will be introducing legislation? The muck that surrounds this whole affair at times makes it increasingly difficult to trust that there is true impartiality on the part of the Government. What can the Secretary of State do to clear up the questions around the Constitutional Research Council and its donations, and restore confidence in the Government’s impartiality?

Lastly, the devolved Administrations are supposed to be involved in the Brexit negotiations. Can the Secretary of State tell us who has been providing the input from Stormont and whether it is less or more than the input from the Scottish Government and the Welsh Government?

Very lastly—[Interjection]—what representations were made to him by the Secretary of State for Scotland about the deal done between the Government and the DUP?

Mr Speaker: Order. There was a certain amount of harrumphing from a sedentary position at the continuation of the hon. Lady’s line of interrogation, but I can confirm, in defence of her, that she was fully 36 seconds within her time.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): It’s the way she says it.

Mr Speaker: Order. That is a matter of stylistic objection—or even, on the part of the right hon. Gentleman, aesthetic objection—but it cannot be said to be a matter of order.

James Brokenshire: It may not surprise the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) to know that I do not agree with the analysis that she set out in her questions. We stand four-square by our undertakings under the Belfast agreement and its successors, and the agreement relating to decision making here at Westminster does not contravene those important elements—something that is specifically spelled out in that agreement.

The hon. Lady highlights the issue of Brexit and transparency. We conducted a consultation with all the political parties in Northern Ireland to seek their views first, and that was the reason for the decision we have taken today, reflecting those views and that input and the commitment in my party’s manifesto.

The hon. Lady highlights the issue of Brexit and contact with the Northern Ireland Executive. Obviously there are not elected politicians there, so we have sought to engage with the Northern Ireland civil service within the Executive, but that takes us only so far. That is why I profoundly believe that we need to see an Executive in place, to be an additional voice for Northern Ireland, strongly making those points, and to ensure that, alongside them, we get the best possible deal for Northern Ireland through EU exit.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. What an extraordinary state of affairs: I was planning to call the right hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson), but he now seems a little disengaged from our proceedings. He toddled up to the Chair and I thought he was interested. He can speak—go on Mr Paterson, let’s hear it.
Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): I came to apologise for missing the first two minutes, but you have called me. Mr Speaker, and I am grateful.

Can my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State confirm that unless we have a fully up-and-running Executive, we cannot implement the devolution of corporation tax, which will benefit every single citizen in Northern Ireland?

Mr Speaker: And there I was thinking that the right hon. Gentleman had come up to the Chair and just muttered some prosaic pleasantry, which I readily greeted. It is very honest of him to say that he was late, but I had not known that he was, and therefore as far as I am concerned he was not.

James Brokenshire: Regrettably, the answer to my right hon. Friend’s question is that without an Executive, we cannot implement the devolution of corporation tax cannot happen. That underlines one of many reasons why an Executive is needed to get on and ensure that that vision right hon. Friend’s question is that without an Executive concerned he was not. It is very honest of him to say that he was late, but I had not known that he was, and therefore as far as I am concerned he was not.

James Brokenshire: As the right hon. Gentleman may know, our consultation about political transparency concerned the narrow elements that were contained within that, but I know that other issues and other points had been raised, including the matter to which he has referred, and they will remain under consideration. As for the legacy issue, I think there is a growing consensus that we need to get the consultation out there, and show everyone the work that has been done on the implementation of the Stormont House bodies so that we begin to see that coming into effect. I earnestly hope that we will be able to move forward, and that it will take place following the establishment of an Executive.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): We welcome the statement, and let me say, for the record, that the Democratic Unionist party was ready last Thursday to form a Government and to appoint our Ministers. There is no question of any reticence in our party about forming an Executive, and we have been encouraged by the Government to do so.

Will the Government proceed to publish the legacy proposals in the event that an Executive is not formed? We welcome what the Secretary of State has said about donations, but will that be extended to include donations to political parties operating in Northern Ireland that are routed via the Republic of Ireland?

James Brokenshire: As the right hon. Gentleman may know, our consultation about political transparency concerned the narrow elements that were contained within that, but I know that other issues and other points had been raised, including the matter to which he has referred, and they will remain under consideration. As for the legacy issue, I think there is a growing consensus that we need to get the consultation out there, and show everyone the work that has been done on the implementation of the Stormont House bodies so that we begin to see that coming into effect. I earnestly hope that we will be able to move forward, and that it will take place following the establishment of an Executive.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Is not the simple truth that, whereas the Democratic Unionist party has managed to obtain £1 billion from the Treasury to spend on the people of Northern Ireland, Sinn Féin—Gerry Adams and those at Connolly House who are refusing to re-form the Executive—will be in no position to ensure that their constituents receive an equal share of that money, because there will be no Sinn Féin Minister in the Executive, and the money will be spent either by Ministers in this place or by civil servants in Northern Ireland?

James Brokenshire: I think the simple point is that an Executive consisting of a First Minister, a Deputy First Minister and other Ministers will be able to make decisions on budgets and all other issues throughout the community. The funds that have been outlined—to be spent on, for example, health, education, mental health, infrastructure and broadband—will be, profoundly, for everyone in Northern Ireland. All communities will benefit from those funds. I think that that underlines the need for the Executive, and the need to ensure that locally elected politicians are the ones who make the decisions.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): We are pleased that the Secretary of State has told us that it will still be possible for the two sides in Northern Ireland to reach a deal within the next few days. He will know as well as I do that trust is imperative in the current talks. Will he explain a little more fully why he is so reluctant to try to seal that deal by asking the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach to go to Belfast and attempt to bring the parties together so that the final measures that are necessary to secure a deal can be taken?

James Brokenshire: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says. I stress that the Prime Minister has been actively involved throughout the process, and has been having meetings with all the party leaders. She had a further conversation with the Taoiseach last week about how matters were progressing, and received updates from me and from Simon Coveney, the Irish Foreign Minister, that were received by the Taoiseach as well. There is that continued active engagement, but if further interventions are required we will, of course, keep matters under review in order to establish what will bring about an effective resolution and produce the Executive whom hon. Gentleman and I want to see in place.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): Of course I understand the points my right hon. Friend has made about budgets and all other issues throughout the community. The funds that have been outlined—to be spent on, for example, health, education, mental health, infrastructure and broadband—will be, profoundly, for everyone in Northern Ireland. All communities will benefit from those funds. I think that that underlines the need for the Executive, and the need to ensure that locally elected politicians are the ones who make the decisions.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): You know, Mr Speaker, that I do not often hanker after the days of Tony Blair, but if we had reached this state of affairs under his premiership, we would have seen not just involvement by the Prime Minister, but active leadership, and he would probably have made the statement to the House. With all due respect to the Secretary of State, it is a matter of regret that the Prime Minister is not here today.
The Secretary of State is right when he says that we need greater transparency on political donations, but he must be aware that the House has already expressed its view on that matter. The Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2014 set the relevant date as being 1 January 2014. Why is he now seeking to change that?

James Brokenshire: The simple point on that is that it is about compliance with the regulations and seeing that those making donations are able to make those determinations based on the law that is in existence, rather than looking at retrospection. Obviously, there will be further opportunity for the House to debate that issue. However, I think that that is the clearest way of doing it.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): While the political situation remains in limbo in Northern Ireland, elderly and frail British former soldiers are even now being brought before the courts on serious charges, while multiple terrorist murderers walk free, having served either derisory sentences or no sentences at all. Can the Secretary of State assure us that the Government remain focused on rectifying that inequality of treatment?

James Brokenshire: I know that this is an issue that my right hon. Friend and others have raised consistently in the House. I commend them for the focus they have provided. The Government remain committed to implementing the Stormont House institutions and that reform which is about fair, balanced and proportionate efforts in respect of the investigations of the past. That is what the agreement sets out clearly in applying the rule of law but, as I have said on a number of occasions in the House, I and others across Government will never tire of recognising the tireless contribution that so many in our security and armed forces made to ensure that we have peace today. Without their contribution, that simply would not have been possible.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): It is not easy to establish devolved government. We achieved that in 2006-07 because the Prime Minister of the day spent 80 hours in St Andrews hands-on, dealing with all parties with the Taoiseach of Ireland. That is just advice to the Secretary of State; it is not a disservice to him and his colleagues to have the Prime Minister engaged heavily.

Given the £1 billion that has been committed by the Government, could the Secretary of State assure the House that in the absence of devolved government no expenditure decisions will be taken by civil servants on priorities for the expenditure of that money?

James Brokenshire: There are clear needs in Northern Ireland, which is why I made the point that I did on the potential need for further clarification for the Northern Ireland civil service in respect of budgetary issues. I also underline that last week’s statement recognised the particular needs and circumstances of Northern Ireland and that there are some urgent and pressing priorities. That is why I think an Executive needs to be put into place, but clearly, in acting in Northern Ireland’s best interests, we will keep that very closely under review if it is not possible to form an Executive in the coming days.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I would like to ask my right hon. Friend about the situation on the border, especially regarding the Brexit negotiations. As a Member of this House who was born in Northern Ireland, I know how important it is not to go back to the hard border that I remember from my childhood. Given that both the British and EU negotiators have said that they do not wish to see a hard border, how soon can we ensure that the situation is resolved to make sure that the people of Northern Ireland know that their future is more certain?

James Brokenshire: As my hon. Friend will know from her experience, the issue of Northern Ireland is a priority item in the Brexit negotiations. Discussions have commenced. We continue to work on that to provide assurance on the border and other issues. As a Government, we believe that a solution can be found and that there is good will on all sides in relation to finding that solution, reaching that agreement through the common travel area and looking at the issue of the movement of goods across the border to ensure that it remains invisible and seamless. It is a clear and firm priority of the Government to achieve that.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): My party is also disappointed that the Executive have not been re-established after being brought down by Sinn Féin earlier this year, but will the Secretary of State confirm that only one party in Northern Ireland is insisting on any preconditions on the setting up of the Executive, and if those preconditions are unreasonable—including the prosecution of soldiers and policemen, the establishment of an Irish language Act which would cost tens of millions of pounds, the commitment by that party to overthrow its manifesto commitments, and a refusal to sit with Arlene Foster, who won the last election—they will amount to blackmail, and the establishment of any Executive on that basis would be fragile and could not possibly exist? Will he also confirm this to us today: has he given into Sinn Féin’s demand that there be no transparency on the funds it receives through the Irish Republic from foreign countries to its own party coffers?

James Brokenshire: I know that there are strong views on a number of issues. The hon. Gentleman’s party and Sinn Féin continue in discussions to find a resolution to these issues and differences, and they have even been continuing today, shortly before this sitting started. The focus needs to be on that. We must have an Executive performing in the best interests of Northern Ireland; I know the hon. Gentleman’s party has strongly indicated that it wants to see that. We will continue to support all the parties involved in this process to find that resolution, and to look beyond the differences between parties. We recognise also that the political process in Northern Ireland is very special, and that so many people have worked so hard to get us to this point. I think that the hon. Gentleman and others all want to see that progressing into the future, and to see that positive bright future for Northern Ireland across all communities.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): The additional funds committed to Northern Ireland in recent weeks continue to be wrongly labelled as money for a single party in the Province. Will the Secretary of State reaffirm that this is in fact money for the whole Province; to be spent by all parties, and that it represents a billion more reasons for political leadership to be restored at Stormont?
James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend makes a clear and important point: the funding package announced last week was firmly for the benefit of all communities, so that we see investment in infrastructure, which has not kept pace with other parts of the UK, and to deal with issues such as employment rates, which are behind those of other nations of the United Kingdom, and also to deal with reform in certain key public services. That is to the benefit of all communities in Northern Ireland. We want to see the Executive able to make decisions and feeling the real benefit of that; that provides that real potential and real opportunity which we want to see seized.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): This crisis has meandered across six months, two elections and, as of today, two and a half missed deadlines, but I still do not get any sense of urgency from the Secretary of State. There is a time for passive observation and there is a time for intensive intervention; why will the Prime Minister not go to Belfast with the Taoiseach and find a resolution to this that we all want to see?

James Brokenshire: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we do want to see that resolution. Interventions have been made by the UK and Irish Governments and others seeking supportive voices to assist in the community and elsewhere to get the parties focused on seeing that bigger picture, looking beyond difference, and being able to get an Executive formed. We will use all interventions appropriately to get that outcome. That is why I make the point about the work the Prime Minister has done, the work that I have done, the work the Irish Government have done and the work the Taoiseach and Irish Foreign Minister have done, but I also agree with the hon. Gentleman that time is progressing and we do not want to see the sort of interventions I have highlighted in this statement. Time is moving on, and if we do not see resolution quickly, there will be a need to take various steps around the budget and other areas. We are still working hard to support the parties, but ultimately it is for the parties to reach that agreement, to see those divides crossed so an Executive are formed. I can assure the hon. Gentleman of the urgency, attention, time and effort that continues to be made in that regard.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): As the only Member on this side of the Chamber who voted for transparency of donations three years ago, I welcome my right hon. Friend’s decision to bring that forward. In relation to resolving the impasse, can he confirm that the £1 billion announced last week will be sufficient, and that there will be no need for more money from Westminster to get this deal over the line?

James Brokenshire: The funds that were announced last week should provide a sense of opportunity and potential for issues that are clearly of relevance to Northern Ireland, such as the lack of transport infrastructure compared with other parts of the United Kingdom and the digital and broadband issue, which has lagged behind other parts of the United Kingdom. The funds should give a sense of incentive and opportunity for an Executive to deliver and get on with so many of the things they want to see.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Is the Minister aware that this impasse in Northern Ireland has been complicated by the fact that the result of the general election has meant the Government getting involved in a protection money racketing system of about £1 billion? As a suggestion, may I say that the only way to get rid of that is for the Prime Minister to call another general election? We know that she is frightened to death of doing it, because she knows that the Labour party would win. We would form a Government and get rid of this almighty mess. There would be no protection racket money, and we would have a decent Labour Government that would get rid of austerities. Get on with it!

James Brokenshire: It sounds as though the hon. Gentleman has still not recognised the result of the last election. The House will be interested in his comments, but I do not think that they will make a difference to solving the real problems that we are wrestling with in Northern Ireland.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): If the impasse is not broken, and if direct rule is imposed, can the Joint Ministerial Committee on EU Negotiations perform its role without the participation of one of the constituent parts of the British state?

James Brokenshire: As I have already indicated in my statement, we are firmly not looking at interventions that even get close to the point that the hon. Gentleman alludes to. It would profoundly not be in Northern Ireland’s best interests to head down that way, which is why I have made my points about the Executive. The best way to address his point is to have an Executive in place with a First Minister and Deputy First Minister who are able to represent Northern Ireland and argue firmly in Northern Ireland’s best interests on Brexit and many other issues.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): This is an unusual Parliament, in that, because of the loss of Social Democratic and Labour party seats and the unwelcome continuing refusal of Sinn Féin Members to take their seats in this Chamber, there is no representation here of Irish nationalist opinion from the island of Ireland for the first time in many decades. Given what the Secretary of State has said in his statement about the possibility of having to introduce legislation in the near future, how will he ensure that that strain of opinion from Northern Ireland is fully taken into account in any consideration of that legislation?

James Brokenshire: I am certainly conscious, in my role as Secretary of State, of listening to voices from all parts of the community. Obviously the voices of the nationalist community are no longer represented in this House, and I will therefore continue to engage intensively with all parties in Northern Ireland. I will continue to listen and to hear the specific points that they make, and I will ensure that that is reflected in my own considerations and those of the Government more broadly as we look at the legislative programme ahead.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): The Secretary of State will know my utter commitment to devolution, but at some point there has to be a realisation that the parrot could possibly be dead, that it is deceased of life, that it is no more. If that is the case with devolution, will the Secretary of State put a timeframe on the life expectancy that is ultimately left in this dead bird? Will appropriations be moved before the summer recess?
James Brokenshire: The head of the Northern Ireland civil service has indicated that we have not yet reached the point at which an appropriation Bill needs to be passed. We are still a little way away from that. None the less, urgent issues need to be addressed about the financial position in Northern Ireland, which is why I made points in my statement about the potential need for further assurance to be granted. I firmly think that there is still life there, and the engagement that we continue to see underlines that. Having locally elected politicians serving the community in Northern Ireland is profoundly what is in Northern Ireland’s best interests. I know that the hon. Gentleman strongly believes in that, and the Government will certainly not be giving up on it. We are working tirelessly to ensure that we see that progress and see the implementation of a power-sharing Executive in a very short time.

Grenfell Tower

4.46 pm

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will update the House on the Government’s response to the Grenfell Tower tragedy and our safety inspections of cladding in other buildings.

Almost three weeks have passed since the catastrophe that hit Grenfell Tower. Progress has been made to help the survivors and people in the surrounding buildings who were affected. Landlords across the country have been taking measures to make their buildings safe. Sir Martin Moore-Bick has been appointed to lead a full public inquiry, and an independent expert panel is now advising my Department on any immediate action on fire safety that is required.

The disaster at Grenfell Tower should never have happened. The police investigation and public inquiry will find out why it did. Right now, the Government’s immediate priority is to provide every assistance to those who were affected and to take every precaution to avoid another tragedy in buildings with similar cladding. The Grenfell Tower victims unit is operating from my Department and providing a single point of access into Government. Staff from across Government continue to offer support at the Westway assistance centre and at a separate family bereavement centre. Almost £2.5 million has been distributed from the £5 million Grenfell Tower residents’ discretionary fund. Each affected household is receiving £5,500 to provide immediate assistance, and payments have been made to 112 households so far.

There has been much speculation about who was in Grenfell Tower on the night of the fire, and it is vital that we find out. As I announced yesterday, the Director of Public Prosecutions has made it clear that there will be no prosecution of tenants at Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk who may have been illegally sub-letting their property, so all tenants can be confident about coming forward with information for the authorities. There may have been people living in flats that were illegally sub-let who had no idea about the true status of their tenancy. Their families want to know if they perished in the fire. These are their sons, their daughters, their brothers, and their sisters. They need closure, and that is the least that they deserve. However, that cannot happen unless we have the information we need, so we are urging anyone with that information to come forward and to do so as quickly as they can.

The immediate response to the Grenfell disaster is being co-ordinated by the Grenfell response team, led by John Barradell. He is being supported by colleagues drawn from London Councils, the wider local government sector, the voluntary sector, police, health, and fire services, as well as central Government. Their expertise and hard work is making a huge difference, but it is only a temporary measure. It is also vital that we put in place long-term support for the longer-term recovery. It was right that the leader of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea took the decision to move on. I look forward to working with the new leader of the council, and I will look at every option to ensure that everyone affected by this tragedy has the long-term support they need.
The Prime Minister promised that every family who lost their home because of the fire will be offered a good-quality temporary home within three weeks, and the deadline is this Wednesday. I have been monitoring the progress of rehousing, and we will honour that commitment. Every home offered will be appropriate and of good quality. What we will not do is compel anyone to accept an offer of temporary accommodation that they do not want. Some families indicated that they wanted to remain as close as possible to their former home but, when they received their offer, took a look at the property and decided that it would be easier to deal with their bereavement if they moved further away. Some families have decided that, for the same reasons, they would prefer to remain in hotels for the time being. Other households have indicated that they would prefer to wait until permanent accommodation becomes available. Every household will receive an offer of temporary accommodation by this Wednesday, but every household will also be given the space to make this transition at their own pace and in a way that helps them recover from this tragedy.

The people affected by the disaster at Grenfell Tower need our assistance and are receiving it, but they also want answers. Sir Martin Moore-Bick has been appointed to lead a full public inquiry. He has visited Kensington and has met victims and survivors, as well as members of the local community who have done so much to help. After consulting the community, Sir Martin will then advise on the terms of the inquiry, and we will ensure there is legal support for victims so that they can play their full part.

We must allow that inquiry and the criminal investigation to run their course. Each must have the space to follow the evidence wherever it takes them. We must all be careful not to prejudge or prejudice either of them, but what we can do right now is take sensible precautions to avoid another tragedy. The Building Research Establishment is continuing to test the combustibility of cladding from councils and housing associations, as well as from private landlords. So far, all the samples of cladding tested have failed—that is 181 out of 181. It is obviously disturbing that there is such a large number of buildings with combustible cladding, and the priority now is to make those buildings safe. Where appropriate mitigating measures cannot be implemented quickly, landlords must provide alternative accommodation while the remedial work is carried out, and that is exactly what happened with the four tower blocks in Camden. Our primary concern has been buildings over 18 metres or six storeys in which people stay at night. Hospitals and schools are also being assessed.

We ourselves have asked questions about the testing regime after discovering the 100% failure rate so far. Last week I asked for the test process itself to be independently reviewed. That was done by the Research Institutes of Sweden, which confirmed that they believe the process to be sound. A full explanatory briefing note on the testing process has been made available on gov.uk. As the note explains, every failed test means that the panels are “unlikely to be compliant” with the limited combustibility requirement of the building regulations guidance. That has been confirmed by legal advice and by the advice of the independent expert panel, which was established last week. For use of the panels to be safe, landlords need to be confident that the whole wall system has been tested and shown to be safe.

We are not aware of any such system having passed the necessary tests, but I have asked the expert advisory panel to look into it further.

Almost three weeks have passed since the catastrophe that hit Grenfell Tower, and I know I speak for every Member of this House when I say that we are still all in shock. It is not just the terrible scale of the suffering; it is that it happened in 21st-century Britain in London’s richest borough. I will continue to direct the full resources of my Department to assist the Grenfell response team, and I will be working closely with the new leader of Kensington and Chelsea Borough Council to make sure there are plans in place for a longer-term recovery. I will return to the House regularly to update hon. Members on progress.

4.54 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for the prior copy of his statement. He struck an appropriate tone today. These are complex challenges for government, both national and local, but Ministers have been off the pace at every stage since this terrible fire. They have been too slow to grasp the scale of the problems people are facing and too slow to act. For the Grenfell Tower survivors, for the victims’ families and for the local community in north Kensington, underlying everything is the question of trust: that those in positions of power mean what they say, do what they promise and do not drag their feet before acting to deal with problems. That powerful message must be understood by Ministers, Kensington and Chelsea Council and the chair of the public inquiry, Sir Martin Moore-Bick.

The Grenfell Tower residents understood what the Prime Minister meant when she said: “I have fixed a deadline of three weeks for everybody affected to be found a home nearby.” It is three weeks on Wednesday since the fire. How many people are still in hotels? The Secretary of State gave the latest version of the promise today: “a good-quality temporary home within three weeks”. Does that include hotel rooms? How temporary is “temporary”? By what date will all residents affected by the fire be in permanent new homes? While we are trying to get the numbers clear, how many will those in hotels be able to move away from Grenfell Tower?

How many have not received the Government’s immediate assistance payments of £5,500?

Let me turn to the wider fears of those living in 4,000 other tower blocks around the country. The Government say that 600 tower blocks with cladding need safety checks, but nearly three weeks on the Secretary of State confirms today that only 181 have been tested so far—and all have failed. Will he accept that these tests are too slow and too narrow? Will he confirm that the Government are testing only one component of the cladding—not the panels, adhesives and insulation; not the cladding as a composite system; and not the installation method or impact on the buildings? All those things can affect fire-safety qualities. Importantly, will he confirm that cladding is not the whole story? We know that from the two coroners’ reports after the previous fires at Shirley Towers and Lakanal House, four years ago. So will he act now—not wait for the public inquiry—to reassure residents in all other tower blocks by starting the overhaul of building regulations; by retrofitting sprinkler systems, starting with the highest-risk blocks; and by making it very clear that the Government will fund, up front, the full costs of any necessary remedial works?
Turning to the public inquiry, which the Secretary of State mentioned, the Prime Minister has rightly set up this inquiry to get to the bottom of what went wrong at Grenfell Tower and help make sure this can never happen again. She said:

“No stone will be left unturned”.—[Official Report, 22 June 2017; Vol. 626, c. 168.]

Yet Sir Martin Moore-Bick has said:

“I’ve been asked to undertake this inquiry on the basis that it would be pretty well limited to the problems surrounding the start of the fire and its rapid development”.

So I say to the Secretary of State that I recognise the importance of the independence of the inquiry, but will he make it clear to the House today what brief Sir Martin has been given by the Prime Minister for this inquiry? As the Secretary of State said, John Barradell is leading the strategic co-ordination group at present, providing the emergency response, relief and leadership that Kensington and Chelsea Council failed to do after the fire. How long will it be running these council operations? What is the hand-back plan? Who will it hand back to?

There are deeper flaws in this council, beyond the very serious failings in response to the Grenfell Tower tragedy, and every public statement from the ruling politicians confirms that they are in denial. These are exactly the deeper problems that commissioners and a full corporate governance inspection would help put right. The Government are still off the pace. If this council were a school, it would be in special measures, fresh leadership would be needed and fresh confidence would be built, as it must be built in this council. Actions speak louder than words, and actions count most in helping the Grenfell Tower survivors, and in rebuilding their confidence in the future and the wider public trust that must be there for the residents who live in our tower blocks and make them their homes right across the country.

Sajid Javid: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments. He asked several questions, and I shall start with the first, on temporary housing. Our commitment has been clear and it is unchanged from day one: all residents of Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk will be offered temporary accommodation in Kensington and Chelsea or a neighbouring borough within three weeks. I just explained in my statement what that offer means. I want to make sure people are offered high-quality accommodation that is appropriate for their family type and size, but they should not and will not be forced to accept accommodation that they do not want to move into at this point.

I was at the Westway centre again on Saturday, and my hon. Friend the Housing Minister was there on Sunday. I met many of the residents and talked to them, mainly about their needs. I wanted to listen to them, because when officials have come back to me and said they are finding that a lot of people are saying, for example, “I’d rather stay in hotels for now and perhaps then exercise an opportunity to move into some of the permanent accommodation that has already been identified, especially the 68 units at Kensington Row;” that is something we should take into account. It would be absolutely wrong for us to say, “No, you cannot stay in the hotels. You have to move, and then you’re going to have to move again.” We should be led by the residents.

I have also met residents who have said, “I thought I wanted something close to where I lived before,” but when they went to one of the available properties, despite it being of high quality and appropriate in many ways, when they looked out the window they saw the tower, were clearly reminded of things they would rather not be reminded of, and changed their minds. I am sure the right hon. Gentleman is not saying that in those circumstances we should force families to accept the accommodation, no matter what. We will be led by the families and their needs. Our commitment is clear: come Wednesday, every single family and every household from Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk that has so far come forward to us will have been offered high-quality temporary accommodation.

The right hon. Gentleman also asked whether temporary accommodation includes hotels. Hotels are emergency accommodation; temporary accommodation—I went to see some examples myself in a neighbouring borough on Saturday—is high-quality accommodation. It may be houses or flats—whatever the residents choose. There is also permanent social housing, which it will take more time to identify, especially if the family desires that it is in the borough. As I have said, it is well known that we have already identified 68 units, and we are very close to adding a number of other units to that availability. That will be permanent housing that we will offer to the families, and they will be able to decide whether it is appropriate for them.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the testing process; it can move only as fast as the samples come in. Since I made my previous statement, there has been a sharp pick-up in the number of samples coming in from local authorities and housing associations. We are turning those around within hours of their coming in, with the results going immediately to the landlord. The test itself is on a component—the core—of each of the cladding panels. A sample of the core is taken, then categorised for its limited combustibility as either category 3, 2 or 1, with categories 3 and 2 being deemed not to meet the building regulation guidance.

The right hon. Gentleman also asked whether the whole system is being tested. As I said, the core of the panel is being tested. It is possible to conduct whole-system tests. That is not the test that is currently being conducted by the BRE, but the expert panel is meeting again today to advise how things can be done appropriately so that we are convinced that a whole-system test actually works and leads to a positive result. So far though, as I said in my statement, we have yet to see any evidence showing that any builder has passed the whole-system test.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about funding. We have made it clear that whatever measures need to be taken—any remedial measures to make buildings safe—local authorities and housing associations should get on with them. If local authorities or housing associations need help with funding, we are ready to discuss that with them and we will work with them.

The right hon. Gentleman rightly reminded the House that the public inquiry is independent. We have to be careful what we say about it in the House or elsewhere, but we should remember that Sir Martin started immediately, meeting victims, volunteers and others, as he should. He will set out the terms of the inquiry. He is not there yet—he should take the right amount of time.
that is necessary and make sure that the inquiry is broad and to the satisfaction of the victims, their families and friends, and that they feel that the terms of reference are appropriate.

Lastly, the right hon. Gentleman asked about Kensington and Chelsea. Clearly, the Grenfell response team—what has been referred to as the gold team led by John Barradell—is being led appropriately with tremendous resource, both from the local government and voluntary sectors and from central Government. At some point, the process of recovery for the longer term will transfer to the council. We are not at that point yet. When we are, we need to make sure that the council is properly resourced with expertise as well as money and any other help that it needs. We will make sure that when that happens it is properly resourced.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that he is working with devolved Governments to ensure that every tower block around the country is going through the same fire safety tests?

Sajid Javid: Yes, I can confirm that to my hon. Friend. So far, the Welsh Government have identified 13 tower blocks with aluminium composite material, and they are all being tested.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for coming to the House to make a statement on the Grenfell Tower tragedy, and I appreciate the chance to have advance sight of the statement, which was very useful. I also welcome the announcement about the 112 households that have received payments. I am not certain whether he has said this already, but I would appreciate knowing how many households still need to receive payment and the timescales for those payments—how long are they likely to take?

Along with many Members in the House, I have been approached by residents in my constituency who live in multi-storey blocks. I commend the work that local authorities have done to take action to test buildings and to reassure tenants who live in those buildings. I used to live in a local authority multi-storey, and I well understand the access issues that concern people. I appreciate the moves that have been made by a number of organisations working together to provide reassurance.

I restate the position of the Scottish National party that the public inquiry should be as wide-ranging as possible. At every stage, the views of the Grenfell Tower survivors should be taken into account. I would also ask a couple of things. I would like reassurance that residents are being helped as far as possible to replace documentation that they lost in the fire, and about residents whose families want to take part in the inquiry and who live abroad. What financial help is available for them to ensure that they can come and take an active part in the inquiry?

Lastly, I would welcome confirmation that there will be no prosecution of the tenants. It is really important that those tenants, and anyone who has been living there, come forward, and I would welcome the Government’s views about that.

Sajid Javid: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments. First, on payments so far from the discretionary fund, there is £5 million available from that fund; £2.44 million has been paid out so far. Of the grants, 249 £500 cash payments have been made, amounting to £124,500, and there have been 112 payments of the £5,000 grant. I should also remind people listening to the statement that that has no impact on benefits or any other compensation that individuals might receive.

I agree absolutely with the hon. Lady’s comments about the public inquiry. It should be as wide-ranging as possible, and should absolutely have the input of victims, their families and friends. Those victims must get the legal support that they need to make proper and full representations.

On lost documentation, I can confirm that since soon after the tragedy, in the Westway centre but also in the victim unit support in my Department in Westminster, almost every Government Department necessary has been represented. In fact, I saw a fantastic example on Saturday, when I met a team from the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency from Swansea. They turned up at the Westway centre within a couple of days of the disaster, and they brought with them driving licences that they had printed out. Residents turned up saying, “I need a driving licence”, fully expecting to make an application, and the DVLA team handed it to them in the envelope once an identity check had been done. That is the extent of the efforts many Government Departments have gone to, and that is what we expect as we continue to help these people—the victims—with their recovery.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): My right hon. Friend has described the tests taking place in housing association and local authority housing, schools and hospitals. What conversations has he had with the insurance industry regarding totally private tower blocks? Leeds has seen much regeneration and there are lots of tall tower buildings with cladding. It strikes me that insurance companies have a vested interest in ensuring that such blocks are dealt with before new regulations come into place.

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right to point that out. The insurance industry has been taking a great interest in the work that is happening, especially in the testing. The Chancellor had a meeting with the insurance industry just last week.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): The Secretary of State will be aware that the statement from the new independent chair that the scope of the inquiry might be limited to the start of the fire and how it spread has caused some alarm among survivors. Will he say a little bit more about that? Will he also confirm that all survivors will get proper legal aid so that they can have proper, independent solicitors and barristers representing their interests?

Sajid Javid: Yes, I can confirm that. I was there again on Saturday, soon after Sir Martin’s first visit, and a number of survivors and their families made the same point to me. It is worth reiterating and making clear that although the judge will rightly ultimately determine the scope of the inquiry, we all expect it to be as broad and wide-ranging as possible. We absolutely want to ensure that all victims, survivors, families and friends feel that they are properly represented and get the proper financial support.
Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): My right hon. Friend has sadly informed the House that, so far, 100% of all 181 samples taken from buildings have failed the combustion tests. I do not wish to prejudice the public inquiry or any future criminal action, but will he tell the House whether the cladding originates from one source or whether it is from multiple sources, which would hint at a more systemic failure across the industry?

Sajid Javid: I can tell my hon. Friend that there are multiple sources.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) is a most estimable fellow, but I think he is probably still enjoying his honeymoon, which we hope that he celebrated with great joy. But I gently point out to him that he beetled into the Chamber 17 minutes after the statement started and that, therefore, it is a trifle saucy to expect to be called on this occasion. We will store him up for another occasion on which he can give the House the benefit of his wisdom.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): A week ago, the Secretary of State told us that the Government were capable of processing 100 tests a day. We now know that there is a backlog of 419 tower blocks that have not yet been tested. Can he tell us about that backlog? How many samples are currently in the laboratory, how many have failed to be provided and what is he doing to ensure that they are all supplied?

Sajid Javid: There is no backlog. We can only process the tests as soon as the samples come in. When they do come in, they are processed within hours and the landlord is informed along with the local fire and rescue service. I can update the House on numbers. Before we received the information back from the local authorities and housing associations, the original estimate was that they could own up to 600 similarly clad buildings. We now think that figure is around 530.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I commend the Secretary of State for the speed of cladding testing to which he just referred. When interim recommendations are made, what processes are in place to ensure that landlords actually comply and carry them out?

Sajid Javid: In the immediate term, we have made sure that the landlord is informed immediately when a piece of cladding fails the test. The local fire and rescue service will carry out the fire safety check, and we expect all those recommendations to be followed. The involvement of the local fire and rescue services, which will report back to my Department, means that we are able to monitor progress.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I do not think that the Secretary of State made reference to the review of building regulations and to the fire guidance contained in Approved Document B, which officers of the all-party group on fire safety rescue had the opportunity to raise with the Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government—we were grateful for that opportunity. The review was recommended by the coroner’s inquiry from Lakanal House; it is 11 years since the last review. Does the independent panel of experts have the power or authority to recommend a revision of the Building Regulations Advisory Committee working party on Approved Document B so that this work can begin now, rather than waiting till the end of the public inquiry?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about building regulations and the guidance on them. It is already clear to us all that there will need to be changes, and that we need to look carefully at the causes and at the fact that so many buildings are failing the guidance test. The expert panel has a wide remit, which is broadly to recommend to the Government immediately any action it thinks we should take that will improve public safety. For the longer term, we will set out in due course how we intend to tackle the much wider review I think will be necessary.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Some media outlets have suggested that Grenfell survivors have been forced to move to cities in the north of England. Can the Secretary of State reassure the House that nobody who chooses to not move out of London will be deemed intentionally homeless?

Sajid Javid: I, too, have heard these rumours, yet no one has come forward with any evidence of any such thing taking place—of someone being moved outside London. I can also give my hon. Friend a reassurance on the intentionally homeless point; in fact, I wrote to every resident last Thursday to make that point very clear to them.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): The safety of domestic appliances is a vital element of fire safety in tower blocks—and, indeed, in all homes. This horrendous fire started with a fault in a fridge, so will the Government revisit the decision of March last year to dismiss or delay many of the recommendations of the Lynn Faults Wood review into product recall, which I commissioned in 2014? In particular, will the Secretary of State recognise that funding for the enforcement of safety regulations through trading standards is inadequate and must be urgently addressed?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State today quite sickening. The reason why people are refusing offers of accommodation is that they are not suitable, sometimes by reason of people’s age or disability, and not because these are fussy people. The units of social housing being offered are existing social housing, and not because these are fussy people. The units of social housing being offered are existing social housing, and not because these are fussy people, and not because these are fussy people, and not because these are fussy people...
of north Ken have had such a raw deal for so long. So when will the Secretary of State put country before party and send in the commissioners?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman is a local London MP, and he has an opportunity now to put party politics aside and just do the right thing for his constituents. His constituents are watching him.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): On Friday afternoon, I met the chief executive and the leader of Corby Borough Council, who assured me that the council has complied with all the requests the Department has made, and I shall ask the same questions of East Northamptonshire Council this Friday. However, is there anything more that individual Members can do to support Ministers and the Government, working across party lines and with local authorities, in the review process ahead?

Sajid Javid: One role that many individual Members, including my hon. Friend, have been playing well is making sure that their constituents are well informed about what the testing process is and what the results actually mean. That was one of the reasons why we published the explanatory note last Friday, and many Members have used it to inform their constituents.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Let us come back to the issue of the commissioners whom the Mayor of London, among others, has asked to be put into Kensington and Chelsea. Of course they need not be put in to manage the whole council, but just its social housing responsibilities. As a localist, I believe that commissioners should be put in only in extremis—in cases such as Rotherham or Tower Hamlets—but surely this is an extreme example of a failure of governance. What consideration has the Secretary of State given to this request and what factors has he taken into account? If he rejects it, does that mean that he has full confidence in Kensington and Chelsea’s ability to manage its social housing stock?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman rightly highlights that when control of the recovery effort transfers to Kensington and Chelsea for the longer term, we need to make sure that the right resources are there, including the right expertise and good leadership, but that is not about to happen. Before it happens, the Government will rightly consider all options that will bring that about.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The Secretary of State talks about having a broad and wide-ranging public inquiry, yet Sir Martin describes his remit as very narrow. Will the Secretary of State explain this conflict? How he will clarify the situation, because this process has to get us the answers in the end?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady will know that in an independent inquiry, and rightly so, it is important that the judge ultimately sets the terms of reference. This is just the beginning of the process. I urge her and all hon. Members to give the judge time to speak to victims and their supporters, the families, the volunteers and others, and then to come to the final judgment on how wide the terms of reference should be.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): This terrible disaster obviously raises questions about the effectiveness of local emergency planning. What steps are being taken here and elsewhere to ensure that other local authorities have good emergency responses should disasters befall them?

Sajid Javid: One of the lessons that has already come from this tragedy is about trying to make sure, across the country, that we take a fresh look at planning for civil emergencies. That work has already begun, led by the Cabinet Office.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): Based on the intelligence of survivors, it appears that a number of the flats were severely overcrowded. We have to assume that those flats were being sub-let illegally and inhabited by people with unstable immigration status, and possibly even those who had been trafficked, as that has been identified as a problem in the borough of Kensington and Chelsea. What are Ministers doing to ensure that private landlords, legal or otherwise, are properly declaring vulnerable people who were in the building on the night of the fire, and not potentially profiteering from any properties or finances being offered to survivors?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady will know that one of the steps that we have taken to recognise this picture, which absolutely may well have been happening, was illegal sub-letting, was yesterday’s announcement by the Director of Public Prosecutions that we want everyone with any piece of information to come forward. That was why the guarantee that they will not be prosecuted was offered, and I think that that will help and make a big difference.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Over the past few weeks, I have been visiting tower blocks across my constituency with fire officers and housing officers. Residents remain very, very concerned. Frankly, they do not understand why the Government and successive Ministers appear to have ignored the recommendations of the coroner’s report on sprinklers following the Lakanal House fire. I would suggest that Ministers who are shaking their heads try visiting my constituents, standing on the 15th floor, and explaining in person to those residents why there are no sprinklers.

Sajid Javid: It is good that the hon. Lady has been visiting tower blocks in Bristol and I hope that she has been able to reassure some of her constituents. It is good to have MPs’ involvement. However, she is wrong about the recommendations on sprinklers in the coroner’s report on Lakanal House because they were implemented fully.

Vera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Given what the Grenfell Tower fire has exposed about the combustibility of external cladding in the UK, can the Secretary of State confirm that appropriate tests are being conducted at non-high-rise as well as high-rise buildings?

Sajid Javid: Our priority has been buildings that are taller than 18 metres—typically more than six storeys—and residential buildings, as that is where one would expect the highest risk, because naturally people would be there overnight. That is the starting point and the priority.
Sajid Javid: We expect that after we have dealt with the priority cases, we can make the testing facility available for all other types of buildings.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I am sure that the Secretary of State knows that many other public buildings, including hospitals, use tower blocks for accommodation and that they might have vulnerable cladding on them. Will he confirm how many hospitals have been tested so far and how many have failed those tests?

Sajid Javid: As I said in my statement, I can confirm that hospitals, schools and other buildings in the public sector are being looked at. That work is being led, through the Government Property Unit, by the Cabinet Office. The process of testing is ongoing. Even before the cladding can be tested, we have made sure that local fire and rescue services have been informed and that any necessary mitigating measures have been taken.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Secretary of State said that testing of the core of cladding had resulted in 181 failures and that that meant local authorities had breached building control regulations. Does that mean regulations at the time the cladding was put up, or regulations as they stand today?

Sajid Javid: The last time there was any significant change in building regulations guidance was in 2006 and much of the cladding was put up in the early 2000s. There has been no significant change in building regulations or building regulations guidance pertaining to fire safety for a number of years. I said in my statement that the samples had failed a limited combustibility test, and that test has been around for a number of years.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I want to take the Secretary of State back to the issue of hospitals, because my local hospital is a tower block with cladding that was put on in the past four years. The Hull royal infirmary management team has been very reluctant to tell the public what additional checks have been undertaken, but after being pressed several times by the local BBC, it has now admitted that the cladding has been sent for testing. Is it not about time that we had a statement from the Secretary of State for Health so that we can be clear about all our hospitals and other buildings with cladding, and so that the public can know what is happening?

Sajid Javid: I assure the hon. Lady that this is being taken very seriously. Where ACM or suspected ACM cladding has been found on any hospital, regardless of whether or not it is a tall building, it has been submitted for testing. Even before the results of those tests are back, the local health trusts have taken action to put in place mitigating measures. For example, many of them have put in place full-time fire wardens, 24 hours a day, to make sure that they provide maximum public safety.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): The lessons of Hillsborough are that survivors must be listened to at all times and that inquiries must be transparent and comprehensive. What assurances can the Secretary of State give in relation to Grenfell Tower?

Sajid Javid: I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Lady. Those are very important lessons to learn. I am confident that the judge, Sir Martin, will address them as he approaches his inquiry. I think that the first public sign of that will be when he sets his terms of interest.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Tenants in high-rise blocks in my constituency are often disabled or elderly, and in some cases they have poor or no English. Will the Government start to work with local authorities and housing providers to develop effective strategies to protect those most vulnerable tenants in the event of a fire or other disaster?

Sajid Javid: There are already many rules and regulations in place to do just that. As we learn all the lessons from this terrible tragedy, it is important that we ensure that we do everything we can to protect the most vulnerable.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I understand the focus of the Secretary of State and his Department on cladding, but may I ask him about the insulation? Some reports say that the insulation caught fire and combusted three times quicker than the cladding. Industry experts say that we should consider a system of non-combustible insulation, which is available on the market. What is the Secretary of State doing to investigate the safety of insulation, including when buildings are uncladded and the insulation is exposed to the elements?

Sajid Javid: The police report on the Grenfell Tower tragedy rightly referred to the insulation. After that, our guidance to local authorities and housing associations was immediately publicly updated to say that there should be checks on insulation, too.
Points of Order

5.29 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You would have heard earlier the Home Secretary and Home Office Ministers stating, in response to questions about reductions in police numbers in specific forces, that police funding has increased in real terms. It is the case that overall funding has been protected since 2015, but I would argue that it is misleading to suggest that that is relevant to numbers of police officers on the ground when it is in fact due to increases in funding for specific issues such as cybercrime and child sexual exploitation. As a result, some forces have not seen a single increase in resources since 2015. Only today, the chief constable of West Midlands police said that the Government need to offer real-terms protection and that policing is getting smaller and smaller. Will you advise me on how I may correct the record?

Mr Speaker: It is a pleasure to seek to advise the hon. Lady, in so far as it could in any way be said that she requires my advice. Let me begin by saying to her that she is an individual both sophisticated and wily. Notwithstanding what she regards as effectively—whether by intention or not—misleading statements, it is apparent from the very terms of her point of order that she, unsurprisingly, has not been hoodwinked in any way. She is on to the matter. She is seized of the issues. She is unpersuaded by the rhetorical blandishments of people opposite her.

I know that the hon. Lady is ferociously bright, but I am sure she will not suppose that others are automatically in every case less so, and therefore incapable of comprehending and seeing their way through the thickets in the way that she has so successfully done. In short, I say to her that these are matters of debate, and she has used the ruse—I use the word “ruse” advisedly—of an attempted but utterly bogus point of order to highlight her grave concern about this important matter. In that mission, she has been successful, for she has aired it and she has persuaded me to respond in terms.

We will leave it there for today but, knowing the hon. Lady as I do, I daresay that she will be at it again with vigour and ingenuity ere long.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP) rose—

Mr Speaker: Gosh! I just referred to the intelligence of the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), and we now have no less a figure than a QC on her feet.

Joanna Cherry: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your assistance to see estimates on the agenda for this week, but tomorrow until the UK leaves the EU, because comprehensive sickness insurance is a requirement in EU law. I fear that this inadvertently gave a misleading impression, and I am afraid that the matter was compounded by the Minister for Immigration repeating the same assertion in an answer to me earlier this afternoon.

While it is correct that comprehensive sickness insurance is a requirement of European Union law, there are steps that the Government could take immediately to state that access to the NHS in the UK satisfies that requirement. That is not just my view: it was the unanimous recommendation of the cross-party Exiting the European Union Committee in the last Parliament at paragraph 73 of its second report. I am sure that the Prime Minister is aware of the Committee’s recommendation and would, like me, not wish the record to stand uncorrected.

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the hon. and learned Lady for her point of order and for her courtesy in giving me advance notice of its gist. What I would say to her is that I am not psychic and therefore cannot say for sure what was, or was not, in the mind of the Prime Minister at the time she answered the hon. and learned Lady’s question. Whether the Prime Minister did know, as the hon. and learned Lady clearly does, the contents of paragraph 73 of the Exiting the European Union Committee’s second report of Session 2016-17 entitled “The Government’s Negotiating Objectives”, I do not know. The Prime Minister might have been aware of the said paragraph at that time, in which case she has a quite extraordinarily compendious memory and power of recall when answering questions. It is possible, to be fair, that the Prime Minister might not have been immediately conscious of that particular paragraph. What I think it is fair to say is that the Prime Minister was endeavouring to provide a succinct reply. In that mission she was successful—her answer to the hon. and learned Lady consisted of 34 words.

I have no reason to suppose that the Prime Minister was seeking deliberately to mislead the hon. and learned Lady, or indeed the House. That causes me to say to the hon. and learned Lady, in thanking her for raising this matter, that differences of interpretation are not infrequent occurrences in the Chamber of the House of Commons, a point with which I suspect she will concur. I have no doubt that she will want to return to this issue and I therefore have a little advice for her. “Erskine May”, with which the hon. and learned Lady is immensely familiar—I am referring of course to the 24th edition, as I feel sure she knows, and, as I feel equally sure she knows, to page 358—states:

“The purpose of a question is to obtain information or press for action”.

In this case I think that the hon. and learned Lady is seeking to press for action rather than simply to obtain information. This I think she has achieved, at least in so far as Ministers on the Treasury Bench have now heard what she has had to say. They may or may not take initiatives as a result. If they do, I hope they satisfy her; if they do not, I feel sure the hon. and learned Lady will require no further encouragement from the Chair to raise this matter on subsequent occasions.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You will be aware of my interest in the estimates process. I was terribly excited to see estimates on the agenda for this week, but tomorrow
estimates will be decided without debate. I understand that this is because the Liaison Committee is not in place, and it therefore cannot put forward reports for debate. On the following day, supply and appropriation will be on the agenda, but that will also be decided without debate. Being particularly keen, I went to the Vote Office to see if I could get some papers on the estimates, but I understand that no papers will be available until after we have taken tomorrow night’s motion—that was what I was told in the Vote Office just now. I understand the circumstances that mean there are no debates right now—I get that. However, my concern about the lack of information is one that I think the House should consider.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. I was not aware of that matter. I feel modestly confident in suggesting that the estimates themselves will doubtless be available but, off the top of my head, I do not know how accessible they will be to the hon. Lady. Certainly the estimates—the figures—should be available. Whether there is other and better, more satisfactory, more discursive, more informative material available by way of commentary or assessment relating to those estimates, I do not know. If no material is available, the hon. Lady has identified quite a serious point. Rather than flannel and suggest to her that I have a comprehensive answer to that concern, I would say that I will make inquiries to Ministers in the relevant Department. If the position is as she describes, I will see whether anything can be done to offer her satisfaction before she is called upon to vote.

If there are no further points of order and Members’ palates have, at least for now, been satisfied, I suggest that the Clerk will now proceed to read the Orders of the Day.

Air Travel Organisers’ Licensing Bill

Second Reading

Mr Speaker: Before I call the Minister of State to move that the Bill be read a Second time, I warn new Members, large numbers of whom are seeking to make their maiden speeches, that they must remain for the opening speeches and that remaining for the Minister of State’s speech means that they not only are about to learn quite a lot about air travel organisation and licensing, but will probably benefit from a fair number of literary and possibly philosophical references in the course of his oration. I speak with some experience of these matters.

5.40 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

It is both fitting and humbling, as you will gladly acknowledge, Mr Speaker, that I should have been chosen to introduce the first piece of legislation of this new Parliament—fitting because of my status and popularity, and humbling because it does not pay to draw attention to either of them.

Hon. Members will recognise in taking a look at the Bill, as I am sure they have, that it reflects that this Government, like others before it, recognise the value of providing UK businesses with the best possible opportunities to grow and also ensuring that consumers are protected when and how they need to be in respect of, in this case, how and when they purchase their holidays. I am introducing the Air Travel Organisers’ Licensing Bill so that we can ensure that consumer protection for holidaymakers can keep pace with changes in the travel market.

The Bill has a long genesis in two ways. First, it builds on long established good practice. The arrangement in the Bill is born of the arrangement of a similar kind that began in the 1970s to protect the interests of travellers. Secondly, we have already debated these issues at some length. We had an earlier Bill, to which I will refer later, in which these measures were included. We gave that Bill a Second Reading and debated it in Committee in some detail. That was done in a convivial, consensual and helpful way, and I shall also refer to that later.

There is recognition across the House that the consumer protection measures in respect of holidays and holidaymakers need to keep pace with changing circumstances and conditions in the travel market. There may be those in the Chamber who, affected by the specious and pernicious appeal of liberalism—because it does appeal to some people—believe that the free market can sort all these things out for itself. That is not a view that I hold, and I know that there will be wise heads across the Chamber who recognise the efficacious role of Government in intervening where the market fails. It does not happen regularly in respect of holiday companies: anyone who looks at the history of this area of the Government’s work will recognise that it has been rare for the fund established by the air travel organisers’ licence to be called upon. None the less, it is an important fund and an important protection. It provides assurance and confidence to holidaymakers as they go about their lawful and regular business.

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry that I am not able to continue to enjoy the right hon. Gentleman’s oratory, but that particular pleasure is now to be enjoyed by the
First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means. I have heard the first of the right hon. Gentleman’s philosophical references and I am sure that the Chamber will hear several more in the minutes to follow. New Members are probably somewhat befuddled by this state of affairs, but I think I can tell colleagues that the right hon. Gentleman is what might be called a one-off.

Mr Hayes: Madam Deputy Speaker, let me say—as the Speaker leaves the Chamber—that I was about to move to John Ruskin, who said:

“The first test of a truly great man is his humility.”

We present this legislation in that humble spirit, recognising that this is a changing market and the Government must act to reflect that change, but recognising, too, that the market will continue to change. Any Government who believed that this was the end of the story would, I think, be disregarding the further changes that are likely to result from technology, the way people organise their affairs, the way they book their holidays, the way the internet operates, and the fact that other technology will change the way we go about our business. I therefore have no doubt that there will be a need for further provision at some point in the future, but, at this stage, the Bill is an important step in bringing the ATOL provisions up to date and up to speed.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP) rose—

Mr Hayes: I will happily give way to the hon. Gentleman, who played a useful role in the Committee to which I referred a few moments ago.

Alan Brown: I thank the Minister for giving way, and for saying that I played a useful role. As he knows, this legislation was part of the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill. What will happen to other measures that were in that Bill, particularly those relating to offences involving the use of lasers that affect pilots?

Mr Hayes: I would not want to test your patience, Madam Deputy Speaker, or indeed your largesse, by ranging widely across the provisions of the other aspects of the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill, but the hon. Gentleman is right to point out that, as I said earlier, these measures had their origin—in that Bill. We will bring further measures to the House: the Queen’s Speech makes it clear, for example, that we will make progress on both sides of that Committee, and I hope that it continues. I think it fair to say that those discussions demonstrated that there was really no difference of principle between the Government and the Opposition on this matter.”—[Official Report, Vehicle Technology and Aviation Public Bill Committee, 21 March 2017; c. 25.]

Those are not my words, but the words of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden), who also played a useful role in the Committee.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): I very much agree with the Minister’s earlier philosophical comments about the appropriateness of Government regulation in matters such as this. I am sure that many holidaymakers will feel more secure when the Bill has been passed, knowing that they will not be left stranded abroad with no means of getting back. May I ask whether the Minister has consulted closely with the airlines, particularly those that fly planes from London Luton airport with holiday packages?

Mr Hayes: I will come to that later, because the hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to the role of the airlines in all this. As he will know, they are covered by other licensing arrangements, but I will address the specific points that he has made. As ever, he has made a case for his Luton constituents, and particularly for Luton airport, which I know is in his constituency.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): As the Minister knows, Cardiff International airport is owned by the Welsh people via our own Government. What discussions has he had with the Welsh Government about the Bill’s impact on operators working from Cardiff?

Mr Hayes: Prior to that first Bill, we had discussions with devolved Governments about its character and content, and I think that there is agreement across the kingdom about the necessity for these measures. I always enjoy my discussions with the devolved Governments, and will continue to do so in my role as Minister of State. However, the hon. Gentleman is right to say that the Bill will affect all parts of our kingdom, not least because of the travel that takes place to and from different parts of it by air. We will certainly want to continue to receive representations from those Governments as these matters roll out.

Before I go any further, let me say something that I should have said at the outset. As you will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, there has been some debate in the Chamber in recent days about sartorial standards. I ought to say, as a matter of courtesy, that I will not be taking interventions from any Member who is not wearing a tie, on whichever side of the House that Member may sit. However, I believe in generosity as well as in courtesy, and I will provide a tie, which I have here, for anyone who is sartorially challenged or inadequate. Of course, I exclude lady Members from that; I would hardly expect them to dress in my tie, their own or anyone else’s.

Let us move to the origins of the UK holiday market. This week will see one of the UK’s, and the world’s, leading travel brands celebrate 175 years of travel. It was on 5 July 1841 that Thomas Cook arranged the first excursion. That was a one-day train journey from Leicester to a temperance meeting in Loughborough. The train carried around 500 passengers a distance of 12 miles and back for a shilling. Contrary to popular belief, I was not the Transport Minister at the time, and I certainly was not one of the passengers, but those early excursions were significant. They helped to form the foundations of the travel and tourism sector in the UK. The growth of the railways meant that, for the first
time, affordable travel could be combined with leisure activities or accommodation and offered to a growing population of consumers.

Of course, today’s holidays—today’s excursions—are quite different from those first ones. Society has changed, and the promise of sun, sea and sand means holidays are more likely to be driven by temperature than temperature. I personally choose to have my holidays on the east coast of England, largely, in Broadstairs, Northumberland and most places in between, but not everyone does, and those who want to travel further afield and those who wish to use technology to make those choices will want to know that they are protected in doing so.

The advancement of technology has continued to drive the biggest challenges facing the leisure travel sector. Affordable air travel and fuel-efficient planes mean that people are able to travel further, and for longer. The growth of the internet and mobile phone technologies have revolutionised the way people book holidays, creating greater opportunities for consumers and businesses.

We debated these issues on the Committee to which the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun referred. It was clear to us then, and I think to the whole House, that the UK has continued to lead the way. We have one of the most innovative and advanced leisure travel sectors in the world and one of the biggest markets in Europe. Overall, tourism contributes close to £121 billion to our economy annually, with outbound tourism contributing around £30 billion.

Strong consumer protection is vital to underpin confidence in that important sector. By its very nature, there are a number of risks in the holiday market which have existed ever since those first excursions. It is common for consumers to pay up front on the promise of a holiday, which may be many weeks or even months away. There can be a lack of awareness of the financial stability of holiday providers, particularly as services are often provided by third parties. In the rare event of a company failure—I mentioned at the outset that it is rare—consumers may experience a financial loss from a cancelled holiday, or significant difficulties from being stranded abroad. It was against that backdrop that the air travel organiser’s licence scheme, the ATOL scheme, was introduced in the 1970s for UK holidaymakers flying overseas.

I will not tire the House with a long, exhaustive history of the ATOL scheme. I see that that is disappointing to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to others, but I want to give all Members as much opportunity as possible to contribute to this important debate. Suffice it to say that the ATOL scheme protects consumers if their travel company fails. It does that in two ways.

First, travel firms that sell flight packages in the UK must hold an ATOL licence, issued by the Civil Aviation Authority. That helps to regulate entry into the market and to filter out companies that are not financially robust. Secondly, the scheme acts as a fund to compensate consumers who might be caught up in a failure. The ATOL licensed company must pay a small levy, £2.50, for each person protected by ATOL. That money is then held in the air travel trust fund and used by the CAA to ensure that consumers are returned home or refunded when a company fails.

Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister looks delighted to give way on that specific point; I am sure he will want to say more about it. First, a correction—Luton airport is in the constituency of Luton South. My hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) and I have many a competitive conversation about it. On the £2.50 levy, I understand that there is a significant surplus in the fund now. Is the Minister confident that, under the new arrangements, where airlines may look around European member states in considering the best regime into which to pay, £2.50 is competitive and the right figure to charge?

Mr Hayes: First, I apologise for ascribing Luton airport to the constituency neighbour of the hon. Gentleman, and not to him. As he will know, in a previous ministerial job, I was able to visit Luton South and to enjoy his hospitality there alongside the local authority. Luton is playing a bigger part in this debate than we may have expected; both Luton Members have contributed to it. As he will know, the fund is administered by the CAA, with trustees appointed by the Secretary of State. It builds up and is invested accordingly.

As we speak, there is about £140 million in the fund. If a major holiday company collapsed, it would be essential that there were sufficient moneys in the fund to cover that collapse. That could happen more than once in a short period; that is not inconceivable. The critical thing is that the fund is never short of money. The guarantee is that we will protect consumers and get people home safely from perhaps far-flung destinations and that they will not lose out as a result of things that they could not have anticipated or affected.

If it is helpful, I will be more than happy to provide the whole House with a further note on how the fund has changed and grown over time. I have mentioned what it is comprised of. I think it would be helpful for me to make available to the Library, and therefore to the House, more details of the kind the hon. Gentleman has asked about. It will help to inform further consideration of these matters as we move from Second Reading.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): The Minister is right to say that there is cross-party support for greater protection of consumers, but he also mentioned safety. Could he take this opportunity to tell us whether Transport Ministers intend to introduce legislation to deal not just with the dangers posed by laser pens, but with the dangers posed by drones, which we have heard about again today?

Mr Hayes: The hon. Lady will know that that, too, was raised in our discussions on what was originally known as the modern transport Bill—or at least apocryphally known as such—and became the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill. She will also know—because of her keen interest in transport matters and her enthusiasm to take those matters further with an election, to which I will not refer more than obliquely—that we are consulting on those matters; the consultation has finished and we will take those matters further with an election, to which I will not refer more than obliquely—that we are consulting on those matters; the consultation has finished and we will bring our conclusions to the House and elsewhere very shortly. However, she is right to say—I am happy to put this on the record—that that is a matter of some concern. Existing legislation provides some protection. For example, if a drone were interfering with military aircraft or a secure site, existing legislation would cover that to some degree, but there is a case to do more,
which is why we have consulted on the matter. I know that she will give the results of the consultation and our response to it her close attention, as she always does.

Let me move on; as I said, I do not want to prolong this exciting speech too much. As I said, the scheme also acts to compensate consumers who might be caught up in a failure. I have talked about the fund which is administered by the CAA to ensure that consumers are returned home, and since the 1990s the ATOL scheme has been the primary method by which the UK travel sector provides insolvency protection under the UK and Europe package travel regimes. Today the scheme protects over 20 million people each year, giving peace of mind to holidaymakers in Luton and elsewhere.

**Kelvin Hopkins**: It is reported in the notes that between 1998 and 2009 the proportion of ATOL sales fell from 90% of leisure flights to just 50%. That is a substantial drop in just 11 years. Were some passengers affected by not being covered during that period?

**Mr Hayes**: As I said at the beginning of my remarks, the purpose of this Bill is to ensure that ATOL remains fit for purpose. The hon. Gentleman is right that the way people travel, the means by which they book their holidays, and the organisations they use to do so are changing. That is why we must look again at ATOL: not because it has not worked or because its principles are not right, but because it needs to reflect those changes. This Bill is the first step in doing so. Anticipating—although not impertinently—what the Shadow Secretary of State might ask me, it is also true to say that this Bill is just that: a first step that creates a framework that will allow us to update ATOL.

Further steps will be required, which might come through regulation or further review of the appropriateness of what we are putting into place today. The hon. Gentleman raised that point when we debated these matters briefly before, and I have no doubt that he will want to press me on it again today, but there is an absolute acknowledgement that this is a rapidly moving marketplace that will require rapidity in our response.

**Iain Stewart** (Milton Keynes South) (Con): Having also served on the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill Committee, I have a sense of déjà vu here. I agree with the general nature of the measures the Minister wishes to introduce, because he is right that it is a fast-moving market, but there is also some concern in the industry, which plans typically 12 to 18 months ahead, that it will need some of the detail of the secondary legislation as soon as possible, to allow it to prepare effectively for that.

**Mr Hayes**: My hon. Friend might have raised that point in that Committee; my memory is good but not encyclopaedic, but I do seem to recall that he has made these matters previously. He is both authoritative on matters regarding transport, having served with distinction on the Select Committee, and consistent in his line of argument. His is a perfectly fair question, and it is what the Opposition and the whole House would expect, so we will provide as much information as we can about what further steps we might take in terms of regulation. There is nothing to be hidden here; there is no unnecessary contention associated with this and certainly no desire not to get this right, and the best way of getting it right is to listen and learn—as is so often the case in politics, in Government and in life.

I have talked a little about the diversification of the market and the growth of the internet and smart technologies. That is not a bad thing: consumers now have many options at their fingertips to buy holidays and put together their own packages. Indeed, an ABTA survey estimates that about 75% of UK consumers now book their holidays over the internet. As methods of selling holidays modernise, we must adapt the schemes and regulations that protect them.

"Quality is never an accident; it is always the result of intelligent effort", as Ruskin also said. That is why we took steps in 2012 to update the ATOL scheme; we introduced the ATOL certificate confirming the protection covered, and broadened the scope of protection to include “flight plus” holidays. These interventions have had a positive impact, extending consumer protection, levelling the playing field for businesses and improving clarity for all. The key here is that consumers know when and how they are protected: making sure the system is as comprehensible and comprehensive as possible is an important aim.

We now need to build upon the changes we made then, and make sure that ATOL keeps pace with the changing travel market. In particular, the new EU package travel directive was agreed in 2015 to bring similar, but further-reaching, improvements to consumer protection across the whole of Europe. I said earlier that the United Kingdom had led the way in this field. It is not unreasonable to say that Europe is now saying it wants similar provisions across other countries to the ones we have had here for some time. So that travel directive is both reflective of, and perhaps even, to some degree, inspired by, the success of our arrangements. This will need to be implemented into the UK package travel regulations by 1 January 2018.

The Government supported the rationale for updating the package travel directive. It will help to modernise and harmonise protection across Europe. Broadly, it will mean that the protection offered across Europe will be closer to the protection we have enjoyed from the beginning of ATOL, but most especially since the changes we put in place in 2012. It will ensure there is a consistent approach to the protection.

**Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): The Minister is giving an interesting and full explanation of the benefits of this Bill.

Will the Minister clarify that the point is that the ATOL regulations currently apply to first-leg flights out from the United Kingdom and a UK airport, but that under this Bill the intention will be that in future if a UK ATOL-regulated operator sells a package virtually anywhere in Europe, as long as they comply with the rules here, that will be covered by the ATOL scheme and the potential levy?

**Mr Hayes**: Yes, that is part of what we aim to do: the aim is to ensure that if a holiday is bought here, wherever the person goes they are protected in exactly the way my hon. Friend described. He is also right to say that part of the change is that people book and make their holiday plans, and part is about how and where people travel. The package holidays people first enjoyed in the 1960s and ’70s are less routine now in that they are no
[Mr John Hayes]

longer the routine way people travel to the continent and further afield, and ATOL was of course born in that period when things were simpler—thus my point for the need for it to evolve, as it has to keep pace with these kinds of changes. That consistent protection of holidays across Europe will ensure that informal package holidays booked online will get the same protection as traditional package holidays booked on the high street—holidays of the kind that had their beginnings in the ’60s and ’70s.

For the first time, these measures will also bring protection to a new concept of “linked travel arrangements”, which I think is what my hon. Friend was referring to. This concept is designed to provide some protection to business models which are not packages, but which often compete closely with packages.

Overall, the new directive has the potential to provide a greater level of protection to UK consumers, whether they purchase from a company established in the UK or overseas. It will also help to level the playing field for companies whether they are in the UK or overseas, and whether they operate on the high street or online.

That point matters in itself. This is about protecting consumers, and about the clarity and comprehensibility that I described. It is also important for those in the travel sector and the industry to know where they stand. Creating a greater degree of consistency for them matters too, particularly for smaller businesses that really need to know, as well as to feel, that the regulations apply across the board in a consistent, fair, reasonable and implementable way.

In order to bring the new directive into force by July 2018, the four clauses simply enable the ATOL scheme to be aligned with the updated package travel regulations. The combined clauses will mean UK-established companies are able to sell holidays more easily. They will be able to protect these holidays through ATOL, and they will not need to comply with different schemes in each country.

That is the essence of what we are trying to achieve today. The Bill will also extend the CAA’s information powers so that they are more able to regulate the scheme and this cross-border activity.

Finally, the Bill will allow the scheme to be able to adapt more effectively to changes in the travel market. I have said that I anticipate further change as time goes on, and the Bill paves the way for that. Overall, the updates we will make to the ATOL and package travel regulations will mean that consumer protection can extend to a broader range of holidays. This will mean that protection is provided for traditional and online package holidays, but also for looser combinations of travel, which have previously been out of scope.

Of course, we also need to be mindful that the regulatory landscape will need to be able to adapt to changes in our relationship with the European Union. The changes we are making are in keeping with this principle. They will help UK consumers, businesses and regulators to transition to the new package travel regulations in 2018 with minimal impact, but we will also retain flexibility in ATOL regulations to adapt to the changes in our relationship with the European Union, ensuring that we continue to have strong consumer protections in place as we leave the EU.

I hope that that has given a clear and reasonably concise picture of the Bill and the reasons for introducing it. As I have said, the UK has always been a leader in this field. We have led in so many ways in so many areas, and when it comes to providing protection for holiday makers, the Bill will ensure that the UK continues to lead, whether we are inside or outside the EU. It will provide UK businesses with the opportunity to expand and grow, and it will provide a framework to ensure that ATOL remains flexible enough to cope with future trends. The Bill is indicative of a Government who are willing to act to protect and preserve the people’s interests, and I stand here as a Minister ready to do that. It is a Bill for the people from a Government of the people.

6.11 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): It was all going so well until that last comment! The Minister has it right, however, when he says that the Bill is to be welcomed. The events of failure are rare, but it is imperative that this market and the response to it should develop so that people who experience those failures have recourse to a remedy. He will find a great deal of support on this side of the House for what he has said and for the Bill. I thank him for his summary and his account. He is right to say that matters in the related Bill were conducted with a great deal of conviviality, courtesy and humility, and he is to be credited with ensuring that that was so.

As the Minister said, it is with a sense of déjà vu that we are debating these changes to the air travel organisers’ licensing system. It has been only four months since these self-same clauses received their Second Reading when they made up part of the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill—or VTAB, as we liked to call it. It ought to be an Act by now—VTAA—but sadly we must still refer to it as VTAB. The Prime Minister’s decision to call an early election meant that VTAB, along with a whole host of other legislation, had to be dropped.

Given that we had wasted a great deal of parliamentary time and effort, it was quite a surprise to see that there was no reference to VTAB in the Queen’s Speech. Instead, the Government have to many ways and in so many areas, the legislation, splitting it between the Bill we are debating today and the automated and electric vehicles Bill that will be introduced later in the Parliament. It is interesting to note that 50% of the legislative programme relating to transport for the next two years of this Parliament will merely be clauses that have been copied and pasted from VTAB, a Bill that should have already been passed into law. This surely highlights how this minority Government are out of ideas and have very little new to offer the country as they focus their attention on a desperate attempt to cling to power.

Mr John Hayes: With the greatest respect, I think that the hon. Gentleman is underselling himself. The progress we made in Committee and on consideration of the previous Bill meant that, when the Government came to look at the model of what good legislation should look like, they needed to look no further than the work that he and I had done. I take most of the credit for that, but I think he should take some too.

Andy McDonald: As ever, the Minister is extremely generous in his praise. He is right, however, to say that we made a lot of progress. I just hope that we do not have to do it all over again. That is the point.
The Government do not have a plan to reintroduce VTAB in its entirety, even though it should already have been taken through. Madam Deputy Speaker, you could be forgiven for asking why the Government do not dare to try to pass legislation that has already passed through this place and received support from both sides of the House. Indeed, it is a matter of considerable concern that a number of important clauses from VTAB appear to have been left out of the Government’s forthcoming legislative programme. They include the clauses in part 4 of VTAB that related to vehicle testing, the shining of lasers—which the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) mentioned earlier—and diversionary driving courses. The clauses in part 3 relating to air traffic services also appear to have been axed. Perhaps the Minister can offer some explanation of why he previously deemed it a necessity to legislate on those issues, as they are not being reintroduced now.

Moreover, during the progression of VTAB, Labour Members raised concerns over the absence of legislation to create a regulatory framework to deal with drones. With the proliferation of drones in recent years, we have seen a sharp increase in the number of near misses with planes. The latest figures show that there were 33 such incidents confirmed in the first five months of this year and 70 last year, compared with only 29 in 2015 and just 10 in the five years before that. Representatives of the aviation industry have expressed their concern over the Government’s failure to bring in legislation to tackle this worrying trend.

Iain Stewart: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I enjoyed our exchanges in the Committee stage of the previous Bill. I may be wrong, but given the intervention I made on the Minister earlier, I believe that it is important to get this Bill on to the statute book as early as possible so that the subsequent regulations can come into effect in an industry that has to plan 12 to 18 months in advance. The other measures that the hon. Gentleman mentioned are important, but they could be put into a different Bill. Perhaps that is the reason they are not in this one.

Andy McDonald: I am again grateful to the Minister for his consistent, collegiate attitude and for his co-operation. His approach to this Bill is exactly the same as it was with the previous Bill, and that should be acknowledged. The Labour party shares his objective of making this Bill and the forthcoming transport Bills relating to automated and electric vehicles and to the space industry the best possible pieces of legislation as they pass through the House. We only wish that the Government were prepared to respond to the rapid technological advances of recent years and to bring forward legislation in the areas that I outlined, which are in urgent need of a regulatory framework. It has become quite clear in recent weeks that inaction can risk lives.

As we stated when the measures in this Bill were first laid out in VTAB, the broad substance of the changes to ATOL are necessary and, for the most part, welcomed. The changes will harmonise UK law with the latest EU package travel directive, leading to many benefits for UK consumers and UK travel operators. A wider range of operators, including more dynamic package providers, will likely be covered under the changes, bringing protection to many more UK holidaymakers not covered under existing ATOL provisions. The requirement for travel companies to be in line with standards at “place of establishment” instead of “place of sale” will now mean that UK companies can sell far more seamlessly across Europe by simply adhering to the widely respected ATOL flag.

However, the EU-level changes do bring about something that could have adverse effects for some UK consumers purchasing from EU-based travel companies. The changes made through the directive will now mean that EU-based companies selling in the UK have to adhere only to an ATOL-equivalent insolvency protection laid out in the member state where the business is based. In practice, that could have unintended consequences and, more significantly, costs for UK consumers. Processes and timescales for recompense may be distinctly different to what many travellers would expect under the gold standard of ATOL. The impact assessment warns: “If consumers purchase a trip from a business established elsewhere in the EU and the company becomes insolvent there may be some costs to the consumer of processing a claim with a non-UK insolvency protector.”

Based on the latest CAA figures, that is not just something that will impact on a relatively small number of holidaymakers; it would currently compromise over 500,000 passengers. It is therefore important the Government take appropriate steps to anticipate and find a way forward on drones. He is right to say that this is a changing and potentially challenging matter, and we need to work not only as a Government but as a Parliament to address it, so I am happy to take up his offer of discussions on the back of that consultation and our response to it.

Andy McDonald: I am again grateful to the Minister for his consistent, collegiate attitude and for his co-operation. His approach to this Bill is exactly the same as it was with the previous Bill, and that should be acknowledged. The Labour party shares his objective of making this Bill and the forthcoming transport Bills relating to automated and electric vehicles and to the space industry the best possible pieces of legislation as they pass through the House. We only wish that the Government were prepared to respond to the rapid technological advances of recent years and to bring forward legislation in the areas that I outlined, which are in urgent need of a regulatory framework. It has become quite clear in recent weeks that inaction can risk lives.

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Based on the latest CAA figures, that is not just something that will impact on a relatively small number of holidaymakers; it would currently compromise over 500,000 passengers. It is therefore important the Government take appropriate steps to anticipate and prepare for any negative impacts. As suggested by the Opposition when the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill was in Committee, making it a requirement for the Government to monitor the impact for UK consumers using EU-based companies would help inform the Government about whether they should consider further guidance or co-operation with consumers and EU member states to ensure that adequate protections are in place.
Mr Hayes: The hon. Gentleman will know that the existing legislation contains an obligation to review it after five years. He is making an argument that he has made previously, and it seems to have some weight. I am open-minded about how we consider such things, and I will certainly reflect on his point about our need to consider the impact of the changes that he describes. I am more than happy to include that in our discussions about drones.

Andy McDonald: I am grateful to the Minister for that clarification.

The Bill’s second clause is not directly relevant to harmonising UK with EU regulation, but it contains a dormant power that the Government will retain, enabling them to make considerable changes to ATOL with regard to air travel trusts. During an evidence session when VTAB was in Committee, we heard from Richard Moriarty of the CAA, a trustee of the current air travel trust, who recognised the possible merits of separating the trust to reflect the variations of products in the market. However, he explained that we simply are not there yet and that it would be wrong for the Government to use this Bill as a means of making wholesale changes without due consultation. The Minister made it clear in a letter to me that changes would be made only through the affirmative procedure, yet the Bill does not account for any further consultation as part of this measure.

Labour will therefore be again seeking a commitment from the Minister, which he gave in Committee during the progress of VTAB, that the Government will conduct a thorough impact assessment and consultation before implementing the power. Mr Moriarty said at the evidence session that he hoped that the Government “will follow the practice that they have followed today: consult with us, consult the industry, do the impact assessment, and so on.”—[Official Report, Vehicle Technology and Aviation Public Bill Committee, 14 March 2017; c. 30, Q150.] Accordingly, if the Government were to undertake a full impact assessment and consultation before bringing forward regulations to create any new air travel trusts through the affirmative procedure, that would be fair and reasonable and would guarantee scrutiny of any further changes to ATOL.

To conclude, while the Opposition are frustrated that the general election meant that the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill was dropped and, moreover, we are concerned with the Government’s decision to omit a large proportion of the legislation as it is reintroduced in this Parliament, Labour none the less broadly supports this Bill. We welcome the changes that will harmonise UK law with the latest EU package travel directive, which will have many benefits for UK consumers and UK travel operators. However, we have concerns about the levels of protection given by EU-based companies selling in the UK and about whether UK consumers could lose out following the change. We will be pressing Ministers for reassurances on that during the passage of the Bill. As we did with the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill, the Opposition will seek further detail from Ministers on the assimilation of the directive, the impact of Brexit, and Government accountability as the Bill progresses through this House.

6.27 pm

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): It is an honour to be called to speak in the debate on the first piece of substantive legislation in this Parliament, and to be the first Back Bencher to do so. The Bill brings back some traces of memory lane for me; I declare an interest in that I practised in consumer protection at the independent Bar before my election to Parliament. Indeed, I was involved in lecturing and cases in this very area. Somewhat optimistically, I called it “holiday law”, which makes it sound—I can hear one of my colleagues saying this—like rather good fun. Having spent years prosecuting trading standards legislation and defending criminal law, as well as working in the personal injury sphere, I must have been on my way back from holiday while looking for a new area to branch into, and then an opportunity came up. I obviously decided that if I could not actually be on holiday, I might as well at least talk about being on holiday. I therefore produced a lecture, which I covered with lots of rather attractive pictures of happy people on holiday, sun-dappled beaches and palm trees, but that of course rather missed the point, because when one goes to see a lawyer, one is telling them not how good a holiday was, but that something has gone wrong. That is the all-important point that I was addressing in my career and that the Government are seeking to address through this Bill.

Things occasionally go terribly wrong when people are on holiday and, from my experience at the Bar, that can be anything from simply poor quality through to a catastrophic failure of holiday, injury or, in some cases, even death. That is what we are seeking to address through the Bill.

I started my lecture to the Bar with the same story that the Minister told of the temperance campaigners—it is one of those throwaway anecdotes we tell at the beginning of what can sometimes be detailed lectures—and I thought for one moment that I was about to hear him repeat my lecture back to me. I am glad that he went on to more substantive matters.

In my constituency I have not only a great many places that people come to visit—I will refer to some of them in a moment—but, of course, many people who, as we all do, look for places to tour abroad. It is for the constituents of Witney and west Oxfordshire that I most strongly desire to see the Bill enacted.

I express my support for the Bill at the outset, because ATOL protection is a critical part of the protection that we all rely on when we book a tour. It is only right—and necessary—that we seek to extend that protection to a broader range of holidays. When ATOL protection started in 1973, the world was very different from the one that we inhabit now. It was a world with few airlines—a world of British Caledonian and nationalised airlines such as British European Airways and British Overseas Airways Corporation. One might even say that it was an era before the benefits of a free market were fully explained and realised in this country—we should perhaps remember that at all times in this debate. It was a day before the internet. It was a day when going abroad was full of uncertainty, and sometimes even danger. It was into that world that the package tours regulations came into being, and rightly so.

Kevin Foster: Does my hon. Friend agree that at that time it would have been unimaginable that someone could use a mobile phone to book a holiday with an operator in Germany, France or another country in Europe? At that time, walking into a travel agent on the high street was the only real way of booking this type of project.
Robert Courts: My hon. Friend makes an outstanding point. We could be sitting in the Chamber now, if we were not paying attention to the debate—I am sure every Member is paying attention with alacrity—and booking ourselves a holiday on our mobile phone. Such a world was not even envisaged in 1973, but we did have the advent of the package tour, and British Airways, was one of the leaders. People’s ability to have their package holiday protected, provided that they had a flight, was a major innovation, and it is something that we have now lost.

I say that from personal experience because, through my work, I have first-hand knowledge of how the package holiday industry now works. Not only do we have what is called “dynamic packaging”, in which a vast choice of providers, destinations and activities are available to members of the public, who can tailor bespoke packages for themselves, but those selling holidays can seek to step around some of the relevant legislation. A website might purport to be operating and offering a package but, when one actually looks, it turns out that the flight is offered by a subsidiary, the accommodation is operated and offered by another company, and other packages—perhaps excursions—are dealt with by someone else. It is quite easy in this day and age to step around the regulations that ATOL provides, which is why the Bill is so necessary. The travel market has changed significantly in recent years. In those days, and it was a romantic era—

Mr John Hayes: Talk of romance was not what drew me to my feet, although it might have done. My hon. Friend talks about the changing character of the industry and the need to ensure that the regulations are updated. Reflecting on the remarks made by the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald), who speaks for the Opposition, I reafirm my commitment to consult further before any regulations are brought before the House under the affirmative procedure. I draw the attention of my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) to section 71B of the Civil Aviation Act 1982, which already makes provision for consultation by the CAA in the light of any such changes.

Robert Courts: I am grateful to the Minister for making that clear. The prospect of amendment has been ongoing for some time, so I am delighted that we are addressing it in the House today.

Although the image we all have of walking down the high street, flicking through a brochure and speaking to somebody behind a till still happens in many cases—many people avail themselves of the services that exist, including at the excellent travel agencies in my constituency—many people do not do that. It is now so easy to go on the internet to put together a bespoke package for ourselves. In a sense, we have become our own travel agents, but that brings challenges as well as opportunities for this new generation of travellers. In this House we embrace the opportunities that come with those challenges. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that we have seen the free market in action with the expansion of providers, destinations and activities. We have seen so many of the advantages that a free market can bring in the interest of consumers. Indeed, the online travel market has led to reduced costs for holidaymakers, as well as increased choice and flexibility.

Of course, we have to reassess protections at the same time as we reassess, and benefit from, those changes. The mix and match of lower prices and wider opportunities has to be seen alongside the protection. Many holidays now fall outside the scope of ATOL, which is very different from the situation in 1973. In 1998, approximately 90% of all leisure flights were covered by ATOL, but I understand that the figure has fallen to under 50% in recent years. I welcomed the Minister’s comment at the start of his speech. As much as I have praised the free market and its benefits in terms of opportunities, choice and reduced costs, I also understand that there is a role for Government. I agree with him that it is appropriate for the Government to step in and ensure that consumers in this field are protected.

That is why I welcome the measures in the Bill to address such changes. The Bill will ensure that the ATOL scheme keeps pace with innovation in the travel market, while also ensuring that protections are in place, regardless of whether someone books online or on the high street. We will therefore ensure that more than 20 million holidaymakers each year continue to be protected.

Kevin Foster: Given my hon. Friend’s comments, will he say something more about clause 1, which extends ATOL to sales made by UK companies within the European economic area? Does he think that that provision is worth while?

Robert Courts: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s timely intervention, as the next page of my notes deals with clause 1. Existing ATOL legislation applies only when the first leg of a relevant flight booking departs from a UK airport. The new legislation introduces a single-market approach to insolvency, whereby EU-established companies will be required to comply solely with the insolvency protection rules of the state in which they are established, as opposed to the place of sale, which is the current position. The legislation is therefore much wider, and the company will only have to be established.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree with me and several consumer groups that £2.50 is a low price to pay for ATOL protection compared with the cost of standard travel insurance? In the longer term, we might see a decline in the cost of travel insurance as more holidays are covered by this enhanced ATOL protection.

Robert Courts: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. He is right that the ATOL scheme is funded by a levy of approximately £2.50 per protected passenger and that it would be extremely unwise of any holidaymaker to go abroad without adequate travel insurance. I encourage everyone always to have such insurance, although it can sometimes be pricey, especially if someone is looking to protect themselves against some of the more routine failures that are easily covered in the ATOL scheme. However, more serious misfortunes can occur when people are on holiday, which is why travel insurance is, of course, still advisable. As my hon. Friend suggests, the cost of insurance may come down in time as a result of this enhanced package.

Clause 1 will allow travel companies established in the UK that sell flight-inclusive packages to use their ATOL membership and protection to cover all EU-wide
sales without needing to comply with the insolvency protection rules of any other member state. Clause 2 deals with funding and qualifying trusts within the ATOL trust management structures. The Department for Transport is alive to the fact that because we have seen significant changes to the travel industry—not only since 1973, but since 2004, as well as more recently—it might be necessary to enter into separate trust arrangements for the greater business model, such as linked travel arrangements, to give greater transparency to businesses and consumers. It might be necessary to introduce a new form of qualifying trust to ensure that the ATOL trust will still protect consumers in the all-important area of flight accommodation. The Bill allows the flexibility under trust arrangements so that we can increase funding and ensure that ATOL is adequately funded as time goes on.

Clause 3 addresses a slightly different point: the ability of the CAA—the House will realise that the authority is responsible for running the ATOL scheme—to require and request information from airlines selling ATOL-registrable products within the UK and more widely. Under the Bill, an important change would apply to airlines that have an air service operator’s licence from another EU member state and therefore would not need any of the licences that have been granted by the Civil Aviation Act 1982.

The House will be delighted that this is a short Bill, containing only four clauses. I have needed to deal with only three, so I do not need to go through the other one—I am sure everyone is delighted. [Interruption.] The Bill is short in terms of clauses, as the House will realise.

Kevin Foster: My hon. Friend referred to clause 3. Those who have an air service operator’s licence from other European countries will not need a CAA licence. Is he satisfied that the measure will still give full consumer protection?

Robert Courts: I am indeed satisfied that it will give full consumer protection. I say so because the Government have consulted widely. Once again, my hon. Friend has somehow, with extraordinary prescience, managed to prompt me to move on to the next stage of my speech, which may have been his subtle intention.

The Government have consulted widely, and the industry’s response has been favourable. We have received broad support from a majority of respondents to the proposals to harmonise ATOL with the scope of the EU package travel regulations. I noticed that during proceedings on the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill, evidence given by the group director of consumers and markets at the CAA stated:

“There are a number of important and welcome developments from the Bill”

“which will be good for UK consumers. First, the directive makes it much clearer what the definition of a package is.”—[Official Report, Vehicle Technology and Aviation Public Bill Committee, 14 March 2017; c. 63, Q143.]

I hope that the House will forgive my mentioning that in detail. I do so simply because of my experience of having argued the concept of what a package is in the courts of this country throughout my career at the Bar. The Bill has wide support in the industry.

I wish to make one more point, which is simply to note the educating effect of tourism. We are of course leaving the EU, but we are not turning our back on Europe or ceasing to be a European country—I will not make more detailed comments. As all Members will appreciate, travelling to a new country and appreciating a new culture is one of the most educating and enlightening things an individual can undertake. We will want people from this country to be able to expand their horizons throughout the EU, as indeed we will want people from the EU to be able to come here. West Oxfordshire has a plethora of tourist attractions, such as Blenheim palace, the great stately house; Cotswold wildlife park; and Crocodiles of the World, which is an excellent attraction that I invite all hon. Members to visit—I have been. We have many picturesque villages throughout west Oxfordshire, including Bampton, of “Downton Abbey” fame.

I have gone on at some length. The House will probably realise by now that this Bill has my full support, and I urge Members to give it its Second Reading.

6.47 pm Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Let me take this opportunity to welcome you to your place, Madam Deputy Speaker. I want to thank the Minister for his summary of the Bill’s provisions. The decision to update the ATOL scheme to provide more protection to travellers when they go on holiday, and to align it with enhancements to the EU and UK travel package regulations that predate people booking their holidays on the internet, is of course to be welcomed.

We need to ensure that the public are protected by updating the UK’s financial protection scheme for holidaymakers. It is important to keep pace with the innovation in the online travel market and ensure that appropriate protection is in place, regardless of whether consumers choose to book online or on the high street. Of course we want to make it easier for UK companies when selling holidays across Europe, and they will be able to trade under the UK’s ATOL scheme as opposed to the regimes in each country they sell to. The measures in this Bill are important as we need it to cover new digital business models and modern consumer purchasing models.

We know that more than three quarters of consumers booked their holidays online last year. The EU package travel directive of 2015, applicable from 1 January 2018, extends the protections beyond traditional package holidays organised by tour operators and also gives clear protections to 120 million consumers across the EU who book other forms of combined travel. The directive is expected to reduce detriment to consumers by about €430 million per year across the EU, and reduce administrative costs and burdens on business.

Passenger rights have been enshrined in EU law, and consumers and businesses deserve to know, need to know and are keen to know how Brexit will affect them. They seek cast-iron assurances that the rights and protections of travellers will not be diminished after the UK leaves the EU, and I know that the Minister understands that.

Existing EU directives mean that UK passengers are currently entitled to a number of benefits if a journey is cancelled or delayed. Such protections give consumers some peace of mind when they are booking travel. Since the EU legislated to provide a comprehensive system of
air passenger rights in 2004, the increased awareness of those rights and the chance to complain or appeal has led to a significant increase in the number of people doing so. That is a good thing, because it democratises the market and gives consumers proper routes of redress—the Minister mentioned the importance of intervening when the market has failed.

It should be noted that there are examples of court cases that have ruled on the circumstances in which airlines must pay compensation. Appeals against some of those judgments have demonstrated the reluctance of some airlines to pay out compensation unless the legal position is made absolutely clear. The rights of passengers must be clear and they must be upheld; otherwise, there will be a detrimental impact on passenger numbers and, ultimately, jobs will be put at risk.

Brexit clearly poses challenges in respect of passenger rights. It is essential that the UK develops its own system of passenger rights and compensation in the aviation sector, and there must be clarity on how such a system will affect non-UK airlines and passengers. Will we have such a system in the UK, post-Brexit? A system will clearly be required, but we, and non-UK airlines and passengers, need to know how similar it will be to current arrangements. In the post-Brexit world, what is to become of all the EU protections currently in place? Will they continue under the UK Government? What reassurances can UK passengers be given? The Minister referred to the “minimal impact” on consumers and business post-Brexit, but more detail is obviously needed, and it is keenly awaited.

The collapse of Lowcostholidays was a stark reminder of the importance of the EU package travel directive, which offers consumers protection in case of insolvency. Will the Minister give due consideration to the points I have raised and update the House as soon as it is possible, so I shall respond now. The reform of ATOL and the package directive will bring the arrangements throughout Europe more into line than they have ever been before. It is imperative that we protect consumers through regulation in the way I have described, so it is inconceivable that, post-Brexit, we will not want to reflect the protections that already exist here and that we see increasingly abroad.

Mr John Hayes: I welcome you to the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The hon. Lady invited me to respond as quickly as possible, so I shall respond now. The reform of ATOL and the package directive will bring the arrangements throughout Europe more into line than they have ever been before. It is imperative that we protect consumers through regulation in the way I have described, so it is inconceivable that, post-Brexit, we will not want to reflect the protections that already exist here and that we see increasingly abroad.

Patricia Gibson: I thank the Minister for his response. The clear guarantees that businesses and consumers are looking for must not be eroded after Brexit. If we have guarantees and the Minister can give us further detail on them, passengers and businesses will be reassured.

Clause 2 will give the Secretary of State power to reform the ATOL scheme and the air travel trust fund, with only an affirmative resolution by each House of Parliament required. Any changes that the Secretary of State wishes to introduce to the scheme must be preceded by a full consultation and an impact assessment that allows for proper scrutiny of the proposals.

Although we absolutely welcome the move to update the ATOL scheme to ensure that a maximum number of travellers are protected when they go on holiday and to align it with the EU travel directive 2015, passenger rights have been enshrined in EU law and consumers and businesses deserve clarity on how Brexit will affect them. The UK Government must provide more flesh on the bones and explain how such rights will be written into our laws. The updating of the scheme is to be welcomed, but the post-Brexit world poses a range of challenges on which consumers and airline business require clarity. I forward to hearing more detail from the Secretary of State in due course.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call Rachel Maclean to make her maiden speech.

6.54 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson).

It is a great privilege to make my maiden speech in this debate as the representative of Redditch. Improving consumer rights is a priority for the Government, and the Bill is needed as a response to the change in how people book their holidays, as more and more people use the flexibility of the internet to book their breaks. I know that the hard-working people in Redditch will welcome the protections when they book their well-earned summer holidays.

The Redditch constituency that I am proud to represent has a proud tradition of returning women MPs to this place. If there is one woman to whom I owe the greatest debt, it is my daughter, Ruth, who at the age of 14 said to me, “Mum, why aren’t there more women MPs? You ought to stand!” I replied, “I will try to find a few moments in between running my own business, taking your three brothers to football and scouts, washing your school uniform and supervising your homework.” Nine years later, I am honoured to have been elected by the people of Redditch.

Redditch is a new town, originally built to accommodate people from a rapidly expanding Birmingham. As another Brummie newcomer to Redditch, I am following in their footsteps. Other hon. Members have extolled the virtues of their wonderful constituencies—the natural wonders up and down the country—and I only wish I had time to visit them all. However, most people in our nation live in towns, and we must remember that people need beauty in their lives, whether they live in the countryside or in towns. I am proud that in Redditch any student of town planning would find the best example in the country of a well laid out, modern urban landscape. Developments such as Church Hill, Matchborough, Winyates, Lodge Park and Woodrow have all been designed to allow maximum amounts of green space, quiet streets and traffic-free highways.

At the heart of the town is a lovely, natural oasis: the Arrow Valley lake and country park, which comprises 900 acres of green space and is packed with wildlife rarely seen in an urban setting—although unfortunately no crocodiles—and also provides a focal point for our community events. To the west the modern shopping centre and the historical centre of the town exist harmoniously.
One can understand why so many people wanted to move to Redditch to live, work and bring up their families. Along with our excellence in town planning, we are not without sources of natural beauty: The constituency includes some beautiful areas of rural Worcestershire, such as the villages of Feckenham, Inkberrow, Hanbury and the Lenches. Hanbury church, which I visited this past weekend with the local ramblers group and my dog, is said to be where the bells on “The Archers” radio show are rung. I am mindful of the diverse challenges I face in representing the issues throughout the whole constituency, including a brownfield-first policy for new developments, broadband provision and farming.

Redditch is also a great centre of enterprise and business, with a wealth of manufacturing companies, although it is particularly famous for its needles. At one point, Redditch made 90% of the world’s needles, and needle-making still occurs there today. In preparing for this speech, I read a play that Members may have seen, “This House”, in which my predecessor Hal Miller features. In one scene, he complains that, despite his envisaging his constituency as one of “meadows and steeples and farmyards and haystacks” upon his election he found a somewhat different reality, angrily declaring to the Whips: “You can’t find a haystack in Redditch because of all the needles!”

Redditch has been fortunate to have had a number of formidable MPs among its previous champions. I pay tribute to my predecessor, Karen Lumley, who sadly retired due to ill health after seven years of dedicated service. She was an MP who fought on behalf of her constituents for the Alexandra hospital, for apprenticeships, for mental health, and for fairer funding in schools. People will remember her for that and with great affection for her ability to bring additional colour to the House, with her varied and unique choices of hair colour. I promise Members that the next time they see me I will still have the same hair colour as I have today—we could not say that about Karen. I would also like to acknowledge Jacqui Smith from the Opposition—the Member for Redditch before Karen—for her great service to the country as our first female Home Secretary.

One issue dominated my general election campaign: our local hospital, the Alexandra hospital, known as the Alex. I want to reassure my constituents that the Alex and its service to patients and their families is my No. 1 priority as their Member of Parliament. I raised that and the issue of the Worcestershire acute trust that runs the hospital on my very first day in the Chamber, and I will continue, again and again and again, to fight to protect and strengthen local health services.

When I reflect on the challenges facing the Alex I am reminded of why I strove to enter Parliament for some years. The Alex hospital, like all our public services, depends on a strong economy. It relies on the taxes that ordinary people pay, and we should never forget that or where those taxes come from: the wages earned by people in jobs created by their employers—the small business owners who have created 2.9 million more jobs since 2010. For the very first time in my life, my wages are paid by the taxpayer. I do not take that lightly, because I know the sacrifice needed to create that money.

Before I entered Parliament I spent my career working in teams that started and grew small businesses in the digital technology sector, as a small business owner and employee. One of those businesses started small, but is now medium-sized and is Britain’s leading publisher of technology content.

Over the years, I have created many jobs for people that enabled them to fulfil their potential and build a secure future for themselves and their families. It has not been easy. I have been through the devastating failures that many entrepreneurs face, losing my home and livelihood before picking myself up and starting again. Anyone who builds a business will recognise that journey. My four children learned at an early age not to ask their mum for pocket money. They learned that we could not go on holiday, that their clothes came from charity shops, that they could not have new toys, phones or trainers, and that their mum and dad did not sleep at night because they were worrying about how to pay the wages of their staff.

Businesses are not some abstract concept. They are built by people from all walks of life up and down this great nation of ours: people who differ from one another in many ways, but who have one thing in common—the desire to work hard, take a risk and create a better life for their children than the one that they had. I want everyone in Redditch to have that opportunity. There are people who feel overlooked and left behind where deprivation and poverty exist and where communities struggle with issues of physical and mental health. I therefore welcome the commitment in the Gracious Speech to mental health, to investment in our national health service and to affordable housing. I look forward to working across the local community in Redditch to tackle mental health issues proactively and make sure that there is help on the ground where it is needed. I shall work with organisations such as the Sandycroft Centre, which offers a wide range of services to support vulnerable families as well as many other people in the town.

Our Prime Minister said in the House that not every problem in society could be solved by an Act of Parliament. I agree, because many problems are solved by the diligence, commitment and sacrifice of ordinary citizens such as the people behind the 275 new businesses that have started in Redditch since 2010. It is our job in Parliament to provide a solid economic foundation so that those people can do what they do best: building businesses; creating jobs; changing our country. I am grateful for the opportunity to make my maiden speech in this debate. I look forward greatly to supporting the Second Reading of the Bill and other important pieces of legislation in the coming months. I will never forget the privilege of speaking up in this House for the wonderful people of Redditch.
an impressive impact on this Parliament. I noted the news about her predecessor, Karen Lumley. I have known Karen since she came to Parliament at the same time as me, and I am certain that the whole House sends her its best wishes. If the hon. Lady carries on in the vein of her immediate predecessor and her predecessor before that, Jacqui Smith, she will achieve great success in the House.

I served in the last Parliament as a member of the Women and Equalities Committee—a fantastic institution that we are rightly going to put on a statutory basis from tomorrow. The hon. Lady may wish to turn her attention to our most recent report, “Women in House of Commons after the 2020 election”. I hope that it is not entirely redundant, given the actions in 2017.

If it is in order, Madam Deputy Speaker—and I look forward to your guidance—may I welcome you to your position in the Chair? Opposition Members have benefited greatly from your wisdom, friendly arm around the shoulder and occasional quite straightforward direction in your previous role as Chief Whip. I note from those discussions that your leather whip has not made it to the Chamber, as it did to the Whips Office. I shall check the Chair to see if a new place has been installed to store it, but I wish you every success, Madam Deputy Speaker, in your new role.

We are here to debate the measures introduced by the Minister. The changes are welcome. Given the various models for selling flights and package holidays, the divergence created by the internet and innovations in the market, it is right that we seek to comply with those changes and bring about better consumer protections. The irony that we have debated this in the previous Parliament is not something on which I seek to reflect at any length. However, as a Member of Parliament who represents two FTSE 100 companies with direct links to the travel and tourism industry, easyJet and TUI in my constituency, where I also represent Luton airport, there is a great irony at the heart of the Bill, which could be misunderstood as a piece of legislation that is linked to our future relationships under Brexit and is about giving Ministers greater flexibility to handle that. That is one aspect, but the genesis of the Bill is as a piece of legislation that seeks to comply with EU directives, including the package travel directive, which seeks to standardise and give greater consumer protection to the 500 million or so people in the single market. Compliance with that is a welcome measure, and it is right that we should make parliamentary time available for it.

The measure must be complied with by 1 January 2018, and it will apply by 1 July 2018. However, the key date that is not discussed in the Chamber and which is the most important is 31 March 2019, only 15 months later, as that is the day on which we will leave the European Union. Despite the best intentions of the Minister, the Department and the Government, they cannot yet tell us the framework for the measure after that date, so everything we debate today is essentially on a temporary footing.

I raised my concerns directly in the last Parliament, as I was fortunate enough to be granted the Adjournment debate that first put on record in Hansard the concerns of the whole industry in the past year about aviation and leaving the European Union. We need a comprehensive air services agreement that not only allows for consumer protections, but which is the most basic starting point for the industry in the first place, allowing us to take off in one place and land in another, not just in the European Union. Even our relationship with the United States is governed through the European Union. This is a significant piece of work.

Britain is leaving the EU and it is incumbent on the Government to bring forward a Brexit deal for approval by this House. But, however people voted, they did not vote to weaken consumer protections, to add cost and complexity to UK operators or to find themselves in a situation where they cannot get the flights that they wish for. The directive being enacted today has significant advantages for UK aviation and consumers, and I very much hope that we will take that spirit forward by seeking a comprehensive air services agreement that includes the measures in the package travel directive. Our membership of the European Union has had other advantages that I hope we will replicate as closely as possible and enact. For example, the most recent changes to the ability to roam with a mobile phone will make a significant difference to many travellers over the summer.

The alternative is that laid out for airlines and travel agents inside the single market, whereby businesses outside the EU will be required to comply with the different rules of each member state to which they sell. That is opposed to the situation issued by this directive and the Bill, whereby each member state recognises the jurisdiction of the others. That reduces risk, complexity and cost. Will the Minister lay out the Government’s intentions regarding the measures being enacted today? It would be a great disservice to UK operators if they were bound by the different regimes across 27 member states having spent only 15 months covered by the protections given by the provisions in the Bill.

In answer to the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), the Minister said that it was inconceivable that we would not want to uphold these consumer guarantees. But, with respect, the reciprocal is not within our gift and, therefore, any negotiations must seek to include this newly enacted settlement.

One further issue raised in the meat of the Bill is that of consumer protection. Will we transpose and adopt the promises of EU regulation 261, which provides compensation when flights are significantly delayed or cancelled? I would appreciate it if the Minister could say a word about that. On the comprehensive air services agreement, does he agree that the most important thing is to try to change as little as possible, given that UK airlines are planning and blocking flights that will take off—or not take off, dependent on the deal—to other EU member states after 31 March 2019? We should seek to get as much stability in the industry as quickly as possible.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an extraordinarily powerful point about the importance of aviation to our economy. Manchester airport is in my constituency. Does he agree that aviation is unique because it does not have World Trade Organisation rules to fall back on, and that it is imperative that the Government secure a deal quickly?

Mr Shuker: My hon. Friend pre-empts my point; we are working from the same page. As aviation is not covered by WTO rules, it would be quite conventional to have a separate stand-alone air services agreement with the European Union. It is my view that we should
try to bring that about now before the meat of the major deal to come, not least because aviation is governed in a different way, but also because establishing those links is generally viewed as the prerequisite to any future trade deal.

In conclusion, the Bill is welcome and brings forward provisions that we all want for consumers and our constituents, but more must be said and done on the issue during this Parliament. The Minister will be acutely aware that he will be judged not on the passage of the Bill, but on the content of any future deal that covers these issues.

7.14 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Luton South (Mr Shuker), who cares passionately about Luton airport in his constituency, and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), who has just given an outstanding maiden speech. I thank her so much.

In a modern and outward-looking Britain, it is significant that the first piece of legislation in this new Parliament is a Bill making it easier for consumers—our constituents—to travel overseas and for people from other countries to travel to Britain. It is also significant that this first Bill is about consumer protection, because this Government believe that we should put people first.

The ATOL system offers protection to holidaymakers if their tour operator goes bust. The UK is proud of having had the system in place since the 1970s. It is robust consumer protection that gives confidence to people booking their holidays and, therefore, contributes to our vibrant travel markets. The system supports the economy—not only the destinations to which people go, but also our local tourism industry. I am particularly thinking about the 800 residents of Chelmsford who work at Stansted airport. It is important for their jobs that we continue to have a vibrant holiday market.

Although holidays are always meant to be the happiest time of year, that happiness so quickly turns into a nightmare if there is a problem with a tour operator. Last summer, 27,000 British travellers found themselves overseas when the company, Lowcostholidays, collapsed. Another 110,000 British consumers had booked their holidays through that operator and did not know what the future would hold. Lowcostholidays had, of course, moved its location from Britain to Spain, so it was no longer ATOL-protected. That reminds us exactly how important it is to look at the consumer protection we offer people buying from British-based companies and that we offer British consumers who buy from companies based in other countries. That is why the EU countries agreed new changes to the package travel directive in 2015, requiring all European countries to have ATOL-type protection. The bit of law we are discussing today will implement that decision.

In the European Parliament, the committee that looks at such issues is the Committee on the Internal Market and Consumer Protection, because consumers are at the heart of the market. As the person who chaired that committee, I chaired the negotiations on the package travel directive. It is important that we ensure that the measure is implemented equally across all of Europe, otherwise we could find that some countries bring in a different system. There is an important difference in that ATOL membership will now be based on whether or not a company is based in Britain, as opposed to whether it just sells into Britain.

As colleagues have said, another important part of the legislation was updating the guarantee system so that it is fit for purpose in a digital age. If someone buys their flight from the wonderful Stansted airport, they will probably click on the airline operator. They will then click through from the airline operator to buy their hotel and then on again to buy their car rental. That might feel like buying a package to some of us, but it was not covered under the old rules in the package travel directive. I welcome the Minister’s work on modernising the measures, which will ensure that those click-throughs are now covered by the ATOL protection.

However, we had many other discussions in those detailed negotiations. For example, should business travellers get the same protection as consumer travellers? That is where we have tended to have a bit of a difference between Conservative Members and Labour Members. My excellent hon. Friend the Member for Redditch has just explained the challenges for small businesses, and an extra cost burden may be unaffordable for them, so we were concerned that they should not automatically have to pay the extra cost of ATOL protection. That is the sort of discussion I hope we will now be able to look at in more detail.

There were also discussions about whether the package should cover add-ons. For example, if someone gets to their holiday destination and decides to buy excursions, or if they bought them before they went, should those be included in the package? We had a lot of representations from small businesses saying, “No, please don’t put these in the package, because it will add bureaucracy and reduce consumer choice.” While I am absolutely passionate about the need to provide consumer protection, we also need to take a step back from time to time and to be on the side of consumer choice and of not adding additional, unnecessary costs for businesses.

In a post-Brexit Britain, our consumers will still want to purchase goods and services from those in other countries, and it will be important to continue to engage with other countries—especially our nearest neighbours in Europe—on issues such as consumer protection. It is important in the Brexit negotiations that we focus on getting a deal that works for consumers as well as businesses, because a vast range of consumer rights are embedded in EU law, on issues to do with not only holidaymakers but misleading advertising, unfair contract terms and the right to seek redress. Crucially, there is also really important legislation about the safety and standards of food. It appears that the tragic fire at Grenville Tower may have started because of an electrical fault in a domestic appliance, which is a brutal reminder of how important it is that we maintain high standards for consumer products.

Today’s consumers are changing, and they embrace innovation. Markets are also constantly evolving, and we are constantly getting new products. Of course, we also have people who have the digital revolution. We therefore need to be constantly working on making sure that our consumer protection, consumer laws and consumer standards are fit for purpose.
The excellent consumer organisation Which? has sent us all a briefing on what it would like from the Brexit negotiations, and it makes a strong case that the UK should continue to work with our European neighbours on consumer standards, on measures to counter fraud and on developing and sharing best practice. In particular, it recommends that we should at an early stage reach agreement on continued co-operation with such agencies as the European Medicines Agency, the European Food Safety Authority, the European Chemicals Agency and the European Aviation Safety Authority. We should listen very carefully to what our consumer organisations are saying.

As the hon. Member for Luton South mentioned, there are other issues that affect homemakers, such as the need to negotiate landing rights. There is also an issue about making sure that any deals about how we use our mobile phones overseas are covered. The UK was a great champion of removing expensive mobile phone roaming charges, which put such a huge burden on consumers. However, other issues, such as the motor insurance directive, have not been perfect for the UK; indeed, that directive is causing great uncertainty in the motorsports industry in the UK, and we will need to continue to engage on that.

When the Prime Minister talked about our offer on EU citizens, I was pleased to hear her offer to keep the European health insurance card, which makes it easier for people to get medical care when they travel across Europe. That is a very generous offer from the UK to the rest of Europe, and we should welcome it.

To wrap up, maintaining consumer confidence is key to a modern, dynamic economy. As we seek to leave the EU and to create a new, deep economic partnership with those across the channel, it is important that we continue to stand on the side of consumers and that we find new ways to co-operate with our neighbours and those across the world who seek to make sure that consumers are fairly protected.

7.25 pm

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): May I offer you my congratulations on your new role, Madam Deputy Speaker?

First, I would like to acknowledge my immediate predecessor, Edward Timpson, who served the previous Government as Minister of State responsible for children and families. Edward was known for his desire to improve the care system for vulnerable children.

I would also like to pay tribute to the late MP Mrs Gwynthun Dunwoody, who was, and is to this day, regarded as one of the greatest parliamentarians to have sat in this House. I intend to serve the diverse communities in my constituency with the same unwavering tenacity as Gwynthun did during her 25 years’ service.

It is a source of great pride to have been elected from the constituency where I was born and raised, and where I continue to live with my family today. As the granddaughter of a Scottish miner, I was brought up on a diet of working-class values. During my childhood, my family had real times of struggle, but that tough resilience and determination etched into my roots has always driven us forward. I know what it is like to grow up living with loved ones who are plagued by mental illness, and I know what it is like to be a single mother with a modest income, struggling to make ends meet. I can promise today that I will never, ever forget where I have come from.

As a teacher and a parent, my love for education will not come as a surprise. Before my journey into politics, I was known for leading the fairer funding campaign in Crewe and Nantwich, which I am still committed to. I stand here today for the children in my constituency, and I will continue to prioritise their education and my children’s education—the future of this country’s education—for as long as I am in the House.

Nantwich is a picturesque market town, home to the world’s biggest cheese awards, and we will, in fact, be celebrating the best of cheese later this month. We are also proud of our annual jazz and blues festival, which attracts more than 40,000 revelers to the town.

Needing little introduction, Crewe is synonymous with railways. At its height, Crewe Works employed 20,000 workers, but that has now fallen to fewer than 1,000. Crewe deserves investment, and I welcome the commitment in the Queen’s Speech to bring forward legislation to deliver the next phase of High Speed 2, as this will undoubtedly benefit Crewe.

The surrounding areas of Crewe and Nantwich are scattered with villages steeped in local tradition, and it is important that the people of Shavington, Willaston, Wistaston, Wybunbury and Haslington know that I will work hard to support their communities. These places are all united by the hard-working, community-spirited, salt-of-the-earth, proud northern folk who live and work in them. It is the nature of my hard-working constituency that I want to focus on in this, my first speech. I want to pay tribute to the British workforce. Every single one of Britain’s 31 million workers ought to be recognised and celebrated as the real wealth creators in this country. Without them, this country would grind to a halt.

Unemployment levels in Crewe and Nantwich are lower than average for the north-west, and lower than the UK average. Yet, food banks in my constituency provided more than 50,000 meals last year, and almost 4,000 children are living in poverty. These are not mere statistics for me to be concerned about; each and every one is nothing less than a travesty. This reflects the changing nature of poverty in the UK. There are now more people in working poverty than in out-of-work poverty. It would seem that in 21st-century Britain work simply does not pay in many cases.

I have just a few more facts for you. More than one in five workers earn less than the living wage, and more than half of working households have seen no improvement in their disposable income in more than a decade. Under-25s are not even entitled to the Government’s national living wage, which is in itself inadequate and falls short of a real living wage. Full-time working lone parents are often the worst affected. Having been a single mother myself, I know how tough it is to be a single mother with a modest income, struggling to make ends meet. I can promise today that I will never, ever forget where I have come from.

As a teacher and a parent, my love for education will not come as a surprise. Before my journey into politics, I was known for leading the fairer funding campaign in Crewe and Nantwich, which I am still committed to. I stand here today for the children in my constituency, and I will continue to prioritise their education and my children’s education—the future of this country’s education—for as long as I am in the House.
the fact that there are now a record number of female MPs in Parliament by acting finally to eradicate gender inequality in the workplace.

We have a duty to address all forms of poverty as a priority, but the fact that we have in-work poverty in the fifth richest country in the world is shameful, and it is a sad indictment of our economic policy. Work should be an escape route from poverty. It is wrong to claim that we are “all in this together”. CEOs can earn in two and a half days what it takes the average worker an entire year to earn. I also cannot help but wonder whether action on poverty pay might be addressed more urgently if we in this House had to do our jobs on a worker’s wage. Is it any wonder that so many people are infuriated by the hypocrisy of MPs receiving inflation-busting pay rises themselves while voting to cap the pay of dedicated professionals who work in our public services? If this Government want to show the UK workforce that they value them, they can—they can start by giving them the pay rise and financial security that they deserve. Actions speak louder than words, and I will continue to hold the Government to account on this issue. In the words of Nelson Mandela:

“As long as poverty, injustice and gross inequality persist in our world, none of us can truly rest.”

Fellow Members, I have no intention of resting.

7.32 pm

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to speak in this debate. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) in her powerful maiden speech.

With a three-year-old and a one-year-old at home, the thought of enduring a plane ride to sunnier climes on a family trip is somewhat terrifying, so I suspect it may be a little while before I will be in a position to benefit from the additional protections this Bill looks to bring into force. Nevertheless, I welcome its Second Reading.

It is an honour and a privilege to be standing here as the Member for East Renfrewshire, but I must confess that I committed the ultimate sin as a successful candidate at the count: I forgot to thank my wife, who was standing a mere six feet away. So if I could indulge myself for a moment, I would like to put on record for ever more my thanks and love to my wife, Heather, and our two children, Daisy and Charlie.

I would also like to start by paying tribute to my predecessor, Kirsten Oswald. Kirsten was a diligent and conscientious MP who did superb work as her party’s spokesperson for veterans. She achieved a great deal in her short time in this place with much patience and charm, and I wish her and her beautiful family well for the future.

I would like to give special mention to the late Conservative Member for the seat, Allan Stewart, who sadly passed away in December. I know how much it would have meant to Allan to have seen East Ren turn blue again, and he and his wife Susie were in all our thoughts on election night.

Madam Deputy Speaker, despite what other new Members may have led you to believe, it is of course East Renfrewshire that is the most beautiful constituency in the land. It is a beauty found not only in its famous green spaces but in its people. East Renfrewshire is home to Scotland’s largest Jewish community. It has a significant Muslim community, a growing Sikh community, and a strong Christian community. It is home to people of all faiths and none—but the key thing is that none of that matters. The constituency is a fine example of everything a modern, open, multicultural and tolerant Britain should be. Testament to that rich diversity and community cohesion is the fact that the constituency will soon be home to the world’s first-ever joint Catholic-Jewish school in Newton Mearns.

Throughout East Renfrewshire flows an entrepreneurial spirit. From Stamerland to Eaglesham, Busby to Clarkston, home businesses are thriving. Family businesses like Valentini’s ice cream parlour in Giffnock and McLaren’s plant nurseries in Uplawmoor sit at the heart of their local communities. From small enterprises like Optimal Travel and Linn Products, ambition, aspiration, innovation and a desire to build a better future for those who follow are proud values that underpin the people I am privileged to represent.

Today’s entrepreneurs are following in a grand local tradition. In 1868, John Shanks opened a foundry in Barrhead to make brassware. In the decades that followed, he developed the bath and lavatory fittings for which his name is famous. Barrhead’s history stretches back much further, however, with the Arthurlie Cross, a stone sculpture dating back to the 9th century, rumoured to mark the grave of Arthur, King of Britons. Nearby Neilston was famed for its cotton, the industrial revolution of the 1800s seeing textile mills dominate the area, powered by the stunning Levern Water. The thread spun at Crofthead mill reached the summit of Everest, being used in the boots of the climbers on the famous British expedition in 1975. Thornliebank printworks, established by the Crum family in 1778, was one of the first smoke-free factories in the world. It has since been replaced by a business park, including a unit inhabited by two Members of the Scottish Parliament, and now itself—so I suspect there is far more air emanating from the site now than there was 250 years ago.

East Renfrewshire’s natural history is equally prevalent. The outskirts of the constituency provide a stunning landscape punctuated with lochs, hills, moors, woodlands and dams, and the community are rightly protective of it. It is little wonder that the constituency boasts the UK Park of the Year in Rouken Glen, and, according to the Royal Mail, the most desirable location to live in the UK, with three other spots in the top 10.

East Renfrewshire’s more recent history brings me back to this place via two Prime Ministers. Gordon Brown was born in a maternity home in Giffnock, now the site of the Orchard Park hotel; and the former Member for the constituency, the redoubtable Betty Harvie Anderson—the first lady to sit in the Speaker’s chair as Deputy Speaker—shared her first parliamentary office following her election in 1959 with none other than the then new Member for Finchley, Margaret Thatcher. So for those new Members who believe that history repeats itself, I am open to offers.

While the results of this election may not have been what those on these Benches hoped in their entirety, north of the border the picture was a little brighter. Much like indyref2, the panda jokes are dead, and I am
proud to stand alongside 11 fellow Scottish Conservative faces. Together, we will continue to fight against the destructive politics of socialism and the divisive politics of nationalism. But we shall do so with an outstretched hand, not a clenched fist, because when the UK Government and the Scottish Government do come together in common cause, that partnership is capable of truly transformational change. East Renfrewshire will receive around £44 million of investment through the Glasgow region city deal for projects as diverse as a business incubation hub in Newton Mearns to a wakeboarding centre at the Dams to Darnley country park. I am not sure, Madam Deputy Speaker, if wakeboarding is high on your agenda, but I will extend an invite none the less.

The people of East Ren are renowned for their love of democracy—turnout is always among the highest in the UK—but after seven trips to the polls in just over three years my constituents need stability and for their politicians to get on and do the jobs they were elected to do. It is the Scottish Government’s inability to do just that which is one of the reasons I am here today. For my part, I will first and foremost dedicate myself to improving the lives of my constituents and assisting them when life deals them a difficult hand or they just need someone to listen. East Renfrewshire’s leafy reputation hides real pockets of severe deprivation and daily struggle, with people who feel left behind and forgotten. It is those people who look to this place and to each of us to demonstrate the good that Government can do, and we must not let them down.

The Conservative party must remember what it is for: extending the ladder of social mobility while providing a robust safety net for those who make the climb. This Government must remember that just as we on these Benches believe that anyone from any background can reach as far and high as their talents and efforts will take them, so too must we acknowledge anyone can fall on hard times. One of the giants of Scottish Conservatism, Teddy Taylor, coined the phrase “tenement Tories”. It meant something very simple—that Conservatism must offer an aspirational vision to all. I am here to represent the people who, and I put it, “don’t all live in big houses”.

The 2015 general election was the point at which the Scottish National party was at its peak—dominant and arrogant. It claimed ownership of my flag and of my voice, but it did not speak for me and it did not own Scotland. And so, the day after that election, I joined the Scottish Conservative and Unionist party. In doing so I made a promise to myself that I would do everything in my power to ensure that my children grew up in a Scotland where their opportunities are unconstrained and their ambition never frowned upon; where their talents and potential would not go unfulfilled; where they are never made to feel ashamed of who they are or how they vote; and, yes, where they remain part of our wonderful United Kingdom. Standing here today may be only the first step towards me keeping that promise to myself, to my children and to families and individuals right across East Renfrewshire and Scotland, but let me assure this House that it is a promise I have absolutely no intention of breaking.

7.40 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I welcome you to the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton). It has been great to hear his and other maiden speeches, which have brought back diversity to what would otherwise have been a one-sided debate. I gently point out to him, however, that the irony of a Conservative Member mentioning divisive nationalism is not lost on us. On the question of the Government getting on with the day job, we are debating this Bill because they actually did not get on with their day job, and chose instead to call an early general election that was not needed.

As a Back Bencher, I find it frustrating when the Chair has to apply a time limit to cut speeches short, leading to frantic scoring out. I think that time limits would actually have been useful for some of tonight’s speakers, because some hon. Members have managed to speak at amazing length about a Bill that is only four clauses long. I will try to be a bit briefer.

This is a small but welcome Bill, although it is perhaps indicative of the Government’s lack of strength and ambition, given that its measures were originally part of the broader Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill. Even so, this four-clause Bill was heralded in the Queen’s Speech, which, as we all know, lacked ambition.

The air travel organisers’ licensing scheme is well known and has provided comfort to thousands of holidaymakers over the years. It has rescued people financially and literally got them home in a timely fashion. It is a fantastic scheme. As other hon. Members have said, holiday travel and booking arrangements have changed over the years, so it is only appropriate that protections change too.

The Minister was keen to say that the UK has led the way in Europe with ATOL. I do not dispute that, but over the years the European Union has also strengthened passenger rights, and it is imperative that those rights are not weakened post-Brexit. The UK Government need to provide assurances that the rights and protections of travellers will not be diminished after the UK leaves the EU.

In fact, it is the 2015 EU package travel directive, which will be applicable from 1 January 2018, that is the driver for this Bill. The fact that three quarters of those who booked holidays last year did so online highlights the need for further protections. It is to be welcomed that protections will now extend beyond traditional package holidays. The new directive applies to three sorts of travel combinations: pre-arranged packages; customised packages; and linked travel arrangements.

I also welcome the fact that clear protection will be provided to 120 million consumers across the EU who book other forms of combined travel. A further advantage is that the measure is expected to reduce detriment to consumers across the EU by about €430 million a year, while at the same time reducing the administrative burden on businesses. It is suggested that compliance costs for traders will reduce from €11 to €8 per package.

Yet again, we have to be grateful to the EU for taking on big businesses, including the airlines, and extending consumer rights to meet modern travel needs. Since the EU legislated to provide a comprehensive system of air passenger rights in 2004, increased awareness of those rights, and of the ability to complain and appeal, has led to a significant increase in the number of people doing so.

That has been supplemented by a number of court cases that have ruled on the circumstances in which airlines must pay compensation. Appeals against some
of those judgments have meant that some airlines have been reluctant to pay compensation until the legal position is absolutely clear. There is therefore still industry resistance to the current compensation schemes. I repeat that it is absolutely vital that the UK does not weaken any legislation in the future.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I welcome you to the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, and congratulate the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) on a fluent maiden speech. I am sure it will not be the last such speech he gives in this House.

Does my hon. Friend agree that this Bill demonstrates why we need Government assurances about the impact of Brexit? There are so many uncertainties about so many aspects of consumer protection and its impact on individuals’ daily lives. If we had had such assurances and clarity this time last year, perhaps we would not be in this situation.

Alan Brown: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. There seems to be great reticence on the part of the UK to come out and give the necessary cast-iron guarantees. We are a year down the line since the vote, but we have not moved forward in many regards. Too often we keep hearing how everything will be okay, but we need to start seeing some flesh on the bones.

We still do not know when the UK will develop its own system of passenger rights and compensation in the aviation sector post-Brexit, how similar that will be to the current arrangements and, importantly, how non-UK airlines and passengers will be affected. That brings me back to the point that we need a clear guarantee from the UK Government.

On a slightly different theme, Scotland has a large number of regional airports, many of which are completely reliant on low-cost airlines and outbound tourism to survive and be an economic success. Recent reports have stated that Prestwick airport in my neighbouring constituency is vulnerable to Brexit, given the number of low-cost airlines there and the type of passenger traffic, which is mainly outbound. Despite the fact that the Scottish Government have voted to reduce air passenger duty by 50%, which they hoped to use as a mechanism to grow the number of routes operating out of Prestwick, Ryanair has confirmed that, because of the uncertainty surrounding Brexit and the open skies agreement, it will not expand further at the airport. That is a cause for concern with regard to local jobs in my area.

The International Air Transport Association predicts that just a 12% decline in sterling would result in a 5% decline in outbound travel from airports. Since the EU referendum, sterling is down 25%, so it has become even more vital for Prestwick airport that we continue within the open skies agreement and maintain outbound passenger numbers. It is incumbent on the UK Government to give an unequivocal guarantee that the UK will stay in the single aviation market after we are taken out of the EU.

Remaining in the open skies agreement—the single aviation market—is vital to ensuring that our airports remain economically viable, and low-cost airlines are vital for regional airports to be a commercial success. EasyJet is setting up a separate operation outwith the UK to ensure it can continue to fly without restrictions after the UK leaves the EU, which is in no small part due to the lack of clarity over the aviation agreement that the UK will eventually come up with.

It is clear that, despite the mantra that everything will be okay when we leave the EU, or even better than the current arrangements, the risks are materialising in front of us. It is clearly worrying if airlines are finding other EU member states a more attractive proposition, and the UK Government need to think seriously about how they are going to counteract that problem for our regional airports. The UK Government really must provide clarity and certainty sooner rather than later.

Clause 2 gives the Transport Secretary the power to reform ATOL and the air travel trust fund using only the affirmative procedure in each House of Parliament. The UK Government need to provide assurances that any changes that the Secretary of State makes to the ATOL scheme through secondary legislation will be preceded by a proper consultation of members of the industry and consumer groups, and by an appropriate impact assessment.

We welcome the Bill but, as I said in an intervention on the Minister, we are concerned about the status of legislation on laser pens and, as the shadow Transport Secretary said, drones. It is imperative that the Government move quickly to provide reassurances on those matters.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call Steve Double.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): It is a pleasure to be called to speak in this debate by you, Madam Deputy Speaker, in your first session in the Chair. I congratulate you on your new role. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown). I also congratulate the hon. Members who have made their maiden speeches today—we have heard some excellent ones.

One of Cornwall’s earliest tourists was the spirited and adventurous Mary Kelynack, a Cornish fishwife who in 1851 travelled to London to visit the Great Exhibition. That took her longer than some say it should have done, but then again she did walk the 600 miles there and back, and she was 84 years old. At the time, Cornish travellers did not have many other options. Some will try to give the impression that little has changed when it comes to travelling out of Cornwall today, but that would give the wrong impression because, thanks to the support of this Government, Cornwall is enjoying record investment in our transport infrastructure.

If Mary had made her journey today, she would have had several options. She could have travelled by road, in which case she would have seen the soon to be completed upgrade of the A30, with the dualling at Temple that will be opened in just two weeks’ time. My hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), the roads Minister, is in the Chamber, and I acknowledge and welcome the Government’s announcement today of their support for the next phase of the upgrade of the vital A30, the main road through Cornwall.

Mary could have travelled on one of the new Great Western Railway’s bullet-style Hitachi trains, the first of which we saw in Cornwall just over a week ago—a
£146 million investment in our railways which will be fully rolled out next year. Or she could have taken one of the three aeroplanes a day from Newquay to London.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): Rivington might be many months prior to a departure date, that is still a necessary move that is broadly welcomed by all. Newquay airport is booming. Passenger numbers are increasing year on year, and by some measures Newquay is now regarded as the fastest growing regional airport in the country. Only recently The Independent declared Newquay the best regional airport in the country. It has regular flights to UK destinations and an increasing number of holiday destinations in Portugal and Spain. That is why I welcome the Bill.

The way in which tourists book their holidays is changing, with fewer and fewer booking the traditional package holiday by popping down to the offices of the travel agent in the town centre. In 2016, 76% of the UK’s 20 million holidaymakers booked their holidays or travel online—a staggering increase even compared with recent years. There was a partial reform of the regulations in 2012, but I am pleased that the Department of Transport firmly believes that more should be done to protect consumers. Holiday providers, market options and ever more varied flexi-packages change, and with that comes the confusion of not knowing whether ATOL cover applies, depending on where the holiday or travel provider is based and what terms and conditions apply in the event of business failure. The Bill seeks to rectify that.

The Government has said that they will “harmonise ATOL with the scope and definitions of the EU Package Travel Directive. It was widely agreed that this will bring greater clarity and protection for consumers and help to level the playing field for businesses selling similar holidays.”

I welcome this key development and note that the Bill also seeks to build in future-proofing so that as the packages on offer—and where and how they are sold—change, they will come under the new legislation.

The travel industry has seen enormous change in just a few years, and the Bill seeks to reflect that so that travellers and the industry are served more effectively. Many if not all of the changes in the travel industry have been to the benefit of consumers, including greater competition, more choice and greater flexibility. It is important that the legislation keeps pace with those changes. It is essential that flexi-packages of all types are covered by ATOL protection and that travellers are clear and confident at the time of purchase, which might be many months prior to a departure date, that the cover is in place. The Bill serves to ensure that very purpose.

Future-proofing the legislation around ATOL protection is a necessary move that is broadly welcomed by all parties throughout the industry, but I want to push the Minister a little on that point. I am sure he would be disappointed if I did not take this opportunity to mention the potential spaceport at Cornwall Newquay airport. I was delighted to see that the legislation to enable that was included in the Gracious Speech. While it will initially be focused on commercial satellite launches, there is also no doubt of the future potential for space tourism. I know that some will scoff, but do not underestimate the Cornish. Trevithick was a pioneer of steam that revolutionised the world and Davey transformed mine safety. The Cornish have it in their psyche, in their history and in their blood to be pioneers. Surely the day will come when Newquay welcomes its first space travellers.

With Cornish inventiveness in our being, “Beam me up, Denzil” is surely only just round the corner. I therefore ask the Minister—with tongue only slightly in cheek—whether the ATOL protection in the Bill can be extended to space tourism when the time comes.

I welcome the additional protection that the Bill will offer to Cornish travellers and believe that it will only enhance the opportunities for smaller regional airports such as Newquay to continue to grow and expand their tourist flights.

7.57 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is a privilege to follow my comrade from Cornwall, the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double).

I am in an odd position in this debate as I have worked for the Association of British Travel Agents and Thomas Cook, and I now sit on the other side of the fence examining the ATOL regulations for which I made the argument several years ago. It is great to be back on this subject again.

I hoped that the first Bill we addressed in this Parliament would be about food banks or a new train line to the south-west, but ATOL reform is as good a place to start as any. I welcome the Bill. The updating of consumer protection for holidaymakers is long overdue and it comes on the back of several improvements in recent years in the way in which holidays have been sold and protected. I spent many years in Brussels working with colleagues of the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) and others on how we could strengthen the consumer protection for people buying holidays. As other hon. Members have said, the way in which holidays are sold has changed considerably in recent years. The travel industry operates under legislation that has not kept pace, in the UK or the EU, with the way in which travel is sold, partly because of the inventiveness and ingenuity of innovators and entrepreneurs in the travel industry. We are fortunate that the UK sector is second to none in how entrepreneurial it is.

My starting point for considering the Bill is to ask whether it will give certainty and confidence to consumers. The ATOL certificates introduced several years ago by the coalition Government were a step forward, but more can be done. In particular, people are often confused by the protection given when they buy a package, when they buy a flight-plus arrangement or when they buy separate arrangements sold at the same time with transferred data—a linked travel arrangement. The Bill does not say much about what secondary legislation will accompany it, and it will be essential that we get the detail right. The industry and consumers have been waiting for the Bill for some time and it is important that there is no further delay.

Having listened to the debate and having worked in the travel industry for a number of years, I think it is important that the House understands the clear distinction
between the protection afforded by ATOL for package sales and those that can be afforded by buying decent holiday insurance, including SAFI—scheduled airline failure insurance. As the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) remarked, time is running out. We are six months away from legislation needing to be in place and 12 months away from full compliance. For an industry already selling holidays 12 to 18 months ahead, that creates a difficulty for consumers when it comes to understanding what protections will be in place for their holidays.

The package travel directive, which I have learned to love and hate at the same time, introduced many new concepts and requirements, particularly in relation to the notable systems changes required to facilitate additional information provisions within the directive. It gets even more complicated when one starts looking through it. Travel businesses need to have sufficient time to prepare for the effective date of 1 July and to plan sales beyond 2018. That preparation is already at an advanced stage. We need the Government to publish the regulations quickly so that they can be properly consulted on and so that industry can take the necessary steps to adapt to them. I am thinking particularly of small businesses that may be captured for the first time in the scope of the regulations.

Travel is a complex fast-paced industry full of fantastic people. These technical updates need to be fully understood and implemented over time for many different booking systems, both in UK companies and those that operate internationally. That is why the draft regulations cannot come a moment too soon. The Bill will help to clear up confusion about which holidays are protected and which are not. There was an interim stage of flight-pluses: buying a flight plus another element, such as holiday accommodation or car hire. Wrapping them all together is a positive step forward, but will the Minister look again at how linked travel arrangements are treated in the Bill? He mentioned an attempt to bring LTAs into the scope of the protection. I would like to see more detail on that, because how they are treated is especially important if those transactions are not treated in the right way, they can fall outside the scope of the protections.

The people of Plymouth should not need to look into the small print of their contracts or their regulations to work out if they are protected. At the moment, there is still too much detail for people to understand whether they are fully protected. Given my newness in this House and the fact that this is the first Bill to be presented, will the Minister do me a favour and address a few things in his summing up? Will he clarify whether the implementation date for all bookings is from the point of sale or the point of departure? That is really important in terms of understanding whether holidays being sold now, which may be captured by the regulations after the implementation date, need to have retrospective protection added to them or whether that needs to be added subsequently. That could result in real confusion for consumers, so I would be grateful if the Minister cleared that up. I would also be grateful if the Minister reaffirmed that the protections afforded by not only the package travel regulations but the air passenger and other passenger rights regimes will be carried through when we leave the European Union.

I would like to spend a moment on the air travel trust fund. For those who have not spent time looking at how the ATTF operates, the fund provides back-up support in the event of a holiday company going down. It should ensure that there are sufficient resources not only to bring people stranded abroad home but to refund passengers who have not yet taken their holiday. Will the Minister provide an update on how it is going? Now there is £140 million in the fund and provisions in the Bill to create what I suspect are protected cells within the air travel trust fund—the Government have up to this point shielded away from doing that—will he clarify how it will work in practice? Should a new entrance cell in the ATTF be exhausted by the failure of a company in that cell, will the ATTF for the remainder of the holiday industry need to top it up? If a company already covered goes bust and the fund is insufficient, will the ATOL protection contributions—the £2.50 we pay for protection—be transferred into that element of the ATTF to ensure that people are brought home? The ATTF has been exhausted in the past so these technical questions could help to provide reassurance for consumers to know that the fund will always be there.

Finally, on enforcement of the Bill, I note that the Civil Aviation Authority and Trading Standards are to take a larger role. The CAA has, for quite some time, done a good job of enforcing the ATOL regulations. I am, however, concerned about Trading Standards, which is already under a huge amount of pressure and stress to deliver the work it currently undertakes. This could further add to that difficulty and complexity.

It is great that so many people are familiarising themselves with the intricacies of ATOL protection. I hope that all right hon. and hon. Members do so during the passage of the Bill. I hope that the Bill will also be the start of a greater focus on tourism by Government. Outbound tourism, which is the type of tourism that ATOL protects, has fallen between a number of Government stools for far too long, with split responsibilities between the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the Department for Transport and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. It sometimes seems that this is a hot potato that no Government Minister wants to touch. I am grateful that the Bill has been introduced, because it is time to consider a single regulator for the travel industry and whether there can be a clear Department responsible for bringing together all the elements of outbound protection for holidaymakers.

We are very lucky to have an outstanding outbound tourism sector. I notice that nearly all Members who have spoken to date have praised their local airport. Plymouth’s airport closed in 2010. I implore the Minister to look at how measures can be put in place to help us to reopen our airport in Plymouth so that I can join the cohort of Members who have praised their own airport. At the moment, my airport is growing grass on the runway. I hope it can open again soon, so that holidaymakers in Plymouth can enjoy the same protections that ATOL affords holidaymakers leaving other airports.

8.6 pm

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to contribute for the first time in this place. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and...
Devonport (Luke Pollard). I cannot hope to live up to his erudition and obvious knowledge of the subject. I am also grateful for the opportunity to be able to speak on the Bill, which I wholeheartedly support. When times change there is sometimes a need for regulations to change. Sometimes there is a need for no regulation, but in this case there is a need for regulations to change. I support that and I look forward to supporting the Bill in the coming months.

It is an honour and a privilege to represent the beautiful constituency of North East Derbyshire, a constituency of stunning landscapes, vibrant communities, rich ambition and a proud, proud heritage. We sit two hours away from here, nestled between the steel city of Sheffield in the north, the beauty of the Peak District in the west and the market town of Chesterfield in the east. My constituency has been happily and completely intertwined with Chesterfield for hundreds and hundreds of years. From that market town rises the crooked spire, with which some Members may be aware: a church that has been in place for over six centuries and which is notable for its spire not quite as straight as it should be. It dominates the landscape of Chesterfield and my constituency for miles around. I am a son of that crooked spire. I was born only a few hundred metres away from where it has stood for those six and a half centuries.

There is something unique about having the privilege to arrive in this place and I look forward to the coming months and years to doing so, but there is something particularly unique about having the opportunity to represent the place where I grew up and the people who gave me the very values I will speak of in this place when I have the opportunity to do so and to be able to talk about the area that made me. I have that privilege and I am incredibly grateful for that.

Before I enter North East Derbyshire into the obligatory most beautiful constituency competition—I assure hon. Members that my constituency will win hands down— I would like to spend a moment talking about my predecessors. I walk in huge and assured footsteps: the progeny of one of the founders of the industrial revolution, Francis Arkwright; one of the people who opened up the Derbyshire coal field, for which my constituency is so thankful and to which so much of its legacy is accorded, Alfred Barnes; and even a Nobel peace prize winner, Arthur Henderson, the three-times leader of the Labour party who did so much during the dark days of the 1930s for the causes of disarmament and peace.

I would just like to dwell for a moment on one particular person who had the privilege to represent North East Derbyshire: my immediate predecessor, Natascha Engel. I have been here but a moment, and I can already see the love and the respect that Members across the House have for Natascha, and I am happy to report that that love and respect is reciprocated in the constituency. In a time of fierce partisanism and, in my view, unnecessary rancour, I am happy to say that, despite having a different rosette from Natascha, I believe she was an exemplary Member of Parliament. I thank her for her 12 years’ service in the constituency and I hope she returns to public life soon, albeit representing a different area, if she chooses to come back to this place.

North East Derbyshire is a constituency of contrasts, from the beauty of the richly undulating hills of picture postcard-perfect villages such as Ashover and the beauty of the Cordwell and Moss valleys in the north and east, to the fiercely independent market town of Dronfield, with its monument to Sir Robert Peel’s repeal of the corn laws in the 1850s. I am aware of my constituents’ dislike of unnecessary regulation, which is something I will remember. They give way in the east to a landscape at once both scarred by the endeavours of man and then rebuilt over time, as we return to our former glory in North East Derbyshire.

My constituency came of age in the service of its nation in the provision of energy. At one point a century ago, a predecessor of mine stood in this place and talked of 40,000 men in my constituency who were mining under its ground every single day. Mining is in my constituency’s blood and, like the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith), I share that trait, in that both my grandparents were miners, including one who mined for a time at Westhorpe colliery in Killamarsh, a town that I now have the privilege to represent.

I am the son of a milkman who left school at 15 and went out to work every day before dawn in order to provide for his children and his wife. I am the son of a lady who left school at 16 and, through sheer force of will, went back to school in her 30s and, while holding down a job and bringing up two boisterous young boys, got two university degrees so that she could provide for her kids and make her life better. I am the great-nephew of the lady who ran the post office at Renishaw, a village in my constituency, and I am the nephew of an aunt who once went to work for the National Union of Mineworkers during the miners’ strike.

North East Derbyshire has demonstrated by electing its first Conservative Member of Parliament since 1931 that it has changed. I do not say that in the spirit of partisanship; I say it as it is merely a fact. In the same way that my constituency has changed, I think my family somehow reflects that change as well, from the descriptions that I have just given. That I am stood here today, a working-class boy able to talk in this place and represent the people I grew up with, is something that I will never forget. I will always seek to do my best for my constituency as a result.

Beautiful as my constituency is, and honoured as I am to be the winner of the competition that I have spoken about, my constituency also suffers from unique challenges and problems. We currently have the issue of inappropriate housing developments in the beautiful valleys that I have talked about, because the local council did not put in place the plans that it should have done years ago to avoid that. We have a fracking proposal in the beautiful Moss valley, which my constituents neither want nor wish to see happen, and I will support them in their opposition for as long as it is on the table. We also have the ever-growing burden of congestion, across a constituency as disparate as mine, which stops people getting around and stops businesses doing their daily work and which we have to tackle in these debates.

But my constituency is more than that. I pledge to my constituents that as long as I have the privilege to speak in this place, however long or short that is, I will work hard on their behalf and try my hardest every single day to make life better for them. North East Derbyshire is the winner of the competition that I have spent a moment talking about. That I am stood here today, a working-class boy able to talk in this place and represent the place where I grew up and the people who represent.

We also have the ever-growing burden of congestion, across a constituency as disparate and mine, which stops people getting around and stops businesses doing their daily work and which we have to tackle in these debates.

But my constituency is more than that. I pledge to my constituents that as long as I have the privilege to speak in this place, however long or short that is, I will work hard on their behalf and try my hardest every single day to make life better for them. North East Derbyshire is the beautiful constituency of stunning landscapes, vibrant communities, rich ambition and a proud, proud heritage. I support that and I look forward to supporting the Bill in the coming months.
can. If I have any time beyond my constituents, I will seek to dedicate it to this place, in trying to answer one of the big challenges of our time—a challenge that I, as someone new here, believe is growing and urgent and needs to be resolved. That is the challenge, at its most basic, of creating healthy, happy and prosperous communities that are bound together in tight union by energy, grit and determination.

I was born in 1980. According to some social commentators I am, to use that ugly word, a millennial and I sense something deeply amiss in my generation and the one that comes after it—a grave uncertainty, not about the politics of today or the policies that my Government are pushing forward, and which I wholeheartedly support, but something that is more visceral, more structural, more underlying. I feel that my generation is unsure about its place in the world. I feel that it is uncertain about where the world is going—that it feels that it is hurting untethered into a place unknown and has been for 20, 30 or 40 years. I fear that my generation believes that it may be the first to hand over the best efforts of those on these Benches and all Benches in this place. We have to consider that as parliamentarians. We have to realise that my generation and other generations are unsure and uncertain.

However, I would also say to my generation, as frustrated as it is, that the easy words and warm allure of anecdote and emotion that I have seen in recent weeks, months and years is no substitute for good governance. In whatever time I have in this place, I will stand up for cool thinking and understanding and for articulating problems in a proper and clear way. In the time I have here, I will also stand up for the values of my constituency—values of compassion and emotion, but also the values of hard work, aspiration and ambition that my constituency has imbued in me. I will also stand up for the creed of free markets, liberal economics and capitalist progress—unfashionable as they may be in a field in Somerset, but the only engine for us to unshackle the challenges of today and look forward to the future. While I have the opportunity to serve here, those are the things that I will put forward.

8.16 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and congratulations on being re-elected—very good choice, may I add? It is great to follow the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), who made an excellent maiden speech.

As is customary in a maiden speech, I want first to acknowledge the work that my predecessor, Graham Evans, did for the constituents of Weaver Vale during his seven years in office. Graham’s contribution to parliamentary life was richly diverse. He both chaired the all-party group on beer and encouraged many hon. Members to take up running—although I am assured that this did not involve running in the direction of the bar. Graham completed the London marathon many times, raising a great deal of money for good causes both local and national, and he encouraged many Members from all parts of the House to do likewise. I wish Graham and his family well in the future.

The House of Commons Library and a plethora of MPs from all parts of the House advise me that it is important to address some notable historical facts and figures about my constituency. Its three major conurbations are Northwich, Runcorn and Frodsham. Weaver Vale takes its name from its association with the River Weaver in the heart of my Cheshire constituency. People and things of historical association include Sir John Brunner, founding member of ICI and a former MP for the patch, Tim Burgess of The Charlantas—a band that are a favourite of mine—who hails from Northwich, and the excellent comedian John Bishop, a Runcorn lad with excellent taste in politics. Weaver Vale is also the place where Daniel Craig served his James Bond apprenticeship in the Ring o’ Bells pub in Frodsham, undoubtedly doing stunts across the bar. Another person of note associated with Runcorn is my wife Amanda, who was born there and has stuck with me through thick and thin—I think it was a wise and necessary move to include Amanda in my maiden speech.

As Members will know, Britain is a diverse, rich and vibrant nation, and much of that can be said of my constituency. An array of industries and business sectors are represented in Weaver Vale, with no one industry dominating the life of the entire constituency. Northwich, Weaverham, Frodsham, Helsby, and the eastern part of Runcorn comprise much of the urban life of the constituency, woven around rural areas. I am obviously going to say this, but it is one of the best places in the country in which to live, visit and work.

What grabs me most about the diverse fabric of Weaver Vale is how it has changed over the centuries and decades. At Runcorn is found Norton Priory, the most excavated monastic site in Europe, where the remains of the 12th-century abbey are found alongside the urban estates from the 1970s, where I must now focus much of my attention in assisting constituents. Weaver Vale has a proud industrial heritage, spanning back to Roman Britain, from the salt mines in Northwich to its association with ICI, historically employing thousands of workers throughout Runcorn, Northwich and surrounding areas. Although many people are still employed in the chemical industry, new high-tech industries have emerged and are thriving at Daresbury laboratory, using nanotechnology and robotics and providing the high-skilled, high-knowledge jobs that our community and our nation need. During my tenure as Labour MP for Weaver Vale, I will encourage new and emerging green industries to locate in my patch, and to employ local people. My hon. Friends and I want an economy that works for everyone. We want a race to the top, creating access to highly skilled, fulfilling and sustainable jobs, not a race to the bottom, with insecure zero-hours contracts and fake self-employment franchises.

Like the nation itself, Weaver Vale is a tale of two communities. It has some beautiful countryside, towns and villages. Just picture that rural idyll, with thatched cottages and country pubs such as the White Lion in Alvanley, which I visited only on Sunday. Some residents in my constituency are fortunate enough to have incomes above the national average, but many of my constituents in places such as Windmill Hill and Palacefields in Runcorn face real poverty in their daily lives, from childhood onwards. Despite what Conservative Members claim, there is a real lack of work, too much insecure
part-time employment, a growth in zero-hours contracts and a welfare system that lacks compassion and common sense.

One person who experienced the shortcomings of our current welfare system is Sheila, who, very recently, had an operation to remove a brain tumour. When I met Sheila, she could barely walk a metre to the TV. That was a result of the operation, but also of the side-effects of the steroid drugs that she was taking to help to prevent seizures. Sheila had worked hard. She had played by the rules, and paid her taxes. But in her time of need, when the welfare state should have been there to care for her, she instead received a £1,500 cut in her income, and was labelled a shirker by a system overseen by a callous, out-of-touch and now, I would say, chaotic Government. The Prime Minister talks about a nation that works for everyone, but it is certainly not working for Sheila and many thousands like her.

Let me also tell the House about another growth industry that is not a welcome sight in my constituency. I am talking about the sight of hard-pressed residents and families having to use food banks. In the past year the use of food banks has gone up by 25% in the Northwich part of my constituency alone, an issue that was highlighted only recently by one of the local newspapers, the Northwich Guardian. It seems that those who are most in need in our society are paying the price of a failed austerity programme that has more to do with an ideological drive to shrink the state, while living standards go into reverse gear and the national debt is now more than £1.7 trillion. This is not a society that works for everyone.

Finally, I want to thank the thousands of constituents who put me here, especially the young people who came out to vote for the first time, inspired by the politics of hope and opportunity and by a manifesto that wants to put them first for investment rather than cuts: a manifesto that wants to invest in our future.

As a lad born in Wythenshawe, Manchester, I never envisaged that I would have the honour of sitting on these green Benches to represent Weaver Vale. I was the first in my family to get a degree, and I gave back to society by becoming a careers adviser, helping young people to get into work, training and education. I was the first in my family to become a city councillor, serving the good people of Manchester for 11 years, and I am now the first Amesbury in my family to become an MP—a Labour MP.

Unlike some in the House, I do not have a long line of ancestors who served this House and the other place next door. My family made me who I am. My dad, Barney, was a carpet fitter, then a publican. My late mum used to clean caravans and serve school dinners, and my younger sister is a teaching assistant. All those people were hit by the pay cap. All of them were and are extraordinary people in their own right: grifters, fighters, and real people.

I bring my real life experience into the Chamber as a check and balance on the Government and as a champion for my constituents, especially those who are most in need. To represent the people of Weaver Vale now is the greatest privilege of my life. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to introduce myself to the House.
fellow candidates on many issues, but I never once attacked them personally. You can check Facebook, Twitter or any of the other social media platforms and you will see that I never denigrated the other candidates. It seems a pity that we have reached a nadir through social media where a lot of plain nastiness is regular. If we all had a little more respect, the world would be a far happier place.

To part two. Over the last 10 years, I have been fortunate to represent my residents at Tendring District Council. My ward, Frinton-on-Sea, has always been at the forefront of my mind when dealing with issues at district level and, from now on, Clacton, my constituency, its residents and their views will always be at the centre of all I do here.

The Clacton constituency is roughly half of Tendring district, a stunning peninsula with the Colne to the south-west, the Stour to the north and the North sea to the east; I think Members can see where I am going with his. As a result, we have 36 miles of the most stunning coastline pretty much anywhere in the country. We have the sandy beaches of Walton, Frinton and Clacton, probably the best beaches of all are at Jaywick Sands. We have the Walton Backwaters, a mysterious area of tidal creeks, mudflats and islands— salt marshes and marsh grasslands which in the late '30s gave Arthur Ransome the inspiration to write his book, “Secret Water”. It is called “Secret Water” because, when one approaches from the sea, it is difficult to see that there is an entrance there. So we have the buzz of Clacton, the quiet of Frinton, the rustic charm of Walton, the beautiful village and priory of St Osyth, and the bucolic hinterland of gorgeous villages and countryside. It is no wonder that we have a fast-reviving tourism industry. We are the sunshine coast.

Which brings me neatly to part three. I find it absolutely incomprehensible that this extraordinarily special place so dear to my heart, lying as it does a mere 70 miles from London, has historically been constantly overlooked. That 70-mile journey takes the best part of one hour 40 minutes by train, which is simply not good enough. A journey by car during peak times is an adventure only for the very brave. The A12 is known to be one of the worst roads in the country. It is often argued that we should be thankful that we are so hard to get to, but there is the old adage: down good roads wealth flows. Imagine if we could bring that journey closer to an hour. Seventy miles in an hour—not unthinkable; not even illegal. We would suddenly get the wealth of London on our doorstep and we would regenerate.

Clacton faces many challenges, most of which we have been taking head-on at the district council, and we have had some success. The long-awaited regeneration of Jaywick has begun. It has new roads, new buildings and a great sense of community. It is on the up. Walton-on-the-Naze has new developments and quality shops arriving. It is on the up. In the last five years, at the district council, we have managed to obtain £50 million-worth of investment for the area, £36 million of which has been spent on new sea defences in Holland-on-Sea and Clacton. You have to go to see them. We have created new lagoons, reefs and beaches over a 5 km stretch. We are on the up. But we need that infrastructure, and that is just one of my priorities for our much overlooked constituency.

I just want to remind everyone that we do exist in Clacton and that all are welcome to come and see us. I will take pleasure in taking visitors to the Naze Tower, built in 1720 by Trinity House as a landmark for mariners. It stands on the highest point in the constituency and gives breath-taking views across to Suffolk and over the beaches and looks down on those treasured backwaters.

We are a jewel of a place with many facets. It is well worth that 1 hour 40 minute journey; do come.

8.35 pm

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I want to say what a great privilege it is to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling), but such was the brilliance of his speech that my heart rather sank.

I am genuinely humbled by listening to some of the wonderful speeches including those by the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) and my hon. Friends the Members for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) and for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), and my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), who really brought home why we are in this place; we listened in silence, and I thank him.

I think I am going to support this Bill, although I have to say that any Bill relating to tourism that encourages anyone to go anywhere other than the Isle of Wight seems to suffer from what our philosophical Front Bench would call an a priori flaw. However, my constituents are as generous as they are understanding, and I am sure that they would allow me to support this otherwise very sensible Bill.

I also want to pay tribute to my predecessor. Andrew Turner was a kind man, a good listener, attentive to his constituents and held in very high regard by many of them. He worked hard for our island for 16 years and I wish him a long, contented and happy retirement.

Representing the Isle of Wight—we call it the island, and I apologise if I refer to it as such—is for me a labour of love. It is my patch of England. I have loved it ever since I was knee high to a grasshopper, and it is close to my heart.

It also has a special place in the nation’s heart, serving as a source of inspiration for islanders, visitors and our nation’s greatest artists. Turner’s first great work was for the Royal Academy: “Fishermen at sea” in the Solent, with the Needles as a moonlit backdrop. The poet Alfred Lord Tennyson settled here, and we hear our sounds and understand our sense of place in his work. When we listen to the seawater today rushing off the stones at Alum Bay, we understand the line in “Maud”:

“Now to the scream of a maddened beach dragged down by the wave”.

Swinburne and Keats wrote here:

“A thing of beauty is a joy forever”,

from “Endymion” is one of Keats’s greatest lines, and was inspired by visits to Shanklin and Carisbrooke. The wonderful eccentric Edward Lear tutored Queen Victoria at Osborne, the Bonchurch watercolourists painted near Ventnor, Julia Margaret Cameron, the wonderful feminist, pioneered portrait photography at Dumbola Lodge, and the Pre-Raphaelites hung out in Freshwater. And today we remain a home for many island artists, as well as cultural and sporting events of world renown.
We have a special place in science, too. We had the world’s first telegraph station, the hovercraft and the seaplane were built here, and the Blue Streak missile system—what a great name for a missile system—was test-fired from the Needles. And today the island’s experts produce some of the most sophisticated radars in the world for the Royal Navy.

My hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) eloquently assured us a fortnight ago that he was still stirring. I am sure of it, but let me remind the House that our Thrust 2 jet-engined supercar, built largely on the island, won and held the world land speed record for our nation for over a decade, at some 633 mph. So on the Isle of Wight, even our stirring is world class.

Moving from science to pseudo-science, Karl Marx was a regular visitor, a point I might have to make should the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) ever come to power—although if the victory last month was any harbinger of the future, let us wish Opposition Members many more such victories in the years to come.

On a more serious note, I mentioned our arts and science not to provide a potted history lesson or to express my love for my constituency—which I hope is self-evident—but because they are what we need for our future. We need again to embrace art, science, technology, innovation and education to inspire, to enrich and to employ. Our island is special in many ways, but our wealth has not always been of the financial kind and there is a perception that Whitehall sometimes overlooks us. In the 1990s, the Government promised the Isle of Wight and the Scilly Isles that they would study the extra costs of being an island. Sadly, that promise came to nothing, but those costs are recognised in Scotland through the special islands needs allowance, which provides an uplift in funding for some half a dozen councils with island seats. I believe that we need a better deal for our island, and it is not just a question of money, although every little helps and I will fight for extra spending on health and education. It is about islanders working with the Government to generate ideas for the public good, and about the Government working with us and being keen to listen. I know that there are good examples of that happening, and I wish to encourage more of it.

We need to embrace the knowledge economy and higher education. I look forward to working with the Department for Education and with universities to provide opportunities for such engagement. We need to continue to drive all education standards on the island, and I will continue to fight for the future of the Sandown Bay school. I look forward to the Government’s continuing support.

Our cultural offer is getting stronger. We have the wonderful Isle of Wight festival—I think Rod Stewart topped the bill this year, as part of a tartan revival that is clearly taking place in politics as well. We also have the wonderful literary festival and the cutting-edge Ventnor fringe festival—look out, Edinburgh! However, I wish to work with Culture Ministers and institutions to find out how they can help us to improve our museum offer and possibly attract a major gallery to the island, to help with year-round cultural tourism.

I look forward to engaging with Sport England and with trade and investment Departments to work with our high-tech sailing industry and with the sailing clubs of Cowes and others to ensure that the town of Cowes remains the centre of the sailing world. I also hope that it becomes a global centre for disabled sailing. That would be an important move that would have practical and moral implications. I was privileged last month to meet the captain of our national blind sailing team, who were prepping for their world championships, and I wish Lucy and her inspiring team all the very best.

We need to work with the Department for Work and Pensions, and organisations such as Help the Aged and our wonderful Mountbatten hospice, to make the island a national leader in ensuring quality of life for those in later life, combining health and social care and voluntary and state support to enrich life.

In transport, we need to ensure the future of the Island railway line and improve our cycling routes to make us Britain’s leading cycling destination. We also need to engage with the ferry firms to provide a better service. Let me be clear: privatisation did a great deal of good in the ‘80s and ‘90s nationally, but the privatisation of our ferries was not such a great success. I do not have all the answers, but I know that we should not have started from that point. I am uncomfortable with the levels of debt that Red Funnel and Wightlink have, because islanders—who are not the richest people in the country—have to help to subsidise it in order to cross the Solent.

I welcome the Government’s commitment to social housing and starter housing from the bottom of my heart. I find it difficult to explain to my fellow islanders why rich property developers were able to build houses there that most of my constituents could not afford. We do not need large-scale projects, which are heartily disliked by many islanders. They do significant cumulative damage to our precious landscape, on which much of our tourism—which accounts for half our economy—depends. We do, however, need genuinely affordable projects to provide homes for islanders, and we will work with the Government to build them. Our island plan should reflect that. For my islanders, housing is hope, especially for the younger ones. Working with many others—our chamber of commerce, our council, our excellent tourism team, voluntary groups and individuals—we will present ideas for a brighter future for our island.

Nationally, this Government have laudable aims of social justice, hope, meritocracy and opportunity for all, values which were inherent in manifestos and are absolutely inherent in our hearts, but we sadly failed to translate them during the campaign. I want those principles, aims, values and aspirations for my fellow islanders and for our nation. Let us deliver real change and real hope in the next few years and set an example, whether economic, moral, or political, that we are the natural party of government.

My fellow islanders deserve nothing but the best, and I will do my best to give them the voice that they deserve. Some Members, such as my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire, have explained why we are here far more eloquently than I have, but I will battle for my island. I cannot promise to win every battle, but I will fight every battle on their behalf for as long as I have the honour of serving in our Parliament what Wordsworth called “that delightful Island”.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!
Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): There is much acclaim for my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely), whom I am delighted to follow. Thank you for calling me to speak, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Friends and family have asked me what it feels like finally to be here, and I simply say, “Surreal,” but in the best possible meaning of the word. I could add “overwhelming”, and that sense is multiplied today as I speak for the first time in the Chamber as the new Member for Stirling. I am acutely aware that so many people have placed in me a sacred trust to do my best to serve all the people of Stirling and to do what is right for my constituents and in the national interest.

I am proud to call Stirling my home. It is situated at the heart of Scotland and its story is long and dramatic. The famed legend of Stirling’s wolf comes from the 9th century, when the Anglo-Saxon defenders of the castle were roused from their sleep by the howling of a wolf, warning them of an impending Viking attack. The wolf is still celebrated to this day.

Stirling remains as steadfast as the rock upon which its castle sits. Last week, I had the privilege of marching with the people of Cambusbarron on the annual march of the gillies, which commemorates the actions of the sma’ folk and camp followers at the Battle of Bannockburn, who came over the hill making such a din that they caused the English to flee. We Scots have always had a knack for causing a stooshie. The march now focuses on saving this important historic site from the threat of quarrying.

Stirling constituency is more than the city. It stretches from Drymen and Strathblane in the west to Cowie, Fallin and Plean in the east, and from Killof, Crianlarich and Tyndrum in the north to St Ninians and the Whins of Milton in the south. Through the good offices of our auction houses, Stirling hosts the premier bull sales in the UK.

I say to entrepreneurs and innovators across the globe: Stirling is evidently the place to be—just as I say to all hon. and right hon. Members that when the peoples of Scotland, England and the other nations of the United Kingdom work together, they have achieved and can yet achieve remarkable things that, in turn, make this world a better place.

Stirling’s best days lie ahead. The enthusiastic support of Her Majesty’s Government for the Stirling city deal, so expertly prepared by the officers of Stirling Council, is most welcome, and I will make it my top priority to work with the Secretary of State for Scotland, my right hon. Friend the Member for Dunfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell), to secure and deliver the Stirling city deal.

This Bill is especially important to the way in which regulation works for innovative companies that have revolutionised the travel industry in the digital space. The new digital district at the heart of the Stirling city deal will encourage the birth, survival and success of many more innovative digital companies.

The pace of technological change in the world today is staggering. We book travel and transport in completely different ways from how we did it only a few years ago. Gone are the days of flicking through teletext to snap up package deals to the sun. The internet revolution has empowered consumers and disruptive new companies to turn old market models inside out, and the provisions of the Bill are very welcome. It is important that consumer protection rights keep up with the pace of technological change. We must shape future measures in a way that adapts to the new market conditions being created by the entrepreneurial skills and talents of our challenger digital businesses, and not stifle creativity by holding on to outdated and outmoded regulation.

I take this opportunity to pay tribute to my predecessor, Steven Paterson. His tenure was short, and I make no apology for that. That said, he was an honourable and worthy opponent whose passion for Stirling and Scotland cannot be doubted. I wish him well for the future.

His predecessor was Dame Anne McGuire. She was Stirling’s Member of Parliament for 18 years, and her public service was especially noteworthy for her tireless work to promote and extend the rights of disabled people. Hers is a wonderful personal legacy, and one in which we should all take pride. I pay tribute to her.
I should also like to make a special mention of my friend Lord Forsyth of Drumlean, the previous Conservative Member for Stirling. His record of service in this House on behalf of the people of Stirling and Scotland, and the United Kingdom, is remarkable. In his maiden speech in 1983, he spoke of the problems facing rural Stirling in the field of telecommunications. That, I am sad to report to the House, remains an issue, although it is now about broadband and mobile telephony, rather than phone connections. I assure the House that digital connectivity is a subject I will keep coming back to.

Public service is often cited as a reason for Members taking seats in this House, and I add myself to their number. A body politic that exists to serve its citizens is one worth aspiring to. I was raised on politics, listening as a small boy as my grandfather held forth on the merits of the then Prime Minister, Harold Wilson. He was not a fan, but his trenchant view was that the Government of the day should govern in the national interest. Henry Campbell-Bannerman, a former Member of Parliament for Stirling and a former Prime Minister, said: “Good government could never be a substitute for government by the people themselves.”

That is also the perfect encapsulation of my personal political credo. I believe in liberty, in freedom and choice. I enlist to the moral argument for free enterprise and free trade as the most powerful means of lifting people, whole nations and regions out of poverty. I believe in law and order, equality for all before the law and in the good that government can do. I believe that the family, in all its forms, is the basic unit of society; thriving and successful families make for a thriving and successful society, and social policy is always best seen through the filter of what strengthens the family. I believe in fair dealing, competition that advantages consumers and justice in all its realms. I believe in giving power to the people and in respecting local democracy, in the constructive tension of public accountability, and in listening carefully to the voice of the people.

Whether right hon. and hon. Members reflect on those last words in terms of the implementation of a Brexit sanctioned by the people or the results of the referendum in Scotland to confirm its place within the United Kingdom, respect for the voice of the people and following their democratically delivered instruction is now the business of this House. And so it is that we must be ready to implement the will of the British people, and I make it my part to do so.

The British people have spoken and we will leave the European Union. So much of the work of this Parliament is now focused on the job at hand, and much of our work as Members must be focused on working together to get the best deal for our constituents and our country. I believe that, in doing so, we have a duty as parliamentarians to personify civility. We should resist trading in dubious charges, misrepresentations and ugly innuendos. We should demonstrate respect for all people, become good listeners and show concern for the sincere beliefs of others; although we may disagree, we ought not to be disagreeable.

I am here, then, on a mission: a mission to restore civility in public life; a mission to represent and defend the interests of Stirling; and a mission to promote and be an advocate for my home constituency and, above all, to serve the people and national interest of this United Kingdom.

8.58 pm

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): It is difficult to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), as I stumble my way through my maiden speech. The best thing is, though, that he and I will be sharing an office for the next five years, so I will have the opportunity to polish my public speaking with the benefit of his advice.

It is interesting that this Bill is the first one that we are discussing. People are talking about the problems air travellers might have, but according to the 2011 census, nearly one in four of my constituents do not even own a passport. The Bill is clearly very important for those who do have a passport and manage to undertake overseas travel, so that their money is protected. For some people, air travel is not something they do every week or every year—it represents a one-off opportunity. It would clearly be the worst thing that could happen to them if their funds were in any way threatened by companies going out of business, so the Bill is incredibly important.

Some Members might not have been present when the Minister opened the debate, but I firmly endorse his sartorial standpoint of not taking interventions from male Members who are not wearing ties. I bought this suit at the weekend specifically to wear when making my first speech in this Chamber—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] I will obviously be wearing exactly the same suit for the rest of the week, but at least for today I am looking my best.

I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me in today’s debate, because the good people of Walsall North, which includes Willenhall, Bloxwich, Leamore, Blakenall and Short Heath, have had to wait 41 years to hear a maiden speech from their Member of Parliament. You can only imagine how disappointed they will be when they see that the seven people who made speeches immediately before me were funny, erudite, clever and interesting—they will think, “What the hell did we wait 41 years for this nonsense for?”

In preparing for my maiden speech, I sought advice from experienced orators from both sides of the Chamber, but I think that the best advice I received came from Brendan Fisher, one of our ever-present, ever-helpful Doorkeepers. I have made a freefall parachute jump with my wife Clare and my two children, Sam and Corrine, and Brendan suggested that making a maiden speech was like doing a freefall parachute jump: there is the nervous anticipation while boarding the plane and ascending to the required altitude, before leaping, screaming, through the doors, only to find that the sensation of racing towards the ground at 100 mph is actually a pleasurable one—something that you want to repeat as soon as your feet hit the ground.

Hitting the ground running was what I needed to do to stand any chance of beating my entrenched predecessor, David Winnick. Many Members will be familiar with David as a tenacious parliamentarian. If I remember correctly, it was David’s amendment to legislation on the detention of terror suspects that led to the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, losing his first whipped vote in this Chamber in 2005. When I knocked on doors during the campaign, I realised just how assiduously David had worked on behalf of his constituents. I found many people who were not minded to vote for the Labour
party—at least not under its current leadership—but were prepared to vote for David because of the good deeds he had done for them, their friends or their family. It was David’s 84th birthday last Monday and I wish to extend my best wishes to him for his birthday and his retirement.

I grew up in a house with six brothers. My dad was an Irish bus driver, and we did not have a lot of money to celebrate birthdays. There was not much money for presents, but with six lads there was quite a lot of fun and quite a lot of fighting. My parents were delighted—and, I guess, relieved—that I went to grammar school. I then went on to university—I was the first in my family to do so—and it was at university that I developed an interest in politics. As soon as I graduated, I went back to night school to do A-levels in politics and economics to give me a bit of a basic grounding. Although, unfortunately, I voted Labour the first time I voted—[HON. MEMBERS: “Boo!”] I know, but I was actually a closet Conservative—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] It was then a quick journey from joining the party as an enthusiastic activist to standing for the council, and I have served on Walsall Council for the past 18 years.

What a privilege it is now to be the MP for Walsall North. I will be building on some bostin’ work that is already going on in my constituency. For example, I recently met Peter Shirley—the irrepressible Peter—who started the Midland Food Group in 1976 on his own. Today, that business turns over in excess of £50 million a year and employs more than 250 people. It sources quality meats and cheeses locally, and its export market includes the Falkland Islands. Similarly, Walsall Housing Group—I am proud to chair the board—recently signed a deal for a joint venture to build 400 new houses in the Goscote Lane corridor. Indeed, according to a recent edition of Inside Housing, within the next two years, Walsall Housing Group will complete just over 1,100 new houses. That is what is going on under the Government: creating high-quality affordable houses and the jobs that go with their construction.

To get a job, people need a good education, so what better place to start that education than Beacon primary school in New Invention? Two years ago, the school was rated by Ofsted as requiring improvement. Boy, did that improvement come in the shape of Paul Drew, the innovative headmaster, who has raised standards not just for staff but for students. Ofsted has recently rated Beacon as a good school. It does not take money to persuade the admin staff at the school that they should be trained to help children with reading practice. That just takes forward thinking—the type that we need to see. Better education is not always about throwing money at it: it is about employing inspirational leaders.

And so to my inevitable Brexit peroration. Sixty-eight per cent. of people in Walsall North who voted in the referendum voted to leave the EU. They want low-cost affordable housing for every stage of their life, and they want inspirational headteachers to give their children the best start in life. It is a privilege to speak this evening, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I hope that you will call me many times in future to advocate on behalf of my constituents.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. We have another maiden speech. I call Bill Grant.

9.7 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I compliment my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) on both his note-free speech and his choice of suit, which I have been admiring like other colleagues. The Bill deals with ATOL and is relevant to people who choose to travel by air. Like my colleagues, I am minded to welcome and support it for three reasons: it is modernising; it is harmonising; and it provides good consumer protection.

May I begin my maiden speech by saying that I am indeed honoured and humbled to be in this Chamber today, having been elected by the people of Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock? It is a privilege, and I will always remember that they trusted me with their vote. I value that and will do all that I can for the constituency of Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock. May I share with hon. Members part of my life’s journey? It would be terribly boring if I gave them my whole life’s journey, but for the past 10 years I was an elected councillor in South Ayrshire. My ward was in the town of Ayr on the coast. There are many good things about Ayr, but I will touch on two. Ayr racecourse is one of the UK’s premier racecourses. I invite Members to come along and spend their money there—they might even make money that they can invest to make some more. Odds on, they may lose some money. In addition, we have hosted the Scottish international air show for the past three years. For the moment, it is a wonderful event. It is not a threat to Farnborough but, in years to come, one never knows.

My time on the council was preceded by 31 years in Strathclyde fire and rescue service. I served throughout Ayrshire and the central belt, was based in headquarters in Kilmarnock, and finally served as a senior officer covering Argyll and Bute, and the beautiful islands—I would name them, but there are too many. It was a complex and diverse fire service, with Glasgow sadly being remembered as a tinderbox city many years ago, and I was well aware of that. Given my background, it is particularly poignant for me to deliver my maiden speech so close in time to the tragic Grenfell Tower incident, which must surely have been a hell on earth for all concerned. I await with interest the outcome of what must be a thorough and effective public inquiry.

I pay tribute to my predecessor, Corri Wilson, for the good work she undertook in this Chamber and in the constituency during her period in office. I thank her and wish her well for the future. Some further thanks are due to my appointed buddy, Joanna Freeman, who is a tolerant and lovely woman. She guided me—a lost soul as one of the new MPs—through what I describe as the wonders of Westminster. I will also take a wee moment to thank my long-suffering wife, Agnes, our two daughters, Angela and Karen, and our family,
981 Ayrshire cattle, not forgetting the—albeit smaller—fishing
community that is, to some extent, the bread basket of
Britain, with Ayrshire tatties, bacon and cheese, and
needs to be rectified, particularly at Maybole, and I am
essential link. The punishment of the 30-tonners and
that serve the ferry traffic to and from our neighbours
(Mr Jack) for the important ferry ports at Cairnryan
hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway
the A77, which is—excuse the pun—a main artery from
waited nearly 30 years for theirs. The town is severed by
Ayr. I waited three months for my bypass, but they have
eternally grateful to them. However, I must apologise
to my constituents in Maybole, a town just south of
are far more fertile than the fields he ploughed, producing
numerous offspring, and I am sure he would have faced
immense challenges from the Child Support Agency.
But his passion went far beyond the fairer sex, and he
penned many poems and songs, with lines such as
“Ye banks and braes o’ bonnie Doon”.
From its source at Loch Doon, the River Doon gently
winds its way past Dalmellington, Waterside, Patna,
Poldness, Dalrymple, Alloway and finally to the Firth
of Clyde at the aptly named Doonfoot.
There is also “Afton Water”:
“Flow gently, sweet Afton, among thy green braes”.
The River Afton gently winds its way past New Cumnock,
where I shall pause for a moment and mention the local
football team, Glenafton Athletic, better known as The
Glens, who, during the election campaign, won the
Scottish junior cup by beating nearby rivals Auchinleck
Talbot. To see New Cumnock bedecked in the team
colours of red and white, with virtually every home
displaying them, and with the lampposts adorned with
bunting, was a credit to the strength and community
spirit of New Cumnock, and I commend it for that and
for the victory on the football park.
As we move onwards, we come to Cumnock, sometimes
referred to as Old Cumnock, which plays host to Emergency
One (UK), bespoke builders of fire appliances and
emergency vehicles that are used throughout the United
Kingdom. I commend them for their good work as they
export—yes, I will use the word “export”—from Cumnock
in Scotland all over the United Kingdom.
As we move on towards Ochiltree, I will stop for a
moment at Dumfries House. May I give immense thanks
to His Royal Highness Prince Charles for his involvement
and, indeed, vision in not only saving Dumfries House
for the nation but securing job opportunities in catering
and tourism within and, indeed, beyond the constituency?
Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock has a proud past. As the
Member of Parliament for that constituency, I will
endeavour to do my best to secure a promising future.
Finally, an extract from Robert Burns’s poem “To A
Mouse”, which may be reflected on by many
parliamentarians from all parties, whether past, present
or future. It reads simply:
“The best-laid schemes o’ Mice an’ Men
Gang aft alyt,
An’ lea’e us nought but grief an’ pain,
For promis’d joy!”
9.18 pm
Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): It is a pleasure to
follow my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and
Cumnock (Bill Grant). Before he spoke, he promised
me that he would make me look good. By speaking so
powerfully, so poetically and so brilliantly, he has already
broken his first political promise—so thanks a bunch
for that.
It is also a pleasure to follow my predecessor, Sir Edward Garnier. He was a brilliant constituency MP for 25 years. He is independent-minded and he is brave, but above all he is just an exceptionally nice man. He will be missed in all parts of this House, and he will be massively missed in our constituency.

It is an honour to represent the people of Harborough, Oadby and Wigston in this House, and I would like to thank them from the bottom of my heart for sending me here. There are four really striking things about my constituency. The first is the staggering amount of community and voluntary work, whether it is local charities such as Rainbows, LOROS, VAL or VASL; the award-winning work of Market Harborough in Bloom, which is visible all over the town and makes it beautiful; the strength of our local army, sea and air cadets, with whom I celebrated Armed Forces Week just the other day; or community campaigns such as the campaign to save the children’s heart unit at Glenfield hospital, which I support. The strength of our civic life is incredibly visible from the briefest look at The Harborough Mail or the Leicester Mercury, or by tuning into our community radio station, Harborough FM. A huge number of people in my constituency dedicate themselves to improving the lot of their fellow citizens, and it is absolutely inspiring.

The second striking thing about my constituency is the strong culture of enterprise. There are now nearly 4,500 businesses in the constituency—a quarter more than in 2010. There is simply nothing that the people in my constituency cannot do well. From milk floats to jet engines, we have made everything. Although we have heard speeches this evening about the invention of powered flight in Scotland, you will be relieved, Mr Speaker, to hear that we have never tried to combine the jet engine and the milk float, as that would lead to dangerous adventures, I think. My constituency is famous for farming and food, and also for textiles. One of its most famous family businesses, Symingtons, actually managed to combine both of those things, because one brother made soups which fattened us all up, and the other brother made corsets with which to constrain our bulging waistlines. You will agree, Mr Speaker, that that is a very cunning business model. Given the culture of small business, the have-a-go culture, and the culture of enterprise in my constituency, I will work to make sure that important initiatives such as the Midlands Engine and the new industrial strategy work for small business as well as big.

The third really important thing about my constituency is the open and welcoming nature of the people. Perhaps that is because we have been plugged into the global economy ever since the Romans came and built the road that now forms the eastern boundary of the constituency. I have to tell you, Mr Speaker, that not all of that road is now passable by car due to several centuries of disgraceful underinvestment by the Vikings, Normans and Saxons, but none the less, later on the canals came and put the constituency back on the map. The fantastic staircase of locks at Foxton Locks is a testament to the time when it was the spaghetti junction on the weekend of its day. In more recent decades, the constituency has welcomed people from all over the world. Sometimes they have come with absolutely nothing but the clothes on their backs, particularly the Ugandan Asians who came and settled there when they were fleeing from Idi Amin. Wherever they have come from, they have often started brilliant businesses and powered our economy forward. In our constituency, we have very good relations between all the different communities, and I will work to keep it that way.

The fourth and final thing, Mr Speaker—you will perhaps see this coming—is of course that my constituency is strikingly beautiful, from the well-kept gardens of Oadby, Wigston and Market Harborough to the gently rolling countryside, it is a lovely place to be. When we are walking near our home—me, my wife Jemma, and our little daughter Florence—tramping through the tall buttercups and the nice pink clover flowers under the big Leicestershire skies, that is about as close as it gets to heaven.

My constituency is a place of beauty, a place of opportunity, and a place with a strong community, and I want to keep it that way. To keep it beautiful, we have to start by reforming our broken planning system. We have made progress in recent years, and of course we must build more houses, but too often at the moment our planning system only builds resentment. It puts development in the wrong places and does not match new housing with the necessary infrastructure, and councillors and the community simply have too few powers relative to developers.

To extend opportunity we have to focus on education. I grew up in Huddersfield, went to a comprehensive, got to go to Oxford and have ended up in this House. I want young people in my constituency to have the same chances as I have had. It simply cannot be right that school pupils in Harborough, Oadby and Wigston get so much less funding than children in identical circumstances in other areas. The new national funding formula will start to address that injustice, and I hope that the Government will press on with it as soon as possible. I also want the forthcoming review of council funding to address the wider underfunding of Leicestershire.

To make the most of our community spirit, we have to make sure that everyone in it is included. We are an ageing society with more people living alone so loneliness is a growing problem. I commend the work of the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness and the fantastic work being done by mainly community groups in my constituency to address loneliness. I will get right behind them.

I am an optimist by nature. Yes, we are in a global economic race, but this country has better schools than ever before and a brilliant culture of enterprise. Yes, we are an ageing society, but I believe that, with more older people and time to volunteer, we have the conditions for a massive boom in our social and community life. Although this country faces some challenges, I for one believe that our best days still lie ahead.
advice and guidance I have had both from hon. Members and from Officers of the House as I take my first faltering steps in this place.

I must pay tribute to my predecessor, Richard Arkless, who was elected in 2015. Richard did not have long in his role, but he made a positive contribution in those two years and I wish him very well for the future. I also pay tribute to Russell Brown, his predecessor, who served our region with aplomb for 18 years, until 2015. Russell defeated the Conservative candidate in 1997, riding on a Labour tidal wave, if you remember those days. I do: I was standing in Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale, John Major was going out and Tony Blair was coming in. It was a painful experience—this is sort of therapy for me tonight. Poor old Russell came in on the Labour tidal wave, only to go out in an SNP tsunami in 2015. We may not have seen anything so dramatic at the polls in Scotland this time, but the tide is rising for the Scottish Conservatives and long may that continue.

I have the honour to represent the electors of Dumfries and Galloway, which, measuring more than 2,500 square miles, is the sixth largest constituency in the United Kingdom. From Dumfries to Stranraer, it is a combination of rolling farmland, sparkling waters and beautiful hills and forests. It captures not only two and a half counties, but the hearts of those who live there and all who visit.

Historically, Dumfries and Galloway is the birthplace of John Paul Jones, the founding father of the American navy. No President has visited us to thank us for that. Of John Paul Jones, the founding father of the American navy. No President has visited us to thank us for that. Of John Paul Jones, the founding father of the American navy. No President has visited us to thank us for that.

To today’s industry is centred on agriculture, tourism, forestry and food processing. In particular, the tourism and farming industries are the bedrock of the local economy, and are based around the small market towns of Castle Douglas and Newton Stewart. My constituency is host to some of the finest dairy herds in the United Kingdom, some of the most expansive upland sheep farms in Scotland, and of course the world-famous pedigree beef cow that is the Belted Galloway.

Our tourism market is very important to our region, and we look forward to welcoming old friends and new to treasures such as the Scottish national book town of Wigtown, with its excellent festival; the ports at Portpatrick and Kirkcudbright, the latter also famous for its artists; and the rugged scenery of the Galloway coastline and hills.

Our small communities are dependent on fishing, field sports and walking tourism, but they are also dependent on faster and wider broadband to develop home-grown businesses, and that is something I seek to improve in my new role.

I am well aware of my obligation to play my part in sustaining those rural communities, but I must also encourage economic development in the larger towns of Stranraer and Dumfries. I was born in Dumfries so I know well its issues. However, I also want to make a positive impact in Stranraer, which has seen its ferry terminal move five miles north to Cairnryan in recent years. That move has resulted in many fewer visitors to the town, but they are a resilient lot in Stranraer, with a wonderful community spirit, and I intend to support them in their regeneration efforts in every way possible. The biggest win for them would be an upgrade of the A75 Euroroute from Carlisle to Stranraer, something I have been telling the hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), my neighbour across the water. I hope that he has taken it on board. That important economic artery has been ignored by Scotland’s Government for far too long.

I would like to take this opportunity to send another message to the Scottish Government. In the 2014 independence referendum, my constituents voted overwhelmingly to remain in the United Kingdom. The leadership of the SNP should respect that decision.

As we prepare to leave the European Union, it is the task of us all in this House, and in all corners of our great country, to ensure that the United Kingdom goes forward economically, socially, and constitutionally, as one nation. To that end, I look forward to working with my neighbours on both sides of the border, to bring forward the borderland growth deal for the economic benefit of the whole of the north of England and the whole of the south of Scotland.

In conclusion, I thank the House for the consideration that it has shown to me this evening. I would add only that I am proud to have been elected to represent Dumfries and Galloway; proud to be one of a baker’s dozen of Scottish Conservatives returned to Westminster; and proud that we have turned the tables and imposed a Conservative Government on the English! [Laughter.]
I will make one very brief point, which I made when I intervened on the Minister’s opening speech. It is important to have the detailed regulations in place as soon as possible. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), who made an excellent speech and who is very knowledgeable in these matters, echoed that point. The industry has to plan 12 to 18 months ahead and it is anxious that we get the regulation in place as soon as possible, so that people booking holidays today for that period ahead can have the coverage and protection the scheme should provide. I will support the Bill on Second Reading tonight, but I hope the Minister will address that point in Committee. Regulation must be in place as speedily as possible.

9.35 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is quite something to be the last Back Bencher called in a debate where we have had, I think, nine maiden speeches back-to-back. We are ending with one of the old regulars. One point I would make to new Members is that when I arrived two years ago I was told to find a nice quiet spot from which to speak. They can see the spot I decided to pick: directly opposite the then 56 Scottish National party Members. There are now slightly fewer of them.

I represent Torbay, which is a main tourism area. Indeed, I struggle to think why anyone would not want to enjoy our beaches and our history. It is one of the most beautiful constituencies in the whole country. It is right, however, if people do go abroad, that there are important protections—the ATOL regulations—in place.

One point made in a number of interventions is that the market has changed massively since the start of ATOL. It is likely to change again so it is important that our regulatory system is kept up to date. I therefore welcome the Bill. A lot of Members mentioned their birthplaces. I enjoyed the speech made by the hon. Member from my own birthplace, the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard). I was born in Freedom Fields, which he will know, and it was interesting to hear the points he made. This is a changing market, where the travel agent with a selection of brochures has been replaced by a smartphone with an app that connects people immediately with a site that can sell the market, where the travel agent with a selection of brochures has been replaced by a smartphone with an app that connects people immediately with a site that can sell directly opposite the then 56 Scottish National party Members. There are now slightly fewer of them.

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The implications of ATOL after Brexit are also a cause for concern. Hidden in the Bill are proposals that the Secretary of State will require only the affirmative resolution procedure to significantly reform ATOL and the air travel trust fund. Labour recognises the merits of some of the wonderful maiden speeches if I have time later.

The Bill will bring ATOL up to date and ensure that it is harmonised with the latest EU package travel directive, extending coverage to a wider range of holidays and protecting more consumers, as well as allowing UK travel companies to sell more seamlessly across Europe. Labour welcomes the extensions, which will ultimately help to protect more holidaymakers, but we want clarity on how UK consumers will be protected by EU-based companies, as they will no longer be subject to ATOL, but to member state equivalents.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Karl Turner: If the hon. Gentleman does not mind, I will not give way at this stage. I am hoping to mention some of the wonderful maiden speeches if I have time later.

The implications of ATOL after Brexit are also a cause for concern. Hidden in the Bill are proposals that the Secretary of State will require only the affirmative resolution procedure to significantly reform ATOL and the air travel trust fund. Labour recognises the merits of some reforms, but we believe that an impact assessment, full consultation and full scrutiny will be required before any fundamental changes are made to this well-respected consumer protection. These issues bring to the forefront uncertainties about the future of UK aviation following
the decision to leave the European Union. Labour has been clear that whichever framework is chosen, the Government should prioritise retaining an essentially unchanged operating environment.

In conclusion, the Labour party broadly supports the Bill, as it will extend protections to many more holidaymakers. However, we want clarity on how EU-based companies—which will no longer be subject to ATOL, but rather to their respective member states’ equivalents—will provide protections to UK consumers. We are committed to securing the best possible framework to ensure that the sector flourishes, but this means adequately preparing ourselves for the many implications that Brexit will have for ATOL and our aviation sector as a whole.

Given that I have a few minutes, I want to mention some of the maiden speakers, kicking off with the hon. Member for Redditch (Vicky Ford). She spoke very passionately about her constituency and the fact that her daughter Ruth encouraged her to stand and continue the long tradition of Redditch electing women to Parliament. That was an excellent move, because her speech was extremely well received and very good. She also spoke warmly of her immediate predecessor, Karen Lumley, who retired from this place due to ill health. We send our very wishes to her from all parts of the House. The hon. Lady also mentioned her predecessor Jacqui Smith, who was the first woman Home Secretary from this place.

The hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) eloquently described the need for consumer protections in this area. She spoke with great knowledge about the EU and the importance of these consumer protections given that we are leaving the EU. I understand that the hon. Lady is a Member of the European Parliament.

My hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) spoke with great pride about representing the constituency in which she had been raised. She also spoke about the very important issue of gender inequality and the pay gap, and the injustice represented by the WASPI women.

The hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) rightly used his opportunity to right the wrong of forgetting to mention his wife in his general election acceptance speech. The hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) spoke with great passion about the constituency in which he grew up, and also spoke very warmly about his predecessor, our very own Natascha Engel, who is greatly missed here. My hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) spoke with great passion about his constituency as well, and also, very cleverly, mentioned his wife, referring to the fact that she had been born and bred in Runcorn.

The hon. Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) was, I have to say, very entertaining. He was, I understand, an actor, but he said that this was probably a more interesting theatre. If I remember rightly, he appeared in “Bread”, which I recall watching as a kid. That, of course, was the comedy series about a family in Liverpool who had suffered a terrible time under the Thatcher Government.

The hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely) spoke with great passion about notable people in his constituency. He mentioned many to mention—my hon. Friends have devoured the privatisation of the ferry service, and many Labour Members would probably agree with him. The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) spoke with great passion about his constituency too, especially when referring to the wonderful shortbread and whisky. The hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) spoke about a very serious issue: the fact that nearly one in four of his constituents do not own a passport, and the importance of the Bill in protecting people who spend an awful lot of their hard-earned money on holidays and expect to be protected by legislation.

The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) spoke of the terrible tragedy that is Grenfell Tower, having had a great deal of experience as a long-standing fire officer. I am sure that the House will benefit from his expertise in that area, and in others.

The hon. Member for Harborough (Neil O’Brien) told us how innovative his constituents were, making everything from jet engines to milk floats. He also mentioned the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness, and said that he would support it. All of us, in all parts of the House, would be grateful for that support. Last but not least among the maiden speakers, the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr. Jack) also spoke about innovation in his constituency, in which the first bicycle was created.

The Bill is not particularly contentious, and Labour supports the Government’s efforts to legislate in this regard.

9.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): It is an absolute honour for me to be able to close the Second Reading debate on this Bill. I must tell you, Mr Speaker, that when I first looked at the Order Paper and saw that we had six and a half hours in which to debate a Bill consisting of four clauses, my heart slightly quailed for a second, but I would like to put it to the entire House that tonight has been an absolute triumph. I have enjoyed every speech: it has been just marvellous.

When I heard my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) stand up and quote, in the context of a number of maiden speeches, the maiden-seducing Robbie Burns himself, and not only that but mentioning his famous poem “To a Mouse”, which begins, as the House will know:

“Wee, sleekit—
I will not do the accent—
“cowrin, tim’rous beastie,
O, what a panic’s in thy breastie!”

I was tempted to think that none of the new Members speaking could count as a sleekit, cowrin or tim’rous beastie, and that the panic was likely to be in the Labour breathie. So it has been a delight. I must say it has been less a parliamentary debate than an episode of “Britain’s Got Talent”, with dazzling speeches and new voices—and especially, may I say with delight, Scottish voices from my side of the House, a rare and delightful occurrence.

We have lost great colleagues across the House, but this evening has brought home to us what absolute legends we have received instead.

We have had an extremely useful debate and I warmly thank all those who have taken part, including the many Members on both sides of the House who have made their maiden speeches. As the debate has made clear, this is not a Bill that is politically charged or partisan. We are collectively seeking to act in the interest of the UK businesses that sell holidays, and in particular in the interest of the travelling public who wish to enjoy...
those holidays free of care. This may not be the largest of Bills when measured in terms of the number of its clauses, but it is a very large Bill when measured by its potential to bring peace of mind to people in every constituency throughout the UK.

That reassurance is what the ATOL scheme was originally created to provide, when it was set up in 1973. Today, not only does it help to prevent rogue traders from entering the market, but it provides important protection to consumers in the event that their travel organiser should fail. It has provided effective protection to consumers for over 40 years and it is well regarded both by those who use it and by the travel sector itself.

Consumer protection is an important pillar of the holiday sector owing to the nature of the market. Holidays are frequently booked and paid for many months in advance of travel, and the consumer may often be unaware of the financial stability, or instability, of their holiday providers. The impacts from the failure of a travel company can be grievous. Consumers may face a serious financial loss from not receiving a refund, or from the cost of having to make alternative arrangements to get home. Even worse, they may experience the trauma, heartache and sheer inconvenience of a cancelled holiday, or of being stranded abroad without accommodation or a ticket back.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for his response to the issue that we face. He will be aware that, for many holidaymakers and travellers, delayed and cancelled flights are an issue. Does the legislation that he is bringing forward address the issue for people who are in that very difficult position, whether domestically, in Europe or further afield?

Jesse Norman: I am not quite sure I have taken the point the hon. Gentleman has raised. If it is about Brexit, I am not expecting this to change at all. He would be welcome to put the question again if we had more time, but I am afraid I will have to move on. I apologise for that.

The ATOL scheme provides important protection in these situations. It ensures that, if an ATOL holder fails, its customers are able to continue their holiday and return home, or that they will not lose out on the money paid if they are yet to travel. Fortunately, the failure of travel companies is relatively rare, but it does happen. In the last financial year alone, 19 ATOL holders collapsed. In each of those situations, the Civil Aviation Authority had to step in to deliver the appropriate protection to consumers through the scheme.

Many colleagues will be aware of the recent failure of the Spanish online travel agent, the Lowcost Travelgroup. When that business failed last summer, it was reported that there were 27,000 customers on holiday and over 100,000 customers who were yet to travel. Although many of those customers were from the UK, the company did not have ATOL protection as it was regulated under the Spanish regime. The collapse of companies such as that is an important reminder of the need to ensure that consumer protection keeps pace with the way people book their holidays. The huge growth in online booking means that customers have a much wider choice of providers, including those based overseas. Yet it is clear from the low-cost holiday situation that not every travel provider is covered by the same level of protection, and inconsistencies apply across borders. That is why we have already begun to take steps to update the ATOL scheme and bring it into line with modern travel practices.

The Minister of State for transport, legislation and maritime, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), has already mentioned in his opening remarks the legislative changes that we made to ATOL in 2012. These introduced the flight-plus category, to bring ATOL protection to the many consumers who book mix-and-match holidays online, in addition to those who buy traditional package holidays on the high street. The then Government also introduced the ATOL certificate, so that consumers know when they have booked an ATOL-protected holiday, and who to contact if their travel provider fails. We believe these interventions have had a positive impact for consumers and many businesses. Not only have we seen an increase in the number of protected consumers, but the changes have also helped to level the playing field between online and high street businesses.

For similar reasons, we have also been working with the European Commission and EU member states since 2012 to ensure that the European regulations are also brought up to date. The original package travel directive was agreed in 1990, and its provisions were introduced into UK law through the package travel regulations of 1992. As my right hon. Friend said earlier, the ATOL scheme is a crucial means by which UK businesses can meet their obligations to have insolvency protection under the EU directive.

The EU and UK package travel regulations have contributed significantly to consumer protection rights since their introduction. However, those regulations were originally designed for a world where people booked their pre-prepared package holidays through a high street travel agent or tour operator. The regulations thus pre-date the growth in the internet, where people are able to create their own informal packages online.

As the House well knows, the internet has now become a vast travel marketplace, providing opportunities for consumers and businesses. Indeed, we heard at the start of the debate that around 75% of UK holidays are now booked online.

That being the case, it is important that regulations and consumer protections are able to keep pace with major changes in the marketplace. That is why a new package travel directive was finally agreed across Europe in December 2015.

The UK Government have supported the rationale for updating the directive, in order to bring greater clarity on what constitutes a package holiday in today’s marketplace and to improve and harmonise protection across the continent. The updated package travel directive will do just that: it brings protection across the rest of Europe closer to the model we have operated since we updated ATOL in 2012. Once again, the UK is leading in Europe; that is good news for consumers.

Overall, it will mean consumers will see insolvency protection extended to cover a broader range of holidays. In particular, it has updated the definition of a package holiday, so that an informal package booked online will need to be protected in the same way as a traditional package holiday booked on the high street.
As has been noted, it also brings a new concept of “linked travel arrangements” into the scope of protection. Like a package holiday, these involve a combination of at least two different types of travel services purchased together for the purpose of a holiday. However, those arrangements are looser, involving the separate selection and payment of each travel service, and separate contracts with different travel service providers. Linked travel arrangements will not be protected to the same level as a package holiday; however, under certain conditions, a refund or repatriation will apply.

There should also be benefits to business. A harmonised approach will help to level the playing field, with the same rules applying for businesses across the EU selling similar products. This harmonised approach will also help to remove barriers for UK businesses that want to trade across borders.

Concerns have been raised about air passenger rights when the UK leaves the EU. The Government are committed to delivering an orderly withdrawal and are preparing to introduce legislation that will preserve the EU acquis on the domestic statute book for the time being. The Government are also seeking to have UK consumers continue to enjoy the strong protections and effective consumer regime that they currently enjoy both inside and outside the EU.

Today, we are taking forward the ATOL Bill to harmonise our domestic regulations with the changes coming in across the EU in 2018. As the House has heard from my right hon. Friend the Minister, the Bill will update the ATOL powers to align them with the scope of the directive. It is a fine piece of work, and I commend it to the House.

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

**AIR TRAVEL ORGANISERS’ LICENSING BILL (PROGRAMME)**

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Air Travel Organisers’ Licensing Bill:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Committee of the whole House.

Proceedings in Committee, on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

(2) Proceedings in Committee, any proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after the commencement of proceedings in Committee of the whole House.

(3) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after the commencement of proceedings in Committee of the whole House.

(4) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings in Committee of the whole House, to any proceedings on Consideration or to other proceedings up to and including Third Reading.

**Other proceedings**

(5) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—(Mike Freer.)

Question agreed to.

**Theme Parks: Child Safety**

**Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mike Freer.)**

10 pm

**Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab):** I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for allowing me this opportunity to raise the issue of child safety in theme parks. We in Leicester were deeply affected by the death of one of our own, Evha Jannath of Belgrave, at Drayton Manor park in Staffordshire. On the morning of Tuesday 9 May 2017, Evha woke up excited at the prospect of visiting Drayton Manor park with her school, the Jameah girls academy, which is in Rolleston Street, Leicester. She had been given £10 by her family to spend at the park. Just four days before, she had celebrated her 11th birthday. What Evha’s mother, Mussamth, did not know, when she waved Evha off that morning thinking that she would be safe and would have an enjoyable trip, was that that would be the last time she would see her. Tonight, we need to begin the process of addressing some of the issues surrounding Evha’s death, and I am grateful to the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work in the Chamber. This is not just for the family or for the 1.5 million people who visit Drayton Manor each year, but for the millions of theme park-goers worldwide.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** I have sought permission from the right hon. Gentleman to make an intervention. Like many in the House, I enjoy theme parks. When we go to Florida, for example, we notice that wherever there is a level of fun, there is also a need for strict regulations. Does he agree that, when it comes to regulations that work, we should perhaps take some lessons from the Americans when we deal with our own regulations back home?

**Keith Vaz:** This is certainly something that I hope the Government will look at, once they have had an opportunity to see the reports that have been prepared by the police and the Health and Safety Executive.

On that tragic day, Evha got on the Splash Canyon ride at just after 2 pm with her school friends. According to eye witness accounts, as the Splash Canyon ride went around its circuit, Evha fell into the water as the vessels bumped into one of the sides of the ride. Having fallen into the water, Evha began walking towards her friends who were in the vessel as it was pulled away by the water current. For a few minutes, Evha followed the vessel trying to get back to safety and to rejoin the vessel, because her friends were still in it. Sadly, at that stage she received no help and was eventually sucked under the water. In his initial report, the coroner, Andrew Haigh, has suggested that Evha suffered blunt chest trauma which led to her death. In his communications with the family and with me, and especially in allowing Evha’s family to see the body for a second time—which was of particular benefit to Evha’s mother—Mr Haigh has been exceptional.

Issues of theme park safety are critical at all times, but especially as we head towards the school summer holidays. These parks across the United Kingdom earn millions of pounds, and whether it is at Disney in the United States or at Drayton Manor, adults and children must be safe to visit them. According to Health and Safety Executive data, there were 420 non-fatal injuries...
at theme parks in 2015-2016, with 249 of them involving children under 16. There have been three deaths since 2005. That is three too many.

All theme parks have television screens that are monitored by staff. The family want to know who was watching these screens and how Evha was left in the water for several minutes without anyone coming to rescue her. The House may recall the horrific accident at Alton Towers in June 2015 when passengers on a ride crashed into an empty carriage and many suffered appalling injuries. The fact that this tragedy could happen so soon afterwards means that certain issues were not addressed, and it is in the public interest that they are addressed immediately. Following the tragedy, a feature of this case has been how the agencies involved have gone to great lengths to help the family. I thank the Health and Safety Executive for the work that it has done so far in investigating the issue, particularly the work carried out by Catherine Cottam under the leadership of head of operations Neil Craig.

The vessels on the Splash Canyon ride have no seatbelts and a number of vessels had their “stay in your seat signs obscured.” Unfortunately, this incident was not the first time that somebody had fallen out of a vessel at Drayton Manor. In 2013, Patrick Treacy also fell off the Splash Canyon ride. In an interview with BBC Radio 5 live following Evha’s death, Patrick’s mother Vicky called for lap bands on the seats to ensure children or adults do not stand up on the ride. If there is a threat that children may fall out of such rides and into the water, certain safety procedures should be adopted. I fear that that was not the case at Drayton Manor after the Patrick Treacy incident and in Evha’s case the same thing happened again.

In the immediate aftermath of the incident, other major theme parks, including Alton Towers, Legoland and Thorpe Park, closed their water rides. However, the rides have since reopened without waiting for the Health and Safety Executive report. The presence of lap bands that would ensure that participants sit in their seat, but would not impede escape if the vessel capsized, must be seen as a potential solution. That would not affect their enjoyment. Clear public announcements regarding seating on rides at all parks, a member of staff escorting people to their vessels and informing them that they must remain in their seats, and clear signage are all vital, but the family feel that all that was lacking on that day at Drayton Manor. According to the children who were interviewed afterwards, they called out for help to the guards, but nothing was immediately done for them. Making sure that such rides are adequately staffed is also a priority. Perhaps it would have been better if there had been two members of staff at the start of the ride assisting children to board the vessels.

I accompanied the family, including Evha’s father Muhammed Islam, her brother Muhammed, and her uncle Mohammed, to Drayton Manor where the ride and the circumstances were explained carefully to us by the police. On behalf of the family, I thank Superintendent Steve Morray and DCI John Quilty and his colleagues for their work and for the relationship that they have built with the family. Of particular benefit was showing the family the CCTV footage of Evha’s last moments. The police investigation continues.

Evha was only 11 years old and got on the boat with five other children of the same age or younger. Children under-12 should be accompanied by an adult at all times on such rides. I also want to raise the issue of bereavement damages for the death of a child, which are currently capped at only £15,000. That is woefully low. Although of course no amount of money can compensate for the loss of a child, we must look again at the issue of fair compensation for families. There is no cap on such payments in the United States. Legislation should be introduced to remove the cap to allow proper compensation to be given to families.

The owners of Drayton Manor have been deeply affected by the tragedy, and William Bryan wrote to me: “the whole Drayton Manor community remains deeply saddened and upset by the terrible incident last week. I cannot comprehend the pain and anguish that the family and wider community feel right now.”

His letter was deeply appreciated. There are so many heroes and heroines who acted swiftly after Evha was discovered. I personally pay tribute to the air ambulance service for its reaction to the incident and its efforts in trying to save Evha’s life, and to the staff, who must have been horrified by what they saw.

Hundreds of people attended the funeral in Leicester, even though many of them did not know Evha personally. The Darus Salam mosque and its director, Moj Mohammed, have also been exceptional and have established a JustGiving page to support Evha’s family. Evha’s school, and particularly its headmistress Erfana Bora, provided great comfort to the family after Evha’s death.

Many legal issues remain outstanding, and I have been careful not to cross into them while the inquest is pending. The family have appointed Hilary Meredith Solicitors, and her legal team to deal with legal measures, and they have taken up the challenge forcefully, for which I thank them.

By themselves, even though I am sure they will be extremely thorough, the police and Health and Safety Executive inquiries will never bring Evha back. However, it is hoped that their recommendations will change how the system works. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is absolutely right that there are theme parks in other countries. Theme parks do not exist only in the United Kingdom; they exist all over the world. Millions of children enjoy going to them, and if there is an example of better practice, I hope we will be able to follow it.

Throughout May I spent a great deal of time with the family, who remain shocked and in mourning. As one would imagine, Evha’s mother is still devastated by the death of her young child. Muhammed, Evha’s brother, has taken on so much after this tragedy and has handled himself in a way that most 18-year-olds could not, and should not be asked to do. Muhammed and the family are concerned about potential negligence leading to his sister’s death.

To lose a child is horrific, but to use that loss as a means of achieving positive change, so that things can be improved for others, is nothing short of heroic. Having spoken to Evha’s father, Muhammed Islam, I know he is set on ensuring that no other family is hit by such a tragic event. No Member of this House wants to be in the position of calling for change after such a tragedy, which is why we need to ensure there is change.
The House will inevitably move on to debate other tragic events—indeed, earlier today we heard more about Grenfell Tower. However, for this close-knit and loving family, no minute will go past, no day will go by and no birthday will fail to be acknowledged without longing for their daughter, sister and niece. They will never again hear little Evha chatting and laughing, and they will never see her lovely face, which is why they want to get to the truth of what happened. They deserve nothing less.

10.15 pm

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt): I thank the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) for securing this debate and commend him for the support and advocacy he has shown for his constituents. May I take this opportunity to extend my sincere sympathy to Evha’s family and friends at their immense loss, and to join the right hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to all those who have shown for his constituents. I thank the right hon. Member for the tribute he paid to Drayton Manor, which operates similar machines manufactured by Intamin at Alton Towers and Thorpe Park. Merlin, which operates similar machines manufactured by Intamin, has already closed its rides so that it could conduct an in-depth check to ensure that the machines were operating correctly. It agreed to keep the rides closed until the HSE— I am the Minister with responsibility for that body—its 50-strong fairground inspection team and, in particular, the two officers he mentioned for the leadership in this instance.

The right hon. Gentleman will know that Staffordshire police, with the HSE’s support, are currently investigating the circumstances surrounding Evha’s death and that, as a result of that ongoing investigation, I am constrained as to what I can say, particularly about this incident. However, I hope to afford him and his constituents some reassurances within those constraints. I can confirm that Drayton Manor’s procedures for responding to emergencies at this ride, including its arrangements for identifying and rescuing anyone who falls into the water, will be examined as part of the investigation and that the ride remains closed while this investigation takes place.

Immediately after the accident, the HSE contacted Merlin, which operates similar machines manufactured by Intamin at Alton Towers and Thorpe Park. Merlin had already closed its rides so that it could conduct an in-depth check to ensure that the machines were operating correctly. It agreed to keep the rides closed until the HSE could reassure it that there was nothing physically wrong with the Drayton Manor ride that would increase the risk to passengers. The HSE did that, and the rides were closed for three days.

Once it had completed its checks, Merlin confirmed to the HSE that it had reviewed all the operating procedures to ensure they were in line with the manufacturer’s instructions and that the operators were working in accordance with their training. It also confirmed that it had reviewed the arrangements for supervising the ride and the riders, ensuring that only those who could be safely accommodated were allowed on to the ride; providing clear instructions to riders to remain in their seats while the ride is in operation, and not to stand, swap seats, lean out of the boat and so on; and ensuring that riders knew that the ride is vigorous and that they need to hold on as the boat moves down the ride. Merlin also confirmed that it had reviewed its rescue and response measures to ensure that it would know immediately that a person had fallen into the water; and that, crucially, it could stop the water flow with an emergency stop and could swiftly get someone out of the water using appropriate techniques and equipment. On the information provided, the HSE was satisfied with Merlin’s review of those other rides. That is important to get on the record in the immediate aftermath of that tragic incident.

Following the incident, the HSE also sent out an information note to the Amusement Devices Safety Council for onward transmission, reminding ride operators of the steps that they were required to take in order to ensure the safety of riders on water rides, in particular. Those included some of the areas that I have just mentioned. Any specific learnings that come out of the investigation at Drayton Manor will be shared with the industry so that it can ensure that they are taken on board.

As I said, the investigation is ongoing and the ride has been shut down to allow that to proceed. The specific lines of inquiry that are being followed cannot currently be disclosed, for reasons that the right hon. Gentleman will understand, but, based on the emerging findings of the investigation, the Health and Safety Executive has no information that suggests the other rides are unsafe to operate.

The investigation is also looking at the arrangements made by the school. After the incident, the Department for Education produced a statement with further advice. If necessary, it will provide additional guidance, should the investigation identify deficiencies in the processes.

Fortunately, serious issues such as this one are rare, but the right hon. Gentleman is quite right to point out that even one is one too many. This was the first drowning on a water ride in the UK. Following such an incident, the Health and Safety Executive carries out an in-depth investigation, not only to establish the causes of the incident but to achieve justice for the victims and their families. Any lessons learned will be shared with the industry, which will be required to implement them.

By way of example, as I am constrained in what I can say about the Drayton Manor incident, I shall explain what happened following the Alton Towers incident involving a multi-car rollercoaster. The operators reviewed and tested their operational and administrative procedures for clearing the block-stops on multi-car coasters. Merlin reviewed its safety management arrangements at Alton Towers and implemented a number of recommendations. Alton Towers’ staff did a series of national and international presentations explaining what went wrong and why. It is important to mention that, because the right hon. Gentleman rightly flagged up the fact that we can learn from other nations, and other nations can learn from what has happened at our theme parks.

The HSE national fairground inspection team’s work plan for this year includes the inspection of multi-car rollercoasters at specific theme parks. The HSE is working with theme park operators and their representative body, the British Association of Leisure Parks, Piers and Attractions, to improve management systems for the control of risks associated with rides such as roller coasters. There is no room for complacency, and the lessons that can be learned from incidents are certainly disseminated, with any new requirements enforced.

If the investigations into the recent incident expose any breaches of the law, appropriate action will be taken to hold those responsible to account. If any shortcomings are found in the current regulatory regime,
steps will be taken to address them. The Health and Safety Executive will act on information received about incidents in other countries. Often, that information is communicated to the executive through its contacts with the British Association of Leisure Parks, Piers and Attractions, which is a member of the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions. The Health and Safety Executive publishes its safety alerts and bulletins on its website, thus making them available to a worldwide audience. When necessary, the executive will engage with international colleagues to improve safety at fairgrounds and theme parks worldwide.

Jim Shannon: Before the debate, I spoke to the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) about Florida, where there are safety belts in all water rides, wherever they may be. That might be a simple solution, but it is perhaps one way to ensure that what happened at Drayton Manor does not happen again.

Penny Mordaunt: Indeed, the right hon. Member for Leicester East also mentioned other possible interventions that might have helped in this particular incident and might help in others. Indeed, on hearing about the incident I have formed a layperson’s view. One asks all sorts of questions, including about lifejackets in certain circumstances.

Keith Vaz: I thank the Minister for the thoughtful and compassionate way in which she has responded to the debate. Does she have any indication of when the HSE will complete its report, because the inquest cannot take place until it is complete? We will then have an opportunity to look at changes that we might want to make.

Penny Mordaunt: I am happy to keep the right hon. Gentleman informed about that. I cannot give him a timeline today for the HSE investigation. I have inquired about that, but the investigation will be led by the evidence, so I cannot give him an end date. I understand from what hon. Members have said that they are keen that any safety measures that could be introduced are introduced now. The process that I have outlined, and the methodical review of different but similar rides will, I hope, give some assurance on that front. There are other things that they have mentioned, and which may strike us as laypeople as common-sense things to introduce. It is, like many situations, a bit more complicated than that. In cases overseas, if people have been more restricted in a boat, that has impeded their escape after an accident.

We need to wait, having assured ourselves that the immediate checks have been done on similar rides, for the HSE report. As I have outlined, any recommendations that it makes to the industry will be disseminated widely. The executive is working as swiftly as it can to complete that report so that other parts of the investigation can move forward, which I appreciate is incredibly important to the family. I would add that the HSE has commissioned research into the risks presented by water rides of this nature, as well as the current philosophy on risk control and whether that needs to change.

I assure hon. Members that the HSE will ensure that lessons are learned from this tragic event and are acted on by the industry. In the interim, measures have been taken to ensure that other rides operate safely. I thank the right hon. Member for Leicester East for introducing the debate. As things progress, I stand ready, as does my Department, to assist him and his constituents.

Question put and agreed to.

10.28 pm

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH

The Secretary of State was asked—
Leaving the EU: NHS Workforce

1. Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What recent discussions he has had with the Home Secretary on ensuring that the NHS has the workforce it needs after the UK leaves the EU. [900174]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): The 150,000 EU nationals working in our health and care services do a brilliant job and we want them to continue doing it. I am in regular talks with Cabinet colleagues to inform both domestic workforce plans and the Government’s negotiations with the EU.

Mr Carmichael: The Secretary of State will be aware that that figure represents in excess of 5% of the total workforce in the NHS. This matter will have to be addressed, engaging with the recruitment sector, the employment sector and, indeed, the devolved Administrations. Is that how he will handle it?

Mr Hunt: We absolutely will be taking a UK-wide approach. The numbers for England are actually slightly higher than those the right hon. Gentleman talks about—about 9% of doctors and about 19% of nurses are EU nationals. However, we are still seeing doctors and nurses coming to the UK, and we need to do everything in all parts of this House to reassure them that we see them as having a bright and vital future in the NHS.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): If students with four As at A-level continue to find it very difficult to get into a medical degree in this country, is it any wonder that we have to import them from Europe?

Mr Hunt: We want to attract the brightest and best into the NHS from all over the world, wherever they come from, if there is a need. The only caveat I would make is that we have imported a number of doctors from very, very poor countries that actually need those skills back home. We have to recognise that we have international responsibilities to make sure that we train the number of doctors and nurses we need ourselves.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The Secretary of State should know that staff shortages are not just for patients—they are also costing a lot more, in Nottingham and elsewhere, because of locum and agency costs. Is it not clear that if we start restricting access from the EU for staffing purposes, it will cost the NHS an absolute fortune more?

Mr Hunt: Let me reassure the hon. Gentleman that there is no intention to restrict access to vital professions such as the clinical professions in the NHS post-Brexit. We have said many times that we will have a pragmatic immigration policy. The long-term solution is not to depend on being able to import doctors and nurses from anywhere, because the World Health Organisation says that there is a worldwide shortage of about 2 million clinical professionals; we are not the only people facing the challenge of an ageing population.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State should know that staff shortages are not just for patients—they are also costing a lot more, in Nottingham and elsewhere, because of locum and agency costs. Is it not clear that if we start restricting access from the EU for staffing purposes, it will cost the NHS an absolute fortune more?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Lady may have noticed a little thing called Brexit that happened last year, which is the cause of understandable concern. If she looks at the facts about how many doctors came from the EU to the NHS in the year ending this March, in other words, post-Brexit, she will see that 2,200—[Interruption] Someone asked about nurses. I happen to have that information here: 4,000 nurses joined the NHS from the EU in the year ending in March.

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend makes a very important point. We absolutely will be taking a UK-wide approach. The numbers for England are actually slightly higher than those the right hon. Gentleman talks about—about 9% of doctors and about 19% of nurses are EU nationals. However, we are still seeing doctors and nurses coming to the UK, and we need to do everything in all parts of this House to reassure them that we see them as having a bright and vital future in the NHS.

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Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): One of the consequences of free movement in the European Union is that proportionately we take in rather fewer doctors, in particular, and fewer nurses from the Indian subcontinent and other places. What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the capacity to revisit the strong relationship we had with those workforces in the immediate post-war years?

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. We absolutely will be taking a UK-wide approach. The numbers for England are actually slightly higher than those the right hon. Gentleman talks about—about 9% of doctors and about 19% of nurses are EU nationals. However, we are still seeing doctors and nurses coming to the UK, and we need to do everything in all parts of this House to reassure them that we see them as having a bright and vital future in the NHS.

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being able to import as many doctors and nurses from the EU as we need to, and that has meant that we have not trained enough people ourselves. That is bad for EU countries and for our own young people.

**Doctors and Nurses**

2. Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): What steps are being taken to increase the supply of doctors and nurses in the NHS. [900175]

12. Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to increase the number of doctors and nurses working in the NHS. [900185]

**The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt):** Last year this Government announced one of the biggest expansions of medical training places in the history of the NHS, involving funding 1,500 additional medical school places every year—of which 500 start this September—and reforms that will enable universities to offer up to 10,000 additional nurse training places every year.

Justin Tomlinson: Swindon clinical commissioning group secured pilot funding for its successful video campaign to recruit additional GPs to fill vacancies in our local community. Will the Secretary of State commit to exploring further innovative ways to match newly qualified staff to vacancies that they might not have considered?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. In parts of the country, GP shortages have been successfully addressed as the CCG has done in Swindon. An important part of this is persuading people who go into medicine that general practice is one of the most exciting and rapidly changing parts of medicine today. We have seen a 9% increase in the number of medical students choosing to go into general practice since 2015.

Mr Wragg: Further to my hon. Friend’s question, may I ask the Secretary of State what he is doing to ensure that enough doctors are recruited, developed and retained at my local hospital, Stepping Hill?

Mr Hunt: I heard a lot about Stepping Hill when I went to visit my hon. Friend; I think it was last year. I had the privilege of visiting the hospital more recently after the horrific terrorist attacks, and I commend the hospital for the brilliant work that it did in the wake of the bomb. The hospital has done a good job of recruiting; I think it has recruited 93 more doctors and nearly 13,000 more nurses working on our wards than there were in 2010, but she is right: we need more nurses and nursing staff, and that is why we are expanding the number of nurse associates. This year we are, for the first time, opening up an apprenticeship route into nursing, which means that people from non-traditional backgrounds—particularly band 3 healthcare assistants—will find it much easier to get into nursing. That is how we will expand the workforce.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): According to the latest NHS indicators published by the House of Commons Library last week, the number of GPs is estimated to have fallen over the past 12 months, and the figures for March 2017 are expected to show a further fall. Why is that?

Mr Hunt: We have had a big increase in the number of medical students choosing to go into general practice, but we have also had an increase in the number of GPs retiring early. That is a problem that we are urgently addressing.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on serving as Health Secretary for three Parliaments, and say to him that besides doctors and nurses, he should look to increase the use of properly regulated acupuncturists, herbalists, homeopaths, chiropractors and osteopaths, who would reduce the burden on doctors and nurses in the health service.

Mr Hunt: Over those three Parliaments, I have learned to expect questions from my hon. Friend in a similar vein, and I commend him for his persistence in championing that cause. As he knows, I think the most important thing, with all such issues, is to follow the scientific advice.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): When the Government removed the nursing bursary and introduced tuition fees, the Secretary of State said that it was being done, as he has repeated this morning, to fund 10,000 extra student nurse places. The universities are saying that no extra places have been commissioned, however, so when will we see an expansion of student nurse training?

Mr Hunt: I always welcome the hon. Lady’s forensic interest in matters south of the border, but given that Scotland has just seen its first fall in life expectancy for over 100 years, she might want to think about her own constituents. With respect to the number of nurses, we now have more than 50,000 nurses in training, and we are confident that we will deliver a big increase in the supply of nurses to the NHS.

Dr Whitford: We still have a nursing bursary and we have no tuition charges, so the Secretary of State may want to explain why universities claim there are no additional places. In addition, we are losing almost half of junior doctors at the end of their foundation years. What action is the Secretary of State taking to find out why?

Mr Hunt: At the heart of this is the need to open up avenues for more flexible working for both doctors and nurses. If the hon. Lady followed what we have done in
Scotland has more money to spend on her own constituents. is still going up in Scotland—she might find the NHS in England. The number of dermatologists in the NHS continues to grow, with 18% more consultants and 13% more doctors in training since May 2010. HEE’s latest workforce plan shows a 2% increase in funded training places for dermatologists compared with the previous year. Dermatology remains a popular choice for doctors, and it typically enjoys 100% fill rates.

Mr Hunt: I welcome my hon. Friend’s first question to me. I am very aware of the issues faced by the Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust, which I visited during the difficult winter period that it has just come through. It now has a new chief executive and leadership team, who have made a very promising start. From the experience of many other hospitals that have been through difficult patches, we have found that it is usually never about the commitment of staff, but about getting the right leadership in place. I can assure her that I saw outstanding commitment from the staff of the trust.

Mr Hunt: I did not vote for the hon. Gentleman’s amendment, because—as usual—Labour Members have told us a lot about how they want to spend the money, without having the faintest idea of where it will come from. He is ignoring an elephant in the room: if we had followed the spending plans he campaigned for in 2015, the NHS would have £2.6 billion less this year, which is the equivalent of 85,000 fewer nurses.

Mr Hunt: Let me tell the hon. Gentleman what extra money is going into the NHS: three years ago, £1.8 billion, which was not asked for by Labour; two years ago, £3.8 billion, which is nearly £1 billion more than Labour was promising; and this year, £1.3 billion. That is a lot of extra money. Why is it going in? Because, under this Government, we have created nearly 3 million jobs, and that strong economy is funding an improving NHS.

Dermatologists

3. Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase the number of dermatologists in the NHS.

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): Health Education England is responsible for meeting the workforce requirements of the NHS in England. The number of dermatologists in the NHS is growing, with more consultants and doctors in training compared with the previous year. Dermatology remains a popular choice for doctors, and it typically enjoys 100% fill rates.
Trust and was impressed by the fantastic work staff are doing despite the surroundings and facilities, which are clearly in need of improvement, for which the right hon. Gentleman has been campaigning. Any significant service change must be subject to consultation with local people, be based on clinical evidence, consider patient choice and have support from GP commissioners.

Tom Brake: Indeed the Secretary of State did visit the hospital on the first day of the election campaign—nothing suspicious about that timing. The Minister will have heard that 43% of the estate is unsuitable for the delivery of modern healthcare yet, thanks to the hard work of staff, St Helier is one of the few hospitals that manages to keep on top of A&E waiting time targets. Would he like to be the bearer of good news and confirm that the Secretary of State cancelled to enable a new hospital to be built?

Mr Dunne: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, the south-west London sustainability and transformation plan area is in the process of turning its proposals into plans, with public consultation when appropriate. It has yet to make any recommendations. As he knows, it set up four local transformation boards to consider how best to transform services, including at both Epsom and St Helier hospitals, for the decade beyond 2020. It would therefore be wrong for me to prejudice those conclusions at this stage.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): Rather than having empty political campaigns, does my hon. Friend have a sympathetic ear for an alternative, well thought-out plan for healthcare in Sutton which works clinically and financially and listens to all residents in Sutton?

Mr Dunne: My hon. Friend is right. We need to look to the proposals coming from the clinicians on the ground who are responsible for running acute services for the whole of south-west London. They have made it clear that they intend to consult the public once they have made their recommendations transparent. They intend to retain all five hospitals but to look at the configuration of services among them, and that needs to be led by clinicians.

General Practitioners

5. Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of the number of GPs. [900178]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): In answering my first Health question, may I thank the cardiac intensive care unit team at Barts hospital in London, where my father-in-law, the just retired Supreme Court Justice Lord Toullson, sadly passed away last week? They did absolutely everything they could and showed the very best of the NHS.

We have committed to there being an extra 5,000 doctors in general practice by 2020 as part of a wider increase in the total workforce in general practice. NHS England and Health Education England are working together with the profession to increase the GP workforce. We believe that that is an essential part of creating a strong and sustainable general practice, and indeed NHS, for the future.

Bridget Phillipson: In recent years, the number of family doctors in Sunderland has plummeted. All the evidence shows that doctors are more likely to stay in the areas where they have trained. Does the Minister accept that new medical school places should be created in areas such as Sunderland, where there is the greatest need to recruit and retain general practitioners?

Steve Brine: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. Since 2016, Sunderland’s GP Career Start scheme has recruited 10 newly qualified GPs. A further five newly qualified GPs will be recruited each year over the next three years. I understand her point about medical school provision. Undergraduate medical education is delivered in the north-east in partnership between Newcastle and Durham universities. There are currently 25 medical schools in England offering just over 6,000 Government-funded medical school places. We are funding 1,500 additional places each year. Five hundred have already been allocated, with 24 of them in Newcastle.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Recruiting more GPs in Cheltenham is vital to share the growing workload they face, but rising indemnity costs, particularly for out-of-hours care, can act as a disincentive. Does my hon. Friend agree that this must be addressed decisively?

Steve Brine: Indeed we do. We recognise the role that GPs play in the delivery of NHS care. Following the GP indemnity review, additional money was included in the contract last year to address indemnity inflation. We said in our manifesto that we will ensure appropriate funding for GPs to meet rising costs in the short term and work with the industry to produce a longer term solution.

17. [900191] Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): As the number of GPs goes down, there is increasing pressure on the time they have with their patients. One area being missed is that of suicide and self-harm. We now know there is an increased risk of suicidal behaviour for those on unstable and irregular zero-hour contracts, and that those on employment and support allowance are more than two thirds more likely to take their own life. What are we doing to advise GPs on that?

Steve Brine: The hon. Lady, who chairs the all-party group on suicide and self-harm prevention, does a huge amount of work in this area. The GP patient survey last year showed that 85% of respondents rated their GP experience as good. We are investing about £30 million of taxpayers’ money in the releasing time for care programme, which we hope will increase the time GPs can spend with patients on issues such as those she raises, but in my new role I am very happy to meet her.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): GPs are the first line of defence against antibiotic resistance, which has the potential to be an uncontrollable global new black death. Will the Minister confirm that the UK will retain its position as a world leader on this issue, and will he tell us when the global antimicrobial resistance innovation fund will open for applications and when the pilot reimbursement model for drug development will begin operating?
Steve Brine: The Government have committed £50 million of official development assistance towards setting up the global antimicrobial resistance innovation fund. We are one of the world leaders on this subject. I am meeting my hon. Friend and my hon. Friends the Members for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) and for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) shortly, when we can take this forward.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): I spoke to one GP last week who told me that because he has been unable to recruit help he has only been able to take one week’s leave in three years. That is clearly not sustainable. The morale of GPs is at an all-time low, the number of GPs continues to fall, surgeries are closing, and patients are finding it harder and harder to get an appointment. The Secretary of State promised an extra 5,000 GPs by 2020, but given that it takes 10 years to train a GP will the Minister tell the House how exactly he is going to deliver on that promise?

Steve Brine: I thank the hon. Lady for her question and I look forward to engaging with her on such matters. The “General Practice Forward View” is a landmark document, which was published in April last year. As she knows, it sets out extra investment that GPs have been calling for for years: £2.5 billion a year for GP services. That means investment is rising. The good news, as the Secretary of State said, is that more people are coming into general practice. We want to continue to encourage that, but we also have to take action to prevent early retirements and to bring people back to general practice. We are indeed doing that.

Nursing

6. Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): What steps are being taken to broaden routes into nursing. [900179]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): Developing new routes into nursing is a priority for the Government. That is why we launched, as the Secretary of State set out, both the new nursing associate role and the nursing degree apprenticeship earlier this year. They will open new routes into the registered nursing profession for thousands of people from all backgrounds and allow employers to grow their own workforce from their local communities.

Mr Fysh: My constituents welcome the manifesto commitment to expand the number of clinical staff for mental health. What more can my hon. Friend say about plans for mental health nurse training and how they will benefit dementia services, in particular, in my constituency?

Mr Dunne: Health Education England’s “Workforce Plan for England” for 2016-17 indicated an increase of more than 3% in the number of mental health nurse training places. It stated: “The current level of mental health nurse training is the highest of any nursing branch as a percentage of the workforce it serves”, which should allow for an increase of some 22% to more than 8,000 full-time equivalent staff members in the mental health workforce by 2020.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): The fact is that when the Government chose to charge students record levels of tuition fees and scrap their NHS bursary, the Secretary of State and his Ministers were warned that that would lead to a fall in the number of applications, and what has happened since then? The number of applications for nursing degrees has fallen by 23%. Given that the Secretary of State has already acknowledged that we cannot continue our over-reliance on EU staff following Brexit, when will Ministers understand that the biggest challenge facing nursing recruitment is not our policy on the EU, but the Government’s own health policies?

Mr Dunne: The hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to the fact that we continue to have a surplus of applicants for nursing degree courses in this country. The level of that surplus has fallen somewhat as a result of the change in funding structures. We shall have to see where it ends up, because at present universities are not recruiting directly outside the UCAS system, but we are confident that there will be more applicants than places this year by a ratio of some 2:1.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the Minister agree that there are opportunities for more mature students to gain access to courses easily, and that more work must be done with adult learning institutions to provide courses that allow such direct access?

Mr Dunne: The hon. Gentleman is right to point out that the more mature workforce, particularly people resuming careers later in life—perhaps, in the case of women, after they have had children—is an important source of experienced professionals, and we need to do more than we have been doing to try to encourage such people to return to the workforce.

Accident and Emergency Departments

7. Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): What steps he has to secure the future of accident and emergency departments. [900180]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): Last year our A&Es saw 1,800 more people every day within the four-hour target than they did in 2010. We also have nearly 1,500 more emergency care doctors and over 600 more emergency care consultants.

Jeremy Lefroy: A&E departments and associated acute care services at district hospitals such as Stafford and Burton are a critical part of the regional emergency infrastructure, enabling the large city-based departments to deal with major trauma specialist cases as well as day-to-day emergencies. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that that vital emergency infrastructure is protected, enhanced and funded?

Mr Hunt: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that an emergency care network that works well for his constituents is essential. As he fully understands, that will mean relying on a network of hospitals. I recognise the concern at his own local hospital, for which he campaigns extremely vigorously, and I assure him that I shall be watching very carefully what happens there.
Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State now confirm what the Prime Minister said when she visited west Yorkshire, namely that it was scaremongering to talk of the closure of Huddersfield A&E? Will he also confirm that we should have a real plan with a gold-standard university for a new medical school in Huddersfield, so that we can really attract talent? That would do a great deal for morale, which would lead to the recruitment of good doctors and nurses everywhere.

Mr Hunt: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that it is time we had more medical schools, given that health and social care will be one of the fastest-expanding areas of the economy in the coming years. I think the Prime Minister was absolutely right to say that there should be no scaremongering about important local plans that will improve services for patients.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): Will the Secretary of State reassure my constituents that the component parts of the NHS can communicate with each other sufficiently to ensure that decisions such as the one by a medical dean to remove accreditation for anaesthetic training will not lead to the closure of A&E departments in hospitals such as Houghton general, where my father was treated so well last Friday?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady’s father is a splendid fellow, and he is now in another place. [Laughter.] I was referring to another House of Parliament.

Mr Hunt: I was concerned about the general laughter following that comment, Mr Speaker.

I am delighted that my hon. Friend’s father was treated so well, and I very much enjoyed my visit to the hospital recently. She is right: where there are changes in the patterns of training, we need to be very careful to ensure that they do not interrupt the delivery of local services in a disadvantageous way.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The boundaries of the sustainability and transformation partnerships are bound to cause concern about the future of A&E and other acute departments given the nature of them. My area, south Cumbria—relatively sparsely populated and rural—is lumped in with Lancashire, which is largely urban. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the voices of rural communities will not be dwarfed by those of the larger urban ones, and in this week, as we celebrate the 25th anniversary of Westmorland general hospital, will he give guarantees that it will not be closed and will indeed not receive any downgrading as a result of the STP process?

Mr Hunt: Westmorland general hospital has a very important future in the NHS and I am happy to give the hon. Gentleman that assurance. I do not think he should be concerned about STP footprints covering both rural and urban areas. However, where there is an issue in his constituency, and many others, it is the response times for ambulances in the most remote areas, and we are looking at that.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Another threat to A&E units is the capped expenditure process, which will mean hundreds of millions of pounds cut from NHS budgets. That was sneaked out during the election, but so far we have had nothing but silence from this Government. It is time that we had the truth: when did the Secretary of State sign off these plans and when is he going to publish them?

Mr Hunt: The capped expenditure process is an NHS England initiative to meet its statutory duty to live within its budget, and I support the principle that in a period where real expenditure on the NHS is going up by £5 billion, those benefits should be spread fairly among patients in all parts of the country.

End-of-life Care

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): What progress is being made on improving end-of-life care. [900181]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): In July 2016 the Government published “Our commitment to you for end of life care”. This set out what everyone should expect from their care at the end of life and the actions we are taking to make high quality and personalisation in care a reality for everyone. By 2020 we want to significantly improve patient choice, including ensuring an increase in the number of people able to die in the place of their choice, including at home.

Maria Caulfield: I thank the Minister for her reply, and it is welcome news that there is such a focus on end-of-life care. Will she meet me to discuss the Access to Palliative Care Bill presented in the other place, to look at how we can improve access to palliative care across the whole of the UK?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I will be delighted to meet my hon. Friend, who is a committed and passionate campaigner in this area. I am keen to explore anything that improves care and choice for all patients at the end of their life.

22. [900196] Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): Croydon’s NHS, including end-of-life care, has been funded below the London average every year since the Conservatives first came into government. That is leading to the closure of services in Croydon that are available elsewhere, and to longer waiting times for GPs or the A&E in Croydon. When will Croydon’s funding be brought up to the London average?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The amount of resource that is dedicated locally is a matter for clinical commissioning groups, and we continue to make sure that funding is fair. I suggest the hon. Gentleman takes that up with his CCG.

Healthcare: CCG Guidance

9. [900182] Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What guidance he provides to clinical commissioning groups on decision-making processes to improve healthcare provision. [900182]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): Clinical commissioning groups, as statutory organisations, have a duty to deliver the best possible services and outcomes for patients within their financial
allocation. NHS England supports them in this by providing several sets of guidance, as do the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence and other arm’s length bodies.

Daniel Kawczynski: I thank the Minister for that answer. He will know that the clinically driven Future Fit process in Shropshire could lead to hundreds of millions of pounds of investment in our local hospital. That is being jeopardised by Telford CCG and Labour-controlled Telford council. When there is this gridlock and impasse between two local CCGs over a long period of time, what more can the Government do to break the deadlock?

Steve Brine: I am aware that my hon. Friend has been concerned about this for a long time. An independent review of Future Fit is taking place, and he will know that Professor Simon Brake has been appointed as the independent chair of the joint committee of CCGs, agreed between them both. The review will report in July and be considered by the local CCGs before next steps, including on public consultation, are decided. Clear rules apply to any significant reconfigurations and I expect these to be followed in Shropshire as anywhere else.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Patients at the Manchester Royal infirmary with serious congenital heart problems found out last week that the services will now no longer be provided in Manchester, or in fact anywhere in the north-west, due to a Government review of services which means that staff cannot be retained and recruited. What has the Minister got to say to those patients who now have to go to Leeds or Newcastle to get the lifesaving surgery that they need?

Steve Brine: I understand that this is an independent review of services, and it will report in due course.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that, when political activists mislead and misinform my constituents about the future of our Princess Royal hospital, the CCG should communicate directly and clearly with residents so that they can be reassured that our A&E and our women’s and children’s services are safe?

Steve Brine: Yes, I do. The CCG should communicate directly with patients, and that should be clinically led when making the clinical case for any service reconfigurations. As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski), there are clear guidelines that the CCGs must follow. There are now five tests that must be met before any reconfigurations are brought forward, and that should be the same for my hon. Friend’s area as for everywhere else in England.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): The Abingdon community hospital is a treasured asset in my constituency, but in trying to find savings of £176 million, the local clinical commissioning group is launching a consultation on its future imminently. May I seek reassurance, on behalf of my constituents, that the hospital will not close and that, as part of the consultation, their voices will be not only heard but acted upon?

Steve Brine: Clinical commissioning groups have a statutory responsibility to consult the public, and Members of Parliament have a key role in ensuring that members of the public engage with those consultations, as I do in my area. I will be following the hon. Lady’s case closely, and she is welcome to come and see me about it if she likes.

Tobacco Control Plan

10. Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): When the Government plan to publish a tobacco control plan.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): The UK is a world leader in tobacco control, and we will publish a new tobacco control plan shortly, building on our success. That plan will set out new national ambitions to further reduce smoking prevalence, particularly among disadvantaged groups.

Sandy Martin: I need to declare an interest as a Suffolk county councillor. Given the health responsibilities of local government, will the Minister tell the House what can be done to deal with the situation in which the actuarial advice from local government and other public sector pension schemes is that they are not at liberty to disinvest from tobacco stocks?

Steve Brine: I will have to look into the exact point that the hon. Gentleman raises, but I should like to welcome him to his place. I worked closely with his predecessor, and the hon. Gentleman has a tough act to follow. When we publish the tobacco control plan, there will be clear local tobacco plans as part of it. We in the Government can give the best evidence of what works, but we need to recognise what is needed in each local area. I know that he has specific needs in his local area in relation to tackling this issue.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I welcome the Minister to his place. Does he agree that it is vital that anyone who approaches the national health service with a smoking-related disease should be pointed towards smoking cessation services? Does he also agree that it is vital that local authorities continue to run those services?

Steve Brine: Yes, absolutely. Local authorities have an obligation to do that, but as I said to the new hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin), it is important that local plans come forward alongside the new national plan. Local solutions are needed for different areas, and that will be the case in my hon. Friend’s borough just as it is in my area of Hampshire.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Last week marked the 10th anniversary of the smoking ban across the UK, but sadly the celebration was dampened by the fact that we have yet to see the Government’s new tobacco control plan, which was promised in December 2015. The previous two Health Ministers I have shadowed repeatedly said that we would see the plan shortly, but they failed to set out an updated strategy for working towards a smoke-free
society. I welcome the Minister to his new post—we have worked well together in the past on the all-party parliamentary group on breast cancer—and I am hoping that, although he has not yet given us a date for the plan, he will be able to give us an indication. Is it going to be published before Christmas?

Steve Brine: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. I think I can call her that; we have worked closely together in the past. I am new to my ministerial post, but I have been through the plan, and it is I who has to stand up and defend it. I want to be sure that it is right and that I am as happy with it as everyone else in the Government. My intention is that it will be published before the summer recess.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): Within East Sussex, Wealden has the highest number of smoking-related deaths. I welcome the update on the tobacco control plan, but how will my hon. Friend raise awareness and provide equal access for rural communities?

Steve Brine: Rural communities are as important as any other. It is up to East Sussex County Council to come forward with a local tobacco control plan, but how will my hon. Friend raise awareness and provide equal access for rural communities?

Dental Surgery: Children

11. Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): What steps he is taking to reduce the number of children admitted to hospital for dental surgery.

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): Public Health England leads a wide-ranging programme to improve children’s oral health. Its oral health strategy, which was published last year, showed a marked improvement across the country in the proportion of children with no obvious tooth decay—it rose from 69% in 2008 to over 75% in 2015. NHS England is finalising plans for the “Starting Well” programme, which will operate in 13 high-needs areas to improve the oral health of under-fives.

Paula Sherriff: Prevention and early intervention are crucial, but no NHS dentists are accepting new patients in Dewsbury, which has the second-worst provision in the country. Children in Dewsbury have five times the national average level of tooth decay. I have asked for help on this for two years, but absolutely nothing has been done. Can you tell me why the dental health of children in Dewsbury is so unimportant to this Government?

Mr Speaker: I cannot, but I hope that the Minister can—preferably rather briefly.

Mr Dunne: I will try, Mr Speaker.

NHS England recognises the significant challenges in dentistry in Yorkshire, which was why it ran a pilot scheme from January until the last week of June to improve access to primary care dentistry in the Bradford City, Bradford Districts and North Kirklees CCG areas. The pilot will inform the wider work that the NHS is considering across Yorkshire.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I declare an interest which is probably fairly well known. The Minister will be aware that the answer is early-years prevention. A huge campaign, which is making progress, is being led by the chief dental officer, for whom I have considerable admiration. Is the Minister prepared to meet me and the chief dental officer to discuss that progress? In advance of that appointment, will he look at the possibility of providing additional funding from the annual dental clawback?

Mr Speaker: New Members probably will not know that the hon. Gentleman is a dentist.

Mr Dunne: I believe that my hon. Friend is the only dentist in the House, and he still practises occasionally. I would be delighted to meet my hon. and experienced Friend to discuss the issues about dentistry that he raises.

General Practitioners: Newcastle

13. Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the consistency and quality of GP services in (a) Newcastle and (b) England.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): In 2016, 85% of patients surveyed across England reported a good overall experience of their GP surgery. In the Newcastle Gateshead CCG, patient satisfaction is even higher than the national average at 88%.

Chi Onwurah: Newcastle has fantastic GPs, but many of my poorest and most vulnerable constituents suffer from GP unavailability and a constant change of providers due to the requirement to re-tender every couple of years to a market that, quite frankly, does not want them because they are too poor or too marginalised to make money from. Will the Minister meet me and my local CCG to find out how we can ensure that those people get the quality and consistency of GP services that they deserve?

Steve Brine: I am very happy to do that.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Following the closure of their GP surgery, my constituents in Brownsover have had to make do without one over the past few years. Approvals are in place for a new surgery and it is due to open next summer. Will the Minister confirm that the timeline set out by NHS England will be met?

Steve Brine: I will ask NHS England, but if that is what it has told my hon. Friend, that is what will happen.

Mental Health Services


The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): We are investing a record £1.4 billion in children’s mental health services. The transition from children’s services to adult services can cause distress, so
NHS England has prioritised transitions when offering financial incentives for improvements. We will consider that in the forthcoming Green Paper.

Luke Pollard: I thank the Minister for that answer. There is a growing crisis in young people’s mental health in Plymouth and the far south-west. Despite 75% of mental health problems starting before the age of 18, only 8% of funding is allocated to young people. Will the Minister consider ring-fencing that young people’s mental health spending so that the funding gets to where it is needed?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. We have to balance the need to give CCGs the flexibility to dedicate funding and prioritise in their own way. We have been told by mental health professionals that the targets for physical health are more rigorous than those for mental health. We need to keep that under review, but we have imposed additional targets, which are being met.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): I commend the Government for their work on mental health over the past few years, but when the Department of Health publishes its Green Paper, jointly with the Department for Education, may I urge the Minister to focus on the evidence of what works for young people and children, which is rigorous early intervention, often with enduring psychotherapeutic interventions? Can she reassure me that the Green Paper will look at evidence on what actually works for young people?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. Indeed, the Care Quality Commission is undertaking a thematic review to see what works. He is right to identify early intervention as key but, as the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) highlighted, there is a need to consider the transition as well.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD) rose—

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) is not exactly standing; he is more perched like a panther about to pounce.

Norman Lamb: Thank you for the encouragement, Mr Speaker.

I have been alerted to an online posting yesterday on the social network Nextdoor by the father of a teenager who suffered awful trauma witnessing the horror at Grenfell Tower. He was after therapy for his daughter. Clearly there is an absolute need to ensure that everyone who may be in need knows how to get such therapy. What are the Government doing to ensure that everyone does know? Also, what are they doing to ensure that there is sufficient funding locally so that mental health services can provide for what will clearly be ongoing needs?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. I would be grateful to receive more details so that we can make sure that such support is going where it is needed. I advise him that, certainly in the case of the too-frequent disasters that we have had recently, we have been relying on more intervention on the ground. In our work on mental health first aid we are prioritising exactly those areas.

NHS Improvement

15. Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): What steps are being taken to ensure that NHS Improvement provides timely and effective support to health communities to deliver consistently high-quality care.

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): NHS Improvement offers tailored support to the organisations it oversees, particularly those that have gone into special measures as a result of a Care Quality Commission review. The Department, of course, has responsibility for holding NHS Improvement to account, and it does that through me.

Nic Dakin: Northern Lincolnshire and Goole NHS Foundation Trust is in special measures for both financial and quality reasons, but the support given to date by NHSI has been neither timely nor effective. What are the Government going to do about that?

Mr Dunne: We are clearly disappointed that Northern Lincolnshire and Goole NHS Foundation Trust has gone back into special measures. It is one of a very small number of trusts that have emerged from special measures and then reverted, so this is something in which we are taking a lot of interest. NHS Improvement has appointed an improvement director and is in the process of arranging for a nearby buddy trust to provide some support. I assure the hon. Gentleman that the Department is receiving weekly updates.

Topical Questions

T1. Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): Yesterday I updated the House on the action that we are taking to address delayed discharges from hospitals in advance of the winter. Since February, there has been a record decrease in delayed discharges, but faster progress is still needed to free up beds for the sickest patients and to reduce pressure on A&Es. Yesterday we therefore set out further measures to support the NHS and local government to reduce delays, including specific reductions required in all local areas, a prospective review of next year’s social care funding for poorly performing local authorities, and immediate CQC reviews in the worst-performing areas.

Bridget Phillipson: The latest figures from the British Medical Association show a huge rise in the number of patients with mental health conditions who are being sent hundreds of miles away from home for treatment. Is not any talk of parity of esteem meaningless unless and until patients can access the support they need close to home?

Mr Hunt: I completely agree with the hon. Lady that that is a very important issue. It is particularly important because people with mental health conditions need
regular visits from their friends and family to help them to get over a crisis. Indeed, their chances of getting discharged and being able to go home are much higher when they are nearer home. She will be aware that we have a commitment to eliminate all out-of-area placements for children by 2020, and we are making big efforts with adults as well.

T4. [900202] Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): Leicester and Leicestershire MPs, irrespective of party and led by the hon. Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall), are united with local people, patients and medical professionals in opposition to NHS England’s badly thought out and, frankly, wrong proposals to close Glenfield hospital’s children’s heart unit. Can my right hon. Friend reassure me that he continues to appreciate the strength of feeling on this issue and that he will ensure that the eventual decision reflects the responses received to the consultation?

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): My hon. Friend and other Leicestershire MPs have made their views very clear to me. I hosted a number of them, from both sides of the House, to discuss this issue. He is aware that the public consultation on congenital heart disease services continues until 17 July. Obviously, we will take all the comments made into account when we come to the conclusions from that report.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): Today is the sixth anniversary of the publication of the Dilnot commission’s report on the funding of social care. In those six years, Ministers have legislated for a cap and a floor on care costs, and then abandoned those measures. They brought forward disastrous proposals in their manifesto for what became known as the “dementia tax”, and they appear to have abandoned those measures, too. Will the Secretary of State confirm that those policies have indeed been abandoned? Will he tell me, and more than 1 million people with unmet care needs, when he expects to have some new proposals for reform?

Mr Hunt: I have great respect for the hon. Lady, because she campaigns consistently on this issue, but I do not think that what she says is a fair reflection of what has happened. In the last year of the previous Labour Government, 45,000 people had to sell their home to pay for their care costs, whereas this Government have made it the law that no one has to sell their home. There is more work to do, but we have made important progress and will continue to do so.

T5. [900203] Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): Nothing is more important than that people can access a GP when they need one. With that in mind, will the Minister join me in welcoming the move made by South Tees clinical commissioning group to enable 90,000 more appointments a year to be generated for people in Middlesbrough, Redcar and Cleveland by ensuring that appointments are available on evenings, weekends and bank holidays?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): I do indeed welcome that. Improvements to GP access in the NHS in South Tees have been put in place. Patients in Middlesbrough, Redcar and Cleveland can now benefit from accessing GP appointments at a time that is convenient for them, seven days a week—that is exactly as it should be.

T2. [900200] Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): With the Scottish Government now committed to a soft opt-out system for organ donation similar to that implemented in Wales in 2015, is it not time that the UK Government followed the lead of the Welsh and Scottish Governments by introducing a similar system south of the border?

Mr Hunt: There is a lot of merit in the opt-out system that has been developed in Wales for some time and is now happening in Scotland. We are looking closely at the evidence, but we have a lot of sympathy with this. If the system does lead to an increase in organ donations, it is certainly something we would want to pursue here.

T6. [900204] Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): One-year cancer survival rates are now at a record high of 70%, but does the Minister agree that we should and can go further by improving early diagnosis and screening?

Steve Brine: Yes. Progress is really encouraging, and I am sure that Members on both sides of the House will have been encouraged to see today’s press coverage about the chief medical officer’s independent report on genomics—the age of precision medicine is truly here. The NHS has always been at the forefront of new technologies, and so it must be with this; we are determined that it will be.

T3. [900201] Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Would a Minister be willing to meet the all-party group on donation after death for a meeting, and I know this issue has support on both sides of the House.

Mr Dunne: I am aware that my hon. Friend has taken an interest in the number of consultants and anaesthetists available at the Friarage hospital. I will be happy to meet him to discuss his concerns in person.

T8. [900206] Rishi Sunak (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con): Last week I met doctors and nurses at the Friarage, an excellent small hospital serving a rural population spread over 1,000 square miles. Will my right hon. Friend urge South Tees Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust to do everything it can to ensure the continued provision of emergency care clinicians and anaesthetists at this vital local hospital?

Mr Dunne: I am aware that my hon. Friend has taken a strong interest in the number of consultants and anaesthetists available at the Friarage hospital. I will be happy to meet him to discuss his concerns in person.
terms of local accountability, but at a time when primary care has been devolved downwards and all the emphasis is on collaboration and integration at a local borough level?

Mr Hunt: I think the answer is that this varies from area to area. The CCGs grew up organically following the Health and Social Care Act 2012. Some parts of the country are discovering that the groups can be more effective if they combine forces, but these things have to be decided locally.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): In addition to the Government’s welcome focus on mental health first aid, may we have equal focus on mental health keep fit, looking particularly at the Mental Health Foundation’s 10 pointers, so that we can all keep our mental health in good condition?

Mr Hunt: As ever, my hon. Friend makes an important point. I think that every child should leave school as knowledgeable about how to remain mentally resilient as about how to be physically healthy.

Mr Hunt: Like all clinical commissioning groups, Coventry and Rugby CCG is under a great deal of pressure, but our view is that, given the recent funding increases, it should be entirely possible for it to be sustainable.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): May I return the Minister’s attention to the issues facing Northern Lincolnshire and Goole NHS Foundation Trust? My constituents are worried that both Grimsby and Scunthorpe hospitals are in special measures for the second time in as many years. Will he meet me and neighbouring MPs to discuss the situation?

Mr Hunt: I am more than happy to meet my hon. Friend, but he should be confident that we have put in place a substantial support package, including a buddy relationship with another trust and special teams from NHS Improvement, to turn the situation around.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Funding our national health service to meet the needs of UK residents is one proposition; funding an international health service open to the world is another proposition entirely. Are there any indications that advance charging for non-emergency treatment for overseas patients is putting more money into our NHS?

Mr Dunne: My hon. Friend is a doughty campaigner for ensuring that non-resident visitors to this country contribute for healthcare received here. We put in place a number of measures to enhance the appropriate charging structures and increased the funding received by the NHS from £89 million to £289 million in 2015-16. We expect similar action to result in a further increase.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): NHS Property Services has just signed a £1 million lease on a central London location. May I suggest that other properties were available? Would the Secretary of State consider inquiring in my constituency, where NHS Property Services increased Knowle West Health Park’s rent threefold? Better value for the taxpayer is available.

Mr Hunt: I will be happy to look into the matter if the hon. Lady sends me the details.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): I know that Ministers share my passion for ensuring that a bereavement suite is attached to every maternity unit in the country. What steps can the Government take to make that a reality?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his dedicated work. The Government understand the importance of bereaved parents having a dedicated place where they can be cared for and not hear other babies crying. We have funded better bereavement spaces in nearly 40 hospitals and continue to work with Sands—the stillbirth and neonatal death charity—to see what more we can do to improve provision.

Mr Speaker: It is always quite interesting to study the habits of colleagues. The hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) has perambulated from one side of the Chamber to the other; nevertheless, she is here and I suppose we should hear her. No? The hon. Lady had a question on the Order Paper. Your opportunity is now—get in there!

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): During the election campaign, a lady in my constituency told me that she had had to wait nearly four hours for an ambulance to arrive at her home to help her off the floor. Does the Secretary of State have confidence in the ambulance service in London and other regions where targets have been consistently missed? Will he now look at extra resources for the ambulance service across the country, which is so urgently needed by all of our constituents?

Mr Hunt: If I may say so, that was a brilliant recovery. The hon. Lady is absolutely right to focus her attention on the performance of ambulance services. They are under pressure. They are hitting around 71% for their category A calls, and the target is to hit 75%. However, there are some bigger issues with the way those targets work, which we are looking at. Her ambulance service has just had a Care Quality Commission inspection.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): As a result of the capped expenditure process, the wider Devon sustainability and transformation plan is being asked to make £78 million
of savings at short notice—within the next nine months. Does the Secretary of State share my concern about the impact on patients, the short timeframe and the undermining of savings already agreed by the STP? Will he meet me to discuss this matter and the wider CEP?

Mr Hunt: I am more than happy to meet my hon. Friend. The principle behind the capped expenditure process is that we should have fairness between patients in different parts of the country. We should not see patients in one part of the country disadvantaged because the NHS has overspent in their neighbouring area, but the way in which we implement the process must be sensitive and fair. We must ensure that we get it right.

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): What advice would the Secretary of State give to my constituents who receive their urgent care from Virgin Care, and are told that wounds should be dressed only once and that, in the event that they need to re-attend, they should purchase further dressings from the local chemist? Free at the point of delivery?

Mr Hunt: I suggest that the hon. Lady gets in touch with the details. What I would say is that when care is not satisfactory—whether it is delivered by the public sector or the independent sector—we have an independent inspection regime to root out the problems.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I was delighted to hear that, in answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman), the Minister was positive about the progress of genome screening. On a recent visit to Nottingham University, I saw similar techniques applied to Alzheimer’s research. Will he back using the process for that, as well as for cancer diagnosis and treatment?

Steve Brine: The chief medical officer’s report—I am sure that my hon. Friend will read it in due course—is clear that this is an exciting new innovation in medicine. We will tackle cancer first, but there is real potential for applying it to rare diseases and the other disease that she mentioned.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. We must now move on.
Education: Public Funding

12.37 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): Urgent Question: To ask the Secretary of State if she will make a statement on the Government's plans for the public funding of education.

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): This Government are determined to ensure that all pupils regardless of where they live receive a world-class education. Over the past seven years, we have made significant progress. There are now 1.8 million more children in schools that are rated good or outstanding than there were in 2010. Today, we saw an eight percentage point rise in key stage 2 results, as pupils and teachers rise to meet the challenge of the new, more demanding, curriculum and assessments.

Looking beyond schools, the Government have prioritised funding for all phases of education. At the spending review, we announced that we will be investing an additional £1 billion a year in early education entitlements, including funding for the new 30-hours’ entitlement and funding to increase the per child rate that providers receive. We protected the national base rate per pupil for 16 to 19-year-olds in sixth forms, sixth form colleges and further education colleges in England. In the spring Budget, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced new investment in technical education for 16 to 19-year-olds, rising to an additional £500 million per year.

We have maintained funding for the adult education budget, which supports adult skills participation, in cash terms at £1.5 billion per year. We have implemented reforms to higher education to drive greater competition and teaching standards. Together that adds up to a comprehensive package of support for education at all stages of life.

We want to ensure that every school has the resources it needs, which is why we have protected the schools budget in real terms since 2010. We set out in our manifesto our intention to increase funding further as well as to continue to protect the pupil premium to support the most disadvantaged pupils. We recognise that schools face cost pressures beyond the total amount of funding going in and we know that there are two crucial questions. First, we know that how schools use their money is important in delivering the best outcomes for pupils, and we will continue to provide support to help schools to use their funding effectively. Secondly, we know that how funding is distributed across the country is anachronistic and unfair and that the current system is in desperate need of urgent reform.

We have gone further than any previous Government in reforming school funding. The second stage of our consultation on a national funding formula for schools closed in March and I am grateful to the 25,000 people who responded, as well as to hon. Members who contributed during the more than 10 hours of parliamentary debates on school funding and during many face-to-face meetings over that period. It is important that we consider carefully how to proceed and, as outlined in our manifesto, we will make sure that no school has its budget cut as a result of the new formula. We remain committed to working with Parliament and introducing proposals that will command consensus. We will set out our plans shortly.

Angela Rayner: I thank the Minister, but there is no sign of the Education Secretary. And where is the Prime Minister? She isn’t running her party any more, Mr Speaker—she is running away from her party. The Education Secretary put in a bid for extra money for schools this weekend, not at Cabinet but on the front page of the Torygraph, and no wonder when Arlene Foster got £1 billion—she must be the most expensive right winger since Cristiano Ronaldo. Will the Minister confirm that that was an increase in school funding of £150 per pupil in Northern Ireland? And is there any extra Treasury funding for education in the rest of the country, or not?

The Minister has said that the new funding formula will avoid cash cuts, so where is the funding for that coming from? New money, or just cuts elsewhere? When he says that no school will lose out, can he confirm that that is in cash terms, not real terms? The Conservatives promised an extra £4 billion for schools in their manifesto. Is that now Government policy, and how much of that is for each year? They were going to raise the money by scrapping infant school meals. Is that still policy? Will the Minister provide universal free breakfasts in primary schools, and does he finally have proper costings for that? Is he still planning to fund new and expanded grammar schools, or has that now been abandoned as well?

The Education Secretary was not the only one haggling with the Chancellor in the Sunday papers. Her predecessor, now the Environment Secretary, said that he always listened to public sector pay bodies. He must have forgotten that he actually abolished the school support staff negotiating body. Will the Minister now look at reinstating a pay body for support staff, and does he support lifting the 1% pay cap in education?

The First Secretary of State also called for a national debate on tuition fees, so will the Minister give us one on the Floor of the House on the Government’s latest fee hike, which they sneaked through during the election campaign? Finally, will he centrally fund any safety measures for school buildings, and update the House before the recess, as well as looking at student halls? Just two years ago, the Government were elected on a manifesto that promised no cuts to the funding of any school or any pupil. Will they finally meet that promise?

Nick Gibb: We are spending record amounts on school funding: £41 billion this year, rising to £42 billion in 2019-20 with increasing pupil numbers. We will respond to the consultation shortly, but the public can be confident that what we promise in our response will be deliverable and will be delivered.

Most economic commentators know that the wild promises made by Labour during the general election to spend billions of pounds a year of taxpayers’ money nationalising the energy industry, the water industry and the rail industry, and billions of pounds on promises across a range of spending areas, will simply add more than £50 billion a year to our annual deficit, leading to a crisis of confidence among those who Labour expects to lend the Government that money. That in turn would lead to catastrophic damage to our economy, an economy...
that today, under this Government, has produced strong economic growth, record numbers of jobs and the lowest level of unemployment for more than 40 years. A strong economy funds public services; economic chaos leads straight to the International Monetary Fund and to emergency cuts.

The hon. Lady asked a number of questions. The School Teachers Review Body has submitted its 27th report to the Secretary of State, and it makes recommendations for the 2017 pay award for teachers and school leaders. We continue to consider the report carefully, and we will publish it, together with our response and a draft revised schoolteachers pay and conditions document, as soon as possible. The hon. Lady asked about universal infant free school meals. We have listened carefully to the sector’s views on the proposal to remove infant free school meals, and we have decided that it is right to retain the existing provision. Universal infant free school meals ensure that children receive a nutritious meal during the day, which saves hard-working families hundreds of pounds a year and boosts educational achievement, especially among children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.

The hon. Lady also asked about fire safety in schools. We are conducting a survey of all schools to find out what cladding they have on their buildings. For schools over four storeys or 18 metres that have cladding we are asking fire inspectors to conduct an urgent inspection of fire safety.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. In view of the level of interest and the other business that I have to accommodate, I appeal to colleagues to ask brief, preferably single-sentence questions. I call Tim Loughton.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): While appreciating the fact that the Government have done more to address the fair funding formula, the Minister knows from his own county, which is the worst-funded shire county in the country, that heads face urgent decisions. In view of the fact that the consultation has been put back a year, can we have an urgent steer on whether the formula is going to be resolved before the recess, because these challenges face heads now?

Nick Gibb: I welcome my hon. Friend’s question, because it was precisely to deal with historical underfunding of counties such as West Sussex and other f40 counties across the country that we went ahead and consulted on a national funding formula. Other Governments who were in office before us should have done that. I accept his concerns. We have made announcements about 2017-18, and we will respond to the second phase of the consultation shortly. We will have a response to that in the normal course of events.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The Queen’s Speech has seen U-turn after U-turn, with flagship policies ditched, including the policy on grammar schools, to appease Back Benchers. Those U-turns make an absolute mockery of the Prime Minister’s “strong and stable” mantra. We welcome the U-turn on the decision to scrap free school lunches but, again, we regret that the decision was made not with the interests of pupils at heart but to protect a fragile Queen’s Speech from a weakened Government.

In their manifesto, the Tories planned to save £650 million from ending free school meals and use it in the schools budget. It is now incumbent on the Government to provide an urgent explanation of how they will stand by their manifesto pledge to make sure that no school has its budget cut. Where will the £650 million come from, or have they decided to scrap that additional funding?

Nick Gibb: I have already responded to that point. We have made a commitment that no school will lose funding as a consequence of moving to the national fair funding formula. We will respond in due course to the consultation, and then the hon. Lady will find the answers to all her questions. I would tell her, however, that today we have published key stage 2 results that show an eight percentage point increase, based on a new, more demanding curriculum that is on a par with the best curricula for primary schools in the world. I urge her to look at where the Scottish education system is compared with what is happening in England.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The solution to this is fairer funding. Does my right hon. Friend agree that those who argue for greater funding must be honest about where it is coming from? Every five minutes that our proceedings continue, national debt, already at £1.7 trillion, increases by £400,000. People who argue for more funding are arguing for more debt being loaded on to children in our schools.

Nick Gibb: When we came to office in 2010, we inherited an annual budget deficit of £150 billion—we were spending £150 billion more in that year than we were receiving in income, and that £150 billion is equal to about 9.9% of the total income of the country. Due to the hard work of the Government and the people of this country, and the sacrifices people have made, we have reduced that deficit to about 2.5% of GDP—about £50 billion a year. Notwithstanding those efforts, we have managed to protect core school funding in real terms, and we are spending record amounts on schools—£41 billion this year.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I invite the Minister to come to Huddersfield to look at per pupil funding and to hear what teachers, headteachers and support staff think of what he has said today. Morale is very low indeed in the teaching profession, and that is largely down to him and his Government.

Nick Gibb: As I said, we are spending record amounts on our schools—£41 billion this year. We do understand that schools are having to face cost pressures, with higher employers’ national insurance contributions and higher employer contributions to teacher pensions, as well as having to fund the 1% pay rise. But we would not have had to make those sacrifices and deal with those efficiencies if we had not inherited a record budget deficit in 2010. If we had not dealt with that record budget deficit, we would not have the strong economy we have today, with record levels of employment and the lowest unemployment in 40 years.
Ms Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): Will the Minister of State confirm what this means for Tatton schools in particular and Cheshire schools in general? Will there be no cuts in their funding?

Nick Gibb: It is good to see my right hon. Friend back in her place, and I am happy to confirm that no school will see a cut in funding as a consequence of the reforms to our national funding formula.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Will the Minister protect the budgets of schools such as Helsby High, in my constituency, in real terms? Helsby High faces a £700,000 shortfall because of his so-called fair funding formula. It is not fair, and we need increases in real terms.

Nick Gibb: The new national funding formula comes into effect in 2018-19. As I said in my opening comments, no school will see a cut in funding as a consequence of moving to the national funding formula. What the hon. Gentleman is alluding to is the cost pressures on schools that occurred between 2016 and 2017 and that will occur over the next four years. We have already incurred about 3% of those cost pressures, and we will incur between 1.5% and 1.6% of them over the next three years—those are figures from Institute for Fiscal Studies. We are helping schools to tackle those cost pressures, but there would not be those pressures if we did not have to deal with the historic budget deficit we inherited in 2010. Those cost pressures are being borne right across the public sector, but because we are prudent with our public finances, we have record employment numbers and record opportunities for young people when they leave our school system.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): The Minister is rapidly becoming my favourite Minister. At the beginning of the consultation period, every school in Southend was going to lose out, but he listened, and that is no longer the case—there is more funding overall. However, will he look specifically at bulge funding where there is a need in the medium term but not the long term to provide extra places?

Nick Gibb: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his kind comments. I hope the same response will come from Opposition Members. [Interruption.] Perhaps in due course. He is right that we have to deal with growth in pupil numbers, and there are provisions in the new funding formula for growth, but we will take his views into account when we respond to the national funding formula.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) on tabling this urgent question. Once again, we are seeing delusion from Ministers and Conservative Members. This discussion, and the warnings from headteachers this morning, are not about the way in which the cake is being cut, but about the size of the cake per pupil. The size of the cake is being reduced year on year because of increased costs. When will Ministers actually meet the shortfall from the real-terms cuts in schools so that headteachers do not have to cut back on teachers and teacher support staff?

Nick Gibb: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question, because she has said something we have been trying to make clear for a long time—that there is a distinction between the national funding formula and the overall level of school funding. She was being honest and making that distinction very clearly. The national funding formula is a way of distributing our funding across the school system in a fairer way, based on the first-stage consultation, which allocates significant funding on a per pupil basis for deprivation and low prior attainment—all principles that were universally agreed on when we consulted on the first measure. I have accepted that there are cost pressures facing our school system, arising from things such as increased pension contributions, general inflation and higher employers’ national insurance contributions. We have already said that no school will lose funding as a consequence of introducing the national fair funding formula, and we will respond to the consultation in due course.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): I thank the Minister for recognising that the current system is flawed, and funding should be focused on where the need is. Will he assure me that funding will also go to places such as Medway, which will need further school places because it has been charged with delivering an historic number of new homes over the next 15 years?

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that, as pupil numbers increase, so we are increasing the number of school places. Over the last Parliament, we created over 500,000 new school places to deal with the increasing population of primary school pupils. We intend to create another 600,000 school places over this Parliament. That is in direct contrast to the last Labour Government, who cut 200,000 primary school places at a time when we knew there was an increase in the birth rate.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): May I take the Minister back to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), because it is absolutely the crux of this? If we introduce fair funding at a time when there are greater cost pressures on schools, those that lose under the funding formula will lose doubly because of the cost pressures. May I urge the Minister to lobby the Treasury to get the extra money to grow the cake? He will have the support of the Opposition if he does.

Nick Gibb: I hope we will have the hon. Gentleman’s support for the new funding formula, because we have said that no school now will lose under it. Hon. Members should not forget that we were very clear and transparent: we showed the effects of the national funding formula on every school’s budget, based on 2016-17, to show people how it would affect them. It was axiomatic that there had to be losers and winners when we applied the formula to that current year. But now we are saying that there are cost pressures, and there are cost pressures on schools, so both winners and losers are going to be doubly invested.
important to address the unfairness in the way school funding was distributed at a time of fiscal constraint than at a time of more ample school funding.

**Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): The Minister knows that Bradford district has some of the lowest outcomes in the education system, yet the Government planned to cut funding for the district in their original proposals. That included funding to every school in my constituency, leading Cottingley Village Primary School to say a week before the general election that it was considering closing on Friday afternoons—I am sure the timing was entirely coincidental. Will the Minister therefore confirm that no school in my constituency or the Bradford district will lose out on funding and that there is no need for any school to close on a Friday afternoon? That proposal is causing a great deal of angst and concern among the parents at Cottingley school.

**Nick Gibb**: I am happy to give my hon. Friend that confirmation. As we said in the manifesto, and as I have confirmed today, no school will lose funding as a consequence of moving to the new fairer national funding system. We are helping schools to tackle the cost pressures they face. We are helping them with how to manage their budgets. We are introducing national buying schemes to help schools to spend their non-staff spend in a more efficient way. We expect to save about £1 billion across the school system as a consequence of the national buying schemes we are introducing.

**Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): No doubt the Minister agrees that given the financial pressures, all policy decisions should represent clear-cut value for money, and I therefore welcome the reported U-turn on grammar schools. Given that the financial case for free schools is iffy, at best, will the Government put a stop to their expansion, especially in areas with surplus places?

**Nick Gibb**: The free schools programme has been hugely successful, with 29% of those inspected rated “outstanding” by Ofsted. Of the mainstream free schools approved since 2014, 86% have been in areas where there was a need for more schools, and the remaining 14% in places where parents are unhappy with the quality of the school places.

**David T. C. Davies** (Monmouth) (Con): The independent PISA—programme for international student assessment—results show that England has the best educational outcomes in the United Kingdom, and Wales, which has been run by Labour for nearly 20 years, has the worst. Is it not about time that Labour Members started to celebrate our policies, which are working, and look rather more critically at their own?

**Nick Gibb**: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As I have said, the key stage 2 results published today show an increase of eight percentage points in standards of reading, writing and maths. We have also seen an increase in the proportion of children passing the age-six phonics check, with 58% passing it in 2012 and 81% passing it last year. That means that as of last year 147,000 more six-year-olds are on track to becoming fluent readers than would have been the case had we not introduced our phonics policy.

**Emma Hardy** (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Will the Minister please answer a direct question with a direct answer, because this is incredibly frustrating for Opposition Back Benchers? Will he say whether schools in Hull West and Hessle will actually see a cut in per pupil funding?

**Nick Gibb**: No school in the hon. Lady’s constituency will see a cut in per pupil funding as a consequence of the move to the new, fairer national funding formula.

**Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): My right hon. Friend will recall, probably with gloom, my question to him two or three weeks before the general election, but, as Arnie Schwarzenegger would say, “I’m back,” and I want to ask him the same question. He told me that in Staffordshire the new funding formula would mean that two thirds of my schools would benefit but one third would receive a cut. Is he now saying that that is not the case and that all schools in Staffordshire will benefit?

**Nick Gibb**: I am very happy to see my hon. Friend back in his place. He is absolutely right that no school in his constituency will see a cut in funding.

**Caroline Lucas** (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Could the Minister stop playing games? What schools care about is the total amount of money they have to invest in their pupils, so will he just level with the public and admit that he has not protected per pupil funding? It is insulting to constituents to pretend otherwise. What will he say to children in my constituency who are facing a 10% cut in their funding by 2021?

**Nick Gibb**: They are not receiving a cut in funding. That is the whole essence of this debate, which, in my view, has not been fairly conducted. As we have said, we are spending record amounts of money on school funding—£41 billion this year rising to £42 billion next year—and we are moving to a fairer way of distributing that funding. We said in our manifesto that even where the new fairer funding system would have resulted in a cut in funding to some schools, that will no longer be the case, so no school will see a cut in per pupil funding under this Government.

**Geoffrey Clifton-Brown** (The Cotswolds) (Con): It must be wrong, historically, that children in Gloucestershire receive almost half what the highest-spending London authority receives. Will the Minister therefore tell us, so that I can reassure my local parents and governors, when we are likely to see the fair funding formula announced?

**Nick Gibb**: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are moving to the national fair funding formula in 2018-19. The consultation, which closed on 22 March, had over 25,000 responses, and we will be responding to it very shortly.

**Jack Dromey** (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Erdington is rich in talent but one of the poorest constituencies in the country, and yet under the Government’s own
conservative figures, 32 out of 33 schools will suffer a per pupil funding cut of £115. What does the Minister have to say to despairing headteachers facing desperately difficult decisions as to which teachers and which teaching assistants they sack, holding back the life chances of children who deserve the best possible start in life?

Nick Gibb: I have enjoyed visiting schools in Erdington with the hon. Gentleman. I have seen some very good practice in the schools that he took me to. As I have said, under the new national funding formula no school will lose funding on a per pupil basis. I have given that commitment in response to this question and I will give it every time an hon. Member asks me. I have acknowledged that there are cost pressures facing schools. Those cost pressures start in about 2016-17—the year that has just gone. That was about 3% of cost pressures, and the figure will be roughly between 1.5% and 1.6% per year for this year and the next two years. We are helping schools to deal with those cost pressures, which apply right across the public sector, in terms of how to manage staff budgets but also how to manage non-staff spend. That is why we are introducing national buying schemes and school hubs to purchase products and services such as energy and water together to help them deliver efficiency.

Mr Speaker: I am immensely grateful to the Minister. I am minded to move on at approximately 1.15 pm, which ought to allow for another 10 questions and answers, assuming that both the question and the answer are moderately brief.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): Can the Minister confirm that the many primary schools in Amber Valley that are set to gain under the fairer funding formula will get the full gain in year 1, or will it be spread over several years after that?

Nick Gibb: When we consulted on the national fair funding formula, we said that we would limit gains to 3% in order to ensure that any schools that were losing funding did not lose more than 1.5% per pupil per year, so I cannot give my hon. Friend that reassurance, but we will respond to the consultation shortly.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Is the Minister aware of the impact that increased national insurance contributions and pension contributions are having on schools in Enfield, Southgate, resulting in cuts in the classroom and impacts on learning and on assisting children with behavioural issues?

Nick Gibb: As I have said, we are spending record amounts of money on school funding, but there are cost pressures. One of those cost pressures, which the hon. Gentleman has identified, is the increased employer contribution to the teachers’ pension scheme. That is part of a range of measures that are helping to tackle our historic budget deficit, which we have reduced from 9.9% of national income to 2.5% of national income, and which we have to eliminate if we are to keep the economy strong. We are determined to continue with that.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Will the Minister work with colleagues across Whitehall to persuade councils to prioritise house building in parishes and towns where schools are facing falling rolls and a resultant shortage in funds?

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. We need more house building across the country to help young people get on to the housing ladder, and we are ensuring that as funding follows the pupil, as pupil numbers rise, so the funding to those schools rises.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): I represent Crewe and Nantwich, where Cheshire East Council is the worst-funded in Cheshire. My concern is that a primary school in Crewe is cutting six teaching assistants, including the only teaching assistant who can speak Polish. We have a new reception class starting in September with 23 EAL—English as an additional language—children who will have no support. I would like to invite you to come to Crewe and Nantwich and speak to headteachers, because they really are very, very concerned.

Mr Speaker: I do not think the hon. Lady wants me to visit the school, but I am sure she wants the Minister to do so, which might be more beneficial.

Laura Smith: You can come too.

Mr Speaker: Well, perhaps I can come on a subsequent occasion, if the hon. Lady is so generous as to invite me.

Nick Gibb: I would be delighted to visit the school with the hon. Lady. Lady and you are very welcome to join us, Mr Speaker. It was precisely to tackle underfunding in schools in areas such as her constituency that we introduced, and consulted on, a national fair funding formula. For too long, too many areas have been underfunded. That is what the new national funding formula is designed to tackle. Now, on top of that, we have said that even where schools in other parts of the country would lose under that formula, they no longer will.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): A fair funding formula is needed for our schools in Dorset and Poole, which are, respectively, the eleventh-worst and second-worst funded local education authorities. The principle should be uncontroversial, but can the Minister reassure my schools, parents and teachers that the formula is on track and tell us when it will be introduced?

Nick Gibb: We are determined to press ahead with the national funding formula. There has been widespread support for the principles underlying the operation of the new funding formula. Deprivation and low prior attainment are key factors, and a large element of per-pupil funding is the same right across the system. We want to go ahead with the new formula, and we think that it attracts widespread support. We have announced that no school will lose funding under the new formula, and it is being introduced precisely to help historically underfunded areas.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister stop using this Orwellian double-speak about an increase in the budget? We know what we are talking about. In real terms, and per pupil, the budget has not increased in the last seven years, teachers have had a £3-per-hour cut in their wages and morale is at rock bottom. Will the Minister at least admit that we need urgent action to increase funding and reverse the cuts that have already taken place?
Nick Gibb: It is Orwellian to say that there has been a cut in funding when there has not. All along, I have acknowledged that there are cost pressures affecting schools over the four-year period.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): What are you doing about it?

Nick Gibb: What we are doing is helping schools to manage those cost pressures, which exist because we are having to tackle an historic budget deficit. That is imperative if we are to maintain a strong economy that delivers record numbers of jobs. We have maintained school funding overall in real terms, and it has continued to rise as pupil numbers rise.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Half of schools in Basingstoke have been losing out for years as a result of the current funding formula, and that has compounded the problem of increased costs that schools face. Can my right hon. Friend do to make sure that parents receive the good news that there will be no reductions in per pupil funding?

Nick Gibb: Yes, I can give my right hon. Friend that assurance. Certain local authorities, from up and down the country, have suffered from underfunding for more than 12 years, and their funding formula is based on out-of-date data. That is unfair, and we are determined to tackle that unfairness. On top of that, we have announced that no school will lose funding under the new formula.

Wes Streeting: The schools funding formula is a total red herring. Before it has even come in, schools are having to lay off staff, increase class sizes, cut back on the curriculum and cut back on enrichment opportunities; and headteachers are struggling to recruit and retain good staff. Instead of talking about a formula that is yet to come in, when will the Minister tell us what he is going to do about the cuts that are already being made, and when will he recognise that education is the best economic policy that there is?

Nick Gibb: We do believe that education is the best economic policy that there is. That is why we are improving standards in our primary schools. We have improved the curriculum and the teaching of reading and mathematics. We have revised, reformed and improved GCSEs, so that children leave our schools with qualifications and an education on a par with the best in the world.

Whatever the hon. Gentleman likes to say, we have protected school funding in real terms. I do acknowledge that schools face cost pressures over a four-year period from 2016-17, and we are helping schools to deal with those cost pressures. Those pressures are being faced right across the public sector, and they are there because we have to deal with the economic mess left by the last Labour Government.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Given that during the general election campaign, headteachers from all over the country wrote to parents to say that per pupil funding would be cut quite dramatically, what will my right hon. Friend do to make sure that parents receive the good news that there will be no reductions in per pupil funding?

Nick Gibb: We will do our best to convey the message that no school will lose funding under the new national funding formula, and I will rely on my hon. Friend to do the same in his constituency.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Yesterday, parents of pupils at the Kingsway Academy received a text message referring them to the website of the Northern Schools Trust, where they were told that their school would be closing. The Northern Schools Trust says that the school is not financially viable. Its sudden closure leaves a black hole of a quarter of a million pounds in the local authority’s financing, and there is great disruption across the area. Is that any way to run a school system?

Nick Gibb: I will look into the specific case that the hon. Lady has raised. Schools have to consult before any closure occurs, and there is a process that schools have to go through. I will look at the matter, and I am very happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss it.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): It is not just about money, though, is it? The Labour party thinks that it can throw money at the problem, but that did not work when they were in government, when the number of pupils studying the core subjects necessary to get a good job fell by half. Have this Government got more good news on that?

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. When we came into office in 2010, only one in five pupils took the EBacc combination of core academic GCSEs. The figure is now two in five, and we want it to rise further.

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): Eighty-nine per cent. of my primary schools and all my secondary schools have told me that they are planning for real-terms cuts over the next five years. In one school the nurture unit, where children who are under pressure can take some time out, is threatened with closure. How will that help children’s mental health in schools?

Nick Gibb: We take mental health in our school system extremely seriously, and we will publish a Green Paper on young people’s mental health before the end of the year. We want to ensure that every child is taught about mental wellbeing and the mental health risks posed by things such as the internet. We take the matter very seriously, but, as I have said repeatedly in my response to this urgent question, no school will lose funding under the national funding formula.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): It was notable that the shadow Education Secretary did not mention standards in schools once. In the county of Nottinghamshire, which is one of the worst funded in the country, standards are rising and 90% of my young people now go to good or outstanding schools; that figure is 30% higher than it was in 2010. Thousands of young people come out of the city of Nottingham, where pupils receive 25% more funding, to go to school in the county, because standards there are higher despite schools receiving less money. Will the Government continue to focus relentlessly on standards in education?

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Academic standards are key in our schools, and standards of behaviour are hugely important in underpinning a rise
in academic standards. That is why we have focused on improving the curriculum in both the primary and secondary sectors.

**Mrs Louise Ellman** (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op):
The Government’s current plans mean cuts of over £600 per head for students in Liverpool’s schools. Is the Minister now saying that schools will face no cuts at all, in real terms, in any aspect of Government funding?

**Nick Gibb**: What we have said is that there will be no cut in per-pupil funding as a consequence of moving to the national fair funding formula. I have acknowledged that cost pressures—equivalent to 3.1% of the total schools budget in 2016-17, and to between 1.5% and 1.6% of that budget over this year and the subsequent two years—will affect schools in the hon. Lady’s area and in other parts of the country over a four-year period, as a result of higher employers’ national insurance contributions and teacher pension contributions. Those cost pressures, which are replicated across the public sector, exist because we are having to deal with the budget deficit. It is imperative that we do so if we are to continue to have a strong economy. [ Interruption. ] The shadow Education Secretary suggests from a sedentary position that we have had seven years to deal with that deficit. It was an historic deficit, and it will take as many years as it takes to get it down to zero.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker**: Order. We must now move on. I know that there is extensive interest in this subject, but these matters will be treated of on subsequent occasions.

In a moment, I shall call Seema Malhotra to make an application for leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration under the terms of Standing Order No. 24. The hon. Lady has up to three minutes in which to make such an application.

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**Feltham Young Offender Institution**

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

1.19 pm

**Seema Malhotra** (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to propose that the House debate a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration, namely the report on the inspection by Her Majesty’s chief inspector of prisons on Feltham young offenders institution.

The report, published on 30 June, follows an unannounced inspection earlier this year. The reports on both Feltham A, which holds children and young people, and Feltham B, which holds young adults, make for shocking reading. That is particularly true of the report on Feltham A, which houses boys aged 15 to 18. Both reports raise numerous concerns about safety and education and purposeful activities in each.

The report on Feltham A has found that the prison is extremely unsafe for staff and for the boys and young people in it, and that it has become more dangerous even since the inspections in 2014 and 2015. The increased violence, combined with staffing shortages, has meant that 15 to 18-year-olds are on restricted regimes that, according to the chief inspector, have done “little or nothing to contribute to their education, socialisation or, clearly, their safety.”

This is in marked contrast to the more optimistic report of the last inspection in 2015. Indeed, this report suggests that things have got markedly worse in the past two years, and a serious crisis point has now been reached.

The youth justice system is there to prevent children and young people under 18 from offending or reoffending. What is happening now is a dereliction of duty: 15 to 18-year-olds are receiving, on average, 7.5 hours of education a week; and 19,000 hours of schooling per year have been lost through non-attendance and the cancellation of classes. The regime has been described as “quite simply, not safe for either staff or boys.”

Some of the young men are being locked up for 22 hours every day. During the inspection, it was found that a third of prisoners were locked up during the school day and were therefore not receiving training or education. Indeed, the media is reporting today a High Court ruling that a 16-year-old boy’s human rights were breached by his being kept in solitary confinement at Feltham young offenders institution and that he was unlawfully denied access to education and the ability to mix with other inmates.

There is an urgent need for a response from the Government on these issues and a clear plan to address them, including on whether the cuts have now led to an unsafe level of resources. Other issues include statutory duties; contracts for the provision of education in prison; staffing levels; staff recruitment, staff experience and staff retention; and factors contributing to increased violence. Another issue is whether now is not the time for an urgent rethink of Feltham’s future.

Young people will be coming out of our youth justice institutions more traumatised than when they went in and with reduced life chances. This is our next generation, and we are supposed to be an advanced society. These are children and their future and their welfare should be a matter for urgent debate in this House.
Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for asking for leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration—namely, the report of the inspection by Her Majesty’s chief inspector of prisons on Feltham young offenders institution. I have listened carefully to the hon. Lady’s application, but I am not persuaded that it should be debated under the terms of Standing Order No. 24.

The hon. Lady is an experienced and versatile Member of the House, and she will know that there are other opportunities to secure attention to the issue. She will know what those opportunities are in both question and debate forms, and I have a feeling that she will probably be beetling towards the Table Office ere long to try one of those other options.

Points of Order

1.22 pm

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In his final speech in the House, the former right hon. Member for Leigh made the very compelling case that there was evidence for criminal acts having taken place during the contaminated blood scandal, which was of course the biggest treatment disaster in the history of the NHS. Given that the criminal acts that, allegedly, took place are set out on the front page of today’s Daily Mail, is it appropriate for the Secretary of State for Health to come to the House and say what action he intends to take? The former right hon. Member for Leigh asked the Secretary of State to indicate whether he was minded to set up a public inquiry into what happened, and said that if that did not take place, he would notify the police of the evidence he had in his possession. Mr Speaker, have you had any indication from the Secretary of State for Health about whether he intends to come to the House to make such a statement?

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order. I have seen the Secretary of State for Health a couple of times today—recently, in the Chamber, and much earlier this morning, when I was returning from my health-giving swim and he was arriving at the House on his bicycle; as the hon. Lady would expect, we exchanged the courtesies of wishing each other good morning. The right hon. Gentleman did not give me any indication that he planned to make a statement on this matter on that occasion; nor has he since done so.

I have to admit that I was not familiar with the headline to which the hon. Lady referred, not least because the organ in question is not part of my daily reading matter. I am sure she will readily understand that it is not ordinarily a paper of any interest to me. However, I must admit that the headline is obviously a very important one relating to a very important story. I am not aware of any plans by Ministers to make a statement, as I have said, but clearly the issue will not go away. I well remember the final intervention of the then right hon. Member for Leigh, and very powerful it was too. I rather suspect that the hon. Lady will return to this matter, especially if she judges it to be urgent, and she will know what opportunities are open to her to raise matters that she thinks are urgent.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On 8 February, I asked the then Minister of State, Department for Exiting the European Union, the right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones), about allegations that it was the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice that lay behind the Government’s decision to issue a notice to withdraw from Euratom alongside the notice to withdraw from the EU. In response, the Minister told the House that that was not the case, and that “it would not be possible for the UK to leave the EU and continue its current membership of Euratom.”—[Official Report, 8 February 2017: Vol. 621, c. 523.]

The former chief of staff to the Secretary of State has now contradicted that statement. He has said that it was in fact the role of the European Court of Justice that lay behind the Government’s decision. Mr Speaker, can you
advise me how we can find out the truth of the matter: why are the Government leading us out of the important treaty on Euratom?

Mr Speaker: I do not think it is for me to seek to penetrate the inner recesses of ministerial minds to ascertain their precise motivation in the pursuit of policy. When the hon. Gentleman asks how he should take forward this matter, my short answer is by the tabling of questions, which will probably need to be very precise and focused if he is to elicit the information he seeks. That is my guidance because, although I have indulged him on this occasion—because I could not know precisely what he was going to ask until he had asked it—what he has asked does not constitute a point of order, although it is no doubt of enormous interest and relevance to him and many other Members.

I must advise the House that it is not the responsibility of the Chair to ensure consistency of statements from any Government, or indeed from persons previously connected with a Government. If that were one of the responsibilities of the Chair, a wholly disproportionate amount of his or her time would have to be devoted to keeping up with such matters. The hon. Gentleman has made his concern clear, and that concern has no doubt been heard by those on the Treasury Bench. If a Minister felt that he or she had been inaccurate in statements to the House, that Minister would have a responsibility to set the record straight.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. With your permission, I would like to raise the motion for the 2017-18 estimates on the Order Paper today. I have notified the Government of my intention to raise a point of order. The calling of a general election only two years into a fixed-term Parliament, the delay in the elections of Chairs of Select Committees and the fact that no Opposition day debates have been scheduled with only days to go before recess have combined to create an unprecedented situation in terms of the scrutiny of Government finances.

Opposition Members are deeply concerned that the Government are asking Parliament to approve, on a motion tonight, the appropriation of £586 billion without debate, so avoiding what many of us believe to be the proper and correct parliamentary scrutiny of public finances. Such scrutiny is of particular interest to the thousands of public sector workers who are currently receiving mixed messages on pay from the Government. Presumably these estimates, which were published in April, still reflect the public sector pay cap, and this is also where the money for the Northern Ireland settlement will come from.

Mr Speaker, as custodian of the House and of its long tradition of transparent scrutiny of Government spending since the Bill of Rights in 1689—not you personally since 1689—will you advise me what course may be taken to ensure the appropriate consideration of the estimates?

Mr Speaker: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s recognition that I am not quite that old—that is, it has to be said, heartening. As for his passing reference to the election of Chairs of Select Committees, the House is due to treat of that matter today. It may well be that I will have something to say on that matter today. I share the concern of the hon. Gentleman, and indeed of Members on both sides of the House, that the Chairs of Select Committees should be elected sooner rather than later, and that the Committees should be constituted as quickly as possible, so that they can undertake their important task of scrutiny. Parliament and parliamentarians will always be served by such an approach.

I understand the hon. Gentleman’s concern that the House should be asked to authorise the expenditure of very large amounts of public money without an opportunity for debate, but I can assure him that there is nothing underhand or disorderly about this. It is in accordance with the Standing Orders and the House’s agreed estimates procedure. This is not one of those estimates days on which the House is invited to debate matters recommended by the Liaison Committee before agreeing to the estimates.

That said, it is always open to the House to reconsider its procedures. I am aware that the Procedure Committee recently published a report on estimates procedure—a report to which a Government response is awaited—so there may be an opportunity for the House to look at these matters before too long. I hope that is helpful both to the hon. Gentleman and indeed to the House.

BILL PRESENTED

TELECOMMUNICATIONS INFRASTRUCTURE (RELIEF FROM NON-DOMESTIC RATES) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Sajid Javid, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr Chancellor of the Exchequer and Secretary Karen Bradley, presented a Bill to make provision enabling relief from non-domestic rates in England and Wales to be conferred in respect of hereditaments used for the purposes of facilitating the transmission of communications by any means involving the use of electrical or electromagnetic energy; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 3) with explanatory notes (Bill 3-EN).
The purpose of the Bill is to approve four draft decisions of the Council of the European Union. All four draft decisions rely on article 352 of the Treaty on the functioning of the European Union, which allows the EU to take action to attain the objectives set out in the EU treaties, for which there is no specific power given. That can be done only with the approval of the European Parliament and the unanimous support of all member states. Before the UK can agree those draft decisions at the Council, Parliament must first give its approval. Section 6 of the European Union Act 2011 provides that a Minister may vote in favour of an article 352 decision only where the draft decision is approved by an Act of Parliament. I am pleased that Members of both Houses will have the opportunity to scrutinise and decide whether to approve such measures.

The UK is leaving the EU. Until that process has concluded, the UK remains a full member of the EU, and all the rights and obligations of EU membership remain in force. That includes exercising the UK’s vote in the Council of the European Union on these four draft decisions. Whether or not those EU decisions involve the UK directly, they may make a difference to the context of the negotiations. While we are leaving the EU and its institutions, we will continue to maintain a resolute friendship and alliance with all the European countries. We have been working in peaceful partnership with EU member states for decades to build a prosperous and stable Europe.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Margot James: Yes, I will give way.

Sir William Cash rose—

Mr Liddell-Grainger rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. It is quite important to be clear to whom the Minister is giving way. The hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) was perfectly convinced that it was he that she had in mind, but the hon. Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) looks similarly confident that it was he. Take us out of our misery, Minister.

Margot James: I apologise for the confusion. I was referring to my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger).

Mr Liddell-Grainger: Thank you very much for that clarification, Mr Speaker.

My hon. Friend is fully aware that I am the president of the European Conservatives in the Council of Europe. We have had support from the Government and from colleagues in both Houses, and I am sure she would like to make it clear that the Council of Europe is still an important part of what we do here. It was set up by the British in 1948 under Sir Winston Churchill and continues to play an important part through the European Court of Human Rights. I hope she will confirm that it will continue to play that important role.

Margot James: I commend my hon. Friend for all his work within the Council of Europe, and confirm that that will continue long after we have successfully concluded our Brexit negotiations.

The Prime Minister set out a bold and ambitious vision for the UK. She outlined our key negotiating objectives as we move to establish a comprehensive new partnership with the EU.

Sir William Cash rose—

Margot James: I will make a little progress and then give way.

That vision for a partnership in the best interests of the United Kingdom means that we will also continue to work with the EU on tackling areas of common interest.

Sir William Cash: I am much encouraged not only by the fact that the Minister is giving way but by what my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) said. It may be that we are no longer brothers and sisters in Europe, but we are cousins. Therefore to that extent we will continue to seek to maintain good relations with the EU, despite the fact that we are absolutely going to leave.

Margot James: I heartily agree with my hon. Friend that we will continue to foster good relations with our EU friends long after we leave the European Union. Keeping that in mind, we are content that all four decisions that the Bill addresses are reasonable, proportionate and in keeping with our best interests, and will not result in any additional financial burdens on the UK.

As I have said, article 352 decisions must be agreed by all EU member states unanimously. When all member states are in a position to vote on the decision, the European Council will schedule a meeting of the Council of the European Union. If all member states vote to approve the draft decisions at that meeting, the European Parliament will be asked in turn to approve the draft decisions. If it does so, the decisions are adopted into EU law. All member states apart from the UK have agreed the EU-Canada decisions, and all member states except the UK and Germany have agreed the Fundamental Rights Agency decisions. We do not believe that any of the draft decisions should be considered contentious in any way.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): It has been suggested that, as we negotiate our exit from the European Union, the United Kingdom should abstain in decisions in the Council. Will the Minister explain what the impact of a British abstention would be on those decisions?

Margot James: I assure my hon. Friend that, were we not to pass the Bill this afternoon, the draft decisions would not proceed. We are still full members of the European Union and therefore our consent is required for the draft decisions to take effect.
Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): The Minister is being generous with her time. She indicated one other country that has yet to ratify or vote on this—namely, Germany. Does she have, or has she been given, an indication as to when support may come from Germany?

Margot James: Any such comment from me would be speculation, which I intend to avoid, but I point out that Germany, like the United Kingdom, needs the consent of its national Parliament before its Ministers can vote on such draft decisions.

As I said, all member states apart from Germany and ourselves have agreed the Fundamental Rights Agency decisions, and we do not believe that any of the draft decisions are contentious. The Government are committed to being constructive in the UK’s ongoing engagement with the EU. Holding up progress on business that is simple and uncontroversial would undermine that approach and the principle of sincere co-operation that lies behind it. It is therefore clearly in the UK’s interests to approve these draft decisions. Delaying the decisions could have a negative impact on the UK’s exit negotiations with the EU, including discussion on any future framework. There will, of course, be further opportunities to examine more fundamental aspects of the work of the EU in other debates. However, I am sure hon. Members will recognise that, whatever their views on EU exit, it is in the UK’s interests to approve these draft decisions.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that, as part of our ongoing relationship with the European Union until we achieve our freedom, the provisions of the trade agreement secured with Canada will be implemented fully in the United Kingdom, and that we will continue to play a proactive role within the EU and beyond in encouraging further free trade with Canada?

Margot James: I welcome my hon. Friend’s intervention. I remember his excellent work when he was a trade representative to Canada and I assure him that the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement negotiations, completed between the EU and Canada, will cover the United Kingdom for as long as we are members of the EU. After that point, it will be up to us to decide the terms of any future trading relationship with Canada, bearing in mind the—I won’t go any further on that.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Will the Minister give way?

Margot James: I will make a bit of progress. I am concluding my remarks on Canada and trade. I will give way to my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) when I have made further progress.

It is therefore clearly in the UK’s interests to approve the draft decisions. Delaying the decisions could have a negative impact on the UK’s exit negotiations, including discussions on any future framework. There will, of course, be further opportunities to examine more fundamental aspects.

John Redwood: Surely the Minister would confirm that the Canadian trade agreement, along with all the others the EU will have in place when we leave, will remain open to us, assuming that both we and Canada wish it to do so? That will clearly be the case, so it will carry on.

Margot James: I accept the first part of what my right hon. Friend says, but I do not wish to predict what the UK and Canada may find it important to discuss in their trade relationship in the years to come.

Jonathan Edwards: Will the Minister give way?

Margot James: I will make a bit more progress and then I will give way.

The first two decisions will enable two countries, the Republic of Albania and the Republic of Serbia, to be granted observer status in the EU’s Fundamental Rights Agency. Before I go any further on that point, I will give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Jonathan Edwards: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. I was not going to raise a point on CETA this afternoon, but as it has been raised by her colleagues I just wondered what estimate the UK Government have given to renegotiating a CETA-type Canada deal following Brexit.

Margot James: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I remind him of the scope of the Bill. It does not include much detailed discussion about our future trade relationship with Canada. For the avoidance of doubt, the Canadian decisions are about competition law, not trade.

The Fundamental Rights Agency was set up to support EU institutions and EU member states by improving the knowledge and awareness of fundamental rights issues in the EU, with a view to ensuring respect for fundamental rights. The agency does this through the collection and analysis of information and data. It can also formulate opinions on specific topics, either on its own initiative or at the request of EU institutions. It also has a role in communicating and raising awareness of fundamental rights, but it cannot hear individual complaints. EU accession candidate countries can be granted observer status at the agency. This allows the agency to collect and analyse fundamental rights data from those countries, but it does not allow them the right to vote in decisions as part of the agency’s management board.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): How does the agency differ from the Council of Europe? The Council of Europe looks after democracy and the rule of law within Europe, and it carries out exactly the same activities as the agency.

Margot James: The goal of the agency is to provide expertise on fundamental rights to EU institutions, member states and countries seeking accession when implementing EU law. The specific tasks of the agency are: to analyse and share information on fundamental rights in the European Union; to carry out scientific research and surveys on fundamental rights issues; to formulate opinions on specific topics, either on its own initiative or as requested by EU institutions; and to increase awareness on fundamental rights in the EU.
Albania was granted EU candidate status in June 2014. The UK supported the awarding of EU candidate status on the condition that Albania redoubled its reform efforts, with particular focus on justice and home affairs, especially tackling organised crime, corruption and illegal migration. The UK welcomed Albania’s progress in adopting legislation towards a judicial reform package in July 2016. Albania must now fully implement the judicial reform package as soon as possible, so that it can underpin other reforms.

Serbia was granted EU candidate status in 2012 and accession negotiations were launched in January 2014, with the first four negotiating chapters opened during 2016. The UK continues to support Serbia on its reform path, including through funding projects in Serbia.

James Cartilage (South Suffolk) (Con): Will the Minister comment on whether Serbia’s membership of the agency would have any impact on the pursuit of war crimes in Serbia, as part of its effort to increase human rights?

Margot James: I cannot comment specifically on the likely impact on the treatment of war crimes in Serbia, a subject about which the Foreign Office is extremely concerned—as, I presume, is my hon. Friend—but I think it can only be a mark of progress for Serbia to be admitted in the way that this decision enables it to be.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): The Minister says that this is a mark of progress, but I cannot accept that. This sounds like motherhood-and-apple-pie Eurospeak. Exactly the same words were used during the accession of Croatia, but has Croatia handed over its war criminals and does it have the rule of law yet? Both were promised. It has one of the longest borders in the EU, which is used for sex trafficking and human trafficking. We heard exactly the same then, but there have been no improvements. Why does the Minister believe there will be improvements with Albania and Serbia?

Margot James: To correct the hon. Gentleman. I do not think I said that I thought there would be improvements; I said that I thought it would be a mark of progress. I was trying to limit my enthusiasm to that degree, mindful of what he says about Croatia. However, I would say that it is early days and we can only go down the path of progress. The UK continues to support Serbia on its reform path, including through funding projects in Serbia.

Serbia has more work to do on anti-discrimination policies, improving the situation for vulnerable people and ensuring freedom of expression. Observer status at the Fundamental Rights Agency should help Albania and Serbia to reform in the areas we are discussing. Albania and Serbia should also be allowed to benefit from instances of good practice and evidence from other EU member states in relation to human rights. The Government are therefore satisfied of the need to support these two decisions.

The third and fourth decisions are necessary to implement a co-operation agreement between the EU and Canada on competition enforcement. The decisions will allow the agreement to be signed and allow conclusion of the agreement after it has been approved by the European Parliament. This competition co-operation agreement will replace an existing agreement that has been in place since 1999. It replicates and builds on the provisions in the earlier agreement by allowing the European Commission and the Canadian Competition Bureau to exchange evidence obtained during investigations, including confidential information and personal data.

The existing co-operation agreement with Canada dates from June 1999, and at that time the exchange of evidence between the parties was not regarded as needed. In the meantime, the bilateral co-operation between the European Commission and the Canadian Competition Bureau has become more frequent and deeper in terms of substance.

Jonathan Edwards: The Government have already told the Exiting the European Union Committee, on which I served during the last Parliament, that following our withdrawal from the EU we will no longer benefit from, for instance, the information exchange agreements between our competition regulator and the Canadian Competition Bureau. That renders much of the Bill rather pointless, does it not? Can the Minister explain how pulling us out of global deals such as the one that we are discussing will be helpful?

Margot James: I have explained that the purpose of the decision is primarily to support our role as a continuing member of the EU until the negotiations are complete, in two years’ time. Until then we will be covered by it, but after that date we shall have to see what has been agreed during the negotiations. The existing competition agreement with Canada does not allow the sharing of confidential information, but the new one does. I shall return to that point in a few minutes.

The absence of the possibility of exchanging information with the Canadian Competition Bureau is regarded as a major impediment to effective co-operation. The proposed changes in the existing agreement will allow the European Commission and the Competition Bureau to exchange evidence that both sides have obtained in their investigations. That will be particularly useful in all cases in which alleged anti-competitive behaviour affects transatlantic or world markets. Many worldwide or transatlantic cartels include Canada and, via Canada, the Commission will gain a good opportunity to have access to additional information concerning those cartels.

Co-operation with third-country competition authorities is now standard practice in international competition investigations. In addition to the agreement with Canada, the EU has concluded dedicated co-operation agreements with the United States, Japan, Korea and Switzerland.

I now return to the intervention by the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards). I omitted to say that even after the Brexit negotiations have been completed, the competition agreement with Canada will continue to apply to British companies if they are trading with the single market of the European Union.

The most advanced agreement is the one with Switzerland, which already contains provisions on the exchange of evidence, and the proposed update would bring the agreement with Canada to the same level as the one concluded with Switzerland.
I am sure Members will agree that the ability to share information is increasingly important for effective and efficient international competition enforcement. Access to information from other jurisdictions can be important to the reaching of a robust enforcement decision. Co-operation and information sharing between jurisdictions can help to ensure that enforcement bodies do not reach different decisions based on different sets of information.

The agreement contains general safeguards for the transfer of information, and additional safeguards for the transfer of personal data. Personal data can be shared only with the express written consent of the person or company to whom they relate. In the absence of consent, such data can be shared only when both competition authorities are investigating the same related conduct or transaction. Furthermore, the transfer of the data will be subject to independent oversight. The agreement also contains safeguards for information provided by a company under the EU cartel immunity or leniency programme. Such information cannot be shared without the express written consent of the individual or company that provided it.

As I have noted, the decisions will have no financial implications for the UK. I confirm that I do not consider that any of the Bill’s provisions interfere with the rights set out in the European convention on human rights, so no issues arise in connection with its compatibility with those rights.

John Redwood: I wonder why there is no cost. Surely, if there is to be an added layer of complexity in the sharing of information—which may be a good thing—there must be a cost in respect of the time of the officials involved.

Margot James: I am assured that no costs are associated with these decisions, other than those that arise in the normal course of Government business.

It is intended that the Bill will come into force on the day of Royal Assent. For the reasons that I have outlined, I commend it to the House.

1.55 pm

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The Bill was included in the Queen’s Speech. The background notes refer to helping to grant Serbia and Albania observer status at the EU’s Fundamental Rights Agency, and an agreement for enhanced co-operation between competition regulators in the EU and Canada. However, I will not be the only one who was somewhat surprised that it was chosen as the second Bill to be given a Second Reading in the new Parliament. Why was it given such a high priority, given what might have happened, and given what was, at one point, in the Conservative party manifesto?

We could have suggested some alternatives. For instance, the Government could have addressed the pay cap. Members of the Cabinet and members of the Conservative party are now doing that, and quite an argument seems to be going on, but we could have been debating the subject in the House today.

James Cartlidge: The hon. Gentleman will know that the civil war in Yugoslavia was an horrific, scarring experience for our whole continent. We should not belittle it by underestimating the importance of those nations’ reaching our level in terms of human rights and so on.

Bill Esterson: Of course the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, which was why it was right for the Bill to be in the Queen’s Speech. I was merely questioning about why it had been given such prominence. Given that it consists of only two lines, why was something weightier not presented first?

I have mentioned the pay cap, the turmoil in the Conservative party, and the agonising over whether public servants should be given a pay rise. There is also the debate about tuition fees, the debate about whether there should be more police and firefighters—

Michael Tomlinson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way, but I fear that he may be being a little bit churlish. He has the opportunity now to set out the Labour party’s position in relation to the Bill. He is, of course entitled to go on speculating about why it might or could not or should have been debated at this time—as long as you allow him to do so, Mr Speaker—but he has the opportunity to debate this subject now. What does he have to say about it?

Mr Speaker: Order. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his inquiry. I could not know what the hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) would say until he had said it, but now that he has said it, I can tell him that he should not have said it.

It would be advisable now for the hon. Gentleman to return to the subject of the European Union (Approvals) Bill. I very gently remind the hon. Gentleman, who is quite a seasoned parliamentarian, that it consists of two clauses, of which—and I say this not least for the benefit of those who are attending to our proceedings elsewhere—the second is “Extent, commencement and short title”. The only substantive clause is clause 1. The question of the pay cap is a matter of enormous interest, but it is wholly irrelevant to the question of clause 1 and consideration of the Republic of Albania, the Republic of Serbia, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, and the relationship between the European Union and the Government of Canada in respect of competition law.

Bill Esterson: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. You may even have stolen parts of my speech.

Anyway, we have the European Union (Approvals) Bill, with its four draft decisions and two clauses, the second of which—as you pointed out, Mr Speaker—consists of the name of the Bill. Members will be pleased to learn that Labour will not oppose the Bill at this stage. We on the Labour Benches are committed to ensuring that the UK fulfils its responsibilities as a member state of the EU, not least in the very important matter of the progress made by the former member states of Yugoslavia. We will do so until the time of withdrawal from the EU; we will continue to scrutinise EU matters that come before Parliament.
This Bill is the enactment of provisions under the European Union Act 2011 and addresses draft decisions of the Council of the European Union. The first of those relates to the participation of the republics of Albania and Serbia as observers in the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, and the second to the signing and conclusion of an agreement between the EU and the Government of Canada regarding the application of their competition laws, which includes the exchange of information between the EU and the Canadian Competition Bureau.

The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights replaced the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia in 2007. As set out on the Europa website:

“It advises EU institutions and national Governments on fundamental rights, particularly in the areas of: discrimination; access to justice; racism and xenophobia; data protection; victims’ rights; children’s rights.”

The agency’s areas of work have been determined through a five-year framework. The main priority areas include the fight against racism, xenophobia and related intolerance.

EU candidate countries can participate in the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights as observers. This Bill approves two draft decisions on the participation of the Republic of Albania and the Republic of Serbia as observers in the work of the agency. The decision will not in itself confer observer status on Albania and Serbia, but it will establish that the Stabilisation and Association Councils for Albania and Serbia can determine the conditions of the two countries becoming observers.

As the House of Commons Library explains, under the draft Council decisions, Albania and Serbia would both appoint an observer and alternate observer in the work of the agency’s management board, on an equal footing with the member and alternate members appointed by EU member states, but without a right to vote. They would also participate in initiatives undertaken by the agency and make a financial contribution to it.

In an explanatory memorandum to the European Scrutiny Committee on 22 March 2016, the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab), who was then and is now a Ministry of Justice Minister, said that the Government support Serbia and Albania becoming observers in the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, agreeing that it would assist their accession to the EU which the UK also supports subject to “firm but fair conditionality”.

Albania and Serbia will both make a contribution to the EU budget in order to participate, ranging from €160,000 to €183,000 a year. The draft decisions have been cleared by the European Scrutiny Committee and the Lords European Union Select Committee. The Minister said that this is an opportunity for us to support the progress being made on human rights in the two countries in question, and I completely agree on that.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: As the hon. Gentleman knows, Labour and Conservative Members and other Members of this House work through the Council of Europe with Albania and the Balkan states to make sure they are monitored and understood. An enormous amount of work is done by this place with parliamentarians across Europe to continue the efforts the hon. Gentleman is talking about. I commend the hon. Gentleman and our Front-Bench team, and I know he will praise the fact that there are MPs here doing the work already.

Bill Esterson: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to make that point, and I thank him for it; I join him in praising colleagues across the House for their work on these important matters.

However, I have a particular question for the Minister, which also came up in some of the interventions: what would be the nature of our involvement in the agency both immediately after Brexit in handling transitional arrangements and in the longer term? A similar question would apply to a number of other agencies. Perhaps the Minister can address that in her concluding remarks.

There is already an agreement between the EU and Canada on competition. This decision extends the powers so that both sides will be able to exchange evidence collected in the course of their investigations.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): I would like the hon. Gentleman to repeat his question in a little more detail, as my understanding of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights is that it is there to help to interpret and work on Community law in its member states, so presumably if we left the EU it would no longer be relevant in that context to the UK itself.

Bill Esterson: I had moved on to the second part, but I will come back to the hon. Gentleman’s question. We need to know what our relationship will be, given the important work—as the hon. Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) rightly described it—carried out by Members in this House over many years, which has been extremely important in making progress in the countries named in this Bill and others. It is important that we have a sense from the Government as to how we will stay involved in the work of such agencies. I am sure all Members will agree that this country still has a very important role to play whether or not we are in the EU.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that a key bulwark of human rights in this country, and indeed across Europe, is the European convention on human rights, which is not affected by this Bill at all? That has to remain the key and most important element.

Bill Esterson: I completely agree.

The EU Commission states that there is a danger that the absence of a power to exchange information with the Canadian Competition Bureau will become an impediment as co-operation between the two parties increases; the Minister made that point. Co-operation with other competition authorities is now standard practice in international competition investigations. The EU has co-operation agreements with the USA, Japan, South Korea and Switzerland. The most advanced is the one with Switzerland; it is very similar to the Canada agreement and has proved, as the Minister said, uncontroversial. Many worldwide or transatlantic cartels include Canada in their operations, and the Canadian commission will get a good opportunity via this agreement to gain additional information concerning these cartels and whether practice is anti-competitive or not.
Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that this Bill serves as an interesting template for taking forward competitive activities post-Brexit? If we can get this right, it might serve to enable other members of the Commonwealth to look at how we can pattern a similar relationship.

Bill Esterson: That is a good point, and I will come later to further questions about arrangements after we leave the EU, so that we can continue to benefit from the sort of arrangements set out in the Bill. We certainly need to make sure arrangements are in place to address anti-competitive practices in this country and involving our interests across the world. The Minister might want to address that very good point in her concluding remarks.

Ian Paisley: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the question of establishing such a pattern impacts greatly on our nearest neighbour, the Republic of Ireland? If we can get the relationship right between ourselves and Canada, it might help in getting it right with the Republic of Ireland, which will help us to bolster our trade.

Bill Esterson: I think we are in danger of wandering away from the subject—[Interruption.] I have no idea why Conservative Members find that funny, but there we are. Obviously, the hon. Gentleman and the Democratic Unionist party are particularly exercised by that matter, among others, but I dare say that this is something that the Minister can pick up on, perhaps on another day.

Competition delivers benefits to consumers, to businesses and to society as a whole. Competition policy therefore contributes to boosting jobs, growth and investment. The Commission pursues this objective by enforcing competition rules, sanctioning breaches and promoting a competition culture internationally. The proposed agreement will improve the administrative co-operation between the European Commission and the Canadian Competition Bureau. Ultimately, consumers in the European Union and in Canada benefit from competition policy and from the sanctions that contribute to a stronger deterrence of anti-competitive behaviour. More effective competition enforcement results in more open and competitive markets in which companies can compete more freely, enabling them to generate wealth and to create jobs. It also gives consumers a better choice of products at lower prices.

This new agreement is substantively the same as the existing one, which has been in place since June 1999. This agreement just adds new provisions on the exchange of information. Even after we have left the European Union, UK companies operating in the EU will still be subject to the jurisdiction of the European Commission in anti-trust and merger investigations, as all non-EU countries are. Information on UK companies will still be transferable after Brexit. After Brexit, the European Commission will still share information about UK companies with Canada but will not be bound to share the information about the UK it receives from Canada with the UK. I would like the Minister to address that point.

This agreement relates to administrative co-operation between the European Commission and the Canadian Competition Bureau, so public consultation and an impact assessment were not considered necessary by the Government, and, as the Minister has now said on a number of occasions, she does not think that there will be financial implications. The Government have noted in the explanatory memorandum that this new agreement will have no impact on UK law and no financial implications.

The European Scrutiny Committee did not at first clear the proposal. The Chair of the Committee, the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), who I dare say will make a contribution to the debate, requested further information about whether and how the United Kingdom could participate in the agreement following withdrawal. The Minister responded to the Committee on 24 October, stating that “the Government will ensure that the UK is in the strongest possible position to cooperate on competition matters with our international partners…There are a number of options for securing the means for international cooperation...As the form of any cooperation agreement will depend on our negotiation with the EU and negotiations with other countries such as Canada it is too early to say what exact form international cooperation will take.”

That raises a number of questions about transitional arrangements in the longer term. In response to that letter, the Committee subsequently cleared the documents.

That brings us to the question of what arrangements will exist after we leave the EU. The Minister referred in her letter to seeking to extend the current arrangements. For how long does she think that will be necessary? What guarantee is there that it would be possible to extend them? UK companies operating in the EU will still be covered by this agreement. The difference will be that, while the European Commission will continue to share information with Canada about UK companies, that information will not be shared with the UK unless a further agreement is reached. She said in her letter that any co-operation agreement would depend on negotiation. How long does she think those negotiations are likely to take? What will she be seeking to achieve in them? We have now reached the point at which Ministers need to start answering the questions about transitional and longer-term arrangements for these and many other matters.

There is no doubt that competition is vital to our economy, to the success of our businesses and to the prosperity of the people of our country. Encouraging healthy competition is vital. The role of national Governments, and of international co-operation, is to create a fair market, not just a free market. It is also to avoid anti-competitive practices, including the creation of cartels through mergers and acquisitions which distort the market; the undercutting and exploitation of workers and smaller businesses; the use of zero-hours contracts where workers have little choice; the treatment of smaller businesses by banks that will only fund those with liquid assets; and the delays in the payment of invoices by larger firms. Those are all examples of anti-competitive and exploitative practices in which Governments—nationally and internationally—should find ways of intervening to set a level playing field. Governments should be a partner to business and to the workforce. They should encourage those wishing to start and grow a business. They should be investing, and they should have the right strategy to do so. They should have an industrial strategy. Underpinning all that should be the right approach to competition, which is what this part of the Bill is all about.
We need answers to the questions about what happens after we leave the EU and about what transitional arrangements will be in place. The nature of the Minister’s comments in her letter to the European Scrutiny Committee show just how complex these questions are, and it is time we started to get some answers.

Michael Tomlinson: I am following the shadow Minister’s speech closely. He has mentioned the European Scrutiny Committee several times. Will he join me in calling for the Committee to be reconstituted as soon as possible? His speech has demonstrated the important work it does, and it needs to get going straight away.

Bill Esterson: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman was in the Chamber before this debate started, when my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) made an impassioned plea to you, Mr Speaker, for the Select Committees to be reconstituted as soon as possible. Of course I agree with the hon. Gentleman.

Labour accepts the referendum result and recognises that Britain is leaving the European Union, but we need to negotiate for strong transitional arrangements to ensure that there is no cliff edge for the economy. We also need to give much greater priority to retaining the benefits of the single market and the customs union than we have seen from the Government so far. We should not accept any watering down of workers’ rights and environmental standards as a result of Brexit. We will seek significant improvements to the repeal Bill to ensure that there is proper oversight of the use of new powers and no drop in EU rights and protections.

In that context, the discussions that we are having this afternoon are really important. We on the Labour Benches will seek—as, I believe, will the Minister—a strong, collaborative new relationship with the EU, not as a member but as a partner. We will seek to remain a member of common European agencies that benefit the UK, such as Europol, Eurojust and the Erasmus scheme. Perhaps the arrangements we are discussing today can be added to that list. We have to get this right, but we are not in a strong position as we enter the negotiations. I want to see the Prime Minister change her approach. She must drop the idea that “no deal” is a viable option. She must also put a much stronger emphasis on jobs, on the economy and on retaining the benefits of the single market and the customs union, and she must bring Parliament back into the Brexit process, as we have seen happening today. The fact that we are debating this Bill shows that we must retain the benefits of the co-operation and relationships that we currently have with the EU.

I said at the start that this was a Bill with only four draft decisions, but it is indicative of what is to come as we address the challenges of Brexit. As far as this Bill goes, the Minister really does need to answer the questions about transitional arrangements and negotiations so that we can continue to share information to the benefit of our economy and of the people of this country.

2.19 pm

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): As has been mentioned, the European Scrutiny Committee, of which I was Chairman for six years, has actually cleared these decisions. We did have some reservations about one aspect, however: we wanted to know how all this would work out during the Brexit negotiations and after we have left the European Union.

Basically, there is a necessity for this Bill because, as the Minister pointed out, although we are leaving the EU, under sections 2 and 3 of the European Communities Act 1972 we are still within the framework of the requirements to comply with EU rights and obligations until Brexit takes effect. There are some who hope that all this will somehow be kicked into the long grass, that we will have arrangements that take us into a world of never-never land, and that it will all disappear. There are some in the House of Lords who certainly take that view and there may even be some in the House of Commons. I was extremely glad to note, however, that on certain matters, in particular the single market and the customs union, the decision that was taken on the Queen’s Speech made it clear—subsequent events seem to have confirmed it—that the Opposition have actually begun to become extremely realistic about the single market and all that goes with it. These sort of arrangements are implicit in the Brexit negotiations and in the outcome of Brexit.

The Bill has to provide parliamentary approval of the decisions on Albania and Serbia, and the European Scrutiny Committee had no reservation or concern after we heard from the relevant Minister—the same Minister who wrote me the letter last year. The important issue here is that Albania and Serbia are not by definition countries that are likely to become candidates for EU membership during the period of our negotiation process and exit. Mr Juncker himself said that he does not think there will be any enlargement until after we have left the EU, so such decisions will not impinge upon us. We do not have to take a specific position on the candidatures of Albania and Serbia.

The Bill’s briefing paper contains many references to the Fundamental Rights Agency, and one thing that has not yet been mentioned in this debate is the charter of fundamental rights, which is embedded in the Lisbon treaty arrangements and is a matter of law. I strongly resisted our being drawn into the charter, and we held a European Scrutiny Committee inquiry into how Lord Goldsmith and his negotiations had failed so dramatically. We thought that we were not going to be a member of the charter, but we ended up within that framework. The Fundamental Rights Agency, which promotes dialogue with civil society in order to raise public awareness of fundamental rights, things which would be part and parcel of the functions that would be carried through by virtue of the Bill in respect of Serbia and Albania, contains something of a vacuum because we will not be part of the charter of fundamental rights after we have left the EU, but we are part of it for the time being, so to that extent there is a problem. I will not invite the Minister to enlarge on that—I hope she is glad about that—but I want to put it on the record that the charter of fundamental rights should never have applied to us in the first place. It was a botched job by the then Labour Government, and we are now saddled with the fact that we are in it. Fortunately, however, we will be coming out of it as a result of Brexit.

However, part of the Fundamental Rights Agency’s role is to fight against racism, xenophobia and intolerance, and I am sure we would agree with that role as a matter
of principle. The object of the involvement of Albania and Serbia in the process is to enable an element of self-education, so that they can become more aware than they have been previously. Take Serbia, for example. I have been in this House long enough to have been here at the time of Sarajevo and all that went with it. Milošević and Karadžić were dreadful people. However much we airbrush some of these things out of history as time progresses, the reality is that the breaches of people’s rights in Serbia were so horrific that they live with us to this day. It will be important for Albania and Serbia to be, as it were, incorporated and absorbed into the processes by which fundamental rights are considered. I do not like the charter of fundamental rights, not because I am against human rights, but because I do not like the idea of some of the adjudications. That is not to say, however, that it is not important that these two countries should be involved in that process.

The Committee of which I was Chairman when these decisions were made had no reason to stand in the way. We originally asked for some information and further comment from the Minister; we got that, so we were satisfied and we cleared the documents. Indeed, the decisions were also cleared by our counterpart in the House of Lords. What the Minister has said is fair and I would not want to stand in the way of the approval of this Bill.

I referred earlier to the accession process. It will take quite a long time for Serbia and Albania to become members of the EU and they will come in after we have left. A European Parliament resolution on Brexit calls for the transition period to be no longer than three years, and the European Commission’s negotiating guidelines for the Brexit talks state that any transition must be “limited in time”. I will just leave that on the record, because some people seem to have got this idea that transition is an everlasting journey. It is not; we are leaving and that is that. By the time Albania and Serbia become members of the European Union—if they do—we will be out and that will be a good thing for the United Kingdom. I ought to add that the Justice Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson), mentioned that Germany must also give parliamentary approval, which I understand will be forthcoming because Germany has an interest in the continuation of the EU in a way that we do not.

The decision on EU-Canada co-operation in competition law enforcement was also approved by the European Scrutiny Committee.

Michael Tomlinson: I declare an interest as someone who served on that Committee in the previous Parliament. Has my hon. Friend received any assurances about when the Committee will be reconstituted? Does he agree that that is a matter of urgency?

Sir William Cash: I am glad to respond, because I have been very much engaged on that subject. In fact, one of the last things I did on the day of Dissolution was to write to the Chief Whip asking him to ensure that our Committee was reconstituted immediately after the election, because in 2015 the whole process went on until November, by which time we had a monument of documents. In the meantime, many things are being decided in the European institutions, many of which are directly relevant to the Brexit negotiations. It is therefore incredibly important that this House has an opportunity to assess the sorts of things that are being decided, subject to the Committee clearing the documents.

As hon. Members may know, if the European Scrutiny Committee imposes scrutiny reserve on a document because we think it is so important that it has to be debated, the Council of Ministers cannot conclude its consideration of those matters, and the Government cannot make a decision to carry the matter through, unless and until that debate has taken place. When we have a pile of documents—I understand there are some 200 documents in the pipeline—and a pile of explanatory memoranda explaining the Government’s position on them, the position the Government adopt on the documents in the negotiations will be highly interesting.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole rightly raises the question of getting on with the job, and I am given to understand, without committing anybody to anything, that the Government are taking steps to accelerate the process because it is so important. Of course, we will discuss the other Select Committees later this afternoon. Their schedules and the allocation of chairmanships to each party will be decided, and I understand that that has been discussed through the usual channels, so I do not expect it to be terribly controversial, but for all the reasons I have set out, it is important for the European Scrutiny Committee to get going.

I entirely endorse what the Minister said about the Canada agreement, which again was discussed by the European Scrutiny Committee. We agreed that we would let it go ahead, but the explanatory notes on the Bill indicate some implications for United Kingdom companies operating in the EU after Brexit, which is the bit we should be most concerned about at the moment:

“Following the UK’s exit from the European Union, UK companies operating in the EU will still be subject to the jurisdiction of the European Commission in antitrust investigations and, where the thresholds are met, in merger investigations in the same way as for other non-EU companies operating in the EU. Information relating to UK companies based in the EU would therefore still be transferable under the new Agreement.”

That is becoming a bit of a hot potato. I made a representation to the Prime Minister the other day on the question of citizens’ rights, and we hear a lot about the question of City regulation, and here it is coming up again.

Some people are making too much of it. An enormous amount is emerging from the commentariat and on programmes we sometimes find ourselves listening to
but that we perhaps ought to switch off. They are trying to make out that, somehow or other, the real problem is that we have to stay in the European Court of Justice, which is complete rubbish. We do not have to stay in the European Court of Justice and, far more than that, we are not going to stay in the European Court of Justice, because we will be repealing sections 2 and 3 of the European Communities Act 1972. The Labour party has made it clear that we will not stay in the single market or the customs union, which raises some of the biggest issues relating to the ECJ. Frankly, as I told the House the other day, we have to come up with a sensible arrangement that does not prejudice the regaining of our judicial sovereignty. At the same time, we must agree some form of tribunal that enables us, through a parallel bilateral “source of law” agreement, to have a decision-making process that does not and cannot keep us in the European Court of Justice. That is not a matter of opinion or of wishful thinking; staying in the ECJ is fantasy land.

Sir William Cash: I am not at all convinced by the EEA route. I do not want to get into all that now, except to say that the EEA involves the EU.

Vicky Ford: The EFTA court?

Sir William Cash: EFTA is a different story, and I specifically raised it with the Prime Minister only a few days ago because I have been having fruitful discussions with the president of the EFTA court and his advisers. He has been over here to talk to the Foreign Office, to me as the then Chair of the European Scrutiny Committee and to others.

It is an interesting proposition. I am not saying that we will do exactly the same in resolving those jurisdictional questions as happens at the moment with EFTA, but the great advantage of the EFTA model is that it is completely independent of the EU yet follows the decisions of the European Court of Justice for the most part, although not always—that is important. I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) noticed that, because not many people have. It is important that we have a constructive discussion about the best way of being cousins rather than brothers and sisters, as I said in my earlier intervention. We all have a mutual interest in ensuring that we have a proper jurisdictional answer to these questions.

I will not attempt to design a model here and now, but it might be something along the lines of a retired European Court of Justice judge—I do not want to be held to this, but it is a thought—together with a retired member of our Supreme Court and an independent judge, so that we get the benefit of listening to arguments that bridge the two jurisdictions. We will retain our sovereignty, judicial and legislative, but we are interested, for the sake of the companies to which my hon. Friend referred, in ensuring that we give them the answers they need. Her general point raises an important practical question, and we need to ensure that we end up with something that works, without prejudicing our legislative and judicial sovereignty, while providing an answer to the people in our constituencies and throughout the United Kingdom whom we serve as Members of Parliament.

Mr Deputy Speaker, many congratulations to you on the fact that I am seeing you here yet again. As you may have noticed, I am still here as well. So for practical purposes, let me draw my speech to a conclusion by saying that I do not in any way want to interfere with the process before us, because it is not going to affect this country in the longer term, and it is important that we act sensibly and responsibly to make sure that we do not rock the boat in the meantime.

2.40 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): As this is also my first opportunity to do this, may I congratulate you and welcome you back to the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker?

I am grateful to the Minister for setting out the provisions in the Bill. On the first two draft decisions, we welcome the opportunity to give our support to the participation of Albania and Serbia as observers in the work of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. As the agency says:

“Fundamental rights set out minimum standards to ensure that a person is treated with dignity. Whether this is the right to be free from discrimination on the basis of your age, disability or ethnic background, the right to the protection of your personal data, or the right to get access to justice, these rights should all be respected, promoted and protected.”

Those are shared values, and Scottish National party Members and the Scottish Government hold them dear. We are demonstrating that in Scotland by using our limited new powers to build a social security system with dignity at its heart. We can contrast that with the approach of the UK Government, who are rolling out a dysfunctional universal credit regime which is punishing the disabled, those on low wages and the vulnerable.

On Serbia and Albania, although there is much work to be done, this is an important step for both countries in their journey to improving the lives of their citizens. They deserve credit for their approach, and we know that joining the EU is also the will of both nations. Serbia was formally announced as an EU candidate in 2012 and has already opened 10 of the 35 chapters of accession. Last week, Serbia’s newly elected Prime Minister, Ana Brnabić, talked of a “strategic orientation toward the European Union, which represents the values that we stand for.”

She continued:

“That is the place where Serbia should be”
Similarly, elections in Albania this week showed, once again, a renewed commitment to the EU. Albania’s two largest parties are both pro-EU, and a national survey has shown that more than 95% of its citizens support EU membership. In their commitment to EU accession, Serbia and Albania have shown a willingness and commitment to improving the fundamental rights of their citizens and to restoring peace. They see the EU as a vehicle for peace across Europe. As his name has been mentioned today, it is worth recalling Jean-Claude Juncker’s tribute to the recently deceased former German Chancellor, Helmut Kohl. Mr Juncker said:

“It was on the day we decided to press ahead with EU enlargement to the east and south east. In a voice choked with tears he said it was one of the most beautiful days of his life. That he, as German Chancellor, was able to bring Europe back together after all the harm that Germany had caused.”

Juncker said of his friend:

“He wept. Nobody was embarrassed by his tears. That was Europe at its best.”

That we are here today playing our, albeit small, part in improving the rights of people across the Western Balkans is a great thing.

What a shame then that this UK Government are hell-bent on pulling Scotland out of the very partnership that delivers those protections; and this despite people in every Scottish local authority area voting to remain in the EU. It is also not lost on us that this Bill comes only days after the fundamental rights of people, in particular those of the LGBT community in Northern Ireland, are now being questioned—all because of a back-door deal with the Democratic Unionist party to keep this Tory Government in power.

Alex Chalk: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that when it comes to protecting the human rights of people in the United Kingdom, be that in England, Scotland or Northern Ireland, our membership of the convention is by far the most important thing in asserting those rights, and that is what we need to keep in mind?

Drew Hendry: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point about the membership of the convention, but it is also vital that we take every opportunity to make sure we are protecting the rights of citizens.

Turning to the third and fourth draft decisions, SNP Members welcome further formalisation of the working relationship between Canada and the EU in regard to competition laws. These draft decisions, in particular, serve as a reminder of the good business and trading opportunities the EU provides for the UK. A bad Brexit deal, or the fatuous, ludicrous idea of no deal, will make it more expensive and difficult for our businesses to trade with the EU—a market eight times the size of the UK market.

The people in Scotland stand to lose much, with independent estimates concluding that a hard Brexit could cost Scotland up to 80,000 jobs within a decade and that after 10 years average wages could fall by £2,000 a year per head.

Ian Paisley: For the record, will the hon. Gentleman confirm that Scotland’s largest trading partner is the rest of the United Kingdom?

Drew Hendry: I am happy to confirm that, but I am also happy to point out how important Scotland is to the rest of the UK as a trading partner.

This treaty shows there are many other potential costs to a hard Brexit; for example, in respect of the protection of the rights of citizens who otherwise may also find that they face additional burdens. As the Minister mentioned, the explanatory notes state that the Bill carries no cost to the Government, but that does not mean that subsequently losing these protections will mean no cost to our citizens and businesses. Areas of EU competition regulation include anti-trust, cartel, merger and state aid measures, and the sectors covered are agriculture and food; consumer goods; energy and environment; financial services; information and communication technologies; media; motor vehicles; pharmaceuticals; postal services; professional services; sports; telecommunications; and transport.

This is yet another example—and we have heard no update today—of where we have no clarity from the UK Government over Brexit proposals on something fundamental to UK companies operating in the EU and, ultimately and importantly, to consumers and our citizens. In contrast, this agreement will mean that information obtained during competition enforcement investigations may be discussed and transferred between the European Commission and the Canadian Competition Bureau. It is intended to increase the ability of both organisations to conclude competition enforcement investigations efficiently, and should be welcomed.

We are advised that following the UK’s exit from the European Union, UK companies operating in the EU will still be subject to the jurisdiction of the European Commission in anti-trust investigations. That raises an interesting question, so will the Minister confirm with whom that agreement has been met and when it was decided? As we know, following the £2.4 billion fine on Google, the EU is considering giving the Commission tougher competition powers to allow for earlier and faster intervention in anti-trust cases. After Brexit, the UK will have no say over these types of decisions, which could involve UK companies. How do this Government intend to deal with the implications for businesses and consumers of having no voice in deciding the direction of EU competition law? We need to hear some commitments here. The hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) did not want to be held to anything, but is it not about time the UK Government were held to at least some things that they are going to do in the future?

Although SNP Members are keen to support the approval of these draft decisions, the very nature of the Bill shows us how deep and wide our current protections are in the EU. In Scotland, we remain determined to give people hope for the future and ensure that the protections they currently take for granted will continue to benefit them, their families and our businesses. I believe that many people in all parts of this Chamber are as passionate about dignity, freedoms and protections as I am and as we in the SNP are. Whatever the future holds, it will be important for those voices to make themselves heard, and when they do, we will be ready to support them.
2.49 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): This is a time for everyone to congratulate you on your successful re-election, Mr Deputy Speaker, so let me do so again on behalf of the whole House.

Let us just reflect on what we are doing here. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) said, we will not be in the EU when Albania and Serbia are admitted as members, so we are using our role as members of the EU now to set out something for their benefit for the future, and that is an important point to remember. We are acting responsibly in our current membership of the EU, not simply washing our hands of those two countries.

In an intervention on the Minister, I asked what the difference is between the work of the Agency for Fundamental Rights and that of the Council of Europe. That is a very relevant question. According to the description she gave, what the agency does is exactly the same as what the Council of Europe does. I could not get a cigarette paper between the two definitions. As many Members have said in interventions, many of us, as delegates to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, are actively involved in monitoring Albania and Serbia—for example, regarding participation in their elections—and will continue to do so for many years after the UK has left the European Union, because the Council of Europe is not an EU body. The UK will, I hope, continue as a member of the Council of Europe and its subsidiary body, if I can use that term, the European Court of Human Rights. It is important to recognise that it is the Council of Europe that owns the European Court of Human Rights and the convention.

As my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) said, we should not take lightly the situation in Serbia. I have spent many years in central and eastern Europe helping countries to develop along the paths of democracy and a market economy. Only a few years ago, Serbia appeared to us to be full of warlords, and full of all the angst of the Balkans at the time. It seems a miracle that Serbia has come so far. In my work at the Council of Europe, I spent a lot of time working with Serbian Members of Parliament. That was done on a cross-party basis—it was an extreme pleasure to work with a Serbian Socialist MP. Serbia has come so far in what it is trying to do, in what it has achieved and in where it is going.

The co-operation that we had encompassed all three areas that the Council of Europe looks after: democracy, human rights and the rule of law. It is important to stress those. There are two examples of Serbia’s problems in the region: one is Kosovo, which some EU members still do not recognise as a separate state, and the other is Montenegro. I am pleased to say that the last Council of Europe meeting was addressed by the Prime Minister of Montenegro, which shows the enormous respect those countries have for the institutions and for the individual members of those institutions.

Albania is a slightly different case. It was, I think, the 35th member of the Council of Europe, and we still monitor Albanian elections very closely. In fact, I was invited to be a member of the recent Albanian elections but was unable to do so because of our own general election. There has been an enormous difficulty with corruption in Albania. I am the Prime Minister’s trade envoy to Nigeria, which has a reputation for corruption, but I can tell hon. Members that Albania runs it a very close second in that respect. When I mentioned to an hon. Friend that I was going to say that in this debate, he warned me, “You’d better watch out. There will be gangs of Albanians wandering about, wanting to throw you into the boot of a car and do away with you.” Well, I have taken the risk and said it.

The Minister set out the responsibilities of the agency: to collect, analyse and disseminate objective, reliable and comparable information relating to the situation of fundamental rights in the EU. I see no difference between that and what the Council of Europe does. In Serbia, the Council of Europe is strengthening the capacity of law enforcement and the judiciary specifically in the fight against corruption. An additional project aims to harmonise court practices and to raise the capacity of judges, to ensure consistent application of the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights. Those seem to me to be identical to the activities the agency undertakes on behalf of the EU, so I believe there ought to be considerable co-operation between the Council of Europe and the agency. It shows how far Serbia has come that it also plays an active role regionally in promoting minority protection, in particular for the Roma community, and inclusive education.

The Council of Europe’s overall strategic objective in Albania is to promote the reform agenda across various sectors. Protection of human rights, anti-discrimination, the fight against corruption and organised crime, and reform of the judiciary, as well as freedom of the media and free and fair elections in line with general European standards, are all part of the effort to increase good governance and democratic participation. I know that Albania has a long way to go—it is behind the other countries of the Council of Europe and the EU in taking that agenda forward—but we are working on that.

It would be churlish of me to deny the rights of Serbia and Albania to be members of the agency on the basis set out in the Bill and in the agreements, but I do think that the European Scrutiny Committee could have looked more carefully at what the Council of Europe is doing and pointed out the overlap between that and what the agency will do. We have talked about how long accession takes. I suggest that the reason it takes such a long time is that there is little in the way of co-operation and harmonisation of aims between individual organisations.

Having expressed my belief that Serbia and Albania should be admitted, I will answer the question put earlier about what we can do to put pressure on those countries, which have emerged from horrendous periods in their history. We have to welcome them into our institutions. It is not necessarily about harmonising legislation and making it EU-compliant, as the agency does. All of that can be taken care of. What we have to do—this is where the Council of Europe works very effectively—is work with them, include them as part of our bigger European family, and press them to act in the right way in their own territories. As those other members of the Council of Europe will affirm, that is an effective practice when it comes to dealing with this issue. I welcome those countries, and cannot think of a reason to keep them out, but I do ask for more co-operation across the board.
Let me turn very briefly to the Canadian competition issue, on which many Members have commented. Personally I can see no difficulty in exchanging information and having a better system for exchanging information—whether that is via the EU or with Canada directly as a result of the activities that take place. On that note, I will sit down.

3 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I add my congratulations to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, as you assume your rightful place in this House in chairing these proceedings. It is good to see you in your place. It is also a privilege to follow some of the speeches that have been made here today, especially that of the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash). When he speaks on these issues, I often think that his constituency has been badly and underwhelmingly named. It should be renamed the rock because he acts like a rock—he is solid on these issues—when he speaks before this House. Once again, he has shown his breadth of knowledge and skill in this particular area. I wholeheartedly concur with his point that the European Scrutiny Committee should be reactivated—and reactivated very quickly—because, as we exit the EU, we will need to scrutinise these matters very closely and ensure that we consider the details that will come up during the exiting process. The Committee is one vehicle that could be used to that advantage, and I wish him well in his quest to have it re-established.

I also agree with the hon. Gentleman on the charter of fundamental rights. It is an absolute dog’s dinner. I will not invite the Minister to comment on that, but he did make a valid point. Many of the shared values that we call rights today originated from this great kingdom under our own rights-based common law. We cast that aside too quickly and think that all those rights were given to us by the EU. We actually bestowed many of the fundamental principles of rights on our neighbouring states. Last year, a display in Westminster Hall celebrated many of the fundamental rights that originated here—from employment rights right the way through to anti-slavery activities. We should take more pride in the fact that this nation is the great bastion of rights and has encouraged rights around the world. I also agree that we are not leaving the European Court of Human Rights. That is an incredibly important point. The ECHR is not affected by Brexit. People forget that. Whenever they hear about Brexit, they all too often think that we are leaving Europe. We are not leaving Europe; we are leaving an economic club that has failed us. We are not leaving those issues of rights.

The hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) made a number of points about some “backroom deal” between my party and the Government of the day. I want to make it absolutely clear that, in my view and in the view of the people in my party and on this Bench, the rights of the unborn child trump any political agreement that has been put in place. I want to make that absolutely and abundantly clear. If anyone thinks that we would trade that issue of life and the sanctity of life on a political deal, they do not understand me and they do not understand my party; they need to be aware of that. For it to be characterised in that way is grossly unfair to members of my party.

Drew Hendry: The hon. Gentleman makes a point about something I said about the deal. I was making a point not about children born or otherwise but about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender concerns in Northern Ireland. He should be willing to clarify that issue.

Ian Paisley: I am quite happy that the hon. Gentleman has clarified his comments, but given what has happened in the past week in this House—the passing of the Queen’s Speech and the amendment that was not moved—I think reference has already been made to that. It should be absolutely clear that, in my view and in the view of my party, the unborn is—even in the words of Hillary Clinton—a “human being”. According to science, it feels pain, it knows emotions and it is faithfully and wonderfully made. My party will take a stand on that issue irrespective of the political agreements that are reached. I say that as a warning to others who may seek to raise the issue in the House in the weeks, months and, hopefully, years ahead.

Turning to the issue of competition, which is mentioned in this Bill, and the competitive rights, which have been identified, I welcome what has been put on page 6 of the Labour party manifesto, because it emphasises the importance of what we are discussing today. It says that the Labour party will make sure that we leave the European Union. I welcome that because, when we leave the European Union, we do not half leave it or partly leave it; we get out. It is essential that we get out of the customs union and the single market. We cannot address the competition matters identified in this Bill with Canada, for example, if we do not get out of the customs union. It is absolutely crucial that we leave the customs union. We cannot make free trade agreements with any other country unless we are free to do so, so the quest for freedom is incredibly important. That was driven home to me recently in a piece of correspondence that I received from a large steel processor here in the United Kingdom.

Bill Esterson: The hon. Gentleman is raising some really important points relating to the competition element of this Bill. He touched on an earlier intervention. Will he say a little bit about how he sees the relationship between the north and south of Ireland working?

Ian Paisley: Certainly. I will comment on it after I have made my point about the steel industry. I received a note from the managing director of John Reid and Sons. It is a massive company that has been in existence for 98 years. It said:

“to remain in the customs union would mean that we cannot do our own trade deals with the rest of the world. We have exported to over 140 countries throughout our 98 years in business; we have an idea of what we are talking about. The customs union is a terrible tragedy for Third World agriculture and fisheries, and prevents proper trade.”

That was written by someone who is at the coalface every day and knows what they are talking about. It is important that that point is reflected in this debate.

The hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) has asked me to comment on some of the points that were made about how this matter impacts on the Republic of Ireland. While you would show me great leniency, Mr Deputy Speaker, if I were to speak at length today


on the Republic of Ireland and on what a future trade deal would look like. I think that, even though you like me considerably, you would probably rule me out of order. I will try to touch on the point. I recommend to all Members of the House that they go to the Library and get a copy of the Policy Exchange document that was published earlier this month. It was written by Ray Bassett, a former ambassador from the Republic of Ireland to the United Nations. The title is: “After Brexit: will Ireland be next to Exit?” It is a very important policy paper that sets out compelling reasons why the Republic of Ireland must follow the United Kingdom out of the EU. If it fails to do that, its trade will be ruined. We have something in common with Canada on that point. For example, Canada has great fishing waters, and it protects those fishing waters for its fishing fleet and fishing companies. In the past 48 to 72 hours, the fishing rights of the United Kingdom have been discussed at some length in the media.

Of course, the Republic of Ireland’s fishing waters are currently underfished, because the Republic of Ireland is able to encourage the rest of the EU to fish in our waters. Once we claim back our fishing waters, Mr Deputy Speaker, do you know what will happen? The rest of the EU will want to fish in Ireland’s fishing waters, putting great pressure on the Republic of Ireland and stealing its catch. It is for such reasons that it is essential that we understand the commercial reasons why it is important for Ireland to exit the EU. I think that I have probably pushed you just enough, Mr Deputy Speaker, with my comments on the Republic of Ireland. I wish that the shadow Front-Bench spokesman would encourage me again, perhaps by asking me another question on the issue, as I would certainly push the matter even further—then we might not get the red flag.

We must make it absolutely clear, as I said earlier, that agreements such as that which we are discussing today impact tangentially on the pattern of how we should do commerce in the future. The Canadian agreements and aspects are very important, because if that is how Canada will be treated by the EU after we leave, we need to take cognisance of what is in the Bill regarding the relationship that we will have with Canada.

In response to the points made by the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), let me say that when the UK leaves and Albania and Serbia join—well, I almost feel like saying, “Good luck with that.” But I think that would be unfair—those will, ultimately, be matters for what is left of the EU. By the time the accession rights are achieved, the EU will be a very different club from what it is now. When the UK leaves and, as I have predicted, Ireland leaves, although Serbia and Albania wish to join, the EU countries might at that point consider what is in their greater interests. The charges for membership of the EU will be immense. For example, since 2014 the Republic of Ireland has had to pay more than £1 billion to be a member of the EU. It previously paid nothing. If that is what Ireland will have to fork out, what will countries such as Serbia and Albania have to fork out under the new arrangements?

I leave those points for the House to consider and hope that the Minister can reflect on them when she sums up.
within the realms of the debate—to cover our future relationship with Canada more generally. I do so as our former trade envoy to Canada, a role that I very much enjoyed until I was made a Minister, and which we probably need to fill again in the near future. I can think of one or two possible candidates—tall, dark, handsome former Ministers from the north of England, perhaps—

[Interruption.]

Where are they, indeed?

It is very nice to have a Bill before the House today that mentions Canada, as it is 150 years since the British North America Act, which established the Confederation of Canada, was enacted. Just this past weekend, celebrations took place throughout Canada. It is nice, 150 years later, to recognise Canada’s birthday and, thinking about competition and business, to recognise the 200-year anniversary of the Bank of Montreal—the bank with the longest presence in the United Kingdom—which also falls this year.

The competition provisions in the Bill are sensible and operate, like the EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement, as a basis for a future relationship with Canada once we have left the European Union. I want to use this debate to explain why I feel this relationship is so important and is worthy of more attention from Her Majesty’s Government over the coming years.

Of course, we have an important shared heritage with Canada which has been strengthened through conflict and war. A reminder came recently when the Bletchley Park commemorative badge was presented by our representative in Ottawa to 96-year-old Sonja Morawetz Sinclair, who escaped the approaching Nazi armies in Czechoslovakia and worked in the examination unit, supporting the important signals intelligence work that was done there. It is nice that our Government have recognised that contribution.

Of course, we have a shared legal system, a shared language, shared business practices, a shared Head of State and, indeed, a shared system of government. This is a relationship that, post-Brexit, can flourish on the basis of those commonalities. It also makes economic sense for us to develop this relationship much more closely. UK exports to Canada in 2015 were £7.3 billion, whereas imports from Canada were £7.4 billion. We have a relatively well-balanced trading relationship as a consequence of our important commonalities and agreements, not only as regards competition, as in this Bill, but as regards the recently agreed EU-Canada trade treaty. It is a good basis for a treaty between this country and Canada once we leave, but because of the nature of European decision making, I think we can do better following our exit from the EU.

We are well placed to succeed and do well from that relationship post-Brexit, not least because of the friendly business environment that I have mentioned and our shared heritage, but also because of our strong presence in the market, particularly as a result of investment from the Government through UK Trade & Investment, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and now the Department for International Trade. I saw that for myself, and saw how valued it was in my time as a trade envoy. We had an excellent team, led by High Commissioner Howard Drake, who was well regarded, and by the consul general and director-general for UK trade and investment, Kevin McGurgan, who was based in Toronto. I saw how well regarded he was and how well connected, both at a political and business level. Her Majesty’s Government were as a result of those relationships.

Only two weeks ago, I was in discussions with our consul general in Vancouver, Nicole Davison, who leads a team in the west doing a great job.

I want to put a bit of meat on the bones and outline what more we need to do to get the maximum advantage from that relationship post-Brexit. I have discussed the need to recognise first—I believe the Government have done so—the importance of that relationship. We have friends at court in the Brexit process. The newly elected Leader of the Opposition in Canada, Andrew Scheer, wrote a comment piece in favour of Brexit in the run-up to the election. The Canadian Government have said that they want to be as helpful as possible to us in this process, and indeed the probable next premier of Alberta, Jason Kenney, a former federal Cabinet Minister, was an advocate for Brexit before the referendum.

That relationship is important to us, not least because Canada is campaigning for a place on the UN Security Council. I call on the Government not just to recognise the importance of the relationship at a federal level but to recognise that Canada is a country of several different economies, and that that provincial relationship with those Governments, three of whom are represented in the United Kingdom—British Columbia, Ontario and Quebec—is vital.

Broadly, my pitch on the Bill is to recognise that what we have achieved through the EU and bilateral arrangements with Canada is a close relationship. However, we need to do more to put more meat on the bones and strengthen that relationship. The Government recognise that, and there is work under way. I call on Ministers to ensure that they are fully cognisant of this important relationship, and put the required effort and attention into supporting that through visits and, as I have said, making sure that our network in the market is as strong as possible so that we get a good deal to replace CETA in the future. As I say, that requires recognition of the specifics of the provincial position in Canada, both politically and economically. I have nothing else to say, other than to end where I began and wish Canada happy birthday on its 150 years, which I am sure that the House will agree with.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I call Vicky Ford.

Vicky Ford rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Just a sec. It is worth reminding Members to get into the habit of standing up to catch my eye, so I know who wants to speak, especially as the list of Members wishing to speak is changing quicker than I have ever seen a list change before.

3.23 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Thank you for calling me, Mr Deputy Speaker. As someone who believes in open, competitive and free markets because they foster innovation, generate prosperity and create the wealth that we need for our public services, I believe we must have robust competition powers so that we can take action against companies that act in an anti-competitive manner. In the 21st-century world, the economic actors are frequently global players, especially in areas such as digital markets. It is important that we can work with other countries on competition issues.
[Vicky Ford]

A couple of years ago, I was in Silicon Valley with politicians from Germany, the Netherlands, Poland and the Czech Republic. Many players in Silicon Valley told us their concerns about how Google was acting. I went with that group of politicians to meet the head of search at Google, and I have never seen a company with so many lawyers in one room. They knew the power that countries could have when acting together. It was therefore interesting to see the European Commissioner for Competition taking action, a couple of weeks ago, on a proposed fine for Google. That case has caused some controversy, and it may create precedents for how platforms can act in future.

It is important in such cases that those who are taking the action make it clear that there is a level playing field, and that they are not singling out, for example, an American company when they would not do the same to a British or European one. One benefit of a co-operation deal, such as the one that we are discussing today, is that by working together we can help to reinforce the level playing field and the idea that we would not single out our own companies for a different type of enforcement. It removes what we call the jurisdiction bias risk. It also brings bigger resources to take on big cases, and post-Brexit the UK will want to make it clear to the world that we are prepared to take on competition cases for big players. The ability to continue to co-operate with other countries is therefore important.

Canada is a dear friend to the UK, as my hon. Friend the Member for Brig and Goo le (Andrew Percy) pointed out, but the Canada free trade agreement is not the perfect model for the future UK-EU relationship. That agreement removes many, many tariffs from different trades. We voted it through in the European Parliament on 15 February, the day after Valentine’s day, and I remember celebrating, as we would have tariff-free chocolate—a great benefit. However, it does not create the deep level of market access that the Government seek in our future relationship with Europe. If we chose that model off the shelf, it would create many new non-tariff barriers in areas such as digital and financial services. It would not provide the regulatory co-operation model that we seek. For example, British car manufacturers would not even be consulted in a stakeholder consultation about changes to international rules on car transactions.

We therefore need a deeper model, and we need to make sure that co-operation on competition has a dispute resolution mechanism for companies as well as countries. I was particularly pleased to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) suggest that the European Free Trade Association courts might prove to be a good or interesting basis for dispute resolution. He was sending a powerful message, given all his experience, that that might be a pragmatic solution.

Finally, picking up the suggestion from my hon. Friend that we need to move on from being brothers and sisters to become close cousins, in developing that relationship there will be things about which we will need to have serious discussions and arguments. I would suggest that this is not one of them. Allowing other countries to come together on issues such as human rights and competition co-operation is something that we should allow to pass and not block. We should save our discussions and arguments for when they are really needed.

3.28 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Mr Deputy Speaker, may I join the long queue of those paying tribute to you on your re-election and on the outstanding role you play in this House?

As my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) said right at the start, the Opposition support the European Union (Approvals) Bill. More generally, the UK is leaving the European Union, and, in that process, the Opposition will fight to put jobs and the economy first. We will also not accept the watering-down of rights and standards, and I say to the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) that we are right to be concerned about that. To give one example from my past, I took the case of the Eastbourne dustmen all the way to the European Court of Justice 15 years ago. For 10 years, rights on the transfer of undertakings were denied to workers being privatised in Britain. Had it not been for those European mechanisms, we would never have seen those rights enforced in this country. We will be leaving the European Union, but I stress again that we will not accept anything that waters down rights and standards.

Sir William Cash: I think the hon. Gentleman is aware that, under the proposed repeal Bill, there would be a transposition of European law into UK law under Westminster jurisdiction. That would include the very rights to which he refers, and I think that is understood on the Opposition Front Bench, is it not?

Jack Dromey: The rights under TUPE and the acquired rights directive are now guaranteed in British law. What is crucial—this is not a debate for today—is what happens after leaving the European Union in terms of the continuation of guaranteed certainty for workers and their rights, as well as the enforcement mechanisms that exist in the event of a dispute.

The Opposition strongly believe in the importance of a collaborative relationship with the European Union. We will no longer be members, but it is essential that we are partners. The hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) referred to the notion of cousins, but, given the way some in the Government are conducting these debates, I sometimes think we are more akin to an estranged couple in a difficult divorce. However, at the next stage, partnership will be essential, and that is one of the principles enshrined in the Bill—a more general partnership that benefits Britain, particularly on key issues such as cross-border security or, as in this case, cross-border trade.

As we leave the European Union, it is essential that we put in place new and sensible arrangements. The Opposition support the Bill because it is right and also—I agree with the right hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) on this, although I think I have just promoted the hon. Lady—because it would, to use my words, although they amount to the same as hers, be wrong to nit-pick on a measure of this kind. This measure makes good sense, so it should be supported.
On the substantive issues—the participation of Albania and Serbia in the work of the Fundamental Rights Agency—we have heard powerful contributions, including from the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), as to the origins of the FRA and why it is so important. That is not least because it was born out of trauma and war in continental Europe and because of the role it has played over many years in advising on fundamental rights, discrimination, access to justice, racism, xenophobia, and victims’ and children’s rights. It is absolutely right that we should have such an agency promoting those principles, rights and values throughout Europe, and that is all the more important now.

It is deeply welcome that we will have Serbia and Albania locked into that process at the next stages. In the not-too-distant past, Serbia was wracked by war, and Albania was under a totalitarian regime for many years. Both are now candidates for European Union membership, and that will be for the European Union to decide. Both will contribute to and participate in the FRA. The proposal has been cleared by the European Scrutiny Committee and the Lords European Union Committee, so we strongly support it.

Let me move on briefly to the EU-Canada competition agreement. The hon. Member for Chelmsford was right that if we have global free trade, it is important that we also have effective mechanisms to combat anti-competitive behaviour. That has to be in the best interests of consumers and companies. Crucially, however, it needs to be effectively enforced. The hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) was right when he referred to the historic relationship we have with Canada. Looking to the future, we need, in his words, to have the economic good sense to develop that relationship.

As far as the substantive proposal is concerned, we already have arrangements in place. It is being proposed to extend the powers to allow both sides to exchange evidence and information in the course of investigations. To make the obvious point, the absence of such a power can be an impediment to effective enforcement. We therefore believe that what is proposed is right, and similar arrangements are in place, as the Minister said, with countries outwith the European Union, such as Switzerland. On that substantive issue as well, we support what is contained in the Bill.

I have two questions over and above those posed by my hon. Friend the Member for Selton Central. First, what will be the transitional arrangements? Crucially, as we stand now, UK companies operating in the European Union are still subject to the same anti-trust and merger rules. In future, the European Union will share information about UK companies with Canada but will not share the information it receives from Canada about the UK with the UK. That poses a very big question about what happens post Brexit in terms of transitional arrangements and how this then works in future.

Secondly, will the Minister clarify what will be the ongoing relationship with the Fundamental Rights Agency? For all the reasons that I have spelled out, it is critical that we are part of a pan-European mechanism that is about human rights and combating racism and xenophobia—never more important in the current climate than it has been in the past.

3.36 pm

Margot James: With the leave of the House, Mr Speaker, I am grateful to have the opportunity to respond to the debate.

The Bill will approve four draft European Council decisions. The first concerns the participation of the Republic of Albania and the Republic of Serbia as observers in the work of the Fundamental Rights Agency. The Republic of Albania and the Republic of Serbia both want to become members of the European Union. This measure does not extend the competency of the Fundamental Rights Agency, Albania and Serbia should be supported to increase their human rights awareness and promote fundamental rights within their countries, and I was pleased by the support that the House gave to that position.

I will deal with a few questions raised by hon. Members on this decision. My hon. Friends the Members for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) and for Stone (Sir William Cash), to whom I express my appreciation for his work in chairing the European Scrutiny Committee, asked about the impact on Serbia’s war crimes record. The decision will allow Serbia to have access to the expertise of the agency and allow data on human rights in Serbia to be gathered and shared, providing steps to improve Serbia’s human rights protections. The UK continues to urge Serbia to meet its obligations to co-operate fully with the International Criminal Tribunal.

The hon. Member for Selton Central (Bill Esterson) asked whether the UK could remain part of the Fundamental Rights Agency post Brexit. The Government are looking at the UK’s relationship with all EU bodies, including the FRA, as part of the exit negotiations. My hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) pointed out that the FRA is completely distinct from the European convention on human rights, and our membership of that convention continues post Brexit.

My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) spoke with considerable authority on the work of the Council of Europe, of which he is a member, and the overlap between that body and the FRA. I share his hope and belief that the valuable work of the Council of Europe will continue long after Brexit.

On the co-operation agreement between the EU and Canada on competition enforcement, the UK has a large number of companies that are well placed to compete internationally in a system of genuine free and open competition. The agreement will help to ensure free and open competition by facilitating enforcement against international cartels. There are a number of questions in this area. The hon. Members for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) and for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) asked about UK companies continuing to be subject to EU anti-trust jurisdiction. The EU has jurisdiction over competition effects within the EU single market. That will continue after we leave the EU, and UK companies will have to comply with EU competition law when they operate within the EU single market, just as US, Japanese and Canadian companies do. The key point about the Council of Europe concerns the setting of standards and the overseeing of these matters. We welcome greater co-operation on international competition enforcement.
The hon. Member for Sefton Central asked whether, after EU exit, we will have to continue to share with the EU information received from Canada. The UK Government will be free to enter into their own arrangements to share information with Canada directly, and the UK and Canada will need to negotiate any such agreement. He also asked about international agreements after the UK leaves the EU, and whether this agreement provides a model. The UK will be free to enter into international agreements on competition, and we believe that this agreement is a good model.

We have had a good debate on co-operation on international competition enforcement, which will ensure that British businesses continue to compete on a level playing field. I think I have answered most of the points that hon. Members raised during the debate, and I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

EUROPEAN UNION (APPROVALS) BILL

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the European Union (Approvals) Bill:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Committee of the whole House.

Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

(2) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after the commencement of proceedings in Committee of the whole House.

(3) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after the commencement of proceedings in Committee of the whole House.

Programming committee

(4) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings in Committee of the whole House, to any proceedings on Consideration or to other proceedings up to and including Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(5) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—(Nigel Adams.)

Question agreed to.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (SELECT COMMITTEES)

Ordered,

That, at this day’s sitting, the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the Motions in the name of Andrea Leadsom relating to Standing Orders etc. (Committee on Exiting the European Union) and Women and Equalities Committee and the Motion in the name of the Prime Minister relating to Select Committees (Allocation of Chairs) not later than two hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order; such Questions shall include the Questions on any Amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; proceedings may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(Michael Ellis.)
Select Committees

Mr Speaker: We now come to the three motions on Select Committees, which will be debated together. It may be helpful to the House to know before the debate that, if the motion on allocation of Chairs is agreed to, the ballot for the election of Select Committee Chairs, including the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, will be held on Wednesday 12 July from 10 am to 4 pm in Committee Room 8.

I hope that that will meet with colleagues’ approval, because it seems to me to be important that we get on with the business of electing Chairs of Select Committees and, preferably, as soon as possible thereafter with the election, by the parties, of members of those Committees. It is very much in Parliament’s interest and in the interest, ultimately, of good government, that these mechanisms are established without further delay.

Nominations will open as soon as the motion is agreed and may be submitted in the Table Office and the procedural hub in Portcullis House. Nominations will close at 3 pm on Friday 7 July. A briefing note with more details about the elections will be made available to Members and published on the intranet.

Just before I call the Deputy Leader of the House—he is itching to favour the House with his eloquence, as colleagues will note—I must add one other point. Specifically, I must tell the House that I have, perfectly properly, had a request from the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) for clarification of the application of Standing Order No. 122A to his position as the Chair of the Public Administration Committee in the 2010 to 2015 Parliament, and of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee since 2015.

Having taken comprehensive advice from the Clerks and reflected on the matter myself, I have decided that the eight-year term limit does apply to the hon. Gentleman. Having chaired the Committee between 2010 and 2015, albeit with an extended remit. That means that, in common with several other former Chairs, if he is re-elected next week, his term of office will expire, eight years after his election in 2010, on 10 June 2018. He and others are, of course, free to put their names forward in the ballot, and if they are elected, they can seek to have the existing terms of the Standing Order amended, or indeed repealed; that is a matter within the purview of the Select Committee on Procedure.

My responsibility is not to speculate on what the Standing Order might be in the future, but to offer a proper interpretation of what it now means. That is what I was asked to do, and that is what I have done. I hope that that is clear to colleagues.

3.45 pm

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Michael Ellis): I beg to move,

Motion 4—Women and Equalities Committee—

That Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended by the insertion of the following line at the appropriate point in the table in paragraph (2):

Mr Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss:

Motion 5—Standing Orders Etc. (Committee on Exiting the European Union)—

That for the remainder of this Parliament, the following changes be made to Standing Orders:

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; 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.

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: European Committees

(11) 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”.

D: European Scrutiny Committee

(12) 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”.

E: Public Bodies: Draft Orders

(13) That Standing Order No. 152K (Public bodies: draft orders) be amended as follows:

(a) after sub-paragraph (b) to paragraph (1) to insert “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”.

F: Positions for which additional salaries are payable for the purposes of section 4A(2) of the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009
Standing Order be allocated as indicated in the following Table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Select Committees appointed under Standing Order No. 152</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communities and Local Government</td>
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<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
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<td>Government</td>
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<td>Conservative</td>
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<td>Culture, Media and Sport</td>
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<td>Education</td>
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<td>Environment, Food and Rural Affairs</td>
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<td>Home Affairs</td>
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<td>Labour</td>
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<td>International Development</td>
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<td>Labour</td>
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<td>Scottish National Party</td>
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<td>Justice</td>
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<td>Northern Ireland Affairs</td>
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<td>Conservative</td>
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<td>Science and Technology</td>
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<td>Liberal Democrat</td>
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<td>Welsh Affairs</td>
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<td>Conservative</td>
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<td>Women and Equalities</td>
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<td>Conservative</td>
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<td>Work and Pensions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other Specified Select Committees</td>
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<tr>
<td>Environmental Audit</td>
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<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exiting the European Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
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<tr>
<td>Petitions</td>
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<td>Procedure</td>
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<td>Public Accounts</td>
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<td>Labour</td>
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<td>Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs</td>
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<td>Standards</td>
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<td>Labour</td>
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Michael Ellis: I rise to speak to the motions on the Order Paper standing in the names of the Leader of the House and the Prime Minister, as well as of the leaders of the three largest Opposition parties. Motion 4 will make the Women and Equalities Committee a permanent Select Committee of this honourable House. Motion 5 serves to establish the Exiting the European Union Committee in this Parliament in exactly the same way as in the last Parliament, and motion 6 allocates the Chairs of Select Committees as agreed between the parties and within the proportions set out by you, Mr Speaker, to reflect the party balance in this honourable House.

Mr Speaker: Does Cat Smith wish to speak?

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): No, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. I call Maria Miller.

3.46 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I want to make a short speech in support of the motion moved by my hon. Friend the Deputy Leader of the House. I welcome the fact that the Government have decided to make permanent the Women and Equalities Committee. The Committee made a recommendation to that effect before the general election, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington) had undertaken to put it on a permanent footing, which I really welcome.

The Women and Equalities Committee has proven its worth. The scope of the work undertaken has covered everything from looking at transgender rights for the first time, and having them debated on the Floor of the House of Commons, all the way through to looking at the impact of Brexit on equalities issues. I am also glad that the Committee has retained its name, as set out in the motion, because the issues that it looks at, which are the responsibility of Ministers, are women’s issues and equalities issues.

Before I draw my comments to a close, I want to raise two points, about which other former Select Committee Chairs may equally well have questions. First, I very much want to know from my hon. Friend the Deputy Leader of the House whether the financial support for Select Committees will be sufficient for the scrutiny that will be required of Government policy at such an important time in our Parliament’s history. We need to make sure that Select Committees, including the Women and Equalities Committee, have the financial and manpower resources that they require.

Secondly, I want the proceedings of Select Committees to be treated with respect. There is a need for Committees to be able to sit, perhaps in protected time, while the House is sitting, so that they are not unnecessarily curtailed or interrupted, particularly when they are gathering evidence. There is also a need for Select Committees, such as the Women and Equalities Committee, to have a role in taking the work of this Parliament around the world, and they should be able to do so with the help and support of the Government and Opposition Whips.

I will close by reiterating my thanks to the Government, who have done more than any other to support the establishment of a scrutiny Committee for women and equalities, for which I think they should be applauded.

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab) rose—

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP) rose—

Mr Speaker: I call Harriet Harman.

3.49 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I am grateful, Mr Speaker. I do not want to detain the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) for long. I have just a couple of
remarks about the motions. I very much support motions 4 and 5 about the Women and Equalities Committee and the Exiting the European Union Committee. They are welcome additions to the list of Select Committees we have in the House.

I also want to support your remarks, Mr Speaker. We should get down to the business of making sure that the election of Chairs and members of Committees is done as speedily as possible. It is important that we get these scrutiny Committees up and running as soon as possible so that the Government Departments are properly scrutinised on the work they undertake. I note that the ordinary membership set-up of Select Committees will be five Conservative Members, five Labour Members and one Scottish National party Member. That is something we very much support, which reflects the fact that this is a House of minorities. That is reflected in the work of Select Committees.

There will probably be a little bit more of a detailed conversation—I am putting it as elegantly as I can—about the legislative Committees in the House. My understanding is that Committees will have nine Conservative Members, seven Labour Members and two Scottish National party Members as the ordinary membership, which again reflects the fact that no party has a majority in this House. That should be reflected in the House’s Committees. I know that that is perhaps a little bit of a concern for the Government in getting things through, but I hope that any proposal is brought to the Floor of the House so that it is properly debated and not stitched up behind closed doors. It is important that, when we debate the Committees of the House, it is done on the Floor of the House, and that all Members of Parliament have an opportunity to contribute.

I also note your ruling, Mr Speaker, on the tenure of the Chairs of Select Committees. You were absolutely right. There was a conversation in the Liaison Committee, where a concern was raised about the eight-year or two Parliaments rule, which impacts on two or three Select Committee Chairs. My understanding was that that was passed to the Procedure Committee to do a quick, detailed and brief report to try to resolve some of those issues. I hope that that Committee comes forward with that at an early opportunity so that this is resolved once and for all.

I very much support the motions. We should get the Select Committees up and running as quickly as possible to get down to the ordinary, good business of scrutinising this Government and Government Departments.

3.51 pm

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): I thank the Deputy Leader of the House for bringing this motion to the House. I strongly support it. In particular, I welcome putting the Women and Equalities Committee on a permanent footing. I was Leader of the House back in the day, and I should have done it. I find myself slightly baffled but congratulate him on bringing it forward. All credit to the Government for doing that.

The Women and Equalities Committee was first established in 2015. With women from both sides of the House—and indeed three men—on the Committee, it has covered a wide area of work, from Brexit negotiations to women being forced to wear high heels. It has more than showed that it justifies being put on a permanent footing alongside the other Select Committees, not least because of the strong and committed leadership given to it by the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) in the two short years she has been chairing it.

I am sure nobody will be saying, as some will be saying outside, “It’s all not necessary. We are all equal now.” While I wish that were the case, it is certainly not true. We have made rapid and immense progress, but there is still much further to go. Despite having a woman Prime Minister, most decisions are made by men, whether commercial decisions, or decisions in the private sector or the public sector. We have only to look at the Brexit negotiating team. God help us! There are eight of them—seven men and one woman. I ask myself, “Why on earth couldn’t they have selected that team on merit?”

Select Committees are Members working together across the House, not because we are all the same—we have profound differences in the different parties—but in recognition of the fact that it makes sense to work together when we agree, and no sense not to. Both sides of the House have expressed a commitment on childcare. I know a number of Select Committees will be concerned about that, but let us see how it is working out in practice. That is an issue for women because of the remaining, persistent unequal division of labour in the home.

There is, rightly, a shared commitment across the House to tackle domestic violence. The daily toll of black eyes, punctured lungs and broken ribs, and the weekly toll of murdered women, shames our society. We need to be certain that things are not set back; that cuts to the police, courts, councils and the Crown Prosecution Service do not make women less safe.

I think there is a shared commitment across the House on women’s income inequality. In 2005, women’s income on average per year was 55% of men’s. By 2010, it had risen to 70%. I suspect, however, that it has now stalled. I would like a gender impact assessment to be brought forward to the House at the same time as the Red Book and the Chancellor’s Budget statement.

I know we have a shared commitment across the House to tackle rape and sexual offences, but we all know that most sexual offences are not reported. We know the fear that she will be blamed prevents many women going to court, letting alone giving evidence. I hope that across the parties we can change the law to make it clear that past sexual history is not relevant to whether one has consented in a particular case. Past sexual history should never be dragged through the courts. I hope we reverse the Ched Evans ruling.

There are more women in this House than ever before—208—and I am especially proud of the 119 Labour women MPs. I warmly welcome all of them, the newly elected and the re-elected. In the House as a whole, however, we are still outnumbered two to one. We also last less long than our male colleagues, not because we are not as tough, durable or excellent as the men—clearly, we are—but because we are more likely to represent marginal seats. The turnover of women is therefore higher than that for men, so women are outnumbered not only numerically but in seniority.

I think the Women and Equalities Committee will show women in this House working together to highlight persisting inequalities and to insist that we make more progress. I am therefore very pleased to support the motion.
Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I had not intended to speak to the motion, but I heard the speech from the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) and while I agree with some of what she had to say I want to pick her up on one or two points.

Before I do that, I want to start by agreeing with the comments made by other Members, in particular the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). I hope we can approach the new arrangement of a balanced Parliament in a sensible and less partisan way, particularly when it comes to the Standing Committees and the work of Select Committees. That will, of course, be the responsibility of the Members who sit on the Committees. I hope that is how we will progress. It is important to get the Committees established, the Chairs in place and the members elected. From my time serving on the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, the Health Committee and the Regulatory Reform Committee, I know how valuable the work can be. I am not making a pitch to be Chairman of any of those Committees, by the way. I just want to make that clear, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is important that they are established and fulfil their scrutiny role.

I also agree with a great deal of what the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham said with regard to the Women and Equalities Committee. I am very proud that the Committee has been established under a Conservative Government. I am very proud not only that it is the Conservative Government who have a female Prime Minister—the second one, of course; women in the Labour party do not do quite so well at getting elected leader—but that we have put the Women and Equalities Committee on a permanent footing.

All I would say is that when we talk about equalities, it is not just about gender. Many of us who come from non-traditional, poorer backgrounds think that the House is not always representative of those of us who come from more challenged backgrounds. Replacing a man with a middle-class or upper middle-class woman does not, perhaps, do a great deal for equality. We should always be cautious. [Interruption] The right hon. and learned Lady does not like the point I am making, but it is important that when we talk about equality it is not just about gender; it is about people’s backgrounds, including where they come from and even their work history. I suspect that if I had stood up and made the disparaging comments that she made about the Brexit negotiating team—at least they seemed to come across as slightly disparaging—but I had made them about a team consisting of seven women and one man, she would be on her feet having a pop.

Ms Harman rose—

Andrew Percy: Of course I will give way.

Ms Harman: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that there is of course a major issue of class inequality in this country. That is why I would like the Government to implement clause 1 of the Equality Act 2010, which requires all Government Departments and public organisations to take into account the importance of narrowing the gap between the top and the bottom in all their policy and operational decisions. If the Government care about class and income inequality, they should implement that clause.

Andrew Percy: I could not agree more. That was why, when I was a schoolteacher, before being elected to Parliament, it irked me so much that under the Government of which the right hon. and learned Lady was then a member, the gap between the top 10% best-performing and the 10% worst-performing schools widened, and social mobility decreased. I am simply saying that I do not think it helps the case for equalities to stand up and make what I thought were belittling and insulting comments about a particular negotiating team on the basis of its gender.

I agree more generally with what the right hon. and learned Lady said about the work of the Women and Equalities Committee under the chairmanship of my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), but I hope that when it is established—as, of course, it has been in the past—its members will also understand that this is a huge subject, and that huge inequalities have existed for many decades both within and without the genders. As I have said, the Committee is doing an important piece of work, but it will be better if those who pursue the agenda of closing the gap do not make inflammatory or divisive comments on the route to that end.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): Because I agree with Mr Speaker’s drive to modernise the House, and to rebalance it and the power that it has against the Executive, I do not wish to detain us any further in approving the motion to establish, or re-establish, the Select Committees that have such an important part to play in that objective.

Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): I commend the Government for tabling motion 4. It is right for them to implement the commitment that they made during the last Parliament to put the Women and Equalities Committee on a statutory basis in our Standing Orders, and it is right for them to do so on this occasion.

I was a member of the Women and Equalities Committee in the last Parliament, under the brilliant chairmanship of the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), and I think that it was a real constitutional innovation. The Committee was significant not just because it produced reports, but through its presence in our constitutional life as well. That point was made to us many times by visitors from other countries, who, rightly or wrongly, look to this place for leadership on many of these issues.

Let me say one thing about Mr Speaker. He is not present, so I feel able to praise him without his blushing too much. I believe that his modernising drive created the conditions in which a constitutional innovation such as the Women and Equalities Committee could come about, under the auspices of the last Government. His work on diversity and inclusion has been particularly...
commendable, and meant that, just last week, we could discuss how the Committee might be put on a statutory basis.

Let me say a last word, as one who has served on the Committee for the last couple of years. Many people have asked why a straight white man would volunteer or choose to be a member. The answer is very simple. For as long as women’s equality is an issue for women—a women’s issue—it is an issue that is about our society. When we seek to hold back 50% of people in our communities, we are holding back not 50% but 100% of our population. The work done by the last Women and Equalities Committee, particularly in bringing women further into politics and into our public life, identified significant issues involving cultures of bullying and intimidation. It also identified the support that was needed, even at lower levels such as local government. Four party leaders or representatives appeared before us, and all four were men. That underlines the fact that there is much further to go.

There was an area in which, in all honesty, I think we struggled. We thought a great deal about flexible working patterns, and ways in which we could make the workplace more available to people from different backgrounds. We struggled to square the circle of how to do that in areas where it is less easy to do flexible working, such as for those with low pay. I suspect that will be a focus for the Committee going forward.

All that said, I commend the motion; the Committee is an excellent innovation and we should be rightly proud in this Parliament that we are bringing it forward.

4.5 pm

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): I rise to support the motion, and also to say a few words about timetabling. It is good that the House is moving to elect the Chairs of Select Committees next week, but that does not give the House much time to elect members of those Committees before the summer recess, and there should be concern if that means members are elected in September and many Committees will not sit and start their work formally until October. There would therefore be a gap of five months in the working of Committees. In the normal course of a fixed-term Parliament Committees can prepare their workload and work towards the end of the Session, knowing reports have to be finished by then. Because of the nature of the last general election, however, many Committees, including the one I chaired in the last Parliament, have had to abruptly stop their work. If they are looking to pick up some of it, there will be a considerable gap and a change of membership.

There are also a number of other functions that Committees undertake, in scrutinising not just the decisions of Government Ministers and this House but outside bodies. I therefore ask whether consideration can be given to establishing some continuity to allow Committees to finish off work they are doing before new Committees are assembled, rather than for them to be completely disbanded between elections before new Committees can do the valuable work that Committees in our institutions can do is lost in this way, and in the current situation we may have an absence of five months without any Committees sitting.

4.6 pm

Michael Ellis: I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) that it is important that financial support is sufficient for proper scrutiny, and I can assure her and the House that Her Majesty’s Government will always respect the work of the Committees of this House. It is, I think, incontrovertible that they have got stronger since 2010, and that can only be a good thing.

I thank the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) for her thanks and her comments about the Women and Equalities Committee being made permanent, and reciprocate by commending her on her work over the years.

Question put and agreed to.

STANDING ORDERS ETC. (COMMITTEE ON EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION)

Ordered,

That for the remainder of this Parliament, the following changes be made to Standing Orders:

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; 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: European Committees

(11) 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”.

D: European Scrutiny Committee

(12) 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”.

E: Public Bodies: Draft Orders

(13) 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”.

F: Positions for which additional salaries are payable for the purposes of section 4A(2) of the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009

(14) 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”.—(Michael Ellis.)

SELECT COMMITTEES: ALLOCATION OF CHAIRS

Ordered,

That, pursuant to Standing Order No 122B (Election of Committee Chairs), the chairs of those select committees subject to the Standing Order be allocated as indicated in the following Table:

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<th>Other Specific Select Committees</th>
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—(Michael Ellis.)
Chris Gibb Report: Improvements to Southern Railway

4.8 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the Chris Gibb Report: Improvements to Southern Railway.

When I became Transport Secretary last summer, the Southern rail network was already bedevilled by a deep-rooted dispute causing massive disruption to the lives of thousands of people and damaging the economy across the region, but it was not the only problem that Southern rail faced. Those problems included too many infrastructure failures and a lack of joined-up government between track and train, as well as the problems that most of our commuter rail networks face after attracting ever more passengers each year, and far more than in the days of British Rail—a massive capacity challenge. That was the background to my decision to ask one of the railways’ most experienced leaders, Chris Gibb, to produce detailed advice for my Department on what we should do to get things back to normal for passengers; what was behind the poor performance on the route, and how could we solve it?

I asked Chris for his advice, because he has more than 30 years’ experience in the rail industry. It is not just me who acknowledges his experience; when the RMT was demanding the publication of this report, it described him as an experienced figure in the industry, and that was absolutely right. I should like to thank Chris for his contribution. His recommendations have been assessed, and 34 of his 38 suggestions are already in train and being worked on by my Department, by the rail industry and by Govia Thameslink Railway—GTR—which operates Southern. His findings make it clear that industrial action was the main cause of disruption for Southern passengers last year, when things were at their worst. Southern passengers know full well how much their train service has improved since that industrial action largely ceased in January. Performance has been consistently better since the new year. The public performance measure is up by more than 20 percentage points from its low of 62% last December. That is much better, but it is not the best. There is still a long way to go, but the situation is clearly much better than it was.

Things are getting better for passengers, and the railways have been working much better. That is why it is tragic that the unions’ leaderships now want to carry on a battle that is meaningless and unnecessary. The performance of this railway will carry on improving only if the industrial action by those unions stops, but they seem unwilling to come to the party. ASLEF, the drivers’ union, started its overtime ban last week, with the result that Southern passengers had 25% of their trains cancelled each day. And just when passengers thought that the services had stabilised, the RMT has called yet more strike action this month. Those passengers are at the mercy of the unions. I have asked the unions numerous times to walk in their passengers’ shoes and to call off the disruption of people’s daily lives that results from this ongoing action.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): My right hon. Friend is well aware of the terrible inconvenience suffered by my constituents in Mid Sussex and by many others along the line because of this and earlier strikes. Is he aware of the unions, working together, being encouraged by the Labour party? Or does he see this as a straight inter-union rivalry?

Chris Grayling: Let me stress again that I know how difficult this has been for my right hon. Friend’s constituents and for others. Their lives have been disrupted and turned upside down in a whole variety of ways. It is certainly the case that, in the early stages, the unions looked as though they were working together on this, but I do not think that relations between the two rail unions are now quite as warm as they once were. I am clear now that I think there is a direct link between the actions of the Labour party leadership, in trying to cause disruption for the Government this summer, and the decision to reprise industrial action. It is absolutely unacceptable that senior figures in the Labour party are being reported as encouraging trade unions to take action this summer. The public are the ones who will suffer.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): In support of the point that the Secretary of State is making, is he aware that Sean Hoyle, the president of the RMT union, has described his objective as being to bring down the Government? Will the Secretary of State join me in saying that that is an absolutely appalling motive for ruining the lives of our constituents?

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): Following on from that point, did my right hon. Friend hear the statement on Russia Today television from Mr Hedley, an activist in the RMT? He said:

“It’s very clear in our rule book, we’re in an antagonistic relationship with the managers and with the bosses. We want to overthrow capitalism and create a socialist form of society.”

How does that help our passengers?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is a shocking state of affairs. The reality is that there are some thoroughly good people working on our railways—people who do not agree with the current action and who just want to do the right job for their passengers. However, their leadership is now leading them up a path that they do not want to go up, and that is not in the interests of the staff or the passengers.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Will the Minister acknowledge that page 93 of the Gibb report shows a graph that demonstrates that Southern was the worst-performing company a very long time before there was any trade union industrial action? Will he also explain why he has not got round the table with the unions and GTR? This is an absolute nightmare for our constituents, but the Government cannot pretend that it has nothing to do with them, given that Gibb also says that the Secretary of State is “already determining the strategic direction of this dispute”.

That is what Gibb says.
Chris Grayling: I am slightly surprised that the hon. Lady has not declared an interest, given that she has received donations from the RMT union.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I understand that the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) is sponsored by the RMT, so can you advise the House on whether she should declare an interest when speaking on this matter?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): It is up to each individual Member to note whether they have an interest or not. To be quite honest, I have no knowledge of whether any Member is sponsored by a trade union under the present legislation.

Chris Grayling: Since last year, we have worked to sort out some of the underlying problems with the management of this railway line, joining up the operations of the track and trains, spending more money on infrastructure, and helping to contribute to a better performing railway. Performance has been rising steadily since the start of the year. Chris Gibb rightly identified a range of problems—I have said to the House that we are working to try to solve those problems—but he was absolutely clear that the principal cause of the disruption experienced by the constituents of the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) and others was industrial action by the unions. He said that passengers would have experienced a relatively normal service had that action not taken place.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Secretary of State continues to argue that the principal reason for the delays is industrial action. Does that not mean that the £300 million pledged by the Government in January is a waste of money and that they should be sorting out the industrial dispute?

Chris Grayling: No, it does not. We have provided additional money for the infrastructure owned and operated by the public sector Network Rail—an additional £20 million last year and then a further £300 million that is being spent right now to stop regular signal failures, for example—but it is disappointing that all the unions and others can do is misrepresent the situation and claim that we are giving that money to the train operator. They know that that is not true. It is simply not the case. One part of solving the problem on this railway and ensuring that it is the good performing railway that it has not necessarily been in the past, even when the industrial action was happening, is to spend money on the infrastructure, so that we do not get points and signals failures—the things that frustrate people and cause problems day by day.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Part of the problem is that there are not enough drivers on the network, so the train operator is unable to operate its trains when drivers do not take voluntary overtime. Drivers not volunteering to take overtime is not the problem; the problem is that the operator has not trained up or employed enough drivers. I declare an interest in that I received donations from RMT, TSSA and ASLEF during the general election, because I know that we can get a better deal for our railways by working with the unions.

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman is actually quite right. At the start of this year, we launched an enormous recruitment programme and some 350 trainees are coming through the system at the moment. He will know that the system for training drivers is too tied up in red tape, union agreements and past working practices, so we cannot train drivers as quickly as we would like or bring in extra staff. It is a nonsense that we should depend on overtime to run any part of our rail system on normal working days. Our strategy is to end that situation, but it will be a blow to some of those who depend on overtime as part of their regular income. It is certainly not the case that Southern drivers are keen to see their overtime disappear in the run-up to the summer holidays.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I suppose I should thank Southern for taking me to and from the hospital at East Grinstead for an operation this morning. I have come back for this debate, and I want to ask the Secretary of State about the future and the investment that he is making. The situation in the Reigate and Redhill area needs serious investment in changes to the track layout at Croydon, and Reigate needs a 12-car platform so that it can have proper services into London. Will the Secretary of State provide the resources for Network Rail simply to produce a potential design of a proper station at Reigate? My constituents are hit by fares and by overcrowding on a service that has all the faults identified in the Gibb report by the various parties.

Chris Grayling: I assure my hon. Friend that I am currently working on what we need to do to ensure that the Brighton mainline, which has not had investment over the years, is capable of meeting the challenges of the future. We are spending far more money on our rail network today than has been spent for decades. The Brighton mainline has been neglected, which is one reason why performance has been so poor, and that is something that we have to change and will.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): It is interesting that the Secretary of State criticises the fact that there are not enough drivers and explains how more drivers are being recruited. Chris Gibb said in his report:

“I understand that at least one losing bidder...had too many drivers in their bid...but it may have been the case that the bidder with the fewest drivers won.”

It is complete nonsense for the Secretary of State to indicate that he did not realise the company won the contract with fewer drivers. Surely he must recognise that.

Chris Grayling: Actually, I was not Secretary of State at the time. The hon. Gentleman says that I should have known, but what I am trying to do is to sort out the problems we have now. I have made it absolutely clear that we do not have enough drivers on this railway—there is no dispute about that—which is why we have launched a big recruitment drive. I wish those drivers were coming on stream now but, as those with union links know, it takes 14 or 15 months to train a driver. I do not think that is sensible, and it should not take that long. That is something we have to address for the future, but we are bringing new drivers on stream as rapidly as we can, within the confines of union agreements.
On Chris’s recommendations, we are doing a variety of things to deal with the problems on this railway, but we should not forget the core issue. Chris Gibb’s main finding—and, yes, there are things for the Department, the train company, Network Rail and others to learn from the report—is that the principal cause of the disruption last year, which caused misery to so many people, was the action of the trade unions. Let us make no mistake, it is the union executives who call strike action and call disputes, and they are the ones who can call it off.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): It is worth reiterating that the one thing Chris Gibb was excluded from investigating in his report was industrial relations. He was not allowed to go into it, but he did say that in recent times it had been the single greatest cause of short-term inconvenience. In the section titled “How did the system get to this point?” he clearly says:

“However I do not believe any single party have been the cause.”

On behalf of passengers, I beg that we get beyond the finger-pointing, the “he said, she said” of this debate. Let us all act with a degree of humility. Every single party bears a responsibility for where we are today, from the unions to the franchises and the Government. Can the Secretary of State please accept his own responsibility, act with humility and say what he—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. You all want to speak, and I am not getting at anybody in particular, but all I will say is that if we have short interventions, everybody will get to speak. We have a very long list to get through.

Chris Grayling: The point is simple. We are talking about where we are now. Two weeks ago we had a railway that was performing much better and a service that most users said was much better than it was last year. We had a joined-up management structure for track and trains operating out of a centre at Three Bridges. We had a programme of ongoing spending to try to remove the perennial breakdowns, signal failures and points failures that cause frustration. All that was moving in the right direction, and then, lo and behold, unnecessary strike action is threatened and work to rule is taking place against things that the unions have already been doing for the past six months, that have been working well and that have been delivering improvements. That is where we are now. We had something that was getting better, after a lot of work by a lot of people. It is a tragedy that we now seem to be taking a step backwards. It is not necessary.

If the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) wants this railway line to get better, he should please say to his friends in the union movement, “You do not need to do this. It is not necessary, it is the wrong thing to do and it must stop.”

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that, whatever the union’s concerns, whether it is rejecting the 24% pay rise or other issues, the only way to resolve its concerns is to get back round the table? Overtime bans and strike action will not resolve the situation; it just makes life worse for passengers.

Chris Grayling: I absolutely agree. On the pay deal, what I find particularly baffling is that ASLEF is now balloting for industrial action on a 24% pay rise, including productivity changes, that it has accepted on the Thameslink and Great Northern routes. If it is not a political intervention, why would it accept the deal in one part of the company and threaten strike action in the other? Most of us now look at the situation—with the railway line getting better, with things on the mend and with a deal that most people would say is generous and that the union has accepted in the other part of the company—and ask why on earth it is now returning to industrial action.

Stephen Lloyd: Why can the Secretary of State not publicly say to both unions and the trade operator, “Let’s meet together, with no preconditions, to negotiate this”? That is what happened with ScotRail, so why does the Secretary of State always want to meet the unions separately? Do it together and do it now!

Chris Grayling: We had very constructive talks earlier this year, and I want to pay tribute to the leadership of ASLEF for the way they conducted themselves back in the January and February negotiations. It is a disappointment to me now that they appear to have returned to militancy, when I thought a constructive dialogue was taking place. Those talks happened, and they were facilitated by the general secretary of the TUC and by a senior rail executive. An agreement was reached but, sadly, it did not pass the referendum. A further offer is on the table for staff. That offer of change combined with a substantial pay upgrade and productivity improvements has been acceptable to the union on Thameslink and Great Northern. It is a huge disappointment that that cannot deal with this issue once and for all.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): The Secretary of State will be aware that this morning several of us from across the House met representatives from the RMT. I have to say that at the end of that meeting we were perplexed as to why still no deal had been done, given the very small number of trains that have been leaving without that second person on board and the very narrow difference between GTR and the unions on how one breaches that. There seemed to be some union enmity prolonging this strike. Can we not just get all of them round the table, bang some heads together and at last get our constituents a train service that stops disrupting their lives?

Chris Grayling: There is no reason why talks cannot start again tomorrow. I say to the unions that they should call off the industrial action and come back round the table. They are trying to turn the clock back. Sensible arrangements have been in place for years that do not require a train to be cancelled if the previous member of staff has been delayed. Ultimately, this is about whether we are going to modernise our railways or not. We have a rail system that is bursting at the seams due to the successes it has enjoyed in the past few years. Our railways are packed, and we need to look for smart uses of technology and smart ways of working to deliver the capacity that we need for the future, and we need to invest in infrastructure to make sure it is reliable. Those are things we want to do and plan to do. The unions need to work with us, and the message from Chris Gibb’s report is that the unions should stop fighting change and modernisation. Nobody is losing
their job and nobody is having their pay cut. I believe that we will need more customer service staff in the future rather than fewer on our railways. I am not in the business of removing staff from working with customers, but we need to have an industry that has the freedom to adapt, develop and equip itself to deal with the challenges of the future. This dispute is all about preventing that from happening; it is about retaining old-fashioned union power and the ability to halt the railways at the whim of union leaders. That is not acceptable. It has been a tragedy for the people on the Southern rail network that they have been on the raw end of this for the past 18 months. Just when we thought things were getting better and the services were getting back to normal, it has started all over again, and it is a tragedy. Opposition Members should say to their union friends, “Stop doing this. Call off your action,” and then we will talk to them again.

4.28 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): May I make it plain from the outset that I am a proud member of the Labour and trade union movement, and very happy to declare the support that I have received from all three trade unions in the rail industry? I am grateful for this opportunity to debate Southern rail and the Gibb report, but it should be noted that this debate should have taken place six months ago, when the report was finished and presented to the Secretary of State. Unfortunately, he decided to sit on the report for six months and wait until after the general election before publishing it, denying this place—and, most importantly, passengers—the opportunity to scrutinise this assessment of the Southern rail fiasco. The Secretary of State should not bury members on the Benches opposite could get their heads around that, we might find ourselves working towards a resolution.

Chris Philp: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andy McDonald: No. The hon. Gentleman has had a go. He can sit down.

The buck stops with the Government. The Tory Ministers who designed and awarded the franchise are responsible for the shambolic delivery of enhancement works and have directed this unnecessary industrial dispute.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way on the point of safety?

Andy McDonald: I am happy to.

Huw Merriman: The hon. Gentleman may be aware that I took a Transport Committee group to view the video operation. It was entirely clear to us that a passenger getting on or off the train is visible. Ultimately though, it does not matter what I think or what he thinks; it is the independent rail safety regulator who has confirmed that the system is safe.

Andy McDonald: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman has raised that point, which I will address shortly.

We know all too well the Secretary of State’s idiosyncratic approach to workers and unions, but even so, the handling of industrial relations in the case of Southern has been especially appalling, and relations are not helped by the antagonistic behaviour of GTR, the Department for from seeing the part of the report that would give us more details of the botched franchise design, for which his Department is responsible; the nature of the agreement with GTR, which has been cloaked in secrecy; and the changes that Gibb has recommended. That is to say that the Secretary of State has redacted the parts of the report that would present the greatest political difficulties for his Government if they were released.

It is highlighted that industrial relations are not the only issue. The Gibb report clearly identifies failures to assess accurately the number of available drivers, to train and recruit enough drivers, to anticipate turnover with any accuracy, to plan for the impact of infrastructure enhancements, to account for changes in Network Rail and for timetable expansion, to get the right trains in the right places, and to cater for growth in demand on overcrowded stations.

I do not recall the Transport Secretary doing anything but oppose every single piece of industrial action. It is wrong of him to attack the men and women who operate our railways while washing his hands entirely of the collapse in industrial relations.

Chris Philp: The ASLEF drivers have just been offered a 26% pay increase, taking their pay from £51,000 to £63,000 for a four-day week. If that is not a generous offer, I would like to know what is.

Andy McDonald: Does not that just lay bare a complete failure to understand what this situation is about? It is not about money; it is about the proper running of our railways, so that we have a safe and accessible railway. If Members on the Benches opposite could get their heads around that, we might find ourselves working towards a resolution.

Chris Philp: Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that we won the case?

Andy McDonald: Perhaps the Secretary of State would like to confirm that he has been ordered by the High Court to produce the report within 14 days, and that he would not have done it otherwise. Who won that one?

Crucially, the section of the Gibb report that would have been the most informative—appendix 9, “Recommendations regarding the GTR franchise agreement”—has been redacted. Where is it? What is there to hide? The Secretary of State has prevented us

[Chris Grayling]
Transport, and Ministers. In February 2016, a senior civil servant at the DFT, Peter Wilkinson, director of passenger services, told a public meeting in Croydon:

“Over the next three years we’re going to be having punch ups and we will see industrial action and I want your support... I’m furious about it and it has got to change—we have got to break them. They have all borrowed money to buy cars and got credit cards. They can’t afford to spend too long on strike and I will push them into that place. They will have to decide if they want to give a good service or get the hell out of my industry.”

Does the right hon. Gentleman honestly believe that threatening to drown ordinary workers in credit card debt is the right way to go about implementing staffing change?

The Transport Secretary has repeatedly attempted to distance himself from industrial action, claiming that it was a matter for the company, despite the unusually close relationship between him, his officials and Govia Thameslink Railway. That has never been a credible claim and the Gibb report confirmed the suspicions that the Transport Secretary was deeply involved in the industrial dispute despite his claims otherwise. Gibb said that the Secretary of State is “already determining the strategic direction of this dispute.”

In similar disputes on the TransPennine Express and Scotrail, agreements were reached that avoided further disruption and prevented industrial action.

**Huw Merriman:** On Scotrail, the technology is there, but even in exceptional circumstances, a driver cannot operate the train despite 30% of the network operating in that manner. What kind of deal is that? New technology is there but it cannot be used.

**Andy McDonald:** It demonstrates what can be achieved when we sit down and have an intelligent conversation with people.

Where there is a willingness to talk on all sides, it is clear that agreements can be reached that benefit passengers. To put it simply, the Secretary of State’s militant anti-worker, anti-trade union stance has significantly worsened industrial relations and had a devastating impact on passenger services. While I am at it, he must come up with evidence for his allegation that the leader of the Labour party conspired in the way that he said he did because it is a complete and utter fantasy. He knows it and he should not come to the Dispatch Box and just make things up that he knows are not right.

**Chris Grayling:** If the hon. Gentleman’s analysis of the industrial dispute is correct, can he explain why the Labour council and Mayor on Merseyside have taken exactly the same approach as the Government on this issue?

**Andy McDonald:** That is not accurate and I will tell the right hon. Gentleman why. If it were not for the stitch-up with Serco and Abellio taking £170 million out of the deal and £5 million that we could use to have a guard on every train, we would not have the problem. So, yet again, he justerves this up to his mates. He does his deals with these people, extracting the value from our railway system. [Interruption.] Absolutely not. It is important to point out that the Gibb report makes no assessment of the merits and de-merits of driver-only operation. However, despite a lack of assessment, Chris Gibb makes it clear that he supports DOO and thinks that any industrial action is wrong.

I would like the Secretary of State to reflect on the following passage from appendix 1 of the Gibb report. It says:

“We have undertaken this project for CLGR Limited, a consultancy company owned and operated by my family and I, and CLGR Limited has been contracted to Govia Thameslink Railway, as facilitated by the DfT. Discussions have been held under the terms of a confidentiality agreement between CLGR Limited and GTR.”

There we have it—Chris Gibb is contracted to Govia, the very company he is supposed to be reporting on. It is more than just “he who pays the piper”. Surely even this Secretary of State can see this latest blatant conflict of interest. Where is the independence in this report? It is just another stitch-up.

What is it with the DFT? Its senior civil servant, who previously told the world he wanted unions out of his industry, has his own consultancy company—First Class Partnerships, I believe—to advise the parent company of Govia, the very company that was then handed the Thameslink, Southern and Great Northern concessions on a £1.2 billion-a-year gold plate. This Government would refuse to recognise a conflict of interest if it got up and bit them on the gluteus maximus.

Labour, like the staff who understand and operate our rail network, the passenger groups who have been protesting and have been motivated to take legal action, and disability charities, simply do not agree with the assumption that destaffing and deskilling our railways is a positive step. Despite being first introduced more than 30 years ago, DOO is only in use on a third of the national rail network. It was originally introduced on three or four-car trains at a time of declining passenger numbers. Passenger numbers having increased hugely in recent years, it is now proposed to introduce DOO on trains with as many as 12 cars. In the past 15 years, passenger numbers on Southern have increased by 64%, from 116 million to 191 million a year. That enormous rise in numbers means that at the platform-train interface there are inevitably increased risks to passenger safety, as anyone who travels on Southern services can see.

**Paul Scully** (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): Can the hon. Gentleman explain why the same union has agreed to 12-car-train driver-controlled operation on Thameslink, with the same company, and on the same lines?

**Andy McDonald:** It is somewhat curious, is it not, that people are being criticised for adhering to a previously achieved agreement, whereas, looking at the situation as it is now, they quite rightly want to look at it properly.

Labour believes that passengers are more at risk if they no longer have the guarantee of a safety-critical member of staff on the train to prevent something from going wrong or assist when something does go wrong. The view of Her Majesty’s chief inspector of railways, Ian Prosser, has been laid out in the Office of Rail and Road’s report, “GTR-Southern Railways—Driver Only Operation”, published earlier this year. Mr Prosser is clear that there are obvious caveats to safe operation of DOO, namely legal levels of lighting—that would be a good start—suitable equipment, suitable procedures and the competence of the relevant staff. None has been adequately satisfied, even by his assessment.
Maria Caulfield: If union members are concerned about the points that the shadow Minister raises, why will they not get back around the table to discuss them and resolve the situation, calling off the overtime ban and any ballot for strike action?

Andy McDonald: To put it quite simply, because they could not get in the door, as has quite rightly been pointed out, when the Government were holding talks at the TUC that were an attempt to divide and conquer—a typical Tory trick to keep the critically important trade union out of the discussion in the first place. Had the Secretary of State had any real intent in that regard, he would have got everyone around the table and got on with resolving the dispute. [Interruption.] He says from a sedentary position that it was the TUC that oversaw things. It did its level best to try to bring this to a conclusion, but not because of the assistance of the DFT or this Secretary of State, because he deliberately excluded the relevant parties.

Sadly, the inference that the Government apparently seek to draw from the ORR report—that all is well and that there is, in effect, no cause for concern over safety—does nothing to assist the process of resolution. Indeed, the Rail Safety and Standards Board has been reluctant to describe DOO as definitively safe, saying:

“DOO does not create additional undesired events but may increase the likelihood of an event occurring or increase the severity of its consequence.”

By the way, Mr Deputy Speaker, you can no longer find that entry on the website—I wonder why.

At a time when there are increased risks of terrorist attacks and a spike in hate crimes, it seems foolish in the extreme to prioritise removing trained staff from services. The safe management of a train when difficulties arise is also key: a case in point was the derailment near Watford Junction on 16 September last year. After a train hit a landslip caused by torrential rain, the guard evacuated the train when the driver was injured in the incident, trapped in the cab and incapable of doing so. If such an accident were to occur on a DOO service, the safety of hundreds of passengers could be compromised. Why does it take a catastrophe to bring this Government to their senses in dealing with issues of safety, rather than wanting to compromise on safety at every turn?

Chris Grayling rose—

Andy McDonald: Let me make this point; then the Secretary of State can have a pop.

A case in point was the derailment near Watford Junction on 16 September last year. After a train hit a landslip caused by torrential rain, the guard evacuated the train when the driver was injured in the incident, trapped in the cab and incapable of doing so. If such an accident were to occur on a DOO service, the safety of hundreds of passengers could be compromised. Why does it take a catastrophe to bring this Government to their senses in dealing with issues of safety, rather than wanting to compromise on safety at every turn?

Chris Grayling: Can the hon. Gentleman confirm that today on Southern rail there are more on-train staff than there were before the dispute started? Is he actually saying that it is Labour policy that if a member of staff is delayed, the previous arrangement, whereby the train could carry on running, should stop, that the train should be cancelled, and that passengers should be turfed out on to the platform?

Andy McDonald: I will tell the right hon. Gentleman what Labour party policy is: to ensure that there is a second safety-critical trained member of staff on that train. [Interruption.] It means that they have the appropriate training and are not outsourced or sold short on training, which is exactly what the Government want to do.

The changes proposed by the Secretary of State would be retrograde for disabled passengers, whose independence would be wound back. Without a guaranteed second member of staff on board, the ability of passengers with accessibility requirements to turn up and go is severely restricted, requiring passengers to make arrangements 24 hours in advance. Southern passengers have been left stranded on station platforms because, as there is no on-board supervisor on DOO services, there was no one to assist them so that they could get on the train.

Huw Merriman: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way—he has been very patient. Does not the requirement for disabled people to book 24 hours in advance relate to a completely separate service? A conductor cannot leave the train and get someone over or off the platform. The hon. Gentleman is confusing the matter completely.

Andy McDonald: The hon. Gentleman rather makes my point for me. Why on earth are we discriminating against disabled people, who want the same freedom as able-bodied people to turn up at a railway station and carry on with their journey?

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andy McDonald: No, I am not giving way again. The hon. Gentleman should sit down.

Before the Secretary of State claims that this is a conspiracy theory cooked up by ASLEF or the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers, a spokesperson for Govia Thameslink Railway said:

“there is no cast-iron guarantee that passengers with accessibility requirements can spontaneously board a train in the assumption there would be a second member of staff on board every train.”

Here is another quote from a representative from a train operating company seeking to introduce DOO, in a recent edition of Modern Railways, on the advantages of trains that could go into service with only the driver on board:

“The good thing would be that all of the regular passengers would still be carried, it would only be the wheelchair users who wouldn’t be able to travel”.

The Secretary of State will be well aware of numerous stories of disabled passengers who have been left stranded as a result of the staffing changes that he is forcing through. Sandra Nigghy, 56, of Highfields, Tarring, was left stranded in the freezing cold for more than two hours waiting for a Southern service on Hampden Park train platform near Eastbourne, because there was nobody to help her on to the train. Sandra said:

“the whole situation was horrible and embarrassing and it is unforgiveable when I had booked assistance 48 hours in advance”.

Everyone should be able to use rail services, and providing assistance to those who need it should be a top priority to ensure a good quality of life. The Transport Secretary should be ashamed that he is making our railway less, not more, accessible for disabled people. I firmly believe that the Labour party, passenger groups, staff and the disability charities are in the right when we say that the Government’s objective should be to make our railways safer and more accessible, not riskier and more exclusive.
The Gibb report paints a picture of a chaotic relationship between Network Rail, the Department for Transport and Govia Thameslink Railway, none of which has sufficient oversight or responsibility, leading to poor performance on Southern. Gibb says:

“None of the parties in the system share the same incentives or objectives.”

He recommends

“that the custodian of the overall system integrity be better identified”.

While those criticisms are clearly true for Southern, they are an accurate summary of what is wrong with the way in which our railways are managed in general. Labour has consistently highlighted the fact that privatisation and fragmentation of the railway has prevented the necessary oversight and responsibility needed to deliver upgrades and run efficient services, which is why, as part of our plans to take rail into public ownership, we will establish a new national body to serve as a “guiding mind” for the publicly owned railway, to avoid the chaos over which this Government have presided.

There is no need for the Government to prolong the suffering of passengers any longer—this industrial dispute is but one part of an unedifying scene—as basic managerial inefficiency characterises this woeful service.

It is within the Secretary of State’s power to end the industrial dispute tomorrow. He can do it by calling off his plans to expand driver-only operation and by guaranteeing a second safety-critical crew member on every train, and he should do so immediately.

As with the east coast main line, which delivered the lowest fare rises and highest passenger satisfaction of any rail service in the country, and which returned over £1 billion to the Treasury, it is time to admit defeat and to take Southern back under public control as a public service.

The privatised, franchised railway system, which allows all comers, including state-owned rail companies from across the globe—with the bizarre exception of the UK itself—to extract profits from passengers and taxpayers alike has had its day. The Government should wake up to rule was official, rather than unofficial. The consequence of that industrial action. That action was then joined by the drivers, whose work began at that time. That was not just the official industrial action on the part of the RMT, but the concession that the operator was already having to improve performance and already faced difficulties—there is no disagreement about that—but its performance declined catastrophically as a result of that industrial action.

As a consequence of that performance improvement plan, performance steadily improved again towards the end of 2015, but it then began catastrophically to deteriorate at the beginning of 2016, and specifically from April onwards. There was no coincidence about that. The reason it deteriorated was the industrial action that began at that time. That was not just the official industrial action on the part of the RMT, but the unofficial action, which the union has denied. There were suddenly very high rates of sickness, and there was a general unwillingness on the part of the workforce to co-operate with the management. It was undoubtedly the case that the operator was already having to improve its performance and already faced difficulties—there is no disagreement about that—but its performance declined catastrophically as a result of that industrial action.

That action was then joined by the drivers, whose work to rule was official, rather than unofficial. The consequence was that the service last year was simply appalling.

What was that all about? It was about the alleged lack of safety as a consequence of the introduction of a system that has been operating on a third of the railways for 30 years. The hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) implied some kind of culpability—some kind of casual response to safety—on the part of the Government, but the Labour Government were in office for 13 years when driver-only operation trains were running. These trains run on the London underground; there happens to be a Labour Mayor responsible for that now. Indeed, the Docklands light railway has no drivers at all.

Currently, according to the figures that the unions gave us in a meeting this morning, over 97% of the trains that Southern is operating still have a safety-trained second member of staff on board. There have been no pay cuts, there have been no job losses. 97% of the trains are still running with a second person on board, and fewer than 3% of those trains are not, and yet the...
hon. Gentleman implied that there had been de-staffing. Far from de-staffing, there has been an offer of a 24% pay increase to ASLEF drivers. There is no doubt about the unions’ responsibility for what happened last year.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): We heard nothing from the Opposition Front Bench about the patients, teachers, pupils and clinical staff whose lives have been wrecked as they have been forced from rail to road, which is far more dangerous. We need to get the railways working properly so that they are all safe and all can rely on them.

Nick Herbert: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend. For those who have faced such constraints on their pay over the past few years, it will stick in their throats to see an offer given to the train drivers such that their salaries for a four-day, 35-hour week will rise to over £60,000 a year. That is a perfectly generous offer. Frankly, this has nothing to do with safety at all. The Opposition have been unable to produce any evidence that the service that is now running is unsafe, partly because it runs extensively across the national network and has done for 30 years, and partly because, as I said, there is still a second member of staff on board anyway—it is just that they are not operating the doors.

Sir Nicholas Soames: My right hon. Friend and I have been working on this for a very long time as next-door neighbours. If all that is correct, as it is, can he tell us, with all that we have examined and learned about it, what he thinks this strike is about?

Nick Herbert: My right hon. Friend’s question would be best addressed to the unions themselves. I think it is about control of the railways—that is what they seek. It is certainly nothing to do with safety or the interests of passengers.

It is telling that since the industrial action fell away and the driver-only operation trains were successfully introduced on the line, the service has started to improve again. That gives the lie to the suggestion that this is only about Southern. It is not only about Southern—it has principally, although not exclusively, been about the industrial action that the unions have unreasonably taken on this railway.

There is no doubt that there is an inadequacy of investment historically on lines that have been carrying more and more people over recent years. In the 12 years that I have been a Member of Parliament, the number of passengers on Southern’s main routes has doubled. I welcome the £6 billion London Bridge investment and the £300 million package that the Government introduced, quite rightly, in response to the Gibb report. However, looking forward, there will need to be substantial further investment in lines that are carrying more and more people on a daily basis, because the infrastructure is not equal to the task of carrying the numbers of people that will only increase with the development that is now anticipated in the south-east. Let us be clear where the blame principally lies for the disruption over the past year—it principally lies with the unions.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I am sure that quite a few hon. Members are wondering what the Scottish National party Transport spokesman can bring to a Southern rail debate. I am hopeful that I can provide a more rounded opinion on the Gibb report, which is what this debate is meant to be about. The Transport Secretary stood up for nearly 20 minutes and union-bashed; he did not give us much about what was in the report, and I think he made a poor start. I say gently to the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) that his suggestion that staff are falsely taking sick days does not bode well for future worker relations. It is indicative of where the Government seem to be with the unions.

In this Chamber, we continually have debates about ideology. The Tory ethos is that the free market will always outperform the public sector, but the fiasco of GTR and Southern rail’s performance over the past few years—not just the past year—suggests otherwise. Calls have been made repeatedly for the franchise to be terminated, but the Government have always refused to act. Instead, they initially helped to reset benchmarks to ensure that GTR was not in breach of contractual performance measures.

Looking back, the report by the Transport Committee complained about a lack of transparency in performance data against contractual obligations. That in itself does not help those who want to understand the contractual position and find solutions. The Gibb report was a welcome interlude, although we have to question why the Government sat on it for six months. They have brought this general debate before us, not in a constructive manner but in a politically motivated, union-bashing fashion, and that will not help things.

I touched earlier on the fact that the Gibb report identified £300 million that had to be spent within the next year to ensure that the 2018 timetable could be achieved. That is quite an eye-watering sum, and it is a massive commitment. The Government committed that £300 million in January, but we are now a quarter of the way into the two-year process, and it would be good if the Secretary of State had told us how the work was advancing. I hope that the Minister will give us an update on that later on.

It took the Government 10 months to complete the programme of work and spend the £20 million that they pledged last November. I will just throw out there the fact that it took them 10 months to get through the initial £20 million programme, but they now expect to deliver a £300 million programme in two years. I presume that some of the £300 million programme will follow on from work identified in the initial raft.

The Secretary of State admitted that the Gibb report confirmed that franchise arrangements have been completely inadequate in their understanding of how infrastructure upgrades would impact on services. That is a failing of the Department for Transport, and the Government have to get to grips with it. The Gibb report also suggested that an immediate revision was required to the overnight timetable to allow for maintenance on the Brighton main line. Again, I throw that out there. What is happening about that, and about the production line maintenance that was supposed to be brought in as a consequence of the report?
I suggest that he reads the report. The appendix sets out both the short-term and long-term infrastructure projects, all the way to 2020. If he wants answers to those questions, I suggest that he reads the report.

Alan Brown: I am asking for answers from the Government, and I expect Ministers or the Secretary of State to give them to me. The Government announced a £300 million package to be delivered over two years. I am asking what is going to happen and whether the programme is on track, because we are a quarter of the way through the time period already.

The Gibb report also called for a review of little-used stations that have, it claims, too many services, which seems incredible against a backdrop of nearly 59,000 fully or partially cancelled trains in 2016. That is an issue that the Department for Transport could have identified earlier, and it should be resolved.

In terms of industrial relations—a subject that has formed the cornerstone of the debate so far—I am pleased to see that Gibb did say that negotiations must be entered into. Again, I repeat calls from other Opposition Members to the Secretary of State to show leadership and try to lead those negotiations. I disagree with Gibb's negative comments about collective bargaining, and I do not think that that should have been within the remit of the report. His suggestion that discussions about driver-only operation could have a roll-back effect on other services that are already driver-only operation is a conclusion too far for me.

We have to be clear about the fact that safety is a key issue. The Gibb report confirms that narrow platforms at Gatwick cause overcrowding, and that the lack of station shelters elsewhere is an issue for passengers accessing trains. It is therefore fair for me, looking at this from the outside, to say that DOO can be seen as a problem for staff, because at the end of the day the staff have to deal with the consequences if an incident arises due to overcrowding or when people alight from trains. I would also say to the Secretary of State that this is a serious dereliction of duty, given that the Government are picking up a £38 million tab for lost revenues, as well as setting aside £15 million in compensation for passengers. Think what that £15 million could have done in infrastructure upgrades if there had been proper forward planning.

In Scotland, there has been far wider national scrutiny of the Abellio ScotRail Alliance, which operates Scotland’s trains. It came into being in April 2015, and I must say that it came in as a living wage employer right away, which is to be applauded. However, we must also acknowledge that its early performance was below contractual levels. The Scottish Government took the lead by intervening, and a performance improvement plan was agreed. Since then, 181 of the 249 actions have been completed, and a further 180 action points have now been agreed. The plan has been reviewed by the Office of Rail and Road, which found it to be robust and deliverable, but challenging. Punctuality on ScotRail is now at 90%, and it has been ahead of the UK average for four years.

Looking ahead, the Scottish Government are now exploring a public sector bid for ScotRail when there is a franchise break. On public sector bids, the UK Government have demonstrated, with the east coast main line, that public sector services are not only viable, but profitable for the taxman. The refusal of the Government to acknowledge this in the rush to reprivatise the east coast main line is frankly shocking. The franchise has raised £1 billion, and 2015 was rated as the best year in its history. It shows that public sector franchises can lead the way over private sector ones.

Finally, as was mentioned earlier, there has been some industrial action involving ScotRail in Scotland. The Scottish Government were willing to meet the unions, and they ultimately agreed a deal that the unions and the Abellio ScotRail Alliance have signed off. [Laughter] That is actually what should be happening, so instead of laughing about it, the Transport Secretary should show leadership and face up to being willing to speak to the unions and getting around the table with them.

To conclude, I hope that the Gibb report will show how these matters can be progressed with GTR. In truth, the Scottish Government have shown what can be done by showing a different attitude north of the border, and I suggest that the Transport Secretary should think about that as well.
that it has carried out. There is clear evidence that driver-operated doors are entirely safe.

The other sticking point with the unions is whether a train can still run if the second member of staff does not turn up because, for example, they are sick, late or on strike. By the way, every train that was scheduled to have two members of staff will continue to have them, but what if that second member of staff does not turn up? The company’s position, which I think is reasonable, is that the train can still run. The union position is that it cannot, which leads to needless cancellations. A strike by conductors is ineffective if the train can run anyway.

I believe that that is the real reason why the RMT is so keen on that point.

The hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald), the shadow Transport spokesman, said that there had been de-staffing on the railway. I gently point out that 100 extra on-board supervisors have been hired since the changes were made. Therefore, far from de-staffing, there has been an increase in staffing, and in practice 98% of trains have run with a second person aboard.

I am disappointed that ASLEF has instructed its members to work a four-day week, because it is having devastating consequences for our constituents as we speak. It is completely unacceptable. There are no good safety grounds, as I just laid out, and an incredibly generous financial offer has been made: a 26% pay increase from £51,000 to £63,000 for working a four-day week. There is absolutely no justification for the strike and I call on the hon. Gentleman to prevail on his friends in ASLEF to call off the overtime ban at the earliest opportunity.

There is no question about the fact that we need to train more drivers, and I strongly encourage Ministers to put pressure on GTR to do exactly that. While this unjustified and damaging overtime strike is in place, we should make sure that trains ideally run with eight or 12 carriages and that they are not short-formed. I have had reports from constituents at Purley Oaks station in my constituency of four-carriage trains, which leads to overcrowding. I ask Ministers to look at that.

Having placed responsibility primarily with the trade unions, Chris Gibb goes on to make a number of other points, one of which, as the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) mentioned, is the £300 million programme. I strongly commend the Government for having found that money, which was so urgently needed.

The hon. Gentleman asked what work has taken place. I have a note sent to me by Network Rail, which I can share afterwards, which lists the work. It includes high output ballast cleaning—I am not sure what that is, but it sounds good—and work on the Balcombe and Sevenoaks tunnels water management systems. Further particulars are available if he would like to hear them. That investment was incredibly welcome and important.

I am very excited about control period 6—the major capital works programme coming in a couple of years. With the right investment between South Croydon station and Windmill Bridge junction, we can increase capacity on the entire Brighton main line by 30%. I strongly urge Ministers to move that project forward.

Finally, the franchise is rather too large. I entirely understand why it was let in this form—the works at London Bridge and the Thameslink transformation—but in due course it should be broken down into its component parts of Southern, Gatwick Express, Thameslink and Great Northern, which would allow for much better management. The behaviour of people such as Sean Hoyle, who has stated that his objective is to bring down the Government, is wholly inappropriate. I call on the unions to end their unjustified strike action forthwith.

5.14 pm

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I know that there are colleagues who are yet to speak whose constituencies have borne the brunt of the appalling Southern rail so I will do my best to be brief. I would like to say a few words about the impact of the Southern situation on my constituents and some of the wider issues raised by the Gibb report.

It might surprise hon. Members to hear that delays on Southern can impact on trains in Nottingham, but the linear nature of the rail network combined with forthcoming changes to the Thameslink timetable could have a hugely damaging effect on inter-city midland main line services. The Gibb report rightly states:

Sometimes funding availability has prioritised elements of the system, without considering the welfare of the overall system.

This appears to be the case on the midland main line, where Thameslink, long distance and freight services share the same track south of Bedford.

The December 2018 timetable change will increase the service frequency through the Thameslink core to 24 trains an hour. On paper, that is a welcome improvement for passengers, but, in an indictment of disjointed and fragmented railway planning, the new timetable is not integrated with the east midlands franchise. The intensity of the new timetable will impair the ability of operators to recover after periods of disruption. As the Gibb report points out, this problem is compounded by GTR’s theoretically efficient but brittle rostering practices. This means that a single service disruption in Brighton can cause reactionary delays that travel up the line and on to the wider network, paralysing trains hundreds of miles away.

It has been reported in the technical press that there could be a nine-minute journey time penalty for services operating from Nottingham to London St Pancras, and a 12-minute penalty for journey times from Sheffield. That is obviously a real concern for passengers and the business community in Nottingham. I understand that it is not too late to make amendments to the timetable and I ask the Minister to commit to addressing the issue.

The Gibb report is long, technical and in places contentious. There are many issues arising from it that could be discussed, but I want to say a few words about the section on level crossings, which are a continued source of delays on the Southern network. The legislation that governs the closure of dangerous level crossings is archaic and hugely inefficient. It is therefore welcome that the Gibb report says that the recommendations of the Law Commission should be adopted as a new Bill. The issue has a long history and I have pressed Ministers on it in the previous two Parliaments.

Dangerous level crossings are the main cause of external risk on the railways and a major contributor to delays. The issue was referred to the Law Commission
by the Government in 2008, and the commission’s recommendations were published in September 2013. In January 2015, the then Liberal Democrat Minister of State, Baroness Kramer, said in another place that the Government wanted to bring forward legislation as soon as possible. Two and a half years later, however, and nothing has changed. On the back of this report, will the Minister give a commitment today to finally bring forward this necessary legislation?

Finally, we need to talk about the lack of transparency that has characterised the Government’s approach to the prolonged period of exceptionally poor service on Southern. As the Transport Committee said in October:

“Until” — it —

“recently managed, after several attempts and considerable time and effort, to extract information from the Department, GTR’s contractual performance benchmarks, and data relating to GTR’s performance against them, were entirely opaque.”

There are questions about the transparency of the report itself. We know that the final version was submitted to Ministers on 30 December, so the claim that the document could not be released until June because of purdah is, frankly, unconvincing.

In the minutes of the rail national taskforce meeting held on 23 November, it is recorded that Peter Wilkinson, the Department’s franchising director, said that the

“Gibb report had been drafted but was not yet signed off”

by the Secretary of State. The meeting was also told by an individual with the initials “NB”, who may be Nick Brown, GTR’s chief operating officer, that

“GTR had had a lot of input to the review.”

When the final version of the report was published, its sweeping statements about the general state of rail industrial relations and the undesirability of direct operations surprised some observers, especially as several hon. Members on both sides of the House had backed some form of state intervention. We need to know what Gove’s involvement was in the drafting of the report and whether it extended beyond the provision of factual information. We need to hear why first the approval of the draft report, and then publication of the final version, appears to have been delayed. It is vital that the travelling public can place trust in these reports, so will the Minister give the House a specific and unqualified assurance that the Department did not seek to pressure, amend or otherwise influence the report in any way to politicise its content?

The situation on Southern has complex causes, but the imperative must be to end the years of misery that passengers have endured. The Government have a role to play in ending it, and part of that role must be to generate less heat and more light in the months ahead. We do not have to endorse the Gibb report in full to acknowledge that it has made some sensible and practical suggestions. It is vital that Ministers now take all reasonable steps to get the Southern rail network moving again.

5.19 pm

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Walden) (Con): This morning I attended a meeting with representatives of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers. It was a futile and frustrating meeting, in which the unions argued that it was proportionate and appropriate to strike because 2.75% of trains on Southern operate without an on-board supervisor. The fact that 97.25% of trains operate with one did not seem to sway them, which will mean untold damage to my constituents once again. In Wealden the service provided by Southern has been unsatisfactory for a long time, and we have raised that time and time again. While its performance has gradually improved over the past year, the behaviour of the unions has deteriorated, and the current industrial dispute is entirely irresponsible and cynical.

I welcomed the Gibb report, and met Chris Gibb last year to discuss the situation and, principally, Southern’s poor management and poor communication. The report does not pull any punches in respect of either GTR’s management or the Department for Transport, but the most damning indictment, by a long chalk, is Gibb’s assessment of the unions. The report plainly states that the primary cause of disruption to passengers has been industrial action by the unions, compounded by incredibly high levels of sick leave among drivers. The report describes the unions’ motives as “debatable” and their actions as “undermining the system”. Having said that, I should add that GTR and Southern are not devoid of responsibility. The union’s behaviour does not excuse the previously existing and ongoing infrastructural problems, which are within the control of a franchise whose financial penalties for failings are too lenient.

In any event, my constituents still have to put up with delays, timetable changes, short-form trains, extended engineering works, overcrowding, unsatisfactory compensation processes, nonsensical bus replacements, poor communication, and potential ticket office closures.

GTR’s handling of the dispute does not cover it in glory. Unfortunately, the Uckfield line is known as the misery line in my constituency. The Gova “transforming rail” consultation is certainly a step in the right direction, and I am pleased that passengers will have an opportunity to comment in detail on timetabling arrangements and proposed reforms, but that simply is not enough. GTR must be made to appreciate the seriousness of the inconvenience and frustration that are being caused on a daily basis.

Let me draw the Minister’s attention to appendix 5 of the report, which concerns the modernisation of the Uckfield line. I have already raised the issue with the Minister, and, as he knows, I support Chris Gibb’s recommendation for the electrification of the line and a depot in Crowborough. The Uckfield line connects the towns of Uckfield and Crowborough to London, and is one of the very few routes in the south-east that have not been electrified. It is hard to believe that a major railway line in a highly developed “global” country still relies on diesel trains, which are outdated and increasingly difficult to keep on track. When they break down they are hard to fix, and it is difficult to find new rolling stock. Even in the sweetest spot, when the Southern service is running a full timetable, with a full number of cars and a full quota of staff who have turned up for work, the service is still woefully inadequate.

The Gibb report states that the current fleet is “inefficient”, and that the sustained use of diesel is not viable. It points out that electrification of the Uckfield line would significantly increase passenger capacity and improve performance and timetabling, and would result in more efficient crewing and less pollution. Above all,
it would provide a seven-day service in my constituency. An annual season ticket from Crowborough to London costs thousands of pounds. If my constituents are paying 21st-century prices for their rail tickets, they are entitled to receive a 21st-century rail service in return, and that means electrification.

We forget what the present situation means for people's day-to-day lives. My constituent Christopher, who lives in Uckfield, says:

"The loss of peak trains will make it even harder than usual for me to keep my commitments to work and family, including being able to reliably collect my two 6 and 8 year old boys from school or after school club."

Electrification and a depot at Crowborough would provide much-needed resilience on the line. No doubt the Minister has read the conclusion of that particular section of the report, which recommends electrification and has a solid financial case behind it. I look forward to having continued conversations with the Minister to try and secure that.

Wealden is in desperate need of a reliable modern train service that offers value for money. My constituents would like to know when the Uckfield line will no longer be known as the misery line, which will come about only once the strikes are called off. I look forward to working with the Minister to ensure not only electrification but a depot in my constituency of Wealden.

5.25 pm

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): I congratulate you on your elevation, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I am staggered that now, 18 months later, the Southern rail dispute is still going on. I find it staggering for a range of reasons, some of which are alluded to in the Chris Gibb report, which I will come on to. I remind Members that it was a resilience report; it was not about the dispute, but was a resilience report looking at Southern rail generally.

On driver-only operation, I appreciate that the unions talk about safety—which is fine; they are perfectly entitled to do that—but there are three key reasons why I disapprove of DOO. First, many female passengers in Eastbourne have contacted me over the last year as I have been campaigning against this dispute and trying to find a resolution, saying, "Stephen, we would not feel safe coming back to Eastbourne late in the night or even early-evening if we were in an empty carriage on our own and knowing there was no second member of staff." That is a very important point, because effectively it discounts about 50% of the population.

Secondly, in Eastbourne a lot of local children go to St Richard’s school in Bexhill, and many parents have told me that they would be anxious if they knew their children were on a train with no second member of staff. Thirdly, as has been mentioned by Labour Front-Bench Members, there is the issue of disability access. Only a couple of weeks ago, a wheelchair-user colleague at Hampden Park in Eastbourne had to sit on the platform as three trains went through because she could not get on.

Those are three powerful reasons why I am fundamentally against DOO. I do not accept the principle and I do not care if 30% of the rail network already carries driver-only trains.

Chris Philp: The hon. Gentleman has explained why he thinks a second member of staff is important. Does he accept that 98% of trains are running with that second person on board and that the alternative for the 2% that are not is that those trains do not run at all?

Stephen Lloyd: I agree, and I will address that when I turn to the Gibb report, but I wanted to say something else before getting on to it. If we asked members of the public around the country where they have DOO—outside the underground, as that is a different kettle of fish—whether they would prefer to have a second member of staff on the train, I bet they would say that they would.

The Gibb report identified GTR as being the worst performing operator in the country, with performance deteriorating two or three years before the current industrial dispute. I grant that the report identified industrial relations as being a primary cause of the system’s breakdown, but that featured on only one page of the entire 163-page document. That leads me to wonder just how impartial Gibb was in putting together the report. After all, while doing so he apparently spoke with GTR over 30 times and Government agencies over 45 times, yet he spoke with the two unions zero times. What is going on here?

When GTR won the contract direct attention was given in it to “best price”, rather than deliverability. Extraordinarily, that meant GTR winning without enough drivers. Gibb himself wrote:

“It understand that at least one losing bidder” included more drivers and that “it may have been the case that the bidder with the fewest drivers won”.

In other words, it was about cost; it was not about quality or customer care. So it was nonsense for the Secretary of State, who unfortunately has left the Chamber, to say earlier that he is trying to train more drivers and that he wants more train drivers. Frankly, the original contract was won by GTR on cost, with fewer drivers than its competitors.

Who is actually leading in the Southern rail dispute, from the rail perspective? Is it GTR and Southern rail, or is it the Government?

Maria Caulfield: The hon. Gentleman was an MP during the time when the contract was being let, while many of us were not. Did he not raise these questions and make these points at the time?

Stephen Lloyd: I certainly did! I welcome the hon. Lady’s intervention and I thank her for reminding me that I was furious about Southern rail at the time. I thought it was absolute rubbish, and I said so frequently. I appreciate her allowing me to remind everyone about that. And it is good to be back; thank you.

Let me go back to the question of who is actually leading for Southern rail in the dispute, and to the Gibb report. Gibb says that the Secretary of State is “already determining the strategic direction of this dispute”.

As I said earlier, I am not sponsored by the RMT. Members on both sides of the House know that the Government are behind this dispute because they want to bring in DOO. That is as plain as the nose on your face. Yes, at the minute, there is a second member of staff on 97% of the trains, as another Member said, but
that was not the intention at the beginning. The intention was to break the RMT and to bring in DOO. My priority is the customer—the rail passengers of Eastbourne who have suffered so much. This is frustrating because the Government went into this ready to have a war. They were ready to have a battle and to beat the RMT, but they have ended up with a complete stalemate in which the two sides have dug in and the passengers, people and communities of Eastbourne and the south-east are suffering.

Ms Ghani rose—

Stephen Lloyd: I will not give way. I am about to finish.

This is ridiculous, and it is about time that the Government and the Secretary of State showed some leadership. The Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), is in his place, so I shall ask him two questions before I finish. First, will the Government confirm or deny that the Department for Transport has never interfered with or blocked the resolution of the Southern rail dispute? I am asking the Minister that specific question in the Chamber because he has the full responsibility to answer it truthfully, and I will ask it again. Will he confirm or deny that the DFT has never interfered with or blocked the resolution of the Southern rail dispute?

My second question relates to something that a couple of other colleagues have already said, but it is crucial. If the Government are serious about ending this dispute, to the benefit of the entire south-east as well as those in my constituency, why will they not host negotiations with both the unions? We know that they have had opportunities to do that, but they have not done so. They are trying to divide and rule. I say this: Minister, pick up the phone tomorrow and say to Mr Whelan at ASLEF, to Mr Cash at the RMT and to GTR, “I want you to meet me tomorrow in my office in Whitehall. I want all the unions and all the sides together with no preconditions.” I am absolutely certain that if the Government had the guts, and the honesty, to do that, we would resolve the issue within a week. Minister, I wait to hear your answer.

5.33 pm

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): The point of agreement between me and the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd) is that the service has caused heartache, distress and job losses for thousands. The report was commissioned to try to find ways to improve the resilience of the service, and I welcome it. I think everyone acknowledges the author, Chris Gibb, to be a serious, experienced individual, and he has produced a report that is thoughtful, helpful and comprehensive. The clear message that emerges from his report is that the primary cause of the appalling service that passengers received last year was the result of members of the workforce “taking strike action, declining to work overtime and undermining the system integrity”.

He concluded that “if the train crew were to work in the normal manner...the output of the system, a safe and reliable rail service for passengers, would be delivered in an acceptable manner”.

The validity of Mr Gibb’s words has been reinforced by the 23 percentage point improvement in performance achieved by Southern over the past few months, when there have been no strikes. GTR has shown that with the support of its workforce it can deliver, as Mr Gibb says, an acceptable level of service for customers.

Like everyone in this House, I am horrified that we are again seeing a return to industrial action. The Opposition were keen to lambast the Government on public sector pay restraint last week, but I am acutely aware of how many public sector workers use these trains. ASLEF, on behalf of train drivers, rejected a pay offer worth nearly 24% over four years. Passengers will draw their own conclusions. [Interruption.] Is the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) trying to intervene? If he would like to get in, I would love to hear whether he thinks that that is a bad thing that is being put to members. I have offered the hon. Gentleman the opportunity to come in and say that the 24% rise is adequate, but he has declined to do so. I understand, so I will return to my speech.

Passengers do not believe that the DCO trains that have operated on our network for the past 30 years are unsafe. They do not believe that passenger trains operated in Germany, Austria or Canada using DCO are unsafe. Passengers do not want much; they simply want the drivers and the on-board supervisors to do their job, so that they can get into work to do theirs. In the helpful statistics provided by the RMT in a meeting this morning, as referred to by my hon. Friend, it was confirmed that 97.25% of the 70% of Southern trains that used to operate with a second person on board continue to do so. Those trains have a second person who is not preoccupied with opening and closing doors; they are there to help passengers. That is a high proportion, reflecting the additional numbers of OBSs that have been recruited. It is not as high as I would like, nor is it as high as GTR intends it to be—GTR is aiming for 100%—but all train users would rather see the 2.75% of those trains continue to run for the benefit of passengers. If they did not run, the negative impact to the service as a whole would be far more than the 3% diminution in service. It would lead to many thousands of passengers being wholly unnecessarily delayed.

Ms Ghani: After this morning’s meeting, I just want to clarify whether the unions are striking because 2.75% of trains are running without on-board supervisors. That will have an impact on thousands of paying passengers.

Jeremy Quin: I thank my hon. Friend. She really has to ask the unions why they are still on strike. My understanding is that it is because of the 2.75% of the 70% of trains that traditionally had a second person on board. I am convinced that her constituents and my constituents would rather that those trains continue to run. I look forward to 100% coverage, but the 97.25% figure and the recruitment shows that GTR is serious about ensuring that there is a second professional on board. Passengers have had enough. It is high time that the unions ended their action.

As the Secretary of State made clear, however, it would belittle the report to suggest that it focuses only on industrial action. It is far broader and more useful than that. What runs through the report is the difficulty of operating trains on a hugely well used and complex service. As the report states, Southern is “simultaneously running at absolute capacity at peak times, and undergoing a period of dramatic...change”.
The introduction of class 700s, new depots at Three Bridges and Hornsey, a doubling of Thameslink peak-hour trains to 24 through central London, and major infrastructure enhancements at London Bridge are all good improvements for passengers. They are vital to maintain a railway that has seen a massive increase in passenger numbers. As the report makes clear, Southern has been under strain with “unreliable infrastructure, a timetable that is very tight and with overcrowded peak services”.

In some ways, the railways are a victim of success. In the days of British Rail, which the Opposition still seem to recall so fondly, the network was declining and, as Gibb points out, was relatively lightly used. In the 20 years since privatisation, passenger numbers have grown such that, on Southern’s routes, more passengers are now travelling than at any time in the past 90 years. The emphasis that Gibb places on collaborative working is welcome, as are the practical steps that he recommends to ensure that that takes place, many of which have already been implemented. I am pleased that on receipt of the report back in January the Government immediately committed £300 million to meet the basic infrastructure requirements that were set out. It is good to hear the Department’s strong commitment to ensuring that the region secures the investment it requires.

The report also has lessons for the operator, and Gibb makes clear the complexity of the Southern operator’s task. There are few, and I am certainly not among them, who view the scale of the franchise as optimal. However, for those who believe that firing the operator would be a simple gain, Gibb argues persuasively that such an approach is naive. Twice operators have been replaced by Government emergency provision, as the shadow Minister said, and the report implies that this comes at greater cost. In both cases, the routes were running at steady state; Southern is going through a period of substantial change. The implication of the report is that firing the operator would be, at best, risky, and at worst could lead to chaotic failure.

However, it appears to me that the operator, in bidding for the franchise, was too optimistic about what it might be able to achieve by crewing via diagramming software. The system can be highly efficient when it works well, and in theory it should work brilliantly, but that requires perfect operating conditions, which are not what Network Rail delivers. I am therefore delighted by the Secretary of State’s commitment to the additional drivers who are being trained and coming online, and I am pleased that of State’s commitment to the additional drivers who are being trained and coming online, and I am pleased that they will increase resilience and reduce dependence on overtime. He is determined to ensure that we have a modern, resilient railway that delivers for its passengers. I congratulate him on commissioning this report, and I thank Mr Gibb for his work.

5.40 pm

Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): I appear to have a very good hit rate with you so far, Madam Deputy Speaker. You have called me two days in a row.

I have seen great men and women stand at the Dispatch Box and take responsibility for things that were often beyond their control but within their Department’s remit. If we are honest, today’s debate has proceeded along some well-worn tramlines. Conservative Members have said that the entire problem with Southern rail is caused by industrial action, and Opposition Members have tried to acknowledge that the systemic failure has wider implications. This debate was set up to fail from its opening remarks. It is important to be aware that it is not a bug within the system that the Secretary of State chooses not to take responsibility for the situation; it is a feature.

I do not have to declare an interest other than that I commute daily to this place on Govia Thameslink, and the everyday experiences of my constituents, which in some cases mirror my own, are at the forefront of my mind. The House has to take responsibility for the very real failings of the system as a whole and plot a course out of them, and I will explain why that is important right now.

How did we get here? Gibb identifies three or four major factors. First, there is no single system operator. With particular regard to Southern, he says:

“The rushed 1990s privatisation...failed to understand the critical needs of the system”.

We see that in the fragmentation across the planning and the response to critical failures. I have had conversations with the train operating companies, which revealed that they could perhaps better manage disruption if they put their own staff in the control room—so that other train operators, which are already in the control room, do not put their services in front. That is a pretty basic failing, but it underlines the fact that there is not a single point of accountability for this failure.

Peter Kyle: Does my hon. Friend not think that the Department for Transport should be stepping into that role?

Mr Shuker: My hon. Friend pre-empt my idea. We should recognise Southern rail as a critical piece of infrastructure for London, the south-east and the whole United Kingdom and treat it as such. The Government should take custody and oversee Southern rail.

Secondly, the £6 billion investment in the Thameslink programme will bring very real benefits, but unfortunately it has been bolted on to a system that has some basic failings. This major infrastructure programme is specified by DFT and led by Network Rail, but it is being put at risk because the basics are being ignored. Gibb instructs DFT to make a call in this calendar year about whether, given what we know about the system, we can turn on an increase in capacity through that £6 billion investment. That is a shocking state of affairs to find ourselves in: the basic infrastructure failures of this system could cause us to waste that money or to delay implementation.

In my constituency, in Luton, we have been trying to get a station rebuild since the Government cancelled the money when they first came to power in 2010. The need is desperate; the station is recognised as one of the 10 worst in the country. The net effect of the Thameslink programme was to make our station worse, as we have gone to 12-car platforms and we have reduced disabled access, and I struggle to explain to my constituents the benefits that will come. My fear is that we will not be able to explain to them why there is not a commensurate increase in capacity, as a result of the basic failings that Gibb identifies.
The infrastructure on the Southern network is in a poor and unreliable condition. Gibb says:

"The franchise highlights the problems. It is not appropriate to let this franchise in the earliest available opportunity, so that Members will have a chance to have an input there."

Fourthly, all of this situation was led by Government decision making. In the last Parliament, I took a view that with this major infrastructure programme coming in it was not appropriate to let this franchise in the normal commercial way. My view was that it was better for government to manage it. These stations are dealing with one third of all passenger journeys in this country. In a sense, the Government found a halfway house, as they went with a management-style contract in which they took on a large degree of risk and the incentives were changed for the operator. That was a mistake; it was neither fair nor foul, and we are trying to manage a contract that would not work in the first place. Gibb’s comments in the report about why the franchise was chosen are instructive. It is an open secret that for a long time Sunday services have been cancelled, because, for example, insufficient drivers work on Sundays. The answer to that is not to bully drivers into coming into work; a contract has been taken on and if the operator wants to change the terms and conditions, they should bring forward appropriate proposals.

If this were any kind of project other than Britain’s fragmented railways, we would have an Olympic-style delivery authority taking over this network. It is key to our infrastructure, but nobody is accountable, and the clear message from the Secretary of State today from that Dispatch Box was not that he took responsibility; it was to say, “I am not to blame.” It is time we had a clear message from the Secretary of State today from delivery authority taking over this network. It is key to our fragmented railways, we would have an Olympic-style bringing forward appropriate proposals.

Another recommendation is that some services be transferred from Southern to Southeastern. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye, has championed a project to extend High Speed 1 from Ashford to Bexhill, Hastings and Rye. With the innovation in train technology whereby expensive overhead electrification can be substituted by a system of hybrid trains that charge themselves over track, my right hon. Friend’s project looks within reach. As it would require the relevant part of the network to be transferred from Southern to Southeastern, we welcome that recommendation in the report and ask the Department for Transport, Network Rail and the train operators to make the necessary investment in extending High Speed 1.

I had a seat on the Select Committee on Transport in the last Parliament, I have a constituency reliant on Southern’s services to get people to work and college, and I have had a season ticket on Southern for the past 12 years, so I have witnessed the illogical and devastating impact the industrial action has caused. I say “illogical” because no drivers or second crew members are losing their job—indeed, as we have heard, 100 additional second crew members have been recruited, and trains will operate without a second crew member only in exceptional circumstances, such as when the crew member is stuck on another part of the line. Secondly, no employees will lose pay—indeed, train drivers are being offered a 23% increase to take their pay for a four-day 35-hour week to £60,000, and most would earn £70,000 by working the fifth day.

Thirdly, the crew are not being asked to do anything novel. The dispute is allegedly about a driver controlling doors, but as we have heard, 30% of our rail network have a management-style contract in which the driver should control both the doors and movement of the train. That links to another argument that driver-controlled doors are even safer.
As I saw with the Transport Committee when I travelled in a train driver’s cab, when carriage doors are opening and closing, it is entirely possible to see on the video display unit what is coming in and out of the train. That is what the rail regulator has opined on, but the video can also run as the train moves through the station. At the moment, a conductor cannot see what is happening on the platform once the doors have closed. Unfortunately, that video capacity is not being used at the moment, but it should be. If it were, the system would be safer than current practices.

Although the lack of logic is frustrating, it is the devastating impact on individuals, families and businesses that distresses me the most. People have lost their job because they cannot get to or from work; they have lost earnings because many earning less than £49,000 a year cannot commute to London for higher wages; and they have lost precious time with their family, which they will never get back. The economy in my area, much of it based on travel and tourism, has lost £40 million. Public services have suffered because essential workers cannot get to hospitals and schools or will not relocate to our region because they will be unable to do so. As a result, tax yields go down as well. For people such as Labour Members to call for protection of and investment in public services while supporting their degradation via and closing, it is entirely possible to see on the video display unit what is coming in and out of the train. That is what the rail regulator has opined on, but the video can also run as the train moves through the station. At the moment, a conductor cannot see what is happening on the platform once the doors have closed. Unfortunately, that video capacity is not being used at the moment, but it should be. If it were, the system would be safer than current practices.

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The blame for that rests with successive Governments, not with this one alone. Passengers are shocked to hear of the historic under-investment in their rail network. The south-east of England accounts for 30% of our country’s passenger journeys but only 15% of the investment. At a time when Government are focused on HS2 at a cost of over £30 billion, too little is being spent on what Lord Adonis, chair of the Government’s National Infrastructure Commission, said is the greatest transport challenge that we face, which is getting people to and from work every day in the south-east of England.

The Government have unlocked £300 million of funding for immediate investment in the south-east, but to stand a chance of delivering the robust infrastructure we need, this level of investment simply must continue into the next control period.

Sir Nicholas Soames: I agree with every word that the hon. Gentleman says, but does he agree that it is now all the more important to come to an agreement between all the parties, so that this infrastructure investment may proceed? Without it, it frankly would not make sense to create that level of infrastructure.

Peter Kyle: I could not agree more. I have said so to the right hon. Gentleman off the record, and am happy to say so in this place. I am calling on the unions to get around the table and, as I have said to the Minister in person, I hope that Ministers will be more muscular and more active in this process, rather than sitting on the sidelines. Every party needs to get around the table actively to resolve this problem for and on behalf of passengers.

It is imperative that Government confirm without delay that they will continue investment into the next control period, guaranteeing that up to £1 billion will be available for the entirety of that period. Once this industrial action is settled and the remaining structural challenges are once again the focus of our attention, passengers will rightfully demand month-on-month improvements in the service they actually experience. Right now, the infrastructure that underpins our system is too weak to offer the robust improvements that passengers deserve. We must move unrelentingly towards the point where our rail network is bulletproof.

Within a month of becoming an MP, I had asked Ministers to scrap the class 313 units from the Coastway route. Some were built in 1976 and none has a toilet. These trains are loathed by everyone. Some of the things the report finds are so blindingly obvious that they prompt the question why it took the report to say them in the first place. Then there are things I did not know about, such as suicide hotspots, bridges being struck by vehicles due to lack of signage, and unnecessarily crowded timetabling for historical reasons.

Why we needed an independent review to tell us these things is beyond me. Government, GTR and Network Rail should have easily had the capacity to sort these things out without the need for an independent assessor, but we are where we are. At last we have the manual on how to improve our system. It is now up to the Government and their partners to make it a reality and this Parliament to scrutinise, challenge and support it every step of the way. I, for one, will not let up in that task.

6.2 pm

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): What a pleasure it is to see you in your place, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) for all he has done, along with my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames), on the all-party parliamentary group on Southern rail. I hope that the group will reform as soon as he is ready.

This is a particularly important debate for me and it is one that is very close to my home, in the sense that I live very near a station on the Southern line, from which I take a train to get here. This situation has had a huge impact on my life and the lives of many of the people I have the privilege to represent. People around our communities cannot get home. Children cannot get to school and therefore the parents, even if they could have got to work, cannot go because they do not have emergency childcare.

I have been working very closely with my hon. Friend the Minister, who has done enormous amounts of work of late to ensure that the rail network gets the money it requires. But in the Gibb report we find many indications of why this is not just about money. It is about so much more. It is about huge amounts of time and infrastructure, and that is why I shall skip over the industrial relations that have been so adequately covered by many of my right hon. and hon. Friends and over some of the aspects of union power touched on by those who are my friends, even if they sit on the other side of the House. I shall focus instead on areas in which we need to take the Gibb report seriously.

As various people know, electrification of the Uckfield line has been spoken about since the 1970s. It was, I believe, the last track to use a steam engine for regular commuting services, right up to the 1970s, and now that legacy is coming through on the diesel line. Surely enough is enough. It is 2017, Thomas the Tank Engine is on an iPad—he is not even a book any more—yet we have diesel trains running on what should frankly be electric tracks. Please, Minister, can we have the electrification we need? Can we catch up with the iPad generation?

There are many people from Edenbridge and District Rail Travellers Association with whom I have been working very closely who have spoken about this and about how we can get this done: how to get the lines dualled—or rather, redualled, as the dual line was removed in the 1990s. Perhaps—here is the real chance—we can get the line to run beyond Uckfield. Imagine that, Madam Deputy Speaker: taking your holidays and deciding that instead of driving down—you do not want to do that, through Croydon and south London, on all those crowded roads—you will get on the tube at Westminster. You take the Jubilee line straight through to London Bridge, where you get on the train. You will travel down some of the most beautiful tracks in Kent, but then you end up by accident in Sussex. However, you will still go through beautiful parts of Kent, travelling on from Uckfield down to the coast. Imagine that, Madam Deputy Speaker, for an evening in Brighton after a day in the House. I can see that you are already desirous of those moments.

I can see that is something that we can all aim for. There are many issues that we can touch on: the parking at Cowden and Hever; the fact that many folk
have to drive to stations such as Hildenborough or Sevenoaks, rather than getting on at the station nearest to them, which has an impact on the environment and road safety. These are narrow lanes with cyclists and horse riders. That is a danger for all of us.

Perhaps the most important issue is the fact that we have to invest in our future. Time and again, we have lived off the legacy of our great-grandparents’ thoughts and dreams—those investments that built the trains, bridges and roads. They were built by the Victorian and Edwardian generations, and in this new Elizabethan age surely we need to emulate that investment, because when we spend on the rail networks we are not spending on getting to London five minutes quicker; no, we are spending on making our nation great, and we are doing it because London is not just the people who live in it. All great metropolises depend on the networks they feed off, and there is none greater than ours and there is none that requires more investment.

6.7 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Almost a century ago, the campaign to get a train station at Mitcham Eastfields began. The first questions in Parliament about a new station for Mitcham are believed to have been recorded by Hansard in the early 1930s. I myself was part of the campaign for a quarter of a century, so the House can imagine my delight in 2008 when the first train arrived from London Victoria at Mitcham Eastfields station at eight minutes past four on Monday 2 June. The station connects Mitcham with central London in just 19 minutes, and since it opened nine years ago, the growth of the area has been remarkable, with residents now able to commute to work in central London. Mitcham Eastfields has been a huge boost for local housing, and has enabled more students and teachers to access St Mark’s Academy and other local schools. The opening of the station is one of my proudest achievements as the Member of Parliament for Mitcham and Morden.

Unfortunately, Southern rail operates the services that run through Mitcham Eastfields, as well as the other stations in my constituency, including St Heller and Mitcham Junction. My constituents comprise many of the 300,000 passengers who use Southern rail every single day, paying extortionate ticket prices for an appalling service. When Mitcham station was opened, all the tools were there for the growth of Mitcham and ease of transport for my constituents. Because of Southern rail, the reality is the worst rail disruption since 1994. A phone call yesterday from my constituent, Mark, summed it all up. In his words, “the drivers are often missing, the trains often break down, and I don’t think there is a single day that the train is on time. And that’s not down to striking staff.”

My constituent, Arexa, was put on disciplinary measures and subsequently lost her job in retail because of the unacceptable regularity of Southern delays. Her story is not unique. Only last month my constituent, William, left his dream job, as the company where he worked could not continue to tolerate his lateness. In fact, my constituent, Collis, uses the phrase, “daily REG”—random excuse generator—for the explanation that Southern give for their appalling service. It is not the service that he and his wife deserve, as they pay over £3,000 a year.

In the last week, services in my constituency have been slashed by even more than was publicised, and the current revised timetable has dropped direct off-peak services from London Victoria. Similarly, the proposed new timetable from May 2018 sees a reduction in rush-hour trains, and there is a gap of nearly 30 minutes between the off-peak trains. It is so frustrating to see the intermediate services fly through Mitcham Eastfields without stopping, helping the Surrey shires at the expense of suburban Mitcham.

It is clear that Southern rail is not working and shows little sign of improvement. The services should be transferred to the Mayor of London. Transport for London clearly has the experience and proven track record of running world-class public transport in the capital. In fact, the Gibb report suggests that parts of Southern would be better operated by Transport for London, and I wonder whether that is the reason why the whole of appendix 9 has been redacted from the report.

This issue is beyond politics, and it is affecting the quality of life of thousands of people—people who get up early, go to work, pay their taxes and, on top of that, pay hideously high fares. All they ask in return is for the trains to run on time.

6.10 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I welcome the Gibb report and agree with almost every one of its findings, and I will not go over many of the comments made by right hon. and hon. Members this afternoon.

My constituency has been particularly affected by the 18 months to two years of disruption we have faced on the Southern rail network. The constituency is served solely by Southern, so there are no alternative rail routes. It is also very rural, and there is no bus service in many parts, so people either drive or get the train—otherwise, they are left completely stranded.

The 18 months of sheer misery were caused by a whole range of things; all the reasons are laid out in the Gibb report, and Southern rail, which I am no fan of, has played its part in this. That has led to dangerous conditions for many passengers. Many times, we are turfed out at Haywards Heath, when the train is terminated and we can go no further. On a dark winter’s night, when there are no taxis about, and there is no other way of getting around, there will be elderly passengers left there, young mums who are desperate to get home to their children, and people who are just trying to get home from work. That has been the legacy of the last 18 months.

We are a tourist destination—we are set on the beautiful south coast, and we are also in the South Downs national park—but the disruption has hit at peak times. In the tourist season last summer, we saw a 25% drop in business in many of our retail areas, and they were hit again during the Christmas period. This has been a devastating time for the tourist parts of my constituency, and businesses are only just starting to pick up now.

Things have improved. Performance rates have improved, and we are now around the 90% mark for daily performance, which has to be welcome. Passengers have started to get used to being able to rely on the train service and feel safe on it, and businesses are starting to see their customers come back and to do business.
So for the problems to start up once again, with overtime bans and ballots for strike action, is absolutely heartbreaking.

We are seeking the second person—the on-board supervisor—on trains. When I go back late at night, I see that second person, and it is reassuring to have them there. I would not support a deal that removed them completely. I absolutely welcome the work they do, and I am pleased they are still there.

Southern still has some passenger care issues to tackle. The Gibb report shows that we are on the most congested rail network in the south-east, and the trains are heavily congested. It is an hour and a half’s journey to London, but time after time—even this week, with the overtime ban—first class is not declassified. We had an incident only last week involving a pregnant woman being told off for sitting in first class, but other trains had been cancelled because of the overtime ban. That is a Southern rail customer service issue; it is not something that should be acceptable in this day and age.

Facilities for disabled passengers are a key issue. In an Adjournment debate earlier in the year, I raised the issue of toilet facilities at Haywards Heath, where our trains join to go into London. There are some fantastic facilities now, and people can drive into the new car park and get the lift straight down on to the platform, but there are no toilet facilities for disabled passengers. It is that sort of customer care that Southern still needs to address. When the Minister responded to the Adjournment debate he was fairly positive in urging Southern rail to try to bring on some of the facilities that it has promised.

We also need to look at issues of the flexible season tickets that we were promised when the franchise was let. Many passengers travel to work two or three days a week and the rest of the time work from home. We were promised flexible season tickets. It cannot be right that someone has to purchase a full season ticket when they are only using it two or three days a week. We urge Southern to deliver on its promises and its commitment in the franchise.

I welcome the huge investment that is going into the main rail line, which has been underinvested in for decades, causing 50% of the delays over the past 18 months. That urgent money that the Government has put in is making a difference, and it is a significant reason why performance has improved over the past few months. My final plea is for us to look at Brighton main line 2. If we had a second main rail line, it would enable many of our constituents to get them in the same room to agree a way forward.

6.15 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): May I, Madam Deputy Speaker, add my congratulations to you following others that have been expressed? It is a pleasure to see you in your place.

I welcome this debate, as the Secretary of State has some major information gaps to fill and some serious questions to answer. It is a shame that he left the Chamber almost as soon as he could, because on top of the six-month delay between the Government receiving the report and its publication, we have had no serious formal Government response. The Minister’s 500-word statement barely stretches to a side of A4. That is indicative of the whole attitude that we are seeing from the Government—all hands-off and no leadership. After two years of the Brighton main line rail nightmare, my constituents expect more and deserve better. They have been regularly in tears of anger and frustration. We have heard the stories of jobs lost, relationships broken up, and businesses taking a very serious hit in Brighton and Hove. All the while, passengers continue to pay through the nose for Britain’s worst-performing rail service.

I have listened to the Secretary of State today. May I point out to him that it will not help passengers to heap all the blame for our long-running rail nightmare on to the unions? The people who work on our railways every day—people who are trained to a safety-critical standard and work on the frontline—are raising specific concerns about access and safety that have yet to be answered. Moreover, the Secretary of State simply cannot keep up the pretence that this two-year-long fiasco is nothing to do with him and the Government. The buck stops with him, whether he likes it or not, and chronic problems long predate the industrial action. That action started a little over a year ago, at the end of last April, whereas we have had enduring problems for well over two years. A glance at the graph on page 93 of the Gibb report makes that very clear. Southern was the worst-performing company a very long time before any industrial action took place.

As the Secretary of State well knows, Chris Gibb says that “all the elements of the system have been under strain.” He says that Southern rail was attempting to run too many trains on poor and unreliable infrastructure. He makes a lot of technical suggestions on issues such as signalling, timetabling and service patterns. He says, critically, that strategic leadership is missing. That is not news for long-suffering passengers. With regard to this dispute, the bottom line is that there has been a chronic lack of leadership from this Government and from Ministers. It is plain that we are not going to get anywhere unless we get people talking together.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Does the hon. Lady agree that this is a case of “a plague on all their houses”—that Southern, Network Rail, the unions, and indeed, I am afraid, Ministers, have all failed passengers? Does she agree that it might be worth investigating the possibility of using binding arbitration to get them in the same room to agree a way forward?

Caroline Lucas: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I certainly agree that we need a situation where everybody is in the room at the same time, not a strategy where certain unions are picked off separately, and not one where the Government do not sit in the room either.

In his report, Gibb makes it clear: “In GTR ‘do nothing’ is not an option, so negotiations must be entered into.” The Transport Committee has called for all parties, including the Government, to sit down together and resolve the dispute, and that was months ago. The involvement of Ministers in the industrial dispute is often officially denied but in one phrase Gibb lays bare their central role, saying that the Secretary of State is “already determining the strategic direction of this dispute”.

I am pleased they are still there.
If the person in this position will not get around the table without preconditions, I really do not see how we are going to make any progress. Can the Minister also tell us where the famous appendix 9—entitled “Recommendations regarding the GTR franchise agreement”—is? That appendix, which might just shed a bit of light on the issue, is conspicuous by its absence. My constituents think that Southern has failed, as do I, and we want to see that section of the report. Does the mysteriously missing appendix 9 actually tell us whether GTR is in breach of its contractual obligations? Is the censoring of that appendix in its entirety the reason why the report was kept hidden for half a year? Perhaps Ministers want to avoid being pushed for answers about whether GTR was in breach of contractual obligations.

In October 2016, the Select Committee told the Government to “get a grip” on the monitoring and enforcement of the franchise, to speed up their assessment of the franchisee’s force majeure claim and to be prepared to restructure or terminate the agreement should GTR be shown to be in default. Until the court case brought by the Association of British Commuters, however, no action was taken at all.

ABC is also raising interesting and important questions about the safety of the concourse at Victoria station, which I want to touch on briefly. Gibb says: “At major stations such as Victoria, pedestrian flows, gateline and concourse capacity are all significantly influenced by commercial strategy.”

He pointed to the dangers that arise when many commuters are concentrated in very small areas of the concourse. He points to the Department for Transport as the place where we should be getting leadership, but are we getting that leadership? Is Victoria safe from overcrowding? Can the Minister give us a timetable and a funding commitment for the works that are needed?

Finally, Gibb says that bringing the franchise into public hands would create disruption and result in projects having to be put on hold, but that lays bare the fact that the Government have allowed the travelling public effectively to be held to ransom by a failing operator. The Government have dismantled Directly Operated Railways, so if they had to strip GTR of the franchise, they would have very limited options in terms of current project delivery. That is a serious dereliction of Government duty.

The state has to guarantee that if the private sector fails, the Government can and will take the franchise back into public control. Without that, there is no stick. The Department needs to rectify the situation and must immediately start preparing a publicly owned organisation to take over on a clear and agreed date. If the industry knew that, for example, in six months’ time the GTR franchise would switch to a directly operated railway, projects could be provided without disruption and my constituents in Brighton Pavilion would have a chance of getting a better deal on the railways.

6.22 pm

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): As this is the first time that I have spoken when you have been in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, may I offer my sincere congratulations on your recent election?

It is difficult, without risking being accused of hyperbole, to describe the sheer misery that passengers and commuters in my constituency and across the south have suffered in recent years because of the significant disruption to Southern Railway services. Many hon. and right hon. Members have described people losing their jobs and facing disciplinary hearings at their place of employment because they are consistently late for work.

At the other end of the day, I have come across many accounts of my constituents being unacceptably prevented from getting home to do the simple but very important things, such as reading their children a bedtime story or sitting around the table to have an evening meal together. Lives and livelihoods are literally being wrecked by the disruption. I have yet to cross you in this way, Madam Deputy Speaker, but many times I have been late to Question Time and debates in this Chamber because of delays to the Southern service that I regularly use to get to Westminster.

Why has this situation come about? I think the reasons are fourfold. First, the franchise structure has been bizarrely established by the Department for Transport. The Government need to learn some serious lessons about the structuring of train franchises. Secondly, as many hon. and right hon. Members have said, the network is by far the busiest in the country, and it is at capacity, or over capacity, on too many occasions. On that point, I particularly welcome the £300 million of investment for Network Rail that the Government are putting in to ensure that the engineering problems are addressed.

Thirdly, Southern and the parent company GTR have, frankly, not performed very well at all. Without repeating the stories that were told earlier, some of the ways in which they have treated their customers have been quite appalling. Lastly, as highlighted in the Gibb review—I congratulate the Government on initiating it last year—militant unions are determined to exploit the misery of passengers and this situation for their own political ends.

There is blame on all sides on this issue, but the people who are suffering—they are standing, often on cold platforms, in the middle of this argument—are the travelling public from my constituency and elsewhere in the country. [Interruption.] My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) says people are also standing on trains, and that is certainly my daily experience.

This situation needs to be addressed. There have been improvements, and I welcome the millions of pounds of additional investment at Three Bridges and Gatwick stations in my constituency, which is important. Quite frankly, however, there is the issue of the image of Britain that is created when people arrive at London Gatwick airport and try to get to our capital.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Will my hon. Friend comment on the impact on Gatwick? There are problems for my constituents commuting from Southampton to Brighton who decide to travel that way to avoid the M27, and indeed for people trying to get to Gatwick for flights, who are missing them after simply being left on the platform.

Henry Smith: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There has been a massive impact on the economy, for people trying to do business in the capital or around the
The reality is that this dispute is not about money. We have heard a lot from the Conservatives about trying to shove cash into the mouths of drivers. This dispute is about safety and accessibility. The unions have put a clear proposal on the table. They have offered to come to a deal that will ensure that disabled and vulnerable people can turn up to the train station without having to give notice, and that there will be safe conditions on the trains. The unions would then withdraw their action. That offer has been disregarded by GTR and its puppet masters in the Government. I call them puppet masters because this is a rigged contract that allows GTR to continue to get the cash incentive to run a service that it fails to run—it does not lose a penny when ticket sales are not made. It does not have to bear the risk. The problem is the contract.

The Government clearly need to bring the contract in-house. Gibb says that that would be disruptive but, as the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) said, that is because the Government wound down the direct operator and have left themselves with their pants down. They are unable to run a service and they are unable to hold the contractors to account.

Tim Loughton: The hon. Gentleman has spent most of his speech panning the role of the Government and the Department for Transport and now he is saying that he wants the franchise to be brought in-house, to be run by that same Government and Department that he has been panning. I have no problem with the franchise being removed, but he has to have a care that whoever is taking it over can do a better job of it, and that is not clear at the moment. Could it be a case of out of the frying pan, into the fire?

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: The hon. Gentleman is quite right—I would not want the Minister to be directly running the railways. It seems that the Minister is barely able to run his own Department and get people around the table to negotiate, which is one of his key responsibilities. Directly Operated Railways operated well on the east coast franchise and the franchise taken off Connex South Eastern. The service improved and it brought money back to the Exchequer. That worked then, and I see no evidence why it would not work in future.

Of course, hon. Members can point fingers at each other—I will be pointing fingers at the Government—but we must try to resolve this without preconditions. That means getting the unions around the table. We must not say that they are welcome around the table only when they have called off their strike. The Government have not got them around the table and we need to make sure that that is done.

If I was a headteacher in a school and had to send my children home because I could not organise supply cover, I would be blamed—not the teachers or the supply teacher who did not turn up. The blame needs to be on the management and on the Government. They need to step up. Our constituents are suffering every single day because of their failings.

Ms Ghani: We all want a resolution because we want to ensure our constituents can take the journeys they have paid for. The hon. Gentleman has talked about how much friction there is. I will read a quote from Mr Hedley, the RMT union assistant general secretary. He said on LBC:

“I think all the Tories are an absolute disgrace. They should be taken out and shot to be quite frank with you.”

Is that the new, gentler kind of politics that the Opposition agree with and believe will bring a resolution to this problem?

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: It does not help when the Government have not been getting the unions around the table in the same room without preconditions. That is how we de-escalate things. People in positions of responsibility, such as the Minister, need to come forward and de-escalate it, and not just point fingers and quote from the radio but actually show leadership.

Paul Scully: The hon. Gentleman has spent most of his speech panning the role of the Government and the Department for Transport and now he is saying that he wants the franchise to be brought in-house, to be run by that same Government and Department that he has been panning. I have no problem with the franchise being removed, but he has to have a care that whoever is taking it over can do a better job of it, and that is not clear at the moment. Could it be a case of out of the frying pan, into the fire?

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If I was a headteacher in a school and had to send my children home because I could not organise supply cover, I would be blamed—not the teachers or the supply teacher who did not turn up. The blame needs to be on the management and on the Government. They need to step up. Our constituents are suffering every single day because of their failings.
was rightly told by many passengers—mainly Thameslink passengers, at that time—that they just wanted the trains that were already there to run on time. If we fast forward to today, the complaints about Thameslink in my postbag and my inbox have been clearly overtaken by complaints about Southern. One thing that I knew I was going to hate about being elected as an MP was the return to commuting, which I had not done for a little while. I have been furiously tweeting about the complaints I have received and about my own experience. I even missed a “meet the manager” event at London Victoria station, because I could not get there on one of its trains.

It is predominantly the Brighton main line that causes a lot of the problems in terms of infrastructure and poor linkages. A lot of the problems start when Sutton services link at Selhurst. That is where we need investment. All the trains that go through Sutton at the moment are driver-only operated, and they all work reasonably well until they get to that point.

In the short time I have to speak, I would like to make four points on how we need to sort this out. No one component, institution or organisation in this dispute has come out of it particularly well. The Department has to my mind built up a very unwieldy agreement that takes up 22% or 23% of the entire rail network within its structure. I would like that to be addressed when the franchise is up for renewal.

I would like the Mayor of London to have a greater say in the management of the suburban lines. Now, that is not the Kent line or the Sussex line.

**Henry Smith:** I am glad my hon. Friend. Friend is clarifying the fact that he does not include in that the Sussex, Surrey or Kent lines, because of course we do not have a chance to vote for the Mayor of London.

**Paul Scully:** I totally agree and I was very specific about that. The Mayor of London did himself no favours by overstepping that mark.

We need, with the congestion on the lines and the poor quality of the rail, to invest in the lines. The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) talked about the time it takes to get to Mitcham Eastfields. That is great in theory, but sometimes the trains go so slowly. Today, I was going to London Bridge and I might as well have been on a milk float, frankly, with the speed we were going—and then I might have even got a seat, which would have been a bonus.

Southern has been very abrasive in its approach to union matters, especially at the beginning. There are clearly too few carriages so we often have breakdowns, and there are too few drivers, hence the staff shortages, but we must come back to the unions. That is for no other reason than that they are the pressing issue. Chris Gibb said:

“The fact that nobody is being made redundant or losing pay against their wishes, that there will be more GTR trains operating with two people on board, and that safe Driver Only Operation is already extensive in GTR, the UK and Europe, just serves to make this dispute more difficult to comprehend, especially for passengers.”

Let us work backwards and get the unions around the table. Let us sort out this dispute and get a terrible service back to being just an incredibly poor service.

From there, we can then make it to the next stage and get it to be a good service. As we have heard, the punctuality figures are starting to come up at the end of the dispute as drivers and new carriages are starting to come on stream. Let us get the £300 million investment in and, when the franchise comes up for renewal, let us look at it in the round and break it up so that it will be more manageable.

6.39 pm

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you for calling me, Madam Deputy Speaker. I welcome you to the Chair, and thank you for chairing the debate. May I also put on record my proud relationship with working people through the trade unions, and declare my interest in that regard?

Today’s debate started abysmally. The Secretary of State for Transport failed to mention safety or access for disabled people once. His prejudices against working people came to the fore, clearly not from a party for working people. Thankfully, my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) brought us back to the Gibb report, and we heard a total of 19 contributions.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) for highlighting the consequences of brittle rostering and the problems caused by level crossings. My hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Mr Shuker) spoke of the bullying that drivers experienced in attempts to make them come to work on their days off. My hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) called for humility, and a focus on the breadth of the issues in the Gibb report. He also identified the Government’s failure of leadership. My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) talked of rail chaos, but stressed that it was not due to industrial action. My hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle), who made the 18th contribution, focused on the issue of disability access.

The scene was set for the perfect storm. Today we have heard about the consequences for constituents, the industry and staff. Ageing infrastructure is failing because of a lack of resources and critical management to address vital maintenance. Heavy demand and over-capacity manifest themselves in overcrowding. New working practices—new timetables, new commencement of routes, new trains and technological advances—have been recommended, but there has been no strategic co-ordination to date. Above all, we have failed and fragmented franchises. Collaboration and strategic oversight were the last considerations, and the very worst outcomes from a profit-driven privatisation process have been apparent. Putting profit before passengers has resulted in their paying heavily: financially, for their tickets; in terms of the worst effects of overcrowding; and—Mr Gibb mentions this at every turn—in terms of having to deal with the complete unpredictability of the service. It has been utterly chaotic. The buck stops with the Government and the Secretary of State, whom even the courts have now told to exercise his force majeure to find a resolution.

It has all been matched by a safety-critical industry. Staff rightly fear that they will find themselves before the inquest following an incident involving a passenger, for whatever reason—perhaps because the technology has missed what a second, human, eye would see. It is all happening in a high-risk setting in which there is the
potential for an accident, a landslide or terrorism, and the possibility of a driver or passenger falling ill, antisocial behaviour, or some other incident. Those with disabilities are pushed to the back of the queue when it comes to ensuring that people’s needs are met throughout their journey. As we have heard, only 3% of trains do not have a second safety-critical member of staff. We have to wonder why the Government cannot resolve this dispute, and give priority to the dignity of a disabled person who could be left on a platform.

All this is happening in a charged industrial environment in which the Government’s agents, and the Government themselves, have declared that rather than resolving the dispute, which would be easy to do, they are deliberately trying to fuel it—

Jeremy Quin: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rachael Maskell: I do not have time.

They are deliberately trying to fuel the dispute owing to their ideological aversion to trade unions—wanting to “break them”, in the words of Mr. Wilkinson, the Department for Transport official—as opposed to listening and addressing the real concerns that have been raised and are apparent for all others to see.

The stakes are high, and the Gibb report, although conflicted, recognises that. It is a serious attempt to analyse the multiple problems with the network, focusing on 10 different areas of failure, and then bring those findings together.

Cutting through the layers of self-interest—and no part of the network comes out particularly well—Gibb’s recommendations have sought to put passengers at the centre and he has pragmatically analysed the steps that need to be taken to build one Southern rail service which collaborates across operators, infrastructure bodies, the regulator and contracted services such as maintenance companies, with a reform programme that not only challenges behaviours, but sets a template for the industry to refocus.

The immense task requires all parties to take a step back and listen to what Gibb is actually saying between the lines of text. This is an immense challenge. There has to be transition. Problem solving and working together is the only way through this and a new approach must be adopted by all. There has to be space for everyone to raise their concerns and, instead of being met by a wall of denial, a bit more flexibility would be addressed for the sake of the public.

Who will provide the second set of eyes to support safe departure and keep the public safe? Those are the real questions the workers are asking and the Government are refusing to hear, and these are the issues that must be addressed for the sake of the public.

The Government would never dream of taking away cabin crew on a short flight, and yet, on journeys which may take a lot longer, removing the one person who keeps us safe, can answer our questions and concerns, and can help meet our needs, is doing the reverse of establishing what Gibb is calling for: a passenger-centred service.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) said, none of us want to stand at this Dispatch Box and lament, “if only”, and recite that “lessons must be learned.” That is why Labour would build a united, integrated, safe, accessible and functioning service for the passengers, and we would also champion the rights of passengers.

6.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time in your new role. I also welcome the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) to her place as a new shadow Minister. Having had to face the Transport Committee on this very issue on day two of my job, I know the challenge of taking up this complex issue at short notice, and the hon. Lady has acquitted herself well in her performance at the Dispatch Box. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members across the Chamber for participating in this helpful debate today, particularly those whose constituencies are on the line of route—whatever party they represent—who have worked so hard to support their constituents and deal with the impact of the disruption over the past months.

I believe that we have to continue to apologise to all those passengers who have been affected by the disputes and the disruption. We have heard many Members speak eloquently today about lives that have been disrupted, jobs that have not been a success and people who have been unable to get the treatment they need. We have heard so many examples, and my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) spoke most eloquently about the impact on her constituency.

It is worth reflecting on why we asked for this report in the first place. The hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) seemed to suggest that I should have sufficient
knowledge of these matters to know precisely what was wrong immediately. I think we can all agree that Mr Gibb was a powerful and persuasive performer when he met the all-party parliamentary group on Southern rail, and I brought him in precisely because, in my early days in this role, I wanted to understand what the real issues on the network were. We were having an epidemic of finger-pointing, and I wanted someone with a lifetime's experience on the railway, in whom everyone on all sides had confidence, to come in and analyse the situation. I think that that is what Mr Gibb has done, and I was surprised to hear some Opposition Members express surprise that he had sought to meet representatives of GTR. I do not think he could have written a proper report without doing so.

It is worth restating the central finding of the report, which is that, were it not for the actions of the unions, passengers would have experienced a much better service. Ultimately then, the quickest and surest path to improvements on Southern is for the unions to refrain from their intransigence. Members on both sides have said that many factors lie behind the poor performance on Southern, and yes, there are lessons for the Department, but one thing is abundantly clear: when the service is not subject to industrial action, performance improves because of the actions that Mr Gibb has recommended.

Peter Kyle: The Minister is quite right to say that the service has improved over the past six months when industrial action has not been running. However, in the previous two years, service levels were falling without any industrial action taking place. The central finding of the Gibb report is that we need another £1 billion in the next period after this funding agreement. Will the Government provide it?

Paul Maynard: I will come to that in a moment. The hon. Gentleman has spoken sensibly on this issue, as did the hon. Member for Luton South (Mr Shuker). They both made thoughtful contributions to the debate. I will do my best to answer all the points that have been raised, but I doubt that I will succeed in the eight minutes remaining. I will do my best to write to anyone I miss.

Tim Loughton: I am grateful to the Minister for taking my intervention. I did not speak earlier because I missed most of the debate. I would just ask him to mention one thing that was not covered. We made a manifesto commitment to customers to establish a railway ombudsman to ensure that the operators are properly penalised when they provide a rubbish service, so that customers do not have to jump through all sorts of hoops to get the compensation to which they are entitled.

Paul Maynard: I am glad that my hon. Friend mentioned that. It was indeed a manifesto commitment, and it is my personal crusade. I am determined to ensure that we bring it in, partly because of what I have seen for myself in dealing with the issues on Southern. I have had meetings today and—as they always say at the Dispatch Box—I will have further meetings in due course. I believe that this proposal is on track, and we hope to deliver it as soon as possible. I am sure that it will be welcomed across the House.

We have talked about some of the wider pressures on the network. The £300 million investment that we announced in January was a specific response to many of Mr Gibb’s recommendations, but I recognise that more will be needed. The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), who spoke for the Scottish National party, asked about the speed with which it would be spent. We made it clear from day one that it would be spent up to the end of control period 5—that is, until December 2018. That money is being spent at the moment, in addition to the £20 million he referred to. It is, for example, being spent on replacing old tracks, points and signalling. That is not just a matter of replacing bits of old kit; it will result in 15% fewer delay minutes and a more reliable and resilient railway.

There are other examples. My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) showed interest in high output ballast cleaning, and I can happily share with him that that is about replacing the ballast on the track. One might think that it is just a matter of cosmetics—not at all. Not only does it provide a smoother journey, but it reduces the number of temporary speed restrictions that increase perturbation on the network and make it harder to adhere to the timetable. Some £17 million has been spent on vegetation clearance, which may also appear to be a matter of cosmetics, but two of the five most recent incidents in the last control period that caused significant delays were due to trespassing. There is a clear link between vegetation management and the likelihood of trespassing on the railways, and that causes delays on the railways.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) mentioned the Uckfield electrification. We are well aware of that project, and we are looking at it closely to ensure that we have the best possible business case. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewes referred to BML2, and I know that the Secretary of State has met with the group and is urging it to carry on its work. Others have mentioned issues at stations. A particular finding about Victoria of Mr Gibb’s is that we need single station leadership, much like that being developed at London Bridge. A problem at stations is when train operating companies and Network Rail are all trying to make different decisions at the same time. We need single station leadership at our major termini.

We also recognise—I recognised it on day two at the Transport Committee—that the number of drivers at the start of the franchise was inadequate. We needed to understand why that was. Some of it was down to unexpected departures—fine—but I wanted to be clear about what procedures the Department had in place to ensure that any franchise handover involved adequate driver numbers. I am delighted that we now have over 322 drivers in training across the GTR network, but it takes 18 months to train a driver adequately with the route knowledge they need to operate safely on the network. The £300 million investment that we announced in January was a specific response to many of Mr Gibb’s recommendations, and we are looking at it closely to ensure that we have the best possible business case. My hon. Friend the Member for High Peak, the Chair of the Transport Committee—that the number of drivers at the start of the franchise was inadequate. We needed to understand why that was. Some of it was down to unexpected departures—fine—but I wanted to be clear about what procedures the Department had in place to ensure that any franchise handover involved adequate driver numbers. I am delighted that we now have over 322 drivers in training across the GTR network, but it takes 18 months to train a driver adequately with the route knowledge they need to operate safely on the network. The £300 million investment that we announced in January was a specific response to many of Mr Gibb’s recommendations, and we are looking at it closely to ensure that we have the best possible business case. We are also aware of that project, and we are looking at it closely to ensure that we have the best possible business case. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewes referred to BML2, and I know that the Secretary of State has met with the group and is urging it to carry on its work. Others have mentioned issues at stations. A particular finding about Victoria of Mr Gibb’s is that we need single station leadership, much like that being developed at London Bridge. A problem at stations is when train operating companies and Network Rail are all trying to make different decisions at the same time. We need single station leadership at our major termini.

As we have heard, performance has been significantly better when we have not been facing industrial action. Back in December, it was as low as 62% on the PPM measure, but it is now up at 82.5%. That is positive, but it came about only because so many of Mr Gibb’s recommendations have already been put in place. Many people referred to the benefits of smart ticketing.
I constantly urge GTR to do more with its key and keyGo smart cards, and I look forward to that benefiting constituents, particularly those in Lewes, soon.

The hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) mentioned the Thameslink programme, and my understanding is that many journeys on the East Midlands Trains franchise will be significantly shorter due to the new Thameslink timetable. That is why Mr Gibb is continuing in his role for the Department and is looking at the Thameslink readiness board, ensuring that all the different actors work together in that complex interaction, which will deliver a significant enhancement to the railway. I look forward to sharing more information with the hon. Lady. Mr Gibb’s willingness to chair the Thameslink readiness board is a sign that an approach to rail where we use expert knowledge and bring it to the table ensures that both Network Rail—many Opposition Members seem to forget that it is publicly owned—and train operating companies point in the same direction and have aligned incentives. She also briefly talked about level crossings, which I take seriously. We must ensure that the Law Commission proposal does what it seeks to achieve, but we also want to address safety around level crossings more widely—not just how we close them more quickly.

We will continue to do all that we can to try to bring an end to the dispute. We have no magic wand, but some evidence that a resolution can be reached is that ASLEF and GTR met for 32 days and managed to reach agreement on two occasions. That proves that things can be done without a Minister having to sit in the room. They are actually grown-ups, and they can reach agreement.

Stephen Lloyd rose—

Paul Maynard: I am afraid that I have already given way.

In conclusion, a lot has gone on already, but there will be a lot more to do. There is far more to do to ensure that all passengers get the timely, punctual and reliable service that they deserve on this railway. My Department will work hard to ensure that that happens. I thank everyone for their participation today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the Chris Gibb Report: Improvements to Southern Railway.

Business without Debate

ESTIMATES 2017-18

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 55 (1) and (3)),

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2018:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £288,994,619,000 be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 1083, HC 1119, HC 1127, HC 1128, HC 1138, and HC 1139,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £32,828,001,000 be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £264,243,414,000 be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.—[Mike Freer.]

Question agreed to.

Ordered. That a Bill be brought in upon the foregoing Resolution;

That the Chairman of Ways and Means, Mr Chancellor of the Exchequer, Elizabeth Truss, Mel Stride, Stephen Barclay and Andrew Jones bring in the Bill.

SUPPLY AND APPROPRIATION (MAIN ESTIMATES) BILL

Presentation and First Reading

Mel Stride accordingly presented a Bill to authorise the use of resources for the year ending with 31 March 2018; to authorise both the issue of sums out of the Consolidated Fund and the application of income for that year; and to appropriate the supply authorised for that year by this Act and by the Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Act 2017.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 4).
Neighbourhood Planning

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

7.1 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I have been involved with neighbourhood planning since I first entered Parliament almost 10 years ago. I am the author of “Open Source Planning,” which has guided many of the planning reforms initiated by the Conservative party in government. When I was Parliamentary Private Secretary to my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), we introduced neighbourhood planning. When he was Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, he appointed me as the Government champion for neighbourhood planning, a role in which I was confirmed by the current Secretary of State only last week. In this role I have been to numerous Members’ meetings to discuss neighbourhood planning. I say all that to illustrate that I have some experience of this subject.

I will particularly address two groups of points this evening. The first is on when neighbourhood plans carry weight. The Minister’s predecessor introduced a helpful change—albeit only temporary, and it is currently subject to challenge—to ensure that when councils do not have a five-year land supply, those places with neighbourhood plans that allocate sites need only demonstrate that they have a three-year land supply. We also looked at changing the time when neighbourhood plans carry full weight and bringing it back to when the document is submitted to whoever will inspect the plan, but even that is not early enough.

Let me give examples from my constituency of why that time is not early enough. The initial attempt of two villages to put together neighbourhood plans was unsuccessful. Almost immediately, developers moved into the villages and put in planning applications, not for just a couple of houses but for large-scale developments. The developers did nothing wrong in targeting two villages that had not been able to produce a neighbourhood plan, but in other cases developers are targeting villages that have just started the process of putting a neighbourhood plan together, so that they can get in before the community can decide where it wants the housing to go. That amounts to sharp practice, as in many cases it forces a race between those putting the neighbourhood plan together and the developers attempting to get the planning application through. With more and more communities now moving to put a neighbourhood plan together, this creates a situation where developers are trying to beat a neighbourhood plan and to frustrate its intention by putting the housing where the developer, not the community, wants it to go.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for all his work on neighbourhood planning, and particularly for supporting and advising me in Mid Sussex, which is in exactly the position he describes. Does he agree that all the hard work and effort of our constituents in putting together these plans voluntarily needs to be reflected and recognised, as our right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) originally intended?

John Howell: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. The thing we need to remember is that the people who have put these plans together are all volunteers—they all do this work for nothing and they all do it for the future of their village. I shall say a little more about that in a moment.

I should say at this point that in the main we are not talking about communities who are anti-development; we are talking of communities who want to embrace new housing for the long-term sake of their communities and to ensure that facilities such as pubs and sports clubs do not fall into disuse. They also want new housing above all to cater for younger people and families. There is nothing for the Government to fear here about being in the world of the nimby; neighbourhood plans have allocated some 10% more housing than it was originally suggested they should provide by their district or borough councils. From that point of view, they have been a great success.

An emerging neighbourhood plan can be a material consideration according to the national planning policy framework. The Department for Communities and Local Government’s own guidance suggests that factors to consider include the stage of preparation of the plan and the extent to which there are unresolved objections to relevant policies. It goes on to suggest that although a referendum ensures the final word, weight should be given to evidence of local support prior to the referendum and the quality of the consultation should be taken into account. I want to add that the consultation on neighbourhood plans is normally very good, which is why they pass their referendums with almost North Korean levels of approval, and this level of consultation goes on throughout the process of putting the neighbourhood plan together. However, in actual fact little weight is given to such neighbourhood plans until the referendum has been passed.

The findings of research conducted in Cornwall show that emerging neighbourhood plans should be given weight in the decision-making process, but that the amount of weight must still be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I had sought the hon. Gentleman’s permission to intervene on this issue, Madam Deputy Speaker. In my constituency, Ards and North Down Borough Council has initiated a regeneration plan for the area and also a neighbourhood plan, in that it has sought the opinion of the general public by holding public meetings. Is the hon. Gentleman telling us that the general public’s opinion is being ignored?

John Howell: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. The point I would make is that we have initiated a process whereby public opinion is taken into account throughout the process of putting a neighbourhood plan together, and that is reflected at all stages of the neighbourhood planning process. Whether that is the same in Northern Ireland I will leave for him to judge.

In the Cornish case, it is harder for the council to refuse permissions for proposals that conflict with an emerging neighbourhood plan, although this may have now been taken care of if the three-year land supply required for the neighbourhood plan areas still stands. But what this shows is how precarious the weight to be attached to neighbourhood plans really is, because it is
still for the decision maker, whether that is the council or the inspector, to assess the application on a case-by-case basis. There appears to be a great discrepancy between the emphasis given to neighbourhood plans by the Secretary of State and that given by the Planning Inspectorate. I suggest, therefore, that we need to put neighbourhood planning on a firmer basis.

The fact that there are so many cases where a neighbourhood plan has not been given weight causes great frustration. It is a cause of much frustration that so much work has been put into producing a neighbourhood plan and yet it has been overturned. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) said, that work is undertaken by volunteers, to whom we all ought to give our grateful thanks.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on initiating this debate and I agree with everything he has said. Is not the danger that if neighbourhood plans are undermined in this way, confidence in the whole process and the willingness of volunteers to undertake the process of putting together a neighbourhood plan will be damaged?

John Howell: My right hon. Friend makes a valid point. That is the last thing I want to see. I want neighbourhood plans to continue to flourish and contribute to house building and to the development of communities.

Of course, not all developers behave as I have described. Many follow what I set out in “Open Source Planning”. They try to reduce tension between themselves and the community and to work effectively with the community. However, there are those who play the game of getting in before the neighbourhood plan is fully made and frustrating the work that is going on.

I suggest that the Minister considers introducing a moratorium on new house building where a neighbourhood plan is being put together. To prevent communities from cheating and claiming that they are producing a neighbourhood plan when they are not, rules would be needed that show that the plan is genuine. There would have to be rules to make sure that communities are allocating sites for development, not using the plan as a nimby charter. That could be done by strengthening the guidance to the Planning Inspectorate and making sure that it is applied consistently, or ensuring that neighbourhood plans are given more weight when, for example, they include a list of sites or the initial consultation has taken place.

Although I say it myself, neighbourhood plans are a great success. They are giving communities a real say and responsibility for new housing by allowing them to work in partnership with their district or borough council and decide where that housing should go. Villages that were once hostile to development have become pro-development. A neighbourhood plan can take up to two years to put together and it represents a lot of hard work for the community—all done by volunteers—but so it should. It makes a major contribution to the future state of any village and cannot be written on the back of a cigarette packet. However, we have to make sure that the effort is not taken for granted or wasted by allowing some developers an opportunity to move in ahead of a neighbourhood plan. Anything the Minister can do to strengthen guidance or advance the time when neighbourhood plans carry protection would be much appreciated.

One of the major things we need to do as a Government is to provide housing for younger people. The average age at which people acquire their first home is now over 30. As it was put to me, one cannot expect people to be capitalists if they do not have any capital. We need to provide people with houses to buy, and there are two issues here—first, the number of homes and secondly, affordability. On the first, I encourage the Government to move ahead with the consultation on the changes to the calculations being made by councils of their housing numbers.

I was part of the local plan expert group—I am localist through and through—and the suggestions that we made to change how housing numbers were calculated were not anti-localist. Serious problems are generated by the lack of an agreed approach to strategic housing market assessments, which have become one of the most burdensome, complex and controversial components of plan making. We set out detailed recommendations for a shorter, simpler standard methodology for strategic housing market assessments, in particular for assessment of housing need, with the aim of saving significant time and money, and—most important—removing unnecessary debate from that aspect of plan making. I recommend the LPEG report to the Minister. I know he is new to his position, but I urge him to read it. It would help if a table of recommendations and how they are being dealt with were produced by his officials. The thinking behind that uplift is that allocating more housing land will lower prices, increase development and improve viability. Of course, the sites allocated need to be actually developed.

This is not entirely a district or borough council problem. As I have said, neighbourhood plans allocated more houses than was originally intended. We need to encourage neighbourhood planners to look to the future of their area when they plan and to be part of the solution, rather than being held at a bit of a distance as they are now.

We can be more localist by stressing to neighbourhood planning groups that they can and should have much more say over the type of housing they allocate. The need in my area and that of the Minister is not for vast swathes of council housing, but for affordable market housing. It is not for more developments of four-to-five bedroom housing, but for more developments of genuinely cheaper one-to-two bedroom houses.

I want to suggest to the Minister that it is time to be radical about the future and to be ultra-localist. The steps we have taken so far have given only some of the involvement to local communities. That process needs to go further and bring neighbourhood planning groups into the equation, so that they may stress the types of housing in terms of the number of bedrooms, and have some say over affordability. Schemes such as Help to Buy have actually touched very few people—some 360,000. We need to find a way of involving local communities in tackling the issue of affordability or they will simply blame us that houses continue to be unaffordable.

We need to stress that this is a dynamic part of the planning system. It is very unlikely that we got it right the first time and we should have the courage to make changes as we go along and seek to expand the scheme as it proves to be ever more successful. But it is essential
that we do not row back on our commitment to involving communities in the decisions over where the houses should go, what they should consist of and, crucially, what they should look like—their design. To that I would add that communities should also have a role in ensuring affordability.

7.16 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government (Alok Sharma): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) on securing this incredibly important debate on neighbourhood planning policy. As he himself has noted, he has made an enormous contribution to developing our approach to neighbourhood planning, and I pay tribute to him for his enormously hard work.

My hon. Friend mentioned his booklet “Open Source Planning”, which was crucial in informing the 2010 Conservative manifesto and the Localism Act 2011. He has played a leading role throughout that time as my Department’s champion for neighbourhood planning. He has also done an enormous amount of work in his own constituency to promote neighbourhood planning. In Woodcote, in his constituency, homes identified in the neighbourhood plan are now being lived in. It is a fantastic example of the real power of neighbourhood planning and of letting people decide where homes should go.

There are many other examples from around the country which have shown what neighbourhood planning can do to deliver more homes. Communities such as Winsford in Cheshire have planned for more than 3,300 homes. In Newport Pagnell, Milton Keynes, there are plans for 1,400 homes. I congratulate all groups across the country on carrying out this incredibly valuable work.

I am proud to say that thousands of community-minded people across England have turned the legislation passed by this House in 2011 into a reality. My right hon. Friends the Members for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) and for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) both noted that in their contributions.

Those community-minded individuals are now creating plans that make a real difference and are benefiting the places in which they live. My hon. Friend will of course be aware, because of the work he has done on this, that, since 2012, more than 2,100 groups have started the neighbourhood planning process, in areas covering nearly 12 million people. There have been more than 360 successful neighbourhood plan referendums, and over 500,000 people have taken the opportunity to vote on those plans.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I see a different side to this. We have big issues in my constituency, with many keen groups who want to create plans, but who are very cynical about the planning process. We have two particularly large developments. In north Abingdon, we have 950 homes on the green belt. In Kidlington, the development involves four villages that will coalesce with a plan for 4,400 homes—an enormous number of homes. Local groups are rightly very worried not just about infrastructure, but, mainly, about their voices not being heard. Does the Minister understand that local people now feel very cynical about all levels of planning and that that is the main reason why they are not taking up neighbourhood planning?

Alok Sharma: May I make a general point to the hon. Lady that I hope will help other colleagues too? Local authorities need to consult their local communities in reaching these decisions on housing and, of course, they are accountable directly to them. The White Paper stated that we will amend national policy to make it clear that authorities should amend green-belt boundaries only when they can demonstrate that they have examined fully all other reasonable options for meeting their identified development requirements. The hon. Lady may well have noted that today the Secretary of State has launched a £2.3 billion housing infrastructure fund that is now open for bids from local authorities to fund much-needed infrastructure. I encourage all local authorities to consider this.

Let me turn to a number of the extremely important and valid points made by my hon. Friend for Henley. I want to begin by making it absolutely clear that this Government remain firmly committed to neighbourhood planning. We all recognise the significant effort neighbourhood planning groups make and that is why we are keen to support them. The Government have made £22.5 million available through a support programme for neighbourhood planning for the period from 2015 to 2018. All groups can receive grant funding of up to £9,000 and priority groups, such as those allocating sites for housing in their plan and those in deprived areas, can receive up to £15,000 as well as full technical and professional support. The housing White Paper, which I know hon. Members will be familiar with and which was published in February, set out our commitment to further funding for neighbourhood planning groups in this Parliament.

My hon. Friend spoke of the importance of bringing forward the point at which neighbourhood plans start to influence planning decisions. As he will know, as plans are progressed they will gain increasing weight and our planning practice guidance makes it clear that decision makers must consider emerging neighbourhood plans. I will look carefully at his suggestion of changes to strengthen guidance to ensure that decision makers are in no doubt of the importance the Government attach to neighbourhood plans.

When the Neighbourhood Planning Act 2017 comes into force, it will further strengthen the position. It will ensure that neighbourhood plans have full effect straight after a successful referendum. That is earlier than at present, when neighbourhood plans only have full effect after they have been made by the local planning authority. I can confirm that I have asked my officials to prepare the necessary orders to start this provision as soon as possible. The Neighbourhood Planning Act will also require local planning authorities to notify neighbourhood planning groups of planning applications in their local community. I know that many groups feel that that is incredibly important.

On my hon. Friend’s comments about a moratorium on planning decisions while a neighbourhood plan is being produced, I recognise his concerns about those who seek to game the system and I know that other right hon. and hon. Members have made similar points.
in previous debates. I absolutely understand the frustrations felt by communities around the country when plans they have worked hard to produce are undermined. That is why the Government issued a written ministerial statement in December 2016 concerning an important policy for recently produced neighbourhood plans that plan for housing.

The statement sets out that relevant policies for the supply of housing in a made neighbourhood plan should not be deemed to be out of date under paragraph 49 of the national planning policy framework where all of the following circumstances arise at the time the decision is made: the neighbourhood plan has been made within the past two years; the neighbourhood plan allocates sites for housing; and the local planning authority can demonstrate a three-year supply of deliverable housing sites.

I know that all Members will agree that it is important that we strike the right balance so that we do not inadvertently create delays in planning for the homes needed. Of course, we keep these matters under review.

Sir Nicholas Soames: I welcome my hon. Friend to his new job and look forward to working with him. Does he agree that what is extremely important is, as my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) said, that although many developers behave perfectly properly, there are others who game the system? That is extremely prevalent in Mid Sussex. May I ask the Minister whether or not what he has just said will protect the district council and all those who work to secure their neighbourhood plans in the public inquiry, which will continue in late July?

Alok Sharma: The Government are absolutely committed to neighbourhood planning. As the new Minister, I am completely committed to it. We want this to work, and it is important for the communities that we represent. I hope that that demonstrates to my right hon. Friend the strength of feeling in the Government when it comes to supporting neighbourhood planning.

The best protection against unplanned development is to get a local plan in place. The best local plans are those where the local authority has engaged proactively with the local community. A local plan provides certainty for communities, developers and neighbourhood planning groups. It also removes the pressure on neighbourhood planning groups to fill the vacuum created by the failure of local planning authorities to keep their local plans up to date. As my hon. Friend the Member for Henley knows, the housing White Paper sought views on what changes are needed to ensure that all forms of plan making are appropriate and proportionate. We will consider how we can further speed up the neighbourhood plan process so that communities get the plans they want in place as quickly as possible.

My hon. Friend touched on the wider recommendations of the local plans expert group, to which we responded alongside the housing White Paper. He made a strong case for the introduction of a standard methodology to assess housing requirements. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government confirmed earlier today in his speech to the Local Government Association in Birmingham that a consultation will set out further details later this month on our proposals for a new way for councils to assess their local housing requirements.

To conclude, I thank my hon. Friend for securing this valuable debate and for his ongoing contribution to neighbourhood planning. I have listened carefully to the contributions made by right hon. and hon. Members and I welcome further suggestions on how best we can support neighbourhood planning in practice.

Question put and agreed to.

7.27 pm

House adjourned.
The Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—
Public Sector Pay

1. Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): If he will hold discussions with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on bringing forward proposals to review public sector pay.

The First Secretary of State and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Damian Green): Public sector pay policy has always been designed to strike the right balance between being fair to our public servants and fair to those who pay for them. The Government will continue to assess that balance.

Neil Gray: I thank the Minister for that answer, and I ask the House to note that my wife is a primary school teacher in Scotland. According to an academic report published this week by the UK Government, average public sector earnings have fallen in the last decade by 6%, or up to £3 per hour for some people. With that in mind, will the Minister advise us on whether he supports, and wishes this Government to follow, the lead that the Scottish Government have taken in ending the 1% cap for public sector workers? Or does he support what the Scottish Government have accepted every recommendation made by a public sector pay review body since 2014. Striking the right balance between being fair to public sector workers and being fair to taxpayers must be the right way forward. The suggestions that were made during the election campaign, and clearly continue to be made, by the Labour party would lead to the situation that the Greek people have had to suffer: precisely because of irresponsible commitments made by their Government, they have had to slash their public services. Public services get worse under the sort of economic policy advised by the Labour party.

Damian Green: Let me answer some of the hon. Gentleman's questions. I hope he recognises that, as I have just said, the Government have accepted every recommendation made by a public sector pay review body since 2014. Striking the right balance between being fair to public sector workers and being fair to taxpayers must be the right way forward. The suggestions that were made during the election campaign, and clearly continue to be made, by the Labour party would lead to the situation that the Greek people have had to suffer: precisely because of irresponsible commitments made by their Government, they have had to slash their public services. Public services get worse under the sort of economic policy advised by the Labour party.

Prompt Payment Code

2. Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): What progress the Government are making on the delivery of the prompt payment code.

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): What progress the Government are making on the delivery of the prompt payment code.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Cabinet Office (Caroline Nokes): Since 2015, we have worked closely with the Government's major strategic suppliers to encourage them to sign up to the prompt payment code. I am pleased to say that all 32 strategic suppliers that we targeted in 2015 have now signed up. We know how important prompt payment is to small and medium-sized companies. Also, is there a way to make sure that Government contracts are of a size such that small and medium-sized companies are more able to bid for them?

Caroline Nokes: We know how important prompt payment is to smaller businesses, and we are committed to making further improvements to payment practice. We are working to remove all barriers facing small and
medium-sized enterprises bidding for Government contracts, and we are committed to increasing spend with SMEs, both directly and through the supply chain. We have also opened the free-to-use Contracts Finder website for suppliers to advertise subcontracting opportunities.

**Gillian Keegan**: Cash flow is vital to small businesses in Chichester and throughout the country. What are the Government doing to ensure that they lead the way and pay their suppliers properly?

**Caroline Nokes**: I welcome my hon. Friend to the House. The Government are committed to paying our suppliers promptly. All public sector buyers must include a 30-day payment term in new public sector contracts, pay undisputed invoices within 30 days, and require that this payment term be passed down the supply chain. Our own payment performance is published quarterly, and the Government are doing brilliantly well in meeting our targets.

**Kelvin Hopkins** (Luton North) (Lab): When my party becomes the Government of this country very soon, we will declare war on late payments, requiring companies bidding for a public sector contract to pay their suppliers within 30 days, and going beyond that with heavy fines for late payers. Will the Conservatives in opposition support us in passing the necessary legislation?

**Caroline Nokes**: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his optimism. In fact, this Government have made sure that undisputed invoices are paid within five days in many cases, and 96% of all contracts are paid within 30 days when the invoices are not disputed.

**Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): The prompt payment code simply has not done enough to address the scourge of late payment, with £26 billion owed and an average of 72 days being taken to pay invoices across the country. May I say to the Minister that she should stop paying lip service to the problem and take the action needed for smaller businesses, which just want to be paid on time?

**Caroline Nokes**: The hon. Gentleman is of course right to point out what a problem this is for small business in particular. However, I want to draw his attention to the Government’s mystery shopper service, which has secured a positive outcome for the vast majority of companies that have brought disputed payments to our attention, and indeed to the signatories to the independent Prompt Payment Code Compliance Board, to which we would encourage all those who have not been paid on time to report such cases.

**Electoral Fraud**

3. **Sir Henry Bellingham** (North West Norfolk) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to tackle electoral fraud.

5. **Mr William Wragg** (Hazel Grove) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to tackle electoral fraud.

13. **Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to tackle electoral fraud.

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office** (Chris Skidmore): The Government believe that electoral fraud is unacceptable on any level. We have a clear path to building a democracy that is both clear and secure, and we will work closely with key partner organisations to deliver a comprehensive programme of work for reforming our electoral system and strengthening electoral integrity.

**Sir Henry Bellingham**: Is the Minister aware that there is now clear evidence that many students boasted on social media of voting twice—one at university, and once by post at home? Surely this is straightforward electoral fraud.

**Chris Skidmore**: The offence of double voting that my hon. Friend mentions is completely unacceptable. Indeed, it is nothing less than an abuse of our democracy. I am meeting Sir John Holmes, the chair of the Electoral Commission, this afternoon, and I intend to raise this with him as a priority. Let all of us in this House be clear: this is a crime. If anyone has any evidence of people voting twice, they should report it to their local returning officer and the police, who must take this issue seriously.

**Mr Wragg**: Will my hon. Friend provide more information about how the introduction of individual electoral registration has assisted in preventing electoral fraud? What checks are in place to ensure that a person is eligible to vote when they register online?

**Chris Skidmore**: The IER digital service operated by the Cabinet Office checks the details provided by the applicant, including their national insurance number, against government data before passing on the application to the relevant local electoral administration teams.

**Andrew Bridgen**: It has been highlighted that all someone needs when they go to vote is a name and an address. In theory, someone could get hold of a telephone directory and vote all day in different polling stations. Does the Minister agree that it is time to use photo identification to prevent electoral fraud?

**Chris Skidmore**: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. People deserve to have confidence in the security of our democratic system of elections. Voter ID has been in place in Northern Ireland for decades, and the use of photographic ID was introduced in 2003 under the previous Labour Government. The Electoral Commission has consistently called for use of ID in polling stations to protect the integrity of the polls. The Government will conduct voter ID pilots in the local elections in May 2018 to enable us to learn what works best, and to ensure that we develop a system in which there is full public confidence.

**John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): Are we not supposed to have policy driven by evidence, and is it not significant that the Minister gave not one shred of evidence in his reply? Quite frankly, in every election there are one or two cases of people being convicted of fraud, out of tens of millions of voters. This is straight out of the Donald Trump disinformation playbook, because Ministers are again trying to suppress voter participation. The Minister cannot come up with any evidence—if anyone has such evidence, they should take it to the police—and he should be ashamed of himself.
Chris Skidmore: I missed the last part of that rant, but this idea has the backing of the Electoral Commission and electoral authorities, so that we can deliver a secure democracy that has the confidence of the public. The last Electoral Commission report on the subject shows that 38% of people felt that electoral fraud was an issue. Since 2010, 2,394 alleged cases of electoral fraud have been reported to the Electoral Commission.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): Electoral fraud, whenever it occurs, is a serious business. The fact that there were two successful prosecutions in 2016 shows the size of the problem. Does the Minister agree that the bigger crime is having 7 million people off the electoral register?

Chris Skidmore: When it comes to the size of the electoral register, I am sure the hon. Gentleman will share my delight that we have the largest electoral register since records began, at 46.9 million people. A record 3 million people registered to vote at this election. The Government believe in a democracy that works for everyone. Tackling electoral fraud means making sure that people are not disenfranchised by losing their vote, and protecting the most vulnerable communities, such as those in Tower Hamlets.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): But surely the time has come for automatic electoral registration. How can it possibly be fair that, according to the Office for National Statistics, in my inner-city Nottingham constituency, less than three quarters of adults are on the electoral register, but in the Minister’s constituency, over 97% of adults are? Is not the real electoral fraud those policies that stand in the way of citizens exercising their democratic rights?

Chris Skidmore: The introduction of the individual electoral registration website has seen 27 million people register to vote using that system. We want to ensure that registering to vote is as easy and effective as possible, but voting and registering to vote have individual responsibility at their heart. We need to protect the integrity of the polls and, equally, all MPs have a duty to encourage registration in our constituencies.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): In Eddisbury there was clear evidence of double registrations, even within the constituency. Does the Minister agree that we should have a central system that flags up people who are double-registered, wherever they are in the country?

Chris Skidmore: The electoral register is held by 380 electoral registration officers. It is right that that remains locally accountable to communities. We do not intend to introduce any central registration system, which would cost upwards of £80 million, but we are interested in looking at this issue, which is a serious one. As I said, I am meeting the Electoral Commission and look forward to taking forward proposals in due course.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): This new ministerial team would be wrong to pander to the near-obsession of their own Back Benchers with the idea that the principal problem of our electoral system is voter fraud. In fact, the biggest thing that undermines our parliamentary democracy is that more than 14.6 million of those who were registered to vote did not do so four weeks ago. Will the Minister make good on the promises, which I have received twice already in this Chamber, to bring forward proposals to increase democratic participation in our country?

Chris Skidmore: The hon. Gentleman mentions a 14 million figure, and we heard a 7 million figure earlier from a Labour Member. What we know from the data is that there is a specific churn of people moving properties, particularly renters and home movers. The Government want to address that to make sure that we have better data, so that we understand where people are registering and why they are registering. That is why we will bring forward a democratic engagement strategy to ensure that we have a democracy that works for everyone.

Democratic Engagement

4. Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): What discussions the Government have had with electoral administrators on promoting democratic engagement. [900253]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore): We have worked closely with electoral administrators across the country to make use of their experience and expertise when consulting on promoting democratic engagement. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to take this opportunity, on behalf of the whole House, to thank our returning officers and registration officers for their hard work in ensuring that the recent general election ran so smoothly. They are the unsung heroes of our democracy.

Maggie Throup: British citizens living abroad want to engage in our democratic process here in the UK, but currently they lose that right after 15 years. What is my hon. Friend doing to deliver on our manifesto promise to give such people votes for life?

Chris Skidmore: The Government’s principle is clear: participation in our democracy is a fundamental part of being British, however far people have travelled. We are committed to scrapping the 15-year rule in time for the next scheduled general election in 2022. Although the manifesto commitment to legislate for votes for life was not in the 2017 Queen’s Speech—the manifesto was a programme for the Parliament, not just for this first Session—we are determined to ensure that British voters, wherever they are, have the right to have their say.

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): In terms of democratic engagement, we had unprecedented problems in Newcastle-under-Lyme during the general election with late and missing postal votes, and with people being turned away from polling stations over registration issues. I have written to the First Secretary of State and Minister for the Cabinet Office about that, an investigation is under way, and I will apply for an Adjournment debate. In the meantime, will the Minister urgently remind council chief executives and returning officers of their responsibility to resource electoral services sufficiently to carry out their legal responsibilities?

Chris Skidmore: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will report that specific point on Newcastle-under-Lyme to the Electoral Commission, which will produce a review of the general election that the Government will look at
closely. The Cabinet Office has provided funding for local authorities and registration officers over a five-year period. We are looking at those claims, but he is absolutely right that our elections are a centrepiece of local democracy, and local authorities should take this seriously.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): Democratic engagement must be safe. Will my hon. Friend provide more information on the work being done to support sufferers of domestic violence in registering to vote?

Chris Skidmore: Indeed. Next year will be the 100th anniversary of women getting the right to vote, and the 90th anniversary of women getting the equal right to vote, but there are still some women and groups in society who, by virtue of their circumstances, are unable to vote. Survivors of domestic violence are unable to register because they do not want to put their safety at risk. We are determined to take forward legislation to ensure that we expand the range of attesters and documentation to give those women the chance to vote in our democratic elections.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): A Lancaster University study found that 24% of people with learning disabilities had registered to vote, but that only 9% of them used their vote. The survey also found that some voters were turned away from polling stations by clerks who perceived their learning disability to be the reason why they were not allowed to vote. What are the Government doing to ensure that all voters, regardless of their disability, have their right to vote in elections?

Chris Skidmore: The hon. Lady makes a very important point. The Cabinet Office has established an “accessibility to elections” working group; its members include Mencap and the Royal National Institute of Blind People. I am concerned to ensure that in the 21st century, disability and sight loss are not barriers to voting. We will look at bringing forward proposals to ensure that we make our elections as accessible as possible.

Mr Speaker: Pithily, John Howell.

Cyber-security

6. John Howell (Henley) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to ensure the cyber-security of public and private sector organisations.

7. Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to ensure the cyber-security of public and private sector organisations.

8. Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to ensure the cyber-security of public and private sector organisations.

9. The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Cabinet Office (Caroline Nokes): Our world-leading national cyber-security strategy, supported by £1.9 billion of transformational investment, sets out measures to defend our people, businesses and assets; deter our adversaries; and develop the skills and capabilities we need. Our experts in the National Cyber Security Centre provide advice and guidance to help both public and private sector organisations be more resilient to cyber-attacks.

John Howell: There seems to be a misleading impression that IT and cyber-security are of interest only to boys. What are the Government doing to encourage women to take part?

Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Only 10% of the global cyber workforce is female. That represents a huge pool of untapped talent. As part of our ambitious plans to transform the nation’s cyber capabilities, we have launched new initiatives, such as the incredibly successful CyberFirst Girls competition to encourage young women to pursue a career in the industry—it has more than 8,000 participants. We also want business to do more to encourage women into that exciting and rewarding sector.

Victoria Prentis: What steps can we take to ensure that we train young people to tackle the cybercrimes of the future?

Caroline Nokes: I agree that it is important that our young people have the skills they will need to support the nation’s future security and economic prosperity. We are working with industry experts and organisations such as Cyber Security Challenge to reach out and inspire children, parents and teachers through a range of extracurricular activities, mixing teaching with real-world challenges and hands-on work experience.

Damien Moore: Many of my constituents are served by Southport and Formby district general hospital, which was affected by the recent cyber-attack on the NHS. What steps are the Government taking to protect our health service from such attacks happening again?

Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend raises a really important issue. The impact of WannaCry was felt by the NHS as a result of a legacy of some unsupported IT systems and inconsistent software patching. NHS Digital is taking a proactive approach to ensure that security patches are applied promptly, and the National Cyber Security Centre has provided expert guidance to CareCERT and is supporting individual NHS trusts and organisations in their migration from unsupported systems.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The Cabinet Office rejected a Public Accounts Committee recommendation that it should set out a detailed plan for how the National Cyber Security Centre will enable those under attack to get help. We heard evidence from many people in large organisations who were very confused about where to go for that help. Will the Minister now reconsider the rejection of that requirement and look again?

Caroline Nokes: Our advice is very clear: we have funded a substantial national cyber-security programme, which goes alongside expertise from the National Cyber Security Centre. That is directed specifically towards improving the cyber-security of Government and the wider public sector. Our collective focus is on ensuring we have the most secure systems, and that public services and buildings are kept up to date so that our information is safe.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Cyber-security is, of course, only as strong as it is policed. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure the police have the resources to enforce cyber laws without having to sacrifice neighbourhood policing?
Caroline Nokes: The hon. Gentleman will have heard my comments about the National Cyber Security Centre. It is really important that we have specialists in place to address what is a very particular and high-tech crime.

Topical Questions

T1. [900209] Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The First Secretary of State and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Damian Green): In their 2015 manifesto, the Government committed to sign up their major suppliers to the prompt payment code. This voluntary code commits signatories to fair payment terms across all UK transactions. Prompt payment can make a real difference to small businesses, boosting their cash flow and allowing them to invest in growth. Since 2015, we have worked closely with the Government’s strategic suppliers to encourage them to sign up. I am pleased to confirm that all the suppliers we targeted in 2015 have now signed up to the code.

Chris Davies: Does my right hon. Friend agree that transparency is an effective way of changing the culture around prompt payments? What are the Government doing to ensure that businesses that regularly pay their suppliers late can be identified?

Damian Green: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. We recently introduced a new statutory duty for large companies to report on a six-monthly basis on their payment performance and practices. It is important that this protects small and medium-sized enterprises. We encourage businesses to report any instances of poor payment practice in public sector contracts to our mystery shopper service.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): The House will be aware that we are currently having the first parliamentary by-election of this Session. It is happening over in the other place; it is the hereditary peers by-election, with just 31 electors. Does the Minister agree that that is a farce in a modern-day democracy?

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore): The Government have been clear, in the previous Parliament and in their manifesto, that reform of the House of Lords is not an immediate priority. However, a Lord Speaker’s Committee in the other place is looking at the size of the House of Lords and we are determined to consider its recommendations. The situation relates to legislation passed by a previous Parliament and in their manifesto, that reform is a priority. My hon. Friend will know that the National Cyber Security Centre is working hard to reduce the prevalence of XP machines in the Government estate. The hon. Lady will know that the National Cyber Security Centre takes the lead on this issue and is co-ordinating work across government.

Mr Speaker: One sentence: Sir Henry Bellingham.

T2. [900210] Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Government’s coalition of chaos extends, unfortunately, as far as cyber-security, with responsibility shared between the Cabinet Office, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the Home Office and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. Can the Minister tell me the prevalence of XP machines in the Government estate, the public sector and the private sector, and what she is doing to reduce it?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Cabinet Office (Caroline Nokes): We have made good progress on reducing dramatically the number of XP machines in the Government cyber-estate. The hon. Lady will know that the National Cyber Security Centre is working hard to reduce the prevalence of XP machines in the Government estate. We are determined to consider its recommendations.

Mr Speaker: One sentence: Sir Henry Bellingham.

T3. [900211] Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): If the Government are really committed to modernising the electoral register, will the Minister confirm that they will allow universities to block-register students during enrolment and re-registration, and ensure that schools and further education colleges give details of people who are approaching voting age to the electoral registration office?

Chris Skidmore: No. We do not agree with block registration. What the Government have done is to ensure, through the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, that universities have a duty to encourage registration. We will publish ministerial guidance on the issue in 2018.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): Now that the Local Government Finance Bill has been suspended, will the Minister tell me what additional revenue-raising powers mayors such as mine in devolved areas like Cambridgeshire will have?

Damian Green: I know my hon. Friend. Friend will welcome the fact that, through the devolution deal with Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, the Government have pledged £770 million of new funding to support local economic growth. I look forward to working with the excellent James Palmer, the new mayor, to support growth in Cambridgeshire.
T4. [900212] Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): At the last general election, the Government made very little attempt to ensure that voting registration and participation took place, and large swathes of the electorate were unable to vote properly. Will the Minister outline the steps that will be taken to ensure—[Interuption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Carry on.

Marsha De Cordova: Will the Minister outline the steps that will be taken to ensure that people living with visual impairments are able to vote, and that voting is fully accessible both to them and to those with learning disabilities?

Chris Skidmore: A record number of people are now on the electoral register. We have a democracy in which more people are participating than ever before. I shall be delighted to work with the hon. Lady on the question of visual impairments, which I believe is a cross-party issue, and we look forward to presenting proposals to ensure that elections are accessible to visually impaired people.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [900217] Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 5 July.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): Today marks the 69th anniversary of the NHS, and last week saw the 80th anniversary of the 999 service. I know that Members on both sides of the House will join me in paying tribute to the incredibly dedicated men and women who work tirelessly to save and improve lives day in, day out.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today. Later this week I will attend a meeting of the G20, where I will discuss the global economy, counter-terrorism and sustainable development with my fellow leaders.

Hannah Bardell: Her face smashed with an iPad, her body beaten, and forced to abort a baby girl: that is only some of the domestic abuse that my constituent Lola Ilesanmi has suffered from her estranged husband because she has refused to allow the genital mutilation of her daughter. Lola is educated, has a mortgage, and had a good job with Royal Bank of Scotland until the Home Office revoked her right to work. I have been writing to the Home Office since March, and have got nowhere. Will the Prime Minister now intervene to prevent the family from being deported, and to prevent that three-year-old girl from being subjected to genital mutilation?

The Prime Minister: The Home Secretary has obviously heard the case that the hon. Lady describes. The issue of female genital mutilation is one on which I think all of us, throughout the House, are agreed. It is an abhorrent activity; it should not be taking place. Great efforts have been made in recent years in strengthening the law on female genital mutilation, getting information out about the issue, and trying to support people in communities where FGM is practised. The message must go out from the House today that we will not accept FGM in this country.

Q2. [900218] James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): In the last few days Iraqi security forces, assisted by coalition airstrikes, have made significant progress in eradicating ISIL fighters from Mosul. That is a significant step forward in the military conflict against ISIL in Iraq, but does the Prime Minister agree that the United Kingdom and the United States, in a broad international alliance, need to work with the Iraqi Government to ensure that there is reconstruction in places such as Mosul, and also to ensure that they are sufficiently strong to withstand the poisonous ideology of ISIL as we seek to defeat it?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: in order to keep the streets of Britain safe, we must continue to attack Daesh in Iraq and Syria, and the UK is playing its part as one of the 71 members of the coalition. The RAF has conducted over 1,400 strikes, and over 500 British soldiers are on the ground providing further assistance, but he makes the very important point that it is not just about the military action that takes place; it is about how we ensure there is sustainable reconstruction and rebuilding afterwards. Our troops have helped to train over 55,000 Iraqi security forces personnel, and we are providing more than £169.5 million in humanitarian aid and a further £30 million to help Iraq to stabilise these liberated areas. Together, we must also work not just in Iraq but internationally to ensure that the hateful ideology of extremism is not able to poison the minds of people.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): May I start by wishing everyone a very happy Pride month, especially those taking part in the Pride march this Saturday and similar marches around the country? We should also be aware that a survey taken by Pride in London found that half of LGBT people in London had experienced hate crime in the past 12 months.

I join the Prime Minister in wishing the NHS a very happy birthday, but I was hoping that she was going to say a bit more about NHS staff and their pay during her birthday greetings, because after a week of flip-flopping and floundering, we thought we had some clarity from Downing Street at last. On Monday, the announcement was that the public sector pay cap at 1% remains, and a rare moment of agreement between Nos. 10 and 11 was seen, but yesterday we heard news that firefighters will be offered 2% this year and 3% next year, so can the Prime Minister confirm whether the public sector pay cap will remain for all other public servants until 2020?

The Prime Minister: First, may I join the right hon. Gentleman in wishing everybody who is going to take part in Pride London on Saturday an excellent day? I am sure it will be a very good occasion, as it always has been. May I also say that I and all Members of the House value the incredibly important work done by our public sector workers, including—[Interruption]—yes, including those in the national health service and others?

I understand why people feel strongly about the issue of their pay, but perhaps I can just set out—[Interruption] For the information of the House, perhaps I can just set out what the current position is. Three public sector pay
review bodies reported in March—they covered doctors and dentists, NHS staff including nurses, and the armed forces—and the Government accepted the recommendations of all three. The firefighters’ award is not determined by the Government—it is determined by the employers—and is not subject to a pay review body. There are outstanding pay review body reports that cover teachers, prison officers, police officers and those on senior salaries. The Government will consider those reports very carefully and respond to them, but while we do that, we will always recognise that we must ensure that we take decisions with regard to the need to live within our means. The right hon. Gentleman and I both value public sector workers and our public services; the difference is that I know we have to pay for them.

Jeremy Corbyn: The public sector pay cap causes real shortages in nursing, teaching and many other professions, as well as real hardship. I had a letter last week from a teacher called David—[Interruption.] It’s all right: he is a teacher; he is doing a good job—all right? He says: “I have been teaching for 10 years. I have seen my workload increase. I have seen more people leave the profession than start, and no form of pay increase in seven years. The only thing holding the education system together is the dedication to struggle on for the students and staff.” He goes on to say that that dedication is “starting to run out”. I say to the Prime Minister that what we are doing through this pay cap is recklessly exploiting the good will of public servants like David. They need a pay rise.

The Prime Minister: The Leader of the Opposition refers to the number of nurses and teachers working in the public sector. Of course we now have more nurses in our hospitals than we had in 2010, and we have more teachers in our schools. But let me remind the right hon. Gentleman why it has been necessary for us to exercise restraint in public spending, including by capping public sector pay. It is because we inherited the biggest deficit in our peacetime history. We have acted to bring the deficit down by a quarter and then a half, and it is now down by three quarters. At the same time, we have seen record numbers of people in employment—nearly 3 million more people in work. We have seen record numbers of people in employment—nearly 3 million more people in work. We have seen the economy grow and record levels of people in employment. Wages are rising by 2.1% while inflation is at nearly 3%. Six million workers already earn less than the living wage. What does the Prime Minister think of that?

Mr Speaker: Order. I noticed earlier, Mr Mahmood, that you seemed to be in a very hyper condition today. I recommend that you take some sort of soothing medicament or go and lie down for a little while. You will feel better at the end of it.

The Prime Minister: We acted to bring the deficit down by a quarter and then a half, and it is now down by three quarters. At the same time, we have seen the economy grow and record levels of people in employment. Our policy on public sector pay has always recognised that we need to balance the need to be fair to public sector workers, to protect jobs in the public sector, and to be fair to those who pay for it. That is the balance that we need to strike, and we continue to assess that balance.

Jeremy Corbyn: We have had seven years of tax cuts for the richest and tax breaks for the biggest corporations. Last year, there was a net loss of 1,700 nurses and midwives to the NHS, and in the first two months of this year alone, 3,264 have left the profession altogether—not a great birthday present for the NHS, is it? Last week, the Chancellor said: “We all value our public services and the people who provide them to us.”—[Official Report, 29 June 2017; Vol. 626, c. 797.] He went on to laud his own economic record by saying that we had a “fundamentally robust economy”. The Prime Minister found £1 billion to keep her own job; why cannot she find the same amount of money to keep nurses and teachers in their jobs? After all, they serve all of us.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman talks about the number of nurses. In fact, I think he was talking about the number of nurses who are registered in the United Kingdom. There are about 600,000 nurses registered in the United Kingdom; about half of them—300,000—work in the NHS in England. Contrary to what he says, we have 13,000 more nurses working in the NHS today compared with 2010. I understand that it has been hard for people who have been working hard and making sacrifices over the years as we have been dealing with Labour’s mismanagement of the economy, but let me remind the right hon. Gentleman of what happens when you do not deal with the deficit. This is not a theoretical issue. Let us look at those countries that failed to deal with it. In Greece, where they have not dealt with the deficit—[Interruption.] What did we see with that failure to deal with the deficit? Spending on the health service cut by 36%. That does not help nurses or patients.

Jeremy Corbyn: I hope that the Prime Minister is proud of her record of controlling public sector pay to the extent that hard-working nurses have had to access food banks in order to survive, and of frozen wages for teaching assistants, paramedics and council workers. But this is not just in the public sector. Across the economy, wages are rising by 2.1% while inflation is at nearly 3%. Six million workers already earn less than the living wage. What does the Prime Minister think that tells us about seven years of a Conservative Government and what they have done to the living standards of those people on whom we all rely to get our public services and our health services delivered to us?

The Prime Minister: I will tell the right hon. Gentleman what has happened over the past seven years. We have seen record numbers of people in employment—nearly 3 million more people in work. We have seen the introduction of the national living wage—never done by Labour, but introduced by a Conservative Government. We have seen 4 million people taken out of paying income tax altogether and a cut in income tax and a change in the personal allowance that is the equivalent of £1,000 a year to basic rate taxpayers, including nurses. That is a record of good management of the economy—you only get that with the Conservatives.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister simply does not get it. [Interruption.] Mr Speaker: Order. We have plenty of time. I am quite happy to run on for some considerable period of time. People who are making excessive noise should try to calm themselves and perhaps just give a moment’s thought to whether they would like to be viewed by their constituents shrieking their heads off. It is very downmarket.

Jeremy Corbyn: There is a low-pay epidemic in this country, and it has a terrible effect on young people. Those in their 20s will earn £12,500 a year less than the
generation before. They are the first generation to be worse off than the last. They are less likely to be able to buy their own home, more likely to be saddled with debt, and more likely to be insecure, low-paid work. Except for more misery, what do the Prime Minister and her Government actually offer the young people of this country?

Hon. Members: Jobs!

The Prime Minister: To echo the words of my colleagues, we offer young people more jobs, more homes, and the opportunity to own their own home. Let me just tell the right hon. Gentleman what is not fair: it is not fair to refuse to take tough decisions and to load debts on to our children and grandchildren; it is not fair to bankrupt our economy, because that leads to people losing their jobs and their homes; and it is not fair to go out and tell people that they can have all the public spending they want without paying for it. Labour’s way leads to fewer jobs, higher prices and more taxes. Labour’s way means that everyone pays the price of Labour.

Jeremy Corbyn: When Tories talk of tough choices, we know who suffers: the poorest and most vulnerable in our society. Young people employed on zero-hours contracts are more likely to have worse mental and physical health. Students who have worked hard at university graduate with £57,000 of debt that will stay with them until they retire. Let me spell it out to the Prime Minister: this is the only country in which wages have not recovered since the global financial crash; more people are using food banks; 4 million children are living in poverty; there is record in-work poverty; young people see no prospect of owning their own home; and 6 million people are earning less than the living wage. The low-pay epidemic is a threat to our economy. Will the Prime Minister take some tough decisions and introduce the national living wage. Those are measures that are giving people real help. We also help people by, for example, cutting taxes—that is important for people. We are doing what is important for this country, which is ensuring that there are jobs and an economy providing those jobs for people, because the best route out of poverty is being in work. That is what we are doing. We have given to people who are low paid: we introduced the basic-rate taxpayers and taken people out of paying income tax; and we are doing what is important for this country, including in this House.

The Prime Minister: We actually now see that the proportion of people in absolute poverty is at record lows. The right hon. Gentleman asks for help for those who are low paid, and I reiterate to him the help that we have given to people who are low paid: we introduced the mandatory national living wage—the lowest earners’ fastest pay rise in 20 years; we have cut taxes for basic-rate taxpayers and taken people out of paying income tax; and we are doing what is important for this country, which is ensuring that there are jobs and an economy providing those jobs for people, because the best route out of poverty is being in work. I know that he has taken to calling himself a “Government in waiting”. Well, we all know what that means: waiting to put up taxes; waiting to destroy jobs; and waiting to bankrupt our country. We will never let it happen.

Hon. Members: More, more.

Mr Speaker: Order. I understand that the House is excited about hearing the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan).

The Prime Minister: First, let me commend my right hon. Friend on the work she has done in setting up the Loughborough Wellbeing Project, and I am happy to join her in paying tribute to the work of the eating disorders service in Leicester. As she says, it does incredibly important work, and we must do more to transform the mental health services that we provide for young people and mental health in general. That is why, as she says, we are putting more money into mental health, and our spending on mental health reached a record £1.6 billion last year. We do need to make sure that that funding gets through to frontline services. One example of that is the work we are doing to ensure that teachers and staff in schools are trained to better identify and better deal with mental health problems when they are present in children. I saw that when I visited Orchard School in Bristol last week, where excellent work is being done, really improving the quality of services for young people with mental health problems.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): As we meet here today, the funeral is taking place at St Peter’s Free church in Dundee of the former leader of the Scottish National party and Member of Parliament for Dundee East from 1974 to 1987. I am sure the House would like to join me in commemorating the life and contribution to politics of the late, dearly missed friend and colleague Gordon Wilson.

The UK government have not announced any measures to address rising inflation and slowing wage growth, which the Institute for Fiscal Studies has described as “dreadful”. As workers face more than a decade of lost wage growth, and endure the worst period for pay in 70 years, does the Prime Minister think she is looking out for the “just about managing”?

The Prime Minister: First, may I say to the hon. Member, as I did last week, that I am sure all Members of this House will wish to offer our condolences to the friends, family and colleagues of the late Gordon Wilson, and recognise the role he played in politics in the United Kingdom, including in this House.

I say to the hon. Gentleman, as I have said to the Leader of the Opposition, that what is important is that we ensure that we have an economy that is increasing the number of jobs, because the best route out of poverty is for people to be in work. That is what we are doing. We have seen nearly 3 million more jobs being created over recent years. That is important for people. We also help people by, for example, cutting taxes—that is exactly what we have done for people who are lower paid—and introducing the national living wage. Those are measures that are giving people real help.

Ian Blackford: Of course it is the forecast of a rise in in-work poverty that should concern us, in particular the likely increase of young people in poverty over the lifetime of this Parliament. Since the 2010 general election,
the FTSE 100 has risen by 39.6%. Monetary policy, not least quantitative easing, has helped to drive up financial assets, while workers have paid the price for austerity. Workers will earn no more by 2021 than they did in 2008. Will the Prime Minister give workers a pay rise?

**The Prime Minister:** I would have thought that the hon. Gentleman, particularly with his background, would have recognised the role played by monetary policy, including quantitative easing, in ensuring that we have the jobs in the economy that are so important to people.

Q3. [900219] **Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): My young constituent paid a £300 house-reservation fee to Pattinson estate agents, but the agents will not refund it after their landlord client withdrew from the contract because my constituent refused to pay 12 months’ rent in advance. She faces having to pay another agent non-refundable fees of £650 to secure a 12 months’ rent in advance. She faces having to pay another agent non-refundable fees of £650 to secure a 12 months’ rent in advance. Will the Prime Minister act to put an end to these rip-off fees and stop these agents capitalising on young people and others?

**The Prime Minister:** The hon. Gentleman should look at the Queen’s Speech, in which we referred to an end to rip-off fees and the Government are taking to drive value for money and efficiency in the aid budget, to ensure that that taxpayers’ money is used to promote global peace and security in the national interest?

Q4. [900222] **Bill Wiggins** (North Herefordshire) (Con): In 2008, I tried to amend the Animal Welfare Act to ensure that people who are wilfully cruel to animals or does not provide for its welfare needs may be banned from owning animals, given an unlimited fine or, as he says, sent to prison. My hon. Friend is right that sentencing is an issue, which is why the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs regularly holds discussions with the Ministry of Justice on sentencing policy for animal welfare offenders.

Q5. [900221] **Paul Scully** (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend tell me what steps the Government are taking to drive value for money and efficiency in the aid budget, to ensure that that taxpayers’ money is used to promote global peace and security in the national interest?

**The Prime Minister:** I am afraid the hon. Gentleman is misrepresenting what the Government are committed to honouring our international commitments on aid. That is important for this country, because that money is saving lives and building a more stable and prosperous world, and that is firmly in our UK national interest. Nevertheless, my hon. Friend is absolutely right that we need to make sure that the money we are spending is being spent properly and efficiently. I assure him that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development is driving value for money and efficiency in the aid budget, focusing on greater transparency, boosting payment by results, and driving value for money from DFID suppliers. In 2011, we set up an independent aid watchdog, together with stronger systems and controls in DFID. It is important not only that we are committed to that money, but that we make sure it is spent well.

Q6. [900222] **Bill Wiggins** (North Herefordshire) (Con): In 2008, I tried to amend the Animal Welfare Act to extend sentences for cruelty to animals from weeks to years. Will my right hon. Friend see what can be done to ensure that people who are wilfully cruel to animals are punished far more severely?

**The Prime Minister:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. Friend for raising this issue. We all share a high regard for animal welfare and it is important to have in place strict laws to ensure that we deal properly with people who are not looking after animals. Anyone who is cruel to an animal or does not provide for its welfare needs may be fined or, as he says, sent to prison. My hon. Friend is right that sentencing is an issue, which is why the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs regularly holds discussions with the Ministry of Justice on sentencing policy for animal welfare offenders.

Q7. [900223] **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): Looe harbour commissioners have highlighted to me the valuable contribution that retired police sergeant—and now special constable—Russ Hall has made to maritime policing. Does my right hon. Friend believe that joined-up working with other agencies is essential and can make a positive contribution to beating crime in small harbours and helping to protect our borders?

**The Prime Minister:** I join my hon. Friend in recognising Special Constable Russ Hall’s contribution in her constituency. She makes an important point; indeed, when I was Home Secretary I brought together various agencies—the police, the Border Force and others—to look at how we deal with protecting our borders. That joined-up working can make a real and positive contribution. As she will know, what matters is not only how we do that but ensuring that we have an impact—and crime has fallen by a third since 2010, to a record low.

Q12. [900228] **Mr Khalid Mahmood** (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for advising me about my blood pressure. When I go to the hospital to see my consultant on Monday, I am sure that he will give me the same advice. My blood pressure rises when I go into hospitals and see all those nurses who are overstretched, overworked and underpaid, and having to use food banks. The Prime Minister pays lip service to them and will not look at ending the public sector pay cap. I now make a plea to her; she should listen not to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition, but to those nurses and do something about the public pay sector cap.

**The Prime Minister:** I set out my position in response to an earlier question by the Leader of the Opposition. People may not realise that there is not only the overall public sector pay increase, but, for many nurses, increments or progression pay as well. A typical band 5 nurse will receive 3.8% over and above the 1%.
Q9. [900225] Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): It is a strong economy that powers this Government’s investment in the NHS and a strong economy that allows this Government to create 1,500 new medical school places and some new medical schools. Does the Prime Minister agree that Lincolnshire’s unique rurality and sparsity makes a compelling case for a new medical school in this great county?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an important point, which is that we can pay for our public services only if we have that strong economy. That is absolutely the basis of it. As he said, we will train 1,500 new doctors every year to ensure that the NHS has enough doctors to continue providing that safe compassionate care that we all want to see. The Department of Health is currently looking at how to allocate these places, and will publish its consultation response shortly. It is also looking at the possibility of new and aspiring medical schools bidding for those places. I am sure that, as he has always been a champion for his constituents and his constituency, he will continue to make an excellent case for Lincolnshire.

Q14. [900230] Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): On Saturday, the shadow Chancellor and I joined staff from Picturehouse Cinemas outside the Ritzy in Brixton who are striking because their employer refuses to pay the London living wage and has outrageously sacked their trade union representative. Will the Prime Minister join me in calling on Picturehouse Cinemas, which made a profit last year of more than £80 million, to pay its staff the London living wage and to reinstate the local reps immediately?

The Prime Minister: That is about a relationship between employers and their employees. Overall, what is of importance is that the Government are taking the right decisions to ensure that we are growing the economy and providing those jobs for people in the first place.

Q10. [900226] Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for taking time during the general election to come up to Banchory and campaign in my constituency where we did rather well. Does she agree that it is utterly shameful that the Scottish Government have, for the second year in a row, had to go pleading to the European Commission for an extension to the farm payment deadline? Is that not proof, if further proof were needed, that the Scottish National party is failing rural Scotland?

Mr Speaker: Order. We are fascinated to hear the answer, but I should just say that, although I am very interested to hear the answer and we will, the Prime Minister is not responsible for the Scottish Government.

The Prime Minister: I welcome my hon. Friend to his place in this House. I very much enjoyed my visit to Banchory during the election campaign. What he says is absolutely right. Time and again in this Chamber, we hear the Scottish nationalists demanding more powers for Scotland, yet what do we see? We see that they are failing to deliver for the Scottish people with the powers that they already have. Yet again, Scottish schools are now outperformed in every category by schools in England, Northern Ireland, Estonia and Poland. Powers are kept in Edinburgh rather than being devolved to local people and, as he says, yet again we see farmers waiting months for their subsidy payments. The simple fact is that the SNP’s policies are not in the best interests of the people of Scotland.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I say to the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), who persists in gesticulating in an extremely eccentric manner, that he seems a little discombobulated from the world he inhabits, which is a very unhappy state of affairs that cannot long continue.

Q15. [900231] Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): The Southern rail dispute is causing real damage to the economy of Eastbourne and the south-east. My constituents have had a dreadful time, with a shocking service provided—or not provided—over the past 18 months. This simply cannot go on. Will the Prime Minister enlighten me, my constituents and the House as to why the Department for Transport and the rail operator will not meet the unions at the same time and in the same room together to negotiate a deal?

The Prime Minister: I recognise the problems that have been experienced by Southern rail passengers—the matter has been raised by a number of colleagues in the House, including my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), who raised it last week. I am very disappointed that ASLEF and the RMT have called more industrial action, which is completely unnecessary; all that it will do is cause more disruption and frustration for passengers. The recent independent Gibb report said that the main cause of widespread disruption on Southern rail has been union action, so I urge the unions to call off the strikes, work with the operator and deliver the services that passengers need.

Q11. [900227] Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Businesses across my constituency will be cock-a-hoop to hear that their calls for better broadband are being answered by the digital infrastructure investment fund, which will unlock about £1 billion for full fibre service and help them create jobs, particularly in rural areas. Does the Prime Minister agree that that is exactly the sort of infrastructure spend we need to get our Brexit ready?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. This country is already a digital world leader, and we are committed to ensuring that we remain so. We already see 93% of the UK accessing superfast broadband, and we are on track to reach 95% by the end of the year, but we want to see more commercial investment in the gold-standard connectivity that full fibre provides, which is why we have launched the digital infrastructure investment fund. Companies across the UK, including in Brentwood and Ongar, will be able to apply for match funding for projects and see fibre delivered right to the doorstep. Yesterday we also announced 100% business rate relief for those businesses rolling out new fibre. This is important. We want to continue to be a world leader in digital, and the actions that the Government are taking will ensure that we will be.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Police officer numbers in Wales have dropped by 10% since the Prime Minister’s party came to power. If policing were
devolved, as it is in Northern Ireland and Scotland, Welsh police forces would have extra funding worth £25 million at their disposal, which would more than replace those lost officers. What justification is there for refusing to devolve policing?

The Prime Minister: We have been around this discussion before. Let me address the central issue of what the hon. Lady is talking about, which is police budgets and the number of police officers. We have been protecting police budgets since 2015, as I believe is acknowledged across the House. We are also ensuring that the police have the capabilities they need to deal with new types of crime, by creating the national cybercrime unit and the National Crime Agency. Those are all important steps to ensure that the police can do their job of cutting crime, and crime is at a record low.

Q13. [900229] Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for introducing the trade, agriculture and fisheries Brexit Bills in the Queen’s Speech, which will be welcomed right across the west country. However, we are facing significant challenges with our rural post office network at the moment, with the transition from community branches to community village stores and community buildings. Some of those moves have been smooth and some have not. Will she take a look at that to see whether there is anything more the Government could do to help my constituents?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an important point. It is right that we recognise the role that post offices play in rural communities, and not only in places such as Camelford and St Minver in his constituency, but in the constituencies of other hon. Members. We have invested more than £2 billion in the network up to 2018. The number of post offices is actually at its most stable for decades. But he is absolutely right. I urge the Post Office to make it as easy as possible for shops that want to take over postal services to be able to do so.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Some 2,400 people have died as a result of the NHS contaminated blood scandal—more than Hillsborough and all the other disasters over the previous few decades put together. On 25 April, the former right hon. Member for Leigh presented compelling evidence to Parliament of a criminal cover-up on an industrial scale, so will the Prime Minister now do the right thing and order a public inquiry for the whole United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady raises an important issue. I know that Members’ thoughts will be with all those who have been affected by this terrible tragedy of contaminated blood. Serious allegations have been made, and Ministers at the Department of Health will obviously look at information that has been brought to the House. If any hon. Member has any further information or evidence that they believe is important, it should go to Ministers so that they can properly investigate it. We are providing more compensation than any previous Government, and we committed £125 million extra funding last July for those affected by the contaminated blood tragedy. The Department of Health will look at any new evidence that is brought forward.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): Rather than celebrating the NHS, the Labour party has rather shamelessly tried to weaponise it as a mere tool for political campaigning. Will the Prime Minister assure me that decisions on services such as the 999 service will be clinical decisions, not those of politicians who are trying to weaponise our public services?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is very important that decisions relating to services provided by the NHS are taken on a clinical basis by those who understand the needs and requirements of people in different areas. That is why we set up NHS England, which has a plan for developing services in the NHS over a five-year period. It is important that politicians allow clinicians and others in the NHS to make the decisions they need to.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I know that the House will be thinking of my constituents Connie Yates, Chris Gard and Charlie at this incredibly difficult time. It is clear that if Charlie remains in the UK no further treatment is available and life support will be switched off. There are differing views about the chances of the nucleoside bypass therapy, which other children—albeit with less severe forms of Charlie’s conditions—have benefited from. I understand that the chances of improvement for Charlie are low, but the doctors would be able to say within three months whether Charlie was responding and whether that change was clinically beneficial. If there is any room for discretion in the court rulings for Great Ormond Street to allow Charlie to leave and to transfer his care to doctors at Columbia University, and if he is sufficiently stable to receive treatment, would the Prime Minister do all she can to bring the appropriate people together to try to make this happen?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is right to raise the concerns of her constituents in this matter. I am sure that the thoughts of all Members of the House are with the family and Charlie at this exceptionally difficult time. It is an unimaginable position for anybody to be in, and I fully understand and appreciate that any parent in these circumstances would want to do everything possible and explore every option for their seriously ill child. I also know that no doctor ever wants to be in the terrible position of having to make such heartbreaking decisions. The hon. Lady referred to the fact that we have that court process. I am confident that Great Ormond Street hospital has considered, and always will consider, any offers or new information that have come forward along with the wellbeing of a desperately ill child.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): When the Prime Minister and I left our comprehensive schools to go to university, we entered a privileged elite. Will she confirm that as a result of tuition fees, introduced by Labour and improved by the coalition, more young people from working class and poor backgrounds are now going to university than ever before? Some people say that there are fewer. Are they right or are they wrong?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to join my right hon. Friend in recognising that she and I left comprehensive schools and went to universities at a time when the number of people going to university was significantly lower than it is now.
lower than it is today. I am also grateful to her for reminding the House that, actually, it was the Labour party that said it would not introduce tuition fees and then, when it got into government, introduced tuition fees. Under the current system, we are seeing more young people than ever going to university, and crucially—to address the point she raised—disadvantaged 18-year-olds are 40% more likely to go to university now than they were in 2009.

**Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab):** The Prime Minister herself commissioned Bishop James Jones to report on the experience of the Hillsborough families. Given the painful evidence before us that parts of the state still do not know how to treat bereaved families or the survivors of catastrophe, will she now give me the date when she will publish Bishop Jones’s report?

**The Prime Minister:** I have not myself yet seen Bishop Jones’s full report. I am not able to give the hon. Lady a date when I will publish it, but she raises a very important point. The reason why I asked Bishop James Jones to undertake this work was precisely because I was concerned about the way in which the bereaved families at Hillsborough had been treated over far too many years, and obviously we have seen the result of the Crown Prosecution Service decisions last week. This is why we have committed in the Queen’s Speech to introducing an independent public advocate who will be able to act on behalf of bereaved families in cases of public disaster. It is important that they are able to have that support alongside them, because too many families have to fight over many years to get justice, as we have seen in Hillsborough. I want to ensure that they have help and support in doing that.

**Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con):** Given the Government’s record on freezing fuel duty, will the Prime Minister resist recent siren calls to raise it, because this hurts the lowest paid the most? Will she also do everything possible to make sure that when the international oil price falls, that price is properly reflected at the pumps so that we can have a Britain that works for every motorist?

**The Prime Minister:** May I first commend my right hon. Friend, who has been championing this issue for all the years that he has been in the House? The work that he has done as a great campaigner on this and, indeed, other issues has been recognised by the Government in changes the Government has made. As he knows, I am pleased that we have been able to do what we have done in relation to holding down fuel duty. I think he is trying to tempt me down a path which I will not go down, because, as he knows, decisions on these matters are taken at the time of fiscal events.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** Order.
Public Sector Pay Cap

12.48 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement outlining the Government’s policies with regard to the public sector pay cap.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): We all recognise that public sector workers do a fantastic job. Over the past seven years, we have seen major improvements in our public services. Crime is down, with a greater proportion of police on the frontline. More children are achieving higher standards at school and going on to apprenticeships and university. Our NHS is looking after more people than at any time in its history.

Government pay policy is designed to be fair to public sector workers, who work so hard to deliver these strong public services, but we must also ensure that we are able to provide those public services on a sustainable basis for the future. In many services, workers have received pay additional to the 1% national increase. Teachers had an average pay rise of 3.3% in 2015-16. More than half of nurses and other NHS staff had an average increase of over 3% in 2016. Military service personnel also saw an average additional increase of 2.4%. Salaries in the public sector remain comparable to those in the private sector. In addition, many people benefit from higher pension entitlements. They also benefit from the rise in the personal allowance, worth £1,000 to a basic-rate taxpayer.

We are currently completing the pay review process for 2017-18. We have accepted the pay review body recommendations made for doctors, the NHS and the armed forces. We will be looking very carefully at the recommendations on the remainder and making determinations in the usual way. As the Chancellor said on Monday, our policy on public sector pay has always been designed to strike the right balance of being fair to our public sector workers and fair to those who pay for them. That approach has not changed, and the Government will continually assess that balance.

John McDonnell: I welcome the right hon. Lady to her post, but when we ask a question of the Chancellor, we would expect the Chancellor to respond to that question. We simply wanted clarity on whether the pay cap is still in force. That is all we asked for.

The response that we have seen today confirmed what most commentators are now saying: this is not a Government; it is a Cabinet of absolute chaos. Let me explain that the existing Government policy, as set out in the comprehensive spending review 2015, due to be ratified today in the Supply and Appropriation (Main Estimates) Bill, is still a 1% pay cap, and this is the dictat to which the various pay review bodies are still working. In fact, they are written to and told that their proposals have to reflect “the Government’s policy on public sector pay awards”.

Yet over the last week we have seen, to be frank, absolute confusion in government—total disarray. The question we are posing is, “Who actually speaks for the Government on this issue?” On the day of the Queen’s Speech, No. 10 was briefing out the end of austerity and the relaxing of the pay cap, only to be contradicted by an incandescent briefing from No. 11. Daily fearful of a putsch, No. 10 backs down. For the Prime Minister it must be tough, living next to a disruptive neighbour you can’t stand, you try to get rid of, and you can’t get on with.

We then receive in the press the wisdom of the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), who, according to a spokesperson, “supports the idea of public sector workers getting a better pay deal”.

This is followed by his past campaign manager turned political assassin, the new Environment Secretary, who supports the putsch against the Chancellor. Then the whole process degenerates into farce when we have David Cameron, earning £100,000 a speech, telling us that the people who want more than 1% are “selfish”. The Chancellor has called for a grown-up debate. I agree. What we have seen are Cabinet Ministers scrapping in the school playground. Cut off from the real world that most people live in, the Chancellor has no understanding of why our public sector workers are so angry. They are angry because they have had enough of seeing tax cuts to the rich and corporations while their pay is being cut.

Can the Chief Secretary to the Treasury clarify how the Government’s estimates 2017-18, as per the Supply and Appropriation (Main Estimates) Bill on the Order Paper today, will accommodate the reported offer to the fire and rescue services, which, we are told, is subject still to Government funding? Moreover, if we are to see another Government U-turn, which in the case of public sector pay we would welcome, can the Government confirm how they will fund the £5 billion needed that they say would be saved by the 1% pay cap? Or are we being confronted with yet another uncosted commitment within weeks of a Parliament commencing? It’s the magic money tree again.

The Government’s own report on Monday showed how much doctors’ and nurses’ pay had fallen. Does the Chancellor think that is fair? Given that 20% more nurses left the nursing register than joined it this year, how much doctors’ and nurses’ pay had fallen. Does the Chancellor think that is fair? Given that 20% more nurses left the nursing register than joined it this year, does the Chancellor agree with the chief executive of the Royal College of Nursing that they say would be saved by the 1% pay cap? Or are we being confronted with yet another uncosted commitment within weeks of a Parliament commencing? It’s the magic money tree again.

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The Government’s policy on public sector paywards. “F or every day...the cap remains in place” the profession is “haemorrhaging”?

Finally, given the chaos on the Government Benches over this policy, can the Chief Secretary tell us when an actual decision will be made about the future of the pay cap? Will public sector workers have to wait until the next Budget before finding out whether they will have decent pay for the next two years? Should not the Chancellor now write formally to the pay review bodies to say that they are free to do what is right by public servants and pay them a fair pay award this year?

Elizabeth Truss: I do not know whether to be disappointed or delighted that the shadow Chancellor does not want to see me at the Dispatch Box, but I am here today to answer his questions because I am responsible for this policy area, and I think that is entirely appropriate.

As has been outlined by the Prime Minister and the Chancellor already, our policy on public sector pay remains in place, because it is the responsible thing to do. It is the responsible thing to balance the importance
of recruiting and retaining high-quality people in our public services with making sure that our public finances remain sustainable so that we can continue to see the improvements in our public services that we have seen under this Government.

Some of the shadow Chancellor’s comments were disingenuous. He did not reflect the fact—

Hon. Members: Withdraw!

Mr Speaker: Order. I know these matters pretty well by now. The right hon. Lady must resume her seat. I am sure that she has got a very versatile vocabulary, and she must deploy some other term. She cannot accuse a Member of being disingenuous; that is an imputation of dishonour. She has been in the House long enough to know that she should not say that. It is very simple, no debate required—a simple withdrawal. Thank you.

Elizabeth Truss: I do withdraw that, Mr Speaker, and apologise for it.

Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman was mistaken in what he said, because in 2015-16 we saw teachers get 3.3% worth of progression pay, we saw more than half of nurses and NHS workers get over 3%, and we saw military service personnel receive 2.4%. I therefore suggest that he include those facts in the figures next time he speaks. As for the fire service, he knows perfectly well that those pay policies are set independently and are covered within the local government budget.

I think it is wrong that we are hearing the Opposition talk down our public services when we are seeing huge improvements, we are seeing more people attracted into our public services, and we are seeing the best performance ever in our education system and our health system. As for uncosted commitments, the right hon. Gentleman has £60 billion worth.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the pay review process. Well, the process is very simple. We have received recommendations from pay review bodies already this year. They make decisions based on the individual circumstances within those sectors. We have followed all of their recommendations. We will look at the further recommendations we need to make decisions on, and we will look at the balance between affordability and making sure that we retain and recruit high-quality public sector workers. This is the right approach. It is not saying that we are going to open up the cheque book, bankrupt our public services and see people lose their jobs, which is exactly what has happened in countries like Greece that took that approach and took their eye off the public finances. The right hon. Gentleman needs to take a more balanced approach in the way that he looks at this issue.

Mr Speaker: During the rather fractious proceedings to date, one Member has been the embodiment of calm and serenity. That Member should be imitated by others, and will now be called to contribute—Mr Kenneth Clarke.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): Those are not adjectives that have been applied to me throughout my political career. Mr Speaker, but I am grateful to you for that credit. May I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on straightforwardly restating the Government’s sensible policy on this issue? It is necessary as part of our ensuring, in this post-Brexit world, that we keep the economy on track; that steady, sustainable growth continues; and that we steadily eliminate the problem of debt and deficit that we inherited.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that if she were to give way to this week’s lobbying on the subject it would be a political disaster, because the Government would be accused of a U-turn and a surrender? It would set off a wave of pay claims across the entire public sector, which the Opposition are obviously looking forward to taking part in if they can provoke them. It might also be an economic disaster, and it would not be in the interests of the many people in the public and private sectors who are having economic difficulties in these times, and who want to look forward to a much more prosperous future as we get our economy back to health.

Elizabeth Truss: My right hon. and learned Friend has a huge amount of experience in this area. He is correct to say that we need to take account of the sustainable, long-term financing of public services. We need to look at the specific issues in each sector where we need to recruit and retain staff, and we also need to look at fairness with the private sector. At the moment, public sector and private sector salaries are roughly comparable. As a country, we need to improve our productivity and our growth rate. That is the way to ensure that everybody benefits. The Government have a fantastic record when it comes to getting people into work, and unemployment is at its lowest level since 1975. We need to make sure that we continue with that.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I welcome the Chief Secretary to her place. We had all hoped that today would bring some commitment and certainty from the Government on public sector pay. Instead, our public sector workers continue to be stonewalled from the Dispatch Box, while members of the Cabinet have apparently abandoned collective responsibility to brief for an end to the cap. Perhaps that says more about those Ministers’ desire to undermine the Chancellor and the Prime Minister than it does their commitment to public sector workers. According to The Times, the Prime Minister wanted to announce something today but could not get her Ministers to agree a line.

This week, a report by academics from University College London was published quietly by the UK Government’s own Office of Manpower Economics. The report showed that average hourly public sector wages fell in real terms by 6%—or, for some, by up to £3 an hour—in the past decade. That is perhaps part of the reason why the past decade has been the worst for wage growth in 200 years, and why in-work poverty continues to rise. With that in mind, can the Chief Secretary advise our dedicated police, firefighters, nurses and others—who put their lives on the line and make great sacrifices for us—what they have to do to earn a fair pay rise, as they will do in Scotland? Or does the Chief Secretary support former Prime Minister David Cameron’s comments from Seoul yesterday, when he said that it was “selfish” to campaign for an end to the pay cap?

Elizabeth Truss: As I have outlined, pay is determined by a very clear process. Independent pay review bodies make recommendations on areas such as pay for the

### [Elizabeth Truss]
police and nurses. We will look very carefully at those recommendations to balance fairness for public sector workers, and recruitment and retention of the best possible people, with affordability for the public finances. That is a responsible approach to take, and it will ensure that our economy grows and unemployment continues to move in a positive direction.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Since 2010, 13,000 more nurses have been employed in the NHS. I am worried that the Labour party’s unfunded proposals for public sector workers could lead to a cut in the number of nurses, given the £68 billion black hole in the financing of the party’s manifesto. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that when she looks at pay for nurses, she will not only consider what is a fair level of pay, but ensure that we remain able to afford to employ more nurses in the NHS? Will she also ensure that we continue to focus on sound finances and a strong economy to pay for our public services?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right to point out that, by having this balanced policy, we have protected jobs in the public sector and we have protected important services. The Office for Budget Responsibility outlined in its report that our policy protects the jobs of 200,000 public sector workers. That is important for those people, but it is also important for our constituents who receive those public services and who are seeing improvements in our schools and hospitals, and a reduction in crime. It is important that we take that balanced approach.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Does the Chief Secretary not accept that there was a fundamental difference between the economic conditions when the 1% cap was introduced, when there was a fear of large-scale unemployment and deflation, and the economic conditions of the present day, when there are chronic labour shortages throughout the public sector and salaries have been eroded by rising inflation? Will she not lift the cap to reflect basic economic reality?

Elizabeth Truss: First of all, public sector pay is comparable with private sector pay. In addition, public sector pensions are set at a higher level, on average, than private sector pensions. The pay review bodies have a remit to look at retention and recruitment when they make their independent decisions. Of course, I will look at all their recommendations when they come out. The right hon. Gentleman has made an omission that was important. I remember visiting Chelmsford prison in his constituency, which was looking at training and progression, because training and progression are extremely important. I am looking at training opportunities for prison officers. We are looking at that throughout the public sector, because job satisfaction derives from many things, and although pay is of course important—I would not deny that—job satisfaction is also about working conditions and about people on the frontline feeling empowered to do their jobs well and knowing that they are making a contribution. Being a public servant is incredibly important, and we need to show that we are giving people on the frontline the ability to make decisions and really improve people’s lives for the better.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): Right now, 130 workers at Annesley Department for Work and Pensions office are being told that their place of work will be closed and their jobs relocated up to an hour’s drive away. Have these public sector workers not suffered enough from the seven-year pay cap? Is not the last thing that they need to be told that they need to find more money to pay for their travel to and from work?

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Lady refers to a specific issue with a jobcentre in her constituency. I am sure that the DWP is looking at how those people can be assisted, and it is certainly something that I am happy to raise with the Work and Pensions Secretary on her behalf.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): In Chelmsford, we are very proud to be home to one of the places where nurses are trained—the great Anglia Ruskin University, which I visited just last week. It is good to hear my right hon. Friend speaking about how nurses have benefited from pay progression, and also from lower taxes, through the increment.

Part of increasing the prosperity of public sector workers is the provision of an increasing number of training opportunities. There is great excitement in my constituency not only about the introduction of degree apprenticeships and being one of the first places in the country to build a new medical school, but about affordable housing and people having more money in their pockets. Can the Chief Secretary confirm that increasing prosperity is not just about pay, but about having a strong economy to deliver more houses, more training and more skilled opportunities?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right that we need to look at what is included in the wider package that people receive, whether that is support for their pension, additional flexibilities or additional elements of pay and training, because training and progression are extremely important. I remember visiting Chelmsford prison in her constituency, which was looking at training opportunities for prison officers. We are looking at that throughout the public sector, because job satisfaction derives from many things, and although pay is of course important—I would not deny that—job satisfaction is also about working conditions and about people on the frontline feeling empowered to do their jobs well and knowing that they are making a contribution. Being a public servant is incredibly important, and we need to show that we are giving people on the frontline the ability to make decisions and really improve people’s lives for the better.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): As a public sector worker, how much has the right hon. Lady’s own pay increased since 2010 and how much has her productivity
increased since 2010? Can the country afford her pay increase, and if so, does she agree with me that Britain deserves a pay increase?

Elizabeth Truss: I would answer the hon. Gentleman by saying that my pay has gone both up and down since 2010, but my pay is set independently. The important point is that the pay of public sector workers is determined by the pay review bodies, whose recommendations I take very seriously, and that is how we should approach this issue. Rather than trying to politicise the issue and saying that we should have a blanket approach, we have set public sector pay review bodies the remit to make such decisions themselves.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): When will the Government introduce the £95,000 cap on exit payments for public sector workers? The legislation is on the statute book, but it has not been implemented. Will it be implemented soon so that we do not have any more payments such as the £390,000 paid earlier this year to the chief executive of Bournemouth Borough Council to leave?

Elizabeth Truss: I would be very happy to discuss that issue with my hon. Friend later.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The rise in inflation, the recommendations of pay review bodies and the closing of the gap between private sector and public sector pay have quite rightly focused attention on the whole issue of the current pay policy. Does the Chief Secretary agree that rhetoric about austerity and uncosted and unfinanced amendments to the Queen’s Speech in this House are no substitute for looking at the tax and borrowing implications and the implications for other parts of the public sector of a review of pay policy?

Elizabeth Truss: We need to look not only at the important issue of fairness for public sector workers and the issue of recruitment and retention, but at the overall health of the British economy, so that we can make sure we carry on having low unemployment rates and growth in our economy and carry on dealing with the debt that is a result of the great depression that we suffered as a country. We need to pay down the debt and get the deficit further down so that we can continue to enjoy high-quality public services.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): As someone who has worked as a nurse during the period of the pay cap and pay freeze, may I just say that that is very difficult to do as a public sector worker? The issue is greater than just a pay rise; it is also about the pay structure. When Labour introduced the “Agenda for Change” system, it created an increment system under which people have to wait five, six or seven years to get the pay they actually deserve. The increment system is not working, and it also gives trusts the opportunity to downgrade people, with a sister in one hospital on band 7 and another somewhere else on band 5. The pay structure is not working, and that needs to be looked at as urgently as the pay cap.

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend’s great expertise as a former nurse is shown by the detailed question she has asked. We need to make sure that we reform public services and give people the opportunity to progress and be trained in the roles they fill. One of the roles of the pay review body is to look at such structures, as well as at rates of pay. During the processes they go through, those bodies certainly take evidence from frontline workers, unions and experts in the area, and I hope that they will take such issues into consideration.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Chief Secretary referred to productivity increases in the public sector. We recently saw firefighters racing into Grenfell Tower, paramedics and police racing into the Manchester Arena after the bomb, and doctors, nurses and other medical professionals working around the clock to save people’s lives. What advice would she give to her hon. Friends on the Government Benches about productivity increases by those people, who have served the people of this country?

Elizabeth Truss: Those firefighters, police and others in the emergency services have done a tremendous job, and I am sure we are all extremely grateful to them for regularly putting themselves on the line of danger. The hon. Gentleman is right to point that out.

What does productivity mean? I talked earlier about empowering people on the frontline to be able to make decisions and do things more quickly. When I talk to nurses and teachers, they sometimes say that they want less bureaucracy so that they can get on with the real jobs that they have been employed to do, and that is why more police are spending more time on the frontline. Productivity means giving people more job satisfaction—spending more of their time doing the job that they have come in to public services to do—and that is why we are reforming public services and seeing improvements.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is vital that the Government should continue to balance fairness for public servants and fairness for taxpayers who pay for public services?

Elizabeth Truss: We need to ensure a continual balance in being fair to the people working in public services—giving them the training and opportunities they deserve, and paying them fairly—while at the same time making sure that they will be able to continue to work in those public services in the future. If we look at what happened in Greece when the deficit got out of control, we can see that there was a 36% reduction in spending on the health service. [Interruption.] Members on the Opposition Front Bench may groan, but they should look at the facts about what happens when unfunded spending commitments are made. Let us be clear: the Institute for Fiscal Studies has said that Labour’s spending plans would lead to the highest levels of taxation we have ever seen in peacetime Britain. Theirs are not moderate but extreme proposals that would lead to people losing their jobs.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): The Chief Secretary quite rightly outlined that there is more to the package offered to public sector workers, including pensions, but will she confirm that the average pension for a local government worker is less than £80
week? What message does it send when, on top of that, their wages are supressed and their workloads have increased twofold? Is not the truth that this Government know the cost of everything and the value of absolutely nothing?

**Elizabeth Truss:** We care about how well our public services are serving the public, and we want to have highly motivated people working in our public services who feel valued and properly remunerated. That is why such decisions are made by independent bodies.

**Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con):** Members on both side of the House want strong wage increases for those at the bottom end, whatever sector they are in. Will the Chief Secretary tell us what our new national living wage will do to the incomes of those at the bottom end, and will she confirm that it will give us one of the strongest minimum wages in the world?

**Elizabeth Truss:** My hon. Friend is right and I congratulate him on the role he had in that policy. We are raising wages for those on the lowest incomes and taking more people out of tax. Basic rate taxpayers have seen a £1,000 reduction in their tax bill. That is important in dealing with the cost of living and in making sure that it always pays for people to go into work.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP):** In a very readable book, “Austerity: The History of a Dangerous Idea”, Professor Mark Blyth charts the fact that austerity always fails, either at the ballot box or with people waking up to the failing consensus that is austerity. If the Government instead concentrated on growth, the deficit would take care of itself. Is it not time that public sector workers, who pay taxes, are given the money to spend in the economy and create that growth?

**Elizabeth Truss:** I understand that the hon. Gentleman’s party voted to support our pay policy earlier this year.

**Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con):** The Institute for Fiscal Studies estimated that Labour’s proposal would cost £9 billion a year, which is more than double the amount the party estimated in its manifesto. That would involve significant borrowing. Our interest bill is £50 billion a year. Does the Chief Secretary to the Treasury agree that that is £50 billion less to invest in our public services?

**Elizabeth Truss:** That is right. Future generations will pay for the services that we are enjoying today, and that is wrong. We need to live within our means and make sure that people are properly rewarded. We need to make sure that things are fair between the public and private sectors. That is what the Government’s balanced policy is achieving.

**Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab):** My union Unison represents workers across the public sector. The hard-working nurses, teaching assistants, cleaners and local government workers in my constituency of Enfield, Southgate who are not subject to increments have been asking me when they will get fair pay for the hard work they do for all of us. Does the Chief Secretary agree with me and some of her colleagues that in the light of the increases in inflation and the cost of living, the public sector pay cap must end now?

**Elizabeth Truss:** I have already said that our policy balances the need to make sure that people are remunerated properly—that is what the pay review bodies look at—and the need to make sure that public services are sustainable in the long term, because as well as making sure that people are paid properly and that the wider package is as good as possible, we need to make sure that those jobs are protected and secure in the long term.

**Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con):** Does the Chief Secretary agree that as a result of Labour’s economic mismanagement in 2008 to 2009, average wages—[Interruption.]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The hon. Lady’s question must be heard. Everybody in this Chamber must be heard. Let us hear Rachel Maclean.

**Rachel Maclean:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. As a result of Labour’s economic mismanagement in 2008 to 2009, average private sector pay fell significantly, while public sector pay remained stable. Does the Chief Secretary agree that it is important, when we look at the pay review bodies’ recommendations, to recognise the challenges faced by small businesses when they are outpaced by public sector earnings? Given that small businesses, as employers, create the majority of the jobs in this country, will she ensure that the pay review bodies take into account the views of small business people?

**Elizabeth Truss:** We have got to the position where public sector pay is comparable with private sector pay, and public sector workers often have pension entitlements on top of that. It is fair to get to a position where pay is comparable, for the skills people have. That is fair for the businesses that we need to create wealth in our country, so that we can fund public services. It is fair for workers in both the private sector and the public sector. Nothing is more important than getting people into work and giving them a sense of pride and responsibility, and the ability to earn for themselves and their family that come with it. The Government should be proud of what we have achieved: the lowest level of unemployment since 1975. The idea that we should put that at risk by making our public finances unsustainable or by pricing small businesses out of the market is very dangerous.

**Mr Speaker:** I see that the Father of the House is leaving the Chamber, but I hope that the calm and serenity that he brought to the Chamber will linger with us for some time to come.

**Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab):** This issue is also about fairness—a word I have heard repeatedly. Liverpool clinical commissioning group paid themselves increases of between 15% and 81%, with a non-executive getting £105,000. An NHS investigation has confirmed that that is far outside the rules, yet the accountable officer and governing body have not been held to account. Does that send a message from the Government to the NHS that people can do whatever they want, that anarchy rules and that the pay cap will be applied selectively and is not fair?

**Elizabeth Truss:** It is very important that all public sector bodies stick within the rules.
Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Stephens, you are a very excitable denizen of the House. I had been intending to call you, but I think I will leave you to simmer down for a few minutes in the hope that you can recover such poise and composure as are available to you.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): The Labour Government brought in Agenda for Change for NHS staff, which finally put us—I was one of those NHS staff—on a fair rate of pay with an independent pay review body, but since 2010 the coalition Government and the Tory Government have systematically undermined Agenda for Change pay rates by capping and freezing wages. The Government are all too ready to describe NHS workers as fantastic, but giving them a fair pay award is just that—fantasy. Is it not time that the Government put their money where their mouth is?

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Lady is not acknowledging the fact that more than half of those people on Agenda for Change are receiving average incremental pay of 3.3%.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that the NHS has attracted workers from across the EU, particularly in nursing. When she looks at how we set public sector pay, will she look at international comparisons across the EU to ensure that pay is set in such a way as to continue to attract those very much needed staff to Britain? Does she have data on that that she can consider?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for his question. The pay review bodies are responsible for gathering the data on how we ensure that we retain and recruit the high-quality staff that we need in our NHS. I know they have looked at that in their reports this year, as I am sure they will do in future.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): In the exceedingly fine city of Norwich, we have three NHS trusts, two local authorities and a teaching hospital—thousands of public sector workers who contribute to our economy, and who are struggling to make ends meet. Surely the Government must understand that austerity is dying on its feet. They should invest in those people. If they lift the public sector pay cap, they will invest in Norwich’s local economy. It is a win-win for everyone.

Elizabeth Truss: I should say to my fellow Norfolk MP that we are seeing improved public services in Norfolk, both in the health service and in our local schools. That is a result of the Government reforming services and investing in them, and ensuring that people receive pay that helps to retain and recruit the best possible staff.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I understand that pay bodies are independent—it is important that they remain so—but will the Chief Secretary explain who sets the context for those pay bodies? When they undertake their reviews, will they take into account not only historical pay rises and the cost of living, but extra influences such as the influence of Brexit on our difficulty in recruiting nurses?
Elizabeth Truss: The answer is that the Government set the remit for the pay bodies last year. Those reports have all been submitted. We have responded to some of them, and we will respond to others in due course. Later this year, we will set the remit for the 2018-19 pay bodies.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): No Opposition Member is talking down our public services in the way that the Chief Secretary to the Treasury claims. We are talking up the incredible commitment of the people who work in them, despite the contempt with which her Government treat them. She talks about job satisfaction. Does she accept that what contributes to job satisfaction for nurses is having the time they need to spend with patients? When the NHS is under such strain, nurses simply do not have the time to spend with patients because there are so many staff vacancies. The NHS is in crisis. Lifting the pay cap is a crucial way of addressing it. Why will she not do it?

Elizabeth Truss: With respect, the hon. Lady talks the NHS down in her question. The fact is that the NHS is doing a tremendous job. We are reducing the bureaucracy so that nurses can spend more of their time with patients. My right hon. Friend the Health Secretary is driving an agenda of reform that is delivering better public services.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is worth remembering what would have happened had the Labour party won the first general election after the great recession: its 2010 manifesto committed to tough action on pay, including a 1% cap on public sector pay. Does my right hon. Friend think that that was because Labour does not value public sector workers, or because it understood the reality of the country’s position as a result of its mismanagement of public borrowing and bank regulation?

Elizabeth Truss: There is rather an issue of false consciousness on the Opposition Front Bench.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): May I help the Chief Secretary? The pay review bodies operate within a budget that is set by the Government. It is a political decision not to accept their recommendations, which she can do something about. Before entering Parliament, I was proud to serve as an NHS manager. Managers in the NHS play a crucial role in both patient care and patient safety. Does she agree that equity of treatment on pay is crucial for senior and all levels of management in the health service, to ensure the recruitment and retention of the very best?

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Lady talks about the recommendations of the pay review bodies. We have accepted all of the recommendations that we have reported on so far this year. They are able to make the recommendations they see fit. The Government set a remit, but the bodies are independent in what they advise us, and they have to take account of areas such as retention and recruitment.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Unemployment has fallen by 63% in my constituency since 2010. I have many nurses and teachers working in my constituency, but I also have carers and, all of whom have benefited from tax changes introduced by the Government that mean they have an extra £1,000 in their pockets and in their take-home pay. Does the Chief Secretary agree that tax changes do not discriminate between private and public sector workers?

Elizabeth Truss: Both private and public sector workers have a vital part to play in the economy of this country. By taking people out of tax, we have reduced the tax bills of basic rate taxpayers by £1,000. The Opposition propose the highest levels of taxation in this country’s peacetime history. Who would that full on? It would fall on precisely the people whom we have been talking about in today’s debate.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I mean to accommodate remaining would-be interrogators, but questions and answers from now on need to be shorter. They have been becoming ever longer as the session has proceeded.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Fifty-five per cent. of public sector workers are not covered by review bodies, including most of our civil servants and some of those on the very lowest incomes. Will the Chief Secretary give any hope that real pay rises will be considered for the 3 million public sector employees without a review body, and what will be the mechanism for doing so?

Elizabeth Truss: As with people who are under the purview of the pay review bodies, we need to ensure that we retain and recruit the best possible civil servants. At the same time, we need to ensure that that is affordable for the public purse.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): As the shadow Chancellor knows perfectly well, the former Prime Minister did not say that it was selfish for dedicated public sector workers to ask for a pay rise. He argued—I would agree—that it is selfish and immoral for politicians to offer benefits to the voters of today to be paid for by the voters of tomorrow. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, for her children and mine, it is important to balance fair treatment of the public sector with handing on a strong country not saddled by excess debt?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We need to ensure that our public finances are properly sustainable, so that we can fund those public services in future, and so that we do not burden the next generation.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Chief Secretary write to the chairs of all the pay review bodies—those serving on them are incredibly frustrated—and ask them to set out the true cost of a nurse, a teacher and a soldier, and to report back to Parliament, so we can assess the independence of their research?

Elizabeth Truss: I am sure the hon. Lady is aware that all documentation from this year’s pay process will be published. She will be able to see the research the bodies have looked at and the people they have interviewed in coming to their determination. In due course, I will be writing to the pay review bodies for their remit for the following year.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Public sector workers are the guardians of our nation in terms of our security, health, education and infrastructure, so we clearly have
to do something, in particular for the lower paid. May I suggest to my right hon. Friend that, given revenue from corporation tax receipts increased by 21% in the past year, can we not have a special redistribution fund to use that increased revenue to at least help the lowest paid public sector workers?

Elizabeth Truss: My right hon. Friend will be aware that the flexibility we give to pay review bodies is such that they can decide to give higher rises to those on the lowest incomes in the public sector. I would also point out that those on the lowest incomes have benefited most from the raising of the personal allowance. There are various ways of ensuring support for those on the lowest levels of pay.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): It will interest the House, I am sure, to know that the Scottish Government announced last week that they are lifting the pay cap. The Labour Welsh Government have the ability to do exactly the same thing, but in reality Labour in Wales is the Conservative Government’s gwas bach, taking their lead from Westminster. Thirty thousand Welsh nurses are having their pay cut in real terms. I ask those on both the Government and Opposition Front Benches to explain to thousands of Welsh workers why Wales remains the poorest paid country in the United Kingdom.

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Lady will be aware that that is a devolved issue and a decision for the Welsh Government.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): I am quite close to this debate. I served Strathclyde fire and rescue service for 31 years, so I am familiar with the good work that my colleagues continue to do; and I have two daughters in nursing. One is a nursing sister, or a senior charge nurse as she is determined today, and one is an auxiliary nurse and a single parent. I do not hear from them what I am hearing from Opposition Members, who are painting a dark picture. My daughters seem to enjoy their work. They work very, very hard, and there is no doubt that my colleagues in the fire and rescue service work very hard, too. My fear, if we continue to increase wages in the public sector, is the risk of a spiral, with inflation and mortgages going up. The point is the value of the take-home pay in your pay packet and what influences the buying power of public workers’ take-home pay.

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend points out the impact on the overall economy of unsustainable increases. We need to look at the overall package for public sector workers, including the reduced taxes that most public sector workers are paying and improvements in areas such as training, and we need to ensure that any pay raises are sustainable.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): I am sure the Chief Secretary agrees that public services are the backbone of our country, but the average full-time public sector employee will have lost £4,073 in real terms by 2020 because of this Government’s decisions. Does she think that that is fair?

Elizabeth Truss: I do not recognise that figure. I outlined the increments we have seen in areas such as teaching, nursing and the armed forces. We need to make sure we have a balance between fairness and affordability, and I outlined that earlier, too. That is what we have been doing and that is why we have been able to sustain high-quality public services at the same time as reducing the deficit and seeing the lowest unemployment for 40 years. The fact is that unsustainable increases in public spending would lead to higher taxes, higher interest rates and a much worse outcome for working people.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the fact we are spending more on debt interest than on our schools perfectly encapsulates the reason why we need to be fair across the generations when it comes to setting public sector pay? Does she agree that there is nothing right or moral in making cheap promises based on money we do not have?

Elizabeth Truss: The Labour Government left us with a huge deficit and a huge debt, which we have had to deal with over the last Parliament. It continues to hang over us, which is why the only path is the sustainable path of making sure we grow our economy, so we can enjoy even better public services and see people’s pay rise across the board.

Mr Speaker: Now that the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) has been sitting in a state of almost Buddha-like repose for some minutes, I think it is safe for the Chamber to hear from him.

Chris Stephens: Mr Speaker, as a passionate trade unionist for 20 years sometimes my emotions get the better of me.

Will the Chief Secretary confirm that pay is so low in some Government Departments that 40% of employees in those Departments are in receipt of tax credits? Will she publish, for each UK Government Department, how many employees are in receipt of tax credits?

Elizabeth Truss: We have good rates of pay across the civil service. We need to make sure that that is sustainable, so we can carry on making sure that we have good services in both the civil service and the wider public sector.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): The public are rightly fed up with politicians playing politics with the NHS, so let us listen to what the NHS pay review body has evidenced and said. Is my right hon. Friend aware that the NHS pay review body stated: “We do not see significant short-term nationwide recruitment and retention issues that are linked to pay”?

Elizabeth Truss: That is exactly why we have independent pay review bodies: they give us impartial advice and make recommendations. We accepted in full the recommendation of that body.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): NHS consultants in my constituency tell me that morale in the NHS is at an all-time low and that this is leading to real problems for recruitment and retention. Having voted against doing so only last week, I understand that certain members of the Cabinet are now in favour of
ending the public sector pay cap. Will the Government now heed their calls and give public sector workers the pay rise they deserve?

Elizabeth Truss: I am not sure the hon. Lady has heard the last hour of our discussion. We need to maintain sustainable public finances at the same time as being fair to workers in the public sector.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): In my constituency, the local NHS trust has been crippled by Labour’s disastrous PFI deal, a £350 million building project that has now cost £2 billion in interest payments that could have otherwise been used for pay rises. Does the Chief Secretary agree that this proves absolutely that sound economic planning in the health service is the best way to provide fair pay in the future?

Elizabeth Truss: PFI is yet another example of how the Labour party spent money it did not have and left future public service organisations, schools and hospitals with debts that they are now having to deal with. That is why we should not heed its irresponsible calls.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Chief Secretary earlier tried to draw a distinction between taxpayers and public servants. Public servants are taxpayers, so she cannot continue to draw that unfair distinction. I would like to introduce an element of maths. Will she acknowledge that when RPI is running at 3.2% and CPI is running at 2.8% but pay is capped at 1%, that is a real-terms squeeze on disposable incomes, which is hitting the living standards of public sector workers? In the general election, when the Prime Minister was challenged on why nurses were having to use food banks she replied by saying it was a complex issue. How much does the Chief Secretary attribute the pay cap to that "complex issue"?

Elizabeth Truss: As I have said before, there is the 1%, but there is also incremental pay in many public service professions. There is the 2.4% for the armed forces, and there is the 3.3% that was received by teachers in 2015-16. Labour Members should tell people about the whole picture, rather than cherry-picking specific numbers.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I am sure the Chief Secretary agrees with me—and with the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell)—that public sector workers are taxpayers. When it comes to public sector pay, we should indeed look at the whole picture, including the major tax cuts that have been made since 2010 for those on the lowest wages.

Elizabeth Truss: Absolutely. It seems to me that Labour Members want to count some things in their sums but not others, and that they are picking numbers rather than looking at the big picture.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Will the Chief Secretary confirm that new Government 10-year gilts are paid at 1%, and will she confirm that if the markets lose confidence in our deficit reduction plan the interest rate is likely to rise, as is the cost to the country, which will mean less money for our public services?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the macroeconomic picture, and to point out that if we do not have a confident deficit reduction plan such as the one that the Government have pursued for the last seven years, the financial markets will lose confidence, and the effect on working people will be a rise in interest rates, a rise in housing costs, and problems for the Government in respect of our borrowing.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): I declare an interest: my wife is a primary school teacher who is currently working as a teaching assistant.

Will the Chief Secretary ensure that both the rising cost of living and recommendations of the independent pay review bodies are properly taken into consideration in the setting of public pay policy for next year’s settlements?

Elizabeth Truss: That is one of the factors that the pay review bodies consider, along with issues such as recruitment and retention and ensuring that the pay settlement is affordable. They have the responsibility of speaking to people like my hon. Friend’s wife who work in the public services, hearing what they have to say, and making a determination. There are different issues in different public services, and I think it wrong to suggest that there is a “one size fits all” solution.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): The shadow Chancellor mentioned inequality. In fact, income inequality has fallen since 2010, and now the top 1% will pay 27% of all income tax, a higher proportion than was ever paid under Labour. Does that not show that the Labour party tries to talk tough when it comes to inequality, but it is left to the Conservatives to deliver?

Elizabeth Truss: The shadow Chancellor does not like facts to get in the way of his rants.

Neil Gray: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. At the start of these proceedings I failed to declare the fact that my wife is a primary school teacher, which I did when I asked a similar question during Cabinet Office questions. I apologise, and I thank you for allowing me to correct the record now.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman—as will be the House—for putting that on the record.
1.53 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government (Alok Sharma): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will update the House on the ongoing work that is being done to rehouse the victims of the tragedy at Grenfell Tower.

Three weeks have now passed since the fire. As we all know, it soon became clear that the delivery of the initial response on the ground was simply not good enough. Since then, much has been done to support victims, to see that justice is done, and to ensure that other buildings around the country are safe. Throughout that process, however, our first priority has been helping victims who have suffered such an unspeakable trauma. We have been working hard to ensure that they have all the support that they need, securing emergency accommodation and making financial and emotional support available as quickly as possible.

The response efforts have been co-ordinated by the Grenfell response team, led by John Barradell. He is being supported by colleagues drawn from London councils, the wider local government sector, the voluntary sector, and police, health and fire services, as well as central Government. I want to express my heartfelt thanks to them all for their immense efforts over the last few weeks. The new leader of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, Elizabeth Campbell, has given a fulsome apology for the inadequate initial response. She has also asked for help from central Government to put things right. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government has said in a written ministerial statement today, we will be establishing an independent taskforce to help the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea to build its capability so that it can deal with the longer term challenge of recovery.

The Prime Minister promised that we would offer temporary housing to all those who have lost their homes as a result of the fire, within three weeks. These are good-quality, fully furnished homes. Families will be able to move on from emergency accommodation and live, rent-free, in proper homes while permanent accommodation, on equal terms, is found; 158 families from Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk have been identified as being in need of such housing.

I can confirm that every family that is ready to talk to the housing team has been offered a temporary home, and that 139 families have received offers of accommodation. However, 19 families have not yet been ready to engage in the process, and we need to respect that. Some are still in hospital as a result of their injuries. In some cases, the people on the ground offering those families support have made clear that it would be inappropriate at this time to ask them to make a decision about where they will live. They have been through unimaginable trauma, and we need to go at the pace at which they want to go. What matters above all else is what the families individually want.

The Grenfell response team have been working with the 139 families currently engaged with the process to match them with appropriate temporary accommodation, and to start to talk to them about their long-term needs. The housing team have identified and secured more than 200 good-quality properties so that residents can have a choice of where to live. I know that some have raised concerns about the quality of the accommodation offered. All the properties have been inspected by the housing team to ensure that they are in good condition. My right hon. Friend the Communities Secretary has personally seen an example of the kind of property that is on offer, and representatives of local residents groups have also seen and been assured of the quality. If the shadow Minister would find it helpful, I would be happy to visit some of the properties with him so that he can assure himself of their quality.

All the properties are local, and are either in Kensington and Chelsea or in a neighbouring borough. That will mean that families can continue to be near their friends and relatives, go to the same GP, and send their children to the same school. Fourteen offers of temporary accommodation have been accepted, and three families have already moved in. I expect the number to increase, but we must respect the pace at which the families want to move. I have personally met more than 30 of the families who have been directly affected, and from talking to them, I understand that there are many reasons why they are reluctant to take up these offers. Some may choose to remain in hotels until they have an offer of a permanent tenancy.

We also understand that one of the big issues holding people back is the lack of trust. Some families were told that they were moving into Grenfell Tower on a temporary basis, and then, years later, they were still there. Their concerns are entirely understandable, and this is a trust that we need to work hard to earn. We must also respect their decision if they do not wish to move out of temporary accommodation before permanent housing is available. We will continue to make offers to families of local homes that we think would be suitable for them, but no one will be forced into a home to which they do not want to move.

I want to respond directly to a number of reports that have been made, claiming that people are being told to move far from London, or that they may be deemed homeless if they do not accept an offer. I want to be absolutely clear to the House: if that is ever suggested to a victim, it is completely unacceptable. I have already assured that if anyone is advised that is not receiving the offer we have promised, please tell me, and we will fix this. I repeat that call to the House now.

Let me set out again what the Government have committed to do. Every household that is ready to talk has been offered temporary accommodation. The housing team will continue to work with families to ensure that their individual needs are met. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said, everyone whose home was destroyed by the fire will be guaranteed a new home on the same terms as the one they lost. That means paying the same rent, with the same level of security, and in the same area.

When it comes to permanent housing, we have already announced a new block of social housing that will provide 68 new homes in Kensington Row. We are urgently working with a number of developers to secure similar properties, either in Kensington and Chelsea or very close to North Kensington, so that families can stay in the same area. These negotiations have not yet concluded, and we need to work closely with the residents to make sure that the sort of properties we are able to make available will match what they want.
There are also 17 leaseholders who lost their homes, and we are working with them to make sure that they do not lose out financially because of the fire. I met a group of leaseholders recently, and we are working with them individually to find the right solution for them.

My visits to the Westway, hearing the harrowing accounts of survivors, have been the most humbling experience of my life. The families I have met have been through unimaginable pain. This is a tragedy that should never have happened, and we are determined to do all that we can to make sure something like this never happens again.

2.1 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I welcome the Minister to the Dispatch Box for his first oral statement in this job and thank him for making a copy of his statement available. May I also add the thanks of Labour Members to John Barradell and the emergency response team, as well as to the community organisations that are still supporting the survivors?

The Minister has had a testing first few weeks. I hope he knows now that, whatever he says, it is the Government’s actions that count in getting Grenfell Tower residents the help and new housing they need, and in giving them and the wider local community in North Kensington the confidence that what is promised will be done. I have to say to him that the Government have been slow to act. They have been off the pace at each stage following this terrible tragedy, and it is clear from this statement that in some ways they still are.

After the fire, the Prime Minister said: “I have fixed a deadline of three weeks for everybody affected to be found a home nearby.”

The three weeks are up, yet whole families, who have lost everything, are still in hotels and hostels. We have learned today that three—just three—of the 158 families from Grenfell Tower have moved into a fresh home, and these are only temporary, which was not what the Prime Minister first said. Plus, only 11 others have so far been found somewhere they feel they can say yes to.

Why have so few families been successfully matched with fresh accommodation? Is it the case, as I have been told, that some have been offered accommodation with too few bedrooms, or in another tower block, or indeed with bizarre conditions attached, including “no overnight stay” for family or friends? A hotel room is no home, and temporary housing is no place to rebuild shattered lives. When will all those now homeless from the fire be offered a new permanent home?

The Minister mentioned the 68 homes in the Kensington Row development. They were already allocated for social housing. How many extra social homes have the Government or the council made available in the borough? Will the Government guarantee that the number of new social homes planned before the fire will be increased by at least the number needed now as a result of the fire? What assessment have the Government made with the Mayor of London and the other London boroughs, of the knock-on consequences for temporary accommodation, social housing and council waiting lists across the city?

The Minister mentioned the recovery taskforce for Kensington and Chelsea. This is the taskforce that has now been sent in to take over from the taskforce sent in three weeks ago. Kensington and Chelsea is a failing council—it has even failed to admit that it is failing. The fundamental concern about this council is not just its capability, but the total lack of trust that residents or anyone else have in it. The Government concede that by sending in the taskforce, yet they leave the council in charge. Labour Members want the taskforce to work, but we doubt that it will. It can advise but it cannot act. It lacks the powers of decision or action that commissioners from the same ruling group. What will be the tests for this taskforce, and what will be the tests of further council failings, before Ministers take the fuller intervention steps needed, as they have in other areas?

The fears following the fire go well beyond Grenfell Tower, as do the consequences. Hundreds of thousands of people who live in high-rise blocks around the country want to know that their homes are safe. That means that the full building has been tested for fire safety, not just one component of the cladding on the outside; that all replacement cladding and fire prevention works necessary to guarantee safety are done; and that no remedial action is delayed or not done because the council or housing association has not got the funding.

How much funding have the Government set aside for these costs? Has the Treasury agreed access to the Contingencies Fund? Will the Minister reassure tower block residents today by making a clear commitment to full up-front funding for whatever work is needed to make these high-rise homes safe? When Ministers have rightly said, “You can’t put a price on people’s lives,” that is what it means.

Alok Sharma: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments. I will take each of his points in turn.

In terms of actions, we have made it very clear that the initial response was not good enough—the Prime Minister has said that at the Dispatch Box. As the right hon. Gentleman knows, ministerial colleagues and I have been engaged in meetings with the community, both on an individual basis and as part of community meetings, and that work will continue.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to the three-week offer. The purpose of that was to make sure that we offered temporary accommodation to the people who wanted it.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about the numbers. As I have said, we are working with all the families involved. I expect that number to rise, but I know that he and all in the House will acknowledge that it is not up to Government, or indeed any Member of this House, to determine the pace at which families should move—that has to be up to them. We have to treat them with sensitivity and that is what we are doing.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about whether people are being housed in tower blocks. That is not the case. I know there was initially some reporting about tower blocks, but I believe that was in relation to emergency accommodation in hotels that are tower blocks, and we responded to that.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about affordable housing. I can confirm that Kensington Row was originally designated as affordable housing, not social housing, so this represents a net increase. We are looking to provide a net increase in the number of homes in the social sector.
The right hon. Gentleman referred to the independent recovery taskforce that has now been appointed. It will report directly to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. Its members, including the chair, are being identified, and we should be in a position to announce further details over the coming weeks. I want to be clear that the special focus of the recovery taskforce will be on housing, regeneration and community engagement.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about high-rise blocks, and I do understand that those living in similar blocks across the country will have concerns. That was why we acted immediately and made sure that we informed local authorities and housing associations of the checks that they needed to do. We put in place a regime for them to send us the cladding materials on any building that they felt was suspect, and that testing has been going on at a pace. We have been very clear that local authorities and housing associations should do whatever is necessary to keep people safe, and that if there are issues to do with funding, we will work with the individual local authorities and housing associations. It is vital that we ensure that everyone who lives in such a block is kept safe.

The right hon. Gentleman also talked about wider tests. When we wrote to local authorities and housing associations on 22 June, we also asked them to look at issues related to insulation and to make checks. On 27 June, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State appointed an expert panel to advise on these matters. It met on Thursday 29 June and agreed a range of matters that it will look at. In particular, it agreed to consider whether any immediate additional action should be taken to ensure the safety of existing high-rise buildings.

I know that this is a subject that we wish we did not have to debate, but I have found, through the discussions that I have had with colleagues on both sides of the House, that this is a time for us to work together. There is a public inquiry, and a criminal investigation is under way. They will apportion blame, leaving no stone unturned, but this is the time for us to work together. I say again to colleagues, including the right hon. Gentleman, that if they feel that any individuals are not getting the right level of support, please come to me. I stand ready to help.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): It is clear that the Minister fully understands the great challenges that the residents face. Anyone who has had dealings with their local authority housing department will recognize the difficulties of finding accommodation quickly, particularly in an area of high housing demand such as North Kensington, and will understand that a long-term solution will take time. Can the Minister provide reassurances to residents that their needs will be paramount and that they will be given a choice of housing that is suitable for their needs?

Alok Sharma: I can absolutely confirm that to my hon. Friend. As I have said, it does not matter what any of us in the House thinks about the accommodation that is on offer. What matters is what the individual families think, and we are going to keep working with them to ensure that they get the right accommodation in the right area to meet their needs.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I thank the Minister for giving us advance notice of his statement. Members appreciate the fact that Ministers have come to the House to make statements so regularly.

There have been reports of some families not having security and certainty about their emergency accommodation, and not knowing where they will be sleeping tonight or tomorrow night. I would appreciate it if the Minister could update us on that situation, particularly with regard to those who are still in emergency accommodation. I also want to ask what support the families are being given when they move into temporary accommodation to ensure that they are able to buy the things that make a home a home, not just a shell, such as toys for their children and perhaps ornaments. I appreciate that the properties are fully furnished, but that does not provide everything that a family needs.

I hope that we will continue to receive updates. I understand that the public inquiry will look into the circumstances surrounding what happened and what led up to it. We have asked for that inquiry to be as wide as possible, with the residents’ views taken into account at all times.

Will the Minister also commit to looking into the response to the events, and to carrying out an inquiry or some other kind of assessment into that, so that we can ensure that we across the nations of the UK can learn from what has happened and, should a disaster like this happen again— we hope it will not— make the best possible response?

Alok Sharma: I thank the hon. Lady for her acknowledgement that Ministers have been updating the House regularly. That is exactly what we should be doing, particularly at this time. She asked about hotel rooms. I appreciate that in the initial stages there were concerns that some people were being asked to move at very short notice. I believe that that has been rectified, and that people will be given much more notice. We will try to keep people in the hotels that they have become familiar with, so long as they are happy to be there. I have had individual conversations relating to hotel accommodation with some of the families, and I think that we have managed to fix this.

The hon. Lady asked about money. When people have lost absolutely everything, we need to ensure that funds are readily available so that they can replace things. We have the discretionary fund: 249 payments of £500 have been made so far to those in Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk, and 112 grants of £5,000 have been made to households. Another 840 discretionary payments have been made to others in the wider area who have been affected. The total spend from the discretionary fund is £2.5 million, but we will ensure that funding is made available where it is required.

The hon. Lady also asked about the public inquiry. Sir Martin Moore-Bick has been appointed, and he has already met victims, survivors and members of the local community. Although the House already knows this, I want to make it clear that all legal support for victims will be provided so that they can play a full part in the inquiry. Clearly it is up to the judge to determine the scope of the inquiry, but I am sure that he will have heard that people want as full an inquiry as possible.

Several hon. Members rose—
Mr Speaker: Order. I am keen to accommodate the level of interest in this extremely serious matter, about which there will, I suspect, be many statements in the weeks to come, but I must advise the House that both subsequent debates are well subscribed, especially the debate on Israel and Palestine, which is very heavily subscribed. I must leave time for that, so what is now required in each case is a short, preferably single-sentence question.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): My hon. Friend mentioned the fact that a number of families had not yet engaged with regard to rehousing. The community in Latimer Road and the Westway have been marvellous in putting their arms round those families, but can he confirm that, even if there is a delay before those families engage, they will still be given the same priority and rights to rehousing that he has mentioned?

Alok Sharma: Yes, I can absolutely confirm that. I should also like to pay tribute to the local communities and volunteers who have worked so hard to support these families.

Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): Is the Minister aware that, despite the press narrative of survivors refusing £1 million luxury flats, some are being offered totally unsuitable accommodation? One man in particular, whom I think the Minister has met, runs his own business and cares for his elderly disabled mother. He was offered a home in a poorly maintained, rat-infested estate that is about to be demolished. What kind of peace and stability could that traumatised family, who escaped with their lives while rescuing their neighbours, possibly find in that frankly shameful offer? I would really like to know who considered that kind of accommodation to be suitable.

Alok Sharma: We do not want any family to be placed in accommodation that is unsuitable. I invite the hon. Lady to join me and the shadow Minister—let us go and visit some of these properties and make sure that she is happy with the quality of what is on offer.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): In his statement, the Minister suggested that some of those who lived in Grenfell Tower had been there for five years, despite having been assured that it was temporary accommodation. Can he assure us that those now being placed in temporary accommodation will not subsequently have it described as permanent?

Alok Sharma: I can absolutely offer that assurance.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Does the Minister agree that the uptake of temporary accommodation by only 14 families is disappointing? If he thinks that this is to do to with a lack of trust rather than the quality of the housing, will he tell us what is being done to build that trust?

Alok Sharma: I want to return to the point that the pace at which things happen has to be determined by the families, but I accept that lack of trust is an issue. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has written letters directly to the affected families, setting out clearly what we are offering, but we must continue to build that trust.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): In addition to ensuring discretionary funds, what discussions have Ministers had with the Association of British Insurers to ensure that life policies and household policies, where they were affordable and were in place, are paid as quickly as possible?

Alok Sharma: I can confirm that the Treasury is looking at all the insurance matters, and the Chancellor recently met the insurance industry.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Does the Minister know how many of the households from Grenfell have previously been homeless and have experience of the homelessness system? Those who have will know that it is hell. They were living in insecure, bad-quality accommodation and were subjected to frequent moves. In some cases, they have stayed in temporary accommodation for up to a decade. Does the Minister understand that that is the context that feeds the residents’ catastrophic mistrust? He needs to deal with those factors as well as the immediate rehousing.

Alok Sharma: I have already acknowledged that there has been a lack of trust, and Ministers must ensure that we work to restore that trust.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I thank the Minister for his statement. He referred to several leaseholders in the flats, so will he outline what steps he is taking to ensure the security of those leases?

Alok Sharma: I am happy to do that. I met a number of the leaseholders yesterday, and we have asked them to provide us with further information on their leases. We expect to start having individual discussions from next week.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): There have been two fires in my constituency and one in a neighbouring constituency since the Grenfell Tower fire, and they were not in high-rises. People are very concerned, so will the Minister explain what systematic action is being taken to prevent other fires? What will he do to ensure that we strengthen the regulators’ powers to address residents’ concerns when they raise the alarm?

Alok Sharma: I talked about the expert advisory panel, which will consider many such matters. As the Prime Minister said at last week’s PMQs, we need to look “much more widely” at what has happened “under different Governments and under different councils”.—[Official Report, 28 June 2017; Vol. 626, c. 587.]

We will ensure that we get to the bottom of that. It is vital that people feel safe, and that is what we are going to ensure.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I thank the Minister for his statement and for assuring the survivors that they will be supported at the pace they want. There have been disputed reports in the media about the number of missing residents, and the situation has been complicated by sub-letting. What efforts have been made to help to identify missing residents?

Alok Sharma: We want to build as full a list as possible of the people who were in the building at that tragic time. As my hon. Friend will know, the Director of Public Prosecutions has said that if people were
sub-letting illegally, they will be exempt from prosecution. If some of them are aware of people who were in the building that we do not know about, I hope that they will come forward.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): I want to share the words of my constituent, Jess. She says: “I am a firefighter and went into Grenfell Tower, rescuing an unconscious girl from the 12th floor. Myself and my fellow firefighters will never forget the horrors of that night and the fact we couldn’t rescue everyone. But we are not to blame for these deaths, the shocking and tragic fire in Grenfell Tower was avoidable. I have never seen a building go up in flames so quickly, it took minutes for the fire to hop from floor to floor. This tragedy has shown that the laws on fire safety in buildings aren’t fit for purpose.”

What would the Minister say to my constituent, and what support has been put in place for workers like her?

Alok Sharma: I pay tribute to the firefighters, not only for the incredible work they did that night but for the work they do every day of year. As for support, it is vital that we ensure that trauma counselling is made available, including to firefighters. The public inquiry is there to get to the bottom of what took place, and we will ensure that that happens. Ultimately, we can never have something like this kind of tragedy happen again in our country.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): The Minister spoke about the importance of building trust among the community. Does he agree that it is important not to inadvertently diminish trust in the judge in the inquiry—Judge Moore-Bick—without good cause? Of course we would all like to see the judiciary in this country more accurately represent the population, but we must not cast aspersions on their impartiality before they have even begun the inquiry.

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As I said, Sir Martin Moore-Bick has already met some of the victims and survivors, and we need to allow him to set out the full scope of his inquiry.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): As cladding is being removed from high-rise blocks around the country, those blocks are losing the insulation protection that it offers. If that cladding has not been replaced by the time winter comes, it may be a struggle to keep those homes warm and dry. What assessment are Ministers making now of the need to have those buildings properly insulated by the winter, so that people are warm, dry and safe?

Alok Sharma: As the hon. Lady will know, where the cladding is coming down, new, non-combustible cladding is planned to go up.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I commend the Minister for his calm and dignified approach today following a dreadful disaster.

I and all of us in Northern Ireland have been terribly affected and deeply moved by what happened in the tower block, and it concerns me that the survivors now face an indeterminate time in different accommodation. It would help matters enormously if the Government committed to help with rents if they are higher than what residents were used to in Grenfell Tower. The Government have a moral obligation to give that assurance to the survivors.

Alok Sharma: I am sorry if I did not explain myself correctly; the temporary and emergency accommodation is rent-free.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The financial provisions for local authorities that are trying to sort out problems around the country seem very ad hoc. Would it not be much better to set up a specific fund that local authorities could draw down from, thus making a proportionate amount available for local authorities in Wales?

Alok Sharma: It is important to respond to the needs of individual councils and local authorities, and that is precisely what we will do in conversations with them.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I say gently to the Minister that the fudge at local level about who is control of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea will not work. The local community does not want the usual suspects in charge of the council. Will he say today that there will be no loss of social or affordable housing and that every single unit will be replaced? It is wrong that people on waiting lists are paying the price and will suffer as a consequence of Grenfell.

Alok Sharma: As the hon. Gentleman knows, there has been a change of leadership at the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced the independent taskforce. As for the housing that people will be put in permanently, it absolutely has to be of very good quality, and that is what we are going to ensure.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): We all know who the villains of the piece are, but it is right that we mention the heroes. I thank the Minister for his warm words today and his gratitude to councils, such as that of the London Borough of Ealing, that have committed resources and staff to help, but some of the most active groups within the area are the local faith communities—St Francis of Assisi, the Holland Park synagogue, the local mosque, the community church. What plans does the Minister have to meet that group which collectively has done so much for so many people with so few resources?

Alok Sharma: Ministers have committed to meet community groups, and some meetings have already happened. My right hon. Friend Secretary of State has also met some of these groups, and Home Office Ministers are also looking at the situation. I understand that it is vital to engage with community and faith groups to ensure that they also provide their input.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister showed real humility in his statement—humility not shown by his Secretary of State at the Local Government Association conference, where he sought to attack local government for the failings of an individual council. If he will not stick up for local government, I will: Kensington and Chelsea does not represent local government as a whole.
It will take time to work through the regulations and to find better regulations for building control, but properties are being built today with Government money through the housing investment funds that are devolved to Greater Manchester, Birmingham, East Anglia and so on, and we could be insisting that sprinklers are installed today.

Alok Sharma: First, I am sorry to have to say this to the hon. Gentleman. Friend the Secretary of State has been working incredibly hard on this issue from day one with me. This is a time for us to work together and to come together, particularly on this issue. [Interruption.] On building regulations and related issues, we have an expert panel and we understand we are going to have to look at all of this in the round.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): If the Government want a little advice from a mere observer of this towering inferno, I can tell them that I think it is time we had an end to Government Members and their supporters howling with derision at the very mention of health and safety and having resolutions to get rid of red tape and regulation. The truth is that had there been more red tape and regulation in those blocks, we would not be talking about this today.

Alok Sharma: I respectfully point out to the hon. Gentleman that the regulations were set out in 2006, when of course there was a Labour Government. The reality is that we have to learn the lessons from this, and of course where people have lessons to offer, we will listen.

Points of Order

2.31 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On Monday evening, the Secretary of State for Health published a written ministerial statement suggesting that local authority access to the £2 billion funding for social care announced in the spring Budget will now be dependent on performance against targets for delayed transfer of care, meaning that some councils could lose funding which they have already planned to spend this year. Today, the Local Government Association has announced it has been left with “no choice but to withdraw” its support for the guidance on better care funding. Social care is already in crisis and this can only make things worse, so have you had any indication from the Health Secretary as to whether he intends to come to the House to make a statement on where this leaves funding for social care and to give hon. Members the chance to ask questions on this matter?

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order, to which the short answer is that I have received no indication of any intention by a Minister to come to the House to make a statement on that matter. I am very conscious of the importance that the hon. Lady and probably others attach to it, and of the evident urgency that she attaches to the subject. She is an experienced Member of the House, and as we approach the summer recess, I rather imagine that she will diligently keep an eye on the subject. If she is dissatisfied with what is said, or with the absence of anything being said, she knows that there are options available to her to secure the attention of and a comment by the relevant Minister.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You will be aware that in this new Parliament and the previous one my colleagues and I had, it seems, a partly successful campaign to save Glasgow’s jobcentres from closure. More than an hour ago, I learned in the press about the Department’s plans. Thirty-five minutes ago, the Department’s plans were laid in the House through a written ministerial statement—and that is despite our request for this to be an oral statement so that we could have a full and proper discussion of these matters. Mr Speaker, can you advise me and my colleagues as to how we can get a Minister to that Dispatch Box to ask why there has been no published equality impact assessment and why the consultation responses still have not been published six months later, and so that we can hold the Government to account on the fact that they still want to close seven of our city’s jobcentres?

Mr Speaker: The short answer is that I am, fortunately, in a position to advise the hon. Gentleman. Friend, whom I thank for his point of order. The essence of my advice is to impress upon him the importance of repetition. He has raised the issue now and his representations will have been heard on the Treasury Bench. He is a seasoned habitué of the Chamber and he will know that tomorrow we have business questions. I firmly expect him to be in his place and to be bobbing up and down with great intensity to catch my eye, in order to question the
Leader of the House on whether and, if so, when there will be an oral statement on this matter. I look forward to seeing the hon. Gentleman bright eyed and bushy tailed in his seat in the Chamber tomorrow morning.

SUPPLY AND APPROPRIATION (MAIN ESTIMATES) BILL

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 56), That the Bill be now read a Second time. Question agreed to. Bill accordingly read a Second time. Question put forthwith, That the Bill be now read the Third time. Question agreed to. Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Criminal Law (Northern Ireland)

2.35 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chloe Smith): I beg to move,

That the draft Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007 (Extension of duration of non-jury trial provisions) Order 2017, which was laid before this House on 22 June, be approved.

Under this order, trials without a jury can take place in Northern Ireland for a further two years from 1 August 2017; the current provisions expire on 31 July. Although this is the fifth such extension of these provisions, I hope to leave Members in no doubt as to the continued necessity for the provisions for a further two years.

May I take this opportunity to welcome Madam Deputy Speaker—Dame Rosie Winterton—to her place? This is the first time I have had the chance to do so from this Dispatch Box. I am sure we will all enjoy serving under her chairmanship this afternoon.

Hon. Members will be aware of the lethal threat posed by terrorists in Northern Ireland. Dissident republican terrorist groups continue to plan and mount attacks, with the principal aim of killing or maiming those who serve the public in all communities so bravely. Police officers, prison officers and members of the armed forces are the main focus of these attacks, but the terrorists’ continued use of explosive devices and other weaponry continues to cause death and injury. Individuals linked to paramilitary organisations also continue to undermine peace and the rule of law in Northern Ireland through the use of violence and intimidation, in both republican and loyalist communities. I want to assure hon. Members that the Government wish to end the exceptional system of non-jury trials as soon as it is no longer necessary. But that should happen only when the circumstances allow, otherwise we risk allowing violence and intimidation to undermine the criminal justice process in Northern Ireland.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I am delighted to see you in the Chair for the first time, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to welcome the new Minister to the Dispatch Box to debate this important legislation. It would be helpful to the House if she were to indicate the types of trials that have involved the individuals who have gone through this non-jury procedure in the recent past. Have they involved loyalist paramilitaries, republican paramilitaries or predominantly one or the other? It would be helpful if she told us that.

Chloe Smith: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments. Initially, I want to set out the conditions under which such a trial can be granted, as that will begin to help to answer her question. I shall also come on to discuss the numbers of such trials. As she will appreciate, I will not be able to comment on any live cases or give her every single detail she asks for, but I will endeavour to give the House a strong sense of what these trials are used for.

Lady Hermon: Obviously, I am not asking the Minister to comment on ongoing cases, but this procedure of non-jury trials has been exceptional to Northern Ireland. I fully understand and support them in the context of continued paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland.
However, what she needs to explain to the community and to the House is that this is not a one-sided process and that those who have been through it, whether convicted or acquitted, come from both loyalist and republican paramilitary groups. It would be helpful if she would do that.

Chloe Smith: The simplest short answer is yes, it is absolutely the case that the provisions we are discussing have and will apply across communities. There is no doubt about that.

If the House will allow me to continue with my opening remarks, I will try to answer everything else during the course of the debate. The Government wish to end the non-jury trial system because it is exceptional, and we wish to do so as soon as the circumstances allow. Although many attempts to visit violence and intimidation and undermine the criminal justice process have been disrupted, the security situation today remains much the same as it was in 2015, when the House last considered these measures. The threat from terrorism in Northern Ireland is assessed as severe. This year alone, there have been four national security attacks in Northern Ireland, including the wounding of a police officer who was serving the community. It would be remiss of the Government to dispose of the provisions now, given that threat and its potential impact on the delivery of criminal justice for all communities in Northern Ireland. It would be a weak argument to suggest that we should move on from the provisions because we have had them for a long time.

In the past two years, attacks by dissident republicans and loyalist paramilitaries have put countless innocent lives in danger. Members may be aware of the incident on the Crumlin Road in Belfast in January, when two police officers who were serving their community came under attack from dissident republicans, leaving one officer badly injured. The forecourt of a busy filling station was sprayed with automatic gunfire, demonstrating the utter disregard these groups show for human life and the harm that they pose to ordinary members of the public. Sadly, this despicable attack was not an isolated incident: there were four confirmed national security attacks in 2016 and there have been four so far this year. That underlines the persistence of the threat that we face.

The presence of dissident republicans and paramilitaries in Northern Ireland means that violence and intimidation remain concerns for the wider community. Figures released by the Police Service of Northern Ireland show an increased number of security-related deaths over the past three years, as well as an increasing trend in the number of paramilitary-style assaults since 2012-13. Threats towards the police and public bodies also demonstrate the continued attempts at the intimidation of individuals and communities in Northern Ireland. In 2016-17, there were 137 arrests and 19 charges related to terrorism. I pay tribute to the work of the PSNI and its partners, because it is having an impact on the threat, but the security situation remains serious.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): May I speak from personal experience? In some court cases there is huge intimidation of witnesses from the public gallery, which it is very difficult to control. I have to say, I was frightened.

Chloe Smith: I welcome my hon. and gallant Friend’s experience being brought to bear on this debate. He is right. I was just about to talk about the circumstances in which non-jury trials are appropriate, and will come on to that very point about the intimidation of those involved in the justice process. He will also be aware of some other jury reforms that have been implemented administratively; I hope to see them succeed.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): With the information she has outlined, the Minister is making the case for the system’s renewal very well. Does she agree that it is essential for all sections of the community in Northern Ireland to support the security forces and the work that they do?

Chloe Smith: Yes, I do. We are talking about a threat that goes across all communities and the wider public, and I hope I have begun to make that clear.

I shall explain the precise ways in which justice is threatened and what the measures before us are for. Non-jury trial provisions are available in exceptional circumstances in Northern Ireland, when a risk to the administration of justice is suspected—for example, jury tampering, whereby intimidation, violence or the threat of violence against members of a jury could result in a perverse conviction or acquittal.

The Director of Public Prosecutions for Northern Ireland may issue a certificate that allows a non-jury trial to be held in relation to any trial on indictment of a defendant, and anyone tried with that defendant, if it meets a defined test that falls within one of four conditions: first, if the defendant is, or is an associate of, a member of a proscribed organisation whose activities are connected with the affairs of Northern Ireland, or has at any time been a member of an organisation when it was a proscribed organisation; secondly, if the offence was committed on behalf of a proscribed organisation, or a proscribed organisation was involved with or assisted in the carrying out of the offence; thirdly, if an attempt was made to prejudice the investigation or prosecution, by or on behalf of a proscribed organisation, or a proscribed organisation was otherwise involved with or assisted in that attempt; or, fourthly, if the offence was committed to any extent, directly or indirectly, as a result of, in connection with or in response to, religious or political hostility.

A case that falls within one of the four conditions will not automatically be tried without a jury, because the DPP must also be satisfied that there is a risk that the administration of justice might be impaired were a jury trial to be held. For those with a historical view, I should be clear that this is not a Diplock system—this is not the system that pertained before 2007. There is a clear distinction between the current system and the pre-2007 Diplock court arrangements, under which there was a presumption that all scheduled offences were tried by a judge alone. In Northern Ireland today, there is a clear presumption that a jury trial will take place in all cases.

In line with the commitments made in Parliament in 2015—before the July 2017 expiry date that necessitates our being here today—the Secretary of State held a full public consultation on whether non-jury trial provisions should be extended. The consultation concluded in
February this year. It received a total of 10 responses from a range of interested individuals and groups in Northern Ireland.

Lady Hermon: I am extremely grateful for the Minister’s generosity in taking interventions. It would be helpful if, before she sets out the consultation’s conclusions and draws her remarks to a close, she could indicate how often the DPP has issued these certificates—he has not been at all hesitant in doing so. It would also be helpful if she could tell us about when he has refused to issue certificates, which is in the minority of cases. That sort of information would be helpful to everyone.

Chloe Smith: I am happy to do that, so I shall pause my speech and provide exactly those figures. In the 2017 calendar year, which is obviously still running, four certificates have been issued so far, and 19 were issued in the 2016 calendar year. In 2016, one request to issue a certificate was refused. I shall give the proportion as well, because it is illustrative for the House: in 2017, just 0.5% of Crown court cases have been dealt with by means of a non-jury trial under the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007—that is a percentage of all disposals. That makes it clear to the House how infrequently the provisions are used. The figure for refusals gives a sense of how carefully the DPP makes the decisions: it is not about rushed decision making; due care and attention are applied.

Before that intervention, Madam Deputy Speaker, I was speaking about the responses to the consultation; I hope you do not mind my taking the time to put this on record for those who have an interest. The Secretary of State has received relevant briefing from security officials so that he can understand the underlying threat picture. In the light of all the evidence and views before him, the Secretary of State has decided to renew non-jury trial provisions for a further two years and to keep them under regular independent review—those are the proposals I have brought before the House. As an extra and new measure of assurance, the independent reviewer of the 2007 Act will review the non-jury trial system as part of his annual review cycle, the results of which will be made available to the public in his published report. We hope that that gives some extra reassurance to those interested in these issues.

We must recognise that Northern Ireland is in a unique situation and that the non-jury trial provisions in the 2007 Act continue to be an important factor in supporting the effective delivery of the criminal justice process in a very small number of criminal cases. Certain jury trials in Northern Ireland would not be safe from disruption by those involved in paramilitary activity, many of whom make their presence known in Northern Ireland’s close-knit communities or indeed in the public galleries of the courtrooms.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Given that some paramilitary organisations are also involved in organised crime, is the Minister confident that jurors in other trials are not being intimidated by those organisations?

Chloe Smith: That reminds us of the importance of the four conditions that apply here. If there were some link with those four conditions, any trial may be considered under these processes. The DPP must be satisfied that one of the four conditions is met, and that justice may be put at risk by the holding of a jury trial. My hon. Friend can rest assured that the provisions are available for all types of criminal cases as long as they meet the conditions.

In 2016 and 2017, a very small number of certificates were issued. I would just like to add that the DPP acts with a great measure of independence. His role is to exercise his discretion in deciding whether to issue a certificate. I note that the current DPP is due to retire this year, and he will have exercised these duties and many others in great service to this country over the years.

As I have said, the numbers of certificates are very small compared with the total burden of Crown court cases. I hope that hon. Members are reassured by the fact that the Secretary of State has not taken lightly this decision to seek to renew the non-jury trial system. We strongly believe, however, that the system is, on balance, proportionate and necessary in light of the unique risks facing the criminal justice process in Northern Ireland.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Just before the Minister concludes, can she tell us whether, in the very small number of cases that have gone before the non-jury courts, there is any evidence of appeals being put forward and indeed being successful in part as a result of the way in which they were tried in the first place?

Chloe Smith: There are indeed ways to challenge these certificates; legal challenges have been made. I will not go into them in great detail here because they are on record and available for Members to look at. However, I will draw out one interesting point from one of the pieces of case law: it is noted that not to have a jury trial is not the same as not to have fair trial. That is a crucial piece of reassurance for Members here today who may be thinking deeply about the measure for which I am asking their support.

Dr Andrew Morrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Will the Minister comment on the concern of the Bar of Northern Ireland that the criteria under which a challenge can be brought under section 7 of the 2007 Act is really very narrow and confined to exceptional circumstances? That concern comes out clearly in the consultation and is expected to be addressed in some way.

Chloe Smith: I am grateful to my hon. and gallant Friend for his contribution. He speaks with great experience, as he has spoken on these issues from this very Dispatch Box. He is right that the consultation responses, while being broadly in favour of continuing the system—indeed many of them noted that they had faith in the Secretary of State’s decision—contained some points of detail that could be considered in the future. However, I must point out that the provisions expire this month. I am asking the House to extend them now for immediate purposes, which is somewhat separate to the broader question of reform that we might look at in due course. I have mentioned an independent review, which will be a very good opportunity to draw out all these issues. I will also take the opportunity to put it on the record that the very complexity of these issues reminds us why we want to see an Executive in place in Northern Ireland—so that a Ministry of Justice there can properly play its part in these issues as well.
In conclusion, we would love to be able to do away with these measures as early as we possibly can, but that can only ever be done when circumstances allow. We want a system that remains fair, effective, necessary, appropriate and proportionate. We look forward to discussing it further under the annual independent review, but, for now, I commend this order to the House.

2.55 pm

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): I am sure that I join the whole House, Madam Deputy Speaker, in welcoming you to your seat. I learned, when I was a very junior Whip under your leadership, that your eye misses nothing. I am quite sure that that will be our experience here. I would also say that, during my time in the Whips Office, one of my opposite numbers was the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the hon. Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), whom I welcome to her position. I also welcome the hon. Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris), who brings a great deal of knowledge and the affection of the House to this particular brief.

May I say at the outset that we do not intend to oppose this order for reasons that will be self-evident? I also think that the involvement of David Seymour, as the independent reviewer, is a very powerful step forward. There have been some issues in the past about the transparency of the process. I understand that Barra McGrory is leaving this year, and I certainly endorse the kind comments that were made by the Minister. The fact that there has been one judicial review of his decisions says a great deal about his skill and impartiality. I appreciate that there have been some Members who have felt a certain absence of confidence, but his service has proved that he is more than capable of being completely objective. We all remember Sir Alasdair Fraser, who held the post for more than 20 years. We welcomed Barra McGrory and certainly look forward to the new appointment.

The points that the Minister made about the current situation need to be considered very sombrely and soberly. It is just over a year ago that Adrian Ismay was killed on his way to work at HMP Hydebank. Obviously, we remember the death of David Black a bit earlier. Clearly, the situation is dangerous. She also mentioned explosive finds. One sad statistic is that, between August 2015 and July 2016, there were 246 incidents of explosive ordnance disposal activity in support of the police, including 35 improvised explosive devices. The situation is serious, and it demands a serious response. The two proposals that the Minister has made today—the renewal of the order and the involvement of the independent reviewer—go a long way forward.

Lady Hermon: I am very grateful to the shadow spokesperson for Northern Ireland for responding to this debate and for assuring the House that he supports the renewal of this measure. I would be very comforted to know that his party leader supports the need for non-jury trials in Northern Ireland. For as long as such trials are needed in Northern Ireland, I would like to know that his party leader supports them.

Stephen Pound: That is a little bit above my pay grade. I shall certainly speak to my party leader and make sure that he sends a note to the hon. Lady, of whom he is very fond.

This is my third trot around the paddock with this subject. In June 2013, when the right hon. and gallant Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mike Penning) was the Minister, we managed to deal with it in seven minutes. In July 2015, when the right hon. Member for Wyre and Preston North (Mr Wallace) was Minister, sadly it took us 22 minutes. I am in no way implying that we are on a particular scale, but I think that it is important, in view of some of the new evidence we are discussing today, that we take a little time to consider the matter.

The role of the independent reviewer of the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007 is crucial. I wish to recommend David Seymour’s report to the House and express my gratitude to the Northern Ireland Office for making it available, and indeed for all the work it has done. The report is salutary. It actually states why the situation in Northern Ireland is so serious. I must say that I now know more about stop and search on the causeway coast and in the glens than I ever really wanted to.

David Simpson: I am glad that the Opposition support these measures. The hon. Gentleman will know that my constituency, which he has visited a number of times, has the highest level of dissident republican threat, and of course it was in my constituency that Mr Black was murdered, so he will know how necessary these measures are.

Stephen Pound: Absolutely. One of the things that strikes many of us when we visit Northern Ireland, apart from the staggering beauty of that part of the world, is the persistence of fear. I salute all public servants, elected and non-elected, who hold the line in Northern Ireland in the most horrendous circumstances. I pay tribute not only to the hon. Gentleman, but to Prison Officer Black, Adrian Ismay and so many others who have suffered.

The independent reviewer’s report, which is a solid body of work, should be studied. I am extremely glad that in future it will contain some oversight of the process. With regard to the only challenge to the DPP’s decision that has gone to judicial review and not been upheld, some people still feel that it is a closed process. When the PSNI goes to the DPP and applies for a certificate to be issued, the DPP quite rightly runs the template of the four tests over the application and makes a decision, but it does depend, to a certain degree, on the individual characteristics, intelligence and knowledge of the DPP. I think that DPP Barra McGrory has proven time and again that he is more than capable of that, but some people have suggested that there should still be some element of external examination and oversight.

I think that the Minister, in a very fine piece of parliamentary footwork and legislative improvement, has answered those objections. I have no way of knowing whether I will be at this Dispatch Box in two years’ time—if I am, it will probably be because I have not been promoted; if I am not, it will almost certainly be because I have been demoted—but if I am, I look forward to reading this. Indeed, even if I am not at the Dispatch Box, I will certainly read it anyway, just to see what we are with the situation.

I thoroughly endorse the Minister’s earlier points about the desire to see Northern Ireland’s devolved institutions up and running again. We know that the people of Northern Ireland deserve better than an
impasse or a vacuum. We know that the quality of the elected representatives in Northern Ireland is such that they are more than capable of reaching such an agreement, and I look forward to them doing so very soon.

I reiterate the point made at the beginning about this being a reluctant piece of legislation. When we considered this in June 2013, the Minister at the time said on the record that the Government wished to see a return to full jury trials as soon as possible. That goes for all of us. We do not want to see criminal non-jury trials. They do not exist anywhere else in the United Kingdom—there may have been an increase in civil non-jury trials, but criminal non-jury trials do not exist anywhere else. They exist in Northern Ireland because of the difficult and exceptional circumstances there.

Lady Hermon: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Pound: I will always give way to a former professor of law at Queen’s University.

Lady Hermon: The hon. Gentleman has inadvertently promoted me; it is awfully flattering and very kind of him, but I was never a professor of law at Queen’s University. The point I wish to draw to his attention—this is why I was so disconcerted, displeased and angry with his response to my earlier intervention about the attitude of his party’s leader towards non-jury trials in Northern Ireland—is that the Criminal Justice Act 2003 provides for non-jury trials throughout the whole United Kingdom, so they are available in England and Wales.

Stephen Pound: I apologise to the hon. Lady for elevate her—I am sure that it would only have been a matter of time before she had been made a full professor of law. I am one of the very few Members of Parliament who have not been a lawyer; my previous occupations having been those of sailor and bus driver. However, I was under the impression that we did not have non-jury criminal trials in Great Britain, although we do have non-jury civil trials, for example in fraud cases. But I am more than happy to be corrected on that.

I would like to hear from the Minister what the actual mechanics of the process will be with the independent reviewer’s reporting. Will it be an annual report, a biannual report or a sixth-monthly report? Will it be laid in the Library or will there be a statement to the House? Bearing in mind that we are entering some pretty choppy waters in Northern Ireland, will she consider a wider involvement by the shadow Secretary of State, because we on the Opposition side are proud of the tenets of United Kingdom law is that we are tried by our peers—those we work with and live alongside—in a jury. That is the way it should be, so it is unfortunate that we have to extend this facility today. However, as I understand it, and as the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) has mentioned, section 44 of the Criminal Justice Act 2003, which allows non-jury trials to take place, applies across Great Britain. I have not looked at it in great detail, so I am not sure how that provision differs from the measures we have in place in Northern Ireland. I am not sure whether there is any opportunity to roll the two into one provision at some future point, because even though we have special circumstances in Northern Ireland, obviously we seem to have them in Great Britain as well, as the existence of the 2003 provision shows. It is always regrettable when we get to that point.

Where is the specific threat perceived to be coming from? The Minister has quite rightly said that a very small fraction of cases are tried in this way, but it would be interesting to know what kinds of offences they were. If she does not have that information available immediately, perhaps she could write to hon. Members who are interested. What sort of cases are tried in this way? Are there any particular offences? Is there a pattern? This point was raised also by the hon. Member for North Down. It is important to try to identify where the problem is.

It is not all bad news in Northern Ireland. I have touched on two pieces of bad news but the Secretary of
State also mentioned on Monday that he is reviewing political donations, which he wants to be more transparent. When I chaired the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs in the last Parliament, we looked at that matter and urged a move in that direction, because we want to make Northern Ireland politics more normal. That was some good news. Today’s news—that we have to extend this measure—is not good news, but I have no hesitation in supporting the Government.

When we looked at this issue previously, we asked whether a single judge sits on the non-jury trials or whether there are any occasions when more than one judge sits. I seem to remember being told that one judge usually sat on such cases because of the limited number of judges available. But given that the Minister suggested that only a small number of cases are tried in this way, is it not possible for more than one judge to preside over such cases?

It is with a heavy heart that we have to extend this legislation, but I support the Government in doing so for the reasons that have been given. I hope that we can continue to move forward to the point at which it is not necessary to make this the norm and where we do not need this kind of legislation on the statute book because Northern Ireland will have moved to where we want it to be. It is sadly not there yet for the reasons that the Minister set out, but I wish her well in that respect.

3.12 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): May I say what a delight it is to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker? I and other SNP Members look forward very much to working with you in the future.

I will be brief, and let me be clear at the outset that the SNP will not oppose this extension. That does not, however, mean that we offer unconditional support to the principle, despite the extra and welcome safeguard of which the Minister has spoken. In fact, I have concerns about the principle when it comes to the human rights implications of a trial being seen to be fair. I make it clear that the prosecutors and judiciary involved are impartial—I have no concerns about their probity—but justice needs an impartial face to show the world, as well as an impartial body corporate. The authorities in Northern Ireland will have to strike a balance between the efficient running of the justice system, with fair and sustainable verdicts, and the need to respect the basic human right to a fair trial.

When we are talking about serious crimes, we need serious scrutiny of the operation of the courts. There is a great deal to be said, as other hon. Members have mentioned, for the principle of being judged by a jury of our peers. There is also a great deal to be said for protecting justice from perverse decisions that are made as a result of intimidation. While we are debating the order today, let us give some thanks and praise to the prosecutors, judges and defence agents who deliver justice in Northern Ireland.

The most important point of all, which was also made by other Members—I was delighted to hear the Minister and shadow Minister agree about this—is that decisions such as the one we are making today would more properly be taken at Stormont. Admittedly, that is a little difficult at the moment, but individuals elected by the people of Northern Ireland should be taking decisions about policing and the delivery of justice. Those decisions should be devolved to Stormont. In spite of these reservations, the SNP will not oppose the order.

3.14 pm

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): What a delight it is to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker. I also congratulate the Minister; it is good to see her in the Chamber.

I was very interested in the comments of the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock). We clearly need to be concerned about whether this arrangement risks verdicts being less safe than would be the case under the system that we enjoy throughout the rest of the United Kingdom. The hon. Lady has presumably seen table 5 in the consultation response. That interesting table shows quite clearly that the chances of acquittal are higher under a non-jury system. What I am slightly worried about, and this touches on the remarks made by my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson), the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee—

Mr Robertson: Ex-Chair.

Dr Murrison: Well, let us say Chair of the Select Committee for the time being.

I am slightly worried about these informatics and what the numbers actually represent. Who were the people given over to a non-jury trial, and who were those tried by jury? It is difficult to make head or tail of the figures without that granularity. But, taken at face value, the process looks safe. Indeed, several consultees suggested that that is the case, so we should derive some comfort from that.

I support the proposition outlined by the Minister. It is important to understand that this is part of a process; it is not Diplock courts. When the original legislation was passed in 2007, it was felt that things were sufficiently normal in Northern Ireland to move to this next level. The question will be when the situation is sufficiently normal in Northern Ireland to enable us to default to the position under the Criminal Justice Act 2003, which, under very exceptional circumstances and using a very high hurdle indeed, allows for non-jury trials. It is pretty clear that we are not there yet.

The hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), who speaks from the Opposition Front Bench, said that the independent reviewer appears to be content with the current situation and believes that the situation has not changed sufficiently for us to fail to pass this extension of two years at this point. It is a credit to the system that we keep it under such regular review and that we are extremely cautious about the difference in Northern Ireland compared with the rest of the United Kingdom that sets to one side our precious jury system, which is so fundamental to the way in which criminal justice runs in the United Kingdom.

David Seymour is absolutely right. Not enough has changed for us to consider not putting in place the extension at this point. We have heard about the five deaths last year, the 29 bombings and the 61 shootings. Most of us who keep an eye on the rest of the United Kingdom find that extraordinary. It is remarkable that all that is carried out in Northern Ireland, which is a small part of the country, and it clearly suggests that the situation in...
Northern Ireland is not yet sufficiently normal for us to consider setting aside the provisions of section 7 of the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007 and relying instead on the 2003 Act.

One or two respondents to the consultation asked a number of questions, one of which I touched on in my intervention. On the assumption that we will default to the 2003 Act as opposed to section 7 of the 2007 Act at some point in the future—sooner rather than later, I hope—one respondent asks what we need to put in place. In other words, what do we need to do to prepare for that point and protect those who are engaged, one way or another, in the justice system, so that people are not intimidated?

The PSNI has made it clear, as we might expect, that it sees real problems in putting alternatives in place—that is, protecting people in the community from the sort of intimidation that the 2007 Act is meant to militate against. Having been a Minister in the Department, I can fully understand why the PSNI might shrink from the proposition that it could be an alternative to the provisions of the 2007 Act, as it would find that extremely onerous. However, we need to start thinking about how to put in place measures that will come into force after we decide that we no longer need section 7 of the 2007 Act, as most of us hope that that will be sooner rather than later. That may well mean some sort of protection for those involved in the system.

The only other issue is the granularity I would rather like to see in table 5 so that we can know exactly—this touches on one or two comments that have been made this afternoon—who these people are who are being tried by this alternative means, because it is only with that information that we can really make sense of informatics such as that table.

As I said in my intervention on the Minister, the grounds for a legal challenge under section 7 of the 2007 Act are really quite stringent, and it has been pointed out by the chief executive of the Bar of Northern Ireland that we might like to review that. I very much welcome the review that the Minister spoke about, and I hope very much that this issue will be included in it. In other words, what do we need to do to prepare for that point and protect those who are engaged, one way or another, in the justice system, so that people are not intimidated?

We are looking forward to the holiday break and to our tremendous and glorious 12 July celebration, when everything good culturally and historically will be on show. I invite all right hon. and hon. Members to come to Northern Ireland to experience some of those wonderful things. I know that the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), has had the opportunity to come over many times to see them at first hand. He has also been along to some of the association dinners we have had, and those have been good occasions.

Bob Stewart: He would have been, wouldn’t he?

Jim Shannon: If there is a free dinner, there is an occasion to be there—[Interruption.] Well, it was a non-alcoholic event, but there you are. It is always good to have the interest of Members of the House. The fact that Members are participating in the debate, or that they are just in the Chamber, indicates that there is a real interest in Northern Ireland, and we appreciate that.

We have to take on and respond effectively to paramilitary activity and the clear dissident activities—the bomb attacks and the murder attempts—there have been in the Province. It is worth reminding ourselves of some of the statistics and of how they compare with the situation in 2015. We have had five security-related deaths—two more than in 2015. We have had 29 bombings, as other hon. Members have mentioned. We have had 61 shooting incidents—25 more than in 2015. We have had 66 paramilitary assaults—14 more than in 2015. There is clearly a need to address the rising tide in paramilitary activity through this legislation.

As the Minister said, the rate of non-jury trial usage in Northern Ireland is only 2%. However, it is critical that we have non-jury trials in our armoury and the ability to use them when necessary to catch those involved in criminal activity and put them in jail, which is where they belong.

It is therefore welcome that the Minister and our Government, led by the Prime Minister and her Cabinet—let us be quite clear about this—support this legislation, and that they are fully committed to ensuring that criminal activities across Northern Ireland are severely dealt with. If non-jury trials are a method of achieving that, let us use them, irrespective of what the issue may be. We can all then ensure that criminal activities across the whole of Northern Ireland decrease and that we have normality—we all look towards normality.

We live in a different Northern Ireland today than we did many years ago, but there are still some steps to take. Along with the Minister, the shadow Minister and other Members who have spoken, my colleagues and I
are particularly interested to see the Northern Ireland Assembly back on the road again and democracy in place. However, with great respect, that can happen only if other parties accept the reality of the situation and enter into talks that can deliver the long-term visionary peace that we all want—a peace that is acceptable to the Unionist population, which we clearly support.

3.26 pm

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): May I join colleagues across the House in congratulating you on your election, Madam Deputy Speaker? I also welcome the Minister to her place.

I rise to speak briefly in support of the extension of the non-jury trial provisions in the 2007 Act for a further two years. As the Minister indicated from the Dispatch Box, this is a pragmatic and practical response to the unique circumstances that we continue to experience in Northern Ireland.

This would be the fifth extension of the provisions since they were first introduced in 2007 by the then Labour Government. However, the temporary nature of the provisions indicates that the Government acknowledge that this is a unique and exceptional situation—a situation that should be reviewed regularly. As my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) indicated, it is a credit to the House that we make parliamentary time available to review it regularly.

As the Minister rightly said, this situation should be ended as soon as it is no longer needed and when the security situation in Northern Ireland improves and is much more stable. However, as the whole House will know, the security situation unfortunately remains volatile and, in some cases, of serious concern. In the last year alone, there have been five security-related deaths, more than 60 shooting incidents and almost 30 bombing incidents recorded by the PSNI. Some 137 people were arrested under section 41 of the Terrorism Act 2000 last year, of whom 19 were charged with an offence.

Members on both sides of the House will know that the security situation in Northern Ireland remains severe—that is its official classification—and it continues to pose a threat to the criminal justice system and the fair and proper administration of justice. Therefore, the extension of this order is a pragmatic and necessary step to protect the administration of justice in Northern Ireland. As other hon. Members have indicated, the order contains some safeguards that make it a practical and appropriate response. Fewer than 2% of all Crown court cases are tried under these provisions. The Director of Public Prosecutions for Northern Ireland has to meet a statutory test before he can issue his certificate, the judge in the trial must give reasons for his decisions, and people convicted under the provisions are still entitled to right of appeal. In short, this is a fair and proportionate measure designed to target a very small number of exceptional cases, reflecting the unique security situation in Northern Ireland.

Other hon. and gallant Friends have referred to the Government’s public consultation, which I have also read. I want to draw the House’s attention to a few points, and hope that they can be given weight when Members decide whether to support this order extension. First, it is important to note that a majority of respondents to the consultation supported the extension of the order. The Chief Commissioner of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission acknowledged the ongoing security implications and suggested that the order should be extended. The DPP for Northern Ireland confirmed that the conditions remain appropriate. The PSNI itself has argued that there are a limited number of cases where continuing risks to the administration of justice justify the extension of this order. Other supporters include the independent reviewer of the 2007 Act, who says that “nothing has happened or changed in the last two years...to justify bringing these arrangements to an end”.

Those are very authoritative and weighty contributions to the public consultation, and I hope that Members across the House will pay heed to them as we decide whether to support the extension of this system.

I am also heartened by the fact that in their response to the consultation, the Government reiterated their commitment to ending these arrangements as soon as the security situation stabilises, recognised the temporary nature of the 2007 provisions, and committed to keep the operation of the provisions under review by the independent reviewer of the 2007 Act, who, as other hon. Members have said, is doing a very good job. I welcome all these commitments, which clearly demonstrate the Government’s intention to make sure that this order is a proportionate response that mitigates some of the ongoing risks to the security situation in Northern Ireland.

I welcome the Secretary of State’s efforts, and those of all the parties in Northern Ireland, including those represented here, to restoring the devolved Administration at Stormont as soon as possible, allowing the people of Northern Ireland ultimately to have jurisdiction over all sorts of matters that affect them, from public services to the economy, security and the administration of justice. That is the long-term solution, and it is something that we all want to see. A restored Northern Ireland Executive and devolved Government is the long-term way to address all these very important issues. While all across this House work towards the normalisation of politics and the security situation in Northern Ireland, we must also continue to recognise the unique security situation that pertains in Northern Ireland. I will therefore support the extension of the order today and encourage other Members to do so as well.

3.31 pm

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): Everybody across this House, and from all parties, can acknowledge the very significant progress that there has been in Northern Ireland over the course of the past 30 years, and that has been incredibly welcome. However, my hon. Friends and I—and, I am sure, others who have gone to Northern Ireland and seen the situation—believe that for too many communities that progress has not been sufficient. There is a still a way to go towards full transformation and full peace. That was recognised in the Northern Ireland Executive’s good relations strategy “Together: Building a United Community”, which recognised how far we have come but also that much more needs to be done to ensure that those in many communities can be brought fully to the table of transformation and peace.

Northern Ireland has so much to give, but for much too long that potential has been stifled by the scourge of terrorism. What is required in this situation is unreserved condemnation of terrorism but working with these
communities to try to ensure that the transformation is fully complete. To that end, I echo the words of so many in this House and say that the best way to do that is by having a strong and stable Government in Northern Ireland delivering for people and ensuring that the journey can be completed. Although this is not a devolved matter, such a stable Government would certainly help to secure the peace moving forward. The Democratic Unionist party has always been of the view that there was no need to bring down the institutions in Northern Ireland, and at this stage we see no barrier to getting those institutions re-established. Our challenge to all the parties in Northern Ireland is to drop all and any red lines that they have and get back into government, delivering for people on health and education. That is the best way to build a stable future for everybody in Northern Ireland.

Turning to the particular subject of this debate, it is with some sorrow that I stand here to welcome the fact that this extension will remain in place, subject to the vote of this House, for a further two years. I do think it is necessary, because unfortunately, in too many places, there are ongoing issues of intimidation and threats. We have heard some of the statistics and figures here today. For some people, hearing the scale of that ongoing activity over the past couple of years may well come as a bit of a shock. For the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland, their day-to-day experience of living there has changed dramatically, and that is welcome, but there is still the ongoing threat of dissident republicans, and threats across both communities.

As a former barrister, and as the new spokesperson on justice for the Democratic Unionist party, I want to pay tribute to our justice system in Northern Ireland. For many decades, through the darkest days of the troubles, not only the judiciary but barristers and solicitors had to put up with many threats and a lot of intimidation; it was not just jury members who faced intimidation. The courts in the Diplock system served Northern Ireland well during that period.

The integrity of the justice system must continue to be protected, although this protection is—and this is welcome—used to a much lesser extent. Justice must be served, because it is the absolute centre of our democracy in Northern Ireland. It is therefore with sorrow that I welcome the proposals, and I give my commitment to do all I can in the next few years to try to remove the necessity for such measures.

3.35 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome you to the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker.

As someone who trained in criminal law and has always held our great traditions—of which trial by jury is one—in high regard, it is with regret that I come to the House and consider situations in which we cannot sensibly offer people that right. It is only right that the House should approve this order. It was interesting to hear the Minister outlining it and explaining some of the reasons for it, and it was interesting to hear the comments that the hon. Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly) has just made.

When I visited Northern Ireland last year, it was clear that things have changed. Things have moved on a lot since the peace process and the agreements that were reached in the late '90s, but there is still an undercurrent that makes provisions such as this absolutely necessary. One only has to walk through the Falls Road area and see the signs on which PSNI has been expanded to “People Should Not Inform” to see that there are still those who would subvert the criminal justice system and make jury trials impossible if they felt it was in their interests to do so. Therefore, we must protect the justice system by making available a slightly different provision to deal with cases in which intimidation or threats might lead to an unfair trial or a perverse outcome.

When I trained to be a lawyer, the Diplock court system was still in existence and was regularly cited in England as an example of a scenario in which there was no trial by jury. As the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) has pointed out, UK law provides for extreme circumstances in which people seek to avoid justice by intimidating juries. It is not possible to have a democracy without the rule of law, and people need to know that they cannot use violence to avoid facing justice.

I welcome the fact that the numbers are falling, and the figures given by the Minister give me comfort that the provision is used only when absolutely necessary. It is right to say this is not a return to the Diplock court system by the back door. When the justice system is under attack, however, it must be able to respond so as to maintain fairness and ensure that an individual can still get a trial—an opportunity to put their case, with all the burden of evidence still on the prosecution—without a jury of 12 people who could be intimidated in an attempt to deliver a result other than the one that justice demands.

It is with regret that I support this measure, but I think that it is absolutely proportionate and that the justice system in Northern Ireland cannot do without it at the moment. We all hope that it will not need to be renewed again, but we must be practical rather than simply philosophical. A defendant will still have all the protections of a criminal trial. The only difference will be the absence, in exceptional circumstances, of a jury who could be intimidated, or who might feel unable to give a fair verdict because of implicit intimidation.

It is worth paying tribute to those who continue to administer law, order and justice in the most difficult and challenging circumstances, in which people seek to intimidate others to avoid being held responsible for the crimes they have committed. This is a proportionate measure that is, sadly, necessary, and it has my full support.

3.39 pm

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I want to make a few points, although the Minister was very kind in allowing me to intervene on her so I have already been able to mention some of the issues that I wanted to raise. When I intervened on her about types of trial and the defendants involved in non-jury trials, I expected her to have the full information at hand. The hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) and for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) said it would be helpful to have an indication about the nature of the defendants, whether or not acquitted, who have gone through the process.

By happy coincidence, before I came into the Chamber I had a look at a research paper. I stand to be corrected by the Minister when she winds up if I have inadvertently
mentioned these individuals, but I do not think that will be the case. Let me give the House some examples. There was Michael Stone, a very infamous murderer—not famous, but infamous for the Milltown murders—and a loyalist paramilitary. There was a gentleman called Chris Ward, who was apparently involved in the Northern Bank robbery, which was a huge bank robbery. I would not like to say where the money went, but I think a lot of us suspect that it went to the IRA. There was the murder of Robert McCartney, which was a ghastly, horrible murder. I know that these are past cases, but I am simply giving examples of cases in which there were non-jury trials, and they were all very serious cases indeed.

It is wholly appropriate to remind the House that this is an exceptional procedure: non-jury trials under the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007 are very exceptional. I also remind the House that this is written into the 2007 legislation:

“No inference may be drawn by the court from the fact that the certificate has been issued in relation to the trial.”

That is really important because, as was mentioned by the hon. Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly), I welcome her to the House—our judiciary in Northern Ireland, and indeed the legal profession in Northern Ireland, has had to endure a sustained terrorist threat over many long years. The judiciary in Northern Ireland is rigorously impartial and independent. The fact that the statistics show acquittals in non-jury trials to be very much in line with those in jury trials indicates that this is a very fair process. Even if it is a non-jury trial, such a trial is a fair process. We have remarkable judges who show impeccable judgment and impartiality.

May I add a comment in fairness to the outgoing or retiring Director of Public Prosecutions for Northern Ireland, Barra McGrory? I know there has been criticism of him, including by me, in relation to the fact that he had been involved—in his past life, but in his professional capacity—in advising IRA members who received comfort letters from both Labour and Conservative Governments. However, as the hon. Member for Tewkesbury will confirm, his evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee as the DPP made it quite clear that no one who received comfort letters did so while he was the Director of Public Prosecutions. I think he has been totally impartial in carrying out his functions as the DPP. It is a very difficult job in Northern Ireland, and the non-jury trial system in Northern Ireland is a challenge for everyone.

As the Minister knows—other Members have given the statistics—the continued loyalist and republican paramilitary activity is a serious concern, and it should be, because the threat level in Northern Ireland is severe. However, there is one point that I would like the Minister to address. Part 7 of the Criminal Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007 made provision for non-jury trials where there is a real and present danger of jury tampering, and section 44 applies equally to Northern Ireland as to Great Britain. Will the Minister say whether there have been any applications by the prosecution under section 44 of the 2003 Act because they feared that there was a real and present danger of jury tampering, and whether those have been dismissed, or whether the only non-jury system that has been in operation is that under the 2007 legislation that we are renewing this afternoon? We need clarity on whether both systems are running in parallel or one has been less used than the other. That would be helpful to the House.

Without hesitation, I give my support to the renewal of the order this afternoon. I am content that the non-jury system in Northern Ireland under the 2007 Act is impartial. Everyone should have confidence in it, given the statistics, and I am happy to see it renewed for another two years.

3.45 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): May I just say, Madam Deputy Speaker, how that Chair becomes you? I welcome you to it and I welcome the Minister to her new position. I hope that will get me called more often.

I was the Army incident commander at Ballykelly when, as many people know, the Ballykelly bomb was detonated just after 11 pm on 6 December 1982. The bomb was placed by the Irish National Liberation Army and took the lives of 17 young people, including several girls—four, I think—and 11 soldiers, six of them from my company. One of them was Lance Corporal Clinton Collins, who I had just finished playing squash with two hours before. He had been promoted to lance corporal that day.

Four years later, I was the lead Army witness in the trial of, I think, five bombers at Belfast Crown court. There was no jury, but if there had been they would have been grossly intimidated by what happened in that court. Throughout the evidence I gave, I was barracked from the public gallery with words like, “You’re a dead man,” and, “You’ve had it.” Of course, it was incredibly unsettling and the court procedures did not seem able to do much about it. After my evidence—not because of it, I am sure—the accused changed their plea from not guilty to guilty. They went down for what was meant to be life, but which turned out to be only a few years.

For my part, I was placed on a published terrorist death list. Indeed, a few years later, a terrorist team came to my house in Brussels, where I was serving as a lieutenant colonel in NATO, got out of their car and spoke to my 13-year-old son, who was playing in the front garden. They intended to kill me. They asked my son whether his daddy was home. His daddy was home but I was not. I was five minutes away. My son, perhaps alerted by the appearance and possibly the accents of the three men, said, “No, my daddy’s not home. My daddy works three miles away in NATO headquarters and he’s not here.” The men got back into their car and left. They killed two other servicemen on the German border later.

Those men were trying to take vengeance on me for giving evidence in a court. I dread to think how much intimidation there would have been for people on a jury in that case. I dread to think how much intimidation would continue to this day in trials such as that one and others we have heard about in the Chamber this afternoon.

Let me be absolutely clear. None of us—no one in this place—wants to have trials without a jury, but right now, Northern Ireland requires non-jury trials, and every single Member of the House should back that.

3.51 pm

Chloe Smith: I begin my brief closing remarks by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) for that moving and timely illustration of exactly the issues we are dealing with today. On behalf of the whole House, I thank him for sharing that piece of his family’s unfortunate experience.
Dr Julian Lewis: This is an appropriate point, is it not, to show our appreciation for the work of our armed forces, without whose courage we would never have had a political settlement, and to express our concern that former service personnel still face the possibility of trial for matters arising out of the troubles when terrorist murderers are able to walk free?

Chloe Smith: My right hon. Friend will be well aware that, at this point, I am not able to deal fully with the issues he raises, except to say in brief that we would all wish to have a way of dealing with legacy issues in Northern Ireland that is fair, balanced and proportionate. We will have to return to those more fully at a later time. I will do my best to work my way swiftly through the requests that have been made of me this afternoon. I thank the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), for his support for the measures, and for the additional reasons he gave for the argument that many of us share. He asked how the review mechanism will work. I confirm that it is for David Seymour to decide on the exact mechanisms of the independent review. We can all have confidence that his previous work has been very thorough, and that he will bring to the subject the oversight and transparency that we would wish for. In some ways, that answers other points that have been made—there are bigger issues than are in the order. The independent review report will be laid before both Houses.

Stephen Pound: Will the Minister tell the House whether that will be on an annual, biannual or six-monthly basis?

Chloe Smith: It will be part of David Seymour’s annual review cycle. I think I said that in my earlier remarks, but I am happy to make it clear for the record.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson), the erstwhile Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee—

Stephen Pound: He still is.

Chloe Smith: Indeed. No doubt we will see my right hon. Friend serve as the Chairman again. He and a number of hon. Members asked about the mechanisms of the Criminal Justice Act 2003. I can confirm to the House that that Act remains in force. The threshold is different for these provisions—the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) made those very same points. Obviously, the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007 came after the 2003 Act. Today’s provisions were designed to complement the 2003 Act—the provisions that were already in force in the UK. They are specific to Northern Ireland and were designed to be a way to address its legacy of paramilitary activity and the risks to the population at large that stem from that.

Lady Hermon: Will the Minister give way?

Chloe Smith: I am afraid I must press on, as I have only a few minutes left in which to answer points raised by quite a few Members.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury asked how many judges sat on the trials. I can confirm that in a non-jury trial there is a single judge. He and others asked about the trend for the types of trials that use the provisions. As I confirmed earlier to the House, trials have come from both republican and loyalist sides of the community, but, as we have seen in this debate, they are for criminal trials of all types. As long as the request falls under one of the four conditions, and the DPP is satisfied on the fifth, a certificate may be issued. I note that others, including the hon. Member for North Down, have gone further into what type of defendant has been tried under the provisions. I will not comment on individual cases in the Chamber, but I will confirm that they are designed to be used across communities and to protect the general public from the scourge of intimidation.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) asked about human rights implications. I am glad to have the opportunity to say a little more on that. In the explanatory memorandum, the Secretary of State is clear that in his view the provisions do not infringe on equality and human rights measures. That is the simple part. The more complex part is that one reason why we feel the provisions are necessary is because they protect the human rights of jurors. As my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham made absolutely clear, jurors have a right to enjoy a family life and a right to privacy. When we talk about the potential intimidation of juries, we must remember how those rights apply. It is also possible to argue that if a person does not receive an unbiased jury trial, their rights as a defendant have been compromised. I raise these points in brief just to say to the hon. Lady and others that there are complex issues, but we feel confident that the 2007 Act does not compromise human rights and indeed that it upholds, to the extent possible in the circumstances, the right to a fair trial.

My hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) wanted granularity in the list of where the measures have been used. As I said, I will not comment on individual cases but I am happy to write to him, and to other hon. Members who raised this point, with a little more detail to further illustrate the kind of trials to which they may apply. He highlighted the comments by the Bar. I reiterate that we all want to look towards a world where these provisions are not necessary. We have an opportunity to do that with the forthcoming independent review.

I welcome the comments made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). He emphasised the range of paramilitary criminality we face and I am grateful to him for placing it on the record. I am equally grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Havant (Alan Mak) and the hon. Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly) for illustrating further the reasons we should all be able to support the measures. I particularly welcome the hon. Lady to her role not only in the House generally, but as the justice spokesperson for her party.

Let me now deal with the remaining points made by the hon. Member for North Down, and dwell a little further on issues relating to the Criminal Justice Act 2003. The relevant provisions have been used in England in two cases, one in 2004 and one that is before Leeds Crown Court this year. It has not yet been used in Northern Ireland, but, as I have said, the two systems are designed to be complementary.

The measures in the 2003 Act do not address one very important issue, namely the potential for bias in juries. We have discussed the potential perversion of a justice system. There has not been time for us to go into this type of provision in too much detail, but it involves...
the important concept of wishing to avoid trials that could be undermined by biased juries, a problem that could arise in the context of the presence of paramilitaries in close communities. I am confident that the hon. Lady and some of her near neighbours are familiar with such issues, and—like, I think, all Members who are here today—want to see an end to paramilitarism, and an end to a world in which these unfortunate measures are necessary. I think we have all agreed that we want to see an end to paramilitarism, and an end to a world in which these unfortunate measures are necessary.

I commend the order to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That the draft Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007 (Extension of duration of non-jury trial provisions) Order 2017, which was laid before this House on 22 June, be approved.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. In the last half hour, the Department for Work and Pensions has made available a written statement outlining the closure of jobcentres across the country, which will lead to the loss of 750 jobs, including jobs at Newton-le-Willows jobcentre in my constituency. The story was briefed to the media earlier today, but no Minister has come to the House to be scrutinised or asked questions about this catastrophic decision, which will lead to the loss of so many jobs. I think that shows contempt for the House, for scrutiny, and, most important, for the people who are losing their jobs. Can you advise me, Madam Deputy Speaker, on how we can ensure that when Ministers make and announce decisions such as this, they do it properly, in the House?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): This matter was raised earlier by another Member. I am sure that Ministers will be aware that it has been raised a second time, and is therefore a cause of some concern to Members. The Speaker advised earlier that Members might consider raising it at business questions tomorrow, so I think I will leave it at that.

Israel and Palestinian Talks

4.3 pm

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Israel and Palestinian talks.

Looking around the Chamber, I am conscious that, first, a great many colleagues want to speak in the debate, and, secondly, there is a great deal of knowledge about this subject in the House. Accordingly, I do not intend to speak for long at this stage, on the basis that will give me more time at the end of the debate in which to respond to some of the questions that are bound to be asked.

Having knocked around this issue for about 30 years—as some other Members in the Chamber have done—I know that many aspects of it are well known to us, and that restating them would probably be less effective than dealing with questions and looking at current issues, which is what I intend to do. I hope that the House will forgive me if I do not cover everything in my opening speech. No offence is intended, but I shall have a little more time to deal with the major questions when I respond to the debate.

I am very pleased to have the opportunity to discuss this important issue. A just and lasting settlement between Israelis and Palestinians that resolves the elements of conflict between them and delivers peace for all their peoples is long overdue and desired by friends of both all over the world. A lasting peace between the Israelis and Palestinians will only come about through a two-state solution negotiated between the parties, and that is the United Kingdom’s position.

Nadhim Zahawi (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend to his rightful place on the Front Bench. Does he agree that one of the tragedies of this conflict is that for many years both sides have seemed to know what a deal looks like but, sadly, have never got there? One of the views in the middle east region is that that is in part because Hamas can never agree with Abu Mazen. Indeed, some will say that Hamas does not want a peace deal because it does not suit their interests.

Alistair Burt: There are many blockages on the way to peace, and a number of them will come up during the course of this debate. Hamas’s inability to accept the existence of the state of Israel is plainly one of them, and there are plenty more. As my hon. Friend said, it is a long-standing tragedy that the broad outlines of what many of us consider to be a deal are available and known, but the steps needed to convert that into action have not yet been taken.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What discussions have the Government had with the Israeli Government about the extension of the settlements in Jerusalem? More importantly, what discussions have our Government had about sanctions?

Alistair Burt: If I am able to pursue my original course of action of putting a few things on record and then dealing with subsequent questions, settlements will inevitably come up. I would like to deal with that issue then.
Several hon. Members rose—

Alistair Burt: I will take two more interventions for now.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his elevation to the Front Bench once again. What is his view of some of the peace builders, in particular the ecumenical visitors who accompany various groups between both parties and attempt to build bridges?

Alistair Burt: Again, I will come on to issues such as two-track possibilities. Many people have a contribution to make. One of the agonies of the situation is that so many people urge good will and want a resolution, yet there are blockages that prevent that from happening. However, everyone with good intent is welcome into the process.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I also welcome my right hon. Friend back—again, again—to the Front Bench. It is good to see him back at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, too.

This debate too often becomes polarised, so may we from the outset establish that in all things this debate should be reasonable? Will my right hon. Friend therefore condemn the recent march in London under the banner of Hezbollah flags and also some of the pillorying of those of us who consider ourselves to be supporters of the state of Israel, as critical friends? During the general election campaign, a supporter of the Leader of the Opposition screamed the name of the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) in my face, and then proceeding to describe me as “Israeli scum” and “Zionist scum” because of the simple fact that I list myself as a friend of Israel—I would say that I am also a friend of the Palestinian people. That sort of behaviour is completely unacceptable.

Alistair Burt: I thank my hon. Friend for his remarks. Sadly, as Members on both sides of the House have pointed out, extremism of language and a deliberate attempt to build bridges?

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people of Gaza and Israel, including the failure to close the Palestinian fissure and therefore to make progress. Gaza must remain a constituent part of a future Palestinian state with the west bank, and with East Jerusalem as the state’s capital.

A further barrier to peace with which it is sometimes difficult for the Palestinian Authority to deal is the attitude taken towards terrorists and their portrayal as martyrs. Although the track records of President Abbas and the Palestinian Authority have shown their genuine commitment to non-violence and a negotiated two-state solution, this remains an area of great difficulty.

On the Israeli side, it is important that the Government of Israel reaffirm their commitment to a two-state solution. Every Israeli Prime Minister since Ehud Barak in the 1990s has advocated a two-state solution as the only way to permanently end the Arab-Israeli conflict and to preserve Israel’s Jewish and democratic identity. However, there are now differences of opinion within Israeli society, which has changed a great deal over 30 years. There are concerns about security risks from other areas. Polls of Israeli public opinion show that although everyone wants peace, seeking a solution to the problems between Israel and the Palestinians is not always the first item on the political agenda. There is a real deficit of trust on both sides, and we encourage all parties to work together to find a lasting solution.

Several hon. Members rose—

Alistair Burt: I give way to the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms).

Stephen Timms: I also welcome the right hon. Gentleman’s reappointment. I agree that we need Israeli support for the two-state solution, but does he agree that continued settlement building risks making two states unviable?

Alistair Burt: I am not sure whether the right hon. Gentleman wrote my speech or had early sight of it, but perhaps I could turn to the next paragraph before giving way to my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris).

Vital to getting an environment that is conducive to fresh negotiations is avoiding actions that undermine the viability of lasting peace. One such action is building settlements. The United Kingdom’s view is clear and unchanged: settlement building seriously undermines the prospects of two states for two peoples. I am extremely concerned by reports this week of plans to construct more than 1,800 new housing units in East Jerusalem. In the UK’s view, all settlements are illegal under international law. If confirmed, the plans would be the latest example of an accelerating policy of illegal settlement expansion. That would take us further away from a two-state solution and raises serious questions about the Israeli Government’s commitment to achieving the shared vision of Israel living side by side with a viable, independent and contiguous Palestinian state. We have always been clear—I certainly have—that settlements are far from the only problem in this conflict, and we have to be careful not to be sidetracked by one side or the other. It is not about one thing or the other. That is the problem: there are so many different things.

The people of Israel deserve to live free from the threat of terrorism and anti-Semitic incitement, but it has long been our position that settlement activity is illegal and that it undermines the viability of two states for two peoples. We are gravely concerned that an increase in the pace of settlement construction in East Jerusalem and the west bank presents a strategic threat to a peaceful resolution of this conflict. As a strong friend of Israel, we urge the Israeli Government to show restraint on the construction of settlements, and to avoid steps that reduce the prospects for peace and security in the region and make it harder to achieve a different relationship between Israel and the Arab world.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): It is worth noting that recent polling shows that a clear majority of both Israelis and Palestinians want peace, with a clear majority in favour of a two-state solution. However, it is hard to see that happening when Hamas remains committed to the destruction of Israel. Does my right hon. Friend agree that Hamas routinely and completely lets down Palestinian people in their quest for peace?

Alistair Burt: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. I mentioned that earlier. Peace is very much the desire of the peoples in the areas concerned, but the awkwardness is how to get there. I have said before from the Dispatch Box that there are always 100 reasons to say no, but we have to find the reasons why people should say yes.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab) rose—

Alistair Burt: I can think of no one better to do so than the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn).

Hilary Benn: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way; like everyone else, I am pleased to see him back in his rightful place. We have just been debating Northern Ireland, the history of which has taught us that courageous political leadership and a willingness to compromise are absolutely essential to progress. Does he share my view that the absence of such courageous political leadership on all sides in the current Israeli-Palestine conflict is the biggest obstacle to bringing about the peace that we all wish to see?

Alistair Burt: I think that the right hon. Gentleman suggests that there is a gap into which courageous leadership should come. It is certainly true that for every courageous step taken, there are issues that pull people back, which may demonstrate that a courageous position might not be well enough rewarded. Leaving Gaza, for example, has not brought the swap of land for peace that the Israeli Government intended when they left. Courageous acts sometimes do not occur because they may make the situation worse. The outside world needs to assist in the building of trust, so that those courageous acts can be taken. There are examples from both sides of where leaders have been prepared to take courageous acts, and that is what the situation calls for.

James Morris: Will the Minister give way?

Alistair Burt: If I may, I will make a little more progress and then look to finish, otherwise I will not be able to fulfil my commitment.

Having looked at the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli Government, a third element is the United States. If there is one area of the world in which the recently elected President of the United States is engaged, it is clearly the middle east and Israel. We welcome his
strong leadership on the issue of middle east peace, as underlined by his visit to the region. It is incumbent on all parties to seize whatever new opportunity there may be to move forward for peace, so we look forward to working with President Trump and his advisers for a peace deal that meets the requirements of both parties, reflects our long-standing support for a two-state solution and takes the chance being offered by his election to move forward.

**James Morris:** Historically, when a two-state solution has almost been reached, it has been on the basis of negotiations where there were no preconditions between either side. That has to be a fundamental principle. The Minister says he has been looking at this issue for 30 years. Having no preconditions leads to a potential two-state solution.

**Alistair Burt:** I agree with my hon. Friend on that. It is not for those of us from outside to suggest or dictate terms, but it is clear that if movement is to be made in a situation where everyone is so very familiar with it, there should be as few constraints as possible. Having an absence of any condition before people talk is probably one of those things that we all know happens behind the scenes, and it is important that that is recognised.

**Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): I visited the region almost two years ago, when one of the many things that struck me was the detention of child prisoners in Palestine who are taken through the military court system. Many allegations of abuse have been made. I know that the Minister is a very decent man and I hope he will look at this issue in his role.

**Alistair Burt:** I thank the hon. Lady. Yes, this is an issue on which I have been long engaged, and discussions are going on with the Israeli authorities about the holding of children in military detention. The UK has already expressed its concern about that, and the hon. Lady can be assured that I will do so again.

I wish to finish by discussing two more things. First, I wish to recognise that this is the centenary of the Balfour declaration. This is a part of our history that divides opinion in this country and in the region, and we will treat it sensitively. I do not think it is incompatible to be proud of the UK’s role in the creation of the state of Israel and yet to feel sadness that the long-standing issues between the relative communities created by it have not yet been resolved. It was a historic statement and the UK is proud of its role in the creation of Israel, but it is unfinished business and, accordingly, in this centenary year we are especially focused on encouraging the Israelis and the Palestinians to take steps that will bring them closer to peace.

**Dr Matthew Offord** (Hendon) (Con): Does the Minister agree that any recognition of a Palestinian state before direct peace talks between the two states, Israel and Palestine, would not only be counterproductive but would damage a long-term two-state solution?

**Alistair Burt:** It is not the UK Government’s intention to recognise a Palestinian state; we believe it should come in due course, at the conclusion of the talks to settle the issue, and I do not believe that position is going to change.

I wish to conclude, as the House has been very patient. We will continue to work through multilateral institutions, including the United Nations and the European Union, to support resolutions and policies that encourage both sides to take steps that rebuild trust, while recognising that it will eventually only be for the two sides themselves to bring about success.

**John Spellar:** I thank the Lazarus of the Government Front Bench for giving way. Before he concludes, I hope he will mention and deal with the extremely unhelpful role of Iran in the affairs of Israel and of the wider middle east, not least in this context of Iran’s strong support for Hezbollah and Hamas. Apropos of that, should we not now call time on this charade of distinguishing between the military and the political wing of Hezbollah?

**Alistair Burt:** If the right hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I will perhaps deal with that issue in my concluding remarks; otherwise, I will have been unfair to people by going on for too long.

The United Kingdom is also strongly supportive of a regional approach to peace. The relationship of Arab states with Israel over a variety of matters means that there has never been a better time to try to make sure that they are playing an active part, both in helping to resolve Palestinian issues and in understanding that their recognition of Israel and the plugging in of Israel to the economy of the middle east would have a profound impact throughout the middle east, where there is a demographic bulge and where many jobs are going to need to be created. There are so many good reasons for the situation to be resolved, and that is one of them. Arab states have a particular role to play.

In conclusion, we remain committed to encouraging both the Israelis and the Palestinians to revitalise the peace process. International action has an important role to play, but, ultimately, an agreement can be achieved only by direct negotiation between the parties. Only the Israelis and the Palestinians can bring about the lasting peace that their people seek and that is long overdue. I am absolutely certain that every single one of us in this House would want to wish them well in that and encourage such efforts.

**Emily Thornberry** (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I begin, as so many Members have, by welcoming the new Minister for the Middle East to his role. He fulfilled a similar but more junior role with great distinction for several years, and I am sure he will do so again. I am also sure that he will continue to bring the same passion for the cause of finding peace between Israel and Palestine that he always has brought to the issue, and that he always brings to issues in the House.

My pleasure at welcoming the Minister to his new role is tempered by the fact that I truly believe that if the Government call a debate on such a serious foreign policy issue as the future of talks between Israel and Palestine—this is the first time a Government have done so for 10 years, I believe—and that debate is held in Government time, it would not be unreasonable to expect the Foreign Secretary himself to make the effort to lead the discussion. I do not mean to undermine how much I welcome the Minister and what he has said but,
although some Members might disagree, when 100 years ago Britain’s then Foreign Secretary, Arthur Balfour, decided that the British Government should publicly declare their support for the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people, he wrote the letter in his own name. He did not delegate the task to his junior Ministers, because he realised that not only do words matter but that who says them matters very much.

I regret that the Foreign Secretary has chosen not to speak today, but I am afraid it is all part of a pattern. Since the Yom Kippur war in 1973, we have fought 12 elections in this country and the Conservative party has published 12 manifestos. During that whole period, the most recent election is only the second time the Tory party has failed to mention the middle east even once in its whole manifesto. Even the 2005 manifesto—a document so parochial, insular and isolationist that it did not even mention Russia or the United States—said that a Conservative Government would “work to achieve peace in the Middle East based on the principle of Israel secure within its borders and a viable Palestinian state.”

Ten years later, in its 2015 manifesto, the Conservative party said it would “support a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, robustly defending the right of Israel to protect its security, while supporting a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, by looking at the truth of the situation, which is that, in my view, there will be two states in the future.”

So, we have to ask ourselves what has changed. We have to ask why the Conservative party has been prepared to spell out its middle east policy in 1987, 1992, 1997, 2001, 2005 and 2010, and just two years ago in 2015, but its latest manifesto says absolutely nothing—or as some might say klum, or as others might say, la shay. I do not know what the Foreign Secretary’s explanation is, and we are not going to find out today. He might blame Nick Timothy, or his good friend Sir Lynton Crosby, but I must say that I drafted my section of Labour’s manifesto; why did the Foreign Secretary trust someone else to do his?

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): It may be that the Conservatives did not cover this issue in our manifesto, but at least we did not elect a leader who views Hamas and Hezbollah as his friends.

Emily Thornberry: When debating this issue, it is important to do so seriously and to raise serious matters. I am surprised at the tone that the right hon. Lady adopts. If she wants to continue to use the Lynton Crosby style of politics in this place, I have to tell her that it is discredited, outdated and does not work. Surely it is better to engage on the substance of the debate. The point that I am making today is that at the last general election, the Conservative party did not mention the middle east and it did not mention Palestine and Israel. I am coming on in my speech to wonder why that is and to put forward a few explanations.

Oliver Dowden: The shadow Foreign Secretary is very dismissive of her leader’s description of Hamas and Hezbollah as friends. I have to say to her that a great many of my constituents, many of whom are Jewish, are deeply worried and troubled by the prospect of someone who aspires to be the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom describing those two Jew-hating terrorist organisations as his friends. I would welcome it if the shadow Foreign Secretary were to take the opportunity to withdraw, on behalf of the Labour party, those comments that have caused so much upset and offence in the community.

Emily Thornberry: One way we can approach this is by looking at the truth of the situation, which is that, in order to engage people in peace, the leader of my party wishes to bring them together to encourage them to discuss matters. It is only through discussion and agreement that we can make progress.

Dr Offord rose—

Emily Thornberry: Before the hon. Gentleman jumps up and down, let me just finish my point. [Interruption.] Please, I urge Members to calm down a little. I am sure that if the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Oliver Dowden) has some good ideas about what a future peace process between Israel and Palestine might look like, he may get a letter from the Leader of the Opposition, asking him up to the second floor of Norman Shaw South to discuss it with him—he is quite happy to discuss peace and people’s ideas. However, if Government Members continue to use one of the main guns of the Lynton Crosby campaign, which is discredited and has not worked, I will not take any further interventions from them.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend has rightly talked about the seriousness of the issue. Our focus must urgently be on those who are living in Israel and Palestine and those who are suffering tremendously. It is important to acknowledge the worsening of the humanitarian situation. Two million people are trapped in the Gaza strip, half of them children. In 2012, the UN said that Gaza would be unliveable by 2020. Many experts say that 2020 is already here. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is important that we focus on those real issues and that we move the debate forward in a productive way today?

Emily Thornberry: My hon. Friend is quite right: when 80% of people who live in Gaza are dependent on aid to survive, it is a very important issue. My hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), who will be summing up the debate at the end of the day, will be dealing particularly with humanitarian issues.

I shall make a little more progress on the point I was making, while messages are perhaps sent to Lynton Crosby for a different script. I drafted my section of the Labour manifesto, so why did the Foreign Secretary trust someone else to draft his? The reason, I suggest, is this: if we have always known in this country, ever since the Balfour declaration 100 years ago, that when statesmen and stateswomen in this country are prepared to set down in black and white their policies on the middle east, those words have an impact. When they are set out by the most senior figures as official Government policy, they matter even more. I know that the Minister has said some very important things today, but the point is that if they are not put in the manifesto or not said by the Secretary of State, they do not have the same impact. That is important.

When the Conservative party fails to set out its policies in respect of the middle east in its official manifesto, people on all sides of the debate, particularly those in Palestine and Israel, are left to interpret silence in the way they wish. Many of them, sadly, will come to
the conclusion that I did, which is that the Government could not repeat their 2015 language supporting a two-state solution and condemning illegal settlement building because, on both those points, they do not as yet know where Donald Trump stands. Until they do, they want nothing written in black and white, because, one day, it might put them at odds with the American President. That simply is not good enough. We cannot overturn decades of established British foreign policy, upheld by successive Governments from both parties, just because this pathetic Government are happy to play patsy to Donald Trump.

Dr Offord: I am grateful to the shadow Foreign Secretary for finally giving way. I can assure her that if her right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition has anything to say about Israel or Hamas, he can say it tomorrow when he visits my constituency, which has the second largest Jewish community in the country, and I am sure that they will have plenty of questions to ask him. What I want to know from the shadow Foreign Secretary—this has been made very clear today—is whether her party, in accordance with its manifesto, which she wrote, will immediately recognise the state of Palestine: yes or no?

Emily Thornberry: If the hon. Gentleman will take his seat, relax and listen to the rest of my speech, I will get to that at a later stage.

Mr Jim Cunningham: Only about two or three years ago, when we had the coalition Government—this might explain the reason why it was not in the Conservative party’s manifesto—the then Foreign Secretary said that the window of opportunity for a settlement was slowly vanishing. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this possibly is the reason why the Government party has possibly never really given up? When I asked the Minister concerned about discussions with the Israeli Government, sanctions and settlements, he responded in a way that did not completely answer the question. More importantly, as my right hon. Friend has said, 2 million people are suffering in Palestine, so what are the Government going to do to alleviate the suffering resulting from sanctions?

Emily Thornberry: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I see that the Minister is making a note of it, so hopefully he will deal with it at the end of the debate, because these questions are important.

We seek some clarity from the Minister today on where the Government stand and what they will do to promote peace in any of the specific areas that the Opposition set out in our manifesto. First, on the issue of security, it states:

“There can be no military solution to this conflict and all sides must avoid taking action that would make peace harder to achieve.”

That was what we wrote in May, and surely no party in this House would disagree. We all know that there can be no progress towards peace between Israel and Palestine unless both sides are sure of their security. Sadly, at present the opposite is true. Peace and security are becoming ever harder to achieve because of the climate of increasing aggression and extremism, which the Minister referred to.
While we are discussing the issue of security, it would be remiss of me not to ask the Minister when we can expect the publication of the report into the foreign funding of extremist groups in the UK. We all know that this is a central issue when it comes to Israel and Palestine. The funding network is vital for Hamas and other extremist groups. We need to look into the issue and understand it. Yet, when the Foreign Secretary was asked about the report on 6 June, he said that he would “dig it out and have a look at it if that’s what you would like me to do”.

Well, we do not want him to “dig it out”. It should never have been buried in the first place. We want the Government to publish it and act on it. We want to know—indeed, we have a right to know—how their policy towards Qatar, Saudi Arabia and other countries that may be funding extremism is being informed by that report. We want to know and we can see no reason why we should not be told. Will the Minister start by telling us today which countries the report implicates? Are sovereign Governments to blame, or simply wealthy private financiers? What are the Government’s ties with those Governments and individuals? Ultimately, why has that report not been published?

Let me turn to the importance of clarity and consistency, among other things, in relation to the middle east. In Labour’s manifesto, we once more called for a two-state solution, an end to illegal settlements and a return to meaningful negotiations to achieve a diplomatic resolution. None of those things should be difficult or controversial. Indeed, they have been staples of UK Government policy and successive party manifestos on both sides going back to the aftermath of the second world war. But, as I have already said, we are now at a crossroads.

The Government do not know whether Britain’s long-standing policies on the middle east are still consistent with our equally strong desire to work closely with the United States to try to co-ordinate policy, because we do not know what the policy of the United States is. The Minister welcomed President Trump’s engagement on the issue, but I note that he did not give us any indication of what Donald Trump’s policy on the middle east is, and that confusion is not restricted to Britain.

Two weeks ago, the Israeli Defence Minister said that there is an agreed level of new settlement construction that the Trump Administration have said they will support. He said that “they respect our approach and our vision regarding...settlements”, but last week the Israeli Education Minister said the opposite, suggesting that Trump’s approach to settlement building was a disappointment and that “he’s...going down the same unsuccessful path that his predecessors did”.

So what is the truth? The Israelis do not know. The Palestinians do not know. And I bet a fair amount that, although the Minister of State welcomes the engagement, he really does not know what Donald Trump’s policy is. Depressingly, I am pretty sure that Donald Trump does not have the foggiest idea either.

Emily Thornberry: The difficulty is that, certainly during the campaign, and in the early days of his—I think the word is—Administration, the statements Donald Trump has made in relation to Israel have been very alarming for those who support a two-state solution.

The point I am trying to make is that Britain has always wanted to be able to co-ordinate its foreign policy with the Americans, and this Government are so weak and wobbly that they feel they have to be in lockstep with Donald Trump. That is where we have the difficulty in relation to middle east policy, and that may be one of the reasons why the Foreign Secretary will not come to the Dispatch Box and why Israel and Palestine were not mentioned in the Tory manifesto.

Let me develop my argument further. One thing we know for sure is that waiting for Donald Trump to make up his mind is no way for the British Government to decide their foreign policy. So let me ask the Minister of State today not just to do what every Foreign Minister has done for the last seven decades and to make it clear that we want to see a peaceful process of negotiation towards a two-state solution, including an end to all acts of terrorism towards Israel and an end to all illegal settlements, but to make it clear that that will be our position regardless of what America finally decides is its policy stance. If Donald Trump departs from those long-standing policies, will the British Government condemn him? That is what they should be prepared to do.

If the Minister of State will not say those things today, we can only come to two equally unpalatable and pitiful conclusions: either the Government have abdicated Britain’s leadership role and are simply waiting to take their cues from Trump Tower, or they see no point in putting pressure on the Trump Administration, because they know they will simply be ignored—just like they were over climate change.

Let me turn to the final point on this issue. The Labour manifesto said simply and clearly: “A Labour government will immediately recognise the state of Palestine.”

Six years ago, the then Foreign Secretary said: “We reserve the right to recognise a Palestinian state...at a moment of our choosing and when it can best help bring about peace.”—[Official Report, 9 November 2011; Vol. 535, c. 290.]

Let me, then, urge the Minister and the Government to seize the moment we are now offered by the Balfour centenary to throw our support behind Palestinian statehood, just as we threw our support 100 years ago behind Israeli statehood.

If the question is whether this is the moment when recognising statehood will help bring about peace, I would simply ask, in Primo Levi’s words, “If not now, when?” When violence and extremism are rising on all sides, when hard-liners are assuming increasing control, when the humanitarian crisis is getting even worse, and when all eyes are on an American President whose grand plan for peace exists only in his mind, we need the...
British Government, more than ever, to show some leadership and to show the way towards peace—and recognition of Palestinian statehood would be one significant step in that direction. So will the Minister of State tell the House whether such a move is under consideration? If it is not, what will it take for the Government to act? The right hon. Gentleman will recall that in 2014, MPs on both sides of the House voted in favour of recognition of Palestine by a majority of 262.

I have mentioned the 100th anniversary of the Balfour declaration.

Emily Thornberry: I would be grateful if the Minister could clarify the position today, and that is why I am asking these questions. If Britain were to recognise the Palestinian state, it would be an opportunity for us to play honest broker and to challenge the Palestinians to ensure that their leaders behave in a statespersonlike way, as their people need them to behave if they are to be a state and in order to look to the future. If we were to recognise that, we could make a positive contribution.

I mentioned the 100th anniversary of the Balfour declaration, but this is also the year when we mark the 50th anniversaries of two equally significant moments in middle east history: the six-day war, and the Israeli occupation of Gaza and the west bank. Just as the consequences of Balfour’s letter are still with us 100 years on, the consequences of events in 1967 are equally alive today. They are alive in the justifiable fears that every Israeli citizen shares whenever they hear denials of Israel’s right to exist, whenever they hear air-raid sirens warning of rocket attacks, and whenever they hear the latest reports of cowardly terror attacks on ordinary Israeli citizens. The consequences are also with us in the anger and unfairness that has been felt by many Palestinian people since 1967, with their children growing up in poverty and deprivation, their homes bulldozed to make way for ever more illegal settlements, and their futures offering just more of the same. It is a vicious cycle of fear and despair—as I said earlier, a downward spiral from which it becomes ever harder to climb back.

But it does not have to be this way. We will hear in today’s debate—indeed, we have all heard in our discussions with Israelis and Palestinians in recent years—that there are on all sides people of good will with moderate views, mutual understanding, and shared hope for progress, who can together take us down the long and difficult but necessary path towards brokering a lasting peace. I hope that this debate will set the right tone in that regard, and that it will be constructive and forward-looking. Most of all, as I said at the outset, I hope that we all remember that our words on this issue are listened to—they matter and they make a difference—and that neither silence nor choosing sides is acceptable if what we ultimately want is peace.

In that spirit, I ask the Minister to address all the questions I have raised, but, most importantly, to tell us very simply what the Government will actively be doing, on their own terms, in the coming months to make their contribution towards that peace.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. It will be obvious to the House that a great many colleagues wish to speak in this debate. The opening speeches have been very long. I appreciate that that is because the opening speakers have taken a great many interventions. I trust that people who have intervened on the opening speeches will remain here and take part in the rest of the debate, because otherwise it is not fair on those who are waiting to speak and will have only a very short time to do so at the end. There will have to be a time limit, after the SNP spokesman, of six minutes initially, but I am afraid that that will come down to a smaller amount later because of the number of people who wish to participate in this very important debate.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): 2017 is a year of many historic anniversaries for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, so I welcome this chance for Members across the House to reflect on Britain’s past, present, and future role in the conflict. The events we mark are not relics of the past holding kernels of wisdom for the astute historian; they have directly structured the ongoing daily reality for the lives of millions of people.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the six-day war and the Israeli occupation of the west bank that continues to this day. The occupation, and the settler movement that formed under its shadow, has created an unsustainable status quo that poses a fundamental threat to our shared ideals of a democratic and secure Israel alongside a viable and sovereign Palestinian state.

I remember taking part in a cricket tour of Israel five years ago, as part of the Lords and Commons cricket team, with my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris). One of the highlights was him hitting a ball into the middle of the Olympic stadium stand, in a piece of cricket playing that was otherwise largely unsuccessful on our part. On that tour, we witnessed some really interesting attempts to build peace from the bottom up. Under the auspices of the Peres Centre for Peace, we saw children from the occupied territories playing cricket together with Israeli Jewish children and Israeli Arab children. That was one of myriad projects designed to try to do something, in different walks of life, to bring peace.

Two other things really struck me on that tour. The first was that an Israeli general election campaign was in progress, and the conflict was barely an issue among the Israeli parties. It was simply behind the wire or the wall, both politically and in reality. The other was a comment made by the chair of the Israel Cricket Association, a South African Zionist who had been there since 1947, who said that 1967 was the time when Israel began to lose its moral authority.
There is something special about the Israeli story. Like many in my generation, I grew up learning about the horror of the holocaust and the building of a brave democratic state in Israel, which was assailed on all sides by its Arab neighbours. There was a sense of moral authority about the setting up of this state, following the appalling events in Jewish history in Europe over the previous 1,000 years or so. I hope that out of the talks that need to happen now, we can find a way to restore the specialness of the Israeli story and the moral purpose of the state of Israel. I think we all have expectations of the state of Israel—that she will aspire to the highest possible standards—but the way in which the conflict and policy have developed makes it very difficult for her to achieve them. I will return to that point.

Particularly significant for us this year is the 100th anniversary of the Balfour declaration on 2 November. I hope that this debate will not preclude further parliamentary consideration of that anniversary at the time. This is a touchstone issue for millions of Arabs and Muslims, and I do not think I am exaggerating when I say that their eyes will be on us. The centenary must be handled with the utmost care and consideration. In the conversations that I had with almost all Arab ambassadors in my former capacity as Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, it was clear that uncertainty and anxiety surround the centenary.

Last November, the then Minister for the Middle East assured the House that the British Government would neither celebrate nor apologise for the Balfour declaration. I welcomed that position for its acknowledgement that although for many the declaration was the beginning of their deliverance from centuries of persecution, for others its unfulfilled passages were the root of their communal loss. In such a context, celebration or apology betrays the legitimate historical sensitivities of either party, when we should be focused on how to move the issue forward to the benefit of both parties.

I would welcome from the new Minister—the most admirable piece of recycling that it has been my pleasure to see; in his position as a Privy Counsellor and a Minister of State he has the authority of all the experience he gained when he previously held the role, for which he was widely held in high regard—a clarification of the Government’s position on the centenary and an assurance that Ministers will endeavour to ensure that their messages are properly synchronised, and that they open a particular dialogue with the Arab embassies and states about the Government’s position on the anniversary.

Talking of anniversaries, I am in my 21st year as a Member of the House; that is an anniversary that we share. Madam Deputy Speaker. It has been an honour to sit on these Benches, but it has been profoundly sad to witness these recurring debates on a frozen conflict, to sit on these Benches, but it has been profoundly sad to sit on these Benches, but it has been profoundly sad to see; in his position as a Privy Counsellor and a Minister of State he has the authority of all the experience he gained when he previously held the role, for which he was widely held in high regard—a clarification of the Government’s position on the centenary and an assurance that Ministers will endeavour to ensure that their messages are properly synchronised, and that they open a particular dialogue with the Arab embassies and states about the Government’s position on the anniversary.

Talking of anniversaries, I am in my 21st year as a Member of the House; that is an anniversary that we share. Madam Deputy Speaker. It has been an honour to sit on these Benches, but it has been profoundly sad to witness these recurring debates on a frozen conflict, the position of which has got worse over the last 20 years. Amid the minefield of competing claims, we get bogged down in an epistemological challenge about how we balance so many unbalanced forces, how we treat fairly down in an epistemological challenge about how we balance so many unbalanced forces, how we treat fairly down in an epistemological challenge about how we balance so many unbalanced forces, how we treat fairly down in an epistemological challenge about how we balance so many unbalanced forces, how we treat fairly down in an epistemological challenge about how we balance so many unbalanced forces, how we treat fairly down in an epistemological challenge about how we balance so many unbalanced forces, how we treat fairly down in an epistemological challenge about how we balance so many unbalanced forces, how we treat fairly down in an epistemological challenge about how we balance so many unbalanced forces, how we treat fairly down in an epistemological challenge about how we balance so many unbalanced forces, how we treat fairly.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I very much welcome the hon. Gentleman’s tone. I am a supporter of the state of Israel, and I am also desperate for some real progress to be made towards a Palestinian state and towards showing dignity and respect for the Palestinian people. I agree with earlier comments that the so-called two-state solutions such as this can get quite polarised and binary in the House of Commons. I believe we all wish to see progress, and we should look to the tone adopted by the hon. Gentleman.

Crispin Blunt: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I am trying to make precisely the point that we all too often indulge in reinforcing our own respective positions.

No single problem is causing the stalemate, and there is therefore no single solution. Neither party holds a monopoly of power to make peace, and all sides have the capability to spoil it. Palestinians have been betrayed by years of factionalised leaderships that have failed to meet their people’s needs—from the basic governance necessary to live in dignity to the realisation of their legitimate political ambitions for self-determination. Now, possibly more than at any time in their history, the Palestinian people are trapped deep within a structural crisis of leadership, with almost all levels of democratic activity and elections suspended. This augurs badly for any efforts to address issues such as the incitement or commission of violence, and it denies Palestinians the opportunity to present their cause with the legal and moral authority that it deserves.

On the other hand, the continuation of the settlement programme, in contravention of international law—I welcome the Minister’s restatement of the British position—undermines the prospects for a viable Palestinian state in the future. Settlements are the physical embodiment of conflict between competing narratives of nationalism, in the context of a historic tragedy that has pitted entire peoples against each other in their respective searches for nationhood. Across the canvas of a biblical landscape, settlements paint a picture of a zero-sum paradigm from which no party has found the political will to escape. Aside from the practical impact that settlements have on the viability of a future Palestinian state, settlements and the multifaceted injustices that they represent are salt in the open wound of their collective dispossession.

Both sides complain that they lack partners for peace on the opposite side of the negotiating table. However, they all too often fail to think about what they themselves could do to nurture such partners. Any colleagues who have been able to spend time engaging with broader Israeli and Palestinian society will know that there are such partners, and they share many of the frustrations at their mutual predicament. These people need to be empowered to win their respective arguments in their societies. The Minister will recall that we both met Gideon Sa’ar during the election campaign. He took time out from frontline Israeli politics—he is a potential successor to Benjamin Netanyahu as the leader of Likud—to go to Northern Ireland with an organisation called Forward Thinking to see the peace and the resolution that we have made, and are trying to make, to the conflict there. He was prepared to learn lessons, and it is a sign of hope when Israeli leaders are taking time out to go and see routes to conflict resolution. We need to be able to do that with political leaders on both sides.

Dr Huq: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?
Crispin Blunt: If the hon. Lady will forgive me, I will not give way because I am concluding and I know that other Members wish to speak.

It was with some disappointment that the general election broke off the Foreign Affairs Committee’s inquiry into Britain’s role in the middle east peace process, after we had received 70 submissions totalling over 400 pages of evidence. I hope to be able to carry on this work if I am re-elected as Chair of the Committee, because there is a need for scrutiny and debate on all the policy questions raised by this tragically frozen conflict. If we do not get to grips with this conflict, it will continue to get worse and more desperate. Britain, with its historical legacy, has a very particular role to play, which is why we cannot escape our involvement in this tragedy, but it will require our full attention if we are to get the Israeli-Palestinian conflict back on a path to peace.

5.3 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I welcome you back to your role, Mr Deputy Speaker, and both your deputies to theirs. I also welcome the Minister to the Front Bench. I note that he is a joint Minister of the Department for International Development and of the Foreign Office. It will be interesting to see how such an innovation pans out, but I hope it enhances rather than diminishes the role of DFID within the Government.

The last time I spoke in such a debate in the Chamber before the general election was during the Backbench Business Committee debate on the question of illegal settlements in the occupied territories on 9 February. It was an historic debate, after which the House resolved, without a Division, to recognise that the settlements are “contrary to international law” and to call on the Government of Israel “immediately to halt” the planning and construction of such settlements.

This is a welcome, if somewhat unexpected, opportunity to revisit in Government time the wider question of the peace process and relations between Israel and Palestine. The Government are to be congratulated on making this time available. I hope they will listen carefully to the points being made by Members across the House and, in particular, consider how they can best support multilateral efforts to bring about a lasting settlement.

As others have noted, 2017 marks a number of important anniversaries and milestones in the region. We should use that opportunity to comprehensively review efforts for peace in the region and ensure that the appropriate diplomatic channels and support are in place.

Dr Offord: Would the hon. Gentleman like to take this opportunity to inform the House what the SNP’s policy is? Would it like to recognise the state of Palestine before direct peace talks?

Patrick Grady: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will be pleased to hear that the SNP manifesto committed us to continuing “to work with international partners to progress a lasting peace settlement in the Middle East, pursuing a two state solution for Israel and Palestine.”

When the vote was taken some years ago on recognising the state of Palestine, SNP Members voted in favour of that resolution of the House.

It is the long-standing position of most international actors, starting with the United Nations and including the SNP in our manifesto, that a two-state solution with secure, stable and prosperous states of Israel and Palestine living side by side should be the basis of a just and sustainable peace in the region. That position was reaffirmed in December last year by the Security Council in resolution 2334, which stresses the need for respect of the 1967 borders and calls on both sides to refrain from activities that prevent progress towards peace.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Patrick Grady: No. The resolution calls for “immediate steps to prevent all acts of violence against civilians, including acts of terror, as well as all acts of provocation and destruction.”

That clearly applies to indiscriminate rocket attacks against targets in Israel. However, the resolution also makes clear the responsibility of Israel, as the occupying power, to respect international law and the protection of civilians, and it condemns “the construction and expansion of settlements, transfer of Israeli settlers, confiscation of land, demolition of homes and displacement of Palestinian civilians”.

There is a responsibility on UN members, particularly UN Security Council members, to take the calls for action in the resolution seriously and redouble efforts to make progress.

We have heard in this debate that far from reducing settlement construction, the scale of building by the Government of Israel has increased. They have attempted to justify that with new legislation in the Knesset. The popularity and legitimacy of that has been questioned within Israel itself. We have heard in speeches and interventions about the worsening humanitarian situation in the Palestinian territories and the need for a response to that.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman makes a fine point in respect of human rights abuses, but one thing that has not been spoken about today as much as it should be is the infringement of the human rights of children through the use of military courts. Will he join me in saying that their use is not only inhumane but unlawful?

Patrick Grady: All the conventions on human rights, particularly the convention on the rights of the child, should be respected in this situation and in situations around the world. Children should not be used as pawns in a conflict.

Historically, the United States and its Presidents have played a key role in the negotiations. I remember studying the Oslo accords at school. In the summer of 2000, I was in America while the last Camp David summit took place. Watching that unfold brought home to me both how close and how far away peace and a genuine negotiated settlement can be at the same time. One could almost say that it is like two sides of a wall, although it is very difficult to build bridges when there is a wall in the way.

It was heartening that one of the last acts of the Obama Administration was not to stand in the way of the resolution at the Security Council. As we have heard, the new Administration have been less than
consistent on that point. At times, they have even appeared to question the consensus around a two-state solution. The first question to the UK Government, therefore, has to be: how are they making so much of their special relationship with the US Administration. What steps are they taking to support a two-state solution and to encourage the US President and his team in that direction?

I want to ask the Minister more generally about the UK’s exercise of its soft power and diplomacy. A specific case has been brought to my attention by an academic at the University of Glasgow in my constituency. The Home Office recently denied a UK entry visa to Dr Nazmi al-Masri, the vice-president for external relations at the Islamic University of Gaza. I understand that Dr al-Masri has a 30-year history of entering and returning from the United Kingdom, and that he was due to travel to support research at the University of Glasgow as a co-investigator on Research Councils UK-funded grants in a £2 million project on translating cultures, other projects on global mental health and the Erasmus programme. His collaborator at Glasgow University has told me that his visa refusal seriously curtails the ability of the programme and the institution to fulfil the aims of projects that have already been funded by the UK Government’s research councils. How can that kind of Home Office intransigence possibly help to promote good will and understanding? Where is the UK’s soft power and diplomatic influence if it will not allow academics in good standing entry into the UK to promote the peaceful study of understanding between cultures and global mental health? I hope the Minister raises that with his colleagues.

That raises further questions about the UK Government’s efforts, particularly in the light of Brexit and the UK’s changing role on the world stage. Are Ministers satisfied that the discussions our Prime Minister has had with Prime Minister Netanyahu are sufficient, or is there a need to go further? What steps are the Government taking to ensure that this country will adhere to the UN Security Council’s demand that, in international relations, states make a distinction between Israel and the occupied territories? Will the Minister guarantee that, as the UK leaves the EU, it will continue to make that kind of diplomatic differentiation? Does he agree that the UK should not be trading with illegal settlements? Those are important questions, especially if the UK Government continue to interpret their so-called special relationship with the United States as essentially agreeing to whatever the incumbent US Administration asks of them.

As has been repeatedly said, a peaceful solution must be based on mutual respect and recognition on both sides. That applies not only to the people of the states of Israel and Palestine, but to their supporters and allies in the international community. Under no circumstances are attacks on or abuse of the Jewish people, or any kind of manifestation of anti-Semitism, acceptable. Anti-Semitism should be named as such and condemned. That applies to violence and extremism in any form, whether directed at Palestinian, Israeli, Jewish or Muslim communities.

In February, I finished my speech by quoting the Catholic translation of psalm 122:

“For the peace of Jerusalem pray: Peace be to your homes!”

Other translations have a similar emphasis: a personal and collective injunction that we will all individually and collectively prosper if peace is achieved. Peace in Jerusalem and the Holy Land will benefit not just those who live there, but all of us around the world. That is the challenge and the opportunity to which we must rise, and to which I am sure the House will return on many future occasions.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I should just mention that speeches will be limited to five minutes.

5.12 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests regarding a fascinating visit to Israel and the west bank that I had the privilege of making in February.

We should acknowledge that despite the existential threats that Israel has so often faced, it is a liberal, pluralist democracy committed to working for a peaceful settlement with its neighbours. It is also a multi-ethnic, multi-faith democracy. Unlike many other countries in the middle east, Israel fully protects the rights of women, and the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, which we should celebrate. Trade between our two countries is at a record high, and I urge the Government to oppose the campaign for boycotts and divestment, which too often is used try to delegitimise the state of Israel.

In recent months, people in this city and this country have tragically suffered directly at the hands of terrorists. Sadly, in the past few years, there have been many similar attacks in Israel. Palestinian terrorists have deployed techniques used in recent atrocities here and in other European countries. Since September 2015, there have been more than 389 stabbings, shootings and car ramming incidents against Israeli citizens. The North London Friends of Israel, which has members in my Chipping Barnet constituency, has expressed its serious concern to me that the UK media tend to report attacks in Israel in a completely different way from how they cover similar attacks in the UK. The group points out that the word “terrorism” is sometimes completely absent and that reports can even lead with the killing of the terrorist, not the attack itself.

More importantly, the prospects for a peace settlement are harmed by those who persist in praising terrorists. The UK ambassador to the United Nations recently stated that at the “root” of recent violence “lies a seemingly unending cycle of poisonous rhetoric and incitement”, including the use of “racist, anti-Semitic and hateful language”.

It is shocking that as many as 25 Palestinian schools are named after terrorists. An estimated £84 million is paid annually to convicted terrorists, with higher salaries given to those who have killed more people. One can only imagine the hurt and outcry that would occur if that happened in relation to someone responsible for a terrorist attack in the UK. It emerged yesterday that President Abbas has vowed never to stop these hateful payments, which is something that I strongly condemn. I hope that other Members on both sides of the House will condemn that, too.
Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making some incredibly powerful points. Does she agree that there will be no peace deal while children are being indoctrinated to “hate the Jews” and the destruction of the state of Israel is encouraged? She rightly points out that schools—and sports competitions—have been named after terrorists, which is completely wrong.

Theresa Villiers: My hon. Friend makes an entirely valid point. In June 2016, a 13-year-old Israeli, Hallel Yaffa Ariel, was murdered as she slept. The 17-year-old terrorist who killed her was subsequently praised on Fatah’s official Facebook page. In a TV interview in September 2015, President Abbas declared:

“We welcome every drop of blood spilled in Jerusalem.”

His Fatah party have praised Dalal Mughrabi as a “bride of Palestine”. She was responsible for killing 37 Israelis, including 12 children, in one of the most despicable attacks in Israel’s history. It is also very worrying, as Members have pointed out, that the recent al-Quds day march in London saw Hezbollah flags flown in full view of the police. One of my constituents described it as “grotesque and unacceptable” that a pro-terrorist demonstration went ahead in London just a short time after we had suffered at the hands of terrorists. Like others, I urge the Government to do away with the artificial distinction between the political and paramilitary parts of Hezbollah and proscribe the whole organisation. The flags carried at the march might have had a small disclaimer on them, but I gather that many included large pictures of Kalashnikovs.

A Palestinian state cannot be achieved through unilateral measures, only through face-to-face negotiations. I therefore welcome the Government’s refusal to sign the one-sided communique in Paris in February. Every Government in Israel’s history have expressed a wish to live in peace with their neighbours. Successive Israeli Governments have declared their support for establishing a Palestinian state through direct negotiations and agreement on mutual recognition, borders and security. Israel’s Prime Minister has repeatedly offered to restart negotiations.

There have been no official peace talks since 2014, but I believe there are grounds for hope. Israel’s relationship with a number of other countries has improved somewhat in the face of shared concern over matters such as the rise of Daesh and the hegemonic ambitions of Iran, which is now involved so heavily in many conflicts in the middle east. That shared concern appears to have opened up new channels of communication and co-operation, and led to a concerted regional push to revive the peace process. This issue divides the House, but I hope we can all agree on the importance of bringing the two sides together so that they can restart negotiations and work together to secure a brighter, better future for both Israelis and Palestinians.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): I add my welcome to the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) on his return to the Front Bench. He has previously served with distinction as a middle east Minister, and he speaks on this issue with great authority. He definitely has a passion for peace, and I commend him for it.

When I saw the title that the Government had chosen for today’s debate, I was put in mind of something the former Palestinian ambassador to the UK, Afif Safieh, once said. He said that when he heard Governments—our own or others in the international community—talking about the middle east process, he felt the objective was a never-ending peace process rather than an enduring peace. Everyone recognises that peace will come only when Israelis and Palestinians are committed to, and deliver, agreements that they can both sign up to. What Ambassador Safieh was getting at, however, was that when the call for talks becomes a substitute for either facing up to the reality on the ground or for using what leverage we have to change the reality, the danger is that we end up colluding with the status quo, and the status quo in that part of the world is very clear indeed.

The website of the United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs summarises life in the west bank thus:

“Palestinians in the West Bank are subject to a complex system of control, including physical (the Barrier, checkpoints, roadblocks) and bureaucratic barriers (permits, closure of areas) which restrict their right to freedom of movement. The expansion of Settlements, restrictions on access to land and natural resources and ongoing displacement due to demolitions in particular, are ongoing. Israeli policies curtail the ability of Palestinians in Area C and East Jerusalem to plan their communities and build homes and infrastructure. The result is further fragmentation of the West Bank. Ongoing violent incidents throughout the West Bank pose risks to life, liberty and security, and—security considerations notwithstanding—concerns exist over reports of excessive use of force by Israeli forces.”

Those are not my words, but those of the United Nations.

As for Gaza, it is something else again. Ten years of blockade by Israel has left Gaza without a functioning economy. At 43%, its unemployment rate is among the highest in the world. Some 95% of its water is not safe to drink, and food insecurity affects 72% of households. Gaza is a tiny strip of land whose population will have grown to 2.1 million by 2020, and the United Nations estimates that by about the same time it will be uninhabitable for human beings.

In the face of all that, the key issue is not whether we are doing all that we can to encourage talks, but what we are doing to help to achieve change in practice. A joint statement issued on 12 May by the UN’s humanitarian agencies operating in the west bank and Gaza was clear on that point, saying:

“Ending the occupation is the single most important priority to enable Palestinians to advance development goals, reduce humanitarian needs and ensure respect for Human Rights.”

We need to think about where we have leverage to enable us to do that, and one of the areas in which we have leverage is the issue of settlements. Of course we all disapprove of settlements—no announcement of a new settlement goes by without an expression of disapproval from our Government, and I welcome that—but is it not time that we started using the leverage that we have and that we use in other parts of the world? Settlements are illegal. When Crimea was annexed by Russia, we applied a series of disincentives to companies that colluded with that illegality. Why is it so difficult for us to do the same in relation to settlements in the occupied territories?

In respect of Gaza, let me ask the Minister this. Does he believe that Israel is fulfilling its responsibilities as an occupying power? If it is not fulfilling those
against its neighbours, one against the other, leaving a marked by six days of regional conflict that pitted Israel war, we reflect that the halfway point since Balfour was solutions to conflicts across the middle east.

includes the commitment to find sustainable political brokering peace, I am pleased that the Gracious Speech as we re-evaluate the role that the UK can play in process, and it is important that we play our part in this .

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and in the host communities, educating thousands of entries in the register of interests regarding my visits to

and determination to succeed. I refer Members to my huge challenges that they face, but their inspiring work of much-needed stability in a region still riven by war,

and quite rightly so, but if we believe in even-handedness between Israel and Palestinians, that same right must apply to Palestinians. It is time, on the 100th anniversary of the Balfour declaration, to fulfil what the House voted for on 13 October 2014 and recognise the state of Palestine.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order.

5.24 pm

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden).

As has been mentioned, the centenary of the Balfour declaration falls this November, marking 100 years since the British Government confirmed the UK's support for the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people. In making that commitment, we recognised that the UK not only has an interest in Israel as a nation, ally, regional partner and friend, but specifically laid out the need to protect the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, thus creating the foundation on which the state of Israel was built. The British Government have since committed to a long-standing position of supporting a two-state solution.

The centenary of the Balfour declaration presents a unique opportunity to revive the middle east peace process, and it is important that we play our part in this. As we re-evaluate the role that the UK can play in brokering peace, I am pleased that the Gracious Speech includes the commitment to find sustainable political solutions to conflicts across the middle east.

As this year also marks the anniversary of the 1967 war, we reflect that the halfway point since Balfour was marked by six days of regional conflict that pitted Israel against its neighbours, one against the other, leaving a legacy of distrust, violence and resentment against ensuing settlements. And yet today, Jordan and Israel are beacons of much-needed stability in a region still riven by war, conflict and the mass displacement of populations.

I have visited both countries and seen not only the huge challenges that they face, but their inspiring work and determination to succeed. I refer Members to my entries in the register of interests regarding my visits to Jordan and Israel. In Jordan, I saw the wonderful work being undertaken by UNICEF in the Za'atari camp and in the host communities, educating thousands of refugee children and helping to support many of the hundreds of thousands of Syrian people who have been given refuge by the Jordanian Government. The Jordanian commitment to stability in the region makes the country potentially a strong partner in the push for peace.

In Israel, I visited Rawabi, the first Palestinian planned city, which is expected to provide homes for over 35,000 Palestinians, and is aiming to create more than 50,000 jobs, focusing on the high-tech, healthcare and the renewable energy sectors. It was awe-inspiring to see a city built from scratch.

We should not underestimate the prospect that a desire for economic progress could also fuel a drive for peace. With sectors such as technology booming in Israel, with 300,000 high-tech workers being employed, a solution with two states at peace offers a future of prosperity for both.

Over recent months, we have seen terrorism and violent attacks in Israel and the west bank, as well as closer to home in the UK. It is always the innocent who suffer. However, whenever terrorism, terrorist extremism and intolerance take place, that must never be allowed to deter us from a desire for peace and democracy. To achieve the goal of a peaceful, stable region, we must support authorities on both sides to come to the table without prescriptive preconditions and in a spirit of understanding.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case for peace in the middle east. In the light of Indian Prime Minister Modi’s visit to Israel and the fact that India has suffered terrorism as well, does she agree that those two great countries can come together and form an excellent security relationship?

Mary Robinson: I agree. It is interesting that we are looking to see which other countries can help, even though we acknowledge that peace itself will come only from the two sides involved.

Regional players and previously hostile states are moving closer towards accepting an ideal of peace, and I note that at the Security Council briefing on the peace process last month, the Arab League Secretary-General reaffirmed a commitment to the 2002 Arab peace initiative. Perhaps this provides an opportunity for constructive dialogue.

For our part, as the dust settles from the general election and we rightly focus on what our future relationship with Europe looks like, we must continue to act in the best interests of peace across the world. We should not lose sight of the historical bond between the UK and the region, and with our strong historical trade ties, and in this special year, the UK has the opportunity to reaffirm and actively pursue peace through our long-standing positions supporting a safe and secure Israel living alongside a viable and sovereign Palestinian state based on 1967 borders, with agreed land swaps, agreement on the status of Jerusalem for both states, and the resettlement of refugees. This has been the UK's commitment to the peace process, based on a two-state solution. As we commemorate 100 years since the Balfour declaration and our support for the region, we should revive the effort for peace through meaningful talks and truly make 2017 the anniversary of the Balfour declaration and an anniversary for peace.

5.30 pm

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): It is with both a humble heart and abiding pride that I stand to make my first speech in the House of Commons. As is customary, I would like to pay tribute to my predecessor. There is nothing that highlights a person’s character more than when they are faced with adversity, and I will never forget the grace, kindness and authentic good wishes that Mr Jackson expressed to me on the night of the election. I hope that his life beyond Parliament is as fulfilling as he intends.
Also, I would like to speak briefly about my home constituency of Peterborough. It is rich in history. Its cathedral is a true gem: it was a temporary resting place for Mary Queen of Scots, and it is also where Catherine of Aragon, Henry VIII’s first wife, is buried. One could say that Peterborough attracts its share of powerful women!

But when I look at Peterborough, my home, I see so much more than the legacies and treasures of its past; I see a city that cherishes its diversity. People have come to Peterborough from every corner of the globe, and many nations are represented. My presence here may be a symbol of this increasing diversity: I am the first black female MP ever elected by my constituency. In Peterborough, I see a place that has much to be proud of. Our major employers, like Perkins Engines and Peter Brotherhood, are world class. We also have entrepreneurs that are cutting edge, and our local newspaper, the Peterborough Telegraph, is dynamic and well read. Peterborough is also notable for its beauty, and there are rural parts of the constituency that serve as our own Garden of Eden.

Peterborough has a bright future and so much going for it, but my constituency and our country also have their share of challenges, which I intend to address as a Member of Parliament. When I began my campaign, one of the very first issues I said I wanted to tackle was homelessness. According to Shelter, in December 2016 some 600 people in Peterborough were without a place to live. Homelessness is an increasing problem for the country as a whole. Contrary to what some may think, austerity is expensive. Cutting budgets does not always save money, let alone lives. We cannot make a rich country out of one that makes the majority of its people poorer.

I am motivated in all that I do by my abiding faith in God. As we look at the issues facing Palestine and Israel, there is the temptation to see religion as something that divides rather than unites people, but I believe that it is mankind’s frailties that cause conflict and strife, not one’s faith. I sincerely hope for a future in which the peoples of the middle east live in the harmony that God intends for them.

It is on this note of faith that I would like to conclude my speech. Hon. Members who have encountered my acronyms will know that I refer to myself as MP FI because I endeavour to “Make People Feel Inspired” and my acronym for faith is “For All In This House”. As stated on the floor in Central Lobby:

“Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it.”

With His help, Mr Deputy Speaker, I intend to do right.

5.36 pm

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Peterborough (Fiona Onasanya) on an excellent maiden speech. It is always a pleasure to follow a maiden speech and the hon. Lady delivered hers particularly well. I did not agree with every point in it, but it was delivered well and I have no doubt that the hon. Lady will join that distinguished group of Peterborough’s alpha women.

Hon. and right hon. Members have drawn attention to the key obstacles to peace and to the final status issues for the negotiations between Israel and Palestine. The starting point of all negotiations must surely be to determine who will be at the negotiating table itself. On the Israeli side, there is a turbulent but moveable coalition, which is typical of Israel’s lively democracy. On the Palestinian side, again, there are a number of parties, but they are deeply divided both geographically and ideologically. Let us not forget that the Gaza strip has been controlled for over a decade by the Hamas terror group, which is committed to the destruction of Israel.

Will Quince: Does my hon. Friend agree that Hamas cannot be a partner to the peace process unless it changes its ideology, renounces violence and accepts the state of Israel?

Chris Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and agree with every point he made. I am sure we will hear more from the Minister on that in his summing up.

Israel has released Palestinian prisoners who are guilty of committing deadly terror attacks as part of the Palestinian demands for the resumption of peace talks,
but I join Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and the international community in calling for a return to negotiations without preconditions. It is difficult to see who will be sitting around the negotiating table when the leadership of Gaza and the west bank is so bitterly divided. Geographical separation is something for the negotiating table. Indeed, it is almost a decade since a former Israeli Prime Minister proposed a peace offer involving a route of safe passage between the west bank and Gaza. Palestinian President Abbas only recently admitted that he turned down the 2008 offer, which would have provided for an independent Palestinian state containing all of the Gaza strip and 94% of the west bank, with the final 6% provided through the long-agreed principle of land swaps.

However, the ideological division between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority concerns me more than the issue of land. Any peace agreement at this time would only be formed between Israel and the Palestinian Authority in the west bank, leaving Gaza isolated from a Palestinian state. Yet Israel stands in the middle of the two parties, in more ways than one. Recently, the Palestinian Authority announced that it would no longer pay the full electricity bill for Gaza, where electricity is supplied by Israel. The reasoning behind the decision is widely seen as a means of exerting pressure on Hamas to relinquish its hold on Gaza. Accordingly, Israel has begun reducing electricity and is now vilified by the international community—this is illustrative of the entire Gaza crisis.

I strongly believe it is in the interests of all parties involved that international actions prioritise the union of a moderate Palestinian leadership that seeks peace in order to solve the conflict and bring much needed relief to the people of Gaza, as well as, of course, to Israel and the west bank. We must make it absolutely clear to the Palestinians that, as my right hon. Friend Theresa Villers stated, naming schools and squares after terrorists does not show that they are committed to peace.

I hope that hon. and right hon. Members who choose to dwell on different obstacles to the peace process make it clear that although Israel is able to defend itself, we must not underestimate the impact of the divided Palestinian leadership and the repeated mantra that Israel is a temporary entity. I wish the Minister a great deal of much needed luck in his efforts to encourage Israeli and Palestinian negotiators to finally sit down together and make the difficult compromises needed to come to this lasting agreement.

5.41 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I want to focus my comments today on Gaza, which is the world’s largest open-air prison. Of the 2 million people crammed into the 139 square miles of Gaza, more than a third are under 15 and almost half are under 25. In their short lives, they have seen a lot—a child born 10 years ago in Gaza has already lived through three wars, in which one in five of those who died were children—and their future looks bleak. According to the UN, we are seeing a process of “de-development” in Gaza, so that by 2020 the strip may well be technically uninhabitable. Some 96% of groundwater in Gaza is unfit for human consumption and the sea is polluted with sewage. Power shortages mean that were it not for the increasingly hard-to-obtain fuel that runs emergency generators, hospitals would go dark. That would mean up to 40 surgical operation theatres, 11 obstetric theatres, five haemodialysis centres and hospital emergency rooms serving almost 4,000 patients a day being forced to halt critical services. As always, it is the children who are hit hardest. In April, a five-year-old girl with cerebral palsy died while waiting for a permit to travel to a hospital in East Jerusalem—she had already been waiting for two months. It seems that the bureaucracy of the blockade held out for longer than that little girl’s health could.

Meanwhile, in Israel we see a Prime Minister who is driven not by concern for his nation, but by concern for the retention of his office. As yesterday’s approval of more than 1,000 illegal settlement units in East Jerusalem shows, we see an Israeli Government who are undermining the integrity of a future Palestinian state and, in doing so, are undermining themselves and their own security.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend draws out clearly the human tragedy of what is happening today in Gaza, but is he concerned that Hamas has recently rebuilt 15 of its terrorist tunnels, which are being prepared for Hamas to launch attacks on the civilians of Israel?

Stephen Kinnock: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. I accept that there is an unacceptable cycle of violence, and clearly all parties in this conflict need to find a solution, but I also feel that in the current circumstances Israel holds the whip hand and it is up to Israel to make that first move.

The fact is that there can be no security without peace and no peace without security. A two-state solution is essential to peace. I do not make that point from a partisan perspective; rather, I echo the sentiments of the former head of Mossad, Mr Tamir Pardo. Just two months ago, lamenting Netanyahu’s apparent rejection of a two-state solution, he said:

“Israel faces one existential threat”,

and it is not external—Iran or Hezbollah—but “internal”, the result of a divisiveness in Israel resulting from a Government who have “decided to bury our heads deep in the sand, to preoccupy ourselves with alternative facts and flee from reality”.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that Israel’s founding principles—namely democracy, respect for the rule of law, and social justice—which have made it in many respects a great country over the past 50 years, are being eroded by the Israeli Government when they seek to silence legitimate human rights organisations, whether that be B’Tselem or Breaking the Silence, in their own country? That strikes at the heart of Israel’s fundamental and very welcome democratic character.

Stephen Kinnock rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Just to help everybody, because I am concerned: if Members are going to intervene, they have to keep it very short. I am going to have to cut the time limit, and the people who are intervening are going to suffer from these interventions. I want to try to give everybody an equal chance. This is a very important debate, and I want to make sure it is fair and open.
Stephen Kinnock: I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) and absolutely agree with the sentiments he expresses. There are particular concerns about the entry Bill, which would potentially prevent Members of this House who have expressed concerns about trade with illegal settlements from entering Israel. This is undermining Israel’s national interest.

Mr Pardo is right: the blockade and effective occupation of Gaza, and the illegal settlements, imperil not only the children of Palestine, subjecting them to a form of collective punishment for acts that they played no part in committing, but the future of Israel itself. They create a deep divide in Israeli society that Pardo sees as potentially the beginning of a path to civil war.

This year, 2017, marks the 50-year anniversary of the occupation. We must ask ourselves what a further 50 years of the politics of oppression, aggression and division will mean. Those policies have polluted the Israeli body politic, just as they have the Palestinian. In 2012, the Israeli Interior Minister Eli Yishai called for Gaza to be sent “back to the middle ages”—well, he is just two hours of electricity a day short of achieving that objective. If the middle ages is what we want, it may well be what we get: a life that is nasty, brutish and short.

Currently, we see an Israel in clinical denial, sipping cappuccino on the lip of the volcano, and a Palestine in clinical despair, with an acute sense that politics is incapable of delivering a solution. As the former Mossad chief has made clear, the root cause of both is the blockade and the occupation. I hope that today the House will speak with one voice, for the sake of both the Palestinian and Israeli people, in calling for an end to the blockade, for immediate humanitarian assistance in Gaza, and for an end to the illegal settlements.

5.48 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

Yesterday, there was a debate on the middle east in the other place. My noble Friend Lord Polak made a typically interesting contribution. He pointed out that in 1948 there were 726,000 Palestinian refugees, and 856,000 Jewish refugees living in Arab lands, yet since then the UN’s focus has been solely on the Palestinians. He pointed to the more than 170 resolutions, the 13 UN agencies created or mandated to look after the Palestinian issue and the billions of dollars that have been provided to the Palestinians. Nevertheless, he still hoped that the UK would do all it could to bring Israelis and Palestinians around the table to hammer out a solution. I agree with him.

Israel remains committed to an independent Palestinian state through, among other things, direct negotiation to end the conflict. Israel’s Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, has repeatedly underlined his commitment to restarting peace negotiations without pre-conditions. Israel has accepted the principle of a future Palestinian state based along 1967 lines and for land swaps to take place.

Polling in 2016 has shown that there is still an appetite for a two-state solution among both Palestinians and Israelis. The figures were almost 60% for Israelis and just over 50% for Palestinians. The biggest obstacle to peace involved the infighting between Hamas and Fatah, the Palestinian approach unilaterally to wanting statehood, and the rearmament in Gaza by Hamas. Personally, I would add to that the seemingly blinkered approach of the Palestine Liberation Organisation. When I was last in Ramallah, I visited the PLO and had talks with its members. I found that there was little basis on which to have those talks. There was an attempt to blame us for all the ills of the region and a dislike for the involvement of anything that smacked of the private sector. I also wish to stress the levels of co-operation that already exist between the Israelis and the Palestinians and to point to one organisation in particular, Save a Child’s Heart, which I have visited on a number of occasions and does fantastic work.

I would be the first to admit that settlement expansion is counterproductive, and I have made that point to the Israeli Government, but the settlement issue is not a permanent obstacle to peace, and it is one of the five final status issues. It is not the reason for the continuation of the conflict, as violence predates the settlements, and the majority of settlers live within established settlement blocks along the green line, which are widely anticipated to become part of Israel in the peace settlement.

The past two years have shown a rising level of terror and Palestinian incitement in Israel. Since 2015 alone, there have been around 180 stabbings, 150 shootings, 58 car ramming attacks and one bus bombing. The result has been more than 389 terror attacks and over 759 injuries and some 50 Israeli or foreign deaths. The violence escalated to the point that, in October 2015, an Israeli mother and father were gunned down in front of their four young children. The sort of attitude that we have seen from President Abbas is not very helpful. He vowed to Palestinians that he would not stop prisoner salaries even if he had to resign, despite telling the US that he would do so.

Bob Blackman rose—

John Howell: I will not give way, as I am fairly close to the end.

No peace agreement will be able to guarantee peace in the medium to long term if a generation of Palestinians are growing up indoctrinated to hate Israel and the Jews. The Palestinian Authority’s failure to deliver on its commitment to end incitement and hate education explicitly undermines the principles and conditions on which the peace process is built. Although I welcome France’s recent efforts to promote peace, I do not think that the best way to make progress is to hold an international conference without the attendance of the two main parties. We must get the two main parties around the table at the same time.

5.53 pm

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): New American leadership in the region is important, but pursuing the “ultimate deal” is about much more than carving up some troublesome real estate. The culture, history, hopes and fears of both Israelis and Palestinians must be respected, cherished and, where necessary, assuaged. It is also crucial that any US initiative supports the valuable work that Israel, Egypt and Jordan have undertaken over the past year to explore a renewed Arab peace initiative. With its close ties to both Israel and many Arab states, Britain is uniquely positioned to play a positive role in fostering an environment conducive to those efforts.
We have heard much today about the obstacle to peace presented by settlement building. I agree that it is wrong for Israel, the Palestinians and the prospects of peace. As the former US Secretary of State, John Kerry, suggested last December, the settlements are not “the whole or even the primary cause of this conflict.” The problem of settlements is not an insurmountable barrier to a two-state solution.

John Spellar: Although settlements may not be an obstacle, they are certainly a problem, especially at a time, as my right hon. Friend mentioned, when Israel’s relations with the surrounding Arab states are at a better pitch than many of us can ever remember. Is it not, therefore, regrettable that the Netanyahu Government are proceeding with settlements when this could be a unique opportunity?

Joan Ryan: I never made any secret of my opposition to settlement building. It is regrettable. A better move towards peace would be if Mr Netanyahu did what I suggested when I stood on a platform with him, and he froze all settlement building.

In the event of an agreement, settlements will, of course, be the cause of anger and conflict in Israel, as they were in 1981 and 2005—so, understandably, will be the release of terrorist prisoners and resolving the status of Jerusalem, especially when some deny the Jewish people’s historic connections to that holy city. Some will say that the price is too high. However, I believe that the Israeli people will pay that price if it offers the genuine prospect of a lasting peace. But will they be convinced that the prospect of peace is genuine when Hezbollah and Hamas, backed up by Iran, stand on the border and threaten to wipe Israel from the map? Will they be convinced that the prospect of peace is genuine when the Palestinian Authority incentivises terrorism by paying salaries to those convicted of heinous crimes and, as we have heard, names schools, sports tournaments and town squares after so-called martyrs? President Abbas claimed, barely a month ago: “we are raising our youth, our children, our grandchildren on a culture of peace”.

Some in the international community, such as Denmark and Norway, are showing the willingness to hold him to his words.

I support Department for International Development aid for health and education projects in Palestine, and the crucial investment being made to help to train the PA’s security forces, but it is now high time for Britain to do likewise. Perhaps DFID could begin by finding out whether any of the several thousand teachers and other essential education public servants whose salaries it helps to pay actually work in the two dozen or so schools named after terrorists. I sought that assurance unsuccessfully from Ministers in March.

I again ask Ministers to establish an independent inquiry into how our aid money can best support a two-state solution. There are a great many Palestinians and Israelis who genuinely wish to foster a culture of peace. I have met many of them, especially in the inspiring co-existence projects such as Middle East Entrepreneurs of Tomorrow, OneVoice and the Parents Circle Families Forum. Those organisations bring together Israelis and Palestinians in a spirit of peace and reconciliation. That is why I urge the Government to reverse their elimination of UK support for co-existence projects and back the establishment of an international fund for Israeli-Palestinian peace to give this vital work the investment it needs today.

In only the past couple of days, the co-existence fund has received the support of the Board of Deputies and the Jewish Leadership Council. It would be a very positive move. By supporting civil society projects that establish strong constituencies for peace in Israel and Palestine, we have a chance to help build the foundations of trust, co-operation and co-existence on which any lasting settlement must be constructed.

I welcome the Minister back to the Front Bench. I have confidence that he can help to guide his Government to find a better way forward for our position on this matter.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. On account of the level of interest, I am afraid that the time limit on Back-Bench speeches has to be reduced to four minutes for each speech with immediate effect.

5.59 pm

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan).

On the centenary of the Balfour declaration—the work, of course, of a Scottish Conservative—we must recognise not only the past, of the founding of the state of Israel, but the present and the hope of the future. Israel has been a success story, and it is a beacon of hope in an often troubled middle east. As the region’s only functioning democracy, it shares many of our values.

Sadly, for all Israel’s successes, peace has eluded the region. As it stands, Israel does not live in peace and security; there is the threat of rockets from Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon, endangering 70% of the Israeli population, and a spate of deadly car-ramming, stabbing and shooting attacks in Israel and the west bank have killed more than 50 people since October 2015.

This terror is of real concern to many of my constituents. As I mentioned in my maiden speech on Monday evening, East Renfrewshire has the highest Jewish population in Scotland. Over 50% of the Scottish Jewish community choose to make it their home, and many will have relatives serving in the Israel defence forces. Some have, sadly, even been touched by the barbarity of terrorism. Yoni Jesner, a young man about to undertake a medical degree, who studied at Belmont House School in Newton Mearns, had his life taken from him in a Tel Aviv bus bombing—he was 19. We remember him and pay tribute to his mother, Marsha Gladstone, and others who are carrying on his memory with the Yoni Jesner Foundation.

These crimes, of course, are committed not only against Israelis. The Palestinians have still not achieved a sovereign state, and Hamas continues to betray ordinary Palestinians and to condemn them to endless rounds of suffering and exploitation. The ongoing Hamas-Fatah feud recently led to the deaths of three children, for whom hospital care was not expedited in Israel.

Despite this violence, it is vital that the UK continues to take an active role in encouraging both sides to come together for direct talks to achieve the peace we all want to see, but this must be done in an even-handed way.
What we need are politicians who are committed, yes, to the creation of a viable and sovereign Palestinian state, but who are equally clear that this must be achieved alongside a safe and secure Israel.

As other Members have mentioned, the appetite for peace and the two-state solution is still alive among the majority of Israelis and Palestinians. Despite terror attacks, incitement and widespread disillusion, there remains significant support for the two-state solution among both populations, and that should strengthen our resolve and fill us with hope. The Government must take the opportunity not only to solidify but to build on that support, by providing further funding to peaceful co-existence projects in Israel and the west bank which do such important work in supporting peace and bringing communities together. That work lays the ground for the day after a peace deal is reached.

The two-state solution is the only path to a prosperous Israel within a peaceful middle east, safeguarding the Jewish, democratic nature of Israel, while securing a lasting peace with the Palestinians. Indeed, talk of the possibility of a one-state solution serves only to embolden hard-liners on both sides of the conflict. Peace will also not be achieved by international support for boycotts and counterproductive unilateral measures against Israel. In fact, every such measure pushes peace further away, often undermining and prohibiting participation in vital cross-community initiatives, particularly cultural ones, which do so much to promote and foster understanding and cohesion.

Ultimately, it is, of course, down to the two parties to agree a way forward, but we should do all in our power to encourage both sides to resume this process and finally bring about an end to the conflict.

6.2 pm

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): The Israeli-Palestinian dispute is an ongoing tragedy. The Jewish and Palestinian people are entitled to self-determination. Zionism is the movement for Jewish self-determination in the state of Israel, and it derives from a centuries-old Jewish attachment to, and living in, the middle east, in what is now the state of Israel. I abhor the use in certain quarters of the term “Zionism” as a term of abuse; that must be stopped, and it must be stopped wherever it comes from.

The only way this tragic situation can be resolved is through direct negotiations between the two parties to form two states—Israel and Palestinian—that are mutually recognised, with major international economic support for the new Palestinian state. Issues such as permanent borders, security, refugees and the status of Jerusalem can be resolved only as part of an end-of-conflict deal reached through that direct negotiation. A stable agreement would be much more likely if it was part of the renewed Arab peace initiative. There has been a great deal of movement and change recently across the middle east, and the renewed Arab peace initiative is extremely important and must be taken up.

The barriers to securing that peace between Israelis and Palestinians are significant on both sides. They include the question of settlements: I agree that settlements are a barrier, but they are not the only barrier, and they are barrier that can be resolved. It must be remembered that Israel withdrew from its settlements in Sinai in 1978 as part of the peace agreement that exists to this day, and it withdrew from its 21 settlements in Gaza in 2005, when the settlers were forced to withdraw. It was anticipated at that stage that that would be followed by peace in Gaza and peaceful relations with Israel. Instead, the terrorist organisation Hamas overthrew the Palestinian Authority and has since been running Gaza, much to the detriment of its people.

The Palestinian refusal to accept Israel’s legitimacy as a majority Jewish state, firmly part of the middle east, is also a barrier to peace, and it is high time that the Palestinians changed that position.

Incitement and terrorism are also barriers. Since 2015, as hon. Members have already mentioned, Palestinian terrorism has resulted in 180 stabbings, 150 shootings, and 58 ramming attacks with vehicles, causing 50 civilian deaths and the wounding of more than 759 Israelis.

That is not the way to secure peace, and this incitement must stop. Naming Palestinian Authority schools after terrorists also undermines Israeli confidence.

I must also refer to Iran’s activities in the region, particularly in supporting Hezbollah, urging and encouraging it to set up new bases in Lebanon ready to attack Israel. Again, I deplore the humanitarian situation in Gaza, but Hamas’s rebuilding of 15 terrorist tunnels to launch an attack on Israel does not bode well for peace.

However, these barriers to peace can be overcome. There is a vision to be had—the vision put forward by the late President of Israel, Shimon Peres, who spoke about the future of the middle east, with two nations, Israel and Palestine, working together as part of a new middle east. Let us hope that this debate contributes to securing that end.

6.6 pm

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): I draw Members’ attention to my entry in the register regarding a trip to Israel and the west bank last year.

The Balfour declaration of 1917 is one of the most significant and important letters in history. When incorporated into the Mandate of Palestine in 1922, the historical connection between the Jewish people and Palestine was recognised, and it has demonstrated the UK’s crucial and integral role in creating a homeland for the Jewish people. The UK has held an unwavering commitment to a two-state solution, and as we proudly mark the centenary year of the Balfour declaration, we are presented with a unique opportunity to renew the middle east peace process. We know that the way to achieve a genuine peace is for the two sides in this conflict to sit down together in direct peace talks and work towards a resolution and a lasting peace.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is complex, and there is only so much you can learn from textbooks and the media. Visiting the region last year and being able to speak to people on the ground, on both sides of the conflict, provided me with the greatest insight possible into the issues. Israel is an open and liberally democratic country that values freedom of speech, allowing people from all backgrounds and beliefs to express themselves. It is a country that celebrates diversity. Churches, mosques and synagogues stand almost side by side, and Jews, Muslims and Christians alongside each other in peaceful coexistence. Surrounding Israel, the rest of the region
includes dictatorship and the oppression of women and minorities, and in some failed states we have all too regularly seen images of young gay people being thrown off the top of buildings and women stoned on the streets. This stands in stark contrast to Israel’s diversity and freedom. It truly is a beacon of democracy and hope in a troubled region.

I further discovered that there are tremendous synergies between my own area, Aberdeen, and Tel Aviv. Tel Aviv has a buzzing entrepreneurial culture, and its creative energy and early-age innovation are simply unparalleled. Similarly, in Aberdeen we have a strong entrepreneurial spirit, and there is huge potential for greater partnership working between these two cities.

I am deeply concerned by Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions protests in my constituency. The group has been actively trying to drive an Israeli cosmetics counter out of business, holding it unfairly accountable for Government policy by assuming that the Israeli Government represent the views of every Israeli citizen. In Aberdeen, poisonous and divisive banners stating, “Anti-Semitism is a crime, Anti-Zionism is a duty”, have been displayed while handing out unfounded propaganda. This is wholly unacceptable, and it serves to polarise the debate, undermine community relations, undermine peace efforts and increase tensions.

Today, I join colleagues who have called for the Home Secretary to consider urgently a full ban on Hezbollah, an organisation that believes not in peace, but only in the extermination of Israel. We need to look at the actions of Hezbollah, and the Government should judge it on those actions. Hezbollah cannot be forgiven for its criminal, terrorist, or militant pursuits simply because it engages in political or humanitarian ones. I urge the Government to join our closest allies in the US, Canada and the Netherlands in proscribing Hezbollah.

The biggest obstacles to the advancement of peace include Hamas’s rearmament drive in Gaza and internal fighting between Hamas and Fatah, as well as growing support for a one-state solution in Palestine that could effectively remove the existence of Israel. Neither is the advancement of peace supported by the Palestinian Authority’s unilateral actions to try to gain statehood recognition at the UN before any peace process has been agreed.

With all the instability across the region and the continuing distrust between the two sides, a two-state solution still seems too far off. However, in this centenary year, let us seize the opportunity to bring about a lasting peace for both sides.

6.10 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I refer to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, which relates to my visit to the west bank last October on a cross-party parliamentary delegation sponsored by the Council for Arab-British Understanding and the Muslim charity Human Appeal.

As a lawyer, I wish to address the Israeli Government’s flouting of international law and their failure to observe the rule of law in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Many constituents write to me and come to speak to me about these issues. Israel is in breach of international law in both the fact and the manner of its continued occupation of the west bank. Two parallel systems of law operate in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, depending on whether someone is an Israeli or a Palestinian, and that is not right. These issues must be addressed if any talks are to be meaningful.

Others have spoken eloquently about settlements, and it is clear that they contravene the fourth Geneva convention. But I want to speak about military courts, which I observed in operation last year. One law covers Israeli civilians who have been transplanted into the occupied territories, but Palestinians are subject to military law. Israel is the only country in the world that automatically prosecutes children in military courts.

Many lawyers more distinguished than myself have expressed concern about the way in which these courts conduct their operations, and I saw with my own eyes the basis for those concerns when I visited with Military Court Watch and saw that there was scant regard for justice or the rule of law in those courtrooms. Many Palestinians see a lawyer very shortly before their first appearance in what can only be described as a farcical process. We saw one young Palestinian man on trial for allegedly throwing stones at a settler car. It was said by his interrogator that he had been interrogated in Arabic, but that the audio recording had been lost. The young man was persistent that he had been interrogated in Hebrew, a language that he did not understand. In any court I have ever been in, if there had been such a dispute and the audio recording had been lost, the trial would not have proceeded, but in this case it did.

I also want to say something about the son of friends of my constituent Carol Morton, who is the director of development at Palcrafts and Hadeel Palestinian fair trade shop in Edinburgh, a Church of Scotland-run organisation that supports Palestinian fair trade. This young man was lifted several months ago for allegedly throwing two stones. He has been in custody since then, and his parents have got visits only as a result of Red Cross intervention. His name is Wadel Badawi, and his parents are Lousi and Mohammed. On one occasion when they visited him, his legs were tied, his head was shaved and he had been beaten. This young man has not been found guilty of anything, and that is how he is being treated. Even if his case comes to a resolution at its much-delayed next trial date on 16 July, he will not be released until the autumn.

Does the Minister really believe that an Israeli military court that behaves in such a fashion, and that has a conviction rate of just short of 100%, is one that can command the confidence of the international community? I do not, and I think it is important that Members from all parties speak out against Israel’s violation of international law and of the rule of law. There should be no pussyfooting around these issues. Just as we must condemn terrorism, we must condemn so-called democratic states that violate international law and do not observe the principles of the rule of law.

6.14 pm

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): The urgency with which this Parliament must help with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was shown by the five debates held and 19 written statements made during the last Parliament. It is becoming increasingly apparent to me that there is no longer any real urgency being shown by either side of the debate about progressing towards a two-state solution. While the Israelis have become used to a status quo that delivers security for them, Palestinians have become
ever more divided, as Hamas continues to clash with more moderate Palestinian factions. Alongside the ever present and ever increasing issue of illegal settlements, a two-state solution is therefore sliding further out of view.

The current governing coalition in Israel is the most right-wing in the country’s history. Since the start of the year, the Israeli Government, emboldened by the new Trump Administration, have announced the creation of more than 6,000 new buildings in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and have attempted to legitimise them through the Land Regularisation Bill. The UN middle east envoy, Nickolay Mladenov, has condemned the Land Regularisation Bill, fearing that it may “greatly diminish the prospects for Arab-Israeli peace”.

The retroactive legalisation of 55 settlements and roughly 4,000 housing units is a significant step away from a peaceful solution.

Let us take the case of Bethlehem, which has a population of 220,000. Surrounding the town are 100,000 illegal Israeli settlers, complete with vast security zones to protect them. These security zones have cut off Bethlehem from its historical connection with its twin city, Jerusalem. While these settlements are in place, it is impossible to imagine a situation in which a peaceful solution between Palestine and Israel can be found.

Many within the Israeli community used to argue that settlements provided an extra level of security for the Israeli state. Ami Ayalon, a former director of Shin Bet, the Israel Security Agency, has called this into question. The volatility and mistrust created by illegal settlement activity is increasingly putting Israeli people and soldiers at risk. Furthermore, even the former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak has emphasised that, in continuing with this policy, Israel is creating an apartheid reality.

Crispin Blunt: On the gap between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, does my hon. Friend share my concern about the reality of the communities simply not meeting because of how the checkpoints are run? The opportunities for Israelis and Palestinians to get to know and understand each other have been continually reduced by the way in which the situation has to be policed.

Ms Ghani: I agree with my hon. Friend. Friend share my concern about the reality of the communities simply not meeting because of how the checkpoints are run. The opportunities for Israelis and Palestinians to get to know and understand each other have been continually reduced by the way in which the situation has to be policed.

While the US Administration under Obama abstained on UN resolution 2334, the newly elected Trump Administration risk creating a vacuum on the world stage. President Trump’s threat to move the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem has further fuelled fears that his Administration will not push for a two-state solution. I am pleased that the United Kingdom voted for resolution 2334 and condemned the passage of the Land Regularisation Bill, but the Government must now step forward and fill that vacuum.

There are three areas in which the Government can exert pressure. First, the Israeli blockade of the Gaza strip is neither productive nor appropriate, and the Minister must call for its further relaxation. Relaxing the blockade would weaken Hamas’s hand in the region, and allow for further reconciliation with the Palestinian Authority. Secondly, to that end, we must encourage Israel to allow more reconstruction aid to enter Gaza. Tension in the Gulf states has meant that Qatari attempts to get aid in have proven fruitless, and Israel is well positioned to help to rebuild a war-torn society. Thirdly, the draconian restrictions in place on Palestinians wanting to move across the west bank continue to stoke further tensions, and by easing some of this control Israel could firmly send a message that it wants a peaceful solution and is willing to work towards it.

Although we are right to support Israel both locally and internationally in relation to the very difficult security situation in the middle east, it is precisely because we are its friends that it is our duty to stand up on the international stage and make it clear that we fully support a two-state solution and will not advocate or endorse any Israeli action that makes such a prospect less likely.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the excellent speech of the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani), which I am sure was heard by the Minister. We are all happy to see the Minister back, although I agree with the shadow Foreign Secretary that it is a shame the Foreign Secretary could not turn up to a debate in Government time on this important issue. However, we are all very grateful to have listened to the Minister’s views on this subject, rather than the Foreign Secretary’s, as I suspect the Minister is rather better informed.

This is a year of anniversaries, as we have heard from many hon. Members. It is 10 years since the beginning of the blockade of Gaza, 100 years since the Balfour declaration and 50 years since the occupation. One anniversary would be significant; I hope that three are concentrating our minds. The key is occupation. If we truly want to fulfil the unfilled part of Balfour, “that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine”—and those rights certainly have been prejudiced in the west bank and Gaza over the past 50 years—we need to end the occupation.

We have heard the humanitarian situation in Gaza described graphically. As was said, there have been three attacks by the IDF, one of the most powerful armies in the world, on the civilian population of Gaza, with thousands of people killed; I condemn all atrocities on either side—deaths and injuries on either side are appalling—but I wish we could have some recognition from the Members who have spoken in graphic terms about individual acts of terrorism of the thousands of people who have been killed in Gaza over the past 10 years, many of them children.

In discussing the need to end the occupation, let me contrast two things. The first is the abject failure of talks over the past 25 years since Oslo. It is not a coincidence that the talks have failed in that way. Many realistic proposals were made by Rabin before his unfortunate murder. The Arab peace initiative, which has been mentioned, is 15 years old and presents an easy and straightforward blueprint for peace: recognition by the states of the Arab League of Israel on pre-1967 borders and east Jerusalem as the capital of a Palestinian state. That is a real basis for peace that the Israelis have never been able to approach thus far, or have never been persuaded by the international community to approach.
On the other hand, there is the remorseless growth of settlements. In the last year or so, we have seen a change in the type and intensity of settlement growth. The 1,800 units in east Jerusalem, including around Sheikh Jarrah in the heart of east Jerusalem, that have been announced in the last couple of days are a fundamental game-changer, as are E1 and the new settlements between Bethlehem and east Jerusalem. All of those will make a viable Palestinian state impossible. There has been a 70% increase in settlement building on the west bank in the last year. These are continuing breaches of international humanitarian law and the fourth Geneva convention.

John Kerry has said that “the status quo is leading towards one state and perpetual occupation”. Just last week, the Secretary-General of the UN, António Guterres, said that “the only way to achieve the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people” is by ending the occupation. That is the issue at the heart of this and unless it is addressed, we will get nowhere. That is what I look to the Minister to address in his concluding comments.

6.23 pm

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as an officer of the Conservative Friends of Israel.

I welcome the debate because the issue of Israel and Palestinian talks is very important. Israel supports the establishment of a Palestinian state through the process of direct peace talks without preconditions. We can see that through the withdrawal from Gaza in 2005 and the release of 104 Palestinian terrorists in 2013. At the same time, all I see from the Palestinian Authority is its continued counterproductive unilateral steps to gain recognition of statehood at the United Nations. What it could not achieve through war, terrorism and violence, it seeks to achieve through international opinion.

As has been mentioned, the House debated this matter on 13 October 2014. I recall the words of the hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas), who was on the Opposition Front Bench:

“That is why—the hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) should heed this—since 2011, when the Leader of the Opposition made Labour policy clear, Labour has supported Palestinian statehood at the United Nations.”—[Official Report, 13 October 2014; Vol. 586, c. 96.]

That is pretty clear.

During the general election, the Labour candidate in Hendon, who was a member of the Jewish Labour movement, said it was inevitable that Palestinian recognition would occur. As I said to him in many hustings and online, no it is not. I say it again to Labour Front Benchers: no it is not. I had hoped earlier today to receive a confirmation from the shadow Foreign Secretary, but no answer came from her about the Opposition’s position. I asked her a yes or no question; she failed to answer. Unilateral actions to recognise the state of Palestine before an agreement has been reached in direct talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority directly harm the peace process and the possibility of a lasting two-state solution.

Emily Thornberry: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr Offord: I will extend the same courtesy to the right hon. Lady that she gave to me and say no, thank you.

Unilateralism is a rejection of the peace process, not a means to revive it. I am therefore grateful that the Minister has made very clear today the commitment from the Government and the Conservative party—our actions speak louder than words—to reject Palestinian recognition before the peace talks. We have confirmed that we will continue to support the Oslo agreement; any other action would reject it. The Government and the Conservative party will continue our endeavours to assist in the creation of a two-state solution so that both countries—Palestine and Israel—can live in peace side by side.

Emily Thornberry: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I made Labour’s position perfectly clear—it is in the manifesto. We think that the state of Palestine should be recognised. I answered that in my speech. I do not understand the hon. Gentleman’s problem, and it is such a shame he did not take my intervention.

Mr Speaker: Yes, well I think that might be called a point of frustration, or alternatively a point of explanation, but I am afraid that we will have to leave it there. No further chuntering from a sedentary position from either side of the Chamber is required, or indeed beneficial.

6.27 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the Minister back to his place. I wish him the best happiness in his new position for the years ahead.

As a well-known friend of Israel, and as someone who is passionate about freedom and democracy, it is a pleasure to speak in the debate. In the centenary year of the Balfour declaration, it is timely that we discuss the resumption of peace talks. It is also important that we remember the support that Britain gave for a Jewish democratic state, and the incredible achievement that the state of Israel has been. My belief in the rightness of that state and the support that we should have for our allies remains strong.

Israel celebrates democracy, has a liberal and open society, and protects the rights of all its minorities. It is a goal of mine to see other countries throughout the world reach the level of protection afforded to all who live in Israel. It is telling that up to 200,000 Arabs who did not flee during the war of independence in 1948 were absorbed into Israeli society as equal citizens. Their descendants make up Israel’s 1.7 million-strong Arab minority today. Israel is the only country in the region with an increasing Christian population. It stands as an oasis of religious freedom in the middle east.

In the west bank, 15% of the population were Christian in 1950. Christians make up only 2% of the population today. Under Hamas in Gaza, Christians face hostile treatment and the population is in steady decline. I do not wish to vilify Palestine—that is not my role or desire—but wrong has been done by many individuals of many creeds and races. It is unfair to attribute one act to a nation or people, but at this stage I should point to the words of our ambassador to the UN, who earlier this year said that
“as long as terrorists are treated as martyrs, peace will be distant. The scourge of anti-Semitic, racist and hateful language must be excised from the region.”

I agree with that wholeheartedly.

The Oslo accords legally bind Israel and Palestine to abstain from incitement and hostile propaganda. It is clear to me that the Palestinian leadership has not taken all the appropriate steps that are needed to deliver on that commitment, which has definitely played a role in the latest wave of violence by youths, who have killed 50 Israelis and foreign nationals in stabbings, shootings and car rammings.

The Minister will know that UK taxpayers’ aid has freed up funds for the Palestinian Authority to reward terrorists with a monthly salary. Some £254 million has been used for that practice, which is 7% of the authority’s budget and 20% of its foreign aid receipts.

I ask the Minister, in his dual role at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development, to ensure greater scrutiny of the Palestinian Authority’s budget. Simply stating that our aid does not go to terrorists is not enough. Our constituents do not want their hard-earned money to benefit those who promote terrorism.

On the northern border, Israel continues to face the threat of Hezbollah. The terror group has amassed some 150,000 Iranian-supplied rockets capable of striking all of Israel. We must stand with Israel against those who seek to destroy its, and our, way of life.

I ask the Minister urgently to consider calls for the immediate proscription of Hezbollah in its entirety—its political and militant sides. We need to hold Iran accountable for its actions. The country provides weapons, training and funding to both terror groups, and it remains the world’s leading sponsor of terrorism.

While both sides must come together to restart negotiations, we must make it clear that the onus is on the Palestinians to demonstrate their commitment to peace. Let us grasp the opportunity that the centenary of the Balfour declaration brings and make it clear to the Palestinians that they must truly renounce violence and finally recognise Israel as a Jewish state, the only state of the Jewish people, for it is only when both sides respect each other’s right to self-determination alongside another that a lasting peace will finally prevail.

Ms Ghani: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Forgive me, but due to the time restraint, I forgot in my rush to mention my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I visited the Knesset, at the invitation of the Speaker of the Knesset, to give evidence on anti-Semitism and Islamophobia.

Mr Speaker: I am most grateful to the hon. Lady for declaring that via the mechanism of a point of order. It will have been noted and appreciated, I am sure, by the House.

6.31 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): This is the first speech I have made in a debate since the general election, so I would like to place on record my heartfelt thanks to my constituents for giving me the opportunity, and their trust, to serve the people of Ilford North for a second time. I should also thank the Prime Minister for her contribution to my election.

I rise this afternoon in exasperation. Despite having been a Member for only two years, I have, for all of the excellent speeches, a sense of déjà vu and repetition. Goodness knows what it is like for those who have been listening to and taking part in these debates for the last 50 years.

I first visited Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories 10 years ago with the Union of Jewish Students on a Young Political Leaders trip. Most recently, I visited with Medical Aid for Palestinians and the Council for the Advancement of Arab-British Understanding. I spoke to a wide range of people on both sides of the conflict—political leaders, civil society and trade union leaders, and people who have lost family to this bloody conflict—who have been affected in different ways. At every point, I try to put myself in the shoes of the people affected. The exasperation arises because the road map should be clear: a two-state solution based on 1967 borders with mutually agreed land swaps and a shared capital in Jerusalem. All these things are the only viable solution for the long-term security and interests of both Israelis and Palestinians.

The obstacles are also well known. They include but are not limited to poor political leadership and missed opportunities; a cycle of violence claiming the lives of innocent Palestinians and Israelis; the ongoing military occupation of the west bank; the blockage of Gaza by Israel and Egypt; and the refusal of people in the region to accept Israel’s right to exist and the right of Palestinians to a state of their own. So much of this has been obvious for so long, yet the prospect of a two-state solution looks worryingly distant.

Let us put ourselves in the shoes of the Israelis. This country knows what it is like to experience the threat of terrorism and political violence. Israel has a right to defend itself and its citizens, whether from rocket attacks, incitement to deadly violence and suicide bombings against Israelis, or from those who would gladly see the world’s only Jewish state wiped from the map. I have never supported those who wish to delegitimise the state of Israel. I have always believed that peace will ultimately come about through face-to-face negotiations facilitated by honest brokers, including this country. It will be made possible, ultimately, by instilling a culture of trust and a desire for peaceful co-existence on the part of both Israelis and Palestinians.

Israelis and Palestinians have something in common: terrible political leadership. That brings me to the policies of this particular Israeli Government. I have seen at first hand the impact of Israeli Government policy towards Palestinians living in the west bank. The ongoing expansion of illegal Israeli settlements cannot be justified, nor can the demolition of Palestinian homes, nor can the use of byzantine laws to seize land from its rightful owners, nor can the military court system, which violates the very principles of natural justice, and nor can the regular intimidation of Palestinian civilians and international aid workers, who too often are victims of settler violence. As many Members have said, the humanitarian crisis in Gaza is simply intolerable and more must be done to bring an end to that terrible travesty.
This, however, is the question that I ask in response to comments that have been made today. If I were a young Palestinian growing up on the west bank or in Gaza, what hope would I have? Where would I look to, with any sense of optimism that one day I could live freely in a state of my own, able to exercise democratic rights or travel the world as any young person in this country could?

This is the greatest tragedy of all. As I said earlier, Israel has a proud history as a democratic state, but the policies of its Government are the greatest weapon—the greatest tool—that its opponents could have, striking as they do at the heart of Israel’s proud tradition as an independent democratic state.

6.35 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for inviting me to speak in this important debate.

Since the Trump Administration came to power, on the surface they have projected an image of trying to bring Israel and Palestine back into talks. However, the language of Trump has been meek, especially in condemnation of settlement building. Emboldened, the Knesset has reacted by passing more extreme legislation, and only last month ground was broken with a new “legal” settlement in the west bank, for the first time in a quarter of a century.

The truth is that we now feel, in many ways, further from peace than ever: further than ever from a lasting and sustainable peace that would allow Israel to exist in safety and security, bring prosperity, security and self-determination, and give life to the people of Palestine—a fair and peaceful settlement.

Only days ago, I met leading expert Professor Paul Rogers, of the world-renowned peace studies department at Bradford university. We discussed this issue, and what stood out was that although, in the current context, some would argue that the conflict between Israel and Palestine is small by comparison with that in, say, Syria, in reality it is massive in terms of its symbolism and the way it is used. It has a significant impact on how terrorism operates in the region and beyond. It is used to recruit and encourage extremists across the world. We must understand that peace would be more than a fair and peaceful settlement.

In 2010, three years after the start of the blockade in Gaza, David Cameron said:

“Gaza cannot and must not be allowed to remain a prison camp.”

However, nearly a decade since the start of that blockade, the situation is deteriorating rather than improving. It is certainly nowhere near the vision of our Government in 2010. The infrastructure has been decimated. Bombardment and power shortages are having devastating consequences in hospitals, and a particularly devastating effect on water treatment. It has been estimated that there are more than 51,000 displaced people in Gaza. We must recognise the conditions of life there: they are not conditions that anyone should live in, let alone have enforced upon them.

Internationally, there should be no perpetual state of war and no perpetual state of occupation. This is occupied territory, and the occupying force has a duty to protect these people. Three generations of Palestinians will have grown up knowing nothing but occupation and fear.

We have been debating the two-state solution and the political parameters of this situation for decades, in the Chamber and elsewhere, with no peace or negotiations in sight. We have to find a way to move through this moment into something better. No doubt there are moderates on both sides, but concessions are almost impossible. Israel is impregnable in its insecurities, and that does not bring long-term security. I call on the Government to tell us not what they think but what they intend to do. How are we going to move this process forward? As I said the last time I spoke, it is time to move beyond condemnation to accountability.

The fact remains that we have seen 50 years of occupation and 10 years of blockade, and engagement in every peace process that has taken place since 1967 is not unilateral. What has the Oslo agreement brought Palestinians? There has been a 600% increase in the number of illegal settlements. It is time to move beyond condemnation.

6.39 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I too refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

Since time is so short, I will concentrate on an aspect that I do not think has been properly discussed this afternoon: what is happening to democratic debate and expression inside the state of Israel. There are developments there that gravely concern me and should concern the rest of the House.

There has been broad consensus in this Chamber when we have discussed this issue today and on other occasions: most people would favour a two-state solution—two democratic secular states, each reflecting the different traditions of that region, but each living in peace and harmony with one another—and in order to get that, a phased end to the occupation, peace talks and so forth. That was a mainstream—although perhaps not a majority—political position inside the state of Israel until quite recently, and it is probably the majority position of the Jewish diaspora throughout the world. Yet today inside Israel it is seen as an extremist position, and people who advocate it are denigrated and denounced for doing so.

Hagai El-Ad is the director of an organisation called B’Tselem, an Israeli human rights organisation based in Jerusalem. Earlier this year he addressed the United Nations in terms not dissimilar to many who have contributed today. The response of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was personally to launch a Facebook tirade against him and to threaten to change the law to prevent people doing national service from working for that organisation. As a consequence, others joined in and that organisation and its officials received thousands of threats, including death threats. That is what they got for daring to criticise the Israeli Government. It would be a little like the Prime Minister of this country doing
the same thing against the director of Liberty for publishing a report criticising British Government policy in, say, Northern Ireland.

Breaking the Silence is an organisation that is composed of veterans of the Israeli army; only those who have served in the IDF can be members of Breaking the Silence. It is fair to say that it does not take a mainstream position; it is critical of the occupation. It is led by a formidable man called Yehuda Shaul who told me to my face that he was a proud Zionist but his main concern is that Israel’s biggest threat was the occupation of Palestine itself, and that is why he wanted it to end.

That organisation has campaigned long and hard within Israel to try to put an alternative point of view. What is the response of Israeli politicians? Some in the Knesset have tabled motions calling for the organisation to be outlawed as a terrorist organisation. That did not get very far, but a law has been passed in the Knesset to make it illegal for Breaking the Silence to go into schools and colleges and speak to young people about the choices facing them. That is hardly a liberal position.

There are many other similar examples, including the no contact policy of Mr Netanyahu. He has said that any international Government or organisation that makes contact with organisations that are critical of the Israeli Government will not speak to the Israeli Government. He said that to the German Foreign Minister earlier this year; the German Foreign Minister had the decency to say that the German Government will not be told by anyone who they will and will not speak to, and he went ahead and met Breaking the Silence and B’Tselem. The response of Mr Netanyahu was to cancel his meeting with the German Foreign Minister—the Foreign Minister of one of Israel’s biggest supporters in the international community. That is the degree of illiberalism and intolerance, and I seek an assurance from the Minister that this Government will not bend in their dedication to consult other opinions within Israel because of threats by the Israeli Government and will not be cowed into refusing to recognise the plurality of discussion that is needed.

6.43 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): I echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) and of the Minister, who said at the beginning of the debate that this House has knocked around these issues for over 30 years. Today’s debate is welcome but, sadly, feels slightly like the film “Groundhog Day”. We debate and discuss, emotions and injustices are raised, we demand peace for the region, yet nothing changes and we do it all again six months later: a carousel of misery, false hope and inaction.

Israeli people continue to live in fear of violence, bombs fall on Gaza—as they did again this week—Palestinians are still living in fear of their homes and communities being occupied with no notice, and thousands of Palestinians are still being held in Israeli prisons, many without charge. We can only thank those people on the ground working day and night to maintain peace that we are not in the middle of a similar increase in violence to that we witnessed in recent years. But it is not all negative. There have been numerous times when it feels as though progress has been made. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) said, in October 2014 this House voted by 274 votes to 12 in favour of a motion to recognise Palestine as a state alongside Israel. That was a brave and welcome decision. As the right hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan) said at the time:

“Recognition of statehood is not a reward for anything; it is a right.”—[Official Report, 13 October 2014; Vol. 586, c. 72.]

Recognising Palestine as a state gives moral and political support to moderate Palestinian voices pushing back against violent extremists, and I would encourage the House to decide on a timeframe for that to happen.

Only last year, the United Nations passed a resolution condemning the occupations. Settlements are illegal under international law. They breach the fourth Geneva convention, which prohibits the transfer of the occupier’s “own civilian population into the territory it occupies”.

But the UN resolution was passed only because of President Obama’s support, and now, with a new and very different President in place, we need clarification on what conversations the Government have had with him. Will they clarify whether he is of the same opinion as the rest of the international community?

Generations on both sides simply cannot continue to be brought up witnessing the brutality of war, fearing for their lives, and stressed and anxious about the future. The middle east and the entire international community need peace. More than anything, children should have the right to a childhood, to be a child, to play, to learn and to be happy. I would like to draw the House’s attention to the serious and ongoing situation of Palestinian child detainees. At the moment, 182 children are being held in Israeli military detention, most on stone-throwing charges, and 46% of them are being held in violation of the fourth Geneva convention and the Rome statute. The inquiry of 2012 chaired by the former Attorney General, Baroness Scotland, stated:

“Military law and public administration should deal with Palestinian children on an equal footing with Israeli children.”

That is clearly not happening.

It is now 50 years since the occupations began, and that is 50 years too long. Today, just about every respectable non-governmental organisation, Government and international community member stands against the occupations. How much longer can this go on? Let us ask ourselves whether we are doing all we can to bring peace to this volatile but beautiful and potentially prosperous region. We need vision, courage and leadership.

Will this Government pledge to take up the baton and change the narrative by pushing even harder for peace?

6.47 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It has been a pleasure to be here for this excellent debate, and to welcome the Minister for the Middle East to his position. This is also a significant debate for me personally, because when I came here as a newly elected MP, my very first vote in the House was to recognise the state of Palestine. As the shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) said earlier, the vote was won by a
majority of 262. I thank all those speakers on both sides of the House who have made such passionate and erudite contributions throughout the course of this debate. I particularly want to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Fiona Onasanya), who made her maiden speech today. She set a shining example as one of Peterborough’s powerful women, and I look forward to her future contributions in the House.

One common thread has run through all the speeches today: the urgent need for peace. We are now 100 years on from the Balfour declaration, and we cannot tolerate a situation in which yet another generation of Israeli and Palestinian children grow up understanding violence, division and extremism as part of their normal lives. We owe it to all those children to see this conflict from their perspective and to resolve to end it on their behalf, whether they are young Israeli children living in fear of the air raid sirens in Tel Aviv or young Palestinian children living in grinding poverty in refugee camps behind the Israeli blockade. Will the Minister tell us what specific steps the Government are taking to secure humanitarian relief and a long-term improvement in conditions for all those young Palestinian children condemned to a life of poverty and violence simply as a result of where they were born?

On the issue of humanitarian relief, let me ask the Minister another question. The Foreign Office stated in December last year, after the Brexit outcome was known, that the UK’s financial aid to the Palestinian Authority was best channelled directly through EU funding programmes. The Foreign Office said that the mechanism “offers the best value for money and the most effective way of directly providing support.”

Do the Government intend to continue their participation in that funding programme even after Brexit? If not, what alternatives are they putting in place to ensure that they achieve the same value for money and the same effectiveness of outcomes?

In conclusion, we have made it clear today that an end to conflict between Israel and Palestine can be achieved only when all sides stop taking actions that perpetuate the conflict and start taking actions that will nurture peace. That means not only a total end to attacks on the Israeli people and state and a clear recognition of Israel’s right to exist, but stepping up efforts to tackle the grinding poverty, the lack of opportunities and the cycle of violence in which so many Palestinian children are trapped. It means having an honest conversation with our Israeli friends about the actions they can take to ease the humanitarian crisis, particularly through the lifting of the blockade. Since 1917, Britain has stood by the two key elements of the Balfour declaration: working to establish and protect the national homeland of Israel while ensuring that nothing is done to prejudice the rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine. Those remain the key tenets of Labour’s policy on the middle east, and those key tenets of Labour’s policy on the middle east, and we cannot tolerate the actions they can take to ease the humanitarian crisis, particularly through the lifting of the blockade.

6.51 pm

Alistair Burt: I thank the Opposition Front-Bench team for both their contributions, in particular the short and thoughtful summing up from the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes). I echo her remark that this has been an excellent debate: more than 20 colleagues speaking with great force in a short period of time about things that they know a lot about.

Like the hon. Lady, I will start by referring to the new hon. Member for Peterborough (Fiona Onasanya). She says that she is a symbol of diversity in her city. That is true, but she is also a symbol of strength, dignity and clarity, and she has a passion for the important causes she mentioned. I know that we will hear more of her. I particularly liked her concerns about the mental health of army veterans. She will find out that looking after mental health was another of the jobs I used to have. She also spoke about achieving her dreams, and I am quite sure that in doing so she is helping other girls in her city to do exactly the same. Her forthright defence of faith, saying that it is mankind’s frailties, not God’s love, that causes the problem, was heard and welcomed by many of us.

There was a range of other speeches. My hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) made a thoughtful contribution, as befits the most recent Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) spoke with extensive experience in this area. The hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman) drew her speech to a thoughtful conclusion with a remark from Shimon Peres. My hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) both made thoughtful speeches. We heard optimistic speeches from my hon. Friend the Members for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), for Ilford North ( Wes Streeting) and for Bradford West (Joanna Cherry), my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) spoke with clarity, and she has a passion for the important causes she mentioned. I know that we will hear more of her. I particularly liked her concerns about the mental health of army veterans. She will find out that looking after mental health was another of the jobs I used to have. She also spoke about achieving her dreams, and I am quite sure that in doing so she is helping other girls in her city to do exactly the same. Her forthright defence of faith, saying that it is mankind’s frailties, not God’s love, that causes the problem, was heard and welcomed by many of us.

There were tough words for the state of Israel from the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South (Mary Robinson), for Henley (John Howell), for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) and for Moray (Douglas Ross), picking out a bit of the relationship with Israel which makes a difference and suggests that there is a future, and referring to neighbours such as Jordan that have made a contribution to peace in the area.

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assembly, and on respect for LGBT rights. We remain deeply concerned that Hamas and other militants are rearming, rebuilding tunnels and holding military training camps.

Overall, although the sympathies of colleagues for one side or another were occasionally clear, it was rare that those sympathies were not expressed without a recognition that there were issues on both sides. Although we have spoken about this a great deal, the recognition that the pain is serious and that we want to do something about it was clear for all. I am sorry not to have time to deal with all the questions raised, but I just want to pick out a little about the DFID side of this and the support being offered to the Palestinian people, who are under pressure.

In relation to the Occupied Palestinian Territories, the UK has provided £349 million of support for Palestinian development from 2011 to 2015, and a further £72 million in 2015-16. I do not see any suggestion that that is going to change or falter. The UK pledged £20 million extra for reconstruction and development in Gaza following the Gaza reconstruction conference in 2014. We are one of the largest donors to UNRWA—the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East—providing basic services to approximately 5 million Palestinians, including 70% of the population of Gaza.

Those of us who have visited Gaza know how miserable it is. If there is one place that we could say stands for the very reason this conflict must come to an end, it would be Gaza. The hon. Member for Ilford North asked what a young Palestinian thinks about their future, but what does the young Israeli soldier think when they are standing on the border of Lebanon and being involved in the west bank? What do they think of their chances of ensuring that their children no longer have to defend the state of Israel in the way they feel committed to do. That is the measure of the task.

If Members want a clear commitment from my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and myself, they can have it. We do not know exactly where the United States is on this issue, but we do know there is a real interest there and a determination to go to see people and talk to them. The deal is not a simple one, as we all know, but it is not often that an American President takes an interest at the start of a first term, and this provides another opportunity. Most of us in this House have seen those opportunities come and go over the years, so this is a chance now that we should all take. We have all seen enough of this.

To answer the question asked by the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), there is no change in our policy. The United Kingdom’s long-standing position on the map is clear: we support a negotiated settlement leading to a safe and secure Israel living alongside a viable and sovereign Palestinian state, based on 1967 borders, with agreed land swaps, with Jerusalem as the shared capital of both states, and with a just, fair, agreed and realistic settlement for refugees. I do not think any other state is going to tell me that that is not going to be our continuing policy; I assure her of that.

What are we going to do? We are going to redouble our efforts. We have to work with international partners and will continue to engage with those in Israel who are seeking such a solution. We recognise the concerns of those in Israel who fear for their security, and they are right to do so, as we have heard. We know well about the random attacks and the fears that have affected the people of Israel. Equally, there will be no ultimate lasting peace unless the hand is reached out and this time grasped by those on the other side, both in Gaza and on the west bank, to make something of this. The United Kingdom will be determined to do everything it can, and those of us who have a second chance at something that means a lot will have a really good go at this. I do not promise an answer, but I do promise an effort.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Israel and Palestinian talks.
Perth’s Cultural Contribution to the UK

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

7 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I am grateful for this opportunity to debate the cultural contribution of the city of Perth to the United Kingdom’s national life. As we await with bated breath the shortlist for the 2021 UK city of culture, our cultural contribution to this nation is vast, overwhelming and ever evolving. Nevertheless, we are not a city that rests on its laurels. We are a city that is rich in heritage and culture, oozing confidence and simply dripping with ambition. With our dramatic riverside setting in the heart of Scotland, where highland meets lowland, in the middle of a hybrid cultural melting pot, we are by far the most beautiful and attractive of all the city of culture candidates.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that support for the city of Perth goes beyond his party and his country? There are Government Members, whom he would no doubt refer to as Sassenachs, who think that Perth is a great city.

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend—I call him that because, as I think you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, he is my colleague in the rock band MP4—for that contribution. I do, of course, recognise the fact that Perth’s bid is supported in constituencies throughout the United Kingdom.

Our plan is to make Perth one of Europe’s great small cities and, in achieving that, give confidence to the other small cities and large towns throughout the United Kingdom. Let me tell you a little about the city of Perth, Mr Deputy Speaker, because our story is utterly unique and like no other, and I know that you are a student of the civic attributes of so many of the communities represented in this House.

Perth is the ancient capital of Scotland. In the 9th century, Kenneth MacAlpin forged the Kingdom of Alba from the Picts and the Scots and was crowned Scotland’s first King at Scone. From then on, every King of Scotland was crowned on the stone of destiny in Scone, which is now part of the Perth city region. I shall say more on that artefact later.

Perth became a royal burgh in 1210, and by the early 14th century it was the most fortified settlement in the whole of Scotland. In the 16th century, the Scottish reformation was sparked in Perth, when John Knox preached in the wonderful surrounds of St John’s kirk in the heart of the city. Our place in Scotland’s pre-industrial history was secured and cemented with a pre-eminent place in the Jacobite struggles and the idea and creation of the modern nation of Scotland.

With industrialisation, Perth’s contribution was matched only by our contribution to the concurrent Scottish enlightenment. Our whisky, dyeing and linen, and our industry powered by the mills along the River Tay, were matched by the cultural contributions from John Duncan Fergusson and Patrick Geddes.

In the 20th century, the city of Perth became the administrative centre for much of the Scottish whisky industry and for Scottish agriculture. It offered fantastic financial services, particularly insurance, which is still a feature of the city today. From the 1940s, hydro-electric dams shaped communities and landscapes right across highland Perthshire, signalling the coming of the renewable energy revolution.

To bring things right up to date, five years ago we were awarded full city status by Her Majesty the Queen during her diamond jubilee celebrations, in recognition of Perth’s contribution to the civic, cultural and national life of not just Scotland but the whole United Kingdom.

We simply overflow with cultural activities. We have four nationally recognised heritage organisations: Horsecross Arts, Culture Perth and Kinross, Pitlochry Festival theatre and the Perth festival of the arts. We have 20 dedicated cultural venues, including the wonderful Perth concert hall, which is celebrating its 12th year this year and is the largest concert-hall venue outside the Scottish central belt and, in my view, the finest concert hall in Scotland.

We are in the process of renovating our existing cultural estate with the creation of a new cultural quarter in the Mill Street area of the city and the multi-million pound redevelopment of the wonderful Perth theatre, which is one of the oldest and best-established theatres in not just Scotland but the whole United Kingdom.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making excellent points about why Perth should be the city of culture. Does he agree that Perth is the ideal location, not least because some of the areas nearby, such as North East Fife, would benefit hugely from Perth’s city of culture statue?

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is a son of Perth and knows the city particularly well. We are of course partners in the Tay cities deal, and I am pretty certain that the energy and activity sparked by Perth being the city of culture will be reflected in his constituency, too.

We are the only one of the bidding cities that has a premier league football team that is still competing in European competition, though that might be short-lived as the mighty St Johnstone take to the fields of Lithuania tomorrow night to try to get a goal back.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing tonight’s Adjournment debate. He will be aware of how fond I am of Perth, particularly of the mighty St Johnstone—good luck to them tomorrow night in Lithuania. What does it say about the cultural impact of Perth when the title of tonight’s debate is Perth’s cultural contribution to the UK? The debate I held on Paisley’s merits was about Paisley’s cultural contribution to the world, so there is a serious lack of ambition from Perth. Seriously, I wish Perth all the very best. Here is to a Scottish winner of the competition.

Pete Wishart: I think I am grateful for that contribution. It was a cunning plan to get the city and culture into the one title, which we have just about achieved. I say to my hon. Friend that I know that we are rivals in trying to be shortlisted for this competition, but the city of Perth will fall right behind the large town of Paisley if it is shortlisted. I am pretty certain that the large town of Paisley will fall behind the city of Perth if it is us who...
are successful in this bid. With all our particular cultural attributes, we are more than able and willing to carry with distinction the badge of UK city of culture.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this matter tonight. Obviously, I look forward to working with him to help to secure the city of culture bid for Perth. Hopefully, he will agree that it is not just Perth that will benefit directly, but wider Perthshire—the 12 towns and the more than 100 settlements that feed in and further enrich Perth and that are enriched by Perth. We should also look back at Perthshire’s cultural contribution to the UK, which started not in the middle ages, but goes right back to Roman settlements. There were Roman roads and trading with the Roman Empire. A contribution was made by taking artefacts from Scotland and throughout the rest of the UK to the wider Roman Empire. In Perthshire, we have Innerpeffray Library, which was established in 1680 and was the first lending library in Scotland. I hope that he will consider the wider Perthshire area and its benefits in his proposal for the city of culture bid.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Can I just say that Members should make interventions, not speeches? I am sure that the hon. Gentleman wants to save that speech for another occasion.

Pete Wishart: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that contribution. I was coming on to mention the big hinterland issues that support this particular bid. May I also congratulate him on what he said? I thought that I was doing well going as far back as Kenneth MacAlpin, but he has managed to beat me by going back to Roman settlement times. I thank him for that and look forward to working with a fellow Perthshire MP to ensure that this bid will be progressed.

This bid is truly inspired, innovative and creative. It fully captures the spirit and the idea of the UK city of culture. At the heart of our bid is a determination to tackle the quiet crisis faced by cities such as Perth and the 30 million people in the UK who live outside our big cities. It is a bid that speaks for the small cities and large towns where so many of our fellow citizens live; that recognises our particular issues, challenges and agendas; and that looks beyond the veneer of scale and rurality—where rural beauty can sometimes mask rural poverty and social isolation. I am talking about small cities where the lack of high-value jobs drives talent elsewhere, particularly among our young people. It is in this setting where culture could make a real difference in connecting people and places. In reply to the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham), we believe that an outstanding city of culture is as meaningful for the people living in its hinterland as it is for those living in the city itself. We want Perth to lead the way in defining these issues and that agenda.

The quiet crisis that I mentioned is characterised in Perthshire by three big challenges, which is our dependency on tourism, hospitality and agriculture where wages are 9% below the Scottish average.

Perth is often seen as a prosperous city. I concede that it is, but sometimes the veneer of prosperity masks real defining issues such as a low-wage and low-skill economy, which is depressingly still a feature of so much of Perth’s community. Some 38% of neighbourhoods are classed as financially stretched, one in five children live in poverty and cultural participation among the 20% most deprived communities is limited in its opportunity. It is the quiet crisis of 150,000 people living across a massive 5,000 square miles with the associated social isolation and low cultural participation levels. These challenges are no less urgent and real than those faced by the big cities, but they are less recognised. We hope to change that in the course of the bid.

Our bid will focus on the contribution of small cities and large towns to the UK economy, alongside the large-scale cultural regeneration programmes that are a transforming feature of our big cities. Different approaches are needed for different types of cities to unlock the potential of places such as Perth and tackle the quiet crisis that they face.

We will use UK city of culture to make real step changes, using culture as a transformative tool and raising the bar for great small cities with imagination, joy, wonder, emotion and surprise. Since Sir Walter Scott’s time, Perth has been known as the fair city. It is a name with which we are very familiar and one that has become intimately associated with the city of Perth, but we want to move beyond the fair city. We will celebrate Perth’s beauty and place at the heart of Scotland’s story, but we will do so by jump-starting our future. We will honour Perth’s heart and our extraordinary history, including a mass celebration of our bid for the stone of destiny to be rightly returned to Perthshire. We will have that tick-box attraction that will drive new generations of tourists to our wonderful city.

We want it to be wild, taking outstanding creative work into the extraordinary landscape surrounding Perth—our wild places, hillsides, lochs and rivers—and giving a voice to the new tribes of the 21st century. We want it to be beyond, starting in our medieval city vennels, the ancient but clogged arteries that criss-cross Perth, flowing through the rivers connecting the city to its hinterland. And it will be connected, both physically and digitally. We are looking to democratise access to culture in a world where people can create and access it across many different and varied platforms. As the infrastructure to deliver this improves and becomes more accessible, we want to ensure that visitor experiences are improved and enhanced. Technology can enable togetherness. We will use it as such.

All this will be created with the participation of the 150,000 citizens living in the Perth city region. We expect more than 740,000 people to take part in person during 2021, and around 650,000 via our ambitious digital platform projects. We can deliver this. Our plans are fully costed and our bid is built on solid roots of delivery, bringing public services and communities together to plan and deliver these priorities across our city region.

We are looking for a solid legacy. By 2022, Perth can be the place that has led the way for other small cities and large towns by reconnecting with its huge hinterland through culture. We hope to create 1,500 jobs in the creative industries by 2021 and an extra 60 additional creative industry start-ups by 2025 to grow our creative sector by 25% to £58 million gross value added by 2021 and to £72 million by 2025, to increase our annual tourism visitors to 2.6 million in 2021, to recruit
2,500 volunteers for Perth 2021 and have 40,000 people volunteering annually by 2025. We hope to increase cultural participation in our most deprived communities by 16% by 2025. We will use the city of culture title to leave a profound legacy and kick-start our future beyond the fair city.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): All these targets are undoubtedly achievable not just by the city that wins the title, but by all the bidding cities. If they want an example of that, they have to look no further than Glasgow, whose cultural renaissance began with its award of European city of culture in 1990. I wish all the cities competing for the title the best of luck.

Pete Wishart: I do, too. I actually performed on the evening when Glasgow was granted its European city of culture status. It was in Glasgow Square, on the eve of 1989 to 1990. I am pretty sure my hon. Friend was not there, but he is absolutely right: even just the process of bidding is transformative for these large towns and cities. I have a particular vested interest in the city of Perth, and I hope we are successful, but I do wish all the other cities well.

I believe in this bid. The time is right for the voice of the small cities to be heard; for us to be held in the same regard as the big cities of the United Kingdom and to have our agendas addressed; for new cultural regeneration models to emerge in small cities, alongside what works in the large cities; and for us to speak for the 30 million people who live in communities such as Perth.

We are a unique and beautiful small city, and our cultural and heritage assets reflect Perth as the place where ancient Scotland was forged and modern Scotland was shaped. In Perth we have the capacity, the potential, the passion, the imagination and the means to do this. Perth is simply the place.

7.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (John Glen): I congratulate the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) on securing this debate about the city of Perth’s cultural contribution to the UK—and, indeed, the world. Once again, he has demonstrated that he is a passionate advocate for the city and its ambition to become the 2021 UK city of culture. Of course, as many in the House know, his cultural credentials are exemplary. He was a member of the bands Big Country and Runrig, and is the only MP ever to have appeared on “Top of the Pops”. He has been a passionate advocate for culture in this House.

While listening to the hon. Gentleman’s speech, I was very aware of the qualities of the bid. These are undoubtedly exciting times for Perth, the fair city, as indeed they are for the other 10 areas bidding for this prestigious title. I know that the shortlist announcement is eagerly awaited, and the independent advisory panel for the competition met recently to assess the bids. I will be carefully considering its recommendations before deciding the shortlist, and we expect to be able to let people know the outcome around the middle of this month.

I want to say a few words about the city of culture before I address the hon. Gentleman’s excellent remarks about Perth. The UK city of culture programme enables places in the UK—they do not actually have to be a city—to compete every four years to hold the title. UK city of culture status helps a place to use culture and creativity to regenerate and transform, attracting visitors, bringing communities together, promoting new partnerships and raising the profile of its culture. Competing places are expected to build a high-quality arts and cultural programme that reaches a wide variety of audiences and leads to lasting social and economic regeneration. Derry-Londonderry was the first UK city of culture in 2013, and Hull is the incumbent.

I have been very impressed by the wide range of places that have thrown their hat into the ring for 2021. We have the smallest cities from England and Wales, in Wells, and in St Davids and the Hundred of Dewisland. There are also larger cities such as Sunderland, Coventry and Stoke-on-Trent. As we have heard, we have an old town, in Paisley, and a new one, in Warrington. There is another rural bid from Hereford and a south-coast entrant, in Portsmouth.

Perth itself has ambitions to be a different type of city of culture from what we have seen so far, and that has been eloquently set out by the hon. Gentleman this evening. Smaller entrants may see the competition in a different way—as a means to support and strengthen communities, rather than to promote physical and economic regeneration.

I am very clear that the economic and social importance of culture to places is now widely acknowledged and uncontested. That was underlined in our culture White Paper, which was published last year by my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), and it is equally recognised, I hope, in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Taking part in the arts improves self-esteem, confidence and health, and brings people together. It makes people feel good about themselves and the environment around them. Culture has played a big part in redeveloping and energising Liverpool and Hull. Their national and international profiles have soared as European capital of culture and UK city of culture respectively.

I want to spend a few moments assessing the effects of Hull 2017. Hull has seen a number of key benefits, and its UK city of culture year has also identified many opportunities for the future. I was fortunate enough to be able to see and hear about them first hand when I visited the city in my first week as Minister a couple of weeks ago. In 2013, when Hull was bidding for the title, little more than a third of residents participated in the arts. Now, nine out of 10 residents have attended or experienced a cultural event or activity as part of Hull 2017.

The first three-month season saw about 1.4 million visits to more than 450 events and activities. There were half a million visits to Hull’s museums and galleries in the first four months of the year, and visits to Ferens Art Gallery and Hull Maritime Museum are up by more than 500%. Moreover, 70% of residents say that Hull being the UK city of culture is positively affecting their lives. Almost everyone who has attended an event has enjoyed it. I am also delighted that there have been more than 100,000 hours of volunteering so far. All volunteers have my deep appreciation and thanks.

The economic boost is substantial, too, amounting to £30 million in 2017 alone. Hotel occupancy is up by 14% and train journeys are up by 17%. Almost 90 new
businesses and 550 new jobs have been created since 2013, and more than half of city centre businesses reported benefits in the first three months of this year.

I really enjoyed seeing some of the fabulous Hull 2017 projects. A particular highlight for me was Ferens Art Gallery. Some £1.5 million of Government investment has supported the refurbishment of this world-class gallery, which shows some of the finest local and national art. We will continue to showcase the power of culture to transform communities through initiatives like UK city of culture and the great exhibition of the north, which will take place next year in Newcastle-Gateshead, which I also visited a couple of weeks ago.

Let me turn, very happily, to Perth’s bid for UK city of culture 2021. All the 2021 entrants have looked at Hull and seen the opportunities it would bring. We have heard today, very eloquently, about Perth’s ambitions. We have heard how the area faces a “quiet crisis” whereby many people in the region feel alienated. There is enormous beauty, but there are also pockets of poverty and social isolation. The city wants to better connect people in the rural areas, as my new hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham), from the south of the county, has explained. We want the city of culture programme to help to tackle social isolation, to overcome the public transport barriers that put people off visiting city centre venues, and to help to develop a night-time economy. The city wants to shine a light on its present and future, as well as its glorious heritage. It wants to be seen as one of Europe’s great small cities. Perth’s creative industry sector currently has the capacity to expand, it would be fair to say, so it wants to attract new talent and encourage existing talent to remain.

Perth has already shown with the Ryder cup that it can welcome huge numbers of international visitors, and it wants to sustain that level of tourism. It possesses an enviable collection of cultural and heritage assets. St Ninian’s cathedral, a category A-listed building, has received more than £150,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund for restoration works. The HLF has also recently provided funding for repairs to St Stephen’s Roman Catholic church, the Perth and Kinross Heritage Trust, and the Croft Woodlands Project.

Perth concert hall is currently hosting the Southern Fried festival of American roots music, and it will be one of the venues for the 2021 Royal National Mòd, if the bid is successful. The Black Watch Museum hosted the ceramic poppy sculpture “Weeping Window” last year as part of the 14-18 NOW first world war centenary arts programme. There are plans to transform Perth’s city hall and ambitions for it to house the stone of destiny.

[John Glen]

Luke Graham: It is great to hear my hon. Friend listing Perth’s many virtues. Since a Scottish city is yet to be awarded UK city of culture status, does he agree that it is time for the award to come to Scotland—and what better city than Scotland’s newest city in Perth?

John Glen: My hon. Friend makes a passionate case. As I said earlier, we do not have much longer to wait.

Perth theatre and St Paul’s church are also being refurbished. I also want to highlight the UK cultural contribution of Perth Museum and Art Gallery. It has hosted the joint Tate and National Galleries of Scotland project “Artist Rooms”. The recent £10 million investment in the gallery offers an exciting opportunity to partner with Tate Britain, focusing on the gallery’s outstanding collection of paintings by John Duncan Fergusson.

I cannot emphasise enough that whoever is the ultimate winner, Perth, like all the bidders, will benefit from having entered the competition. Dundee’s bid for city of culture 2017, although it was ultimately unsuccessful, brought incredible benefits to the area. Dundee has gone ahead with the V&A Dundee Museum of Design and plans to bid to become European capital of culture in 2023. I am very clear that preparing a bid generates new ideas, creates new partnerships and energises the cultural sectors. A candidate city can have a higher profile both at home and abroad, which may bring new investment and opportunities to attract many more visitors. Remember, Hull was successful only the second time around. The area learned so much from its first attempt, and it used that learning when making its successful bid for 2017.

I commend Perth for its ambition in seeking to become UK city of culture 2021 and the enthusiasm that it has shown throughout the bidding process. The prize of UK city of culture status is huge, and I am delighted to see so many—and such diverse—areas seeking the rewards that placing culture at the heart of their offering can bring. The UK has unmatched cultural assets. The UK city of culture competition unleashes the power of culture to transform places’ futures through ambitious, inspiring and groundbreaking projects.

I pay tribute once again to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire and colleagues on both sides of the House, and to Perth and Kinross Council, for all their determined support for Perth’s bid. There is now only a short wait until the House, the country and the world will know which bids will be shortlisted.

Question put and agreed to.

7.28 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Thursday 6 July 2017

The House met at half-past Nine o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

ACCOUNT OF THE CONTINGENCIES FUND 2016-17

Resolved,
That there be laid before this House an Account of the Contingencies Fund, 2016-17, showing—
(1) A Statement of Financial Position;
(2) A Statement of Cash Flows; and
(3) Notes to the Accounts together with the Certificate and Report of the Comptroller and Auditor General thereon.—(Mrs Wheeler.)

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Commonwealth Countries

1. James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with his counterparts in other Commonwealth countries on the future of trade and investment between the UK and those countries.

2. Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with his counterparts in other Commonwealth countries on the future of trade and investment between the UK and those countries.

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Mr L. Fox): Ministerial colleagues and I regularly engage with business stakeholders and policy makers in Commonwealth partner countries. In March, my noble Friend Lord Price and I met over 20 visiting Trade Ministers at the inaugural Commonwealth Trade Ministers meeting in London, and we discussed strengthening collaboration and deepening intra-Commonwealth trade and investment. We are now preparing for the Commonwealth summit in 2018.

James Duddridge: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. The Commonwealth is particularly up for doing trade with the UK, especially in Africa. The Secretary of State referred to intra-Africa trade. Can we be even bolder and encourage a continental—intra-Africa—free trade deal not only with our Commonwealth friends but going beyond our Commonwealth friends?

Dr Fox: We are sympathetic to the concept of an African continental free trade area, and we are in favour of a range of initiatives to help foster wider and greater intra-Commonwealth trade. There is a great deal to be gained for all Commonwealth partners from closer co-operation. The Government’s aim—including through the development agenda championed by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development—is to create sustainable prosperity, and helping developing countries to enable them to trade their way out of poverty is an essential and key element of that strategy.

Chris Davies: Britain and the Commonwealth nations share a great history, and over the years have formed many great links across academia, sport, culture and numerous other areas. What steps has my right hon. Friend taken to expand this co-operation with Commonwealth countries to include a free trade agreement, so that we can add business and commerce to the long list of Commonwealth co-operative endeavours?

Dr Fox: As my hon. Friend knows, the Commonwealth is not a trading bloc, and it actually contains a number of very disparate economies. We are liaising with several Commonwealth partners about bilateral agreements in the future, and my Department is working with stakeholders to develop initiatives that will stimulate UK and intra-Commonwealth trade and investment in the lead up to and beyond that vital Commonwealth summit next year.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Members on the Conservative Back Benches are desperate for the Secretary of State to give us more confidence that we will massively increase trade with the Commonwealth, but I think he is wise not to do so. India, Australia and Canada collectively account for less than 5% of our exports, and research shows that the most enduring statistic is that trade halves whenever the distance between nations doubles. Is it not foolhardy for us to be turning away from our closest trading partners and relying on increasing trade with countries so very far away?

Dr Fox: I am sorry to hear such a lack of understanding of how the modern economy works. Particularly for countries that have a large proportion of their trade in services, services trade does not depend on distance. In fact, what we need is increasingly close co-operation with countries that are similar to us in their economic status, not necessarily geographically proximate, although I entirely understand that for goods the geographical distance does have a greater bearing.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): One country with which negotiations on trade have been very advanced is Canada, with the EU discussions on the Canadian trade deal. Obviously, the Secretary of State will want to seek to replicate that fairly quickly after our exit from the EU, but that has been subject to a huge amount of disinformation regarding the costs and benefits of the deal. When are the Government actually going to take on this issue and set the record straight?

Dr Fox: What we do not know at present is what the state of the EU-Canada agreement will be at the point at which we exit the European Union. It may well be
that all countries have ratified it, but as the right hon. Gentleman is well aware, as a result of the Singapore judgment every single Parliament and some regional parliaments will have to ratify the deal. If the deal is not ratified at the point at which we leave the European Union and has only provisional application, it will have no basis in UK law, in which case we will have to have the fall-back position of using that as the basis for a future UK-Canada agreement.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): I think that the potential for trade with Commonwealth countries is very exciting—they are growing and strong economies—but every time I open a newspaper or listen to the radio or TV, the story is presented very negatively, as though it will be almost impossible for us to do these trade deals. Does the Secretary of State feel that that is wrong, and that it undermines the work he is doing?

Dr Fox: It does appear that some elements of our media would rather see Britain fail than see Brexit succeed. I cannot recall a single time recently when I have seen good economic news that the BBC has not described as being “despite Brexit”.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Our agri-food producers see the Commonwealth as an exciting, wonderful and expansive new market for their powdered milk products, red meats, pig and poultry. Will the Secretary of State assure us that he is in discussions with the Commonwealth countries about increasing the opportunities for trade in our agri-food products to give encouragement to our producers at home?

Dr Fox: I entirely agree. To underpin the confidence in the agricultural sector, it needs to know that there are increasing markets out there. One of the key roles of the Government is to help our agricultural sector to have the confidence that it requires for investment by showing that we can help it into markets. It is worth pointing out that according to the European Commission’s own website, 90% of global growth in the next 10 years will be outside the European Union. Those are the markets we have to help British business get into.

Businesses (Support)

2. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): What steps he is taking to encourage businesses to take advantage of new opportunities for international trade.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mark Garnier): The Department for International Trade provides market access, support and advice to UK businesses in the UK and in 109 markets overseas. Through the GREAT campaign, we build the global appetite for British goods and services, and give UK companies access to millions of pounds’ worth of potential business through the digital services offered on the GREAT.gov.uk digital platform.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: It is a great tribute to my hon. Friend’s Department that in the first year of its operation, the Office for National Statistics reports that exports went up by a huge 7% to £548 billion. Does he agree that with the increase in demand for British exports, UK Export Finance, with its widened role, has an important part to play?

Mark Garnier: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that matter. I thank him for the work he does on the all-party parliamentary group for international trade and investment. He is absolutely right that the Department for International Trade needs to provide a suite of services, and that includes UK Export Finance. Some 7,000 businesses have been helped by UK Export Finance, the appetite for risk has been doubled and we have increased the number of currencies we can use from 10 to 40, from the Australian dollar to the Zambian kwacha. That is part of a very wide range of things and we have been successful so far.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): This Front-Bench team must know that a silly attack on the BBC cannot be used as an excuse for policy. This is a Secretary of State who has refused to meet the all-party parliamentary manufacturing group. The manufacturers I know have no confidence in this Secretary of State. They think he is living in cloud cuckoo land and is not competent, and they want his resignation.

Mark Garnier: I will take note of the hon. Gentleman’s comments.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Will the Minister explain what steps the Government are taking to ensure that, following our departure from the European Union, our export manufacturing businesses do not face high tariffs from other nations?

Mark Garnier: The Department for International Trade is embarking on a series of talks with the World Trade Organisation and individual countries to, in the first instance, secure continuity of business with those countries with which we already have agreements. I speak as a remainer from the campaign, but this is a fantastic opportunity to forge new trade deals and take advantage of the opportunities that Brexit presents.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): To grow their international trade, many businesses need to be able to call on the best possible members of staff. What will the Minister do to ensure that freedom of movement is retained for those businesses, and that the investment they get through initiatives such as Horizon 2020 is still available to them?

Mark Garnier: It has always been the case that the Government have had an open policy, but a mature policy for people who come from outside the European Union. Britain will certainly be open to the best and the brightest people in the world, who will want to come and work in what is, frankly, one of the best places to enlarge those skills.

Brazil

3. Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Government of Brazil on a trade agreement with that country after the UK leaves the EU.
The Minister for Trade and Investment (Greg Hands): Brazil is the UK’s largest export market in Latin America and represents significant opportunities for the UK. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State attended the UK-Brazil joint economic and trade committee last December. As I saw for myself in March in Rio, São Paulo and Belo Horizonte, both Governments are committed to deepening UK-Brazil trade and investment. UK and Brazilian officials continue to work together on proposals for reducing trade barriers, for discussion at the next joint committee.

Mr Robertson: I thank the Minister for his response and congratulate him on that work. I was in Brazil last November and have had many meetings with His Excellency the Brazilian ambassador to London, and while Brazil has not been able to achieve a trade deal with the European Union, it very much looks forward to one with the UK. So can the Minister expedite such arrangements as quickly as possible?

Greg Hands: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his work with the all-party group on Brazil in the last Parliament, and he makes the good point that we do not need to have a free trade agreement to have free trade. Indeed, as I am sure he knows, the EU has no free trade agreement with the world’s largest markets such as the US, China, India and, indeed, Brazil. So there are many trade barriers that we can address without having a formal free trade agreement. This is very much our approach in Brazil, as seen by our joint committee talks and my own visit in March.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Minister will be aware that the barriers to trade are not simply those that would be covered in an orthodox trade deal; there is also the unfamiliarity with local customs and so on. If we are to encourage our small and medium-sized enterprises to export, what practical facilities can be given to open up markets like Brazil, potentially enormous but at present very difficult for SMEs to access?

Greg Hands: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and welcome him back to his place; I have fond memories of working closely with him in previous Departments on trade and other issues.

There are two things to say in response to the hon. Gentleman’s question. He is right that the removal of non-tariff barriers—the grit in the system—is a key aspect of our Department’s work, and he is right to emphasise that this is about not just free trade agreements in the future, but also removing those practical barriers, which is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State had those talks back in December. In terms of supporting SMEs, the GREAT.gov.uk portal is very good; there is good access to Brazilian deals that are coming up, and I urge all SMEs to go to that portal, in order to access that.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Of course, the Minister could have pointed out that a trade agreement can only take place with Mercosur, because Brazil is part of that bloc, and should an EU trade agreement be put in place with Mercosur prior to our leaving the EU, it would become one of the agreements the EU currently has with some 50 countries. How does the Secretary of State propose to carry out his manifesto commitment to replicate all of those existing agreements after Brexit, and specifically, what legislative instruments does he propose to introduce to that end in the trade Bill?

Greg Hands: A lot of these matters will form part of the trade Bill which will be introduced in this Session. What is most important is that, as we seek a smooth and orderly exit from the European Union, we seek to replicate all of those existing EU free trade agreements, to provide certainty and stability for our businesses as we go forward to enable them to access both existing and future markets.

Food and Drink Sector

4. Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): What estimate he has made of the value of the contribution of the food and drink sector to UK exports.

10. Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): What estimate he has made of the value of the contribution of the food and drink sector to UK exports.

12. Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): What estimate he has made of the value of the contribution of the food and drink sector to UK exports.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mark Garnier): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 4, 9 and 10 together. The food and drink sector makes an important contribution to exports. In 2016, UK food and drink exports reached £20.1 billion, an increase of 9% from the previous year. This represented 6.6% of our total goods exports. For the first quarter of this year, food and drink exports reached £4.9 billion, up 8.3% on 2016, representing the highest first quarter exports value on record.

Mr Speaker: I gently say to the Minister that the grouping is with Nos. 10 and 12. [Interruption.] No, a question was withdrawn, and it might well be the case that the briefing had not kept up with the evolution of events. I say to the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman). That should satisfy him; he does not seem easily satisfied this morning, but that will have to do.

Luke Hall: I know that my hon. Friend understands the importance of the food and drink sector to the south-west of England, so may I ask what he is doing to promote growth and trade across the south-west?

Mark Garnier: The answer to my hon. Friend’s question exemplifies the type of tailored help the Department for International Trade can give. Working with our officials in the south-west and local producers and businesses, we have created the Great British Food programme, which is designed specifically to allow south-west food and drink businesses to interact directly with overseas buyers. We have already seen them working with the EU, Turkey and China, and since April 2016 we have won over £19 million-worth of business across more than 30 export markets.

Jo Churchill: As the Minister knows, food and drink manufacturing is an enormous market, particularly in my constituency. Issues over regulations, sampling and tariffs are among the concerns of global leaders such as
Muntons, as well as some of my smaller exporters. Will he agree to meet me and them to discuss these issues further?

***Mark Garnier***: My hon. Friend had a number of such meetings when she brought her local chamber of commerce down to London, and I believe that Muntons was part of that. She is absolutely right, however, to say that regulations, sampling and tariffs are an important part of doing trade deals, and it is important that we maintain those standards ourselves as well. It is absolutely the job of the Department for International Trade to interact with those people who need help at any level, and I would be very happy to visit my hon. Friend’s constituency and meet not only Muntons but others as well.

***Dr Johnson***: Lincolnshire has a proud tradition of producing food, and the food and drink industry is very important to my constituency. What is the Minister doing to help the food and drink manufacturers in Lincolnshire with their exports?

***Mark Garnier***: The Department for International Trade spans the whole of the country, and when it comes to specific areas, we look at specific needs. For example, in October, the Department and the midlands engine trade mission will be going to Anuga trade fair in Cologne, which is the leading international trade fair for food and beverages. I hope that we will be taking firms from my hon. Friend’s constituency to promote their goods and opportunities there.

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9. [900264] Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): York has a food manufacturing sector, and it has real concerns over the increases in import and production costs and over labour; we are all, of course, concerned about the environment. Can the Minister tell the food manufacturing sector what new trade opportunities he has secured for it, and what their value will be to the economy?

***Mark Garnier***: The value to the economy of the food exporting sector is absolutely enormous. I think it is the biggest manufacturing sector in the world. We have already seen a number of opportunities for going out and exporting it, and trade figures are up by some 7%. We can give a breakdown of the actual data, and I would be happy to write to the hon. Lady about that later. Without a shadow of a doubt, the Department for International Trade is successful in what it does. We have seen exports increase across all sectors and, as I pointed out earlier, we have seen record numbers in food and drink exports.

***Bill Esterson*** (Sefton Central) (Lab): Why have the Government done nothing to stop Nestlé moving production from the United Kingdom to Poland, with the loss of 300 jobs? The Government confirmed this week in a written answer that Ministers met Nestlé in April. Nestlé has said that it would take an investment of £1 million to keep production in the UK. The Government found £1 billion to save one job in Downing Street, but they cannot find £1 million to save 300 jobs at Nestlé. Unbelievable!

***Mark Garnier***: The hon. Gentleman raises a number of issues. The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) has been working hard on behalf of her constituents to try to help with the redundancies at Nestlé, as indeed has the Department for Work and Pensions, which is standing ready to put in place its rapid response service. We are happy to meet representatives of Nestlé, and I would be very happy to meet them again. [Interruption.] Fantastic. Thank you.

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Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Scottish food and drink exports have doubled since the Scottish National party Government came to power in 2007. This has been key to the development of the Scottish economy. What does the Minister think about Michel Barnier’s comment that frictionless trade in goods is “not possible” outside the single market and the customs union? Given the concerns of the Scottish Food and Drink Federation and the Scotch Whisky Association, and the huge reliance of the Scottish economy on this sector, will the Minister consider a transitional arrangement?

***Mark Garnier***: The total value of Scottish exports is some £62 billion a year, of which £50 billion is exported to the rest of the United Kingdom. That is as good a statement as any as to why Scotland should remain in the Union of the United Kingdom, rather than in the European Union.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): More than 80% of the fish caught around the south-west coast and 30% of our lamb is exported straight to the rest of the EU, yet under World Trade Organisation rules, that produce would face very high tariffs. What guarantees can the Minister give that our fishermen and our agricultural industry will not face tariffs or any other barriers if we leave the European Union?

***Mark Garnier***: This is all part of our negotiations with the European Union. It is an ongoing process, which will hopefully reach its end by March 2019. The United Kingdom Government are very keen to secure a deal with the European Union that sees no change whatever for businesses. We want as smooth a transition as possible into independence from the European Union, and the interests of fishermen down in the south-west are as important as those of everyone else.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): More than £30 million-worth of fish was sold through Brixham fish market last year, the most valuable catch in England. Will the Minister meet me and industry representatives to discuss opportunities for expanding markets after we leave the European Union, as well as frictionless trade and smooth transfer across the border?

***Mark Garnier***: The Secretary of State is a Member of Parliament for the south-west, and he is happy to come and have that meeting, as am I as the departmental lead on the food and drink sector. Between the two of us, my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) may get twice as many meetings as she anticipates. We look forward to coming to help.

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Topical Questions

T1. [900285] Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.
The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): The Department for International Trade has three main tasks: promoting British goods and services overseas, supporting inward and outward direct investment and creating a trade policy that benefits our businesses and citizens across the whole UK. To that end, I am delighted to welcome Antonia Romeo as our new permanent secretary and Crawford Falconer as our new chief trade negotiation adviser. Both bring excellence and expertise to the Department at this crucial time.

Hywel Williams: Fisheries and agriculture, the environment and transport are all key competencies of the National Assembly that could be affected by any future trade deal. Does the Minister concede that the National Assembly must have the power to endorse or reject any trade deal that would so profoundly affect its basic duties?

Dr Fox: We have made it clear all along that we intend to have maximum consultation and collaboration in that area and, to emphasise the point, in our manifesto we set out a plan to create a new board of trade, which will ensure that trade and investment is equally spread, as far as we can, across all parts of the United Kingdom—the devolved Administrations, as well as the English regions.

Dr Fox: We have made it clear all along that we intend to have maximum consultation and collaboration in that area and, to emphasise the point, in our manifesto we set out a plan to create a new board of trade, which will ensure that trade and investment is equally spread, as far as we can, across all parts of the United Kingdom—the devolved Administrations, as well as the English regions.

T3. [900287] Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): As well as an economic opportunity, there is a moral opportunity in trade with the developing world. Will the Secretary of State please tell the House what steps he is taking to support trade with developing countries?

Dr Fox: We have made it clear that, post Brexit, we will continue with duty-free access for the least-developed countries, but we need to see whether we can go further and reduce some of the burdens, particularly as we leave the customs union and are outside the common external tariff, by stopping the distortions on value added, which diminish the chance of investment in some of those developing countries.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): In his recent talks in the United States, did the Secretary of State discuss President Trump’s initiation of a section 232 investigation into the effect of steel imports on US national security? What concerns does the Secretary of State have about the impact such a protectionist ruling might have on the UK’s steel sector and on jobs in our steel industry due to lost exports and trade deflection of dumped goods on our market?

Dr Fox: We are all concerned about the overproduction of steel, largely coming from China, and what we have seen as possibly unacceptable subsidies into that sector, but it needs to be addressed in a way that is compliant with the WTO rules-based system. I raised with Secretary Ross and the trade representative, Mr Lighthizer, the impact that could have on the United Kingdom, and it is fair to say that our views landed. We now await the publication of the report, on which the President has up to 90 days to act.

T4. [900288] Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Brecon and Radnorshire is full of excellent small business owners who are looking to trade with the rest of the world, but many are concerned that the trade deals the UK is looking to make with the rest of the world will focus on big, rather than small, businesses. What assurance can my right hon. Friend give to small business owners that their voice will not be lost in negotiations?

The Minister for Trade and Investment (Greg Hands): My hon. Friend makes an extremely strong point. Over 99% of businesses in this country’s non-financial business economy are small and medium-sized enterprises. Last year we helped over 1,200 Welsh companies, most of which were SMEs, and we ensure that we have regular SME-focused roundtables. We meet SME representative groups and, of course, SMEs can always access our portal, GREAT.gov.uk, which gives important indicators on how to improve their exports.

T2. [900289] Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): The Secretary of State wants to leave the EU because he felt it was undemocratic and unaccountable, so why is he happy for the UK to trade under World Trade Organisation rules, given that the WTO is more undemocratic and more unaccountable?

Dr Fox: The two things are not analogous. We operate with the WTO because we believe there needs to be a rules-based system for global trade, and if the WTO did not exist, we would have to invent it today.

T5. [900290] Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): My constituency has one of the largest export clusters in the south-west, and it is focused on the rest of the world as much as it is on the EU. What assurance can my right hon. Friend give that we will focus on doing global trade deals and not just on the EU?

Dr Fox: My hon. Friend makes a very valid point, and of course it is not just about exports; it is also about inward investment. Therefore, let me bring the House up to date by saying that at 9.30 this morning we published figures showing that a record-breaking number of foreign direct investment projects came into the UK in 2016-17—2,265—safeguarding nearly 108,000 jobs and creating nearly 255,000 new jobs in the UK. No doubt, the usual suspects will describe this by saying, “despite Brexit”.

T7. [900291] Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I thank the Ministers for the written answers they have given me this week on the EU-Japan free trade agreement. They were at pains to reassure me that existing animal welfare and environmental standards would be maintained, but can they give me further reassurance that we will use this as an opportunity to address with Japan the illegal timber trade and commercial whaling?

Greg Hands: We engage on these issues on an ongoing basis with Japan. I know this is very important to the hon. Lady, so may I reassure her that the Government share a lot of her concerns on protecting animal welfare in free trade agreements? The UK has one of the best scores on the world animal protection index, where we are in the top four. I am important that we maintain animal welfare standards in this country in future agreements, and I have every confidence that we will.

T6. [900292] Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): Ten and a half thousand UK businesses export to Canada, a quarter of a million jobs in the UK rely on trade with Canada and we are likely to be one of the biggest winners from the EU-Canada trade treaty. However,
CETA—the EU-Canada comprehensive economic and trade agreement—is imperfect, so what are we going to do post-Brexit to ensure that we do even better in our trading relationship with Canada?

Greg Hands: That is a very appropriate question, in this the week of the 150th anniversary of the Canadian confederation. My hon. Friend will know only too well that the UK exported more than £7 billion-worth of goods and services to Canada in 2015. We have five offices throughout Canada. We remain strongly supportive of CETA, but of course we will look to have a future agreement with Canada at an appropriate time.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): Secretary of State, you will be aware that there are not only particular opportunities, but some challenges for each of the devolved regions across the UK in the next few years. Can you outline what plans and intentions you have to fully integrate the interests of the devolved regions within your strategy? Will you commit to an early meeting with delegations from the devolved regions to outline your engagement moving forward?

Mr Speaker: Order. It is a great pleasure to welcome the hon. Lady to the Chamber again. She is already a prodigious and assiduous contributor, but may I politely say to her that she must not inherit the bad trait of her hon. Friend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) of referring to the Minister as “you”? The word “you” in this Chamber refers to the Chair, and I have no plans to adopt any policies on these matters. She should refer to the Minister. I am still trying to train the hon. Member for Strangford, but I think his apprenticeship has some distance to travel.

Dr Fox: The words “tricks” and “old dogs” definitely come to mind on that one. The hon. Lady makes a good point: there are not only challenges, but great opportunities. It is essential that we look at our trade and investment programmes across the whole of the UK. As I said in answer to an earlier question, that is why we are bringing the new Board of Trade to help ensure that we have that balance, but I can tell her that in the figures that we announced today Northern Ireland secured 34 new projects, totalling 1,622 new jobs. That is a big gain and this is exactly the sort of programme that we want to encourage to ensure that investment goes to all parts of the UK, ensuring that we create an economy that works for everyone.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): You will be delighted to learn, Mr Speaker, that British tie manufacturers’ exports are worth millions of pounds. Can the Secretary of State suggest how this House could help promote the wearing of ties, to increase exports?

Dr Fox: I did not check with my fellow Ministers before I came to answer these questions, but I suggest we can lead by example: my tie was made in England.

Mr Speaker: I cannot claim that mine was; I am not sure. But I am sure that if they are so popular, it will not be necessary to compel people to wear them. We shall move on.

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

The Minister was asked—

Equality and Women’s Rights: DUP Discussions

1. Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the Democratic Unionist Party on the Government’s commitment to equality and women’s rights. [900270]

8. Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the Democratic Unionist Party on the Government’s commitment to equality and women’s rights. [900279]

Christian Matheson: We have seen the recent tangle on abortion policy that the Government got into with the DUP. Women with pre-existing medical conditions, such as uncontrolled epilepsy, who seek abortions need to receive treatment in hospital settings to access back-up medical care if it is required. Will the Minister commit to ensuring that women from Northern Ireland with complex medical needs who cannot be treated in a stand-alone clinic will be able to access funded care in NHS hospitals?

Justine Greening: First, I recognise that this whole subject area is incredibly sensitive, and we need to approach it with some care and, indeed, some respect. I had a helpful first meeting with a number of the organisations, including charities, that are involved in this area. We talked about not only the core issues that were discussed in the House last week but some of the more challenging issues that women face when seeking abortion services. I assure the hon. Gentleman that we will consider all those issues very carefully.

Anna McMorrin: Equality and tolerance are important British values that we should all be proud of, so will the Minister work to overturn the ongoing ban on equal marriage in Northern Ireland? Does she believe that £1 billion is a fair price to pay for selling off such fundamental values?

Justine Greening: I am proud to have been part of a Government who introduced same-sex marriage, and we should all be proud that we are in a Parliament that passed that Bill. The London Pride celebrations are taking place this weekend, and that will be a chance to celebrate the progress that has been made. We have to fundamentally win the argument on moving forward on LGBT rights. This is something that needs to take place throughout the country, including in Northern Ireland, where there is a democratic Northern Ireland Assembly. It is a debate we all need to engage in, but we have seen progress over many years and we can be proud of that. Nevertheless, as the hon. Lady sets out, there is still a lot of progress to be made.
Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): In response to a 2005 Northern Ireland Department of Justice consultation, the Royal College of Midwives, the Royal College of Nursing and the Northern Ireland committee of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists all backed changes to give more women in Northern Ireland access to terminations. In the absence of a Northern Ireland Assembly, how will the Government deal with this issue?

Justine Greening: What we can do is make sure that Northern Ireland women who are presenting here in the UK have the same rights as a woman from England would already have. To my mind, we need to ensure that whether someone’s address is Belfast or Birmingham, if they are here in England seeking abortion services, they have comparable service and comparable rights, and that is what we will seek to do. As my right hon. Friend sets out, though, there is also a debate to be had in the Northern Ireland Assembly. It is of interest that Ireland’s new leader has talked about bringing forward a referendum on abortion in Ireland next year.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): It is good to see the Rainbow flag flying over the Foreign Office in Pride week. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that she and the Government will remain fully committed to protecting LGBT rights, both at home and abroad, where there is work to do?

Mr Speaker: At least as importantly, the Rainbow flag will be flying over the House.

Justine Greening: I can absolutely give my right hon. Friend that assurance. There will be no backsliding on LGBT rights from this Government. We aim to continue the progress that has been made working throughout the House and across party lines. We will seek to do that not only in the UK but around the world. I will be part of the London Pride celebrations this weekend and I am proud that since the election we now have, I think, more openly LGBT MPs in this House than in any other Parliament in the world.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I have spoken about equality and the rights of women in our party to my party leader, who is a woman, to my close constituency colleague and a Member of the Legislative Assembly, who just happens to be a woman, and to my most senior member of staff, who is my close adviser and who, shockingly, is also a woman. They seem to be satisfied. I ask the Minister this question: what discussions have been held with Labour’s sister party, the Social Democratic and Labour Party, which has many of the same moral stances that we have, which is what I believe this question seeks to highlight?

Justine Greening: The hon. Gentleman sets out the fact that there is a discussion and a debate to be had across political parties both here in this Parliament and in Northern Ireland. That is a debate and a discussion that I welcome, and I know that we can have it in a constructive way. As I said right at the beginning, it is important that we recognise that this is an important and sensitive issue and that the way in which we have that debate needs to be in accordance with how important it is to have a measured approach and an informed discussion about how we can continue to see women’s rights go forward.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I join hon. Members across the House in wishing a happy Pride to all those celebrating London Pride this weekend. Despite the fact that a number of promises were made during the election campaign on the need to strengthen and protect equality legislation, there was no such commitment in this year’s Queen’s Speech. People across this country have deep concerns that the Tory backroom deal with the DUP could undermine our equality here in the UK. What assurances will the Minister provide that progress on equality will not be sidelined for political expediency?

Justine Greening: I think that I have given those assurances on a number of occasions. I will be very happy to come to this Dispatch Box and continue to give them, as they are important. I simply say to the hon. Lady that, as we have been so clear-cut that there will be no backsliding in this area, to continue to suggest that there will be is not a very helpful approach to achieving cross-party consensus to move forward on these issues.

Mr Speaker: I call Nic Dakin on question 2.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): DUP representatives have described homosexuality as repulsive, wrong, vile, immoral, offensive and obnoxious. Does the Minister agree that it is those hateful remarks themselves that are repulsive, wrong, vile, immoral, offensive and obnoxious and that they should have no place in our politics let alone in Government? The DUP once ran a campaign called, “Save Ulster from Sodomy”. Is it not time to save Ulster from bigotry?

Justine Greening: The views that the hon. Lady sets out are absolutely not ones that I agree with or that are shared by this House. As I have said, it is important that we have this debate and progress continued improvements in LGBT rights, women’s rights and the rights of disabled people—and all sorts of people who face discrimination in our country—in a measured fashion and that, where we can, we find some consensus. It is in that fashion that we will steadily win the battle.

State Pension Age: Women Born in the 1950s

2. Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the disadvantage experienced by women born in the 1950s as a result of changes to the state pension age.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the disadvantage experienced by women born in the 1950s as a result of changes to the state pension age.
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has regular discussions with all Cabinet colleagues on a range of issues. The Government will not be revisiting the state pension age changes implemented by the Pension Acts 1995 and 2011. This Government are committed to supporting 1950s-born women and men who cannot work, and those who wish to continue working, retraining or returning to work.

Nic Dakin: Yesterday, in response to the Westminster Hall debate, the Minister made the well-intentioned but ill-judged suggestion that an adequate response to the pensions plight of the 1950s-born women was for them to access apprenticeships. That shows how far out of touch some people are on this issue. There is a clear consensus across this House to address this injustice. When will the Government bring forward legislation to address that injustice?

Guy Opperman: Many companies such as the Co-operative, Barclays, Aviva, Centrica and others have committed to older workers by recruiting and retraining them. The employment rate for those aged between 50 and 64 is up 48,000 this quarter, and 213,000 on the year. That includes 57,000 people who started apprenticeships aged between 45 and 59, and 3,560 who started apprenticeships over the age of 60.

Gill Furniss: Following the appalling announcement in yesterday’s Westminster Hall debate, which was probably the best-attended debate ever in that Chamber, many of us have heard through our postbags that the poverty caused by this Government’s decision on equalising the pension age is appalling. Is that not just another sign of this Government showing yet again how out of touch they are with the real world, as they have over the past three weeks?

Guy Opperman: With the greatest respect, 22 years ago, when neither the hon. Lady nor I was in the House, the Government introduced the Pensions Act 1995 to require equalisation. That was then overseen by various Governments, who provided extensive information in many different ways over the following years. The 2011 Act then accelerated the process by 18 months. Following that, 6 million letters were sent out to individual constituents. If the hon. Lady knows of any individual issues, I urge her to write to me and I will make sure that there is support for any specific constituent that she has.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Notification is clearly a key concern. Will my hon. Friend confirm what steps have been taken to raise awareness of the changes in the state pension age?

Guy Opperman: I look forward to meeting the all-party group when it is reformed, but I make the point that revisiting the 1995 Act and the 2011 Act would cost well in excess of £30 billion, as my hon. Friend knows. However, I look forward to those meetings and discussions.

New Mothers (Redundancy Protection)

3. James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): What steps she is taking to strengthen redundancy protection for new mothers returning from maternity leave.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): We intend to respond to the consultation on this very issue by the end of this year. The Bill that is now before the House provides a power to add other grounds of discrimination to the Equality Act relating to pregnancy and maternity and to the protection from redundancy. It is essential that women have the same protection, whether they are employees or self-employed.

James Frith: I see little evidence of the ton of bricks. As a former employer, I know first hand the value of protecting maternity rights, not just for the expectant mum or returning mother but for the employer as well. Does the Minister agree that it is vital that we encourage employers to meet their legal responsibilities to prevent the discrimination happening in the first place and that those who do not should be held to account?

Claire Perry: I forgot to welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place. He is absolutely right. We are working with ACAS and the Equality and Human Rights Commission, because not only employers but women returning to work need to be aware of their rights. Having had three children, two in America, I can assure Members that the rights and responsibilities enjoyed here are far better than in other parts of the world, but they are still not good enough. Minister Margot James and I are absolutely determined to sort things out.
Mr Speaker: Order. That Minister does not require her name to be advertised in the Chamber; we all know who the hon. Lady is. The Minister is experienced enough to know that one should not name names in the Chamber. I am sure she will do better next time.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): The fact that some women are still discriminated against during pregnancy or maternity leave is both unacceptable and unlawful. Will the Minister assure the House that the Government not only take the problem extremely seriously but are looking at how laws can be better enforced to give the protection she promises?

Claire Perry: I am delighted to give those assurances.

My apologies, Mr Speaker—I shall continue to serve my apprenticeship.

Mr Speaker: With considerable skill and charm, I am quite certain about that. I thank the Minister for what she has said.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Given the Minister’s view about this, will she take up the issue of tribunal fees, which a previous Government, of which she was a one-time member, increased significantly? Does she not accept that charging a huge fee to take a case to tribunal is one of the biggest reasons why women who have been discriminated against cannot enforce their rights?

Claire Perry: The hon. Lady will know that there has been an employment tribunal fees review and we have found no evidence that pregnancy and maternity discrimination is falling foul of the current fees system. She also knows that we are carefully considering responses to the consultation and will be responding.

Ex-prisoners (Support)

5. Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): What support the Government provide to women who lose homes and assets as a result of a prison sentence. [900275]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Dr Phillip Lee): The Justice Department is aware of the link between homelessness and reoffending, which is why we are making sure that we address female offenders’ housing and support needs as an absolute priority.

Ian C. Lucas: The Minister has correctly identified the importance of homelessness in reoffending, but will he give much more detail about what specific assistance is given to individuals who leave prison, who we do not want to see reoffending but who need assistance at a crucial time?

Dr Lee: The community rehabilitation companies and indeed the national probation service are required to provide the services to which the hon. Gentleman refers. I guarantee that the female offenders strategy, which is due to be released by the end of the year, will concentrate primarily on improving that community offering.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): Thirty-eight per cent of women released from prison have no accommodation arranged for them, and more than 46% of women in prison have experienced domestic violence. The Minister knows that many of the problems associated with women prisoners revolve around their mental health. With increasing evidence that autism is to be found among the female population, will the Minister take advantage of this new set of statistics to look at mental health provision for women leaving prison? That is most important.

Dr Lee: I thank my right hon. Friend for the question. I am responsible not only for women’s justice but for offender health. In September, I will have two roundtable meetings to discuss the current mental health provision, both for men and for women. We are aware that the combination of mental health not being treated properly and addiction not being treated properly are significant contributors towards recidivism.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Many of the women who are imprisoned have mental health problems. Imprisonment and losing their home and possessions set back their chance of recovery. Will the Minister in his reports pay particular attention to the impact of women with mental health problems when they become homeless and lose all that they have managed to pull together?

Dr Lee: Yes, we will. I am aware that a significant proportion of the female population in prison are victims of very difficult circumstances, be they homelessness, coercive relationships and the like. I confirm that the strategy, as I said previously, will concentrate on improving the community offering so that ultimately these women do not commit offences in the first place.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Will the Government confirm that they do not believe in giving prisoners who lose their home any more support than any other person who happens to be in the unfortunate position of losing their home? Will the Minister confirm that the Government do not believe in giving female prisoners who lose their home more support than male prisoners who lose their home?

Dr Lee: I am very glad to be continuing my brief—my hon. Friend always delivers the question that I expect. I assure him that, with regard to access to housing, I am not aware that ex-offenders will be given any more priority than people who have not committed an offence. With reference to whether we treat men and women who have committed offences equally, I am interested in reducing crime and I am convinced that a disproportionate number of women are committing crime because of the way in which they are treated, be it by their partners or indeed by their housing circumstances. I think he will agree that, if we can get this right, we will be reducing crime, which I think is the best outcome.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Vulnerable women on release are not given adequate support, either with housing or with community reintegration. Many return to abusive relationships, drug and alcohol abuse, and, at worst, crime. Does the Minister honestly believe that we are giving women’s life chances parity of esteem in their current treatment?

Dr Lee: I agree that we are not getting the treatment of women offenders right. That is why I was eager to introduce a new strategy. The Manchester area provides
an example of where the Department is investing in a whole system approach. I do not think Whitehall is the place to make decisions on a woman’s future before, during or after prison. I would prefer to localise decision making so that decisions are made by people who understand the women concerned, so that we can keep them in the community and away from prison.

Mr Speaker: We will probably be able to take only the Order Paper questions next, and that must be done briefly.

Gender Pay Gap

6. Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to reduce the gender pay gap. [900276]

7. Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to reduce the gender pay gap. [900277]

10. Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to reduce the gender pay gap. [900281]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Justine Greening): The gender pay gap is now at its lowest ever, which is great news, but we need to go further. We are one of the first countries to introduce gender pay gap reporting, and I am delighted that mine is the first Government Department to have published its pay gap figures. What matters is not just transparency, but recognising where women face barriers and taking action.

Edward Argar: I welcome the progress that has been made, particularly under this Secretary of State. Does she agree that central to further progress on this issue is a genuine and continued partnership between business and Government?

Justine Greening: Absolutely. Mandatory reporting is just the start. We have worked with business to publish guidance on how to pull together accurate information and set out case studies showing what businesses and trail-blazing employers are already doing. With the Government Equalities Office, we recently held events in places such as Leeds and Glasgow that gave employers an opportunity to showcase the business benefits of closing their gender pay gap.

Chris Davies: I congratulate the Department for Education on being the first Government Department to publish its gender pay gap and its bonus pay gap. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Department is leading by example in promoting gender equality in the workforce?

Justine Greening: I hope that is correct. It is important work and we are strongly encouraging other civil service Departments and employers across the public sector to follow suit.

Gillian Keegan: Globally, only about half of working-age women are employed, and they earn three-quarters as much as men even if they have the same level of education and are in the same occupation. Does my right hon. Friend agree that realising the economic potential of women benefits the whole of society, not just women?

Justine Greening: Absolutely. This is not just the right thing to do; it is the smart thing to do. I have a role on the UN High-Level Panel on Women’s Economic Empowerment, whose work showed that gender equality and women’s economic empowerment is one of the most powerful global levers for growth that we can pull. Indeed, McKinsey did work that suggested that if we bridged the gender gap here in the UK, it could add £150 billion to our GDP by 2025.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: I will call the hon. Lady if she has a single-sentence question.

Chi Onwurah: International women in engineering day was 22 June. The Minister knows how important career choices are for women and the gender gap. What is she doing about that?

Justine Greening: One of the main actions we can take is to make sure that girls study maths and science at A-level. We know that that is a powerful way to keep those career options open to them.

Topical Questions

T1. [900247] Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Justine Greening): In April, our groundbreaking legislation on the gender pay gap came into force. This weekend we are celebrating London Pride, where people come together to celebrate how far we have come and to keep up the pressure for progress in LGBT equality. I look forward to joining those celebrations. Fifty years ago this year, Parliament voted to decriminalise male homosexuality in England and Wales, and this year’s general election returned the most openly LGBT MPs Parliament has ever had. Finally, and importantly, I outlined last week how the Government will ensure that women from Northern Ireland seeking an abortion in England will no longer have to pay for NHS treatment.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Is my right hon. Friend satisfied with the Government’s efforts to empower women economically internationally?

Justine Greening: I think that we can be proud of the work that this country is doing, not just here at home, but internationally, to beat the drum for women’s economic empowerment. In fact, alongside the work that we have been part of at the UN, this week the Prime Minister will attend the G20 summit in Germany, where women’s economic empowerment will be a priority, and we will keep on being a champion of that.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): The Minister will be aware of the levels of persecution, intolerance and hate crime towards transgender people. Can she therefore confirm whether she has plans to develop a new transgender action plan, in line with the previous response to the Women and Equalities Committee? Also, do the Government plan to conduct a review of the Gender Recognition Act 2004?
**Justine Greening:** The hon. Lady raises an important point. We responded very constructively and positively to the Select Committee’s important report, and we have been very clear that we will review the Gender Recognition Act. That sits alongside a lot of other work that we will be doing to ensure that we take action on this.

T4. [900250] Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The excellent Leonard Cheshire charity has estimated the disability employment gap to be 31.3%. What are the Government doing to close it?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman):** On 7 September this year we will have the 100th anniversary of the birth of Leonard Cheshire, the Victoria Cross-winning founder of this great disability charity, so I support this question and this great organisation. The Government remain strongly committed to helping people with disabilities and health conditions get back into work. Over the past three years more than 500,000 people have done so, and we have a Green Paper setting out the full details of the matter.

T2. [900248] Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): The Minister for Women and Equalities has this morning heard the overwhelming view across the House on the WASPI issue, following yesterday’s Westminster Hall debate. Is she not embarrassed by the Government’s current policy, and what will she do to change it?

**Justine Greening:** I know that there was an important debate yesterday in Westminster Hall. This is an important area, but it is also important that we have a steady transition, as the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), has set out. I am content that the way the Government are handling this, which follows on from previous Governments, is the right way. The hon. Gentleman should also reflect on the fact that we have invested £1.1 billion to ensure that there is support during the transition.

**Mims Davies** (Eastleigh) (Con): I recently had the pleasure of speaking at the Women’s Leadership Network conference, alongside the principal of Eastleigh College. Confidence is key in getting women back to work, particularly returners, or climbing up the ladder. What are the Government doing to encourage returnships so that we can support what the Prime Minister has said?

**Justine Greening:** As part of the Budget the Chancellor announced a £5 million fund for returnships, which we know disproportionately help women returning to the workplace. Industry is already doing some groundbreaking and innovative work. We want to use the fund to help develop that work and hopefully mainstream it.

T3. [900249] Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): A TUC survey of workplace representatives found that one in three respondents have reported management criticism of menopause-related sick leave. What discussions has the Minister had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on reducing discrimination faced by women during the menopause?

**Justine Greening:** Any discrimination of that nature is entirely unacceptable in 21st-century Britain, and I can assure the hon. Gentleman that, through my Department and the Government Equalities Office, we have discussions across Government to see what more can be done to strengthen the legal framework within which businesses operate, but the framework is already there and it is important that we ensure that it is enforced.

**Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Following an earlier question, women must feel that they can bring forward cases of maternity discrimination. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that people from all backgrounds can access justice?

**The Minister of State, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Claire Perry):** The question that I think my hon. Friend is getting to is whether there has been a change in access as a result of changes in fees. We considered this issue very carefully, because it was the case, particularly when we talked with small and medium-sized enterprises, that very many vexatious tribunal claims were being brought against them. They were. An hon. Lady on the Opposition Benches says, “Rubbish.” She should get out and talk to some businesses sometime and hear what they think. A change was therefore made. We are now reviewing the help for fees scheme so that we can understand exactly what is going on. However, there is no evidence that maternity discrimination cases have been particularly affected by the fees.

T5. [900251] Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Following recent reports of arrests in relation to planned attacks at an LGBT event in Barrow, what discussions has the Minister had with the Home Office to further combat far-right extremism?

**Justine Greening:** Hate crime is entirely unacceptable. As the hon. Gentleman will know, we have developed and are now funding a hate crime action plan. Alongside that, it is important that we work upstream. The work that we are now doing on bullying in schools can play a massive role in the long term. I also draw the House’s attention to the recent social attitudes survey, which really showed that tolerance and inclusiveness of LGBT rights are now widely accepted across the country, but there are clearly still pockets of intolerance, which we absolutely have to combat.

**Mrs Maria Miller** (Basingstoke) (Con): There are record numbers of women in this Parliament, but women are still outnumbered by men two to one. Will the Government consider the recommendation in the report of the Women and Equalities Committee to bring into action section 106 of the Equality Act 2010 to ensure that each political party is transparent about the gender of the candidates they field?

**Justine Greening:** We will be responding to the Committee’s report. These are incredibly important issues for our country. I am concerned to ensure that, although we have now broadly got up to a third of parliamentarians who are female, we do not now plateau. We all have a role in ensuring that we continue to see progress, and I assure my right hon. Friend that I am...
committed to ensuring that the Government play a leading role in that, and I am proud that we also have a female Prime Minister.

T6. [900252] Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Two thirds of public sector workers are women, so they are disproportionately hit by the public sector pay cap. What is the Minister doing to argue the case for scrapping the cap?

Justine Greening: We have an evidence-based approach in relation to public sector pay. An independent group of people looks at the pressures on the public purse and at ensuring that our pay settlements are affordable. It also looks at the evidence in relation to recruitment, retention and the numbers of people we want in our public sector, particularly on the front line. That is a sensible approach. The hon. Lady will be aware that a number of pay review bodies will come out with their reports across the board, and we will consider them when they do.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): As my right hon. Friend confirmed earlier, the gender pay gap is at its smallest ever, but more needs to be done. What work is being done to encourage girls and women to choose careers in high-paying sectors traditionally dominated by men, especially Pakistani and Bangladeshi women, who have the largest gender pay gap?

Justine Greening: We heard a question about STEM earlier. That is one of the most important areas where we can really start to level up girls and women in the workplace. More generally, it is important that all girls going through school understand that there is a career ahead of them that they can aim for. That is not just about the subjects they do; it is about ensuring that their attitudes and expectations are suitably high.

T7. [900253] Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Nottingham Women’s Centre recently launched its “Help through Crisis” report—Big Lottery-funded research that indicates that women often experience multiple disadvantage and have complex needs that are not currently being met. May I invite the Minister to visit Nottingham Women’s Centre, meet some of the women who took part in that research and discuss how she will ensure the provision of appropriate holistic services for women with multiple and complex needs?

Justine Greening: I am grateful for that very kind offer. The Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee), will also have heard that request for a visit. From my personal experience as a local MP, I know the amazing work that many such centres do, so I thank the hon. Lady for her invite and I will ensure that somebody responds. I would love to visit.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What assessment has my right hon. Friend made of the impact of vile online abuse on people, particularly women, coming forward to stand for public office?

Justine Greening: Following this election, the issue has never been higher on the political agenda. As somebody who did not have a particular life mission to become an MP, but wanted to play a constructive role in my community and represent it in this place, I think it is important that we get rid of this aggressive sort of political campaigning. It does our democracy no good and puts decent people off running for Parliament, and that is a bad thing.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The Scottish Government have committed to increase the number of women on public boards, and the Partnership for Change 50/50 campaign encourages the private, third and public sectors to achieve gender balance on boards by 2020. At the current rate of change, gender balance will take several decades, so when will the UK Government follow the Scottish Government’s lead?

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Anne Milton): Since 2010, the number of women on FTSE 350 boards has more than doubled, and we now have the highest percentage ever—over 24%. We have the lowest number of all-male boards in the FTSE 350, with only six remaining. It is not good enough, and we need to make more progress, but progress is being made. The work that the Government are doing through the Women’s Business Council to stimulate a culture change is very important. Diversity and women are good for business.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. As we come to the first of the two urgent questions that I have granted today, can I please remind colleagues of the importance of sticking to the time limits that have been declared and communicated repeatedly to colleagues? Obviously this is particularly relevant to the Front Benchers—the person who secured the UQ and who has the allocated two minutes, and the Minister answering it, who has the allocated three minutes. We really do need to stick to the limits, because otherwise it is very unfair on Back Benchers.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: No, no—I am not taking points of order now. Points of order come after UQs and statements, but we will look forward to hearing the hon. Lady; we are saving her up for later on in the day.
Adult Social Care Funding

10.41 am

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): Does the Minister share my deep concern about the state of social care highlighted—

Mr Speaker: Order. What the hon. Lady needs to do is just ask the Minister for the statement on the matter, and then she follows with her substantive question when the Minister has given his response.

Barbara Keeley: (Urgent Question): To ask the Minister to respond to the Care Quality Commission report on the state of adult social care and on issues of funding social care.

Mr Speaker: I call Minister Steve Brine.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): Thank you, Mr Speaker—take two.

There are few things more important to any of us than the way in which the oldest and most vulnerable are cared for in our society. First, let me pay tribute to the 1.4 million people who work in the country’s social care sector. They support many of the most vulnerable people in our communities, often in the most difficult of circumstances. I am proud that we have done more than any Government before to improve the quality of social care, introducing a tough system of CQC ratings, new qualifications for care workers, and new standards to ensure that everyone receives the highest-quality support. I am heartened that today’s CQC report shows that even in a time of acute fiscal pressure, 79% of adult social care services are now providing good or outstanding care.

However, it is impossible to ignore the pressure that our ageing population and advances in medicine are putting on the system. We have seen the number of over-65s increase by nearly 1.2 million, or about 14%, over the past five years. Today’s CQC report shows that in some areas, it is completely unacceptable that standards in some settings are below those rightly expected by care users and their families. This Government view social care as a priority, which is why in the spring Budget this year we announced an additional £2 billion over the next three years for councils in England to spend on adult social care services. That means that, in total, councils will have access to £9.25 billion more dedicated funding for social care over the next three years—enough to increase social care spending in real terms. We have also been clear that later this year we will be consulting widely on the future of social care in this country to put it on a stable footing.

My right hon. Friend the Health Secretary updated the House on Monday about action he is taking to address delayed discharges from hospital in advance of this winter. Last year there were 2.25 million delayed discharges, up by 24.5% from 1.81 million in the previous year. The Government are clear that no one should stay in a hospital bed longer than necessary—it removes people’s dignity, reduces their quality of life, leads to poorer health and care outcomes for people and is more expensive, ultimately, for the taxpayer. Since February, there have been significant improvements in the health and care system, with a record decrease in month-on-month delayed discharges in April of this year.

However, we must make much faster and more significant progress well in advance of next winter to help free up hospital beds for the sickest patients and reduce pressures on accident and emergency departments. That is why we have introduced a further package of measures to support the NHS and local government in reducing delays. That package includes guidance, a performance dashboard, plans for local government and the NHS to deliver an equal share of the expectation to free up 2,500 hospital beds, and of course CQC reviews. We have also been clear that we will consider a review in November of the 2018-19 allocations of the social care funding provided at spring Budget 2017 for poorly performing areas. We have been clear that the Budget funding will all remain with local government, to be used for adult social care.

Barbara Keeley: I thank the Minister for that response, but I really must ask him whether he shares my deep concern about the state of adult social care, as highlighted by today’s report by the Care Quality Commission. Some 3,200 care services were rated as “requires improvement”, with more than 340 rated as “inadequate”. That means that some 92,000 vulnerable people are receiving poor care and some 10,000 people are receiving inadequate care. The picture is even worse in nursing homes, with one in three receiving the poorest ratings.

Does the Minister share my concern about safety, with one in four care locations failing on protecting people from abuse or avoidable harm? That means thousands of vulnerable people not getting prescribed medicines, being ignored when they ask for help and not having enough time for their home care visits. The Labour party has repeatedly raised the damaging impacts of budget cuts, with more than £5 billion having been cut from social care since 2010. Does the Minister now accept that that has caused the crisis in care staffing, which is at the heart of the poor care that is being reported? Poor staffing levels and staff training are key factors in those providers with the poorest ratings.

In his written ministerial statement earlier this week, the Secretary of State suggested that the £2 billion allocated in the spring Budget to local councils for social care, to which the Minister has just referred, will now be dependent on performance against targets for delayed transfer of care. That means that some councils could lose funding that they have already planned to spend. Does the Minister accept that threatening local councils with the loss of planned funding could lead to a worsening of the quality and safety issues highlighted today? With social care in crisis, this is not the time to be threatening joint working with local councils, so will he reverse that threat and match the Labour pledge of an extra £8 billion for social care, including an extra £1 billion this year?

Steve Brine: I thank the hon. Lady for that response. This subject was much discussed during the general election, and I think it will be greatly discussed during this Parliament. Nobody is making any threats. The Government are very supportive of the best-performing systems, where local government and the NHS work together to tackle the challenge of delayed transfers of care. We have said that, depending on performance, we will consider a
review in November of the 2018-19 allocations of social care funding provided in the spring Budget for areas that are poorly performing. As I have said, that funding will all remain with local government, to be used for social care.

Obviously, we recognise that there are real pressures in the system. That was why we responded—I think the hon. Lady’s party was pleased with this at the time—with an additional £2 billion for social care in this year’s Budget. We have also given councils the chance to raise the council tax precept. My authority, Hampshire, has done that, and I think that has been well received.

Turning to the actual report, it would be easy to duck all of this. Dare I say that I hope we can conduct this debate in a sensible spirit? People out there working in the system who want to pass the mum test, as was said this morning, want us to do that and are watching things closely. Of course, it would be easy to bury our heads in the sand, but let us remember that had we had the rigorous inspection regime that the Secretary of State put in place earlier, a lot of problems, including those in the hospital sector when the hon. Lady’s party was in government, would not have been heard of. We know about the current situation only because of the inspection regime that has been put in place.

The CQC report found a number of things, and obviously we will digest it over the days and weeks ahead. It found that the adult social care sector performed best in how caring its services are: 92% of services were rated good and 3% outstanding. We can kick this issue around all we like, but today’s report shows exactly why we introduced the inspection regime. It is uncovering the care that is good—the vast majority of it—and it is also uncovering the care that is not, which is where we want to help and support local authorities to make sure that improvements are made for the people we represent.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): It is concerning to note from the CQC’s state of adult care report that staff turnover rates have risen from 22.7% to 27.3% in the three years to 2015-16. Will the Minister meet me to discuss the important role that supporting skills and opportunities for career progression can play in reducing turnover, improving morale and, most importantly, improving the quality of care that people receive? Will he visit my constituency to see the excellent joint working that has been done by the trust and South Devon College towards just that?

Steve Brine: I thank my hon. Friend for that. I think she knows that I will be in the vicinity of her constituency at some point over the next few months, and I would like to take her up on her offer. I wish her well in her current campaign.

The workforce is critical. Adult social care is a rapidly growing sector, and there are about 165,000 more adult social care jobs than there were in 2010. It is imperative that we get the right people into the right jobs, to deliver the improved quality of care and services that we all want to see. We are working closely with our delivery partner Skills for Care to improve the level of skills in the adult social care workforce, and we are making the profession more attractive with the introduction of the national living wage, from which up to 1.5 million people in the social care sector are expected to benefit. I might point out that that policy has come in only as a result of this Prime Minister and this Government.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I want to point out that the report rates 92% of services as good and 3% as outstanding on caring. That comes from the commitment of staff, who, sadly, have not been given a breaking of the 1% cap. The issue of safety has been raised, with one in four providers failing to provide safe care. That comes down to workforce and funding. Brexit threatens the workforce; as the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr. Wollaston) said, there is a turnover of one in four. Funding has been reduced by 9%, and that has to be tackled.

Does the Minister recognise that one in five emergency admissions could be avoided if alternatives were provided? Although the measures are different in Scotland, delayed discharges are falling in Scotland while they are rising in England. Will he get rid of fragmentation and look at real integration of health and social care in the sustainability and transformation plan reorganisation?

Steve Brine: I said at the very start of my response, did I not, that we should salute the 1.4 million people who work in this country’s social care sector? We should also salute the families who support people who are in and out of care settings all the time. I did also say—I am grateful that the hon. Lady responded to this—that it does not surprise me that the caring side of the sector came out as one of the good bits in the report.

The hon. Lady spoke about keeping people out of the emergency setting, and that is absolutely what the STP process is about. We are one NHS, and there is one public sector. This is about the NHS getting delayed transfers of care right, but it is also about the work of local government. The STP process works at upper tier authority level as well as across the NHS—in my area of Hampshire, the NHS is working closely with Hampshire County Council—to deliver a one-system response. She is absolutely right, as usual, to point that out.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): It is absolutely vital that we improve adult services that are failing and falling behind, but let us not lose sight of the fact that most adult social services are of high quality and many are improving. Nearly four out of five of our adult services are good or outstanding. We all know that there is a looming crisis in social care, which is why the Chancellor announced further investment of £2 billion in this area. Is that investment starting to show some results?

Steve Brine: Yes, we believe it is. The CQC has completed its ratings, and the proportion of providers rated good or outstanding increased to 79% by July 2016; the previous figure was 72%. It is also worth noting the CQC’s statement that 81% of services rated inadequate improved their overall rating following re-inspection. Obviously, there is a challenging element to the report. As I have said, we do not hide from that or shirk it—nor should we—and that is why we set up the inspection regime. It would not be right or fair to people who work in or rely on the sector to say that everything is going to hell in a handcart, because I do not believe that it is.
Steve Brine: Of course I want to work—as will the current Care Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price)—with the respected former Care Minister, and with any other Members who have any sensible suggestions. Taxation is of course a matter for the Chancellor at financial events, and there will obviously be a Budget later in the year.

On the areas where there are care challenges, we have picked up 12 local areas for review, as the Secretary of State said earlier this week. We have published the details that are suitable for the review, which we have developed from the dashboard criteria. We will give those involved every possible support, as we do with the inspection regime for hospitals, for instance. Such inspections are to get hospitals out of special measures, which the Under-Secretary of State said earlier this week. We have published the details that are suitable for the review, which we have come up with proposals that meet the five criteria for any reconfiguration. As he will know, there are now five; Simon Stevens, the chief executive of the NHS, has added a fifth on patient safety. My right hon. Friend mentioned St Leonard’s community hospital, which provides really good services at the moment and is approved by the community.

Mr Speaker: The Minister has just elevated the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope) to the Privy Council, of which he is not currently a member. Whether that was inadvertent on the part of the Minister or a gentle hint to the powers that be remains to be seen. It would be only a very modest elevation for somebody of the hon. Gentleman’s experience.

Steve Brine: No, I cannot go into the detail of why that is, as I suspect my right hon. Friend realises. There will be a one-NHS STP process in his area, and it will have to come up with proposals that meet the five criteria for any reconfiguration. As he will know, there were previously four criteria that had to be met, but there are now five: Simon Stevens, the chief executive of the NHS, has added a fifth on patient safety. My right hon. Friend mentioned St Leonard’s hospital, and any reconfiguration or change of service in relation to it will have to be considered in that context.

Mr Speaker: The Minister has just elevated the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope) to the Privy Council, of which he is not currently a member. Whether that was inadvertent on the part of the Minister or a gentle hint to the powers that be remains to be seen. It would be only a very modest elevation for somebody of the hon. Gentleman’s experience.

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that it is time we considered bringing the social care sector back into public ownership to remove the profit-making aspect of looking after the most vulnerable in our society?

Steve Brine: Mr Speaker, I have no advance knowledge of the future career prospects of my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope), but I am sure it is only a matter of time before he becomes a Dorset knight.

I do not agree with the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker), whom I welcome to her place. I do not think that what the sector needs right now is nationalisation. I would gently say once again that public ownership is not the answer to every challenge in our public services.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): When visiting a constituent at home last week, I discovered that he has had dozens of carers. Many of them have delivered excellent care, but he was really concerned about the sheer number of different carers that he had had. What does my hon. Friend have to say about proposals or plans to ensure that people receive consistent care from as few carers as possible, which benefits both the patients and the carers?

Steve Brine: As ever, my hon. Friend. Friend is on the money. Across primary care, the named GP policy is a huge step forward, and that idea is absolutely something we should aim for in this sector. That may come out during the consultation later this year, and I feel certain that my hon. Friend will respond to that consultation.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: What an array of riches! I call Melanie Onn.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): One among many, Mr Speaker.

This Government have pushed a national crisis on to hard-pressed local councils and hard-up local residents, forcing council tax rises that will barely cover the minimum-wage salaries paid to carers. The Minister says that the precept has been welcomed, but I would ask: by whom?

Steve Brine: The precept is welcomed by local authorities that want to get extra money into their social care system.

Melanie Onn: It’s not.

Steve Brine: I understand that the hon. Lady wants to play politics with this issue, but as I said in my response to the urgent question, I honestly think that we can do better than that.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): I have found the CQC’s inspections of struggling care homes in Amber Valley to be a very useful way of making sure that they improve care for local people. Is the Minister confident that the CQC is sufficiently resourced and skilled to carry out those inspections in a timely fashion and to a sufficient quality?

Steve Brine: Yes, I think that the CQC does a fantastic job. Andrea Sutcliffe, its chief inspector of adult social care, whom Members will have heard on the media this morning, was absolutely right when she talked about services needing to meet the mum test or the dad test. Ultimately, we are all affected—I have ageing parents, like many Members of this House. The mum test or the dad test is what we want, because when people go into adult social care settings we want to feel that they are as well looked after as we could manage ourselves.
Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): Loneliness can be extreme in housebound adults and the level of mental health issues such as depression is often high but unrecorded. Will the Government ensure that there is a holistic approach to social care that includes key indicators of mental health and wellbeing?

Steve Brine: Yes, the hon. Lady makes a very good point. Those are exactly the issues that will be discussed in the consultation later this year, in which she will, of course, be very welcome to take part.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What is the status of the announced Government policy that the Dilnot cap will be implemented in the financial year 2021-22?

Steve Brine: Okay. The Prime Minister has been very clear about the importance of tackling this issue. As she said, we will look after 2 million more over-75s in the next 10 years and we have to find a sustainable way of caring for older people. As I have said, we will consult on detailed proposals, which will include a capital floor and an absolute limit on the amount people can be asked to pay. Our objective will be to get the widest possible consensus.

Mr Speaker: Whether the right hon. Gentleman regards that as a satisfactory answer is for him to decide, but it is the answer that he is getting.

Sir Desmond Swayne: It was.

Mr Speaker: In fact, he has got it.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Did the Minister see the recent “Dispatches” programme featuring Bupa’s Crawfords Walk care home in my constituency, which had shocking levels of care? If large, well-known providers such as Bupa are caught putting profits before patient care, what can the Minister do to ensure that smaller, less high-profile providers are not doing the same?

Steve Brine: I am sorry, but I did not see that programme. I shall look out for it on “watch again”. What we can do is put in place the toughest, most rigorous assessment and inspection regime, and that is what we have. That has come from this Secretary of State, not from the previous Government, who ducked the issue. What we can do is ensure that there is rigorous inspection to root out poorly performing services. That is the same in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency as it is in mine.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): With an increasingly ageing population, does the Minister agree that it is deeply cynical to pretend that there is some consensus.

Mr Speaker: Order. This is a hugely important subject and there is extensive interest. I would like to accommodate it all, but we do have another urgent question to follow, then business questions, and then a heavily subscribed debate. May I please now ask colleagues to be good and have an appalling case of abuse in a small private care home in my constituency as it is helping to drive up standards and highlight problems, but many older residents tell me that they want to stay in their own homes for longer. What is the Minister doing to help make that happen?

Steve Brine: Yes, I do. There were many disappointing things for me about the recent general election—[Laughter.] To be serious, one of the more disappointing things was that the debate around the future of adult social care was reduced to the use of the words “dementia tax”, which did the sector, our constituents, our public life and this Parliament an enormous disservice. We do need to have a grown-up debate in this country about this issue, and that is why we will bring forward proposals for consultation.

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): This week marks the sixth anniversary of the Dilnot commission report on social care, yet the Government are no closer to finding a solution on funding social care. Will the Minister tell the House why his Government have wasted six years and failed to take any action to solve the social care crisis?

Steve Brine: Honestly, now I am being tempted into politics. The bottom line is that the Labour party had 13 years in government to sort out the social care system, and it never did. It was in the Labour manifesto in ’97, there was a royal commission in ’99, there was a Green Paper in 2005, there was the Wanless review in 2006, the Labour Government said it would be solved in the 2007 comprehensive spending review and then there was another Green Paper in 2009. I honestly think that lectures from Labour Members about wasting time on this subject are for the birds.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): The Minister has made an excellent point about the years of failed opportunities and failed promises under Labour. During that period, were not 40,000 people per year forced to sell their homes in their lifetimes to fund their care?

Steve Brine: Yes, and my hon. Friend is absolutely right that one of the most disappointing aspects of the discussion over the past few months is that the current situation is hardly perfect. If it was, we would not be debating it, and if it had been easy to solve we would have solved it years ago—and the last Labour Governments would have done so as well.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Members rose—

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): We have an appalling case of abuse in a small private care home in my constituency that resulted in prison sentences for the two people involved. What is the Minister going to do to raise standards in small private care homes?

Steve Brine: I cannot comment on that individual case, but if the hon. Lady writes to me about it I will be more than happy to look into it and meet her.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I welcome the Care Quality Commission inspections of care homes in my constituency as it is helping to drive up standards and highlight problems, but many older residents tell me that they want to stay in their own homes for longer. What is the Minister doing to help make that happen?
Steve Brine: That is exactly why I said that this has to be a one-system solution. We need the NHS to work on delayed transfers of care, but we need local authorities to work with us as well, which is what the better care fund is all about. We know that it is better for people to be cared for in their own home, but that is not always possible, which is why we need a long-term solution to the funding of adult social care that deals with not only residential but domiciliary, care—and that is why we tried to introduce that debate during the election.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Liverpool City Council spends more on adult social care than it is able to raise in council tax, yet still has more of a cut to make, and pays a very low level of fees as a consequence. Can the Minister give an assurance that councils such as Liverpool will not be further disadvantaged when he rolls out the extra funding he is promising to try to improve this situation?

Steve Brine: As I said, councils have access to a total of just over £9.25 billion more in dedicated funding for social care over the next three years as a result of measures introduced by this Government since 2015. That is enough to increase social care spending in real terms. And let me just put this on the record for the House: the UK spends more as a share of GDP on long-term care than other industrialised countries, including much-vaunted Germany, Canada and the United States.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I gently say to the Minister that the only reason the Labour party was able to mention the “dementia tax” was that the Conservative party had put something stupid in its manifesto. This matter is far too important for party politics. Does the Minister agree that the social care system is broken and that we need a cross-party agreement on how to move forward?

Steve Brine: I do think we need a cross-party, cross-country solution to the long-term funding of adult social care, which is why we staged a debate during the recent election, which is why we need a proper consultation, which will be coming online later this year. My hon. Friend is absolutely right: this is far too important for the knockabout of party politics.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): On the question of care homes requiring improvement, on inspection 38% still require improvement and 5% have deteriorated. What action is the Minister taking, beyond just inspections, to improve standards?

Steve Brine: That is an absolutely fair question. This is why I said in my statement that, through the dashboard, we have picked the 12 most challenged local areas for review. The reviews will cover providers and commissioners of services, looking at the interface between social care and general primary care and acute and community health services. It will include an assessment of the governance in place for the management of resources. I am sorry to have had to read that out, but I wanted to get it absolutely clear for the record. That is why those reviews are being put in place. We are not just pointing the finger and saying, “You’re bad.” We want to support those areas to deliver the care we are getting in the vast majority of other areas.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Improvements in medicine have enabled people to live longer, but we also want them to live more healthily. We know that investment in reducing loneliness, in improving activity and in treating conditions such as macular degeneration, which causes blindness, will help to reduce the need for social care. What is the Minister doing in this regard?

Steve Brine: Although I am not specifically the Minister with responsibility for care, I am the public health Minister and the primary care Minister. We have brought those two subjects together because we want to see a healthy population across the board. I am pleased that my hon. Friend has mentioned the Commission on Loneliness. It was probably set up before she entered this House; it was started by the late Member Jo Cox, who did some really good work that is rightly being taken forward in this Parliament.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Carers in Northern Ireland who provide for elderly and disabled loved ones save the NHS some £4.6 billion, and that figure rises to £132 billion across the whole of the United Kingdom. How does the Minister intend to ease the pressure on them by funding more respite places, to allow families to have the much-needed breaks that enable them to carry on caring in the long term?

Steve Brine: I will look into that. The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. I am sure that Members across the House take part in carers week events every year. I certainly do that in my constituency. It is at those events that we meet not only the staff who work in the system but the people who, day in and day out, do not have the life that they would like to have because they have caring responsibilities. We also meet young carers who do incredible work. The hon. Gentleman is right, and we should all say a clear thank you to those people for the work that they do.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): The extra money in the last Budget for social care is helping Kent County Council to provide more people with access to care, particularly at home, but the cost of social care is going to keep rising. Does my hon. Friend agree that we as a society need to have an honest conversation about how we fund those growing costs fairly across the generations?

Steve Brine: Yes. This is no different from the conversation that we are having about the funding of every other public service. It is very easy to take to the streets with placards saying “Spend more!” Indeed, I think the Leader of the Opposition spent the national debt several times over just in his response to the Queen’s Speech. This is why we need a proper debate and a consultation on long-term funding. Ultimately, it could come out of general taxation, but we have to have a debate as a country on how much we can afford to do while funding all the other public services. I have not noticed us being short of requests to increase funding in other areas as well. We have to have that honest debate as a country.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): If we are going to have that honest debate, the Minister, whom I welcome to his place, has to accept that the
decisions of his Government have fuelled the social care crisis. My council, the third most deprived in the country, has had the 17th highest cuts to its budget, including having £40 million taken out of social care by 2020. The social care precept that the Minister has introduced does not raise the amount of money in my area that it could in wealthier areas. Will he please accept some political responsibility for the mess we are in?

Steve Brine: Of course Governments of all colours have delivered us to the place where we are at this very moment, but have this Government put more money into the social care system? Yes. Did we provide more money in the Budget this year? Yes. Are we allowing councils to raise more money? Yes. As I said earlier, we spend more on long-term care as a share of GDP than other industrialised countries, including Germany and Canada and the massive economy of the United States.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): As the Minister knows, about 2.8 million adults over the age of 65 are currently in receipt of formal or informal social care. Can he confirm that a recent Care Quality Commission report showed that, despite the pressures, the proportion of care services rated good or outstanding is actually increasing?

Steve Brine: Indeed I can. We introduced the new, tougher system of CQC inspections, for the reasons I set out. We introduced a care certificate for support workers and healthcare assistants, and we introduced the new quality standards to clarify what excellence actually looks like in care. We brought in new criminal offences of ill treatment and wilful neglect, and we introduced a fit and proper person test to hold directors to account for care. Those are all things that have happened under this Secretary of State that never happened before.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): The care sector is a significant employer in my Bristol South constituency, but people are being lost to other sectors. I listened carefully to the Minister’s response to the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), but I urge him to be much more ambitious in supporting the sector to recruit more people and build on career pathways between health and social care to encourage people who want to do those jobs.

Steve Brine: I thank the hon. Lady for her sensible question.

Christian Matheson: Mine was sensible.

Steve Brine: They have not all been sensible, but yours was marginally more sensible.

As I said earlier, this is a rapidly growing sector and it is imperative that we get the right people into the right jobs. That is why it is so important to work with organisations such as Skills for Care to improve the level of skills, and people in this sector are expected to benefit from the national living wage.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Worthing has the highest proportion of over-85-year-olds in the country. They tend to be not particularly well off, and their major asset is their property; so can the Minister ensure that, in welcoming the fact that we will have a grown-up debate at last, any sustainable solution recognises that people who have worked hard, paid their dues, looked after their family and done the right thing should be appreciated, not penalised, for having done so?

Steve Brine: I have said that we will consult on detailed proposals later this year, which will include a capital floor and an absolute limit on the amount that people can be asked to pay. Those two critical pillars must go together.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): More care homes may face closure if they cannot access migrant workforces. What steps will the Government take to ensure that migrant workers, who are happy to work in our care homes and who provide excellent standards of care, will still be able to come to the UK after Brexit?

Steve Brine: The Secretary of State has been absolutely clear, including at oral questions earlier this week, that we see the migrant workforce as critical to the NHS, by which we mean in-patient care as well as the social care system—we want to see those protected.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Adult social care funding has been raised with me across Eastleigh. Delayed discharge is also being prioritised by the clinical commissioning group, but Eastleigh’s Lib Dems on Hampshire County Council chose back in February not to support a further £27 million for the county’s social care budget. Will the Minister highlight the fact that some parties talk about action but simply fail to make a difference locally?

Steve Brine: My hon. Friend is a doughty champion for her Eastleigh constituency, and I also represent part of the borough. What she says surprises me, but I am sure she will raise it in the national debate in the months leading up to next May’s borough council elections.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): In March, the Select Committee on Communities and Local Government agreed a report on adult social care. We called for significant extra funds in the short and medium term, but we said that, in the long term, a lasting solution will be found only through cross-party working. The Minister seems to agree in principle, but will he confirm: that he will engage with Opposition Front Benchers and other parties on the consultation’s terms of reference; that he will fully involve them in the consultation; that he will approach the consultation with an open mind, and not rule out any alternatives; and that the Select Committee will be involved in the consultation?

Steve Brine: I confirm that there will be the widest possible engagement across the House and across the sector, including with the Select Committee that the hon. Gentleman may or may not be in charge of in the next few weeks.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I have visited many nursing and care homes in my constituency of Wealden and have met committed and caring care staff. Does the Minister agree it is the inspection system introduced by this Government that is finally shining a light on poor care and driving up standards?
Steve Brine: Yes, I do. As I said, this inspection regime is a good thing. It is important for families and for people in the system, but it is also important for the staff—they want to know that they are benchmarked as giving the best possible care. It is as important for the staff as it is for the punters, for want of a better word.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab) rose—

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: I call Paula Sherriff.

Paula Sherriff: You finally spotted me, Mr Speaker. Worryingly, Age UK recently described choosing a care home as “Russian roulette”. Does the Minister believe it is acceptable to force people to take these risks with their most loved ones?

Steve Brine: I did not quite catch the question, but I do not think the hon. Lady is easily overlooked in any forum. If she would like to write to me or speak to me afterwards, we will be able pick up that point.

Mr Speaker: There is somebody after the hon. Lady and so she need not develop a complex about the matter. Somebody has to be last, and on this occasion, nevertheless with a cheery disposition, it is Mr Tom Pursglove.

Tom Pursglove: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Some local authority areas are undoubtedly better than others at joining up social care departments with the NHS. Does my hon. Friend therefore agree that we need to see a greater focus on sharing best practice where it exists?

Steve Brine: Yes, I agree with my cheery hon. Friend, and this is a good place to finish. There is so much good practice in the sector, and the report highlights that today. We should celebrate that, as we do, and learn from it, as we will, while ruthlessly picking out those areas that need support in order to improve the care they are giving.

Jobcentre Plus: Closures

11.21 am

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to make a statement on his plans to close Jobcentre Plus offices, and the impact on local communities and Department for Work and Pensions jobs.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr David Gauke): Yesterday’s announcement confirmed the proposals that were published in January. These changes will mean that the DWP will be able to offer a more efficient service, while delivering good value for the taxpayer, saving more than £140 million a year for the next 10 years. Eight out of 10 claims for jobseeker’s allowance and 99% of applications for universal credit full service are now made online, which means that DWP buildings are used much less, with 20% of the estate currently underutilised. Our estate plans must reflect the way customers interact with DWP now and in the future, not how they behaved in the past. I can assure the House that these changes will not lead to a reduction in the number of frontline jobcentre staff; in fact, to continue improving the service provided to customers, jobcentres are actively recruiting in many areas.

These changes are being made in consultation with DWP employees and their trade unions, which will ensure that the important connections that jobcentre staff have with the local community are preserved and customer services can be maintained.

The DWP’s private finance initiative contract with Telereal Trillium expires next March, which gives us an opportunity to review how we deliver our services. We have sought to rationalise our estate in a way that delivers value for the taxpayer and makes best use of the space available, while continuing to deliver vital support to our claimants and enabling the delivery of our reform agenda.

Margaret Greenwood: Members will recall that in December last year the Government announced that they were planning to close half the jobcentres in Glasgow. In January this year, they set out plans for further closures, amounting to the closure of more than one in 10 jobcentres across the UK. These closures have the potential for the loss of up to 750 jobs. Yesterday, the Department announced via a written ministerial statement that just six of the original 78 jobcentres earmarked for closure will remain open, and only 11 of the 80 planned to co-locate with local authorities have been given a reprieve. Two additional jobcentres that were to stay open have been added to the closure list.

The impact of the closures will undoubtedly be felt most by the poorest and most vulnerable in our society. By closing such a large proportion of the DWP estate, the Government would be forcing claimants to travel further to access the vital services that they need, thus having an impact on the lives of sick and disabled people, carers and parents with young children, so will the Minister commit now to publish the equality analysis on each site that is being closed? Currently this is secret, and they should be made public. Furthermore, the Government plan to subject an additional 1 million claimants to in-work conditionality, a process under
universal credit by which people in work may be required to attend jobcentres. What assessment has the Minister made of the impact on demand for jobcentre services as a result of increased in-work conditionality?

The decision to close jobcentres on this scale at the same time as accelerating the roll-out of the universal credit full digital service makes no sense. It is simply not good enough to quote figures about online claims to justify closure plans. Universal credit will place other, new demands on staff, who will, for example, have to assess whether self-employed people claiming universal credit have a viable business plan. What assessment has the Minister made of the increased demand placed on jobcentre staff as a result of the roll-out of universal credit?

Finally, the closures will have an impact on jobs within the DWP. Will the Minister outline the number of jobs that will be lost as a result of these closures, among frontline jobcentre staff and in the corporate centre sites as a result of the new “hub strategy” for the corporate centre? The Government must immediately pause these closures to allow proper scrutiny of their plans.

Mr Gauke: I shall begin with the hon. Lady’s first point about Jobcentre Plus staff. The reality is that in every nation and region there will be an increase in the number of jobcentre staff, from the beginning of the process to its end. Job numbers are going up, particularly as we roll out universal credit. She talks about 750 job losses, but only a small minority of them are likely to be redundancies among frontline jobcentre staff. She asked how many; we are probably looking at a range of 80 to 100 or so—I do not want to be too precise about that, but that is the maximum we are looking at, and we hope to be able to bring it down.

The fact is that the reforms take account of the changes in the welfare system resulting from the rolling out of universal credit full service. It is absolutely right that we make use of the fact that it is the end of a contract and take the opportunity to find savings. We are talking about taxpayers’ money. We can find savings in the DWP’s estate and, at the same time, provide modern, up-to-date jobcentres that provide the service that is needed. That is the right thing to do. I am disappointed that the Labour party is going to stand against the careful and sensible use of public money, which is exactly what the Government are delivering.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): In these difficult times, will my right hon. Friend praise Harlow jobcentre, which does a huge amount not only to support my jobs fairs but to encourage apprenticeships? Will he ensure that jobcentres throughout the country do everything possible to employ apprentices and to encourage employers themselves to have apprenticeships?

Mr Gauke: My right hon. Friend makes a good point, and he is a great champion of apprentices and apprenticeships. We do want to encourage them as much as possible, and the DWP and jobcentres are doing so throughout the country.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Compassionate conservatism lasted fully two days. There should have been an oral statement and a vote in the House on this issue. Does the Secretary of State accept that there is a direct link between the index of multiple deprivation and the jobcentres earmarked for closure? Will he publish an equality impact assessment, particularly on the effects on those with disabilities and those with caring responsibilities? What engagement has there been with the devolved Administrations throughout the UK? What will be the effect of the roll-out of universal credit, given that some of the jobcentres earmarked for closure were included in the statement on the roll-out published by the Department?

Mr Gauke: I make the point to the hon. Gentleman that when it comes to jobcentres—this was touched on by the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) in her remarks about Wirral—after these reforms have been completed there will be a reduction in the number of jobcentres there, but Glasgow will still have more jobcentres per head of population than any other city in the United Kingdom. Also, a number of the Glasgow jobcentres were particularly under-utilised. It is sensible that we rationalise the estate and can deliver modern services. In some cases, we need much improved jobcentres, with improved facilities and greater capability to do more things. That is exactly what the strategy involves.

On the equality impact assessment, the Government have, as always, fulfilled their obligations in terms of the assessment they have made. I make the point again: I hope that the Scottish National party is not going to stand against the sensible use of Government estates to deliver public services in the most efficient and cost-effective way.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Rationalising the use of the DWP’s property assets has to be a good thing, for the reasons that the Secretary of State has outlined. That is also true in city constituencies like mine where there is no danger of the JCP closing, but an opportunity perhaps to co-locate it alongside other services. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the more serious issue ahead is making sure that we have the right resources in the JCPs for the expanded roll-out of universal credit that is starting early next year?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. That is exactly right. It is very important that we have jobcentres that are able to deal with the new and important role of providing the support that claimants need. I am talking about having the work coaches and the facilities in place. In some cases, that requires new, improved estates, and we should not be stuck just on the footprint that we happened to have a few years ago, particularly as there is now an opportunity to make those changes, given that the contract is coming to an end.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): Annesley DWP office has 130 workers, three quarters of whom are women. The close proximity of the office to their home enables many of those women to have a career and be a parent. There are no nearby offices to relocate them to, so I ask the Minister to pause the closure and conduct and publish an equality impact assessment in this special case.

Mr Gauke: It is the case that there are sites in Chesterfield and Mansfield, which are within half an hour by car from the site that the hon. Lady mentions. It is anticipated
that at least 75% of the staff—probably more—can be redeployed to other sites and will not be in a position in which redundancy is relevant, and of course the DWP is seeking to ensure that that number can be maximised.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree on the importance of getting jobcentre staff to work outside jobcentres, in places such as food banks, to ensure that we are getting the right welfare claims in the right way?

Mr Gauke: There is an important outreach role that jobcentre staff can and will perform. It is simply not the case that all work is done within jobcentres themselves. Staff can provide outreach services in other sites as well, as indeed they will increasingly do.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Sutton is a pilot for universal credit. I support the principle of universal credit, but the difficulty is that it is extremely complex and is leaving some people completely unable to plan their expenditure. When universal credit is rolled out more widely, how will the Minister ensure that those who feel that they have to go to the jobcentre because they cannot rely on the post delivering certain items, are not severely disadvantaged?

Mr Gauke: As I have said, 99% register for universal credit online. Also, those who are seeking work are expected to spend up to 35 hours a week searching for work, and that includes the time taken to get to jobcentres, for example. In very particular cases, if there are those who are not able to make it to jobcentres, other arrangements can be made.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): The Secretary of State is aware that I am unhappy about the closure of Shipley jobcentre. I have many questions for him that you would not allow me to go through now, Mr Speaker. Perhaps my right hon. Friend will meet me so that I can go through some of them with him. Just for now, will he confirm that some of that outreach work will continue to be delivered within the Shipley constituency, and will he also guarantee that the staff there can choose which office to work at, which may be much closer to their home, so that they do not all have to move to Bradford?

Mr Gauke: I can give my hon. Friend an assurance that outreach work will continue in Shipley. Not just in Shipley but more generally, DWP will look to work with staff as much as possible to accommodate their preferences. I know that my hon. Friend has already met the Minister for Employment to discuss this matter, but I dare say that he and I will have further conversations on this point in the near future. Given previous experience, we will probably have many such conversations.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): The Government seem obsessed with the spreadsheet economy to the detriment of our communities, which must suffer the consequences of austerity. The National Assembly for Wales does not have control over our own employment services, meaning that we too are quite vulnerable to the closure of jobcentres and the loss of hundreds of jobs. I urge the Secretary of State to reverse these planned closures, and ask him whether he would consider devolving Jobcentre Plus functions to Wales.

Mr Gauke: Let us be clear about the employment record over the past seven years. We have nearly 3 million people in work, youth unemployment has fallen by 375,000, the employment rate is at a record high and unemployment is at the lowest level since 1975. Some of the credit has to go to what jobcentres are delivering and the policies that the Government have pursued—those things have assisted. It is right that we continue to seek good value for money for the taxpayer, and I do not foresee any move towards further devolution in this area.

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): What arrangements are being made to help vulnerable claimants to access jobcentres? I am thinking particularly of those in rural areas, for example by offering help with travel.

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend raises an important point. There are steps that we take to assist more vulnerable claimants, such as being able to make visits, where necessary, in particular circumstances. That will continue, but it is absolutely right that we require those who are able to visit a jobcentre to do so.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Is the Secretary of State aware that when we embarked on finding jobs when the pits shut in the Derbyshire and Bolsover area, we set up Markham Vale straight off the M1 and created several hundred jobs in the process? That has not yet finished with the local authorities concerned. The Bolsover jobcentre played a significant part in ensuring that those 700 jobs were available, and, as a result, needs to continue. We are enlarging the site to provide several hundred more jobs. Surely it is not appropriate to shut the Bolsover jobcentre that has played a magnificent part in providing work for the miners and families of miners who lost their jobs. Surely he should reverse this.

Mr Gauke: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his recognition of the work that has been done to help those who were working miners. I think I am fairly confident in saying that employment numbers and unemployment numbers have moved in the right direction in his constituency over the past seven years, which may reflect the changing political nature of his constituency. The staff at the Bolsover site are moving to Staveley. Jobcentres do have a valuable role to play, as I have outlined, but it is right that we should have modern facilities and that is what these plans involve delivering.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Obviously, we are having this debate in the context of record employment. On both sides of the House, we should be welcoming the fact that fewer people are unemployed now than ever before. That has brought with it enormous social benefits—[Interruption.] If the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) is patient for a moment, she will hear the question. In Wirral West, for example—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman needs to ask a question not in a moment or two but straight away, because many other colleagues are waiting to contribute. The hon. Gentleman is new, and he must get used to it. I want him to get to his question.
Alex Burghart: I will, Mr Speaker. The important thing is that we ensure that people have the support they need, rather than be obsessed with bricks and mortar.

Mr Gauke: I agree with my hon. Friend. That is the right point, and the support that people need can often be better provided in well-equipped, modern—sometimes larger—jobcentres than by using the estate that may have served us well 10 or 15 years ago but is now out of date.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Sheffield’s Eastern Avenue jobcentre is rooted in the community that it serves. Its staff therefore understand local people and can do the job, better supporting them because of that. The Secretary of State talks about a much improved service, but does he not recognise that centralising the service, breaking that link with the local community, will damage the work that the jobcentre can do? Will he think again?

Mr Gauke: On the hon. Gentleman’s point about Sheffield Eastern Avenue centre closing, let me reassure him that outreach will be put in place in the local community, so there will continue to be a service in his area. The number of jobcentres in Sheffield is being reduced from seven to six, but in the context of that city that is the right move so that we have got six properly functioning, fully utilised centres rather than more.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): May I say to my right hon. Friend that when the Labour Government closed down the Christchurch jobcentre the sky did not fall in. Would it not be sensible now, with fewer jobcentres, to ensure that they are open at weekends so that they are more accessible?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Other Governments have also changed the estate system for jobcentres, and I do not think that was by any means disastrous. His point about opening at weekends is interesting. We would have the facility to do that, and we will keep it under review, considering value for money and so on. If there was a good case for that, it is certainly something we could do.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): Having conducted a survey outside Batley jobcentre, I know that the majority of users walk there—often every day—to use the computers to look for jobs. With Batley’s closing, they will have to walk to Dewsbury, a journey of 20 minutes—if they are able-bodied. Will the Secretary of State confirm whether new sanctioning guidance will be provided for those who are late or miss appointments?

Mr Gauke: We do not expect people to miss appointments. As I said earlier, people looking for jobs are expected to spend 35 hours a week doing so, which should enable them to travel from Batley to Dewsbury in the time available. We would expect people to make appointments, but we would look at the individual circumstances if somebody has missed an appointment, to take into account whether there might be any mitigating factors.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Has my right hon. Friend made any assessment of the direct benefit that jobseekers will experience as a result of co-locating jobcentre services with other sources of support? Surely it is outcomes that matter here.

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend is right—it is outcomes that matter. In some circumstances co-location in itself may have benefits and in others having a jobcentre that is modern, properly designed and of sufficient scale to provide a range of services to claimants helps to improve outcomes. It is improved outcomes that we want.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Evidence to the Scottish Affairs Committee from the Public and Commercial Services Union suggested that jobcentre closures were likely to lead to increased numbers of people being late for appointments and therefore being sanctioned, and the director of Poverty Alliance argued that the Government should therefore reconsider sanctions for lateness. Will the Minister now confirm that he is committed to doing so?

Mr Gauke: Let us put this in context: 97% of JSA claimants are not sanctioned every month. Given the number of hours we expect people to spend looking for work, I think travelling to a jobcentre, just as people travel to work, is the way life operates for most people. If there are particular circumstances that result in someone being late for an assessment or meeting, they can be taken into account.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): Does the Minister not realise that jobcentres are always needed under a Labour Government, whereas under this Government, with unemployment falling and 2.9 million more people in work, we should be spending money on getting more people into work and not on empty office space?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend makes a good point. One could be drawn into a comparison of the records on employment of Governments of different sorts. I am proud of this Government’s record. We have an important role in supporting people in getting into work, staying in work and improving their position. I would prefer to spend the resources we have on doing that as efficiently and effectively as possible, and we would not be doing that if we were wasting £140 million a year on an estate that is no longer fit for purpose.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): I appreciate that the DWP makes considerable savings from the closure of jobcentres, including the one in Pyle in my constituency, but it is passing on a huge cost to those who will have to fund out of their benefits the costs of travelling by bus to their new jobcentre. According to the Minister, it takes 39 minutes to get from Pyle to Porthcawl, but it is clear that he has never tried to make that journey on a bus. Will he undertake to ensure that no one travelling from Pyle to Porthcawl is sanctioned because of a bus service that is not regular?

Mr Gauke: Those who have been out of work for 13 weeks or more have access to a jobcentre discount card, which reduces their travel costs by half. A lot of people in their daily lives have to travel distances and be somewhere on time. We expect people to spend 35 hours a week searching for work, and that can include allowing good time to travel from home to a jobcentre. I think that is perfectly reasonable, but I repeat that if there are particular circumstances that result in someone missing an appointment, there is discretion regarding sanctions.
Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the purpose of the estates review is to make sure that the estate is effective and reflects demands on the service?

These are not my words but those of the Scottish National party Government Cabinet Secretary for Justice, Michael Matheson MSP, in relation to Police Scotland. They show that the SNP argue for rationalising the public services estate when it suits them.

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Governments have to ensure that public money is spent sensibly, and one of the ways of doing that is by rationalising the estate. Keeping open under-utilised jobcentres is simply not a good use of taxpayers’ money, and it does not do claimants any good either.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The Scottish Affairs Committee published a report at the end of the previous Parliament that was hugely critical of the Government’s approach to jobcentre closures, particularly in Glasgow, where some claimants are having to take three buses to reach other jobcentres, at huge expense. The Secretary of State has said three times this morning that he will not review the sanctions regime for people who are late for appointments. Will he look at that with the compassion that I know he has, having been a good Minister in the previous Parliament, to see whether anything can be done to ensure that people are not put into significant deprivation as a result of these sanctions?

Mr Gauke: I make the point to the hon. Gentleman that there are many more appointments for which claimants are late than there are sanctions. It is simply not the case that being late automatically means a sanction; a judgment is made. I think we also have to recognise that many people in work have to catch three buses to get to work and are expected to be there on time, so I do not think it is unreasonable to expect people to travel to a jobcentre if they are able to do so. Glasgow continues to be the most generously provided for, in terms of the number of jobcentres, of any city in the United Kingdom.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. There is excessive noise coming from the Scottish National party Benches. They are in a very excitable state. I am not sure what it is they have for breakfast, but I will take care to avoid it.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Bearing the burden of the poverty of our constituents.

Mr Speaker: We are always grateful to you, Mr Docherty-Hughes, for your observations from a sedentary position. No doubt we will be hearing more of them in due course.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): In Aberdeen, Greyfriars House will close and staff will move to the front-facing jobcentre at Ebury House. Can the Secretary of State reassure my constituents that the level and quality of service and support they receive will not diminish following the decision, and what improvements can they expect to see in the level of service?

Mr Gauke: The reality is that services will improve. I strongly believe that universal credit, in particular, will result in an improved welfare system, and we are increasing the number of work coaches. Every region and nation in the United Kingdom will see an increase in the number of frontline staff providing services, and Scotland is no exception. I have visited jobcentres to see the sort of work that is now happening, and I am encouraged by the improved services and the collaborative and effective way in which jobcentre staff are working with claimants to help them get jobs and improve their circumstances.

Mr Speaker: No one could accuse the Secretary of State of excluding from his answers any matter that might be judged by him to be in any way, or at any time, material. “Comprehensive” would be a polite way of describing it.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): North Green jobcentre serves some of the most deprived neighbourhoods of Liverpool. Will the Secretary of State meet my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) and me to discuss the plans to close the jobcentre and explore alternatives, including co-location with local authority services?

Mr Gauke: Liverpool has the third-highest concentration of jobcentres for larger cities, but I know that my hon. Friend the Minister for Employment will be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss this further.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): There has been a 70% reduction in the number of jobseekers and unemployed people in my constituency since 2010. One of the best ways to reach vulnerable claimants who have not managed to get into work is outreach based at local colleges, where educational support could be tailored at the same time. Can the Secretary of State confirm that innovation is at the heart of these changes?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Jobcentres are certainly very open to partnership working. She highlights an area where more progress is needed, and indeed where we might be able to help.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): The DWP is proposing to relocate the service centre out of Newport to some location north of Cardiff, but the exact location is unclear. My hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) and I clearly want to keep those jobs, the expertise and the services. The centre provides 249 jobs right in the heart of our city. Will the Minister meet us, so that we can put the case in person?

Mr Gauke: We are trying to find a site that would minimise job losses, but I know that my hon. Friend the Minister for Employment would be happy to meet the hon. Lady.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): My constituents in Broxburn are facing the closure of the DWP office. They faced the closure of Hall’s of Broxburn just a few years ago, losing 1,200 jobs. Like the constituents of other hon. Members, they are very reliant on the service, and the Government’s Google Maps approach does not reflect the true amount of travel they will have to undertake. Will the Secretary of State review the decision
and undertake to carry out a full review of the vulnerable areas that are reliant on the vital services provided by these centres?

Mr Gauke: We looked at a variety of measures in the consultation including travel distance, and we consulted staff, so I do not accept the hon. Lady’s criticism of our approach.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State accept that requiring some sick and disabled people to travel further to attend compulsory interviews is likely to lead to more cost, hardship and worry for our most vulnerable constituents who are looking for jobs? What will he do to ensure that his plans do not leave these vulnerable people to be hit the hardest?

Mr Gauke: Let me be clear. We do not expect claimants of employment and support allowance to attend jobcentres regularly. We are not looking to reduce the number of health assessment centres. This is very much focused on jobseekers, but we must also ensure that we rationalise the estate and use our resources as effectively and efficiently as possible.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): The closure of local services will have a hugely negative impact on the local economy in towns such as Merthyr Tydfil. It will also have an impact on the quality of life of employees with caring responsibilities, who will have to travel longer distances. What consultations and impact assessments have been carried out with staff, customers and trade unions? Will the Department change direction if the consultation does not support the planned closures?

Mr Gauke: There has been comprehensive consultation. As I set out earlier, an announcement was made in January. There will, indeed, be further consultations to the extent that any redundancies are necessary.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): These are not reforms; they are cuts. Closing Bridgeton jobcentre is a cut in support for the people who need it the most. As I see in my surgeries, these people are already getting hit and being sanctioned by this Government. People having to travel from Bridgeton jobcentre to Shettleston jobcentre will have to take two buses and use money from their income. Will the Secretary of State guarantee that not one person will end up being sanctioned for being late because of that?

Mr Gauke: We expect people to make reasonable efforts to get to the jobcentres that are relevant to them. If people make reasonable efforts they will not be sanctioned.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): The jobcentre in Deptford closed in November 2010. Now the jobcentre in Lewisham will close. Young people from New Cross and Deptford will now need to travel to Peckham for support with finding employment. With youth violence on the rise, how will the Government ensure that our young people travelling to Peckham are kept safe?

Mr Gauke: People who work in the hon. Lady’s constituency also travel to get to work. The fact is that we need a sensible and properly utilised jobcentre estate across the country, and that includes in London.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): More than 300 jobs will move from the4on site in Paisley to Glasgow, and this follows hundreds of job losses and transfers at Doosan Babcock and Chivas Brothers. This is the very last thing the Renfrewshire economy needs. Will the Secretary of State assure me that there will be zero redundancies as a result of this move?

Mr Gauke: The intention is to keep redundancies to a minimum but, as I made clear in my earlier remarks, the number of frontline staff in jobcentres in every nation and region of the country will be increasing, not reducing, over the course of the process.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Knowing me as you do, Mr Speaker, you will know that I have no ambition to be churlish on this matter, so I will say to the Secretary of State that I am grateful to see that Castlemilk jobcentre has been removed from his proposed closure plan. However, there is more than a hint of disappointment that Langside jobcentre remains on the list, as it serves the second most densely populated council population in Scotland, and there is a clear need for it to be there. Let me ask a very specific question: is there an equality impact assessment, and will he publish it?

Mr Gauke: First, let me express my gratitude for the absence of churlishness from the hon. Gentleman, who sets an example to us all. On the equality impact assessment, the Government have fulfilled their statutory duties, as they always do.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The original jobcentres inquiry clearly did not respond to West Dunbartonshire Council’s offer of shared premises—it was just about assets. The closure of Alexandria jobcentre creates the situation in West Dunbartonshire whereby not only Jobcentre Plus staff but DWP staff administering benefits now feel as though they are under threat. What assurances can the Secretary of State give to my constituents and those working at the DWP in Clydebank and at Jobcentre Plus in Clydebank and Dumbarton that they will not be moved from my constituency?

Mr Gauke: On co-location, let me be clear that we are happy to work with other authorities, but signing on does have to take place on jobcentre premises. In terms of guarantees and so on, any Government Department has to look sensibly at its estate to ensure that it is deployed efficiently. As I say, we are in an environment where we are in fact increasing frontline staff, not reducing them.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Given that the Joseph Rowntree Foundation used Glasgow as its study centre in its report on disconnected communities, and suggested very strongly that a well-distributed
employment support network is vital, how have the cuts now being applied to Glasgow been objectively, evidently based?

Mr Gauke: It will still be the case that of all the large cities in the United Kingdom, Glasgow, per head of population, will have more jobcentres than any other city.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I have porridge for my breakfast, Mr Speaker, with just a little bit of salt in it, like my granny taught me.

The Secretary of State said that people will not be sanctioned if they make reasonable efforts. Who will judge what is a reasonable effort? Constituents of mine in Maryhill now face a six-mile round trip, with all the expensive bus routes and potential delays that that entails. He keeps saying that Glasgow has far more jobcentres per head of population. What does that mean for the remaining jobcentres in Glasgow? Will he guarantee that Springburn jobcentre will not close? Will he meet his Scottish Government counterparts before any further decisions are taken?

Mr Gauke: We have settled the estate now, and we do not have any immediate plans to revisit this. In terms of the sanctions process, a comprehensive system of appeals is available. As I say, there are far more missed or late appointments than there are sanctions, and I would expect that to continue to be the case.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Yesterday’s statement about the closure of Easterhouse and Parkhead jobcentres is another body blow to the east end from this callous Tory Government. Written parliamentary questions that I have lodged have shown that the Secretary of State and his Ministers have never bothered to visit jobcentres in Glasgow. Will the Secretary of State come to Glasgow and do the bus journeys from Gartloch to Shettleston to see how idiotic these plans are?

Mr Gauke: I think that the hon. Gentleman might want to have a word with the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) on the subject of churlishness. The fact is that Glasgow, as I keep saying, has more jobcentres per head of population than any large city in the whole of the United Kingdom, and that will continue to be the case. I have to say that if the Scottish Government took the approach of SNP Members in this House with regard to good use of taxpayers’ money, then they would be in even bigger trouble than they appear to be.

Points of Order

12.4 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You were not in the Chair on Monday and may not have heard the Minister of State, Department for Transport, the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) say that he was not going to take interventions from anybody who was not wearing a tie. Given your pronouncements on this matter, Mr Speaker, do you think there is a risk of a slippery slope that might lead a Member to refuse to take interventions from Members who are sartorially challenged in other ways, such as wearing a gaudy tie or a garish waistcoat? I would welcome your advice.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order. First, I can reassure the House that rulings on the dress code, which should be observed by Members if they wish to be called in debate, pose questions or, indeed, raise points of order, are a matter exclusively for me. That simply is the fact of the matter. They are not a matter for the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), although I always value his views, as I do those of all colleagues. Many Members will be aware that I have known the right hon. Gentleman for three decades, that I enjoy his company and that I can often be observed chortling at some of his literary and philosophical references in the course of his orations in the Chamber. Those orations are always enormously enjoyed, not least by the right hon. Gentleman himself. I rather thought that what he had to say on this matter was proffered in his characteristically jocular fashion. However, in so far as I could be said to have received an application from the right hon. Gentleman, by virtue of his pronouncement, for the role of style policeman, I can tell the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) and all Members of the House that I have filed it in the appropriate place.

Secondly, it is of course for a Member, be they a Minister or not, to decide to whom to give way during a speech. That said, I am confident that no Member, in making that decision, would in any way discriminate on the basis of the attire of the colleague seeking to intervene, any more than he or she would do so on the basis of a Member’s age or gender. It would indeed be quite wrong of anyone to do so. I hope that that puts the right hon. Gentleman’s mind at rest and we can leave the matter there.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As the House will know, responses to Public Accounts Committee reports are published in the Treasury minute. I am concerned that the publication date for the most recent Treasury minute was first delayed from late July to mid-September and that its current publication date is now 19 October. A number of reports—three in particular, namely the Committee’s forty-ninth report, “Financial sustainability in schools”, fifty-seventh report, “Capital funding for schools”, and sixty-third report, “Housing: State of the Nation”—will not have a response until the next publication date in December. It is extraordinary that the Government can delay responses to important reports by Committees of this House. That shows disrespect
for the work of Select Committees. Could you look into this on behalf of the House, Mr Speaker, and urge the Government to get their skates on?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order. She will know—it is implicit in her point of order—and other Members of the House will be aware that it is incumbent on Ministers to respond to reports of Select Committees in a timely fashion. That is not just a general exhortation; it is a quite specific and explicit requirement, which is a matter of time limits. It is not altogether and immediately obvious to me whether the time limit would be thereby breached, but if it would, that time limit should not be breached.

It is very important that we proceed in an orderly way in this matter and that Ministers treat not just the Chairs of Select Committees but Select Committees as a whole with appropriate respect. It is not for Ministers to decide that they will respond when they are ready; they must respond as required. If that does not happen, I know the hon. Lady, and I rather imagine she will want to draw attention to the issue and secure perhaps even a greater focus on the subject matter of the report in House time; and it would be very regrettable if, as a result of what might be called ministerial lethargy, there had to be a greater amount of time spent on the matter in the Chamber than perhaps those Ministers had themselves anticipated. The expression “shooting oneself in the foot” springs to mind.

Of course, as the hon. Lady will know, the Leader of the House is not only the Government’s representative in the House, but, very importantly, the House’s representative in the Government. I know the new Leader of the House, and I know how attentive to her responsibilities she intends to be, so I feel sure that she will be having a word with those Ministers to ensure that they satisfy both the letter and the spirit of the requirement imposed on them.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In your position, you rightly promote a sense of tolerance and inclusion in this Chamber, and you urge all Members to uphold proper integrity. During Women and Equalities questions earlier, the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) raised some questions about comments that some members of the DUP had made in the past about the LGBT community. Although he did not make those comments from a sedentary position about members of the Muslim community, I hope that there was some misunderstanding about the remarks as they were perhaps heard elsewhere.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. I know what the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) was overheard making derogatory comments about members of the Muslim community, and that the remark I heard was rather supportive of the Muslim community. As you have said, the Chair, above all, has two key responsibilities in this regard, and there can be a creative tension between them, if truth be told. One is to uphold the absolutely critical principle of free speech, and the other is to uphold the principle that debate must be in accordance with our traditions and our conventions—that debate must be seemly.

Strictly speaking, of course, Members should not make observations from a sedentary position at all. In so far as the hon. Lady is saying that the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) did so, the hon. Gentleman would scarcely be in a minority in that regard. All sorts of Members chunter from a sedentary position at various times. But what I would like to say is: please, let us try to proceed in a respectful manner and try to avoid having these matters the subject of regular points of order.

I have heard what the hon. Lady has said. I did not hear what was allegedly said, and I am not going to criticise an hon. Member when I did not hear what he is alleged to have said. All I would say is that the hon. Member for Shipley is an extremely assiduous attender in the Chamber and a very frequent contributor. Sometimes, some of the things that he says will displease other Members—[Interruption.] Order. He is as entitled to his views, within the rules of order, as any other Member.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I have been sitting next to my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) during the period that was mentioned by the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell). My hon. Friend and I do not often see eye to eye on many things so springing to his defence would perhaps not be my most natural response. But may I assure you, Mr Speaker, and the House that I heard nothing that was disrespectful to the Muslim community? In fact, the remark I heard was rather supportive of the Muslim community. I hope that there was some misunderstanding about the remarks as they were perhaps heard elsewhere. I did not hear what has been suggested, and I was sitting right next to my hon. Friend. I hope that that is helpful to you and to the House.

Mr Speaker: I have listened very respectfully to the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell)—and, indeed, to what was said by the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff), both when she was speaking from the Dispatch Box and a moment ago—and I hope that the hon. Member for Livingston will accept that I cannot be expected to adjudicate on that which I did not hear. Let us leave it there for today.

May I make the general point, at the start of this Parliament, that we should try to treat each other with respect? Somebody referred to tolerance. Tolerance, frankly, is not about putting up with things about which you do not much care. That is not tolerance; that is indifference, or apathy. Tolerance is about putting up with the expression of views of which you rather strongly disapprove, but which you nevertheless accept have a right to be heard. Let us try to think about it in terms not just of what we ourselves hold as an opinion, but of what other people might think.
The business for next week will be:

**Monday 10 July**—Second Reading of the Telecommunications Infrastructure (Relief from Non-Domestic Rates) Bill.

**Tuesday 11 July**—Consideration in Committee and remaining stages of the Air Travel Organisers’ Licensing Bill followed by motions relating to the Hybrid Bill procedure.

**Wednesday 12 July**—General debate on the Grenfell Tower fire inquiry.

**Thursday 13 July**—General debate on the commemoration of Passchendaele, the third battle of Ypres.

**Friday 14 July**—The House will not be sitting.

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for 13 July will be:

**Thursday 13 July**—Debate on supply of homes and affordable homes to buy followed by debate on the introduction of an opt-out system for organ donation in England.

Colleagues will want to be aware that the election of Select Committee Chairs will take place on Wednesday 12 July from 10 am to 4 pm in Committee Room 8.

Finally, Mr Speaker, I was delighted to hear of the hard work that both you and the Lord Speaker have put into ensuring that Parliament properly marks Pride weekend. Among other activities, the rainbow-coloured flag will be projected on to the Palace for the duration of the weekend. I am sure that Members from across the House, in this, the most diverse Parliament ever, will join me in sending our best wishes to all who are celebrating this weekend and the rest of Pride month.

Valerie Vaz: I join the Leader of the House in her good wishes to everyone taking part in Pride weekend. We are in the business of equality for everyone. Perhaps you need to wear a rainbow tie next week, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I will probably not require any encouragement.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business. She made no mention of the specific debates that I asked for last week on the High Court judgments concerning the plan for clean air and the benefits cap. She also made no mention of Opposition days, the last of which was in January. She made no mention of when she will schedule the debate on the statutory instrument on tuition fees, which the Opposition prayed against. That is particularly important in view of the latest Institute for Fiscal Studies report, which states that students will graduate with average debts of £50,800 after interest rates on student loans are raised to 6.1% in September, and points out that such interest rates are very high compared with current market rates.

The report goes on to state that with their higher principal debt, students...from the poorest 40% of families now accrue around £6,500 in interest during study.

The First Secretary of State said in a speech earlier this month that there is “a national debate that we need to have” about university tuition fees. I do not know where he was from 3 May to 8 June, but he actually got an answer: a minority Government. Will the Leader of the House please honour the parliamentary convention and let us debate that statutory instrument? It seems as though young people are being rejected by this minority Government.

May we have a debate on early-day motion 63, on the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign, which has so far been signed by 124 hon. Members from all parties?

"That this House believes it has a moral duty to ensure that there is a fair transition for women born on or after 6 April 1951 regarding their pensions; recognises the need for a non-means-tested bridging pension that will secure the financial stability of those affected by the 1995 and 2011 Pension Acts and compensation for those at risk of losing in the region of £45,000, creating a fairer pension system for all; and calls on the Government to bring forward transitional arrangements to provide pension certainty for the women disproportionately affected by this system."

The debate in Westminster Hall yesterday was totally oversubscribed—it was standing room only—so will the Leader of the House find time to debate this injustice to 1950s women, or are 1950s women also rejected by this minority Government?

So far, the financial black hole includes the £1.5 billion for the deal; the £2 billion hole in the public finances over the next five years left by the national insurance U-turn; the concession that was, quite rightly, made last week in support of women in Northern Ireland, but which not been costed; and the extra money that many Secretaries of State are asking for, such as the £1 billion for education and the money asked for by the Health Secretary. The financial black hole is getting bigger. The Government announced in the Queen’s Speech that they will have three Finance Bills over the course of this Parliament, so will the Leader of the House say when we will have the summer Finance Bill? The Treasury has suggested such a Bill—that has certainly been picked up by the shadow Treasury team—unless, that is, there is to be no debate in Parliament, but just an announcement in Manchester in October.

Guess who said:

“tell others who’ve got their own opinion to shut up...There is a sense you have at the moment of everybody doing their own thing...Nobody actually asserting very clearly what they want to do in the national interest...We can’t go on living from hand-to-mouth in this sort of shambolic way.”

It was the former Tory party chairman Lord Patten, and this is why he said it. This is the response on 3 July to a written question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West): The government’s manifesto includes a free vote on the Hunting Act 2004, but we are not planning to bring forward a free vote in this session.”

That is a U-turn. On free school meals, a Minister responded this week that the Government have decided it is “right to retain” the existing universal infant free school meals provision. That is a U-turn. On grammar schools, the Secretary of State for Education, again in a written answer to my hon. Friend, has confirmed:
“There was no education bill in Her Majesty’s Most Gracious Speech, and therefore the ban on opening new grammar schools will remain in place.”

That is another U-turn. On the triple lock on pensions, which the Government wanted to scrap by 2020, they have made another U-turn. On the winter fuel allowance, the Government’s planned means-testing has been dropped, which is another U-turn. Everything in their manifesto has been dropped; there is no policy. What is left? Oh yes, “strong and stable”—I think that is another U-turn.

Mr Speaker, you will remember that the Prime Minister was billed as the second incarnation of another female Prime Minister, whose nickname, for those of us who can remember it, was TINA—“there is no alternative”. We in Her Majesty’s Opposition—here we are—say: there is an alternative.

Andrea Leadsom: On the subject of what the hon. Lady calls U-turns, as she and all hon. Members know, the result of the general election was not what we wished—we do not have the majority we wished for—but Members can be satisfied that the proposals the Government have brought forward are therefore focused on measures that we can all support.

Those measures are, first, about making a success of leaving the European Union and making sure that we can continue to trade and collaborate with our EU friends and partners. Secondly, there are measures to strengthen the economy by bringing forward new proposals on matters such as being a world leader in electric and autonomous vehicles, commercial space flights and other industries that will create the jobs of the future. Thirdly, there are measures to improve our society: we want strengthened support for people affected by mental health problems and measures to protect people from domestic violence. Those are measures that the whole House can get behind. Lastly, there are more measures to strengthen the United Kingdom, to prevent extremism and to protect us from terrorism. Those are the sorts of measures that the Government will bring forward, and I urge all Members to look at them and take them very seriously. They represent the real progress that this Government will make.

Let me turn to some of the hon. Lady’s specific points. On the court judgments, such cases remain with the judges, so as she will know, we cannot comment on them in the way she wishes.

Arrangements for Opposition days and for private Members’ Bills on sitting Fridays will be brought forward in due course. We are looking at them very carefully. The number of them will be at least in line with the number of days provided for in the Standing Orders, but additional days will be provided through the usual channels.

The hon. Lady asked for a debate on student fees, and mentioned the interest rates on student fees. I should make it clear to the House that student debt is not like normal commercial loans: student fees are made available to all students, regardless of their financial history; they are repayable according to income, not according to the amount due; and they are of course written off by the taxpayer after 30 years. They are less like a commercial loan, and more like a contribution—only a contribution, because the taxpayer continues to pay significant sums—towards the cost of a degree that will mean the individual concerned earns more during their career than taxpayers who do not have the benefit of a degree. The system attempts to be fair to the student and to the taxpayer who does not have such a benefit.

Finally, I want to point out that our measures to improve apprenticeships—there was a commitment to nearly 3 million of them in the last Parliament, and there is a commitment to many millions more in this Parliament—are offering real alternatives for young people who do not want to go to university. The Prime Minister made the point at Prime Minister’s questions that disadvantaged 18-year-olds are seeing the highest ever level of entry to higher education, which is a good thing and should be celebrated by the whole House.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I am sure the Leader of the House agrees that the House would want an early debate on any Government programme where the costs are rising, and it does not look as though it is good value for money for the taxpayer; where senior personnel are leaving, and the governance of it is deteriorating; where procurement processes are breaking down; and where the technology is being overtaken by other, more modern, developments. May we therefore have an early debate on HS2 phase 1 before we start on the folly of bringing in a Bill for HS2 phase 2, and to consider whether, if work on the route is to go ahead, it should be used for another form of transport, such as the autonomous vehicles on which the Leader of the House is so keen?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend and I have worked for a very long time on representing her and my constituents in every way we possibly can. My constituents, just as much as hers, have grave concerns about the impact of HS2 as it passes through the Chilterns and South Northamptonshire, and all the way along the route. I am extremely sympathetic to her calls, but she knows as well as I do that there is a commitment to HS2. The Bill for phase 1 has received Royal Assent, but we will of course continue to look at what more can be done to provide mitigation and compensate all of our constituents during the construction phase.

Mr Speaker: As the Leader of the House knows, lots of my constituents are very hacked off about the matter as well.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing what passes for the business for next week. I join her in wishing well all those who are participating in Pride week during the next few days.

There were no votes this week. There are not going to be any votes next week, and there will probably not be any votes during the week after that, so there will be no votes before we get to the summer recess. This is quickly becoming the zombie apocalypse Parliament where the Government undead wander the streets of Whitehall looking for brains, only to discover they have all left the country because of Brexit, like everybody else. I do not know how much longer the Government will be able to pad out the business with uncontroversial Bills and measures, but at some time the will of the House will have to be tested once again.
There will, however, be votes next week—thank goodness—because we will all be deciding who the Chairs of Select Committees are to be. I declare an interest in that matter. It is good to see the Select Committees up and running, but what on earth is happening with Standing Committees of this House? We have already passed a couple of Bills on Second Reading—I know they will be taken in a Committee of the whole House—and there is another Second Reading debate next week. We must have a conversation and discussion about Standing Committees, because they are important in passing legislation. I looked at the arithmetic and figured out that there should be nine Conservative Members, seven Labour Members and two SNP Members on a Standing Committee, giving no one an overall majority. That is my understanding, but the Leader of the House can correct me if I am wrong. When will a motion come to the House, and when will the Standing Committees be up and running?

I very much support the shadow Leader of the House in calling for a full debate on the WASPI issue. Westminster Hall was packed to the gunwales yesterday, with so many Members of Parliament wanting to represent their female constituents born in the 1950s. We have to have the debate here on Floor of the House. I have noticed that there is a cooling in the mood of Conservative Members about the issue, as they recognise this injustice. We saw the £1 billion bung go to the DUP. Let us have a debate here on the Floor of the House, where Members can put the case.

Lastly, it is a year ago that we got the Chilcot report. You will remember, Mr Speaker, that we debated it for two days. Today, Sir John Chilcot said that Tony Blair was not “straight with the nation”. Is it not time for a parliamentary Committee to investigate this properly and take appropriate action against the former Prime Minister?

Andrea Leadsom: I encourage the hon. Gentleman to consider, perhaps by reading Hansard if he was not listening, the strong case I made for the measures the Government will be taking to take significant steps in improving the situation of all residents right across the United Kingdom. He says that there have been no votes. That is testimony to the agreement across the House that we are indeed doing the right thing. I encourage him and his hon. Friends to continue to support the Government’s efforts.

Standing Committees are being looked at and will be appointed in due course, and the issues the hon. Gentleman raised will be resolved.

We have had five debates on the WASPI issue. As with all high-profile issues that are of concern right across the House, the Government continue to look at the measures in question. However, the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that, unfortunately, we are still trying to deal with the problems in our economy left by the last Labour Government. We still continue—[Interruption.] Opposition Members might groan, but the reality is that this Government are still clearing up the last Labour Government’s mess. We have therefore had to take tough decisions to be fair right across the range of people coming up to retirement age, as well as to those still of working age.

The final point the hon. Gentleman raised was about the Chilcot inquiry. That was a seven-year inquiry. The Government have looked at it at great length, and it has been widely discussed. The Government continue to learn the lessons of the Chilcot inquiry and are absolutely committed to continuing to do so, but we do not have plans to reopen a further inquiry.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Can we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs about dog theft and dog fighting? There are far too many dog thefts in my part of the world and probably in other parts of the world, and many of those dogs are used as bait for dog fighting, which is absolutely disgusting. The law enforcement and animal welfare agencies do not appear to do enough about that. Can we have a statement from the Secretary of State on what he intends to do to clamp down on this disgusting practice?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises such an important point. There is no doubt that we are a nation of dog lovers. As Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, I spent quite a lot of time trying to improve the rules on puppy licensing to get backstreet breeders out of the way, and to improve animal welfare, training and so on. I encourage him to get in contact with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs again on what is a very important matter for all of us.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): South Yorkshire has lost more than 400 police officers since 2010. Can we have an urgent debate on what extra resources can be made available to make people in Barnsley East safe?

Andrea Leadsom: I welcome the hon. Lady to the House and wish her great success in her new role. She raises a matter that is important right across the country—that of policing. She will know that the Government have protected police funding in real terms. I met my own police and crime commissioner only yesterday to talk about the difference in how policing is happening. She will be pleased to know, as I am, that crime has fallen by a third since 2010, enabling police forces to put more into tackling cybercrime and into crime prevention, particularly in respect of online crime. Nevertheless, the relevant Minister will have heard her points.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a general debate on the criteria for awarding city status? In every respect, Southend-on-Sea, with its many and various qualities, should already be a city. I believe that is an oversight to which attention may be drawn in a general debate.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is a huge supporter of his constituency. I am sure that all Members will have spent happy hours on the beaches there. Nevertheless, he will appreciate that city status is a rare privilege that is conferred on a town by Her Majesty on advice from Ministers and is not something for the House.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): In the last Parliament, I rose to seek the support of the then Prime Minister in relation to a constituent, Lisa Brown, who has been missing in Spain since November 2015. I now find myself having to rise in the House in relation to another constituent, Caroline Hope, who
after travelling to Turkey on personal matters was diagnosed with cancer and sought emergency surgery before returning home to Scotland. She has now been infected with E. coli and is having to rely on the support of family, friends and strangers to raise over £30,000 to bring her home to West Dunbartonshire. I ask the Leader of the House to seek from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Foreign Secretary a quick response to a letter I sent them this week on Caroline’s situation and on further support in respect of Lisa, who is still missing in Spain.

Andrea Leadsom: I am obviously incredibly sympathetic—that sounds like a genuinely terrible situation. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that there are oral questions to the Foreign Office next week, and he may well wish to raise it then.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): My village of Woodlesford was lucky in that it had one-in-200-year flood defences put in place before the Boxing day floods. However, the water still got within one inch of people’s doorsteps. My villages of Methley and Mickleton had similar problems. The devastation in Leeds was huge, and there has been a rush to put bigger flood defences in. May we have a statement from the relevant Minister on the flood strategy for Leeds, with specific mention of what modelling has been done to ensure that more water does not come down to my villages, which already have flood defences in place but came perilously close to having them breached?

Andrea Leadsom: I had the great pleasure of going to Leeds last year as Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to see the new moveable weirs, which should make a big difference to the ability to prevent water overwhelming towns such as Methley and Mickleton. The Environment Agency is working closely with Leeds City Council and the local flood groups to understand the latest flood modelling results and identify the most appropriate options. A lot of work is being done, involving £3 million of additional Government funding, on the Leeds flood alleviation scheme.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): In west Yorkshire, our blue light services and those who represent rank and file staff are very clear that our emergency services are in crisis and staff are struggling to cope. West Yorkshire has lost more than 1,200 police officers and 554 firefighters since 2010. It is no wonder that my constituents feel less safe. Given that we have not had an Opposition day since January, will the Leader of the House provide Government time for a debate on this important subject before the summer recess?

Andrea Leadsom: I refer the hon. Lady to what I said to the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock): crime is down by a third since 2010 and the Government have protected police funding. She may wish to raise the specific issues in her constituency by applying for an Adjournment debate or a Westminster Hall debate.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): At the weekend, I joined a group of volunteers from the Heart of Hednesford group, who were planting up hayracks on the platforms of Hednesford station, which will give passengers a colourful welcome to the town. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating and thanking that fantastic group of volunteers? May we have a debate in Government time about the role of volunteers and community groups in local communities?

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted to have this opportunity to share from my hon. Friend’s congratulations to her volunteers. We all appreciate the amazing work done by volunteers—litter picking, planting flowers or supporting vulnerable people and so on. We have frequent debates in this place on volunteers, and I encourage my hon. Friend to seek a further one to show our appreciation.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House arrange for a statement to clarify who is responsible for dealing with the increasing problem of urban foxes, about which I have had huge numbers of complaints recently? No one takes responsibility. I am not suggesting, Mr Speaker, the setting up of a Vauxhall hunt, but I am seeking to satisfy and help those of my constituents whose lives in their homes are being made intolerable by foxes. What can be done, and who takes responsibility, other than people saying, “They’re lovely”?

Mr Speaker: I am sure that the more ubiquitous the hon. Lady is in the Vauxhall constituency, the more terrified the foxes will be.

Andrea Leadsom: Yes, Mr Speaker, I was going to say that the foxes have a cheek going to Vauxhall, given the hon. Lady’s views on them; it is very brave of them.

There are very strict rules on wildlife in urban, as well as rural, areas, and keeping the fox population down is an important issue. I suggest that the hon. Lady write to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Several hon. Members rose—

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Given the number of terrorist acts carried out in the UK by people who were prevented from going to the middle east, may we have a statement from an appropriate Minister setting out the arguments for and against preventing would-be adult jihadists from travelling abroad and keeping them at home, when we know that they cannot all be monitored at home around the clock?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend raises a very important issue. Approximately 850 UK-linked individuals of national security concern have travelled to engage with the Syrian conflict. We think about half of them returned to the UK, while over 15% were subsequently killed in fighting in the region. Our priority is, of course, to dissuade people from travelling to areas of conflict, and our Prevent strategy includes a lot of work to identify and support individuals at risk of radicalisation. This is clearly something for the commission for countering
I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this issue, which is very dear to his heart and mine. Giving babies the best start in life through secure early bonding is absolutely vital. I am sure that will be a part of our new mental health Act mentioned in the Queen’s Speech and that Members across the House will be keen to put forward their views. The timing of this will be decided in due course.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for saying what it might cover to promote perinatal mental health and giving our children the best start in terms of mental health in their lives?

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Leader of the House mentioned extremism in her opening remarks. Will she make Government time available for a debate on the report on extremism and the funding of extreme activity in the UK that the Government have not yet published? Members are entitled to know, for instance, whether that is because there are many references to the activities of the Saudis in the report. May we find time for such a debate?

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman will appreciate that this is clearly something for the commission for countering extremism. It will be keen to look at reports of what has gone on already.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Childline, which is now part of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, was founded 30 years ago and over that time has helped more than 4 million children in need. May we have a debate about how Government could work more closely with Childline and the NSPCC, particularly in areas such as online abuse and children’s mental health?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend has been a huge advocate of the excellent work of Childline, and I think everybody across the House will want to congratulate it, too. He will be aware that teachers and school staff across the country have started training to be able to identify, and respond to, early signs of mental health problems among pupils, which is a very good thing. My hon. Friend might want to expand on that discussion by applying for a debate, and I encourage him to look at early years, infant mental health, which is so important to set young people up with lifelong emotional wellbeing.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): The M56 is the principal economic artery for not just west Cheshire but large parts of north Wales, and it continues to jam up regularly, at which point all the roads surrounding it jam up, too. May we have a debate in Government time on why their road strategy has failed to find any investment for the M56 in the last 10 years?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that this Government have significantly invested in roads and continue to do so. If he has a specific issue about the M56, I encourage him to apply for an Adjournment debate, but this Government are fully committed to improving our infrastructure to get the economy going, and to give the boost of even more jobs for people in this country.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for mentioning the excellent work of Childline, and I think everybody across the House will want to congratulate it, too. He will be aware that teachers and school staff across the country have started training to be able to identify, and respond to, early signs of mental health problems among pupils, which is a very good thing. My hon. Friend might want to expand on that discussion by applying for a debate, and I encourage him to look at early years, infant mental health, which is so important to set young people up with lifelong emotional wellbeing.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): The Leader of the House and I share a strong interest in perinatal mental health and giving babies the best start in life, and I declare an interest as chairman of the charity she set up, so I am greatly encouraged by the Government’s commitment to a mental health Bill in the Queen’s Speech and particularly to amending equalities legislation to reduce any discrimination against people with a mental illness problem. Can my right hon. Friend give us an approximate timeline for that legislation, and say what it might cover to promote perinatal mental health and giving our children the best start in terms of mental health in their lives?

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Lady is right to raise this issue, which is very serious in her constituency. She will be pleased to know that since 2010 there have been over 370,000 fewer violent crimes a year, but that does not help at all when in her constituency there have been many of them, and I suggest she take that up via a Westminster Hall or an Adjournment debate.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): May we have a debate on the accountability of local councils? Taunton Deane council is giving permission for 17,000 houses. One company alone has built up a multimillion pound land bank on the assumption that the council will give it permission. May we please have a tightening of the rules and a debate before councils are accused of all sorts of serious things that I suspect they do not want to be?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises the important point that housing must be sited in an appropriate place and there must be clear and transparent rules around planning. However, a balance needs to be struck, as we desperately need to be building more houses. We have a great record of building—over 800,000 new homes since 2010 in this country. That is a very good contribution, but more needs to be done. My hon. Friend might want to raise his specific point at the Department for Communities and Local Government questions scheduled for before the summer recess.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Further to the point made by the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) and in the light of the recent terrorist attacks in London and Manchester and yesterday’s report by the Henry Jackson Society on the foreign funding of extremism in UK, may I ask when the Prime Minister will either publish the report on the foreign funding of terrorism commissioned when she was Home Secretary or make a statement to this House on the foreign funding of extremist groups in the UK?
Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will know that this is an enormously important issue for the Prime Minister personally, and she has committed to doing everything possible to keep our people safe. She is setting up the commission for countering extremism and is fully occupied in resolving this issue. I am sure he can rely on the fact that she will do everything possible to stamp out extremism in all its forms.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Among the regular issues that land in my inbox are litter and fly-tipping. I am sure that this affects other hon. Members as well. Fly-tipping alone cost local authorities in England £49.8 million in 2015-16, and that is on top of the cost of litter clear-ups. May we please have a debate in Government time on how effective the enforcement of the relevant regulations is and on what more can be done to encourage members of the public to dispose of their litter and waste properly?

Andrea Leadsom: I am very happy to encourage everyone to take their litter home with them. My hon. Friend is right to say that street cleaning cost local government nearly £800 million in 2015-16—a huge amount of money that could be better used doing other things. I was pleased to launch our national litter strategy for England recently. It covers three areas: enforcement, education and infrastructure for bins. That consultation has now finished, and further announcements will be made very soon.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Today is a sad day for Glasgow politics, as the funeral was held this morning of Councillor Alistair Watson, whose life is celebrated in early-day motion 139. He gave 22 years of public service to the communities of Cardonald, and I send my condolences to his family and friends, and to the Glasgow Labour family.

[That this House recognises the life and work of Councillor Alistair Watson, trade unionist, railwyman, transport campaigner, tireless local champion for the community of Cardonald for 22 years and sends condolences to his family at this sad time; notes that Mr Watson was an exemplary councillor with a clear local focus but also a bold strategic vision, a local champion and city-wide advocate, with a vision of a city region with integrated transport at the heart of Glasgow’s regeneration at the same time as working every day on the issues that mattered to his community neighbours; and further recognises that Mr Watson was well known for being a robust debater but with a smile and a handshake for his political opponents, was respected and valued by everyone who worked with him and who experienced the pride and passion he had for his work.]

May we have a debate or a statement on public service, to celebrate those who have served our communities with distinction, such as Councillor Alistair Watson?

Andrea Leadsom: I, too, would like to offer my condolences to the family of the councillor the hon. Gentleman mentions. There are people right across the country who put in many years of public service to improve their own local communities or the country that they live in. That service is vital to all of us. He makes the good point that we should have a debate not only to encourage more people to get involved but to celebrate those who have done so. I encourage him to apply for a debate on that subject.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): As Daesh loses territory and fails to deliver the so-called caliphate, it grows ever more desperate in its death cult crimes, especially against the Yazidi people. May we have an early debate on the application of international law to bring prosecutions against Daesh fighters, and those who choose to partner and even marry them, to ensure that every terrorist is held accountable for their barbaric crimes?

Andrea Leadsom: We are very concerned about the appalling crimes committed by Daesh against Christians, Yazidis and other minorities, as well as against the majority Muslim populations in Iraq and Syria. Ultimately, the only way to stop the abuse is to defeat Daesh and establish a long-term political settlement in those countries. We continue to work closely with the Government of Iraq and with the United Nations to do just that. My hon. Friend should be reassured that any Daesh supporters returning to the UK will face the full force of the law.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): Developers in London routinely use a variety of methods aggressively to drive down levels of affordable housing. The Battersea power station development is the most recent high-profile example. May we have a debate in Government time on what more needs to be done to ensure that private developments include sufficient public gain and adequate affordable housing?

Andrea Leadsom: We all share a desire to see more affordable housing; there is a big commitment to that on the part of this Government. More than 300,000 new affordable homes have been built since 2010. Of course, it is a matter for local planning authorities to ensure that the right proportions are built in every development.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I heard what the Leader of the House said earlier about student loans. The original policy, introduced by the coalition Government, was widely supported and remains progressive, but things have changed slightly. The level of interest at which living costs and studies loans will be repaid will rise to 6.1% this September. That, allied with compound interest over a 30-year period, led to the calculation in yesterday’s Institute for Fiscal Studies report that the total debt could rise to more than £55,000. A number of us are very concerned about this. May I therefore urge my right hon. Friend to find Government time for a debate, which the First Secretary of State and Minister for the Cabinet Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green), has also intimated he would like to see?

Andrea Leadsom: Of all people, my hon. Friend should recognise that student finance is not like a normal commercial loan. The taxpayer still contributes significantly to the cost of higher education for university students, and it is right that those who will benefit from the higher earnings attracted by graduates should contribute to that cost. However, the mood of many colleagues has been heard, and I am quite sure that the Department for Education is considering this matter.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Gun and knife crime is up across London, and this month marks the two-year anniversary of a high-profile drive-by mistaken identity shooting in Wood Green.
Despite a number of representations, this homicide remains unsolved. May we have a debate in Government time on resources, particularly for London boroughs that are experiencing an increase in gun and knife crime? In the light of the fact that 230 officers have been moved over to do important work following Grenfell, we need to be able to rely on there being enough detectives working to solve that two-year-old crime.

**Andrea Leadsom:** It is important to be clear that, although there are pockets in which terrible incidents take place—it sounds like a really awful experience in the hon. Lady’s constituency—there have nevertheless been 370,000 fewer violent crimes since 2010. It is important that we speak in measured terms, because it is easy to scare people into thinking that things are getting worse when in fact they are getting better. It has been made very clear that police funding has been protected, but the police themselves are changing the way in which they manage things operationally and putting more money into cyber-policing, into dealing with online crime and into counter-intelligence. None the less, the hon. Lady might wish to raise the specific issues in her constituency via an Adjournment debate.

**Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): My right hon. Friend might be aware of the problems that riding schools up and down the country are having with the valuations being ascribed to their premises by the Valuation Office Agency. Some are now closing as a result, which will undoubtedly have an effect on Riding for the Disabled. May we have a debate on the subject, and could she raise it with her Cabinet colleagues?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am very much aware of the issue of rates for riding schools and other large premises in rural areas. My hon. Friend might know that, as part of the £435 million package of support launched at the Budget, the Chancellor announced a £300 million discretionary relief fund over four years from 2017-18 to enable local authorities to provide additional support to local businesses. I encourage my hon. Friend to suggest that his constituents apply to the local council to see whether they are eligible for that discretionary relief.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Following the revelation in an independent audit of loans by Credit Suisse and VTB Capital to state-owned companies in Mozambique—loans that now fall on the shoulders of every man, woman and child in that country—may we have a debate or a statement on what measures the UK Government are considering to ensure that loans given to Governments under UK law are transparent?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The issue of transparency in Government loans, and in overseas aid, is very important to the Government. Foreign Office questions will be held next week, I believe, and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will wish to raise this matter at that time.

**Dr Matthew Offord** (Hendon) (Con): There is some concern about the broadcast media’s coverage of the Brexit negotiations, and we only need to watch “Newsnight” last night to see why. One of my constituents has emailed me about this, stating:

“I need to know whether I made the right decision but the mainstream media just do not cover EU developments.”

Will a Minister come to the Dispatch Box to explain this, or indeed to justify the statement that the BBC is continuing to comply with its royal charter?

**Andrea Leadsom:** We all want to see balance in reporting, giving as much time to the opportunities of leaving the EU as is given to the other side of the argument. A number of people have expressed concern that that balance is not there, and I think that all of us across the House would wish to see that addressed very closely.

**Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House provide time for a debate on local government funding? Kirklees Council, which covers my constituency, is losing £1 million a week. Services are close to breaking point, with vulnerable people suffering the most. As the Cabinet now seems to be conducting a public debate on austerity on the front pages, may we also have one in this House?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I remind the hon. Lady that, actually, it is this Government who are sorting out our public finances. It is under this Government that we have seen employment up by 2.9 million people, over 800,000 fewer workless households and a pay rise for 30 million people through income tax cuts. Basic rate taxpayers are £1,100 a year better off under this Government, so to suggest that everything is falling apart is simply not true. Opposition Members need to stop scaremongering, and I urge the hon. Lady to look at the facts.

**Mims Davies** (Eastleigh) (Con): Hamble Lane, Eastleigh town centre and the Botley Centre on Botley high street leave constant queues and jams, and the resultant air pollution remains a key concern for my constituents, and particularly for parents of children with asthma. Will the Leader of the House kindly find Government time for a debate on air pollution so that we can talk about and really tackle this growing public health concern?

**Andrea Leadsom:** Air quality is a serious public health issue—my hon. Friend is right to say that it has a major link to asthma, which is a serious condition in itself—and we take it very seriously. She will have many opportunities to raise it when we have the High Court judgment and when the consultation proposals are published later in the summer.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Some 200 staff who were supposed to be working at a Green Day concert were let go on Tuesday after it was cancelled at very short notice by the promoter, PCL Presents. The staff were offered only their bus fare by the employer and particularly for parents of children with asthma. Will the Leader of the House agree that in this case these workers have clearly been exploited, which is unacceptable?

**Andrea Leadsom:** If that is indeed the case, I agree that it does not sound acceptable. On the wider point, there has been a lot of discussion in this House about the measures this Government have taken to stamp out the abuse of zero-hours contracts. Of course, many people are content with their zero-hours contracts, which work for them. The hon. Lady raises an important specific point, but the broader point has been well debated in this Chamber.
Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Some illegal Traveller camps in Dudley have left behind criminal damage and large clean-up bills for council tax payers. May we have a debate on the use of police powers to remove illegal camps and on proposals to allow combined authorities to pool provision for authorised Traveller sites, rather than insisting that each local authority has its own provision?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a subject that has been raised at every business questions so far in this Parliament, which highlights the importance of the issue in every constituency. Local authorities and the police have a wide range of strong powers that help them to take action, including being able to direct trespassers to leave the land, removing any vehicles and property, when there is a suitable pitch elsewhere in that local authority area. I hear my hon. Friend’s point about pooling local authority resources. That is not currently possible, but he may wish to raise it directly with Ministers.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): I too want to raise the need for an early debate on illegal encampments. In the past few months there has been an unprecedented rise in the number, scale and frequency of encampments in south Birmingham, often with public concern made even worse by the antisocial behaviour associated with those encampments and by the mess they leave behind. The encampments are often evicted from one place only to reappear down the road. We need an early debate, and I ask the Leader of the House both to review the status of the existing powers and to review what best practice is available and where it can be applied. If the available powers need further review, will she set the ball rolling?

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Can we have short questions so that everyone gets in? I do not want to miss anyone out; I want everyone standing to get in.

Andrea Leadsom: Again, there are already strong police powers. There are occasional issues with enforcement, but where Travellers fail to comply with police direction, it is a criminal offence punishable by up to six months’ imprisonment. So, too, is re-entry on land within three months by a person subject to a direction. There is an issue with enforcement, but the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) should be aware that 84% of Traveller caravans are now on authorised land, compared with 77% in 2007. The Government are committed to reducing the number of unauthorised sites by making sure there is reasonable provision for Travellers that takes account of their particular cultural requirements, to enable them to avoid being on unauthorised sites.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): The players and supporters of Gwernyfed rugby club in Brecon and Radnorshire have recently completed a sponsored bike ride across Wales, raising £45,000 towards the cost of purchasing their rugby pitches from the local authority. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating all of Gwernyfed—she does not have to pronounce it—on that outstanding achievement? Will she also allow a debate on what more can be done to transfer assets to local community groups without exceptionally high costs to those groups?

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate all those involved. It is a very impressive sum for a sponsored bike ride, and I commend my hon. Friend if he was involved. As he will know, responsibility for grassroots sport is devolved to Wales. Sport Wales has responsibility for investing in and supporting grassroots sport. This year Sport England launched a community asset fund worth up to £15 million, and he might want to ask Sport Wales whether it has any similar schemes upcoming.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Like many of us, the Leader of the House likes to be patriotic and use our national carrier airline, British Airways, but may we have a debate about the shameful way it is treating its mixed-fleet cabin crew and about how the Government have given it permission to wet lease the planes and staff of Qatar Airways in order to keep flights going during the current industrial dispute, despite the terrible record of Qatar Airways on female workers? Is it not time for a debate on that subject?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point on workers’ rights, and applying for a debate in Westminster Hall or for an Adjournment debate would be a good opportunity to raise it further. However, it is important in all industrial disputes that passengers are also taken into account. I am sure he would agree that that is the right balance in all disputes.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): I welcome the Government’s commitment to extensive investment in our road network, such as the A303 and A358 in my constituency. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate in Government time on how we can capitalise on that investment to deliver jobs, housing and skills development?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is a great champion for his constituency. I have spent many hours queuing patiently on the A303, so I understand his desire to see it upgraded. More specifically, new infrastructure brings jobs and growth in every constituency, and the Government have committed to massive new investment in capital infrastructure spending. He may wish to raise that in a Westminster Hall debate to give all colleagues the opportunity to talk about this Government’s work to build the economy.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I hope the Leader of the House heard my question to the Prime Minister yesterday about my constituent Lola Ilesanmi and her daughter, who is under threat of female genital mutilation. Unfortunately, the Prime Minister’s response was not adequate—it was almost as bad as the letters and responses I have had from the Home Office—so may we have a debate on the processes of the Home Office and the measures in place to protect women suffering from domestic violence and women and girls under threat of FGM?

Andrea Leadsom: Nobody in this House would for a moment condone or have anything other than disgust and abhorrence at the whole subject of FGM—it is an
appalling abuse of young girls and young women, and nobody would condone it for a moment. This Government have made a huge effort to stamp out FGM. It is extraordinarily difficult to do that, but we are breaking through. At least through the hon. Lady’s question today we will be able to highlight again the plight of those suffering this appalling abuse. She raises a specific constituency point, and I urge her to raise that in Home Office questions or indeed to continue to raise it in PMQs. She has the support of the whole House in seeing this stamped out.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Colin Smith received contaminated blood in 1983, when he was just eight months old. That blood turned out to be from an Arkansas prison, and he died aged just seven, having spent his whole life fighting illness. Please, for Colin’s family and for all those affected, may we have an opportunity before the recess to debate the new reports that suggest that risks of contaminated blood were known and discussed from 1980, because those affected need a public inquiry to get to the truth?

Andrea Leadsom: I totally agree that the contaminated blood situation over several decades, which has affected people in so many different ways, was a terrible thing to happen. The hon. Lady will appreciate that successive Governments have, over decades, reviewed the situation and made compensation available to all those victims. I am aware that the last review, in 2015, made further recommendations and that there are concerns about the possibility that there was some cover-up. I encourage her to seek an opportunity for a debate, to try to air that issue further.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): As we have heard, the broken business rates system is very detrimental to business. Frankly, it is a shambles—that view is echoed in businesses right across York, including those trading in the Shambles. May we, as we heard in PMQs, see some action to address, because we were promised this in February and it has not come to light of day? I would therefore like an urgent statement on why it has not been.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will know that rateable values are set independently by the Valuation Office Agency and reflect open market rental value. The Government do not intervene in that independent exercise, but I do understand that if the market rent for the area has changed, rateable values change with that. She will be aware that the Chancellor announced a £300 million discretionary fund over four years, from 2017-18, to deal with issues of business rates changing for particular businesses. That has been made available to local authorities so that, at their discretion, they can support individual businesses. That has been made available to local authorities so that, at their discretion, they can support individual businesses in dealing with their issues.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): The “Companies & Markets” section of the Financial Times carried an article this Monday on how investment in the car industry has slumped amid Brexit concerns. That issue was raised with me numerous times during the election, as I have a large Ford plant in my constituency. What is clear from the article and from the experience of Ford workers is that new investment is not coming to the plant, and it has slumped by 30% across the UK. The Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders has said that there will be a devastating impact, and it will “permanently damage” the UK car industry, if this is not addressed when Britain leaves the customs union and the single market. May we have a debate on the impact of Brexit on the automotive industry?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises an important issue for her constituency. The UK has a thriving automotive industry, and I am sure she will be delighted that we are bringing forward measures to support electric vehicles and to be a world leader in that area. She may also be pleased to know that the Department for International Trade figures released today show a record-breaking number of foreign direct investment projects coming into the UK—up 2% on the 2015-16 figure. The direction is absolutely the right one, but she may well wish to raise specific issues for Ford in her constituency through a Westminster Hall debate.

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): Before the 2015 general election, Chancellor Osborne made a commitment to the residents of Warrington that the new Mersey gateway bridge and the existing Runcorn bridge would be toll free. Early this year, a junior Transport Minister broke that promise. May I request that the Leader of the House arrange for the Secretary of State for Transport to come here to make a statement to inform Members as to when the Government will announce that they will keep their promise? Alternatively, will she arrange a debate, as this issue is affecting the whole region?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point for his constituency, and he will be pleased to know that there will be Transport questions on Thursday 13 July, when I am sure he will be able to raise that with Ministers.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): May we have a debate on Home Office intrasensure? Will a Minister come to this House to explain why, despite following all Home Office advice when submitting his application for extension of leave to remain, my constituent Akakpo Dosse Kangni-Soukpe and his wife have been stripped of their status and forced to quit their jobs, leaving their children, two of whom are British citizens, destitute? May we have an urgent debate on and review of Home Office procedures that leave so many people in such vulnerable situations?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a worrying case in his constituency, and I am sure he will want to raise it either at oral questions to the Home Office or through writing to Ministers. As we all know, the UK Border Force does have an MPs’ hotline and deals as a matter of priority with MPs’ cases, so he may he wish to take this up directly with that body.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): In 2015, the Government promised not to sell HMS Ocean and not to close Stonehouse barracks and the Royal Citadel in Plymouth, but the helicopter carrier and both bases are now up for sale. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate on base closures and how we retain helicopter carrier capabilities at Devonport?
Andrea Leadsom: First, let me welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place and wish him success in this House. He is raising something dear to all our hearts: the fortunes of our military, be it the Royal Navy, Royal Air Force or Army. Sadly, I fear that his views are not shared by many on his side of the House, who argue against protecting our citizens. Nevertheless, his point has been heard and I am sure he will be raising it with Ministers whenever he can.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It has been common practice in the NHS, for example, for employees to be required to repay redundancy payments if they secure another job in the health service within a certain period of time. Given that several former Members who lost their seats at the last election have now taken up paid roles as Government advisers, will the Leader of the House set aside some time for a debate as to whether it is appropriate for Members to receive redundancy payments if they shortly thereafter take up a taxpayer-funded role?

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab) Name names.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady shouts from a sedentary position, “Name names”. My concern, and that expressed by many Members across the House, has in fact been that Members who have lost their seats, particularly this time around, have in some cases genuinely struggled. The Leader of the House role comes with an ability to feed into the policies for Members’ pay and expenses. The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, but I think he will find that Members from across the House are in fact concerned that Members who lose their seats are not being fairly treated—that is quite the opposite of the point he is raising.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I am sure that Members from both sides of the House would want to wish a happy 69th to the NHS, which clocked up that milestone yesterday, but local provision seems to be less and less healthy. My area has lost two accident and emergency facilities and if the current transformation plan goes ahead, there will be more beds in an average DFS than in Ealing hospital. May we therefore have an urgent debate, in Government time, on the future of the NHS?

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): The shadow Leader of the House and other Members have raised an important question: why has there not been an Opposition day since 25 January? Given the scarcity of substantive Government business and the huge number of issues raised by the Opposition, why does the Leader of the House refuse to schedule one before the summer recess? Or does she want to commit to one now?

Andrea Leadsom: There are Standing Orders that cover Opposition days, sitting Fridays, Backbench Business days and so on, and the Government are working on setting out when those days will be through the usual channels. The House will be informed as soon as possible.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I suggest the hon. Gentleman waits till the end of business questions. I am not going to change my ruling.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Last week I mentioned just a few of the failings of the Secretary of State for Scotland and challenged the Leader of the House to list some of his achievements. In her response, she said that he has spoken up for energy in Scotland and that he has been “an enormous advocate for...Scottish agriculture”.—[Official Report, 29 June 2017; Vol. 626, c. 745-46.]

What about the fact that he stood by when the Government pulled the plug on carbon capture and storage and on onshore renewables—investment in renewables is now down 95%—and that the Government have withheld nearly £200 million of EU funding that was meant for Scottish farmers? If there are supposedly his achievements, can the Leader of the House list any other outstanding achievements that make my point—that he is not standing up for Scotland—for me?

Andrea Leadsom: May I say that that is utter nonsense and not worthy of the hon. Gentleman? Would he like to mention the Secretary of State for Scotland’s support for the Scottish oil and gas sector? He gave hours and hours of commitment to the discussion of a package of fiscal reliefs to support the oil and gas sector in Scotland. I was an Energy Minister myself, so I know very well what he did in the energy space: he spent hours with me working on a supply chain to give Scottish fabrication yards the chance to build the parts of offshore wind turbines. But the hon. Gentleman does not mention any of that. This is a petty and spiteful act from an Opposition who should be ashamed of themselves. The Secretary of State for Scotland has spoken up for the people of Scotland at every opportunity.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): In the previous Parliament, the Public Accounts Committee and several constituency Members from all parties expressed concerns about Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs estate reorganisation. It appears that major contracts were signed while Parliament was dissolved, which appears to fly in the face of official guidance to the civil service on not making big decisions on commercial contracts during purdah. Will the Leader of the House, the champion of the House in the Government, undertake
to look into this matter and report back, or ensure that a Minister reports back? As HMRC is not a ministerially led Department, will she grant a debate in Government time so that Members can express their concerns directly?

Andrea Leadsom: If the hon. Lady would like to raise specific issues relating to HMRC processes, I will certainly take them forward for her, but I wish to use this opportunity to point out that since 2010 HMRC has secured £150 billion for this country in additional compliance revenues as a result of its actions to tackle tax evasion, tax avoidance and non-compliance. In 2016 alone, HMRC collected record revenues of £26.5 billion from compliance activities. We have secured nearly £3 billion from offshore tax evaders and more than £2.5 billion extra from the very wealthiest since 2010. If the hon. Lady or anyone else in the Chamber would like to praise HMRC for its contribution to sorting out the economy and getting us back to living within our means, I would be delighted to hear it.

Richard Graham: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Earlier, the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) described the NHS as a Labour institution. The NHS is not a political organisation: it does not belong to any political party. There are Government Members and Opposition Members who have served the NHS, as there are Members who have served in the armed forces and other public services. Were she still in her place, I would have asked the hon. Lady, who is a reasonable woman, to withdraw her remark. Is it in order to ask you, Mr Deputy Speaker, whether that remark could be withdrawn?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Absolutely not, as you well know. You have put your views on the record, but it is not a point of order or a matter for the Chair.

Exacting the European Union and Global Trade

1.25 pm

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Exiting the European Union and global trade.

This is an important debate, not only because it is our first full debate on global Britain, but because this debate was originally timetabled for the day on which the tragic terrorist attack on Westminster bridge took place. The thoughts of everyone in this House are, as ever, with the families of those who were killed and injured. None of us will ever forget the outstanding bravery of the emergency services and all those who helped to restore law and order, and who work tirelessly to keep us safe at all times.

We stand at a vital juncture for this country, ready to write a new chapter in our history. As we begin the process of withdrawing from the European Union, the Government have promised that we will hold a series of debates to allow the House to have its say on the future of the United Kingdom. I welcome that commitment and look forward to Government and Opposition colleagues being able to engage fully with the proposals of my Department and the Government.

The Department for International Trade was created as a result of the change of Government that followed the country’s vote to leave the European Union in June last year. It has enabled us to take a fresh look at our national approach to trade and investment. Trade is vital to our country’s economic wellbeing, and as we leave the EU we will be able to shape trade policy according to our own national interests. Leaving the EU represents an unprecedented opportunity for the United Kingdom. The EU Commission’s own website on trade states that 90% of global growth in the next 20 years will come from outside the EU. As one of the world’s largest economies, we have the chance to work with old and new partners to build a truly global Britain at the heart of international trade.

We will of course support the conclusion of all the EU’s ongoing free trade agreement negotiations while we are still a member, and seek to transitionally adopt all those existing third-party free trade agreements before we leave. As the Prime Minister has said, we want a deep and special partnership with the EU as we negotiate our exit.

The Department for International Trade will ensure that the promotion of British goods and services abroad is complemented by a continuing effort to keep the United Kingdom as a top destination for inward investment, and will help British companies abroad to make the right investment decisions that will grow our global footprint. As I indicated to the House earlier, figures published this morning showed record foreign direct investment into the UK in 2016-17, proving beyond doubt that Britain has the necessary economic fundamentals to attract investment from all around the world.

Foreign direct investment, as well as trade, creates prosperity and jobs throughout Britain. Free trade increases consumer choice, raises standards of living and makes
wages go further, as global competition drives down prices on everyday goods—a point to which I shall return later. In this task, our own history is on our side. For more than a century, our country was the commercial capital of the world, and we were among the first nations to recognise the benefits of free trade and economic liberty.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): I share the Secretary of State’s optimism about the future of our country once we leave the European Union. Does he agree that we should break the myth that we need trade deals to trade? Of course trade deals are important, but we can trade without them.

Dr Fox: I would distinguish between trade deals and trade rules. We of course need rules to govern the global trade environment, which is why we are committed to the World Trade Organisation—a subject to which I shall return later—but we do not explicitly need free trade agreements in order to trade. The trading environment is regulated in lots of other ways, such as mutual co-operation agreements. The hon. Lady is quite right that we can use several tools to shape the global environment.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): My right hon. Friend is right that, even if there is no free trade deal, we will be no worse off than the USA or Japan. May I ask him a direct question? The Lancaster House speech was admirably clear, and I am sure he can confirm that we are leaving the EU and the single market, but there was some doubt and comment about our status inside the customs union. Is he happy to confirm today that we are leaving the customs union?

Dr Fox: Our manifesto talked about what would happen when we had left the customs union. That was the basis on which I was elected, and, I assume, on which all Conservatives were elected.

Most of us in this House and, according to the polls, in this country believe in the principles of free trade and the benefits that it brings, yet in today’s world free trade is in need of a champion. For the first time in decades, the established order of fair, free and open global commerce, which has done so much to enrich and empower the world’s nations, is under threat. In April, the World Trade Organisation noted that, in 2016, world trade in goods grew by only 1.3%—the first time since 2001 that trade has grown more slowly than GDP. Yet the threat to growth and prosperity is going largely unrecognised. Globally, there are signs of an increasing tendency towards protectionism. Barriers to trade are going up across the world. A particularly worrying report by the WTO highlighted the acceleration in protectionist measures since the 2008 financial crash. Some of the worst culprits are the countries of the G7 and G20. The nations, including our own, that have gained the most from free trade are at risk of forgetting their own principles, yet protectionism hurts those whom it purports to help. That is especially important as the expansion of global production chains sees intermediate goods cross multiple borders before a final product is made. It means that barriers on imports damage a nation’s exports.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The right hon. Gentleman speaks about the customs union and the Lancaster House speech, but does he not share my concern, and the concern of the Scotch whisky industry, that the customs processes as they stand are creaking under pressure? I should declare an interest as the chair of the all-party group on Scotch whisky, which met for the first time last night. Those processes are being transformed into a new digital process, but there is little confidence that it will be able to cope with the process of Brexit. What guarantees can he give that industry that those issues will be solved?

Dr Fox: The hon. Lady raises a fair point about global trade facilitation. We have just signed the trade facilitation agreement, which aims to reduce border friction across the world. It is estimated that that is worth about £70 billion in the global economy. One of the biggest barriers facing Scotch whisky, however, is tariff barriers. The Department has been trying to talk to Governments such as India’s who have very high tariffs against Scotch whisky, which is not good for their own consumers because it encourages an illicit trade. I encourage all those Governments to indulge liberally in the pleasures of single malt—as I do myself.

By 2010, G7 and G20 countries were estimated to be operating some 300 non-tariff barriers to trade. By 2015, that number had mushroomed to more than 1,200. There are those who, having accrued great wealth, would pull up the drawbridge behind them. We cannot let that happen. This country’s own commitment to free trade was perhaps most clearly illustrated by the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846. The Conservative Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel rightly saw protectionism as an attempt to preserve the wealth of a privileged few at the expense of the many. Import tariffs were all but abolished and Britain’s free trade principles were created to put bread into the mouths of the hungry majority. Now, as then, it is free trade and competition that will do most to address inequality and safeguard the interests of working people. More than ever, it is up to nations that possess the economic and diplomatic means to reassert the rationale of free trade to do so.

Rishi Sunak (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way and for his powerful and optimistic speech on free trade. On reducing protectionism, does he agree that leaving the customs union will give us the ability to reduce import tariffs on many goods that we do not produce here at home, which will reduce costs for ordinary working families and benefit many developing countries by helping them trade into prosperity?

Dr Fox: That is an important point. At this morning’s International Trade questions, we made the argument that being outside the common external tariff will give us freedoms to help many developing countries in a way that we are currently unable to. I hope that that will act as a spur to others taking similar measures, because we will encourage poorer countries to trade their way out of poverty and become less dependent on international aid programmes. I do not think that that is a party political issue, but the question is how best to achieve it in practice.
On the progress that has been made, we have reduced poverty levels to their lowest in history. As the world’s emerging economies have liberalised trade practices, prosperity has spread across the globe, bringing industry, jobs and wealth where once there was only deprivation. According to the World Bank, the three decades between 1981 and 2011 witnessed the single greatest decrease in material deprivation in human history. It was a truly remarkable achievement.

The Leader of the Opposition has accused the Prime Minister of following “free trade dogma”. He went on to say that this has often been pursued at the expense of the world’s most fragile economies. In fact, any economist worth their salt can see that free trade has been one of the most potent liberators of the world’s poor. Let us take India as a specific example. In 1993, about 45% of India’s population sat below the poverty line as defined by the World Bank. By 2011, it was 22%—too many, but a phenomenal achievement. It is no coincidence that, in the intervening period, India had embraced globalisation and started to liberalise its economy. It is hard to imagine an international aid programme—even one as generous as our own—that would or could have been so effective on its own.

Sadly, it is also easy to find examples of where a lack of free trade has harmed the most vulnerable. If we want to see the contrasting results of open and closed economies, we should look across from China to the Korean peninsula, where so much attention is focused today. In 1945, both North and South Korea began from a very similar base, but while South Korea was more embracing of open trade and free markets, despite any shortcomings, Pyongyang turned inwards, with the tragic consequences for its citizens that we see to this day. [Interruption] I am happy to give way to the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) if she thinks that North and South Korea enjoy the same living standards today.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Of course what the right hon. Gentleman says about the situation in those two countries today is absolutely right. The point I was chuntering about was that what he described was not actually happening in South Korea in the 1960s and 1970s. A lot of the south-east Asian economies did have protection in those two decades in order to modernise and build up.

Dr Fox: I accept what the hon. Lady says, but that is why I specifically used the words “more embracing” of free trade and open markets. Despite the shortcomings, South Korea none the less created a far better standard of living for its people. Seoul is now at the heart of a thriving economy and, consequently, a dynamic democracy where freedom and prosperity are shared among its people. It should come as no surprise that, while 80% of South Koreans have access to the internet, less than 0.1% of North Koreans enjoy the same access. Perhaps most tragically, there is a greater than 10-year discrepancy in the life expectancy of those north and south of the demilitarised zone. That is why we recognise that trade and development form a fundamental and synergistic partnership. Trade flourishes where there are high levels of education, developed financial sectors and, hugely importantly, sound governance and minimal corruption. There is still much to do, but we would be both foolish and irresponsible to abandon the direction of travel. An open and free trading system is part of the global and national prosperity agenda.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): As always, my right hon. Friend presents a powerful case for free trade, but does he not agree that, sometimes, there is too narrow a vision of it? We tend to think about free trade in goods, because they are visible, and to talk about the problems and opportunities that exist, but we forget about the free trade in services, which are by far the largest part of what the UK has to offer to the rest of the world.

Dr Fox: My hon. Friend makes an excellent—and key—point. Getting the global economy moving requires the major liberalisation of services in the same way as we had the liberalisation of goods as the focus of the Uruguay round. One thing that comes from that is that countries such as the United Kingdom, where about 80% of the economy is service-driven, are less dependent on being part of a geographical bloc for trade. When it comes to trade in services, what matters is that we are dealing and trading with countries that are functionally similar rather than geographically proximate. That is a change in globalisation we would do well to understand in the debate as we leave the European Union.

It is not just about raising living standards in developing and developed countries. There is, I think, an even more compelling case for free trade. The prosperity it can create is the basis of a social stability that underpins political stability. We have seen that around the world. That political stability, in turn, underpins our security. In other words, they are all part of the same continuum, and we cannot disrupt one element without disrupting the whole. That is why Governments of both colours in this country have tended to see development, prosperity and security as a single policy objective. It is a truth that we need to understand in this interdependent, globalised era.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): It is not just us making this case. In the discussions with those who are involved in the World Trade Organisation—even though we are a member, we want to get back our voting rights—they have made it pretty clear that they celebrate the re-arrival of the UK as a voting member of the WTO for one vital reason: they feel that globally it has begun to stall and the UK is the single biggest exponent of free trade. It has always been, and they want to welcome us back for that reason alone, if nothing else.

Dr Fox: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is important that we can show our trading partners globally that whatever our differences in the mechanics through which we go about the task, there is an overwhelming belief in the concept of free trade in this country. As I said at the outset, the global trading environment needs someone to champion free trade at a time when many countries feel that we are rolling backwards, away from the progress that we have made. If we as a country can speak with a strong voice about the principles of free trade, citing examples from history as to why it has benefited some of the poorest people in the world, we will make a moral as well as an economic case.
Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): I am listening with interest to what the Secretary of State is saying, but one point that he has not touched on yet is exchange rates. Is it not absolutely essential that appropriate exchange rates should be arranged between nations so that trade can operate fairly? If a country depreciates massively, it can develop a big trade surplus, and China has done precisely that in recent decades. Does the Secretary of State not agree that exchange rates are crucial?

Dr Fox: That is an important point, but I would distinguish between artificial and intentional currency manipulation and a free market with floating currencies. I happen to believe that floating currencies are one of the ways in which we allow our economies to have shock absorption so that we do not take all the economic pain through unemployment. One of the problems with the existence of the euro is that some of the countries of southern Europe that might have chosen other mechanisms to adapt to the process of change had, in the end, to opt for high levels of structural unemployment because they were unable to do so. The hon. Gentleman’s point is correct, however. Artificial manipulation of currency is different from the workings of the general economy and floating currencies.

Such is the power of free trade that even if we ignore the social and humanitarian benefits that it has brought to the developing world, it would still be indispensable from a purely economic standpoint. During the 1990s, per capita income grew three times faster in the developing countries that lowered trade barriers than in those that did not. That effect is not confined to the developing world, either. Analysis by the OECD has indicated that a 10% increase in economic openness is associated with a 4% increase in output per head of the working population. In other words, free trade works.

Globalisation has been of huge and sustainable benefit to the world economy, through trade, migration, specialisation and innovation. Those advantages exist at every level, from macroeconomics right down to individual firms. Increased competition, economies of scale and global value chains have all contributed to a productivity revolution, boosting the output of firms across the globe. Although it might not always be noticed, the wider benefits of a liberal trade policy have spread to consumers and households by providing a wider choice of goods at a lower price.

In the decade to 2006, the real import price of clothing fell by 38%. In the same period, the price of consumer electronics, as we all know, fell by 50%, despite the rapid technological improvements that saw mobile phones go from a $4,000 brick that was hard to carry to computers no bigger than the palm of one hand. Those are the tangible benefits of trade, and their importance in improving the lives of the people of Britain must not be underestimated. Of course, in any rapidly changing economic environment, we should ensure that the country’s growing prosperity spreads to all corners of the United Kingdom. It is therefore not only right but important that Governments can mitigate the effects of globalisation and provide the tools through which individuals and economies can adapt and prosper. That is how we provide both economic opportunity and security in an era of sometimes bewildering change.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The Secretary of State talks about the interdependent global world. The British Ports Association warned that a hard Brexit could hurt small and medium ports, which rely on short sea trade. Its members, including Forth Ports in my constituency, are very worried about the hurdles of new customs requirements and costly tariff regimes. Given that 95% of international trade by tonnage goes through our ports, what action is being taken to address those concerns and ensure that Brexit will not damage vital industries trading through them?

Dr Fox: The first service we can do is not to add adjectives to the word Brexit, because what the Government intend to achieve is as open a trading relationship as possible. If we think about it, the free trade agreement that we will go on to negotiate with the European Union ought to be the easiest FTA in global history. We are starting in a zero-tariff environment and from absolute 100% regulatory and legal equivalence. The only way we would not reach a free and open trading environment would be if the politics of the process took precedence over the economics, prosperity and wellbeing of the people. That is the challenge.

I will give the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) a second challenge, as this is not just about Europe. The decisions we take will reverberate through the global economy. If we put trade and investment impediments into the European economy that do not exist today, that will cause ripples across the global economy that will be felt well beyond our borders.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): My right hon. Friend knows that all 47 ports in this country opposed the European Union port regulation, which was inimical to our national interest and the lifeblood of our trading relationships. Ports are central to this whole question, and that is another good reason for our leaving the EU.

Dr Fox: I do not really need any more reasons for the decision we have already made, but I am always happy to take another on board.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Could the Government make it clearer that we want an open trading relationship with our European partners and that it is up to the European Union to decide whether they want that or not? Will the Secretary of State also ask who is arguing for protectionist measures against an independent United Kingdom? I do not hear many voices in the EU arguing for that, and I think that that is just a fear put about by people who want us to stay in the European Union.

Dr Fox: Our debates are watched beyond our shores, so perhaps the first point to make is that we are leaving the European Union. There is not any chance that we will not leave the European Union. The British people have spoken and the process, including the parliamentary process, has begun to make that happen. As we do this, we have to look beyond our membership of the EU and determine what sort of global trading environment we want to live in. We are very clear about the model we want. I have travelled to other countries, and we are encouraging Governments beyond the EU to say to our European partners that it is in everybody’s interests—
including in Europe and in the wider global trading environment—that we maintain as open a global trading basis as we possibly can.

At a time when the direction of travel in the rest of the world is towards greater liberalisation, it would make no sense for Europe, for internal political reasons, to introduce impediments to that trading environment in the way some have suggested. I do not believe that that is in the interests of the citizens of Europe, whether in the United Kingdom or on the European continent. If we are guided not by abstraction but by the prosperity and wellbeing of our people in the negotiation, we are likely to come to the right outcomes.

To build a free trading world, the UK must continue to support, strengthen and promote the existing global trading structures. The World Trade Organisation is the home of the rules-based international trading system, as the shadow Secretary of State and I agreed earlier this morning, and we unequivocally support it. Its predecessor, the general agreement on tariffs and trade, was established in 1948 to offer a war-torn world stability, security and prosperity through international trade co-operation. The United Kingdom was there from the beginning, and for half a century we worked with our international partners in a series of ministerial rounds dedicated to removing barriers to trade and liberalising the global economy.

The WTO was established in 1994, following the success of the Uruguay round. For the first time, we had an international body with truly global reach that existed to regulate trade and to encourage nations to adhere to the principle of ever-greater trading freedom. If the WTO did not exist today, we would need to invent it. Britain is a founding member, and we are a member in our own right, but on leaving the EU we will need to update the terms of our WTO membership; at present all our commitments are applied through the EU as a whole. Constancy and continuity will be a key to our approach.

As I set out in the recent ministerial statement, we anticipate that our rights and obligations to other WTO members, as provided under the WTO agreements, will remain largely unchanged. We will achieve that through a process of replicating our current commitments, which will cause the minimum disruption to trade and the maximum certainty and confidence. I am grateful to the secretary-general of the WTO, Roberto Azevêdo, for confirming that the WTO fully supports this aim for stability. I thank him and his staff for the support they have given the United Kingdom in Geneva.

Let me also be clear that replicating the EU-WTO schedules for the UK’s independent use in no way prejudices the outcome of the article 50 negotiations with the EU. The process is largely technical and reflects the close ties of trade and commerce that we will continue to share with the EU, even after our exit. Throughout the process, it is imperative that we maintain transparency both with this House and with our fellow WTO members. I reiterate the offer that I made in private to the Opposition Front-Bench team: should they wish to visit the Geneva and Seoul and briefing with our ambassador and the secretary-general, the Government will happily facilitate that. The better informed we all are in the House in these discussions, the better.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): Quite often one hears in the press, and sometimes erroneously in this House, talk of “falling back” on WTO rules. Is that not a falsehood? WTO rules form the basis of any agreement going forward; they are not something to fall back on if there is no deal.

Dr Fox: Indeed, WTO rules are the basis on which the world trades. On top of the basic WTO rules and the most favoured nation status that they represent, we have a number of agreements that give us, in effect, exemptions. However, we trade freely with countries where we do not have a specific free trade agreement. At the present time, the United States is worth just under 20% of our exports—we do not have a specific free trade agreement, but we can trade very freely. That is not to say that through FTAs or mutual recognition agreements, mutual co-operation agreements and the other tools available to us, we cannot improve the functioning of the global trading system. We need to do so, and the Department for International Trade has a highly skilled team dedicated to the technical rectification of our WTO schedules. We are collaborating with businesses and officials within Whitehall and the WTO to ensure that our transition to independent membership is both smooth and fully understood by our trading partners.

James Cartidge (South Suffolk) (Con): My right hon. Friend is generous in giving way. He mentioned the word “transition”, which many have now mentioned—including those who supported the vote to leave—in smoothing the process of Britain leaving the EU. Does he support consideration of transitional arrangements in leaving the EU? Is he concerned about Michel Barnier’s comments today that any negotiations on transition will have to be in late 2018 at the earliest, which does not leave us much time?

Dr Fox: If we require a transition to a new environment, it would be common sense to do so, but it would not be acceptable for any of the elements that, in leaving the European Union, we sought to leave to be binding on that transitional agreement. However, that is part of the negotiation. It is a negotiation, and at any point in that I would not take too seriously or literally anything that the negotiators were saying in the public domain.

After we leave the European Union, we will uphold our principles as we negotiate free trade agreements with new partners around the world. Although we cannot negotiate and conclude FTAs while we remain in the EU, the Department has instigated 10 trade working groups with 15 different countries as well as a high-level dialogue with the United States, which will develop into a fully fledged trade working group later this month. Going forward, as I said to the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey), we may find that a new FTA may not be the correct solution for every partner, but we will look at all the measures available to us to ensure the best outcomes for citizens and businesses across the UK. Our dedication to free trade will be constant. With every nation, we will work to remove barriers, liberalise trade and secure market access for British businesses.

As we move forward towards ever greater trade liberalisation, we will ensure that our trade remedies continue to protect and promote Britain’s producers.
If the first duty of Government is the protection of its citizens, the Department for International Trade must extend that obligation to our businesses and work to defend the drivers of our prosperity from rule-breaking and anti-competitive measures. Free trade is not a free-for-all; that is why we have the WTO. If we support a rules-based system, we must ensure that those rules are respected and rigorously enforced.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I understand and take on board everything my right hon. Friend says about the WTO and a rules-based system, but, as he observed earlier in his speech, the bulk of our economy, and the bulk of our competitive advantage, lies in the services sector, which in the case of the financial sector is not particularly covered by WTO rules. Will the Government be equally committed to making sure that we have global liberalisation of the services sector, which is so critical to us?

Dr Fox: I think I said that earlier, and I also said that this morning in questions. If there is a real cause for us to champion beyond the basic case for free trade, it is liberalisation of the services sector. That is the way in which we will unlock the potential of many economies around the world—and, incidentally, it is the best way to unlock Britain’s economic potential in trade.

In my discussions around the world I have been struck by the way in which products—either goods or services—that originate in the United Kingdom are regarded as being at the top end of the quality market. That is where we are best able to compete. There are those who would make the case for a Britain with lower regulatory standards and fewer protections in place across the economy for the environment, for workers and for consumers. Let me tell the House that Britain will not put itself at the low-cost, low-quality end of the spectrum, as it would make no sense for this country economically to do so, nor morally would it give us the leadership we seek. I believe there is no place for bargain-basement Britain. High standards and high quality are what our global customers demand, and that is what we should provide. From our food and drink industry to our technological expertise and our financial services, people across the world buy British because they see the Union flag as a kitemark of quality. The key to our long-term prosperity lies not in abandoning our values and standards but in reinforcing them. High-quality, high-reputation goods and services are the route to highly skilled, highly paid jobs and future prosperity in this country.

This Government’s highest ambition is to build a Britain that works for everyone, not just for a privileged few. It must also be a global Britain, willing to support a rules-based trading system and champion the cause of free trade itself. We do not pretend that the era of globalisation is without its challenges, but we must never cease to show our citizens the benefits that free trade brings to their lives and to this country. We realise that the challenges and opportunities of globalisation, allied to the rapid change in technology, can produce their share of problems and insecurity. We must strive to address the negative aspects of globalisation and ensure that no one is left behind by the pace of change, while harnessing the power of the global economy to spread prosperity across Britain and our trading partners.

We must ensure that we equip our country with the skills necessary to navigate those challenges and that those who are disadvantaged are given the appropriate support. We must unfailingly uphold the principles of free trade across the world, nurturing prosperity and banishing poverty to the pages of history.

I believe that the vast benefits that global trade can bring to Britain and the world and the way in which my Department is working to secure those benefits across the whole of the UK are the key to success in the future. The Leader of the Opposition has wrongly dismissed free trade as political dogma, but to do so is to betray the very people the Labour party claims to represent. To attack free trade and to undermine our nation’s proud tradition will deny prosperity to those who need it most. I hope that all Members of this House, regardless of their political persuasion, want the benefits to be bestowed on this country and back our vision of Britain as a champion of global free trade and the benefits it brings.

Two centuries ago, Thomas Babington Macaulay described free trade as “one of the greatest blessings which a government can confer on a people.”

We intend to do just that. It is in our power to build a better and fairer Britain for future generations. We require courage and conviction to do that, particularly at a time when protectionism is rearing its ugly head. Prosperity, stability and security are the prizes for a strong, rules-based international trading order, and that is what we seek to achieve.

2.2 pm

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): First, I join the Secretary of State in paying tribute to PC Keith Palmer and all the other victims who suffered on that fateful day in March when this debate was last scheduled.

The Secretary of State is at the Dispatch Box fielding for the first time since the creation of his Department almost a year ago a debate on Government trade policy in Government time. It is not exactly normal practice for Trade Ministers to hasten to the Dispatch Box when the country has just posted one of the worst sets of balance of payments figures in its recorded history. Although I admire the right hon. Gentleman’s chutzpah, I am not entirely convinced about his timing. The figures released just last week by the Office for National Statistics show that in quarter 1, the UK’s current account deficit was £16.9 billion—a widening of £4.8 billion from a deficit of £12.1 billion in the previous quarter—most of which is due to the widening of the trade deficit. Despite sterling being so low, exports increased by only £1.7 billion, whereas imported goods increased by £4.3 billion—a widening of £2.6 billion.

James Duddridge: When we are importing more than we are exporting, surely it is easier to get a deal with our European colleagues, whose interest appears to be in continuing to export to us.

Barry Gardiner: I want us to get a deal. Of course we want the best deal for this country, but the hon. Gentleman has to take on board the fact that since the referendum
leaders.

**Dr Fox:** Some sectors will respond quickly to devaluation. For example, in food and drink there has been a 7.3% increase in our exports in this quarter. Why, in the light of the uncertainty the hon. Gentleman describes, does he think the figure for foreign direct investment in Britain has been at an all-time record in the past year?

**Barry Gardiner:** Let me be absolutely clear: we welcome foreign direct investment in this country—of course we do. We want people to be investing in our jobs, our economy and our future—

**James Cartlidge:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Barry Gardiner:** Perhaps if I can finish responding to the Secretary of State’s intervention, at an appropriate juncture the hon. Gentleman might catch my eye.

There is no difference between the Secretary of State and me on those matters. In fairness, I will say that in the past 50 years there have been 15 sets of quarterly balance of payments figures that have been worse than last week’s, and one of them was under a Labour Government, just after the global financial crisis. The other 14 have all been in the past five years, under the Conservatives.

It would be mean of me to give the right hon. Gentleman too hard a slapdown because the Chancellor has been doing it so effectively on behalf of us all. Only yesterday, we read that the Chancellor is demanding that the Secretary of State prove the case that our ability to strike trade deals after Brexit will make up for losing tariff-free access to the EU. In other words, the right hon. Gentleman is being asked to justify his job as the Secretary of State for International Trade once leaving the customs union gives us the competence—perhaps in this case I should say the right—to negotiate our own independent trade agreements.

**Mr Duncan Smith:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Barry Gardiner:** I will, in a little while.

A year on from the referendum, a year on from the Government’s announcement that they were taking back competence in international trade negotiations, the Cabinet is still divided on what it has all been about. That is extraordinary. The country is crying out for leadership, and all its current leaders can do is sit around the Cabinet table plotting who amongst them should be their next leader. A year on, what has been achieved?

**Mr Duncan Smith rose—**

**Barry Gardiner:** I give way to one of their previous leaders.

**Mr Duncan Smith:** The hon. Gentleman is busy asking the Government what their position is. We have set that out very clearly: out of the single market, out of the customs union, and making trade deals. As he speaks for the Opposition, perhaps he can now clarify what their position is. After the election, having fought on a manifesto containing a clear commitment to leave the European Union, Labour’s leader and shadow Chancellor said, “We are leaving the single market. We are leaving the customs union.” The right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) said, “We are leaving the single market. We are leaving the customs union.” But when the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) and his colleague the shadow Brexit Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), were interviewed, they never confirmed what their leader and the shadow Chancellor said. They have been doing an intricate dance around the matter, so I ask the hon. Gentleman a simple question: is the Labour party’s position to leave the single market, to leave the customs union and to make trade deals?

**Barry Gardiner:** I urge the right hon. Gentleman to read precisely what our manifesto says. We have made our position on those points extremely clear: we are leaving the European Union; that means that we want to secure the best benefits, and we will look to secure exactly what the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union said he would achieve, which is the exact same benefit benefits as we currently have inside the European Union.

**Mr Duncan Smith:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Barry Gardiner:** The right hon. Gentleman really must allow me to respond to his first intervention before seeking to follow it up with a second. The trouble with the right hon. Gentleman is that he does not want to listen to the answer. [Interruption.] Is he quite calm?

**Mr Duncan Smith:** No, I am not.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** Order. I am sure that Mr Gardiner will take the intervention when he wants to.

**Barry Gardiner:** As I was saying before I was persistently—and, I must say, quite rudely—interrupted, we have set out very clearly that we will try to secure exactly the same benefits that the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union claimed would be procured in the negotiations, but we are not fixated on the structures; we are fixated on the outcomes. But we will be leaving the European Union. The right hon. Gentleman can be assured that we are committed to honouring that manifesto commitment.

**Mr Duncan Smith rose—**

**Barry Gardiner:** No, the right hon. Gentleman has had his chance.

A year on, what has been achieved? It took Donald Trump’s Administration seven weeks to produce a trade policy paper. This maladministration has failed to do so in an entire year. I have now been asking the Secretary of State to produce a trade White Paper for seven months. How extraordinary it is that the Department for International Trade has existed for a year but has completely failed to set out its mission and vision in a White Paper so that British businesses can have some clarity about their future.
Nor was there any clarity in the Conservative manifesto. It was scant on detail and peppered with vague promises, such as:

“We will work to forge a new culture of exporting” and

“We will take a more active role in supporting British consortia to win...contracts”.

Of course, we were promised a trade Bill, which has now been confirmed in the Queen’s Speech. The accompanying notes actually state that one of the main benefits of the trade Bill will be:

“To meet the manifesto commitment to ‘introduce a Trade Bill’.

Well, yes, but it is something of a tautology.

I am heartened to note that the Secretary of State clearly read our manifesto, because since the general election his Department has adopted Labour’s manifesto pledge to guarantee market access for the least developed countries to the same level they currently have with the EU. Since the general election the Government have also agreed with Labour’s manifesto pledge to address trade remedies. If only they would agree to publish a trade White Paper that integrates industrial strategy with international trade policy, that creates a network of regional trade and investment champions to promote exports, that promises full transparency and scrutiny of future trade deals, and that builds human rights and social justice as a key strand in trade policy, perhaps our encounters at the Dispatch Box would become a lot more consensual.

The challenges we face in leaving the EU are not insurmountable. Ours is a great and proud country and we are an enterprising people. Our goods and services are among the best in the world, our economy is a dynamic and attractive marketplace for investment, and we will be a thought leader in the next wave of industrial growth. However, if we are to rise to these challenges, we need more than the patriotic flag-waving we have seen from the Government Front Bench; we need clarity and careful planning, which we have not had.

We are setting out to leave our major trading partner. Where is the road map? There is no White Paper. Where is the estimate of costs? That appears to be what the Chancellor has now started demanding. Government Ministers appear incapable of presenting anything approaching a unified view on the matter. The Prime Minister repeatedly tells us that “no deal is better than a bad deal”, and her Chancellor says that actually “no deal would be a very, very bad outcome for Britain”, while her Brexit Secretary tells us that he is “pretty sure”, but “not certain” and “not 100% sure”, that there will ever be a deal.

The truth is that no deal is not a trump card to be thrown on the negotiating table in some macho gesture; it is actually the procedural outcome of article 50, because if we fail to negotiate a deal within the two-year period, we will be ejected from the single market of the European Union and put on World Trade Organisation terms. From far from being a trump card to be played, no deal is actually a cliff edge over which we would be pushed.

**Kelvin Hopkins:** My hon. Friend quite rightly focuses on the trade deficit, which with the rest of the European Union is gigantic, but actually we have a trade surplus with the rest of the world, so the problem is essentially with our trade with the EU. Does that not put us in a very strong position to negotiate with the rest of the EU about whatever happens afterwards?

**Barry Gardiner:** I have absolutely said that I want us to be in a strong position in these negotiations, but what I also want is clarity from the Government about what the future will mean for our businesses.

**Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): My hon. Friend talks about the possibility of crashing out of Europe without a deal. If we do not achieve a deal in those negotiations, who will be responsible for not having achieved a deal?

**Barry Gardiner:** We must all hope that we will ensure that we get a deal, and that it will absolutely provide us with friction-free access for our goods and services.

**Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): We talk about whether no deal is better than a bad deal, and it is a card that we can play. I put it to the hon. Gentleman that not accepting that does not mean that we will get a good deal, but if we do not accept that no deal is an option, we are guaranteed not to get an exceptional deal. For example, if he was to go and buy a car and said, “I have to buy a car today”, or if he said, “I would like to buy a car, but I don’t have to buy it today”, which would he get a better deal for? And would he like to buy a car?

**Barry Gardiner:** The point I would make to the hon. Gentleman is that the triggering of article 50 was setting precisely the timeframe in which he was to buy the car. It said that within two years either we had to negotiate a deal, or we would be trading on World Trade Organisation terms. He makes my point precisely.

**Mr Jenkin:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Barry Gardiner:** I am sorry, but I will not give way again, because I have given way many times and I am conscious that more than 20 Members wish to participate in the debate, and we have to be fair to colleagues.

My party has consistently said that economic logic should dictate the outcomes of the Brexit negotiations. Certainly we must not jeopardise a positive new trade deal for some arbitrary immigration targets set for political reasons. We need a new trade deal with the EU. It must maintain the supply chains and business relationships that link us to the EU and that are so critical for jobs and economic wellbeing.

Let us remind ourselves just what is at stake. The European Union currently accounts for 44% of our exports. The EU remains our closest trading partner, in terms of the volume of trade and geographical proximity. The top 10 Commonwealth trading partners combined account for just 8% of our exports, and the entire Commonwealth—all 52 countries—accounts for just 9%. The Secretary of State once referred to protectionism as a class A drug. If he really thinks that his current round of trade dialogues could possibly make up for the

[Barry Gardiner]
There is no dichotomy between trade with the EU and trade with the rest of the world—that is simply absurd—but our global trade opportunities will be shaped by our future relationship with the EU, whatever that is. Prospective trade agreement partners will want to know what trading bilaterally with the UK will mean for access onwards into the EU.

**Kelvin Hopkins:** Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Barry Gardiner:** My hon. Friend does not want to see a decline in jobs in any sector of this country. It is really not right simply to dismiss the fact that, if we do not secure friction-free, tariff-free arrangements with the European market, those jobs could be prejudiced in this country. I am sure that he would want to take cognisance of that.

Cross-border data flows are a key cornerstone of the digital economy. They help to drive UK innovation, economic growth and business efficiency through facilitating data transfers between organisations located in different countries. To help our economy grow and create jobs in the UK, we need to create a trade environment that drives innovation and positions the UK as a leader in the digital economy. techUK speaks for business when it says that the Government need to facilitate access to both the European market and the rest of the world, but this requires appropriate cross-border data flow arrangements with our different trading partners. It sounds simple. It is not.

The Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership negotiations on the EU’s privacy shield framework to replace the safe harbour privacy principles demonstrated that facilitating cross-border data flows between the European system and the American system is a genuine challenge that will not be addressed overnight in future free trade agreements. We cannot simply create a separate trade policy on this issue for the EU and a different one for non-EU countries. The direction we take on one influences our options on the other. Will the Minister set out what discussions he has had with industry on this and what decision, if any, he has taken about the appropriate way to go forward? He will appreciate that the issue of cross-border data flows is not just about facilitating market access. It is also about the regulatory framework to provide data protection for privacy and human rights.

The second example of the inseparability of EU trade and our policy for trade with the rest of the world relates to the future support that we provide our agricultural industry. The UK’s food and farming industry is not only important to our national identity: agriculture also contributed £9.7 billion to the UK economy in 2016. Our food and farming industry is the product of decades
of shaping by the European single market and the £3 billion-plus of support from the common agricultural policy.

The EU’s combined rights and shared obligations under the WTO include a specified limit on the amount of agricultural subsidies that the EU may utilise. The UK is entitled to a share of these as part of the Brexit divorce and could, in theory, continue with a modified version of the CAP. But the Secretary of State will know that there are rumours that his Government are considering a deal whereby the UK would give up a share of its agricultural subsidies to the EU in order to secure a more favourable deal for other sectors of our economy. Will he guarantee today that our future trading relationships will not be based upon the sacrificing of British farmers and their livelihoods?

It is not just the EU that will be pressurising the UK to drop its share of agricultural subsidies. A number of countries have already expressed interest in free trade agreements with the UK on the basis of liberalising our agricultural market. Countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa are active members of the Cairns Group, which is a WTO negotiating group precisely for agricultural trade liberalisation and the reduction of subsidies. Does the Secretary of State regard this liberalisation as positive for our farmers?

**Helen Goodman:** I am extremely concerned to hear what my hon. Friend is saying given that there are 400 sheep farmers in my constituency, who would be very badly affected were we to have a flood of cheap lamb imports from Australia and New Zealand. Does he agree that there can be no virtue in our destroying the hill farmers in our country to benefit the sheep farmers in wealthy countries such as Australia and New Zealand?

**Barry Gardiner:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to point out that, were we to go on to WTO terms—from memory, the tariff rate for sheepmeat is about 44%—we would absolutely destroy the capacity of our hill farmers in particular to compete with foreign imports.

The Government need to come clean and give clarity to the British food and farming industry on our future trade policy options and what that means for the industry. It is not good enough to tell farmers that the status quo will be maintained until 2020 and then leave an abyss as to what options are available for their future. These people need a comprehensive international trade policy, and they need to know what it is.

Beyond Brexit, as the United Kingdom once again assumes competence for its own independent trade agreements, the Secretary of State must set out how he is pursuing agreements that share the benefits of globalisation more equitably. One can only wonder that this Government thought it sensible to embark upon a new industrial strategy without first publishing a White Paper. Has he introduced a trade Bill in the Queen’s Speech but, as of this moment, he has not set out to Parliament or to business any policy on which to base it.

The Secretary of State has been travelling around the world holding preliminary talks with his counterparts. In fact, he has recently returned from a visit to the USA. When the Prime Minister first announced the start of preliminary talks with the USA, the American Farm Bureau Federation wasted no time in confirming that it would seek food hygiene changes in any UK-US deal, namely to end restrictions on US exports of chlorine-washed chicken and hormone-grown beef. Will the Secretary of State confirm to us that, in any talks about future trade deals, the sovereignty of our food safety and environmental protection standards will be not be sacrificed in the name of regulatory harmonisation?

An industrial strategy and international trade White Paper should have come together precisely because of the interdependence of trade, job creation, and economic growth. That makes Labour Members fearful that the Government have not done the proper assessment of the danger that future trade arrangements could pose for job losses and wage depression. The Government have put the cart before the horse. A trade White Paper should set out what the UK’s future policy on trade defence instruments will be. The UK currently has in place a series of trade defence measures, such as anti-dumping measures against China—and, to a lesser degree, India and Malaysia—on steel, other metals, and solar panels. The UK has famously opposed such measures at the EU. Now that we will be able to set our own trade policy, the Government must tell us whether they will stick to that line. If they do not plan to introduce trade defence measures, they need to set out whether and how they will protect and support sensitive sectors such as the steel industry and the solar panel industry from cheap imports.

The Government must also weigh whether they can afford to take a tough stance with countries like China and India with which they will be looking to conclude trade deals—or will they sell out our steel sector and others? The UK steel sector is in an existential crisis. My hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland, who chaired the all-party parliamentary group on steel, and my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), who launched the “Steel 2020” report earlier this year alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley), expressed outrage at the Government’s leaked memo that suggested steel would not be a priority industry post Brexit, threatening to destroy the very livelihoods of communities across England and south Wales. Similar concerns were raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central, as the ceramics industry in the Potteries faces increasing competition from Chinese dumping on world markets. The British Government have for the past number of years been blocking efforts by the EU to introduce the sort of anti-dumping measures employed by the US by repeatedly exercising a veto and actively encouraging a blocking group of other nations. One official in Brussels is reported as saying:

“The British are sacrificing an entire European industry to say thank you to China for signing up to the nuclear power project at Hinkley Point, and pretending it is about free trade.”

It is right that we reach out to our international counterparts, but travelling around the world to hold “pre-negotiations” is no substitute for clear policy that sets out what our negotiating armoury is. An international trade White Paper should set out the Government’s principles—a clear plan of what the UK intends to achieve through future trade negotiations.

**Mr Jenkin:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?
Barry Gardiner: No, I am about to conclude.

To that end, I ask the Minister to respond to the following questions about the Government’s international trade policy. What are their principal trade policy objectives? What will be their guiding principles for our future negotiations? How will they seek further liberalisation from our current tariff levels, and in which sectors? What transparency and parliamentary scrutiny will be given over our future trade negotiations? Will they commit to disclosing whether any obligations in trade agreements, both those in negotiation and finalised, are the motivation for legislative amendments before the House or regulatory changes by the Government? How will they ensure that our future trade agreements benefit British small and medium-sized enterprises as well as big business? How do they propose to protect and enhance workers’ rights? How will they address human rights within the context of new trade agreements? How will sustainable development be a guiding principle for our trade policy? How will they ensure that current environmental protections are maintained and enhanced in future trade agreements? What investment dispute resolution model, or models, are the Government willing to adopt?

The Department’s recruitment advertisements suggest that the priority trade sectors are healthcare, financial services, and education; clearly, food and farming do not feature among its priorities. How will trade policy address the sectors that do not appear to have been identified as a priority? Will the Government be excluding devolved Administrations and local government agencies from trade agreement commitments on Government procurement? How will they ensure that British businesses maintain access both to European markets and the markets of other trading partners, especially where there is considerable regulatory divergence between these markets? Will the UK be adopting any non-conforming measures for investment and service commitments in its future trade agreements?

By providing comprehensive answers to all these questions and publishing an international trade White Paper, the Government may be able to restore business confidence in the fact that they are holding current trade dialogues and working groups that are backed by a clear and strategic plan. If not, it will reinforce the idea that we are on the wrong track, as we are still at the beginning of the process without a clear endgame and lacking a strategic understanding of the issues at stake for the UK economy and for jobs in this country.

2.34 pm

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): I would like to quote what Angela Merkel has said quite recently, but first I would like to say that I entirely endorse every single word that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said—not to flatter him, but because it is practical. He has shown a command of the subject that completely belies the little-fattle that the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) talked about. It has been my happy experience to notice that my right hon. Friend has a complete command of the subject.

What my right hon. Friend said is enormously important. That includes, in particular, the historical—but not nostalgic—background to his remarks. This country has, for the past 400 years, built up a policy of external, global trading, right the way through from the Elizabethan period—in fact, even earlier than that, in the late 15th century. He mentioned Robert Peel. I hope he will not mind my mentioning the fact that Peel was driven into the repeal of the corn laws by no less than Richard Cobden and John Bright during the massive battle over that issue. That liberalised the whole trading system. Indeed, the French commercial treaty of 1860—the first ever free-trade treaty in the world—was negotiated on the initiative of John Bright by Richard Cobden, with Michel Chevalier, who was the president of the French board of trade at the time. This is the basis on which our history has been developed. We have been right all the time that we have stuck with free trade.

I have been much encouraged by the attitude of other countries, including in my right hon. Friend’s meeting with Mr Ross in the United States only a few days ago. With regard to the United States, only one and a half hours ago I watched a live speech by Donald Trump from Poland. Among other things, he said that we must get rid of Government bureaucracy, deal with over-regulation and insist on sovereignty. He said that is the basis of freedom for sovereign nations. My right hon. Friend spoke about our ability to conclude our own trade agreements. That is why we have to unshackle ourselves, by virtue of leaving the customs union, from the fact that the European Commission determines our trade policies—there is no getting away from that.

The hon. Member for Brent North is in a bit of a pickle because, as he knows perfectly well, only last week the hon. Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) tabled an amendment on the single market, and it was defeated by the Opposition themselves—they were not prepared to go along with it. I have heard similar remarks made with regard to the noble Lord Adonis’s debate in the House of Lords. There is a kind of schizophrrenia on these questions among Labour Members. They do not really know where they stand, and they are completely confused, but I think that a sense of realism is coming into it. I pay tribute to the extremely sensible Opposition Members who are beginning to realise that we cannot stay in the single market and the customs union and leave the European Union, because the two things are completely inconsistent. I know that the hon. Member for Brent North accepts that now.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD) rose—

Sir William Cash: I will not give way just yet.

The speech by Mr Barnier today is extremely relevant, and I have the benefit of having the full text here. I will not go through every detail of it, I can assure you, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I note that some of the things that he said are highly relevant to what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State rightly pointed out in his speech. On the question of what happens if there is no deal, Mr Barnier said:

“Here also, I want to be very clear: in a classic negotiation, ‘no deal’ means a return to the status quo. In the case of Brexit, ‘no deal’—

he claimed,

“would be a return to a distant past.”

He is wrong—that is not the case. I think the hon. Member for Brent North said that under the World Trade Organisation tariffs, there would be a 40% tariff on lamb, but even Mr Barnier says that custom duties would include

“an average of 12% on lamb and also fish”,
which is very different from what the hon. Gentleman asserted. I do not blame him—he was speaking from memory, so I am not criticising him—but I am just pointing out what Mr Barnier said. 

Mr Barnier also made the extraordinary assumption: 

“In practice, ‘no deal’ would worsen the ‘lose-lose’ situation which is bound to result from Brexit.”

Again, he is wrong. He went on to say: 

“And I think, objectively, that the UK would have more to lose than its partners.”

That is just not so. He then went on to reveal what is really going on at the EU and with his negotiating position: 

“I therefore want to be very clear: to my mind there is no reasonable justification for the ‘no deal’ scenario. There is no sense in making the consequences of Brexit even worse. That is why we want an agreement.”

They want an agreement because they know, just as Allister Heath, the distinguished editor of The Sunday Telegraph, pointed out in an article two weeks ago, that German car makers are getting really worried about the idea that there will not be an agreement, because that is not in their interests either.

On trading relationships, it is absolutely essential to remember that, while we will continue to have some 40% of our trade—although the figure is declining—with the internal market, or the framework of the remaining 27 member states, we run a monumental deficit of £71 billion a year with the EU, as the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) has said. That figure went up by £10 billion last year alone, and we do not even have this year’s figures, which will be even greater. The Office for National Statistics may have indicated to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State how much worse they will be by this time next year.

By the same token, our global trade surplus with the rest of the world, in goods and services, imports and exports—that is the golden thread and the parameter that international trade statistics rely on—is expanding at an enormous, accelerating rate. That is the basis of our future prosperity. I say with respect to Opposition Members that more effective trade with the rest of the world, including taxing companies, will result in greater profitability. Out of that enormously growing prosperity zone, we will be able to pay for the public services that the public want and we want. The national health service will actually have more money at its disposal as a result of our successful international trading relationship with the rest of the world.

Mr Barnier went on to make an interesting observation: 

“To my British partners I say: a fair deal is far better than no deal.”

That may be how it looks, but the truth is that they have to be very careful that they do not put us in the position of having to accept the idea of no deal. If that happens, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said, the advantages to us of trading on WTO terms are simply not unsatisfactory at all—quite the opposite. We all need to be realistic.

Interestingly, Mr Barnier then referred to the great port of Zeebrugge, which he said he will visit shortly, “and for which the UK is the primary market with 17 million tonnes of roll-on roll-off traffic in 2016”.

He went on to say that he could not imagine, in the interests of the UK, Flanders and Belgium, that it would be a good idea to have

“an interruption of supply or a highly efficient organisation being called into question.”

We do not want a trade war over ports with the rest of the European Union. As I pointed out in an intervention, it was the EU that introduced the ports regulation. We had a massive row in the House of Commons, including in Committee, and I have been dealing with the issue as Chairman of the European Scrutiny Committee for the past two years. It is, however, going ahead, and the reason for that is that there is no way we can stop it. That is the response to the questions that have been asked. The reality is that until we get our sovereignty back and get the ability to run our own ports system on our own terms, we will be subjected to things like the ports regulation, which was put through by a majority vote behind closed doors. Nobody really knows who decided what. I tried to find out, but we could not make any serious progress in discovering who was making decisions. A lot of it, I think, was coming from Hamburg, because it has an enormous interest in preserving its own position.

The imposed rules were rejected by every single one of our 47 ports—not just the employers but the trade unions, which all piled in and said, “We can’t tolerate this new ports regulation.” Yet there it is, going through, if it has not gone through already while we were away for the general election. The bottom line is that our ports are the arteries for the lifeblood of our international trade, and they have been such for four centuries, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said.

Mr Jenkin: I remind my hon. Friend and the House that the reason it is a ports regulation is that when it was a directive it was blocked by the European Parliament. So undemocratic is the EU’s legislative system that the Commission can force it through as a regulation, so even the European Parliament cannot block it. What kind of democracy is that, and is it not a good thing that we are getting back control over our laws?

Sir William Cash: My hon. Friend and I have been battling on these questions for 30 years, including since Maastricht. He hits the nail on the head. Democracy is lacking in the European Union. The freedom of choice to which Donald Trump referred today—the freedom of sovereign nations to decide their own democratic decision-making processes, including the right to determine their own trade policies—does not mean that there is anything negative about our ability to deliver what is in our national interest. All our history, and every single aspect of our life in this Parliament for centuries, has depended on our ability to make up our own minds about what is in the interests of our own electorate, based on the general elections at which they exercise their freedom of choice. That freedom of choice is based on the word “freedom”.

The key point is that, as the likes of John Bright and Richard Cobden understood, freedom includes freedom of choice—freedom of choice in the marketplace and economics, and freedom of choice to make electoral decisions in the ballot box. That is why they worked towards giving working people the right to vote in 1867. It is all about freedom; when we have that freedom,
understands what he is doing. Príncipe, and many people wonder whether he really

Somalia, South Sudan, Mauritania and São Tomé and Príncipe, and many people wonder whether he really understands what he is doing.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman complains that the European Union is not democratic, while at the same time worrying about it being a superstate. The reality is that the European Union is a regional trade agreement, of which there are many in the world. One hundred and eighty-eight states of the United Nations are in regional trade agreements. Only five are not in regional trade agreements, and thus have the type of sovereignty that he has been talking about. The hon. Gentleman is taking the UK towards the type of sovereignty enjoyed by East Timor, and thus have the type of sovereignty that he has been talking about. The hon. Gentleman is taking the UK towards the type of sovereignty enjoyed by East Timor, and thus have the type of sovereignty that he has been talking about.

Sir William Cash: I know where the hon. Gentleman is coming from, but I simply say that even the leader of his party has more or less had to abandon the pursuit of the independence of Scotland, which is what underpins that question. [Laughter. / That is the bottom line. Comparisons between our great country and Somalia and Sudan are simply absurd, because this is a great country that has been making its own laws for centuries.

We went into the European Community with hope, and I voted yes in the 1975 referendum because I wanted to see whether it could work. My 30 years in the European Scrutiny Committee have proven absolutely that it does not. It is undemocratic and operates behind closed doors, and I doubt whether even that applies in some of the countries to which the hon. Gentleman has referred.

I now want to conclude—

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): Hear, hear!

Sir William Cash: I always know that I am making an impact when the hon. Member for Wantage starts wanting to get to his feet.

Mr Vaizey: Right hon. Friend.

Sir William Cash: He is my right hon. Friend—my very good friend. [Laughter. / I have great respect for him, although we do not always agree about everything. The same is true of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), who is, I suspect, on much the same track as him.

We enjoy a trade surplus of £34.4 billion with the rest of the world. As I said, yes, 44% of our trade is with the EU—

James Cartlidge: Will my hon. Friend give way on that point?

Sir William Cash: Yes, all right.

James Cartlidge: Is the surplus to which my hon. Friend has referred not smaller than our surplus in services with the EU?

Sir William Cash: It is the aggregate of goods and services. When we consider whether we are making a deficit or a surplus, we have to look at the totality of the position.

Mr Crawford Falconer, the chief trade negotiation adviser, has an enormous amount of experience, and I am extremely glad to hear that he has been given the job of negotiating with countries such as the USA, Canada and Australia. Last year, our trade surplus with the USA was £39.6 billion and our trade surplus with Canada was £1.3 billion. In 2015, we had a trade surplus of £3.7 billion with Australia. They have all said that they want to trade bilaterally with us. It is absolutely right that we should go into those negotiations on the basis that they will lead to greater prosperity for everybody, including ourselves.

Such trading arrangements are the means by which our economic growth and our prosperity will increase exponentially. They will provide security and stability, which will allow us to deliver an effective economy and public services from the taxation of the companies involved. It is a virtuous circle and we are dedicated to it not out of ideology or from any sense of anti-Europeanism, but simply because it works. It is a good policy. The Prime Minister has put her will behind it, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has explained it thoroughly and well today.

Whatever the circumstances, and whether we were remainers or leavers, we must continue with our current policy. Angela Merkel says that what matters is the future of Europe, not Brexit. That is the policy of the German Chancellor. Let us seize the opportunity to make Brexit work in our national interest.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. After the next speaker, I will be setting a six-minute time limit. A lot of Members have put in to speak, and it may have to be reduced further.

2.54 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I associate myself and other SNP Members with the Secretary of State’s comments about PC Keith Palmer—this debate was due to take place on the day of the attack on Parliament—and our thoughts continue to be with him, his family and his friends.

I welcome you to the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is nice to see that we have gender balance among the Speaker and Deputy Speakers.

I rise to speak for the first time in a substantive debate since my re-election as the MP for Livingston—I am grateful to the people of Livingston for re-electing me—and since my appointment as SNP spokesperson on international trade and investment.

I pay tribute to my former colleague and Member for Ochil and South Perthshire, Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh, our previous spokesperson on international trade and investment. She was one of the hardest working MPs this Parliament has ever seen, and she was a doughty champion for the people of Ochil and South Perthshire. She pursued many matters—from international trade to the plight of the people of war-torn Syria and the UK Government’s involvement in the Yemen conflict—and her dogged work ensured that, time and again, UK Ministers were dragged to the Dispatch Box to answer the questions of SNP Members. We will continue to pursue such issues with vigour and passion.
My former colleague was a far cry from some of the Conservative Members who, sadly, have replaced her and other SNP colleagues. I do not mean to be entirely unkind—they are not in their places today—but they have been here for only a few weeks, and they have already rolled over on a distasteful deal with the DUP, failing to stand up for Scotland and their constituents. This Tory Government have found £1.5 billion to do a deal so that they can vote down pay increases for emergency service workers and public servants. In recent weeks and months, we have come to rely very heavily on those emergency workers and public servants, and the Scottish Conservatives should hang their heads in shame.

The Scottish Conservatives now have a choice: they can choose to do what is in the best interests of Scotland and of the constituents who voted them in, or they can fall into line with the rest of their party in support of a hard Brexit. I challenge them to use the opportunities that lie ahead to make sure that the Prime Minister reconsiders her position and joins us, and other Members in other parties, in defending Scotland's place in the single market and the customs union.

The trade and customs Bills will seek to put in place a legislative framework to allow the UK to operate its own trade policy and provide new domestic legislation to replace EU customs legislation. The problem is that, despite all the bluff and bluster from the Tories, the UK had to cave in on the first day of Brexit talks and agree that the divorce deal will have to be established before any trade deals are agreed, leaving business, the economy and workers across our country in limbo. Michel Barnier said earlier today that frictionless trade in goods and services "is not possible" outside the single market and the customs union. We need to know from the Secretary of State and colleagues whether there will be transitional arrangements for our economy in relation to goods and services.

We know the track record of this Government on scrutiny and process: they avoid it at all costs. They had to be dragged through the courts even to give Parliament a say on the triggering of article 50, so what hope can we have that we will get to scrutinise properly the many laws and regulations that will be coming back from the EU? The Government's plans for the great repeal Bill include so-called Henry VIII powers to avoid any scrutiny, as well as antiquated and back-door measures through the use of delegated legislation. What guarantees are the Government offering to ensure they will not abuse such powers? What guarantees are they offering to ensure they will not use antiquated and back-door measures to avoid scrutiny by and the need to obtain the consent of the devolved Administrations?

The public rejected the Prime Minister's call at the last election to strengthen her hand in the Brexit negotiations, and she cannot carry on as if the election result has not happened. It would serve her and this Government's flailing credibility better to build a much more consensual approach, because leaving the single market would be an unprecedented act of self-harm.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that that would in particular be an act of self-harm for Scotland? At present, EU trade deals with the likes of South Korea mean that the tariff on our major export of Scotch whisky has been reduced to nil, whereas a 20% tariff has to be paid on other whisky entering South Korea. Are we not much more likely to get such favourable deals for Scotch whisky if we have the whole weight of the EU behind us, rather than if we are negotiating just as the UK?

Hannah Bardell: I absolutely agree with everything my hon. and learned Friend says.

The Secretary of State alluded in his opening comments to trade deals with countries such as India, particularly on whisky. Are he and his colleagues not concerned that when the Foreign Secretary visited India recently he was advised that:

"Mobility issues are of importance to us; we cannot separate free movement of people from the free flow of goods, services and investments"?

Trade agreements are about give and take. The Government, the Ministers on the Front Bench and others who have spoken do not seem to understand that concept.

The plans for a hard Tory Brexit have already immersed the UK economy in uncertainty, with inflation escalating and companies preparing to move their operations outside the UK. [Interruption.] Conservative Members chunter from a sedentary position, but they only need to open the papers every day to see examples of that. Figures from the National Institute of Economic and Social Research suggest that Scotland's exports could be cut by more than £5 billion if we fail to retain full membership of the single market. The research also shows that trade in goods could decline by 35% to 44%. If exports of Scottish goods were to fall by a similar amount, the additional cost would be about £3 billion. According to the UK Government's own analysis, leaving the single market could reduce Scotland's GDP by more than £10 billion.

At the end of this process, when we have clarity on whether there is a deal or no deal, if the Government have not taken on board Scotland's position, which I will come on to later, we must have an insurance policy. We must have a say over our own future and be able to decide whether we want to be an independent nation within Europe. That is why Scotland's main business organisations issued a joint statement on 8 July last year, confirming that Scotland's businesses need continued access to the single market and free movement of labour.

Since then, those organisations have all repeatedly raised concerns about the impact of Brexit on business, including on access to labour, both skilled and non-skilled. For example, the loss of EU nationals will seriously harm our rural economy. About 8,000 EU nationals come to live in Scotland and work in the food and drink industry, and 15,000 seasonal migrant workers harvest our world-class fruit and vegetables. We cannot put our future or the future of our vital sectors at risk.

EU nationals also make a huge contribution to our NHS. One in 20 NHS doctors in Scotland comes from the EU. More than 1,000 companies owned in the EU employ over 127,000 people in Scotland, and about 181,000 EU citizens live in Scotland, bringing vital skills and expertise. We heard only last week that the rate of applicants for nursing posts from the EU has dropped by 96%. That will be devastating across the UK.

Scotland is an open and modern economy. Our exports of goods and services account for about 50% of our GDP. That is why our membership of the single market
The Secretary of State’s comments show just how was very much a case of, “Mebbe’s aye, mebbe’s no.” UK would get a free trade agreement with the EU; it negotiations for the UK, was unable to confirm that the Committee no w ork had been done? This was compounded in all of the time between then and coming to that study not done before we went into the referendum, but the impact of Brexit on the UK economy. How can we economic analysis—none—had been done to address indeed, the rest of the UK in March 2017 that no to the Exiting the European Union Committee and, Scotland when we heard the Brexit Secretary admitting to show the contempt the UK Government have for them central to their negotiating position. It just went Tories failed to gain a clear majority, they must think to the single market, we gamble with a market of 500 million people and free trade deals with 90 countries around the world.

The Tory manifesto contained a pledge to leave the single market and the customs union. Given that the Tories failed to gain a clear majority, they must think again, put those options back on the table and make them central to their negotiating position. It just went to show the contempt the UK Government have for Scotland when we heard the Brexit Secretary admitting to the Exiting the European Union Committee and, indeed, the rest of the UK in March 2017 that no economic analysis—none—had been done to address the impact of Brexit on the UK economy. How can we have been in a position whereby not only was an impact study not done before we went into the referendum, but in all of the time between then and coming to that Committee no work had been done? This was compounded by comments on “The Andrew Marr Show” recently, where the right hon. Gentleman, who is opening negotiations for the UK, was unable to confirm that the UK would get a free trade agreement with the EU; it was very much a case of, “Mebbe’s aye, mebbe’s no.” The Secretary of State’s comments show just how disorganised he and the Tory party are on Brexit and our future trading relationship with the EU.

Just this week, the Financial Times reported that the City of London was sending a delegation to Brussels to present a secret blueprint for a post-Brexit free trade deal on financial services. The City is left to do the work of the Government for itself.

Concern mounts over the damage facing employers if they are forced to move operations to the continent. Not every sector is able to do that, or should do that. We should have a Government who are listening to the devolved nations and all those sectors. This is just the latest indication that businesses do not trust the Tory Government.

The SNP Scottish Government put forward a very sensible compromise agreement on Scotland’s place in Europe, respecting the results in 2014 and of the EU referendum. It laid out a sensible and pragmatic approach to the situation we now find ourselves in: that Scotland could retain its membership of the single market and remain within the UK.

In Scotland, we are working hard to support SMEs and corporates with initiatives like the Borders enterprise agency, which was just launched, with a focus on meeting the region’s distinctive economic needs. We have also launched the Scottish-European Growth Co-investment Programme, the first part of the Scottish growth scheme, with £50 million from Scottish Enterprise and £50 million from the European Investment Fund, which will leverage at least £100 million from private sector fund managers. Evidence of the fruits of the Scottish Government’s labours were borne out by yesterday’s GDP data, which showed the Scottish economy defying recession concerns and growing at 0.8%, compared with the UK average of 0.2%.

But this is set against a backdrop of Brexit uncertainty giving businesses much pause for thought in investment decisions. The Chancellor has conceded that a “large amount” of UK business investment is being postponed, and urged early agreement with the EU on transitional arrangements. Our growth is under threat, and we need to hear more than warm words from the Government Benches. The Governor of the Bank of England, Mark Carney, spoke of “anaemic wage growth” and said he would like in coming months to see “whether wages begin to firm, and more generally, how the economy reacts to the prospect of tighter financial conditions and the reality of Brexit negotiations.”

Scotland’s voice is being ignored. That is not democratic, and it is not acceptable. Scotland is the top destination in Europe for exports from the rest of the UK, so it is in everybody’s interests to have a close trading relationship, because the European single market is Scotland’s real growth market, and is eight times bigger than the UK market alone.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union said on a recent visit to Ireland:

“Ireland will not have to choose between having a strong commitment to the EU or to the UK—it can and should have both.”

Why, then, can that not apply to Scotland?

In a press conference in Dublin on 30 January 2017, the Prime Minister said that the UK would maintain “the common travel area and excellent economic links with Ireland.”

Again, I ask why that cannot apply to Scotland?

There must be a meeting of the UK and devolved Governments to decide objectives before the next cycle of negotiations with the EU this month, and there must be a commitment to take seriously, and act upon, the interests of Scottish businesses, universities and a range of other groups becoming increasingly alarmed at the way Brexit is being handled.

Scotland’s voice must be heard during the Brexit negotiations. Only recently we heard from a surprise supporter of that long-held SNP view. The Labour party leader, the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), took time out from partying at Glastonbury to write for the Sunday Herald saying that Scotland needs a clear input into the Brexit negotiating process. He said:

“The Scottish Government must have regular and systematic access to the British negotiating team so that the Scottish perspective, especially in those areas for which the Scottish Parliament is responsible, is fully taken into account.”

That is very welcome; it is just a shame that his party cannot be united on access to the single market and the customs union. Will this Government finally acknowledge the overwhelming support for a Scottish seat at the Brexit table and extend the hand of friendship to all the
devolved nations to enable them to take part in these negotiations, which will affect their people, their economies and their future?

This Conservative Government are cowed and reduced; they failed resolutely to start negotiating a trade deal with the EU at the same time as the exit deal. We in the SNP believe that it is important to maintain our international development goals and ensure an ethical trade policy. To ensure that our international development goals are maintained, the Scottish Parliament must have a real say on any trade deal that is negotiated. ActionAid has ranked the UK joint worst in the world for having the largest number of treaties with developing countries that most restrict the rights of poor countries to tax UK companies operating there. That is not acceptable and it does the UK’s reputation no good on the world stage. The SNP will continue to defend Scotland’s interests and prioritise maintaining Scotland’s membership of the single market and the customs union in the Brexit negotiations.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): My hon. Friend mentions our relationships with developing countries. Resolving the tax treaty with Malawi was a priority for many Members in the last Parliament. Malawi is neither too small nor too poor to be independent, despite its many challenges. Today is its independence day, and I am sure that we all wish it a happy independence day.

Hannah Bardell: I share my hon. Friend’s sentiment in wishing Malawi a happy independence day. I note the work that many Members across many different parties have done on Malawi, not least the former Labour First Minister, Jack McConnell, who I know continues to champion that work in the other place.

It is vital that the Brexit negotiations are carried out alongside a firm commitment to developing an ethical trade policy. I say to the Prime Minister and her Government that they will not get any kind of unity or agreement by ignoring the issues that they find in front of them. It is time to take their heads out of the sand, face the music and work with the devolved Administrations and other Members across the House so that we can get the best possible deal.

3.12 pm

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): I draw hon. Members’ attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. This is the first time I have had the chance to speak in this new Parliament and the first time I have spoken with you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is a great honour.

Let me begin by praising the incredible work being undertaken by the Department for International Trade. I read the Secretary of State’s brilliant article on Conservative Home this morning, and I know that everyone in the Chamber will have avided themselves of it. Ministers have travelled to 50 countries—the number of air miles accumulated boggles the mind—and 10 trade groups have been set up. We have an international trade adviser, and we took the shrewd decision to make the brilliant Antonia Romeo the permanent secretary. And we now have a Minister on the Front Bench who is fluent in German—

Mr Jenkin: And Russian.

Mr Vaizey: And Russian. So everything is now in place for progress to be made.

I have to say that I am sceptical about the future. May I quickly add that I do not work for the BBC? However, I want to use this opportunity to say that I am a huge supporter of the BBC and of BBC news, which is respected all around the world. Those people who question the BBC’s patriotism or declare that it is somehow biased in this debate are absurd. You can see me on YouTube, when I defended George Osborne’s Brexit emergency Budget debate, being torn apart by Andrew Neil. He cut me no slack as a remainder coming on his programme. The BBC is not biased or partial, and people who claim that it is have simply lost the argument.

Let me get back to the main point of the debate, which is trade. I confess that I find this country in a confusing position. We are leaving the European Union free trade area that gives us access to 500 million consumers in order to trade with them on the basis of the World Trade Organisation rules. That seems to be the only position that we are taking. At the same time, we will negotiate a free trade deal with the United States because we do not like trading with that country on a WTO basis, so I am completely unclear as to what our position is on free trade and why we are walking away from 500 million consumers. I also find it odd that we want to have no deal rather than a bad deal.

It is quite clear from Michel Barnier’s speech this morning that we cannot pick and choose which sectors might benefit from access to the single market. It is also clear that having access to the single market and being a member of the European Union enables us to have free trade. The European Union has negotiated 60 free trade deals. The House approved a free trade deal with Canada this week, and another has seen exports to Korea rise by 54%. The EU has just started negotiations with Japan, and it is through no fault of the EU that we do not have a trade deal with the United States.

Trade deals are not necessarily nirvana. Ministers and others say that we will be able to have free trade deals from the day we leave the European Union, but I caution them as to the nature of those free trade deals. My hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) talked about the virtues of free trade, with which I agree, and the opportunity to reduce import tariffs, but he has to be aware of the reaction of the British public and different sectors of the British economy if we simply reduce tariffs against their competitors. Not every free trade deal will be plain sailing, which is why it has taken seven years to negotiate the free trade deal with Canada.

Hannah Bardell: Is the right hon. Gentleman aware of the research by the University of California, Berkeley showing that the average time taken to negotiate a free trade agreement is 28 months? That means it would take the UK 91 years of cumulative negotiation to get to where we are. Does he think that will be a problem?

Mr Vaizey: That is the point. The idea that we can take free trade deals off the shelf and not face lobbying from different sectors of our economy on the possible threats to their position from a free trade deal—the idea that all sectors of our economy are crying out for free trade—is a very dangerous one. If we have a common market, we are bound to have a customs union. If we have a customs union, we are bound to have a single market. If we have a single market, we are bound to have a union of states, and the only position that we are taking. At the same time, we will negotiate a free trade deal with the United States because we do not like trading with that country on a WTO basis, so I am completely unclear as to what our position is on free trade and why we are walking away from 500 million consumers. I also find it odd that we want to have no deal rather than a bad deal.

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trade deals—is a misconception. These are extremely complicated arrangements. / Interruption. / My hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) says that we do not have a free trade deal with the EU, but at least we have access to the market without quotas, tariffs or non-tariff barriers.

Remember that free trade deals are constructed by human beings. This week I met a former US trade negotiator who is well plugged into the entire scene and who told me that the US trade representative organisation is already at full stretch and is demoralised by President Trump canning the Trans-Pacific Partnership. It has to renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement, and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership has been put back on the agenda. When President Obama said that we were at the back of the queue, the language may have been unfortunate but we should be realistic about where we are in the line with the US and realistic about the capacity of the US Administration to negotiate with us.

I have a few asks of the Minister, who is free to reply in German or Russian, as he sees fit, to show his capacity, for which I have nothing but admiration. Which countries are we targeting, and why have we chosen them? I know that we have 10 trade groups. I would like to hear his thoughts on a timetable for free trade deals with those countries. Is there any economic analysis of what the growth of GDP will be once those free trade deals have been negotiated?

I am a great supporter of the work of the Secretary of State for International Trade, who mentioned the welcome inward investment we have seen in the past year or so. As a former Minister with responsibility for the digital industries, I particularly welcome the investment by companies such as Facebook and Google. There are many, many issues, but we welcome their inward investment. Does the Minister agree that that inward investment is predicated on their ability to recruit people with specialist abilities?

James Duddridge: From around the world.

Mr Vaizey: Will the Minister assure us that companies that want to invest in the UK will, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) says, be able to continue recruiting people with the right skills both from the European Union and from across the world? One of the benefits of the single market is that for a person recruited from the European Union, having their partner and family members able to come here to work is a huge incentive.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I fully respect that we will be leaving the single market and will need a new deal. At the moment, a company selling, say, a cancer scanner to a Spanish hospital needs to have a maintenance service contract. It can send an engineer to service the scanner under a posting of workers arrangement, and there is mutual recognition of the engineer’s professional qualifications. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, in our new trade agreement, it is important to be able to easily trade not only goods but services, with the ability to send workers flexibly from one jurisdiction to another?

Mr Vaizey: My hon. Friend makes a fantastic point. She was an incredibly effective MEP and she certainly would have turned up to Juncker’s speech in the European Parliament; she worked tirelessly and I very much hope the Government will listen to her as we negotiate Brexit, because she has experience that is unparalleled in this House. The point she makes is pertinent to my constituency, where MRI scanners are made at Oxford Instruments.

I was going to talk about Euratom, but I have run out of time—luckily we have a Westminster Hall debate on Wednesday. I do not know whether my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) will be speaking in that debate, but we all want to make our points on Euratom then.

Mr Jenkin: Will my right hon. Friend find a moment or two to talk about Euratom?

Mr Vaizey: I will on Wednesday morning, because I have run out of time now—I have only 30 seconds left. I wish to conclude with a plea. I know that we have this two-year timetable under article 50, but, as the Secretary of State said, this is a political process. He is hoping that the European Union will do a deal because their politicians will want to do what is right for their people. Why are we wedded to a two-year cliff-edge process, given that even in a brief, six-minute speech I have been able to highlight some of the extraordinary complexities we are facing? If only I had had longer, perhaps 12 or 18 minutes, I could have expanded on this.

3.21 pm

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), as, perhaps unusually, I agreed with almost everything he said. It is a year since the referendum and three months or so since we triggered article 50. We wasted two months on a general election that has left the Prime Minister enfeebled and the Front-Bench team confused. The impact on our economy is potentially hugely serious, and we are running out of time. The public services are in crisis. We need the sort of confident direction that is necessary to attract investment in our economy, to enable growth and the taxation receipts necessary to bolster our services.

When I participated in the EU referendum debate a year ago, one argument I heard regularly was, “Because of the trading imbalance between us and the EU, they need us more than we need them so they are going to be very favourably inclined to a generous settlement.” I have heard similar sentiments reiterated in today’s debate. If that is the case, I cannot understand why there is a problem with saying that we want to remain part of the single market and the customs union, and we will go for a transitional arrangement until we get it. Somehow we do not seem to be getting that from Ministers, but that it is what is needed to give investors the confidence to invest in our country.

I make it clear that I have a constituency interest: there are more foundries in my constituency than in any other in the country. They are tied into the manufacturing supply chain, particularly that of the car industry. The future welfare of that industry is essential for the future jobs and employment prospects of my constituents. We must be clear about the role the car industry plays in the national economy; 77% of cars manufactured in Britain are exported, 56% of them to Europe. Our overall trading statistics by value show that the contribution of
the car industry is huge and significant. It is no coincidence that what I articulated as our objectives earlier are exactly what the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders wants.

This idea that no deal is better than a bad deal and that we can fall back on World Trade Organisation tariffs is nonsense. That would add 10% to car prices, and 2.5% to 4.5% for parts. Given the to-ing and fro-ing of car parts in the supply chain in the industry, the potential cost is £2.6 billion for imports and £1.86 billion for exports. The cost of an average car could increase by £1,500.

The Government’s mixed messaging and hostile rhetoric has caused damage. In business questions, my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) mentioned recent figures on investment in the car industry, which has dropped from £2.56 billion in 2015 to only £322 million in the first half of this year. That is hugely significant for the future of a manufacturing industry that is crucial for our export performance.

In the time I have left, I wish to comment on the approach and potential of some of the alternative scenarios I have heard outlined. To be clear: I am as in favour of trading with other countries as anybody is. Implicit in a lot of the arguments I have heard is that the EU is somehow a barrier to our having good trading relations with other countries.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): I agree with what my hon. Friend is saying. Our markets and economy are on a cliff edge because of the Government’s irresponsible behaviour.

May I correct the comments by the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) on sheep market imports? He misquoted Michel Barnier’s remarks about 12% tariffs. Actually, sheep market imports from outside the EU are subject to tariffs of 12% plus a fixed amount ranging from £900—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order.

I have been lenient with the hon. Lady because I appreciate that she has been in the House only for a matter of days. Nevertheless, she should be intervening on the hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey), not making a speech about something said earlier by someone else. I am sure she will get the hang of it, but I cannot let her go on any longer. I am sorry.

Mr Bailey: The ability of my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) to make a speech while intervening demonstrates that she is rapidly acquiring the skills of Parliament.

To return to the point I was making, if being a member of the EU is an impediment to trading with other countries, why do some of our key EU rivals when we come out of the EU? If we look at the World Bank ratings on the ease of doing business in the expanding markets of China, India and Brazil, we see that China is ranked 96th, India 149th and Brazil 143rd. The idea that they will become any easier to trade with if we come out of the EU is, quite frankly, self-delusion. The right hon. Member for Wantage outlined some of the practical difficulties in setting up any trade negotiations with other countries, and they will still be alive.

The fact is that by coming out of the EU, we are moving from a trading bloc that is relatively easy to deal with to one that is not. We need to make it clear, at this point, that we want to remain in the EU single market and customs union.

3.29 pm

Julia Dockerill (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) for his contribution. I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to make my maiden speech in this important debate about trade. I am also thankful to my hon. Friends for gathering around me like a protective huddle of penguins; I very much appreciate it.

We must be realistic, pragmatic and determined about how we best shape this country as we leave the European Union. Too often, debate on how we do that is infected by a corrosive pessimism that betrays a lack of confidence in our nation and in what we can offer the world. Now is a time for resilience, resourcefulness and self-belief. We need not a crowing self-regard but an appreciation that our people and what we have created together have value. I want to talk today about why I believe that to be so.

First, let me pay tribute to my predecessor, Dame Angela Watkinson, a lady of grace and a lady whose service leaves a proud legacy. Dame Angela’s story embodies the essence of Conservatism. From humble working class roots in Leightonstone, she built not only a flourishing career through hard work and talent, but a record of public service in this place and beyond, particularly through her church and on behalf of children with disabilities. I offer her my profound gratitude on behalf of the people of Hornchurch and Upminster, whom I so proudly represent here today.

Rather like me, Hornchurch and Upminster may now be in London, but it will always and forever have an Essex heart. Both Hornchurch and Upminster were agricultural parishes of the county, and the vestiges of a simpler past are scattered across the seat like antique jewels—whether Upminster’s beautiful tithe barn, our Grade II listed windmill or the charming churches of St Laurence and St Andrew. From the mid-17th century onwards, the area attracted successful merchants from the City of London looking to build their country pads. By 1885, Upminster was first formally connected to the metropolis by rail. None the less, its population remained modest right up until 1906, when developer Peter Griggs spotted a chance to turn the area into a new garden suburb for aspirant workers. Hornchurch was similarly swept up in the wave of suburban growth. By 1965, both were formally incorporated into the London borough of Havering.

There is a rather naive and totally fallacious belief that somehow it is going to be easy to trade with other countries when we come out of the EU.
The area’s role in defending London during the war was played out from RAF Hornchurch, just outside my constituency. My constituency later helped to revive Hornchurch and its war-weary people by providing land for a large new housing estate on Harold Hill to alleviate inner-city housing shortages, particularly among eastenders who sought better lives for their families — what more fitting location for the first sale of a council home to a tenant by the Greater London Council? For aspiration, hard work and a deep sense of family, community and nationhood flow through the veins of my constituents.

Ours is a seat where an agrarian Englishness and sense of stability mixes with the upward mobility of the metropolis, and where the brash thrust of the centre breaks into something gentler, almost nostalgic. It is a place where taxis, vans and the tools of tradespeople rest on driveways after a hard day’s work; where doorways are swept and homes taken pride in; and where people hold straightforward, honest hopes for good schools, jobs, public services and homes. My constituents contribute to and believe in what this nation has to offer but they expect our nation’s politicians to hold that belief as well.

I began my career in this place working for the Minister for Asia and the Pacific, my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mark Field). A person with a hugely generous spirit, he gave me the space and confidence to flourish in my own right, and it fills me with enormous joy to see him promoted to serve this country with his immense talent. Those were deceptively sunny days for our country, yet in quick succession I was to witness at close quarters the expenses crisis, the financial crisis and then a seemingly unending series of scandals that systematically undermined public trust in nearly every institution within our nation. I shared in the national mood of disillusionment. Not long afterwards, I attended a town hall meeting in Tower Hamlets where I saw councillors physically attack and issue death threats to one another. I felt a profound sense of horror over what had happened in the borough. The divisive identity politics of race, religion and class had turned out to breed only a culture of grotesque corruption, incivility and isolation, while local politicians’ self-congratulatory mantra of “fairness”, “community” and “justice” were used only as a cloak to retain power. That night inspired me to became one of five feisty Conservative councillors who fought alongside others to expose what was going on. Tower Hamlets is now a byword for what can go wrong when we fail to uphold the systems, institutions and values that make Britain work.

Later I spent time working with European and developing nations on governance issues. Witnessing developing nations battle with endemic corruption, it became ever clearer to me that without decent governance, all other efforts to raise living standards and increase prosperity will struggle. Meanwhile, seeing the EU at close quarters, I reluctantly came to the view that it was divorced from the reality of those whom it purports to represent. It is now time to return accountability to our own politicians. Indeed, I should like to see post-Brexit Britain as one of a group of modern, open nations pursuing close co-operation in matters of security and defence, and an ambitious agenda on free trade, covering goods and services, on economic prosperity and on the creation of international standards for the new technologies shaping our lives. That must sit alongside a restatement of the importance of the nation state, with a new focus on intergovernmental co-operation rather than collective decision making via costly and cumbersome bureaucracies.

Our parliamentary democracy is a precious and delicate gift, the sum of the toil, sacrifice, disagreements and compromises that generations before us have made. Its principles have proved a template for governance across the globe and provided the space for millions of individuals, institutions and enterprises to flourish. It is a dynamic system that works because it is lubricated by trust and because each generation of parliamentarians tries its best to fine-tune it to reflect the needs and wants of the citizens they represent. The past decade may have undermined trust in our economy, in our politicians and in our media, but crises and scandals can also drive improvements, and should not be taken as a reason to give up or dismiss our nation with a relentless, virulent negativity. Quite the opposite. It is the duty of our generation of politicians to learn, to reform and to lasso the hopes, ambitions and talents of British people of every background as we enter this challenging but enormously exciting new era.

3.36 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I begin, of course, by congratulating the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Dockerill) on her maiden speech. She demonstrated how attached she feels to her constituency, and that really is the best start for being an effective Member of Parliament. It also shows what progress we are making when a Member can stand up and say that they are the second woman Member in their constituency.

This is the first time I have spoken since the general election and, of course, I want to begin by thanking my constituents for taking part in the election—especially those who voted Labour. The majority of my constituents voted to leave the European Union in the referendum last year, and when I discuss that with them they tell me that they want a Brexit that controls immigration but boosts exports and secures long-term jobs, particularly in manufacturing. What they like about the European Union is the social chapter, the common market—what we call the customs union—the environmental protections, co-operation on research and development, and the European arrest warrant.

Their views on migration mean that I have to say that I think that it is inevitable that as part of leaving the European Union, we will have to leave the single market, but I think the issues on the customs union are rather different. I was pleased by the speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) and the remarks made by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) about keeping the customs union on the table. I do not know why the Chancellor was suggesting the other day that there are legal difficulties with that; Turkey belongs to the customs union and not the European Union and that was the position that this country was in between 1975 and 1992. It offers not just tariff-free trade but barrier-free trade.

When I went to talk to the North East England chamber of commerce, its members were particularly worried about how firms would handle the rules of origin if we were to leave the customs union. It is not enough for HMRC to have a computer system. That does not deal
with the bureaucracy, because each individual firm has to apply to get the status they need to use the system. That is immensely bureaucratic and time-consuming, and the OECD has found that that increases costs by about 25%.

Another very important thing is what we will do about all the European agencies—the Government have not been clear about that at all. In my constituency there is a Glaxo plant that employs 1,000 people and produces half a million packs of drugs a day. I have been working with Glaxo, both locally and nationally, on what kind of Brexit deal would be good for the pharmaceutical industry. It wants a level playing field with the other drugs manufacturers across Europe, and that means staying inside the European Medicines Agency. The agency has been located in London because Britain is one of the best producers of pharmaceuticals, and we helped to draft almost all the rules that the agency applies. Glaxo has sent me its paper on priorities for the UK’s exit, in which it said:

“Any UK withdrawal from the EU that ends or damages the UK’s ability to benefit from the EU framework”

the medicines agency framework.

“could significantly impact patients, and hinder GSK’s operations in the UK and across the EU. Any future regulatory processes...must avoid introducing delays, significant new costs or unpredictable outcomes.

It is critical that an agreement is reached early in negotiations between the UK and EU that the European regulatory framework will continue to apply to medicines, vaccines, medical devices and cosmetics that are already authorised or undergoing clinical trials, to ensure that supply or development of these products is maintained without disruption.”

Vicky Ford: I am interested in what the hon. Lady says about medicines and vaccines. Yes, the mutual recognition principle is extremely helpful in allowing British companies to work with others across Europe and a single market for medicines, but I understand there are issues that make it more difficult for those same pharmaceutical developers to share data with, say, American counterparts. Under the comprehensive economic and trade agreement, which as I have said before in the House is not perfect for the UK, there are potential benefits to mutual recognition not only with Europe but with other countries. Does she not agree that we want both types of agreement if possible?

Helen Goodman: What we really want is minimal regulatory costs on businesses. That means that we should stay in the European Medicines Agency. If we leave and have to set up our own, we will be imposing a third regulatory system on them, and as I am sure the hon. Lady knows, that would be immensely expensive. We have a lot of exports and jobs in the sector. I tabled a lot of parliamentary questions to the Department before the general election and got content-free answers. I now want Ministers to be clear about what they will do not just about the European Medicines Agency but about the 40 other agencies we belong to, ranging from environmental. Again, we have had no clarity from Ministers. If they agree to the import of meat with lower animal welfare and consumer safety standards and lower prices, they could decimate British agriculture, which would be a disaster for farmers and a disaster for the environment.

3.44 pm

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): I will shock the Front Benchers by saying that I agree with absolutely everything the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) said—about my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Dockerill), who is indeed truly fabulous. Hon. Friends and new friends, we all cuddled around her in what is now known as doughnut. I am used to being part of a doughnut, but never before have I been called a penguin. None the less, I have waddled back to my usual place and am happy to have caught your eye in this Brexit debate, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I am proud to have supported Brexit. Although there were many reasons to support Brexit, and for many of my constituents the principal one was about taking back control of our laws, mine was a different one—the economic future of Britain. Before being elected to this place, I was a banker in Africa and the City. I ran banks in various African countries, and I saw that the backbone of those countries and the banks was commodities and trade in goods. I therefore have some experience with trade finance, letters of credit, debt financing, raising finance, export guarantees and doing business and trading across different territories. As such, I think it is quite good that this Parliament is not to be jam-packed full of detailed legislation beyond Brexit. Brexit will be complicated enough.

I believe we will look back with a degree of selective memory and not see Brexit as a great revolution. It feels problematic at the moment, and I feel for the Minister for Trade and Investment, who has day-to-day responsibility for delivering Brexit. In many ways I am grateful to be on the Back Benches, having campaigned for Brexit, so that I can let him do some of the detailed lifting, but over the next 18 months I would like to do more on trade and customs-related Bills, both in the Chamber and in Committee.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) gave us a history lesson, but an A-level history student might be confused by some of the debates we have here. A student looking at the corn laws and gunboat diplomacy—attempts to build up trade and markets—and reading Adam Smith would see a trajectory of ever more open free trade and that being seen as a good thing, separate from capitalism and sometimes having its wings clipped. In a time of global uncertainty about quantitative easing, sub-prime lending, eurozone collapse and so on, perhaps my greatest concern is Donald Trump’s comments on trade. The big nation states, the G7 or G20, need to take responsibility and look at free trade not only for our own benefit but for the benefit of others, particularly in the Commonwealth and Africa, which I will discuss if there is time.

Since 2005, when I became an MP, the proportion of our goods exported to places outside Europe has increased from 48% to 56%. As speakers on both sides of the House have noted, the growth areas are outside the Europe Union. In an intervention on the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner), I highlighted the fact
that we import more than we export. Understandably, we in the UK look at Brexit from our own standpoint, because it was we who voted on it and we who wanted it as a nation although, there were clearly a lot of debates across all the parties. If we look at it more from the perspective of continental Europe—from the point of view of exporters of German BMWs, or of prosecco and champagne, which the Foreign Secretary discussed—Brexit could seem a lot closer to being delivered.

I welcome the Department’s meeting of Commonwealth Trade Ministers. I was fortunate enough to attend some of the earlier meetings. There is a real appetite for refreshing relationships with the Commonwealth. It should have been happening anyway, but Brexit gives us a further opportunity. I am glad that in Africa more generally, we are taking a step back from the European partnership agreements. I encourage the Government, especially the Department for International Trade, to pursue policies to grow countries out of poverty. That has a great impact on us by cutting migration and terrorism, as well on the people who escape poverty. To be frank, that is as important, if not more so, than getting the short-term benefit of export trade. There is a good opportunity there.

I have some concerns about how the Department is organised, at a time when the Foreign Office is joining up with the Department for International Development at ministerial level to encourage a united regional and country-by-country approach. The trade envoys will have a country approach, but Ministers are taking a more sectoral approach. When I was a banker in Ivory Coast, gold miners would come to me and ask about the country. Oil producers would ask me about the country and how easy it was to do business. Tech companies would come to me, but not to ask about technology; they would ask about regional issues and how easy it was to do business. Perhaps the Government can provide those services in the round. I would love to see more of Lord Price’s high value opportunities study, which we can really leverage. I think that the blockage in Downing Street on the trade envoys should be freed up and we should appoint more trade envoys as soon as possible.

3.50 pm

Ms Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me this opportunity to make my maiden speech on behalf of the people of my constituency, which covers not only the city of Lincoln but the surrounding villages of Skellingthorpe, Waddington East and Bracebridge Heath. I am proud to have been elected and to have the chance to serve my city. I am Lincoln through and through, so in electing me as their Member of Parliament, the people of Lincoln have truly elected one of their own. I assure them that, as promised, I will be their voice in Westminster.

Until just a few weeks ago, I was an NHS nurse. Having worked in the NHS since 2003, I am all too aware of the challenges that the current privatisation and running down of the service means for health workers and for my constituents. I am also proud to have been a part of Lincoln’s Labour-led city council and to have watched its many positive achievements, including the new transport hub currently under construction in the city centre. But as a local councillor I have also witnessed the impact of cuts to local council budgets, and how austerity for some has caused untold misery for the many, not the few.

At the beginning of the general election campaign, it was unclear whether I would be standing here today to make this speech, but Lincoln and its citizens have a history of defying the odds. From the development of the first tank during world war one by a determined group of engineers, to the recent run-away success of Lincoln City football club—the Imps—who took the fight for the FA cup to the Emirates stadium last season, Lincoln has a proud history of going the extra mile. Who would have thought just a few weeks ago that Lincoln would elect one of its own born-and-bred, working-class citizens as its MP?

One of the less-known facts about Lincoln is that Henry VIII looted Lincoln cathedral of its treasures in 1538. Over the past seven years, the Tories’ austerity programme has seen a similar looting of health and education services in Lincoln and an increase in social inequality. Our public services, including the local hospital where I worked as a nurse, are under tremendous pressure because of the current “austerity for some.” Likewise, local GP services are under huge pressure, especially since the recent closure of local GP practices. Since my first day in Parliament, I have been inundated with messages of concern from residents worried about the possible closure of our local walk-in centre. Every day that I went to work, I witnessed at first hand the strain that Lincoln’s A&E department was under. In-patient wards are chronically short of nurses and doctors, and nurses can no longer afford to train because bursaries are being withdrawn. As a single parent in 2000, I relied upon the nursing bursary to undertake my training.

During my election campaign I visited some of the city’s food banks, which again are a testament to the stark poverty found in some parts of Lincoln. Surely in 2017 the need for food banks in the world’s fifth richest country is absolute proof of the inequality present in our society today. Homelessness, people sleeping rough on the streets and hard-working people just about managing by working long hours for low wages are just as much the norm in Lincoln as in many other parts of the country. Over a quarter of all children in some areas of Lincoln live in poverty, yet the Prime Minister has found the key to the magic money tree, enabling her to find over £1 billion to keep her Government in power, proving that austerity is indeed an ideological choice, not a necessity.

Lincoln has two great universities, which we are very proud of, both of which recently achieved the highest rating possible in a new national assessment for the quality of teaching, learning and student achievement in UK higher education. Yet many of the students who live in our city struggle with mountains of debt after paying the huge cost of tuition fees. They live in privately rented homes that are often poorly maintained, paying high rents, which increases the amount of debt they accumulate. How can that be fair?

During my time in this House, I will strive to represent Lincoln and all that is good about it, but I will also champion the cause of those who have been left behind without a voice. I hope that Lincoln is a fairer and more equal place for all its residents when my time here is done.

Members may know that Lincoln boasts a stunning gothic cathedral, a medieval castle and a significant historical quarter, and they may be aware that Lincoln proudly displays a copy of Magna Carta in its castle.
However, perhaps fewer Members know that 2017—the year of my election—marks the 800th anniversary of the Charter of the Forest, which was signed in Lincoln and is on display in Lincoln Castle.

Tradition has it that I mention my predecessor, Karl McCartney, who was a strong advocate for transport and its infrastructure in the city and surrounding area. Lincoln is still struggling to cope with the heavy demands placed on a modern and developing city against a backdrop of more traditional and historical infrastructure. As part of my election pledges, I will continue the work that Karl contributed to. I look forward to positive and effective relationships with the county and city councils, and other stakeholders, to find the solutions to keep Lincoln moving. I also pay tribute to my great friend and colleague, Gillian Merron—Lincoln's MP from 1997 until 2010—who worked incredibly hard for Lincoln and duly achieved much for our city.

Turning to Brexit, Lincoln, like many other places, voted overwhelmingly to leave the EU. Although there will be significant implications for trade, employment and services in Lincoln, the decision to leave the EU was democratic, and our task now is to ensure that we get the best possible deal for everyone. Lincoln has a large European community living and working around the constituency, and we need to ensure that EU nationals are protected.

In closing, I restate my hope and aspirations for Lincoln as its MP. I will campaign hard to get a medical school in Lincoln, which will attract the doctors we so desperately need to start to address the crisis in our local NHS. I will work with local councils, and business and community stakeholders to attract the funding for transport networks and infrastructure that will bring the jobs and training my constituents so badly need after seven years of Tory austerity. I will campaign for extra housing to be built, in addition to that planned by Lincoln's Labour-led city council, which will benefit local families and those unfortunate enough to be homeless in Lincoln. Finally—this comes from the heart—I hope that by the end of this Parliament, however long it lasts, the indignity and suffering endured by those who have to use one of Lincoln's many food banks is just a bad memory, not a fact of daily life.

3.57 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Lincoln (Ms Lee). I congratulate her on her passionate maiden speech. Many of us will also remember her predecessor fondly.

This debate is at the heart of the challenge for us all in this Parliament, for although leaving the EU is by no means the only task before us—many of our constituents may have a clearer focus on seeing their local school and hospital well-funded, and their own standard of living gradually increasing—if we lose our access and tariff-free trade with the EU and fail to grow our global business enough to compensate, much else is at risk, because business generates, directly and indirectly, 75% of the total tax revenue that funds vital services. That also means that there is a particular responsibility on all of us here who voted against leaving the EU not to sit back in our chairs and say, “I told you it would be a disaster”, but rather to do our best in making sure that the process works and succeeds because jobs, the economy and, ultimately, the lives of our constituents are at stake. But if I ask remainers to be pragmatic in seeking the opportunities and not overplaying the risks, I would also ask leavers to be pragmatic in their approach. Let me give one example.

The Prime Minister did not commit us in her Lancaster House speech to a position on the customs union. She said that

“I want Britain to be able to negotiate its own trade agreements. But I also want tariff-free trade with Europe...Whether that means we must reach a completely new customs agreement, become an associate member...or remain a signatory to some elements...I have an open mind...It is not the means that matter, but the ends.”

So the Secretary of State was right earlier to focus on prosperity as his guiding light. What works best for business is what will be best for us, because it is business that has delivered the 2.9 million new jobs since 2010—more than all the other 27 EU nations put together.

Today we should all rejoice that exports are up sharply and inward investment is at record highs from 2016’s results. It is a far cry from the prediction made by some of 800,000 unemployed, a deep recession, and real economic hardship by now. But nor should we be complacent, for the figures show a strong surplus of exports and services, but a continued deficit in traded goods. In a year of significant currency depreciation, that means we have to do much more. This implies success in retaining the more than 40% of our trade with the EU, and success, too, in exporting to high-growth markets.

As chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on China, let me touch on China, and south-east Asia.

James Duddridge: I compliment my hon. Friend on his work as chair of the all-party group and in facilitating greater knowledge of Hong Kong. I urge him to touch on the trading relationships between mainland China and Hong Kong, and how the latter can be seen as setting the pace for the former.

Richard Graham: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. I am not going to talk too much today about the differences between, and indeed the closeness of, Hong Kong and China.

Our exports to China doubled between 2010 and 2016, but they are very dependent on the success of a handful of companies, especially Jaguar Land Rover. What holds us back, and where we have to make much greater progress, is market access. With an excellent new director general of trade and investment in Beijing, recruited from industry, I hope that Ministers will drive real progress in this strategic partnership to deliver greater access for British services, in particular.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that we should be focusing on the role of innovation, universities, science and technology in the context of Brexit?

Richard Graham: Yes. The hon. Lady is absolutely right in general. I was going to touch on the importance of education as one of our high-growth exports, and that has to be innovation-led. FinTech, but also lots of other techs, is an area where we can do much more. She is right on that.
Meanwhile, in ASEAN—the Association of Southeast Asian Nations—total exports in the last year for which figures we have complete figures were up by 4%. Exports to two of my markets—Indonesia and the Philippines—were up strongly, while Malaysian exports dropped slightly, but from a much higher starting point. Goods exports in the past six months rose by 8.3%, demonstrating that this progress was not just a flash in the wok. We have real success, particularly with business services and insurance, but also with FinTech, MedTech, and even EdTech—not to be confused with EdStone. It is worth noting that we now sell more in education than in insurance. Our partnerships on education in Malaysia are a strong example of what can be done. It remains a strong goal for us as a nation, but also a dream of mine, to establish a British university in the Philippines and in Indonesia.

This matters, because one of the joys of being in business in Asia in general is that long relationships and trust drive business as much as the quality of the product and the transaction itself, and those relationships start early, at schools and universities. In the long term, our education presence and links will enable us to catch up with our main European competitors—Germany and France—in exports of goods, while retaining our advantages in services. This is why we should not include students in our immigration figures, as it leaves an impression of not welcoming foreign students. Moreover, our universities’ growth in foreign student numbers has been well below the growth realised by other Anglo-Saxon countries such as the US, Canada and Australia. This is an opportunity that we can seize, and I hope that the Minister will refer to it.

The prosperity fund will play a key role in growing our bilateral business opportunities. I encourage Ministers to ask that trade envoys be involved at an early stage of any proposal. The Minister knows that not long ago we had three trade envoys in ASEAN, but now only myself. I hope he will encourage the Prime Minister to consider appointing additional bilateral trade envoys to ASEAN nations, which, in turn, can help take forward the bilateral trade relationships by including the business of business in the annual high-level Government-to-Government meetings.

In recent years, British businesses have made great strides in ASEAN markets. For example, we partner with Indonesians to win airport refuelling contracts. We have developed a biogas bus service in Bali from recycled cooking oil. We provide teacher training in Borneo. We have complete figures were up by 4%. Exports to two of my markets—Indonesia and the Philippines—were up strongly, while Malaysian exports dropped slightly, but from a much higher starting point. Goods exports in the past six months rose by 8.3%, demonstrating that this progress was not just a flash in the wok. We have real success, particularly with business services and insurance, but also with FinTech, MedTech, and even EdTech—not to be confused with EdStone. It is worth noting that we now sell more in education than in insurance. Our partnerships on education in Malaysia are a strong example of what can be done. It remains a strong goal for us as a nation, but also a dream of mine, to establish a British university in the Philippines and in Indonesia.

What we do in Indonesia is one example of realising the great opportunities in Asia and in ASEAN in its 50th anniversary year. It is a region where the GREAT campaign is well recognised and the Union Jack a strong brand, and London is the best showcase for its international growth and aspirations. As I have indicated, we can do much more, but we build on strong foundations. Let us not be shy to tell our story and do more.

4.5 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Thank you for calling me to speak, Madam Deputy Speaker, and may I congratulate you on your appointment?

It is a great honour to speak in this House. I am the first member of my Stone family ever to be elected as an MP, and standing here I like to think of my mother and father looking down on me with pride. I also owe sincere thanks to my wife Flora and my three children. Without their support and great help, the likelihood of my being elected to this place would have been rather smaller.

It is customary for new Members to mention their predecessors. Dr Paul Monaghan is a passionate nationalist and while here he took a close interest in middle east matters, the welfare of former inhabitants of the Chagos islands and, in particular, animal welfare. That is his record. I acknowledge it and thank him for it.

In addition, I really must mention my great friend who once represented part of my constituency, the late Charles Kennedy. He is much missed and will never be forgotten, by me in particular. I was for a time his constituency chairman.

Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross is the second largest and most remote constituency on the UK mainland. For that reason it presents special challenges to the Scottish and UK Governments. Sparsity of population, distance and severe winter weather all necessitate taking a different approach to the delivery of vital services. What works in Surrey or Glasgow is not necessarily going to work at all where I come from.

For that reason, recent changes to local maternity services in my constituency, which involve greatly increased numbers of pregnant mothers having to make a 200-mile round trip to Inverness, are causing great concern. Therefore, within the rules of this House pertaining to devolved Scottish Government matters such as health, I give notice that that issue is of the greatest importance to me and that I shall use my role as an MP to do everything in my power to address it.

Equally, lack of access to suitably fast broadband is proving to be a drag anchor to many local businesses in my constituency. That is particularly unfortunate when we are trying to promote tourism in this most beautiful area. The importance of operating efficiently online cannot be over-exaggerated. If local tourist businesses are to compete in a global market, they depend on that type of service. Again, I give notice of the importance of the subject to me and, given the opportunity, I will have much to say about it in the future.

My constituency and its constituent parts have an interesting history. For instance, I am absolutely prepared to bet that Members do not know that he whose portrait hangs among others in the Strangers’ Dining Room—the Whig leader, Charles James Fox—was the Member for my hometown of Tain in Easter Ross. In the 1784 general election, Fox fought a particularly energetic campaign to win his seat here, by which I mean Westminster, which he represented. He was helped by the great beauty of her age, Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, who was strongly suspected to have been his lover at the
time, but it was absolutely no electoral avail. Owning to a legal challenge, the result lay unconfirmed for over a year. Fox strongly suspected that his distant cousin George III and Pitt the Younger lay behind this evil stratagem, and it served only to deepen his dislike for George III. But Fox had cunning friends, who dreamed up a wheeze. They made him a burgess of Kirkwall in Orkney—a burgess is a freeman—and because of that he was very quickly duly elected to the pocket burgh of Tain and the Northern Burghs. And so he represented my home town until his Westminster result was ultimately cleared, after which he resigned.

Would that my own efforts to be elected to represent my home town had been as easy of those of Charles James Fox, I could elaborate on the fact that Malcolm MacDonald stood for my constituency. Indeed, the uncle of the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames), one Randolph Churchill, also contested the seat. Given the time available, however, I will save that for another day.

I am sorry that the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) is not here today, because I want to quote some Gaelic to amuse your good self, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to test Hansard. We have a saying:

“Togar càrn mòr de chlachan beaga”,

which means:

“The mighty cairn is built of little stones”.

I do hope that this particular stone—myself—may play a suitable part in the mighty cairn that is democracy in this special place.

4.11 pm

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): It is a particular pleasure to follow the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone). It was impressive, elegant and informative all at the same time. I particularly enjoyed it as a descendant myself of “Barra men”, who found their way further south via Inverness-shire. They unfortunately left out Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross, skirting it a bit to the south. I know that the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) will be pleased with that reference. All of us in the House look forward to hearing a great deal more from the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross in the future.

I turn to the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), who is still here. I take the same approach as he did. I believed that it was right for this country to remain in the European Union, but the decision has been taken and our job is to be pragmatic about how we deliver the result. The need for give and take on both sides must be firmly recognised. This must be a Brexit that works for the 48% just as much as for the 52%. I am sure that the Ministers on the Treasury Bench will bear that in mind. In practical terms, it involves our being open-minded about the nature of the deals that we reach as we leave. No one party’s manifesto vision attained a majority in the House, so the House itself has a particular right to seek to shape the nature of our leaving and of our future relationship with the EU.

I endorse and agree with what my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester has said about the customs union. It seems to me illogical that we should put ourselves in a worse position than Turkey by ruling out membership of it. On the position of foreign students, as a London MP I see the great benefit of the talent that comes into our universities and into the financial services provided by the City of London, which is a wellspring of our economy and our public services. I hope that we will see some flexibility there.

Because my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey)—my very good friend—was not able to get in, I will add that we need to look afresh at Euratom. It seems illogical to exclude ourselves from something that is very much to our technological advantage. Israel is a member of Euratom, so it is perfectly possible to participate in it without being a member of the EU. We should not put artificial obstacles of a rather theoretical and almost theological kind in the way of a good, practical deal, where one can be done.

That brings me to the meat of what I wanted to say, which concerns the financial services sector. I refer to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. Some 36% of my constituents work in or around the financial services sector and its supply chain. The sector is critical to them and to the economy: some £45 billion is generated for our economy by the City of London alone, never mind the broader financial services sector across the whole UK, which employs some 2.2 million people. The total tax contribution of the financial services sector for our public services is some £71.4 billion, so I have no truck with Opposition Members who criticise or carp at the work of the City of London and the financial services sector.

The financial services sector is a strategic national interest, and it must be a primary duty of our Government, as we seek to leave the European Union, to safeguard it. In particular, that will require a proper deal to deliver mutual market access. If some compromise on the form of the adjudication or arbitration arrangements is therefore necessary, so be it. At the end of the day, it is much more important for the welfare of this country that we have full and proper access for our financial services sector than that we argue—as with angels on the head of a needle—about different courts of justice and elements of jurisdiction. Modern countries with a global outlook sometimes recognise the need to collaborate and to share jurisdictions in areas of mutual advantage, and we should not rule that out in this case.

This process must also involve meaningful and early transitional arrangements, not ones set to an arbitrary timescale of two years, three years or whatever. The transitional arrangements must apply for as long as it takes to do the job for the financial services sector. The deal made with the British people was to respect the outcome of the referendum; it was not a vote about how long the process would take or about the manner of our leaving. It is well established from the evidence that for some elements of the financial services sector—derivatives, say, as opposed to insurance or euro clearing—different lengths of transitional arrangements may well be necessary, and we should be flexible in that respect.

Finally, we must continue to have access to global talent. The issue of students has already been mentioned, and one of my hon. Friends referred to the issue of posted workers, which is also very important. The same applies
to London’s position as a great international law centre, because the ability of lawyers to move between multinational firms is absolutely critical. Those are the practical things we need to deliver. I say to the Government that they have my support in doing so, but this must all be done in a way that puts the business outcome and the prosperity of this country above any “ologies”, “isms” or any other kind of academic consideration.

4.17 pm

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to make my maiden speech. First, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Ms Lee) on her fantastic maiden speech. I share her passion for representing our constituents. I also congratulate my fellow Scot, the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), on his speech, and I echo his sentiments on the legacy of Charles Kennedy.

We have heard passionate contributions from hon. Members today. During the Brexit process, we must get the best deal for our economy, protect jobs and defend the rights of EU nationals. I will be fighting for that on behalf of my constituents in Midlothian, and I thank them for sending me here to do that.

I must pay tribute to my predecessor, Owen Thompson, who I know worked hard to represent Midlothian, and I am sure his contribution to the community will be remembered well. I thank him for his congratulations, and for the warm and friendly way in which we conducted our campaign. In his maiden speech, Owen, who was wearing his Midlothian tartan tie, spoke about the green representing the landscape, the blue representing the reservoirs and the black representing the coal in Midlothian.

Owen remarked that he was the first non-miner in a long time—since the second world war, in fact—to be elected to represent Midlothian, and I want to make two points about that. I have another first: I am the first woman to be elected to serve Midlothian, and of that I am very proud indeed. Secondly, although you can see that I myself am not a miner, Madam Deputy Speaker, I am proud to come from good mining stock—both my grandfathers, Willie Rowley and Ron Curran, worked down the mine—so I am keeping that strong Midlothian tradition alive, and I was honoured to receive the endorsement of and support from my local retired miners group.

Speaking of former miners to represent Midlothian, I would also like to pay tribute to two former Members for Midlothian whom I have the honour of knowing and have learned from, Sir David Hamilton and Eric Clarke. Eric said in his maiden speech:

“I am proud to be a socialist and a trade unionist”.—[Official Report, 11 May 1992; Vol. 207, c. 430.]

I am very glad to be carrying on that mantle, and I am very grateful to David for helping me with my campaign. I must say that I have run out of paper with the list of people from all parts of the House who have asked me to pass on their warm wishes to Eric and David.

It is traditional to talk about the history of one’s constituency in a maiden speech, but I feel that those who have come before me have done a fantastic job of highlighting our rich history of Gladstone, of our proud industry—or once proud industry—of Dolly the sheep, of Dalkeith Palace and of Rosslyn chapel, so I would like to talk about the people of Midlothian and what I hope to do for our future.

On 9 June, the day after I was elected to serve here, I spoke at a local food bank, the Food Facts Friends Project in Penicuik. I talked to Mark, who told me his personal story. He told me that when he found himself having to rely on a food bank, it did not just give him the food he needed, but gave him friendship and support and helped him to develop a network. He then helped set up and run the Penicuik food bank himself.

Mark’s story reminded me of an ethos that is central to charity and to the idea behind food banks, and that should be central to the work we carry out here when we talk about helping people in need: a hand up, not a handout. It is essential that we give people the tools that they need to live their lives to the full. When I have worked with people in various jobs who are receiving benefits or support from charity, that is what they want. They want support to do things for themselves, not a handout, as some Members of this House and the media might have us believe.

I am sad to say that Mark had to report last week that demand for the food bank had gone up again, with more than 20 families a week using the service. He said that people who come to the foodbank because they cannot afford to feed their families may have been sanctioned or suffered from the benefit cap and welfare reform. Others simply cannot feed their family on the income of low wages and inadequate help from the Government. That is an absolute disgrace and something I will spend my time here fighting. I will fight for good jobs, for good wages, for support for our young, our elderly and people with disabilities, and for a hand up for those who fall on hard times, because it can happen to any of us.

Midlothian is a strong and proud community. Yes, we come together in solidarity in times of hardship—we did it during the miners’ strike, we do it when there are job losses and we have done it again now—but we also have many fantastic ways of coming together to celebrate and enjoy our community. There is the youth project that Councillor Margaret Russell runs; our community radio, Black Diamond FM; and the Cousland community coffee morning, where I share a roll and a cup of tea at the weekend with members of the community. Since being elected, I have attended many children’s gala days. On polling day, I gratefully received some nice soup and a roll from the Grass Riggs café for older people and their carers. That is to name just a few. I want projects like that which bring the community together to flourish.

I started my speech by paying tribute to Labour Members Eric Clarke and David Hamilton, and I will end on their wise words too. Eric ended his maiden speech by talking about

“the double standards of having a few who are rich and the vast majority who are poor.”—[Official Report, 11 May 1992; Vol. 207, c. 431.]

David ended his speech by talking about Labour standing up for vulnerable people, saying that

“those people will benefit, along with all of us, and not just a few.”—[Official Report, 12 July 2001; Vol. 371, c. 1015.]

Although the phrase may have been stolen today by Government Members, I am going to reclaim it. I end by echoing those sentiments in saying that I am proud
to have been elected here to represent the people of Midlothian on a platform of hope and with the message that I am joining my friends on these Benches to fight for the many, not the few.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I have given as much time as possible to the many excellent maiden speeches this afternoon, but I now have to reduce the time limit to five minutes.

4.24 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Midlothian (Danielle Rowley). I congratulate her on her very fine maiden speech. She speaks with great passion, which shines through, and I am sure she will be a huge asset to the people of Midlothian by representing them in the way she set out.

I am also pleased to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill). Some of the points that I make will be very similar to his, particularly on the issue of the transition, on which I agree with him strongly.

I will start by setting that in the context of my constituency of South Suffolk. I am optimistic about this country being outside the EU once it has secured a comprehensive trade agreement, which must at all costs include services. We must not forget that we have a £20 billion surplus in services with the EU.

In the immediate term, when I go around my constituency, I find that companies are optimistic. There is a company called Challs International, which I will be visiting next Friday, and which is opening a new plant. The company is not a household name, but it has a product that is one: Buster Sink Unblocker, which some Members might have seen in the supermarkets. Its boss is optimistic, as are other companies, if they have trade deals, about selling in countries outside the EU, and I think there is a great future for this country when we get to that stage.

There are concerns in my constituency, however. Our biggest manufacturing employer, certainly in Sudbury, is Delphi Diesel Systems, a major exporter to the EU, which is currently consulting on its plant closure. That would result in the loss of 520 full-time skilled jobs in Sudbury. I am grateful to the Under-Secretary of State for International Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier)—who is in his place—for the help he is giving me to work with the company to try to find a way forward. I look forward to meeting his officials to talk about that.

If that firm closes—I hope that does not happen—we will then have to talk about how we get in new business and inward investment to replace it. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is right that we have fantastic figures on inward investment, but if we want to attract new inward investment, I agree with other hon. Members that we must avoid this cliff edge at all costs.

The hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) referred to the automotive industry, which, of course, includes my company Delphi. Mike Hawes, the chief executive of the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, says:

“We accept that we are leaving the European Union. But our biggest fear is that, in two years’ time, we fall off a cliff edge—no deal, outside the single market and customs union and trading on inferior World Trade Organisation terms.”

His worry is that that will hit our ability to attract the investment that is critical to future growth, and that is my concern.

My concern is that we are not taking seriously enough the threat of leaving the EU without a deal. In my opinion, we should look for cross-party support on the whole issue of a transitional deal. We should realise that the national interest is best served by trying to reach a transitional deal in the event that we do not have our new trade deal arranged in time.

I strongly agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill). We must not move from one cliff edge to set up another. To have a transitional deal with another arbitrary time limit would be potentially foolish. It is my understanding that that is what the EU would at present want from any transition. However, we start by talking about our interests, and the best thing for this country would be to have a transitional deal that lasts from when we leave until a new deal is signed. That is common sense and sensible.

I have two more points to make on the issue of transition, because, understandably, there has been a lot of talk about that in recent weeks. Any deal must be a trusted transitional deal. We must not use transition as some kind of Trojan horse for remaining or as a way of fudging the issue of securing a good long-term deal. A transition must be precisely that—covering from where we are now until we have a new comprehensive deal in place. It must be trusted by those on both sides of the argument—those of us who argued to remain and those of us who argued to leave.

I noticed today that Mr Barnier said that there would be no negotiation on transition until at least late 2018. I raised this point in an intervention on the Secretary of State earlier, because that is extremely worrying. As a Parliament, we should be trying to come together around a position we can agree on, and the transitional deal is part of that. We should look at how we can press perhaps even for a parallel process, so that in the event that this country does not secure a deal by March 2019, it has an insurance policy in place to ensure that business stability and confidence is maintained and we do not crash out with the effect that would have on our economic future.

4.28 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I also congratulate the hon. Member for Midlothian (Danielle Rowley) on her excellent speech and the priorities she has set for herself and her constituents. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) on making a confident and polished maiden speech; clearly that particular Stone will be playing a significant role in the cairn of democracy.

I am disappointed that the Secretary of State is not here, because I would have liked to point out to him that the business of attacking national broadcasters is something that Putin and Trump do, and that it is not something that our Secretary of State should be doing.

Mr Vazey: Will the right hon. Gentleman therefore join me in welcoming Robbie Gibb from the BBC, who has just become the director of communications at No. 10?
Tom Brake: I am sure that there will be some excellent cross-fertilisation going on there. Of course I congratulate Robbie Gibb on his new role.

As the Minister will know, the Liberal Democrats favour staying in the single market and the customs union, and we are disappointed that the Government made no attempt to secure that while talking to the other EU countries about freedom of movement. We need to hear the Minister’s assessment of the cost of leaving the single market and the customs union. What would be the cost of reaching no deal? What would be the cost of a bad deal or a good deal? The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union has said that he cannot tell us what these costs are because we do not know what the deal is, yet we hear successive Ministers saying that leaving the European Union is going to be absolutely brilliant and a bonanza for British business. They can tell us that, yet they cannot say what the cost of leaving the European Union with either no deal or a bad deal would be. Will the Minister tell us what those costs would be, or is there a cover-up going on?

We also need to hear how many deals the Minister expects to be struck when we leave the European Union. How many does he expect to be secured in the first, second, third and fifth years after our departure? We have heard from other Members what the average time is for securing a trade deal. I would also like some feedback from the Minister on the countries with which the European Union has already struck a deal or is about to finalise one. Canada and South Korea are examples, and I understand that Japan is now close to securing such a deal. I would like to know how long those countries think it would take to secure a new deal with the UK at some point in the future. Given that informal discussions have started, I also think we are entitled to know what countries such as China, India and Brazil have been saying to the British Government about their expectations of how many more Chinese, Indian and Brazilian citizens will be able to come to the UK on the back of any trade deals. People will be interested to know those facts.

The Minister has heard from many contributors this afternoon about the importance of freedom of movement. He will have been lobbied by a series of companies and organisations across the board about their concern over the impact of restricting freedom of movement. He will have heard from companies that innovate, and from companies similar to the one in my constituency that is worried that it cannot gain access to engineers from companies similar to the one in my constituency. It is worth considering why our financial services sector is such a world leader, which is not just because it has been around for a long time but because the in-depth, unique infrastructure surrounding financial services—whether it be the lawyers, accountants, consultants or the like—makes Britain such a good place for this industry. Those advantages are not going to change.

It is true that business never likes uncertainty, and there is undoubtedly uncertainty in certain areas of our regulatory and legal frameworks surrounding financial services. If the House will indulge me, I will address two of those areas. First, as Members will fully appreciate, a key area that has been highlighted is this country’s desire to continue benefiting from the single passport for financial services that operates within member states of the European Union, whereby a firm that obtains authorisation to carry out a particular activity in one state can carry out such activity in other member states without further authorisation or regulation. It would be good to hear from the Minister and the Secretary of State whether we intend to try to maintain that position.

Another area of real uncertainty is the principle of equivalence. At the immediate point of exit, EU law will form part of UK law and, therefore, as a matter of fact will be equivalent. However, it should not be controversial for the United Kingdom to keep the bulk of EU financial regulation then in force as, frankly, much of it was either largely driven or written by the United Kingdom or derives from international accords of one kind or another. That is another area where certainty for business
would be appreciated. In particular, the clearing of euros in the City of London is attracting a lot of concern.

Having said that, we need to ensure that our reasonable concerns about this uncertainty do not lead us in the long term, post Brexit, to try to keep everything the same as now. Why should that be? It would mean accepting wholesale a European regulatory framework that we would no longer have a role in shaping, and which would consequently allow the European Union—if, perish the thought, it wished to cause us difficulty—to stifle the activity of our financial services sector.

I do not have time to go into what I think the vision for financial services should be post Brexit. [Interruption.] That is a shame for everybody. We need a transition in order to get there, but our financial services sector has a bright future after Brexit. I look forward to the Minister’s response.

4.39 pm

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): It has been a great pleasure to be in the Chamber this afternoon to hear some excellent maiden speeches, and if the House will indulge me, I would like to single out those of my hon. Friends the Members for Lincoln (Ms Lee) and for Midlothian (Danielle Rowley). It was also a great pleasure to be here to hear the Secretary of State enthusiastically extol the virtues of free trade, on much of which I agreed with him. He rightly said that fair free trade engenders and develops prosperity, and of course it also develops peace. If we are trading with somebody, we are not fighting them. The irony of that statement is that that was precisely why the EU—the European Economic Community—was founded in the first place, and he now wishes to move away from it.

At the risk of getting my wrist slapped by the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), who is no longer in his place, let me say that I think Brexit is going to be a disaster. However, I voted for article 50, because my side lost the referendum and I recognise that. I also stood on a manifesto promise to get the best form of Brexit possible in the circumstances. For me, that is a people’s Brexit that promotes prosperity and jobs, environmental protections, workplace protections, which I know some right hon. and hon. Conservative Members have suggested might be watered down, and consumer protections. I say to the House that although we will try to get the best Brexit deal for the UK, we cannot bind future generations, which may wish to get a different relationship, including rejoining the EU at some point. As hon. Members throughout the House have said, we have to resist the ideological push to get the hardest deal come what may, which to an extent is being led by some of the more hard-right Brexiteers in the Conservative party. I do not think it is acceptable that we leave the EU with no deal, and if we do that, it will be down to the Ministers who are negotiating.

There is concern in the private sector about the uncertainty being generated by the current circumstances, and there is an absurdity in the current position. The automotive sector wants a sector deal, and we know that some companies, such as Nissan, have a company-specific deal. The aerospace sector wants a special deal, as do the pharmaceuticals industry, the nuclear industry and the chemical industry, which is tussling with the REACH—registration, evaluation and authorisation of chemicals—regulations. We heard from the Secretary of State that the Scotch whisky sector wants a separate deal. The hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) told us about the City of London and the legal sector needing a special deal, and he was absolutely right. Higher education, which depends on funding, academic collaboration and the Erasmus programme, wants a special deal, as does agriculture, particularly in relation to seasonal workers. Hospitality also wants a sector deal. We heard from Ministers today in a statement on health and social care that social care wants a sector deal. I cannot help but wonder when the lightbulb will come on in the national consciousness and instead of having so many different sector deals, we will see that one deal might be more appropriate. There is a problem with the single market—we know that free movement has caused difficulties—but that can be addressed.

Finally, let me make a plea. The Government are currently in a weak position, and because of their desperation to sign a free trade deal—any free trade deal, with anybody—we are not able to stand up for the values that I thought we all shared. The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) referred to that. It means that we are not condemning President Trump over his walking away from the Paris deal, and we are getting into bed with people such as Duterte of the Philippines. This failure to achieve decent terms for our trade deal, or even understand what those terms would be, is affecting our foreign policy position as well, and making us a weaker nation as a result.

4.43 pm

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Labour’s manifesto stated:

“Labour is pro-trade and pro-investment. The UK’s future prosperity depends on minimising tariff and non-tariff barriers that prevent us from exporting and creating the jobs and economic growth we need.”

The negotiations for the UK’s exit from the EU have already begun, and our future prosperity as a nation is vitally dependent on our international trading relationships. Of those relationships, the UK-EU trade deal must be the Government’s priority. A no-deal with the EU is the worst possible deal and must be ruled out. Anyone who has run a business knows that you look after your existing business relationships first—if you do anything else, you do so at your peril.

We have heard many speeches today. The hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) spoke about the transitional arrangements and the question of how to deliver frictionless trade.

The right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) gave the first of the many speeches that we could call pro-Chancellor, given the interesting interrelationship between the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) spoke about the car industry’s importance to the UK economy and the need to ensure that we continue to support car exports. He also spoke of the damage that no deal would do to that industry.
The hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Dockerill) made her maiden speech; I congratulate her on the enthusiastic way she spoke about her constituency.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) spoke about her commitment to her constituents and their need for a Brexit that supports exports and jobs. She also spoke about the importance of the European Medicines Agency to this country and about the need to support the hill farmers in her constituency.

I think the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) spoke in support of the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Ms Lee) made an excellent and passionate speech and spoke about the importance of the transport hub delivered by the Labour council of which she was part. Support for transport infrastructure is of course crucial to backing the businesses and jobs of her constituents, including those involved in international trade.

The hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) clearly backed the Chancellor.

The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) reminded us of his late friend, Charlie Kennedy, who was much respected by Members from all parties. I congratulate him on his confident maiden speech; I enjoyed his story about his predecessor, Charles James Fox.

The hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) was with the Chancellor.

My hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Danielle Rowley) made an excellent maiden speech in which she reminded us that she is the first woman to represent her constituency. She comes from a family of miners and is keeping that Midlothian tradition going. I was pleased to hear her remind us that she was elected, as I was, on a platform of hope for the many, not the few.

The hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) was, clearly, with the Chancellor—[Interruption] I think he was, anyway. He gave a good example from his constituency of the dangers of a cliff-edge exit and spoke about the importance of transitional arrangements.

The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) made a good speech, and the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami), who I think was backing the Chancellor, gave another good short speech.

The debate finished with a great speech by my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson), who reminded us of the importance of fair and free trade and how it engenders prosperity and peace. He, like me, will be supporting a Brexit that promotes jobs and retains environmental and consumer protections—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mark Garnier): He, like I.

Bill Esterson: I thank the Minister for the correction. No doubt the fee note will be in the post.

The Government have promised to deliver the “exact same benefits” as we currently have inside the single market and customs union, and Labour will hold them to account on that commitment. We recognise that once we leave the EU a transitional period is vital to avoid a cliff-edge for the UK economy.

The Government have still failed to set out a coherent international trade strategy for when the UK has formally left the EU. We have called on them to publish an international trade White Paper. The UK needs clarity on this issue as never before. It is unacceptable to take the country into an uncertain future that includes our exiting the EU without a comprehensive plan on international trade. Such a plan must be presented to and properly scrutinised by the British people and their elected representatives in Parliament.

A White Paper must set out what the Government’s plans are for future international trade, outlining negotiating principles and trade policy objectives, including which industry sectors will be prioritised and which will not. Clarification of what was meant in the Lancaster House speech by hybrid customs arrangements needs to be set out. The Government say that they intend to pursue closer trade links with Commonwealth partners to make up for any lost trade with the EU, which currently accounts for 44% of our exports. However, none of the UK’s top 10 export partners is a Commonwealth country.

The spring Budget statement revealed that this Government are out of ideas when it comes to boosting exports and tackling the productivity slump forecast by the Office for Budget Responsibility. This is a Government who talk big on trade and Brexit, but who have failed to provide the support for British businesses wishing to export and grow into new markets.

The latest Office for National Statistics figures show that the UK’s trade in goods deficit has increased by £2.6 billion. Our imports are on the rise while our exports are failing to catch up. Despite the Government’s bombastic talk of Britain leading the world as a trading nation, our trade performance on their watch has been weak.

British small and medium-sized enterprises and trade bodies have repeatedly called on the Government to do more to deliver real support to potential exporters. The Government have ignored them, focusing instead on the big corporations and on arms sales. They have systematically delayed SME funding for overseas trade shows and have, over the years, decreased the budget for such funding. They should be maintaining the tradeshow access programme and, crucially, delivering it on time—not delaying it by four months as has just happened.

The Government need to maximise support for those wishing to export and make it clear what their mission is and what their vision of trade is. They need to bring forward the White Paper and say what their view is of transitional arrangements, how they will deliver frictionless trade outside the EU with the EU and, above all, to put forward the priority of jobs and British businesses first.

4.45 pm

The Minister for Trade and Investment (Greg Hands): May I thank Members for what has been a very useful debate? I think that 17 Members have spoken in the first general trade debate since the formation of the Department last summer. Let us consider for a moment the significance of this new Department of State. It was 10 years ago, almost to this month, that Labour abolished the word “trade” from the name of every Government Department.
One of Gordon Brown's very first decisions was to eliminate entirely the word "trade". The creation of this new Department shows the determination of our Prime Minister to put trade at the heart of Government. May I praise the free trade vision that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State outlined earlier today?

First, let me say a few words on today's foreign direct investment data, showing a record-breaking number of FDI projects coming into the UK in the financial year just finished. Inward investment into the UK is estimated to have safeguarded nearly 100,000 jobs last year. Our trade officials have helped to secure more deals than ever before—up 7%—so a big thank you to all our staff around the world.

May I just remind Labour Members that the trade deficit, which they talked about at one or two points today, is down considerably since we inherited the position in 2010—down a considerable £5.6 billion! At the same time, exports to the EU have increased by 11.3%, but exports outside the European Union have increased by 34.6%, which is a very significant figure.

We had calls from the Labour Opposition for clarity from the Government—this from a party whose leader calls free trade a dogma. The hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) says that Labour Members are "principled free traders". We remember his clarity on the comprehensive economic and trade agreement. On the Monday in Committee, he supported CETA, but on the Tuesday, he called for a Commons vote on it on a deferred Division. Then on the Wednesday, he urged his party to vote down CETA, but it rebelled against him by a margin of 85 to 67. He says he is in favour of free trade but he seems to be against all free trade deals.

There is one final point that the hon. Gentleman might want to note. He talked about his hon. Friend for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland. Now, he might not have been watching on 8 June, but the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland is now on the Conservative Benches and is now my hon. Friend, not the hon. Gentleman's.

We had some excellent maiden speeches, including a first-class maiden speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Dockerill). She spoke with limited notes, which was welcome, and paid tribute to Dame Angela Watkinson, a friend of mine and many others. My hon. Friend talked eloquently about Upminster, a place I know well as its name is on the front of every single train I take each morning on the District line. I rarely get there, but I am looking forward to visiting one day. She mentioned the sale of council homes in London and how important that still is today, and she presented a positive and uplifting vision for the future of this great country. We thank her and welcome her.

The hon. Member for Lincoln (Ms Lee) talked about her predecessors, whom I knew well, Gillian Merron and Karl McCartney. She did not mention another predecessor, Dick Taverne, who of course left Labour to join the Social Democratic party. From the content of her speech, it sounded like there is little chance of that happening in her case. I congratulate her on her speech and welcome her to this place.

We heard from the new hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone)—one of the longest constituency names and the second largest constituency, too. He clearly knows it well and I am sure that his predecessor but one, the late Charles Kennedy, would have been very proud of his speech in this House today.

We heard from the new hon. Member for Midlothian (Danielle Rowley), who made an accomplished maiden speech. It is refreshing to hear Scottish accents coming back to the Labour Benches. She made some good points on welfare and I think we would all agree that people need a hand up, not a handout.

We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) and my hon. Friends the Members for Rochford and Southend East (James Dudderidge) and for Gloucester (Richard Graham). My hon. Friend the Member for Stone mentioned the Labour split on the single market. I have seen 11 Queen's Speeches in this House, and although I have occasionally seen a Government rebellion on an Opposition amendment, I have to say that I have never seen an Opposition rebellion on an Opposition amendment—

Helen Goodman rose—

Greg Hands rose—

Greg Hands: I will not take an intervention, as there is no time.

We heard an entertaining speech from my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage, who praised me for my language skills—so vielen Dank. He asked in particular about countries—we have 10 working groups covering 15 countries. He talked about the timetable and the analysis of the increase of GDP, and it is impossible to tell at the moment, as it is impossible to know what will be in those agreements.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East rightly pointed out the increase in value of our exports outside the EU since he and I were first elected in 2005, rising from 48% to 56%. He is also right on the trade deficit.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester was right to say that, whether we campaigned for leave or remain, what is important is to seek the best outcome for the UK as regards success in the negotiations. I praise him for the work he does as our trade envoy in south-east Asia, as well as on the question of the importance of China.

My hon. Friend the Members for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) and for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) mentioned the importance of financial services. They are absolutely right, but here we are in a strong position. The City needs access to European customers, but European borrowers and investors also need access to the largest capital market in the European time zone, which is the City of London. That is very important to remember.

From the Opposition Benches, we have heard from the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) and the hon. Members for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) and for City of Chester (Christian Matheson). They were all good speeches.
Trade is now back at the heart of Government policy making and I hope that all Members will agree that it is back where it belongs. For the first time, the three pillars of trade, finance promotion and policy fall under one roof, allowing us to approach trade in the most co-ordinated way possible. Our three objectives are worth reiterating and their simplicity should not detract from their significance. We will promote British exports the world over, encourage both inward and outward investment and build the strongest possible trading framework for the UK post-Brexit.

Finally, this country has a great free trading future. I am optimistic about a good outcome for the Brexit negotiations and I and the whole Department are looking forward to growing trade and investment in the years to come.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Exiting the European Union and global trade.

Southend Hospital

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

4.59 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I am grateful to Mr Speaker for giving me the opportunity to raise on the Adjournment the future of Southend hospital. In so doing, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) on his promotion to Under-Secretary of State for Health. I know he will do a splendid job. I must warn the House that I will not take any interventions, because I have a lot to say, and I am sure my hon. Friend the Minister will not take offence if we do not split the half-hour available exactly.

I am absolutely furious that it is necessary for me to raise in the House the future of Southend hospital. We are all gathered here after what in my case was the 10th time I have been a parliamentary candidate in a general election, and I certainly did not enjoy this particular experience. I am a conviction politician. I am not in the school of, “Oh, it’s a choice between the red and the blue team. I support the blue team, and if the going gets tough I might slide over to the red team.” I support things, and one of the things I support is an enterprise culture. I hope that businesses can make a bit of profit, the country can do well and we can spend money on our wonderful health service.

As I look at the Dispatch Box, I recall 34 years ago standing just behind the now Leader of the Opposition—we both had rather long hair in those days. All I would say is that I think he and I hold the same views today as we did 34 years ago. Let me say this and get it off my chest immediately. I do know a bit about the health service. Colleagues stand up and say that they are expert in this and expert in that. It does not matter what age they are, but I think there should be a little bit of respect for how long we have been here and for experience. I go back to the time when I was a junior Parliamentary Private Secretary to Michael Portillo and Edwina Currie and we had our departmental office in Elephant and Castle, and I was there when we first moved into 79 Whitehall, so I do know a little bit about the health service, and a little bit about sustainability and transformation exercises, which I will come to in a moment.

Not only that—I know a little bit about politics. Unlike all my colleagues, I held a challenging seat not once, not twice but three times between 1983 and 1997—just like my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) has now. I have moved on to a slightly more comfortable seat in terms of support for the Conservative party, but I never ever forget how tough it was.

My inspiration in politics is the late Baroness Thatcher. Unlike many colleagues in the House, I was a colleague of hers and knew her when she was at the top of her game; not only later in her life when perhaps she was not firing on all cylinders and romanticising about things. She is my inspiration, frankly. Of course, she never went along the populist line; she always did what she thought was in the best interests of the country. I say to my hon. Friend the Minister that during Mrs Thatcher’s time as Prime Minister, when we had a huge Conservative majority, I was able to stop Basildon A&E closing within two days. In Basildon, our garden
backed on to the grounds of the hospital, and I now live five minutes from Southend hospital. As I look at our situation today, there is no way that I, the Member of Parliament for Southend West, am going to allow the hospital in the heart of my constituency to have its A&E downgraded. There is no way that I am going to allow it not to have 24/7 access. There is no way that I am going to allow ambulances with blue lights flashing not to stop at Southend hospital.

Getting back to the campaign, colleagues up and down the country think they had a tough campaign because of the manifesto and the style of the campaign, but the rudeness I encountered in this campaign disgusts me. The things that people—young, middle aged and old—now say to us, the politicians who take the blame for decisions made by bureaucrats and others who are paid twice as much as we are, and the way they use the F-word and C-word, disgust me. On social media, the mickey is taken about of me because of "cake". Shame! Shame on any youngster who thinks it is a laughing matter, when my constituent Leah Betts died of an ecstasy overdose. Shame on Channel 4, which got people checking with his civil servants and thought there was a drug called cake. It is an absolute disgrace. Those people who think it is funny now were not even born when my constituent died. The general tone of this election campaign was jolly disappointing.

For me in Southend, at the heart of it all was a campaign called Save Southend A&E. I am furious that those who were behind the proposals did not get the politics. Behind the scenes, I had been organising health summits, where we got decision makers in SEPT—South Essex Partnership Trust—dealing with mental health services, representatives of the clinical commissioning groups of GPs, and the hospitals to talk to one another. I was not at all happy with senior management, who are paid large salaries—it is all in *Hansard* over the years.

I get frustrated that the longer one is an MP, the more one is ignored. I think of the chairmanship I am privileged to hold of the all-party fire safety rescue group. It was not just Conservative Ministers or Liberal Ministers; it was Labour Ministers who accepted the wrong advice. We all know the dire consequences of our advice being ignored.

To get back to the health service, with 15 minutes to go, one individual was going to stand against me in the general election on the issue of the A&E. There was all the online abuse. We had rallies. We had mass demonstrations. It was a nightmare, but I can look after myself. I have not survived for 34 years in Parliament because people have been looking after me. I am arrogant enough to say that I know what I am doing. I know a bit about people, because before I became an MP I owned an employment agency, so I have interviewed hundreds of people. It annoys me that others think they know better than I do on this issue. I say to my hon. Friend the Minister that in future, when anything that involves Southend hospital is being done—including by bureaucrats and officials—pay the hon. Member for Southend West the courtesy of telling me what is going on. I should be told first.

On the proposal to dumb down Southend A&E, the argument is lost—completely lost. In the election manifesto on which we fought the recent campaign, we see on page 67 the heading “Holding NHS leaders to account”, followed by a part of the manifesto that I shall repeat over and over again if I am not listened to:

"We will also back the implementation of the plan at a local level, through the Sustainability and Transformation Plans, providing they are clinically led and locally supported.”

For goodness’ sake! A politician does not ask a question speculating what the answer might be. Unknown to me, we had clinicians employed by the people suggesting these proposals openly speaking out against any changes. It beggars belief that just two weeks ago the person running Southend A&E—I will not name them—went to Rochford Council for a meeting and tore the proposals apart line by line, word by word. How on earth could the arrangements for A&E be changed if the very person running the scheme speaks against it? I have any number of examples of clinicians, GPs and others who are openly speaking against the proposals. It is certainly not clinically led.

Hospitals are not perfect—not by a long run—but I wish to pay tribute to everyone who works in the national health service. I do so not in a patronising way—I know that there are all these arguments about the public sector pay review and all of that—but because they do a fantastic job. Although it is sometimes forgotten, all Members of Parliament are human beings, so we all get unwell and we all have family members who get unwell. We are grateful to GPs and hospital consultants for the wonderful work they do for us time after time.

Of course MPs are the ones who hear the complaints when someone is not looked after well, but we must never allow that to cloud the overall fact that we have a wonderful health service.

I was a member of the Health Committee for 10 years, which is not a short time. I went all over the country, and all around the world—you name it; I have been there and seen it—and I returned to the UK with the view that we have the best health service in the world. However, because people have the highest possible expectations, no amount of money will deal with all the issues. There is the situation with this baby, and the President of the United States reckons he is going to spend twice as much as we are, and the way they use the F-word and C-word, disgust me. We are grateful to GPs and hospital consultants for the wonderful work they do for us time after time. The women and men who work in our health service are absolutely marvellous.

I also want to point out that the people who came up with these suggestions have presumably not yet started talking about the ambulance service. I have any number of people telling me that the idea that we can transfer people to Basildon A&E is just not on, for all sorts of reasons. I have heard many reasons why that cannot happen.

I really want to praise Southend hospital and the wonderful things the people there achieve. Only last Thursday the Countess of Wessex, who has a particular interest in babies, opened the Kypros Nicolaides foetal medicine unit, which helps around 45 women each month with specialist foetal medicine care. It is absolutely tip-top. The latest Care Quality Commission report gave the A&E department good ratings. It had been underperforming for a while, but we have now got it up to a good level of performance. The simulation suite has recently celebrated its first anniversary. This state-of-the-art suite has been used to deliver a wide range of training opportunities designed to look and feel like a
real patient bay, and it can replicate any medical scenario. Last November the brand new £3 million state-of-the-art endovascular hybrid theatre was opened. This new cutting-edge suite combines all the features of a fully equipped operating theatre, with an interventional radiology suite, and it includes ultra-modern imaging and operating equipment for complex endovascular work.

Our hospital has always had a wonderful reputation for treating people with cancer. It has also always been first class at treating people who suffer strokes. Basildon has really been the centre of excellence for people with heart problems. Southend hospital has the Red2Green system. The initiative has seen positive results across all the wards, ensuring that every day is valuable for patients in the hospital’s care through early daily review by senior clinical staff expediting investigations, treatments and early safe discharge home. The last thing we want is elderly people spending too long in hospital and catching infections.

There is funding for GP streaming. The Department of Health announced allocation of A&E capital funding to ease pressure on emergency departments in time for winter 2017, and we are absolutely delighted with that. We are also delighted with the £180,000 that we have received to help with cancer. A patient-led assessment of the care environment was undertaken in May. Although the formal outcomes will not be available until later this year, the informal comments from the volunteer inspectors were very positive. Thrombectomy training is a cath lab-based technique where a blood clot is directly removed from the brain’s arteries. This is fantastic technology, and Southend will be not only top of the country but top of the world in this discipline, which is wonderful news.

A team at Southend University hospital are using innovative 3D presentation technology with radiotherapy to allow patients greater insight into the machines used for cancer treatment. Everybody is obviously very frightened when cancer is diagnosed, but this therapy will help with the treatment, and it helps the patient to feel more positive and confident that they will beat the disease. A maternity training simulator has been introduced, which enhances patient care, and a new paediatric insulin pump service improves diabetes care for children. Southend University hospital’s team were recently highly commended in the Health Service Journal value in healthcare awards, and a dementia day room funded by Southend Hospital Charity’s appeal was recently opened.

Anyone who works in the health service—whatever they do—has a gift. I am not terribly good at looking after other people when they feel unwell. Frankly, it makes me feel unwell. How a surgeon cuts someone makes me feel unwell. How a surgeon cuts someone makes me feel unwell. How a surgeon cuts someone makes me feel unwell. How a surgeon cuts someone makes me feel unwell. Someone has to do it—brain surgery and all that. These women and men are absolutely blessed and splendid. I speak from the Conservative Benches, and we used to be seen as the enemies of the national health service. The situation is quite the reverse; we totally support and value the health service. As long as I am the Member of Parliament for Southend West, I will ensure that Southend University hospital has not only a bright future, but a glorious one.

5.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): I very much enjoyed the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess). I congratulate him on securing this debate and commend the fire in his belly that always shines through when he speaks in this House, or anywhere else, on behalf of his constituents. They are lucky to have him. I congratulate him on his re-election once again last month.

It is a strange that there is nobody in front of me and everybody I am talking to is behind me, but such is the layout of the House of Commons—and I am of course talking to you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I understood before I came into the Chamber, and I certainly understand now, that there is significant local concern about the future of the A&E at Southend University Hospital NHS Foundation Trust. My understanding is that Southend A&E will continue to provide substantial emergency services 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and any change—I underline, any change—to this position would need to meet the four tests of service change. For clarity, let me outline those tests, because they really are the bottom line of any proposed service change in the health service in England. First, proposed service changes must have support from commissioners; secondly, they must be based on clinical evidence; thirdly, they must be able to demonstrate public engagement; and fourthly, they must consider patient choice. An additional NHS England guidance has been added—that proposed service reconfigurations should be tested for their impact on overall bed numbers in the area, and the impact thereof on safety. It is important to set that out very clearly.

The work of the success regime has now fed into the Mid and South Essex success regime sustainability and transformation plan.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I would like to introduce Broomfield hospital in Chelmsford into the discussion as one of the hospitals in the mid-Essex area along with the three in Southend and those in Basildon. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) on bringing so much experience to this debate. Broomfield is deeply loved. It serves our newest city. We too need our 24-hour consultant-led A&E. NHS England made it clear to me on Monday that it is not only 24-hour, but consultant-led. Can the Minister confirm that? Can he also confirm that any decisions made will put patient safety first? The future of our NHS relies on first-class training and innovation in Chelmsford. As part of the mid-Essex area, we have the country’s first new medical centre. Will the Minister confirm that he supports that medical centre?

Steve Brine: I will, Madam Deputy Speaker. I could feel you bristling at the length of the intervention. I can assure my hon. Friend that none of the options being considered includes the closure of any of the three A&Es, and all will continue to provide emergency care 24 hours a day, seven days a week.
I was mentioning the work of the Mid and South Essex STP, which was published in November 2016 as part of the effort to ensure that there are sustainable services in mid and south Essex. There is now a major workstream looking at service configuration across the three hospital sites. Work led by clinicians in 2016 arrived at five possible future configurations for consolidated specialist services across the three hospitals. As well as providing the majority of routine hospital care for its local population, each hospital site would provide some centralised specialist services.

Let me briefly outline the current thinking as it has been set out to me. Southend hospital will continue, as I have said, to provide substantial emergency services 24 hours a day, seven days a week. In addition, it will be a centre of excellence, as my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West rightly said, for planned care, alongside its already well-established cancer centre and radiotherapy services. Basildon hospital will provide enhanced specialist emergency care—for example, specialising in the total management of major life-threatening illness. Broomfield Hospital in Chelmsford will provide a combination of specialist emergency and planned care, with the potential to provide a specialist centre for children. I have to emphasise that these ideas are being further developed by the clinical groups as we speak. No single preferred option for consultation has been arrived at.

Let me now turn to the proposals for emergency care. It is important to note, and I wish to reiterate, that in all potential options for hospital reconfiguration currently being discussed, Southend hospital would continue to provide emergency services 24/7. An options appraisal process was held earlier this year involving clinicians, stakeholders and local people. The higher-scoring options listed one hospital as the provider of specialist emergency care—for example, specialising in the total management of major life-threatening illness. Broomfield Hospital in Chelmsford would provide a combination of specialist emergency and planned care, with the potential to provide a specialist centre for children. I have to emphasise that these ideas are being further developed by the clinical groups as we speak. No single preferred option for consultation has been arrived at.

I also understand that the practice of taking patients by ambulance from Southend to a specialist centre is already established. For example, people who suffer an acute heart attack in Southend are currently taken by ambulance to the Essex cardiothoracic centre—that was easy for me to say—in Basildon. I have been advised that that arrangement has been in place for many years. Separating some of the major emergency work in that way releases capacity and resources for planned surgery and other treatments.

For the local NHS, new centres of excellence across the hospital group in both planned and emergency care have the potential to compete with the best in the country to attract high-calibre staff and bring the best of modern and world healthcare to mid and south Essex. I emphasise that in all options currently under discussion, about 95% of hospital visits would remain local at each hospital.

As I have stated previously, the programme is currently under discussion and I am advised that the aim is to launch a full public consultation at the end of the year at the earliest, centring on a single preferred option. The public consultation will explore in detail the benefits and implications of the proposals and will inform plans for implementation. Engagement with staff and local people will continue to influence and refine plans at every stage. That is a key principle, as I have said, in local reconfiguration of services, and it has to be right that the process is guided by those who know and understand the local area best.

In conclusion, as a constituency MP I completely appreciate the concerns of my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West, whom I again commend for his work.

Sir David Amess: I should have said in my speech that all my literature had headlines such as, “David pledges support for 24/7 A&E service”. I felt that I was not believed, so it is good that my hon. Friend has repeated that we will have 24/7 care. Finally, given that morale at the hospital has been ruined over the past few weeks, it would be great if we could have a ministerial visit at some stage, perhaps even from the Secretary of State.

Steve Brine: I thank my hon. Friend for that offer and will pass it on to the Secretary of State, although I am not entirely sure whether he or any of his Ministers can compete with royalty.

In the 30 seconds I have left, I commend my hon. Friend for his work on those issues affecting his constituents. He is a doughty champion for them. I think they do believe him, because they re-elected him admirably just a few weeks ago. I encourage both him and his constituents to maintain an open dialogue with the local NHS, as I know they will, especially during the pre-consultation and consultation phase, and reassure him that Southend A&E will continue to provide substantial A&E services.

Question put and agreed to.

5.29 pm

House adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Tuesday 4 July 2017

[David Hanson in the Chair]

Persecution of Christians: Role of UK Embassies

9.30 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered persecution of Christians and the role of UK embassies.

Today is 4 July, independence day for the United States of America, which enshrined religious freedom as one of the most fundamental constitutional rights. Despite the fact that it is a celebration of victory over us British—every person in this room—it also celebrates the concept of freedom, which must always be celebrated and cherished. Today's debate is about the right to religious freedom and how the House can best help achieve that.

Both at home and abroad, conflict along religious lines remains a consistent feature of human life and a considerable barrier to building stable societies. Although religion is not necessarily the driver of global conflict, conflict often manifests along religious lines, and those who suffer violence are often targeted because of their beliefs or because of the faith group with which they identify. Even when certain groups do not experience violence, they can often be discriminated against in terms of work, education, healthcare and in many other ways that can limit their chances of improving their lives.

Although there are many complex and interconnected factors that lead to violence within a state, there is a correlation between states with high levels of freedom of religion or belief and states considered to have had low levels of peace or high levels of terrorism—the correlation between the two is clear. The Pew Forum Research Centre assesses that out of the 16 countries with high hostilities towards religious groups, 11 have low or very low peace levels and nine have high or very high incidences of terrorism, according to the Institute for Economics and Peace global terrorism index. That makes them some of the most violent countries on the planet.

I am very pleased to have secured the first debate in Westminster Hall in this new Parliament; I am sure I will be back once or twice, but that is by the way. It is important to have this debate. I should have declared an interest at the beginning; I apologise for not having done so. Mr Hanson, I am chair of the all-party parliamentary groups on international freedom of religion or belief and on Pakistan religious minorities, so the issue is very real for me. I thank Members for the turnout; there is a good balance here of Members from all parties.

A failure to recognise the role of religion and to promote freedom of belief will make much more difficult—if not impossible—the work of embassies and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Department for International Development and other Departments as they try to build more stable societies. The roles of the Minister and our Government are at the crux of the debate.

I will mention a few brief cases that outline the depth of persecution across the world. It is sometimes good to remind ourselves of what we have that other people do not. People do not take note of our car registrations and take pictures of us as we go to our churches on Sundays, but there are places in the world where that happens.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Before he goes on to itemise some aspects of persecution, does he agree that in addition to the various departmental responsibilities and the good work that has been done there, there are various non-governmental agencies such as Open Doors and other groups that have highlighted the topic he is discussing today? They are to be highly commended for so doing.

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. In the Gallery today are people with a particular interest in this issue: Open Doors, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Release International, Premier Christian Radio, and people who highlight this issue across the world. We thank them for their work. As my hon. Friend said, their work is good as well.

The Eritrean Orthodox Patriarch, His Holiness Abune Antonios, aged 89, has spent more than 10 years under house arrest. His continued imprisonment coincides with an increased crackdown on Eritrean Christians by the Eritrean authorities, 122 of whom were reportedly rounded up and detained in May. Many of those detained have been subject to torture—by being kept in metal shipping containers without water and flogged, for example. In May, all members of the Kale Hiwot Church in Adiqlala were detained, including 12 children. Children are seen as a threat by some Governments, even though they are young. They are young enough to understand the powerful words of the Bible, but at the same time Governments see them as a threat, which annoys me.

Russia’s Supreme Court in Moscow recently declared that the Jehovah’s Witness national headquarters in St Petersburg and all 395 local organisations were extremist. The court banned all their activity immediately, according to the Institute for Economics and Peace global terrorism index. That makes them some of the most violent countries on the planet.

In February 2017, ISIS released a video vowing to kill all Egyptian Christians. ISIS is a real threat to everyone in that area. The House and the Government need to express solidarity with Christians wherever they are in the world.
Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): The case of the Coptic Christians highlights what this debate is focused on. It is difficult for people in Egypt to speak up publicly about the persecution, which puts responsibility on Government-to-Government relationships and the pressure that can be applied behind the scenes.

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. We both had an opportunity to visit Iraq and to understand the issue he has highlighted. As he rightly says, we must speak up on behalf of those who cannot be heard and who have no voice. Today in this Chamber, we will be their voice.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): I am sure my hon. Friend agrees that the persecution of Christians is nothing new. Those who believe in the biblical truth of the gospel have always been persecuted. We do not have to go to other countries to see that; we see it in the British Isles, where street preachers and others are told to remove themselves from the streets. If we live in an age of equality, that should be rectified.

Jim Shannon: That is a timely reminder from my hon. Friend. We do focus on Christians in other parts of the world, but sometimes we need to focus on what happens at home as well, as my hon. Friend said.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): On the hon. Gentleman’s campaign for equality and freedom of expression and on the British Government’s advocating human rights abroad, should not the Government advocate the rights of homosexual men—for instance, those in Chechnya who are being tortured and killed because of their homosexuality—as well as the rights of Christians?

Jim Shannon: I agree. This debate is about the persecution of Christians, but I wholeheartedly support what he says. I have no issues with that.

Christians have lived in Iraq for two millennia, but are currently on the verge of extinction. Many have fled areas controlled by ISIS and other Islamic extremists. Overall, persecution in Iraq is characterised by impunity, the threat of attacks and second-class treatment by the authorities. The Christian population, which before 2003 numbered as many as 1.4 million, dwindled to 350,000 and is now estimated to be around 250,000.

As in Iraq, the Christian population in Syria has fallen dramatically in recent years, from 1.25 million in 2011 to approximately half a million. The situation in Syria is characterised by heavy persecution of all types of Christians in areas held by ISIS and other Islamic militants. In those areas, Christians are often given the ultimatum: convert to Islam or die.

Can you imagine, Mr Hanson? What would we in this House do, as Christians, if we were given that challenge? I would like to think we would stand firm in our beliefs. That has been the stark and cold reality for Christians in Syria, and they have fled from areas held by Islamic State and areas destroyed during the conflict.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I happily served with the hon. Gentleman on the Defence Committee. It is absolutely right that Britain should stand up for human rights and the right of expression of religion right the way across the world. Many from the various Christian denominations in our constituencies believe that, because of our historic and cultural heritage, we should play a particular role in standing up for Christians’ rights to exercise their freedom of belief or religion in various parts of the world. Does the hon. Gentleman agree?

Jim Shannon: We are honoured to have the right hon. Gentleman here. He brings his years of wisdom and knowledge to the debate. His words are exactly what we need, and I thank him for them.

Turning back to China—in my Ulster Scots accent, some of the words and names will never sound like Chinese—Pastor Zhang Shaojie was sentenced to 12 years in prison for fraud and for gathering a crowd to disturb public order. He was detained without formal documentation on November 2013, along with 20 other members of the Nanle county Christian church. Church members, lawyers and Christians visiting the family of the detained Protestant pastor were beaten, harassed and detained by hired thugs, police and Government agencies. In December 2013, there were significant questions about the fairness of his trial. Reports from his pastorate’s daughter are that he is on the verge of death after suffering various forms of torture while serving his 12-year sentence.

In Burma, following hundreds—probably thousands—of allegations and the co-ordinated documentation by Rohingya groups of mass killings, mass rapes and the destruction of whole villages, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights sent a team to interview Rohingya refugees who had recently fled to Bangladesh. Some 70,000 had fled. Based on more than 200 interviews, which is a substantial evidential base, OHCHR issued a damning flash report on February 3, complete with harrowing tales of the burning alive of elderly Rohingya men and the slitting of children’s throats—unspeakable, unspeakable wickedness. The UN estimates that Burmese authorities may have killed as many as 1,000 Rohingya men in recent violence alone.

The Conservatives’ 2017 manifesto declared that they would

“expand…global efforts to combat…violence against people because of their faith”.

In the recent Shrove Tuesday, Easter and Finsbury Park mosque attack statements, our Prime Minister said that we must take measures

“to stand up for the freedom of people of all religions to practice their beliefs openly and in peace and safety.”

With that in mind, I look to the Minister, with whom I spoke beforehand. I wish him well in his new position. I know that he knows the issues well, and I have no doubt that his response will be exactly what we in this Chamber want to hear. I am anticipating a good response; I believe and know from our conversations that that is how the Minister’s mind works and his heart thinks. I would be grateful if he clarified what the measures will be, and I offer the APPG’s assistance in taking them further. We are here to enable Government to take such things forward. We had a meeting last week in which we had the opportunity to hear from Government officials about how the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Department for International Development and other bodies work together. In his intervention, the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar) mentioned the Defence
Committee. I think there is a role for that Committee on where we go and how we can collectively work together better.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): At that excellent meeting with the Minister, it was important that the Members present stressed the need to take a cross-departmental approach and to explain to the British public why using taxpayer funds to tackle things such as persecution of religious minorities abroad is important for security back home.

Jim Shannon: I thank the right hon. Lady for her intervention, and for her contribution to the meeting we had with the Minister. I think all of us at that meeting were focused on how we could do better.

I come to what I hope the Minister and his Department will be able to do. Will he ensure that displaced communities in Iraq and Syria are able to return home safely? I think that would be an aspiration of us all, but how will that happen? I am ever mindful that the Minister has just taken up his role, but knowing his history and past comments, I am sure he will be able to respond.

In the light of the above cases, we ask Her Majesty’s Government to ensure that UK embassies are resourced to have a human rights focus incorporated in the work of the embassy and, specifically, to report and monitor on freedom of religion or belief. That is one issue we spoke about last week. In his response, the Minister indicated a willingness to make that happen; for it to happen, we look to the Minister and those resources. We need the people in those places to have the necessary training. If done properly, that will allow UK embassies to assess the appropriate time to intervene on issues of persecution, before they escalate too much, and will also allow embassies to assess the appropriate means of raising cases.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office toolkit on freedom of religion or belief has been sent to all FCO country desk officers and embassies to help in situations of persecution. The toolkit explains what to look out for in potential cases of persecution, providing a list of questions to check against. It provides guidelines on what can be done to ameliorate the situation. The toolkit outlines the methodology of response, but we ask the Government to ensure that embassies are asked what they are doing to use and implement the toolkit. It is all very well to have it in the armoury, but if it is not used or used incorrectly, we will fail to move forward in the way we should.

Embassies are due to take a lead in determining projects for the human rights and democracy fund. In his intervention, the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) referred to human rights. The embassies have the opportunity to address that now, and we need to be using the toolkit regularly where it is possible, necessary and applicable. The hon. Gentleman is right, and I support that wholeheartedly. Considerable consultation should be taken up with civil society and faith-based actors on this matter. That is a way forward.

Ensuring that FCO and DFID partners and projects do not discriminate based on religion or belief is crucial. We need the mindset in the FCO, DFID, Department for International Development—in Government policy singularly and collectively—to ensure that discrimination based on religion or belief does not take place. That means ensuring that the UK is not supporting any programme that provides humanitarian or other support to one group of people based on their beliefs, while withdrawing it from another.

When I first came to this House in 2010, there was a statement about the floods in Pakistan. I was aware from my own church, the Baptist church, that some of the people who were Baptists in Pakistan were not receiving the humanitarian aid that they should have received. It was discussed in our church the Sunday just before that, and it was coincidental that there was a statement. It was clear to me then that some of the authorities in Pakistan were withholding humanitarian aid from Christians. I want to see that stopped, and I believe the Minister will be able to respond on that.

In a world where nearly 85% of people globally adhere to a religion, if the FCO and DFID are to meet their commitments to promote peaceful, inclusive societies—that has to be the goal—they will need to engage with religious actors and communities, and support initiatives that build respect and trust between people of different faiths. The APPG on freedom of religion and belief is there for those with Christian beliefs, with other beliefs and for those with no beliefs. We need to make sure that that is our focus. It is exactly such initiatives, led by local civil society groups, that embassies need to ensure are financially supported and provided with space to operate. Such programmes are crucial for breaking down tension between different religious groups, promoting understanding between people and reducing the drive and desire to persecute Christians and people of other beliefs.

We hear about what happens to the Baha’is in Iran and Iraq, to the Shi’ites in Pakistan and to those of other religions in Indonesia. We hear about what happens in the middle east—my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) and I were talking before the debate about how Egyptian Coptic Christians are treated—and to those in Algeria, Morocco and many other places across the world, such as south and central America. In all those places, our focus has to be on having a society in which people understand, appreciate and accept that others may have a religion that is different from the one they hold to, and that they must have access to education, healthcare and support for their children, and the opportunity have a business.

Julia Dockerill (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that clampdowns on religious freedom often go hand in hand with an oppressive approach to free-thinking in general, and in particular to the press? I have worked a lot with the Bangladeshi community, and in Bangladesh there are a lot of problems with sectarianism, which goes hand in hand with a vicious clampdown on bloggers. Has work been done with advocates of a free press, in a similar way to what the hon. Gentleman is doing?

Jim Shannon: I wish the hon. Lady well in her new position, and I thank her for that intervention. We need to look at what the media’s role will be in the future. The media have a physical relationship with people and a critical job to do, and how it is done affects what happens in a country. We need a responsible, respected free press.

Engaging with human rights and faith-based organisations, religious actors and communities, and programmes of reconciliation will help to achieve the
[Jim Shannon]

FCO and DFID's goal of tackling the causes of insecurity, instability and conflict. There is a role for the media there.

I will conclude with this comment, because I am very conscious that all those who have made an effort to be here deserve to speak, and I look forward to hearing all their contributions. We cannot be responsible for the problems of the world, but evil triumphs when good people do nothing. I believe that, in this debate, we as Members of Parliament have a duty to convey our concerns directly to the Government and to ask for the help of the FCO, DFID and all the other Government bodies across the world. It is clear that we must use our influence to do something. We need to be the voice of the voiceless—those in the Public Gallery will understand that they are also a voice for the voiceless, as we are here. Our embassies and ambassadors have a role. I believe that, with respect to previous Ministers, this has not been fully utilised in the past, but it must be utilised now. How does the Minister think this will be done, and done soon? Every day that passes, there is a new case of persecution due to religious belief. Every case is one too many. Let us do today all that we can.

Several hon. Members rose—

David Hanson (in the Chair): Order. As is self-evident, a number of right hon. and hon. Members wish to participate in this debate. The wind-up speeches will commence at 10.30 am and I intend to try to call everybody, so it will be very helpful if Members exercise self-restraint.

9.53 am

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I will be mindful of your guidance and keep my remarks relatively short. It is a pleasure to be here at a 9.30 am Westminster Hall debate led by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I am a former member of the Backbench Business Committee, and it is apt that he secured this debate, given the number of times he has appeared before us.

It is very sad that we have to have this type of debate. Today, we celebrate—or remember, as some might say—4 July 1776, when the then American colonies looked to break away from a system of government that they thought did not give them their fundamental rights. Yet here we are more than 200 years later talking about many countries around the world where people still do not have the most fundamental right to come to God as they see Him and as they believe He is, and not to have sanctions imposed upon them merely because they disagree with the prevailing view in their local community or nation.

It is easy to think that we are just talking about Iraq and Syria, but Open Doors' great work shows that the countries where it is worst to be a Christian are North Korea and Somalia, closely followed by Afghanistan, Pakistan and Sudan. We know about Daesh's appalling crimes, including its genocide in the middle east, yet the countries that are the most oppressive of their citizens' political rights are just as oppressive of their religious rights. People's freedom of choice in anything is a threat to the leadership of those countries. I hope the Government, through our embassies, will be active in tackling that mindset.

Anyone who is as strong in their faith as they claim they are has nothing to fear from anyone else's beliefs. The fact that there are other faiths in this country does not affect my Christian faith. I am free to believe what I wish to believe, without feeling threatened by the fact that some other people believe something else. We need to promote that to ensure that other nations start to understand that this is not about our requiring them to convert or change their beliefs, but about giving people the fundamental right to choose what they believe and to approach God in their own way. That right, which seems literally God-given in this country, is sadly so precious in others.

On Friday my church, St Matthias in Torquay, will be hosting the south-west Open Doors evening of prayer. We will be reflecting on the fact that every Sunday we go to church without fear and without worrying if our employer will fire us or if the state will want to interview us about why we were there. We hope many other Christians will soon be able to enjoy that right.

I am delighted we have had the chance to debate this issue. Just standing here and bearing witness for those who are not able to express their faith as freely as we can is as important as any action we take. I hope they take inspiration from knowing that there is again a debate in this House about this issue. They do not walk alone; their Christian brothers and sisters in this House are standing side by side with them even as they go through their darkest time.

David Hanson (in the Chair): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for keeping his speech within four minutes, which is about the time limit we have to have to get everybody in.

9.57 am

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted that my first contribution is on this topic. Having been away for seven years, my knowledge will be somewhat dated, but hopefully the spirit and the faith I have always tried to demonstrate are still there.

I would like to say two things in my very short contribution. First, I have always seen it as the role of MPs to take up the position of minorities in various parts of the world that are being discriminated against, persecuted and even worse. Secondly, I was pleased to go with Christian Solidarity Worldwide on a number of visits. Pakistan and Nigeria were two of the main ones, but when I was previously in this House I was able to go to Geneva to make representations on behalf of a North Korean who had escaped from that regime. Likewise, I have demonstrated outside a few embassies, including the Eritrean and Burmese embassies, because of the way their countries have deliberately persecuted not just Christians but all minorities. I know that some of the Members for Torbay (Kevin Foster) said it is a tragedy in this day and age that we have to have such debates, and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made that point eruditely.

My experience of embassies abroad comes from the country I was most concerned about, Sudan—now, of course, there is South Sudan as well as Sudan. Whenever
we went on a visit there when I was the chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on Sudan, my experience was that the embassy was very helpful. It flew us about and gave us an enormous amount of time. On the third visit, the ambassador, Sir William Patey, went beyond the call of duty. My only criticism of him is that he went on to become chairman of Swindon Town Football Club, who are our rivals—I am a former chairman of Forest Green Rovers—so he went on to do things that were not as good as those he had done as an ambassador.

It is vital for the role of the embassy team to do research, to make representations and, when it receives delegations, to ensure that those delegations can see what is happening, despite how difficult that is—at times in Sudan it was dangerous. It is the role of the embassies to ensure that that is carried out to the best of their ability. I had that experience in Sudan certainly. I do not know what it is like now, although I imagine it is even more difficult. To my mind, that is why we as parliamentarians have a role to play. When we make such visits, which are important, we must ensure that the embassies make our visits not so much seamless but as instrumental as possible in enabling us to obtain information that we can bring back to debate and on which, we hope, we can make some representations to our own Government.

10.1 am

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): Thank you, Mr Hanson, for calling me because I omitted to put in to speak last night, for which I apologise. It was an oversight, but one that I should not have committed.

An interesting cross-section of Members of Parliament is in attendance to support my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) who, as chair of the all-party group on international freedom of religion or belief, had the foresight to call for this debate. We welcome to the Chamber new Members who are showing their concern for the persecuted, and returning Members who we know through their faith will take a stand for the persecuted. As my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) so eloquently put it, we are all here to show our solidarity, and that is the important point. Some Members may not even speak, but we are numerous and we wish the persecuted out there to know that.

I will focus briefly on the role of the Foreign Office and embassies. Thanks to the foresight of my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford, we were lucky enough to have Lord Ahmad speak to the all-party group. He underlined the fact that freedom of religious belief is a priority for the Foreign Office, but in welcoming my right hon. Friend the Member for Strangford said—are seeing a rise in the persecution of Christians.

The background is one of increasing persecution of Christians in parts of the world where we are significant donors of aid. How recently has the Foreign Office had a systematic review of its human rights interventions to assist persecuted Christians? We may not get the answer in the debate, but perhaps it will be possible to give interested Members some hard evidence of freedom of religious belief being made a priority.

I will finish by focusing on a test case. On behalf of the Church of England, of which I am the Second Church Estates Commissioner, may I ask where the Foreign Office is taking bilateral decisive action? We are looking closely at a recent case that occurred on 10 June in Pakistan, which is the second largest recipient of our overseas aid. The Pakistani anti-terrorism court convicted Taimoor Raza of committing blasphemy on Facebook and he has been given the death penalty. It is the first time that someone has been charged under article 295C of Pakistan’s penal code, which makes blasphemy on social media an offence. I cannot help but contrast that with restrictions that are not in place in other parts of the world, including at home—not that I wish anyone to go that far, but I would like to see some better policing of social media.

The Church of England will be paying close attention to that case. The Bishop of Coventry has tabled a series of written questions to highlight it. I, too, have a request, although it may be one that needs to be left pending, because it needs time for a response—we would all like to see what, in practice, it means to make freedom of religious belief a priority.

10.5 am

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for bringing this extremely important debate before the House: the first debate of the Parliament in Westminster Hall—

Jim Shannon: The first of many.

Dr Cameron: Yes—the first of many, I am sure. I commend the hon. Gentleman on his 4 July tie, which has brought a great splash of colour to Westminster Hall. I must declare an interest in this important debate: I am a practising Christian and a member of the all-party parliamentary group on Christians in Parliament.

As we have heard, individuals are persecuted throughout the world for a variety of religious beliefs, not just for Christianity. It is important to stand up for freedom of religion everywhere in the world and for all religious beliefs, and to teach future generations tolerance of religious belief.

Only a few years ago, I enjoyed a family holiday in America—in Pennsylvania—and my children were able to meet Amish communities and to learn about other religions that we might not have much contact with in the UK. The message is that we must have religious
tolerance and teach our children it from the word go. That is an important lesson to learn and it will set them up for the rest of their lives, as well as giving them such interesting learning experiences. We can cherish meeting those with different beliefs from around the world.

I want to speak briefly about the role of the Department for International Development. I was a member of the Select Committee on International Development in the previous Parliament and we were fortunate enough to visit Lebanon and Jordan to see the good work being done there. Our aid money is helping some of the most vulnerable refugees in the camps, and I very much appreciated that work. However, when preparing our report, we heard evidence to the Committee that Christians are often fearful of going to refugee camps—they fear persecution and being singled out. They hide their religious beliefs in the refugee camps, and some are so much in fear for their lives and of the potential danger that they will simply not go to the camps.

In countries where we are working with refugees, our work in the field and our aid are important, but we must also ensure that we reach out to marginalised groups, including the Christians whom we heard about in Committee. They might not otherwise figure in our work, so might not benefit from relocation programmes such as those of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. I ask the Minister: what percentage of Christians will feature in those programmes and, wherever possible, will refugees from all religious backgrounds be included in our relocation work?

I have also heard from local churches in my constituency. At times Church groups can feel that their beliefs are marginalised in this country, too. It is extremely important for us to stand up and to say that all faiths have a place in society—their beliefs should never be marginalised. We are an open and multicultural society. It is also important that families with strong religious beliefs are able to access religious education where they feel that that would benefit their children.

I echo the request made by the hon. Member for Strangford: a cross-departmental approach by the FCO, DFID and so on to this very important issue is much needed. We must highlight religious persecution wherever it happens right across the world, but we should also effectively resource our embassies to monitor and ensure freedom of religious beliefs, and advocate that freedom wherever we are in the world.

Several hon. Members rose—

David Hanson (in the Chair): Order. Five Members are standing and there are 20 minutes left, so self-evidently each Member has four minutes each. I call Fiona Bruce.

10.10 am

Fiona Bruce (Con): I welcome the Minister to his place and thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for bringing this issue to the House once again.

It is about five years since we stood here and spoke about this issue for the first time in a debate about the persecution of Christians in the middle east. I am pleased that there have been positive developments since then. The FCO has recognised that this issue needs to be addressed. There has been religious literacy training for FCO staff, and the Department held an excellent one-day summit. Ministers now raise issues as they go around the world, and they come to debates. Lord Ahmad’s appointment is another indication that the FCO takes this issue increasingly seriously.

However, as colleagues have mentioned, DFID needs to do much more. The FCO has led on addressing this issue, but DFID is way behind the curve. I know from trips with the International Development Committee that, in many parts of the world, DFID staff share embassy sites with FCO staff. I believe that they could do much more to address the serious and deteriorating position across the world.

In its most recent review of religious freedom in 196 countries, Aid to the Church in Need clearly indicated that religious freedom has declined in 11 of the 23 worst offending countries and stated that in seven others, “the problems were already so bad they could scarcely get any worse.”

The tragedy is that, of the 23 countries with the worst religious freedom in the world, which contain 4 billion people, no fewer than 17 receive UK aid.

DFID has promised to “sustainably address the root causes of poverty and exclusion”, but it will never do so unless it addresses religious freedom much more seriously. Lack of religious freedom is a root cause of poverty, displacement, violence and death across the world, including in many places where DFID operates. The 21st-century phenomenon of the rise of hyper-extremism is concerning. The hon. Member for Strangford referred to recent atrocities against Coptic Christians in Egypt. Hyper-extremism was illustrated graphically by a video released by IS in February 2017, in which it vowed to kill all Egyptian Christians. Hyper-extremism is a wrecking ball. It is primarily, but not exclusively, violent Islamic hyper-extremism. It is determined to do nothing less than eliminate all other beliefs, including moderate Muslim beliefs, and to develop a monoculture.

Of course, women suffer particularly from the elimination of religious diversity. That is why it is so important that we ask DFID to address religious freedom when it addresses sustainable development goal 16, which states: “Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.”

DFID needs to be much more proactive. It needs not just to stand alongside civil society and deal with individual cases but to take a lead globally and, in countries where we work, proactively prevent civil disturbances where the root is lack of religious freedom.

I am afraid that, as I have travelled the world with the Select Committee, I have found that that is not the case. In Nigeria, for example, I had to fight for someone from a leading Christian organisation to get round the table at a meeting with non-governmental organisations that DFID had organised. It seemed that there was an elephant in the room with regard to civil disturbances that DFID simply did not want to address: religious freedom. That must change.

10.14 am

Chris Bryant (Ryton) (Lab): I am delighted that you are here in Parliament, Mr Hanson, let alone chairing this debate. I welcome the debate, which the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) secured.
I hope Members will not mind if I refer a bit to the Bible, as I think I am the only former priest in the room. Chapter 19 of John’s Gospel states that when Jesus was on the cross, the soldiers decided that since the robe that he wore was seamless, they would cast lots for it rather than tear it apart.

The fundamental point that I want to make to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is that human rights are a seamless garment: we cannot split the different elements that we try to stand up for—religious freedom, personal freedom, sexual freedom and, for that matter, the rights of women. In many of the societies that we are talking about, women are not allowed to go to school and be educated, to go on to university or to drive a car, and they are often treated terribly in their marriages. They are still effectively treated as a chattel, as they were in this country in the 19th century.

Although I fully endorse all the comments about how the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and DFID need to stand up to try to do what they can in relation to religious freedom all around the world, I differ slightly from the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) in that I do not want religious tolerance; I want religious respect. Tolerance always seems to me like putting up with people being different from me, whereas respect is far closer to the Christian gospel. I hope that the Foreign Office will take away the point that human rights are a seamless garment. We as a nation stand by human rights and the rule of law. That is a key part of what we offer to the international community.

If we simply focus on one element—freedom of religion—we undermine the historical truth of the Christian faith. In the Epistle of James, the answer to the question, “What is true religion?” is “to visit widows and orphans in their affliction”.

That is fundamentally what our international aid budget is all about. If we try to say, “We won’t give you money if you don’t honour religious freedoms,” we fundamentally undermine what all the churches campaigned for in the run-up to the millennium: a set of goals to tackle poverty around the world. I am delighted that there is cross-party agreement that we should stick with the 0.7%, but that should be focused on alleviating poverty above all else, not on any other political goals.

10.17 am

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): As we have heard, it is right that our Government and Parliament stand up for the human rights of people of all faiths and people of no faith, but it is also right that, as a Christian country in which all are welcome, we debate this issue. There was quite properly an urgent question recently about the appalling treatment of homosexual people in Chechnya. It is right that, as Christians, we raise concerns about our Christian brothers and sisters around the world.

I do not think we have quite registered the scale of the problem and the fact that it is getting worse. The fact is that more Christians are being killed for their faith in more countries around the world than ever before, and the global persecution of Christians is getting worse, not better. Many Christians are being forced to leave their homes; displacement is a massive issue all around the world. That is extremely serious, too.

We have heard about the top five worst countries in the world—North Korea, Somalia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Sudan—but it is concerning to note that the situation is getting worse, not better, in Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Jordan, the Palestinian territories, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates. It is a grim picture, so it is right that the Foreign Office and DFID, and the whole Government, take this issue increasingly seriously. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Minister; it is excellent to see him in his place, and I know that he will take this issue seriously. I hope that he will go back to the Foreign Office and convey the strength of the concern expressed by Members across the House, and that that will be conveyed to our diplomatic staff, who do excellent work on our behalf around the world.

Talking of the work that they do, major trade negotiations are of course coming up, as part of the Brexit arrangements. As has been said, freedom of religion and belief contributes not only to countering extremism, but to encouraging economic development in the countries in question, and to making them prosperous, so that they can be markets with which we can trade well in the future. The Foreign Office will be looking for trade deals with countries such as China, India, Saudi Arabia, Mexico, Indonesia and Turkey; in all of which there are issues of the kind we are discussing. I hope, therefore, that it will not be with a sense of embarrassment, or as an afterthought, that the issue of freedom of belief is mentioned in the negotiations. The evidence, as has been said, is that when it is properly dealt with, prosperity increases, here and around the world. Those things are not opposed to each other; they are all of a piece.

Similarly, one thing on which I think there would be absolute agreement across the House is that there should be equal access for everyone to the work of the Department for International Development. We would rightly be appalled if DFID aid were denied to homosexual people in certain parts of the world, so we should be equally appalled if it is denied to certain groups because of their faith—and if it is denied to Christians. I hope and believe that the Foreign Office and DFID hold to that line and enforce it, but I should be grateful if my right hon. Friend the Minister would respond to that point.

I want finally to mention a small practical point. I have the Open Doors World Watch List map up on my office wall in the House of Commons. It is a great little aide mémoire to remind us day by day how fortunate we are in the freedoms we have, and it would be a great thing for all the churches in our constituencies to have one, perhaps in the porch where people go in.

10.22 am

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I extend my thanks to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for bringing forward this important debate. Freedom of religion—the freedom for people to worship their God, however they perceive him or her to be—should be an absolute right. If any society exercises censorship over which God its members may worship, prohibits a particular religion or compromises on freedom of religion, that is a threat to all that society’s freedoms.

The 300,000 Christians in North Korea are deemed to be enemies of the state, in a country where worship must be reserved exclusively for the nation’s leader.
Christians face being tortured and executed. It is a society that looks like something straight out of a George Orwell novel. In Somalia, the state religion is Islam, and converting to Christianity or any other religion is illegal. Indeed, the Islamist group al-Shabaab has stated that it wants to rid Somalia of all Christians. Those suspected of following Christianity are killed on the spot. In Iraq there are 300,000 Christians, and there have been public execution-style killings of them by ISIS—some of which have been recorded for propaganda purposes. Saudi Arabia, with its 1.25 million Christians, punishes conversion to Christianity with death.

India also has a poor record on freedom of worship for its 59 million Christians, and so does Qatar, which has 900,000—not to mention Pakistan, whose 5.3 million Christians are often treated as second-class citizens. Christian women and children there are often the targets of sexual abuse, and blasphemy laws are abused to attack Christian churches; those churches are monitored and often attacked. Even in the Maldives converting to Christianity means forfeiting citizenship, and owning a Bible is punishable by death. I could go on with my examples, of course, but there is not time. The list is unfortunately far too long. What a world we live in.

I want to add my voice to the praise that has been directed today to the work of Open Doors. It has often visited Parliament to reveal its World Watch List of countries in which Christians face awful persecution. Sadly, it seems that the western media frequently under-report such persecution. The suspicion that I have heard expressed is that that is because of a fear of offending cultural sensibilities. I do not know whether that is true, but I certainly hope not, because there is no room for cultural sensitivities when it comes to basic human freedoms. Persecution and violence are wrong and unacceptable, and we must all have the courage to say so.

While democratic countries celebrate their freedoms we cannot turn away as minority groups abroad are bathed in violence and blood. The UK Government and specifically the Foreign and Commonwealth Office need to support the efforts of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief. We need to ensure that there is proper support for the work of Open Doors and other non-governmental organisations that work on the frontline to help Christians who are persecuted. We cannot afford to stand by. An attack on religious freedom is an attack on all freedoms and we in the west, particularly, who believe in those values and take them for granted must stand up for them wherever they are attacked.

10.25 am

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hanson. I find myself in the familiar position of paying tribute to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), not only for his leadership on this issue but for his diligence, once again, in Westminster Hall.

In the couple of minutes for which I intend to speak, I want to draw the Minister’s attention to one issue to do with religious freedom that has not yet been mentioned, but which is still a problem for those who face it. In the Open Doors World Watch List that comes out every year, the “usual suspects” are mentioned, and the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) mentioned some of them. However, I was surprised this year to see Colombia and Mexico included. I asked why it was, and it would seem that there is a problem with organised crime targeting religious groups—particularly church groups, and particularly in rural areas—and with the violence to which organised crime necessarily resorts to make its way, such as extortion.

Surely there is a role for the UK to help to develop civil society structures in those countries, to help with law enforcement to take on organised crime, in areas in which we have experience. For example, the hon. Member for Strangford and other Northern Ireland Members have been extremely supportive of the continuing peace process in Colombia, which has taken lawlessness out of some rural areas, and thus has, hopefully, helped the religious groups that have been affected. That was an earlier example of coalition-building by the DUP and others, which was successful in bringing peace to Colombia.

I ask the Minister not to take his eyes off the ball in relation to such criminal-based persecution of Christians. It is surely an easy hit for us to make, to improve the lives of those who want to worship in those countries.

10.28 am

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson, for my first ever Westminster Hall debate. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing the debate.

Although I am a new Member, I am not unfamiliar with the House, having been a researcher for my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss). Often in my previous role, I would remark on how often the hon. Gentleman pops up in the Chamber, leading me to believe that he is the Member for Westminster Hall rather than for Strangford. However, in all seriousness I am grateful to him for allowing us this important opportunity for debate. He is a tenacious and diligent Member of Parliament and a credit to the people of Northern Ireland.

I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate. I shall keep my remarks focused within the parameters of the motion, but I recognise that there is persecution of people of all religions—and, indeed, of those of no religion at all. In particular I should like to highlight the plight of the Ahmadiyya community, which faces intolerable oppression the world over. I commend the work of hon. Members in that regard, including that of the all-party group on the Ahmadiyya Muslim community.

Like other hon. Members, I pay tribute to the sterling work done to highlight the persecution of Christians. I have been familiar with the work of Open Doors since about 2009, when I came to faith. I should declare an interest, as I am a member of a Baptist church. The profile of Open Doors, at events such as Christians Linked Across the Nation, led me to look more closely at the persecution of men and women of faith. Of course Aid to the Church in Need has also done excellent work, and I regret that for reasons of time we cannot go into that so much.

Although we value freedom of worship and religion in this country, far too many places do not. The prayers of many in the Church have rightly focused on persecuted
Christians who are being slaughtered at the hands of Daesh in Iraq. It is heartbreaking—sometimes, I confess, it is too easy to just turn off the TV—when we see the situation in Iraq the sheer brutality of being a Christian in that region and, as has been said, its impact on women and children.

We know that Christian women in Baghdad and Basra have been forced to veil themselves in order to feel safe outside their homes and that greater pressure is being forced on Christians to observe Ramadan. More concerning is that Iran now exerts increasing influence within Iraq, and that Christian converts who previously followed Islam are said to be being monitored by the Iranian secret service. I will be grateful if the Minister responds to that particular point and clarifies whether it has been factored into discussions and considerations within the Foreign Office.

I have briefly touched on the situation in Iraq. The situation in North Korea also rightly garners a lot of attention and interest, but I will use a few moments to focus on a country of a lesser international profile, but which is still cause for grave concern: Tanzania, and particularly its coastal region of Zanzibar. At this juncture, I should declare an interest as the vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Tanzania. I saw that the chair, the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), was here; I pay tribute to his work with the APPG.

With a population of almost 57 million, and a Christian population of more than 31 million, it is perhaps difficult to believe that Christians could be persecuted in Tanzania—particularly given that they make up the majority of the population. However, radical Islamic extremism in certain regions of the country, including Bukoba, is leading to immense hostility against Christians. Again, I will be grateful if the Minister will reference Her Majesty’s Government’s efforts to discuss the protection of Christianity and the upholding of freedom of religion with the Tanzanian authorities.

The purpose of the debate is to consider the role of embassies in foreign relations and in protecting Christians. It is perhaps no surprise that, before I sum up the debate on behalf of the Scottish National party, I will talk about Saudi Arabia. For reasons of not only geopolitics, but also, in my view, trade, Saudi Arabia remains one of Her Majesty’s Government’s closest allies. I continue to feel that Saudi Arabia’s inexcusable—I repeat, inexcusable—human rights record at home and abroad, including in Yemen, has far too often been overlooked by Her Majesty’s Government. Quite frankly, the British state is far too quick to lower its flags to half-mast on the deaths of Saudi monarchs. However, seldom does a day go by without the brutality of state-sponsored torture, human rights abuses and murder by the Saudi authorities; no flags are lowered to half-mast in those cases.

I am greatly encouraged to hear of more Christian converts in Saudi Arabia—a state that, even today, can punish by death anyone who leaves Islam. However, the fact that, back in 2017, Saudi Arabia is still one of the most dangerous countries on earth in which to follow Christ; and in recent months and years what exactly the UK is getting from its relationship with the Saudis—other than arms sales.

It strikes me that we are not exerting much influence in Riyadh when it comes to promoting our values of freedom and human rights for those of all faiths and none. In Christianity, the Bible commands us to turn the other cheek. However, in too many cases, particularly in Saudi Arabia, it feels as though Her Majesty’s Government are turning not only the other cheek but, in some cases, a blind eye.

I will sum up some of the remarks from colleagues, who have contributed to an excellent debate. The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) spoke of the situations in Egypt and Nigeria. The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) was quite right to put on the record the situation in Chechnya. It is important that we consider that and that we do not forget it; it feels to me that it has fallen off the agenda a little bit, and he is right to bring it back up. The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) spoke of trade deals and the FCOS’s work, and I touched on some of that in my remarks about Saudi Arabia.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) gave a very honest overview of a lot of the country profiles. I was particularly glad to hear her mention the situation in Pakistan, because Her Majesty’s Government have to hear that news. The hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) spoke of the situations in Colombia and Mexico, and it is concerning to see those countries coming on to that list of shame. I am grateful to him for bringing that to our attention.

The hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) spoke about the work of his local church. As a new Member, it is important that I place on the record my thanks to my own church, which supported me as a candidate throughout my election campaign.

It is good to see the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) back in the House and speaking so passionately about his work in Sudan. The right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) quite rightly talked of discretionary funds for local projects, and I hope the Foreign Office takes that forward. My hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) spoke about working with children and teaching them about tolerance. That is important, and is something that, as the parents of a two-year-old, my spouse and I are now looking at. Having had him not baptised but dedicated, we are considering how we teach our son about the role of Christianity, of religion and of freedom of speech.

I want to make sure that there is plenty of time left for the Minister to respond to my points and those from other hon. Members. I also hope that drawing my remarks to a close early will afford the hon. Member for Strangford the final word on what has been an excellent debate. I simply conclude by thanking him for bringing the matter to the Chamber and thanking you, Mr Hanson, for your forbearance.

10.35 am

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure as always to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. It is also a pleasure to sum up for the Opposition in the first Westminster Hall debate of the
Session. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for bringing the debate and for wearing that magnificent tie on what is American independence day. Despite the ruling that ties are no longer necessary for hon. Gentlemen in the Chamber, it would take away from the gaiety of the nation if he were not allowed to express himself in that way. I thank him.

The hon. Member for Strangford has brought a very important subject to this Chamber. He made the important point that worldwide discrimination against Christians includes not only violence but other forms of discrimination, including that relating to access to work, education and healthcare. We need to remember that discrimination is not necessarily overt and violent; it can be subtle and can include not only violence but other forms of discrimination, including that relating to access to work, education and healthcare. We need to remember that discrimination is not necessarily overt and violent; it can be subtle and sometimes quite difficult to identify. In his introduction, he highlighted cases that we are sadly all too familiar with: the treatment of Christians in Eritrea; the declaration of Jehovah’s Witnesses as extremists in Moscow; the attacks on Coptic Christians in Egypt by ISIS or Daesh—whatever term hon. Members prefer; persecution in Egypt, Syria and China; and the treatment of the Rohingya people Burma. The list goes on and on, and I am pleased that we are debating the issue and that so many Members from different parties are here to express concerns.

The hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) identified the work done by Open Doors. We have already heard the list of the worst places in the world to be a Christian, which includes North Korea, Somalia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Sudan. My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) highlighted the role of Members in representing minorities, and referenced his particular experience in Sudan. One of our jobs as MPs is to highlight and speak up for those people who cannot speak up for themselves. I hope the Minister will reference that in his closing comments. I was very pleased to hear the right hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made the point that we must address this issue particularly Christianity. The right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) highlighted the role of Members in representing minorities, and referenced his particular experience in Sudan. One of our jobs as MPs is to highlight and speak up for those people who cannot speak up for themselves. I hope the Minister will reference that in his closing comments. I was very pleased to hear the right hon. Member for Meriden made the point that we must address this issue for our own security; that is really important.

At the heart of all of this is the role of the FCO, DFID and our embassies as part of our diplomatic mission. We have to be diplomatic in the way that we deal with these things, which may be one reason why it sometimes feels as though progress is quite slow; our representatives—ambassadors and high commissioners stationed in countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan and North Korea—have to proceed with diplomacy, which can sometimes look like inaction. I will be interested to hear the Minister’s view on that.

The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) and many other hon. Members talked about the role of DFID. She also highlighted the important issue of Christians being reluctant to go to refugee camps; they might get help in those camps but are concerned about being discriminated against. Again, I hope we will get a response from the Minister on that. The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) also mentioned the role of DFID and expressed her clear view that it could do much more.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) made an important point about religious respect, not tolerance. I support that view. Tolerance implies that we are just putting up with things and not necessarily paying them due respect. We should use the word respect, rather than tolerance.

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) highlighted the important fact that in seeking trade deals outside the EU following Brexit, human rights issues should be uppermost in any negotiations. Those discussions should always take place in any trade deals we try to strike with other countries.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) highlighted that the list of countries the world over where Christians are being persecuted is sadly far too long. Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) mentioned the new aspect of organised crime that targets religious groups in places such as Colombia and Mexico, which I am sure will be addressed. We have to remember that religious freedom is a constitutional human right, and we in the UK must fight for it worldwide. It is absolutely right that we in the UK stand up for human rights and particularly Christianity. The right hon. Member for Meriden made the point that we must address this issue for our own security; that is really important.

We must not forget the NGOs. UK embassies should be given the resources they need to have a human rights function and to report on human rights issues. They should be given help with raising appropriate cases and implementing the toolkit. We must also ensure that the partners who we work with do not discriminate on the grounds of religious belief.

I would like to give the Minister a chance to answer the various points that have been raised, so I will finish with a quote from India’s most famous member of the Dalit caste, Dr Ambedkar, who renounced Hinduism to escape the caste system and converted to Buddhism. He said, “where equality is denied, everything else may be taken to be denied.”

That sums up the issue of discrimination worldwide, on whatever basis. Christians worldwide who are discriminated against are being denied equality.

10.43 am

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I thank the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) for giving me plenty of time to address the important issues that have been raised today.

First and foremost, let me congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this debate. I am pleased to announce that his tie will be going into cold storage for the next 366 days, because next year is a leap year, but we look forward to seeing it in future. There is some relevance in his wearing that tie. Although many of us in the Chamber may feel that the ideals behind the United States of America are not as strong today as they have been at some point in the last 250 years, those ideals have found a new momentum towards freedoms that should be promoted across the globe. I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his important work and his consistent and persistent...
commitment to the freedom of religion or belief, as chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on the issue.

I hope that Opposition Members will allow me to quickly mention two former Members of the House who are not here because they lost their seats, David Burrowes and Caroline Ansell, who I think would have been here, playing an important part in this debate. We very much miss them, but I know that their commitment to Christianity means that they will play their part.

Like all hon. Members here today, I am appalled by the persecution suffered by countless millions of Christians across the world who seek only to practise their deeply held beliefs openly, in peace and safety. Here in the west, as has been rightly pointed out, those freedoms are all too often taken for granted. We need to utilise this opportunity, particularly on such a robust all-party basis, to make the case that has been referred to.

I agree wholeheartedly with the sentiments of my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) and the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar). Here in the UK, we rightly recognise that we have a special responsibility for protecting and upholding the rights of Christian communities across the globe.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) is absolutely correct that Her Majesty’s Government should redouble their efforts to work on a cross-departmental basis. My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) rightly pointed out that there has been improvement, but Members can rest assured that I regard it as an important priority to ensure ever closer work between DFID and the Foreign Office in this area and, indeed, a number of other areas where there should be closer co-ordination.

Fiona Bruce: I welcome that. The Foreign Office and DFID work closely together, so will the Minister kindly assure us that he will refer his ministerial colleagues at DFID to the comments made by many Members in the Chamber today? DFID needs to follow the FCO’s lead in addressing the human rights issue of freedom of religion and belief in a much clearer, more comprehensive and structured manner than it has done to date.

Mark Field: I entirely understand that, and I will come on to the comments made by my hon. Friend and my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden about that issue. They can be assured that there is, in ministerial terms, rather more co-ordination now between the Foreign Office and DFID, given that two Ministers are double-hatted. That will assist particularly in parts of Africa and the middle east where there is a part to play. I also will ensure that in the most evident problem hotspots, we make clear to our embassies the expectations about what we need to work towards.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden asked how much is spent on freedom of religion projects. We shall, during this tax year, spend some £758,000 on such projects worldwide, including in Pakistan and Iraq. We also lobby Governments across the globe on a regular basis. She rightly pointed to the case of Taimoor Raza in Pakistan—which has already come across my desk in the two and a half weeks since I took on ministerial office—and the appalling death sentence that has been passed after his blasphemy conviction. The reality is that more often than not, or almost invariably, such a sentence is commuted to life imprisonment—bad though that is.

We need to have a debate about the issue that my right hon. Friend raised. She is quite right that Pakistan is the second largest recipient of aid from the UK Government through DFID. I have some sympathy with her view that we need to, in some diplomatic way at least, link the two. However, I also have some sympathy with what the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) said. I would be very reluctant to withdraw from any ongoing aid or development projects on the basis that there were concerns here. We should openly try to suggest, in a cross-departmental way, that a number of Her Majesty’s Government’s priorities, particularly in relation to freedom of religion, need to be an integral part of any ongoing aid and development work. We are spending significant sums of money, but a number of projects could happen in various other parts of the globe.

I very much take on board what my right hon. Friend said, and she can rest assured that through diplomatic channels, in our work between London and Islamabad, we will ensure that the Pakistani Government are made well aware of what we regard as being not just our priorities but their responsibilities in relation to DFID expenditure.

I want to touch on the issues raised by the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) about Colombia and Mexico and by the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), whom I congratulate on his debut on the Front Bench, about Tanzania and the terrible plight of Zanzibar. I have to confess that I have no data to hand about issues of freedom of religion in those areas or the particular issue referred to of organised crime, but I will write to both hon. Members once I have been able to get more information from our embassies.

I am particularly concerned currently about the plight of Christians in Burma, Iraq and Syria, where the Christian population has fallen dramatically, from 1.25 million as recently as 2011 to approximately 500,000 today. I recall my parliamentary visit 14 years ago to Aleppo, Palmyra and Damascus in Syria. We drove for a mere half an hour from the centre of Damascus to visit some of the ancient Christian villages where St Paul proselytised some 1,900 years ago. I shudder to think what has become of those ancient Christian communities today.

The right to practise one’s religion peacefully—or, indeed, to follow no religion at all—is and must remain a fundamental entitlement, and the UK Government will continue energetically to defend and promote it. As a number of hon. Members pointed out, it is a sad indictment of our 21st-century world that we still have to defend that right, but we do have to, because, as we have learned, it is increasingly being violated.

In 2013, I spoke from the Back Benches in another debate, which I think was led by my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton, about the persecution of Christians. The fate of Christians and other religious communities in the middle east and the north Africa region is complex and often compounded by their minority status. In Syria, Assad’s actions have helped to fuel the worst sort of sectarian violence—which has alread—Although at one point he was perhaps seen as someone who could stand up for minorities, the truth is that he has now shown himself incapable of...
maintaining control of his country or of effectively countering the threat from extremists. In so doing, he has put at risk communities including Christians, Mandaeans, Yazidis and all other minorities, as well as the interests and safety and security of the Sunni majority.

The UK Government remain determined to promote and defend human rights more generally. Failure to do so has had an impact on Christian and other religious minorities. As the hon. Member for Rhondda powerfully reminded us, where freedom of religion or belief is under attack, other basic rights are threatened too. It is in all our interests to promote religious freedoms and human rights more generally, so I welcome this opportunity to set out briefly what the Government are doing to promote freedom of religion or belief across the world.

Our activity is both multilateral, through institutions such as the United Nations and its Human Rights Council, and bilateral with individual countries. In the multilateral sphere, we strive to build and maintain consensus on this issue by lobbying other countries and supporting UN resolutions such as the one recently sponsored by the European Union. We also engage closely, through our extensive diplomatic network, with individual countries. We promote the right of freedom of religion or belief and we raise vigorously—if often, for obvious reasons, behind the scenes—individual cases of persecution.

In relation to Pakistan, which we have discussed, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs continues to raise the rights of all Pakistani citizens, including religious minorities, and did so very robustly during his visit last November.

In relation to Iraq, we remain deeply concerned about the atrocities committed by Daesh or ISIS against individuals and religious communities, including Muslims, Christians, Yazidis and others. We continue to engage closely, and with a specific cause in mind, with religious leaders both in the UK and in Baghdad and beyond. In the last financial year, we have provided £90 million of humanitarian assistance to Iraq alone. That takes our total commitment to £169.5 million since June 2014. A significant, ring-fenced element of that support will help to protect displaced religious minorities. I take to heart some of the criticisms by the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Carey, about the Government’s approach to religious minorities in the middle east, but it is the case, as has been pointed out in this debate, that an avowed policy of giving preferential assistance to any single religious group might make it more vulnerable to discrimination in some of the more ungoverned spaces of the world.

In Syria, Christians, Mandaeans, Yazidis and other minorities, as well as the Sunni majority, as I pointed out, have all been victims of Daesh atrocities. Ultimately, as I think we all know, the only way to stop that abuse is to defeat Daesh, and we continue to play a leading role in the 67-member global coalition in that regard.

The hon. Member for Strangford and my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) were right to highlight the plight of the Coptic Christians in Egypt. They are a minority, but a very significant minority—some 8 million to 9 million out of an overall population of 90 million.

We have touched on Yemen and the treatment of the Baha’i community, and on the treatment of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia, which the hon. Gentleman rightly pointed out. Officials from our mission in Moscow attended the various court hearings there, and members of the Jehovah’s Witnesses in the UK noted that the presence on the ground of diplomats from the UK had a positive effect on how individuals were treated and how the process was undertaken. We shall continue to monitor that case particularly carefully.

More generally, our project work overseas is an important part of our effort to promote and protect religious freedoms. One project is helping to develop lesson plans for secondary school teachers in the middle east and north Africa. The aim is to teach children about religious tolerance, religious acceptance, and the absolute right to freedom of religion or belief. We strongly believe that teaching children in that way is a vital part of promoting tolerance and respect at grassroots level and of helping to build future resilience against extremism.

David Linden: I note that the Minister has mentioned a number of countries in which work is ongoing, but before he concludes, and while he is talking about tolerance and respect, will he address my specific remarks on Saudi Arabia?

Mark Field: Yes. The hon. Gentleman will forgive me, but we are talking about a different debate, and I am sure that we will have plenty of debates on Saudi Arabia. It is also not within my responsibilities in the Foreign Office. I will therefore try to address the issues in writing and get my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East to do so.

Our staff in embassies across the globe are essential to the success of our work, and I hope that the debate today will help to redouble some of their efforts. It is important that we make clear the strength of feeling across the party political divide. We need to promote religious tolerance, human rights and religious rights, which are an integral part of our work. To support those staff, we provide training in religious literacy and have created a freedom of religion or belief toolkit, which was referred to earlier and provides useful information on addressing freedom of religion or belief.

In conclusion, I assure the hon. Members present of the Government’s and, moreover, my personal determination to continue supporting, defending and promoting the right to freedom of religion or belief. We will use our influence to promote that fundamental right across the world and to support Christian minorities, including in the middle east, through our engagement in multilateral institutions and with individual Governments and civil society.

I thank all hon. Members for their contributions today, but I hope that the House will indulge me if I single out my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Dockerill) for her first contribution in the House. My hon. Friend is also my very good friend, having worked in my private office, most recently as my chief of staff. She has worked with me for 11 years and learned about all the bad habits of politics from me, and I hope that learning from those mistakes will mean that she has a far more meteoric career in this place. It is a pleasure to be able to mention that.
I also take this opportunity to thank all hon. Members here. Their often unsung work is an important signal of the UK’s determination to stand up for religious freedoms and in particular for Christian communities in some of the most politically unstable and unpredictable corners of the globe.

10.58 am

**Jim Shannon:** I thank all right hon. and hon. Members, both new Members and those who have been here for a while, for their significant and helpful contributions on an issue that is very important to all of us—it is why we are here. It is good that there has been comprehensive political representation, from all parties, in Westminster Hall today. That has ensured that we have highlighted the relevant issues.

I think the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) summed up, in her response to the debate, the feeling of us all in this Chamber. I found out that the shadow Minister for the Scottish National party, the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), is a fellow Baptist, so there is more than just me in the House as a Baptist. It is always pleasing to see someone from a similar denomination in the House, and we wish him well in his new position.

The Minister, in his reply, summed up the things that we all want to see in place, and I thank him for that. He referred to his personal commitment to the issue, and I know that he is committed.

I will leave the last word to Matthew in chapter 5, verse 10:

“Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

*Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).*

**David Hanson (in the Chair):** Order. We must now move on to the next debate. I call Alison Thewliss to move the motion. Would Members who are leaving please leave quietly, including officials?

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**High Court Judgment: Benefit Cap**

11 am

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the High Court judgement on the benefit cap.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hanson.

On 22 June 2017, a ruling was made in response to a judicial review of the imposition of the benefit cap brought by four lone-parent families who had three children under the age of two. This was supported by Gingerbread, Shelter and the Child Poverty Action Group, all of whom I thank for their briefings on the matter. The judgment was damning of this Tory Government.

In my speech I intend to refer to Mr Justice Collins’s judgment and I absolutely commend it to anybody with any interest in this issue.

Mr Justice Collins was quite clear in his findings:

“Whether or not the defendant accepts my judgment, the evidence shows that the cap is capable of real damage to individuals such as the claimants. They are not workshy but find it, because of the care difficulties, impossible to comply with the work requirement. Most lone parents with children under two are not the sort of households the cap was intended to cover and, since they will depend on DHP, they will remain benefit households. Real misery is being caused to no good purpose.”

In response, the Department for Work and Pensions says that it intends to appeal the decision. I find that truly shocking and urge the Minister to reconsider, unless she supports misery being caused to no good purpose.

Back in the Government’s own assessment before the 2015 Welfare Reform and Work Bill, there was an acceptance that the policy of reducing the cap from £26,000 to £20,000, or £23,000 in London, would have a disproportionate impact on women. It even stated:

“Most of the single women affected are likely to be lone parents: this is because we expect the majority of households affected by the policy to have children.”

The Local Government Association says that this lower cap is being implemented without a full understanding of the impact of the original cap. I ask the Minister, what did they expect to happen? Mr Justice Collins found that the policy is unlawful and discriminates against female single parents.

The Supreme Court has said previously that the benefit cap breaches the UN convention on the rights of the child and that:

“It cannot possibly be in the best interests of the children affected by the cap to deprive them of the means to provide them with adequate food, clothing, warmth and housing, the basic necessities of life.”

Mr Justice Collins reiterates that point in his findings, stating in paragraph 40:

“the effect of the cap means that the children and their parents have restrictions on what can be provided by way of housing, food and other things that an average child should have available. Further, as the ministers have said, it may be necessary to try to move to cheaper accommodation to avoid the effect of the cap so that there will be an upheaval for the family. I have set out the evidence of the damage to both family and private life which the cap has produced and will continue to produce.”

**David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): I commend my hon. Friend for her sterling work on this campaign. In her conversations with the UK Government, have they indicated how this policy is compatible with their family test?
Alison Thewliss: They have not. The family test would appear to be something the Government have said in some grand papers and then not implemented at all.

According to the most recent DWP statistical release from May this year, 66,000 households were capped as of February, up from 46,000 in November 2016, because of the lower cap being applied. Some 74% of them were capped only because of the introduction of the lower cap levels, and 72% of capped households, or some 48,000, are single-parent families. Some 79% of single-parent capped households, or 38,000, have at least one child aged under five years old, including 15%, which is 7,200, with a child aged under one at February 2017. At February 2017, 83% of capped households, or 55,000, had between one and four children, and 10%, or 6,800, had five or more children. That is a very small number in that whole pool of people, but those are significant figures and each of them is hiding its own tale of misery.

I am not even convinced that this policy will save money as there are significant consequential costs: the cost of bad debt to councils and housing providers when the rent costs can no longer be met by the tenant—that single parent in a household—who has been capped; the cost of court proceedings to go through the process to evict that individual and to reinstate the property after eviction and bring it back on to the market; and the cost of temporary housing for that family once they have been evicted and have presented themselves to social workers as being in need of housing. The LGA estimates that the cost of temporary housing is £2 million per day—£2 million per day that we do not need to be spending because of people being evicted as a result of this cap.

There are also the costs to children’s services and mental health services due to the stress on families—the stress of not being able to pay the bills, of going into housing arrears, of eviction and homelessness and of all the other things such as maybe having to leave their homes and the support networks around them. There is the cost to the education of the children involved as they have to move schools and is it not just about the youngest children, as their older siblings in the family might have to move schools and go to a different area away from family and support networks. All of those are costs, and we must bear them in mind.

Single-parent families of young children are forced by this Government into a no-win situation. They cannot earn enough via work because they cannot take on a job that will pay them enough to get out of the cap—they cannot take on more than the 16 hours that they need because they have childcare obligations to children under two. Some of the mothers involved in this case are breastfeeding. It is more difficult to go out and start work when someone has obligations to go back and feed their child, and we should not be forcing them to do so because, as we know, those early years with a child are extremely valuable. The families are also trapped because they cannot get enough support from the state. Sadly this leaves them with destitution, food banks and both physical and mental ill health. These are women who are doing their best and struggling to provide a better life for their children. We should be helping them, not caving the legs from under them.

The Scottish Government’s independent adviser on poverty and inequality, Naomi Eisenstadt, said yesterday that “life outcomes are largely determined by the wealth and social class of one’s parents at birth...it represents a fundamental unfairness, but also significant waste of talent and opportunity for the economy and social cohesion of Scotland.”

I would argue that that applies more widely to the UK as well. By taking parents’ circumstances and punishing them—not allowing them the means that they need to feed their families—we are stunting the life chances of the children throughout their lives. We are punishing people for the circumstances they are in.

The UK Government will say, as they always do in these types of debates, that the best way out of poverty is work, and that those receiving benefits should face the same choices as those supporting themselves solely through work. If those phrases are on the Minister’s sheet today, I advise her to cross them out now. Mr Justice Collins stated:

“those observations are entirely irrelevant in relation to lone parents such as the claimants who find themselves in real difficulty in being able to enter work because of the need to care for a child under 7.”

The circumstances of the parents in this case are worth reading out in full, just in case those looking at Hansard or watching at home have not had the chance to read through some of the circumstances. The first claimant, “DA”, was “homeless, living with her four-year-old son in a refuge in north London as a result of serious domestic violence from her husband, which led to her having to leave her council flat. She is due to give birth in mid-June. When living in the refuge, she was not subjected to the cap since it does not apply to those victims of violence who have to live in a refuge. It was submitted that she was not able to be a claimant since she was not a lone parent with a child under two and was living in a refuge. That objection has not been seriously maintained since she will become subject to the cap when she gives birth on leaving the refuge. Furthermore, I was informed that she has now been given emergency accommodation for those who are homeless which costs £247 per week. She has investigated the possibility of private accommodation but has found, as is confirmed by her solicitor who has made a statement based on her experience of dealing with many clients who are homeless or for suffering the effects of the benefit cap or the bedroom tax, that very few private landlords are prepared to accept tenants who depend on housing benefit particularly if they are capped. As must be obvious, when she gives birth she will not be able to work particularly as she wishes to breastfeed. Furthermore, the council has refused to allow her to join its housing list since she came from outside its area as she was fleeing violence and does not have the necessary four year residence in the borough. She has been informed that when capped she will have £217 per week available for rent. She has mental and physical problems as does her son. She is anxious to work when she can.”

The other claimants are equally worthy cases and worthy of the attention of everyone in this House, but I would like to mention the last one, a parent who has four children:

“WBA has four children, aged 17, 14, 13, 7 and 14 months, the youngest also being a claimant. The youngest child was conceived following a rape by her husband; she has indeed been the victim of an abusive relationship over the years. She has been granted a DHP in February 2017 but only for short terms and with no promise that they would continue. On having been granted a DHP on 20 April 2017, the council wrote a letter dated the same day saying it had been cancelled. The way she has been treated has distressed her. She wishes to work when she can.”
I should mention another campaign that I am involved in, which is on the rape clause. This family will potentially lose the rights to child tax credit and universal credit unless the mother fills in the form to say that she has been raped. This is a family who are already under significant pressure. They deserve support, not further demonisation and stigmatisation.

The Government will talk about childcare. They will say that they are offering childcare to people, and that is an important point. Actually, it is not an important or relevant point in this case. The money they are offering for nursery places is not for this specific group, the under-twos. The cost of nursery places, particularly for under-twos, can be prohibitive in a lot of cases. The childcare ratios for under-twos bear a higher cost, and some nursery providers will charge more for an under-two’s childcare place than for a three or four-year-old’s. Some nurseries do not deal with under-twos at all—they do not take babies.

There are issues of availability and flexibility as well as cost. If the parent goes out to work, they are essentially working to pay for the nursery place, not to bring extra money into the house. They cannot always rely on family, because they may have had to leave home and parents by choice, but by circumstance. These are women who have been forced back to work and cannot carry out childcare tasks as they might have before. This is not really a choice for a lot of these women.

The Government expect women to make the same choices regardless of their circumstances, but some of the women in the cases I mentioned do not have the choices that we would all like. They may not have a choice over their reproductive rights. They may have been raped. They may not want to have a termination. They may not have all the choices they would want. It is interesting that the benefits charity Turn2us, which runs a helpline, has reported an increase in inquiries about whether or not to proceed with a pregnancy, as a result of the benefit cap. That is absolutely appalling. The Government are forcing women into such choices.

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Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It cannot be possible that any Minister listening to these cases could intend people to live in such circumstances. To be generous to the Government, is it not more likely that the ideology of austerity and of arbitrary caps is forcing people into them, through policy?

Alison Thewliss: Absolutely. The entire policy and the way that people end up as a result of it need to be reviewed. It is causing genuine hardship to no good purpose, as the judge pointed out. We need to look at the whole policy in the round.

The Government will say that there is the discretionary housing payment. Yes, there is, but the savings from the benefit cap amount to £155 million, while the amount put towards the DHP by the Government is £37.1 million, so there is no way that the money can be made up in that way.

The Local Government Association has found that the “cumulative impacts of welfare reform are contributing to a… housing affordability crisis.”

The Government have a huge part in that. There is a lack of rehousing options for women. Where can they move that is cheaper than where they are now? If they live in a city such as London, they would probably have to leave it altogether, which would mean leaving the family, school and other support networks they might have. There is a lack of social rented housing, particularly in some parts of England. A lot of it used to be local authority housing that has either been bought under right to buy or has gone to housing associations or other areas where there is less control over it. Not enough new housing has been built in its place, so there are fewer options for people. Private lets are extremely expensive. When private landlords see someone who they think will not be able to pay the bills in a few months’ time, they will not take them on. As the judgment states, “the reality is that DHPs do involve short term payments and give those affected no peace of mind.”

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): May I say how grateful I am that the hon. Lady secured this debate? I would like to cite one extra figure: 3,270 children in Scotland have been affected by this cap. We have heard harrowing tales about individuals who have suffered because of it, and about the difficulty that the Government are placing them in: an ultimate Hobson’s choice that single parents, predominantly mums, have to make over their children. In Scotland, 3,270 individual children are being made subject to this cap. They are under 18, they do not vote, and their parents have to make the choice.

Alison Thewliss: I agree.

The judgment further notes that inquiries were made of local authorities about their practices in dealing with DHPs. Of the 235 who responded, none had ever made a permanent award nor had any agreed to make a payment before a tenancy commenced.

So somebody who goes into a new tenancy cannot expect to get that payment, and neither can the landlord expect to receive it. It is not enough of an option. By their very nature, discretionary housing payments are discretionary—they are at the discretion of whoever the
person applies to. They are also oversubscribed in many areas, because people know that they are their only option to try to top up an income that is dwindling as a result of Government policy.

The other problem with moving people to so-called cheaper areas around the UK is that those areas also tend to have higher rates of unemployment. People are not moving to areas where they are more likely to get work; they would get work in areas where rents are higher, because there is more demand for it there.

The issue of private landlords is particularly worrying. The judgment mentions evidence from the Residential Landlords Association and the National Landlords Association that “private landlords are very reluctant to take on tenants who were capped and many would seek to evict such tenants.”

It is not even that people will not get a tenancy, but that they will be evicted from the tenancy they already have. That seems particularly cruel.

All these problems are avoidable. They are a result of Government policy, and there is a choice here for the Government. We are in a very different situation now from the one before the election. There is no longer a majority for austerity in this House. The Government have a choice. They do not have to waste further money on appealing the judgment. I understand that they have already wasted at least half a million pounds on other appeals relating to the bedroom tax and the carer’s allowance, but they should not waste more public funds appealing a case that has already been proven to be an injustice. They should put their hands up and say, “There is an injustice here, and we will put it right in the interests of the children who are affected.”

The Government have a choice. The Chancellor has stated that the British people are “weary” of austerity. I urge the Government to do something about it for these women, for their children and for families across the UK. If money can be found on the magical money tree for £1 billion to prop up the Government, it can be found for women and children across these islands.

11.20 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Caroline Dinenage): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) on securing this important debate on the benefit cap High Court judgment.

The hon. Lady raised. The latest labour market statistics show that we continue to have a record number of people in work. In April, nearly 32 million people were in work. Evidence shows that work is the best route out of poverty. There are also record numbers of lone parents in employment. It is not easy. In life, very few people choose to be a lone parent, as I know. I never made the choice to be one, yet I was a working lone parent, making the same difficult decisions that lone parents, particularly mothers, have to make every single day.

An evaluation of the previous benefit cap showed that it changed attitudes and behaviours. One in five of all capped households went to work after a year, compared with just 11% of similar uncapped households previously. Importantly, capped lone parents were 51% more likely to be in work after a year as compared with similar uncapped lone-parent households. Those surveyed said that the new employment had brought financial rewards—some felt better off and able to afford extra treats for their children—and other rewards in health, happiness and self-esteem.

Capped households are 41% more likely to go into work than uncapped households, and 38% of those capped who were interviewed said that they were doing more to find work. The original cap met its aims, but the change was mainly felt in London and the south-east. To spread the work incentives across the country, we introduced a lower tiered cap in November last year. It aims to build on the original successes. The new tiered cap is set at £23,000 for couples and lone parents in Greater London and at £21,000 for other parts of the country. That is an equivalent salary of £29,000 in London or £25,000 in the rest of the UK. We know that four out of 10 households in London and in the rest of the UK earn less than those respective amounts. That system is fair to those who use it and to those who pay for it.

The cap levels continue to provide a clear incentive to work. Households are only required to work part-time hours to be exempt from the cap. Households that claim working tax credits are exempt from the cap if they work just 16 hours a week for lone parents or earn £520 a month on universal credit. However, we acknowledge that the move into work just is not appropriate for some people. That is why there is a range of exemptions for vulnerable groups, including households in receipt of most disability benefits, carer’s allowance, the equivalent universal credit carers element and the guardian's allowance.

We were disappointed by the High Court judicial review decision, which challenged the application of the cap to lone parents with children under the age of two. The Court gave the Government the ability to appeal, and we will be appealing the decision, as we strongly believe that work is the best way for people to raise their living standards. We know that children whose parents work benefit from increased life chances. They are less likely to grow up in poverty. Evidence shows that one of the biggest drivers of child poverty is long-term worklessness and low earnings.

I want to respond to some of the issues that the hon. Lady raised. The latest labour market statistics show that we continue to have a record number of people in work. In April, nearly 32 million people were in work. Evidence shows that work is the best route out of poverty. There are also record numbers of lone parents in employment. It is not easy. In life, very few people choose to be a lone parent, as I know. I never made the choice to be one, yet I was a working lone parent, making the same difficult decisions that lone parents, particularly mothers, have to make every single day.

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The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) talked about the family test, but he is mistaken about what it is. He has a far too pessimistic view. It is not a tick-box exercise, but a way of assessing the impact of a policy on a whole range of family measures. It is not in children’s best interests to live in workless households. Children’s life chances and opportunities can be significantly damaged by living in households where no one has worked for years and where parents do not consider work as an option.

Let us face it: we are only requiring people to work for 16 hours a week. Children in households where no parent or carer is in work are much more likely to show challenging behaviour by age five. Parental worklessness has been shown to be significantly associated with poorer academic attainment and greater behavioural problems in children aged seven. Growing up in a workless household is associated with a higher risk of being not in education, employment or training in late adolescence.

David Linden: The Minister is talking about the importance of ensuring that we do not have households with worklessness, but part of the problem is that the Government have done very little to tackle pay inequality. They are bringing forward a living wage that does not support under-25s. Nothing the Minister is saying reassures me that the Government are making any attempt to tackle pay inequality, particularly for under-25s. This Government will be actively discriminating against them with their false living wage.

Caroline Dinenage: I am afraid the hon. Gentleman is just wrong. Some 1.3 million people on the lowest incomes have been taken out of income tax altogether since 2015. In April 2017, we increased the national living wage to £7.50. That will directly benefit 12 million workers this year. A full-time worker on the national living wage will see their annual pay increase by more than £500.

One issue raised was that the benefit cap is forcing people to move. Our evaluation of the original cap found that very few households moved house. Where they have moved, the vast majority have moved locally. I am particularly concerned about the arguments that the hon. Member for Glasgow Central made in respect of vulnerable women. Before doing this job, I was the Minister for Women and Equalities, and the violence against women and girls agenda is close to my heart. That is why I am delighted that the Government have committed more than £100 million to tackling violence against women and girls. Such violence is absolutely unforgivable in any circumstances.

We recognise that some groups, such as pregnant women, new mothers and victims of domestic violence, find it harder to adapt to benefit caps. That is why we have explicitly stated in the guidance that direct housing payments should provide targeted help to women within 11 weeks of an expected birth and to households with children under nine months. Women who need safe accommodation, such as sanctuary houses, are prioritised. Housing benefit can be paid for both the home a victim has fled and the refuge or other temporary accommodation for up to 52 weeks. That 52-week limit is to avoid the blocking issue that the hon. Lady specified. It is also disregarded from the benefit cap.

In regard to Scotland, 7,300 households have been capped since the benefit cap was introduced. Of those, more than half are no longer capped, with 21% moving into work. The cap is having a positive impact. We can always find negative and distressing stories; when those happen, the hon. Lady is more than welcome to bring them to my desk and to my attention, but we have to look at the vast majority of people who have been assisted by the cap.

Both the cap and the policy limiting entitlement to the child element of tax credits were subject to detailed impact analysis throughout their development. We know that children whose parents work have improved life chances and are less likely to grow up in poverty. Parents receiving universal credit can get help with up to 85% of their eligible childcare costs. That is not just for children over the age of two or three; there is no minimum child age requirement for claiming costs through working tax credits or universal credit.

Our new childcare offer is backed by unprecedented levels of investment. Spending on childcare will increase to £6 billion by 2020. I was the Minister for early years education, and we are spending more than any previous Government on early years education and support for childcare. Finally, the flexible support fund can be used to help those working fewer than 16 hours a week with childcare costs for a child of any age, when those costs would otherwise present a barrier to work.

Lowering the cap emphasises the message that it is not fair for someone on benefits to receive more than many people in work. The hon. Lady may say that I should cross through those lines in my speech, but they are the most important. Even when claimants remain capped, they are better off from any work they are able to do. In some cases, a relatively small amount of work can be sufficient to mitigate the effects of the cap. For those impacted by the cap, we have made discretionary housing payments available to people who may need extra help.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.
I will briefly give some history. The treaty of Lausanne in 1923 led to the Turks formally ceding all earlier claims on Syria and Iraq and, along with the treaty of Ankara, settled the boundaries of the two nations. The earlier post-world war one discussions about a Kurdish state being formed after the break-up of the Ottoman empire, which had been nominally supported by the British, including Sir Winston Churchill, were absent from the treaty of Lausanne.

The Kurds have a long history of suffering second-class citizenship, and in the late 1980s they experienced genocide at the hands of Saddam Hussein—a genocide that was formally recognised by this House in 2013. From 1991 onwards, Sir John Major’s no-fly zone and safe haven protected the Iraqi Kurds from further attack by Saddam Hussein, and Tony Blair and George Bush’s overthrow of Saddam Hussein was welcomed by the Kurds as a liberation. Indeed, on my visits to the region I have personally been thanked for the British contribution to the liberation of Iraq.

The Kurds re-joined Iraq in 2003 and they have tried to make that arrangement work. They brokered a federal constitution, which was agreed by 80% of people in the Iraqi referendum in 2005. It enshrined a binational country of equals and, for instance, agreed a mechanism for resolving the status of the disputed territories. The deadline for that resolution was supposed to have been 2007, but it has still not been carried out. The end to federalism was demonstrated in February 2014 by Iraq’s Prime Minister Maliki, who unconstitutionally carried out all federal budget transfers to Kurdistan.

In June 2014, Daesh captured Mosul, took a third of the country and seized sophisticated American military kit, including lots of vehicles and heavy weapons. A Kurdish offer of help before the attack was spurned. Maliki failed in the most vital duty of any leader, which is to uphold the security of the state and protect its people. So the Kurds suddenly acquired a 650-mile border with Daesh and there was an overnight influx of Iraqi Arabs from Mosul, who increased the population by a third, straining all public services to breaking point. Daesh attacked Kurdistan in August 2014 and came within 20 miles of the capital, Irbil, which was only saved by immediate American air strikes and other assistance.

Then, a massive slump in the price of oil exposed the inefficient nature of the Kurdistan economy—massive state employment, little productivity, a minuscule private sector and an almost complete reliance on energy revenues, which now came through independent exports via Turkey. The Kurds faced a perfect storm of crises and came through, not unscathed but in one piece. This highlights their great resilience.

The story of how the Kurds eventually united with the Iraqi army against Daesh is instructive. When I visited the Kirkuk frontline in November 2015, I was told that there was no co-ordination, or indeed any communication, between the peshmerga and the Iraqi army. A year later, with western support the two forces concluded a deal to continue to drive Daesh out of Mosul, and I saw for myself the result of that deal last November, both on the road to Mosul and inside Mosul. This unprecedented military partnership came despite the historic bad blood and bad feeling between the Kurds and the Iraqis, which largely exist because of the
Iraqi army’s chemical weapons attacks on hundreds of villages and the extermination of nearly 200,000 people in the 1980s.

I will not focus on the moral reasons for airing arguments for Kurdish independence; instead, I will address the strategic gains for the west. Once Daesh is defeated in Mosul and later in Raqqa, the key question is how to prevent any such force re-emerging and how to undermine the ideological and political appeal of such “vile fascism”, as the KRG’s High Representative to the UK, Karwan Jamal Tahir, has put it.

We have to understand why many Sunnis came to believe that Daesh was less awful than Baghdad. Many could not accept the loss of the privileges they had enjoyed under Saddam. Thanks to the Kurds, however, Sunnis joined power-sharing Governments in Baghdad, and their militias and tribes helped to defeat the al-Qaeda insurgency in 2007-08.

However, the immediate consequence of the disastrous American decision to withdraw all its forces, a decision favoured by Maliki, was that Maliki brutally repressed Sunni civil rights protests. Sunnis had seen how badly Shia politicians had treated the Kurds and concluded that they themselves could face worse.

The central task now is to eradicate the drivers of Sunni radicalism and protect minorities, who have suffered rape, murder and dispossession by Sunni neighbours, as well as facing the massive cost of reconstruction and the need for a “Marshall plan of the mind” to tackle the deep traumas of those who were raped in their thousands and saw their menfolk slaughtered. The Kurdistanis also need devolved governance.

Already, we see that the old centralising is in contention; and it would be odd—bizarre, even—if the status of Kurdistan was not part of the conversation after Daesh. There are those who say that this is the wrong time, citing internal division in Kurdistan, the starkest symbol of which is the paralysis of its Parliament. I hope that the continuing negotiations, which have involved our diplomats, will resolve the dispute. As candid friends, we must continue to put pressure on the Kurds, so that their Parliament sits again and there is a functioning democracy as quickly as possible.

The state of the economy is another reason why some people say that now is the wrong time for the Kurds to consider, ask for and seek their own independence. However, I take the point made by the Kurdistan leader and former Iraqi foreign minister, Hoshyar Zebari, that “if we wait for all the problems to be resolved, we will have to wait forever”.

I commend the reforms of Prime Minister Barzani and Deputy Prime Minister Talabani: aligning revenues with state spending and introducing better forms of identification of the work force, to eliminate double-jobbing and ghost workers. They have much further to go, but statehood could end excuses for neglecting reform and allow access to development funds that are conditional on such reform.

The Kurds reckon that old foes are weaker or amenable to a potential independence deal, agreed with Baghdad. Turkey, Kurdistan’s major trading partner, could see Kurdistan as a major source of secure energy supplies, an interlocutor with the Kurds in Turkey, and a buffer between Turkey, Sunnis and Shi’as. Iran, of course, is resolutely opposed, but it is, thankfully, under intense pressure from America and the Gulf states and has absolutely no right to veto Kurdish independence. Arab-Iraqis adore Kurdistan, as Shimal Habib—the beloved north—thanks to the holidays they have there, enjoying the temperate climate and the hospitality. But Baghdad has refused to treat the Kurdish region fairly or with any good will. As for the bilateral relationship, the Kurds see us as a partner of choice, and the APPG supports a bigger British footprint in Kurdistan.

There are three specific issues I would like the Minister to address in his remarks. The first is the peshmerga. The gallant, brave, wonderful peshmerga are fighting Daesh on the ground, and that helps to secure our own security, freedoms and way of life. One of my most moving visits was when I went to see wounded peshmerga soldiers in Irbil. Many seriously injured soldiers are beyond the capacity of the medical facilities and the health system there, and I have asked two Prime Minister’s questions urging the British Government to supply a small number of beds at Queen Elizabeth hospital Birmingham because, as I am sure we agree, we owe the peshmerga a huge debt of honour and gratitude.

The second matter is visas. The visa application system is a vexed issue and the rejection rate has increased from 55% to 66%. We need up-to-date figures, and I ask the Minister to help with that. Entry clearance officers have perhaps three minutes to examine an application, and any small query means a no. One application was rejected due to a small discrepancy over claimed income, even though exchange rates had moved in the intervening days. Such issues are not clarified because we no longer interview our diplomats and Ministers can no longer intervene to assert a national interest. We should, of course, police and secure our borders, but we must, looking forward to a post-Brexit world, encourage people to do business and holiday here, and not make it excessively difficult for them to do so.

Thirdly, on bilateral relations, the KRG’s Prime Minister visited the UK in May 2014, and we established a joint committee, which was obviously then overtaken by events. When will the committee begin to function or a new committee be set up? I urge the Government to invite the Prime Minister or the new President of Kurdistan to meet our Prime Minister.

Today’s debate coincides with independence day in the United States. The Kurdish people will decide in their referendum in September whether they, too, want to be an independent state.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): I think I have been following the hon. Gentleman’s speech carefully. Is he really saying that a vote for independence by the Kurds in Iraq would be welcomed in Ankara?

Jack Lopresti: What I am saying is that the moods have shifted. I am not saying it would be welcomed, but I hope that, looking towards perhaps more co-operation and trade, we might get a better response than we had anticipated.

We can be optimistic and helpful in whatever discussions and negotiations follow on from the referendum, but whatever the people decide, the UK and the KRG have a lot in common, and our special relationship must be nurtured and developed.
Several hon. Members rose—

Philip Davies (in the Chair): Order. It might help new colleagues if I just let everyone know the format. I plan to give the Scottish National party spokesman, the shadow Minister and the Minister 10 minutes each at the end of the debate, so I will want to get to them just before 3.30 pm in order to allow the proposer of the motion to wind up for a couple of minutes at the end. I say that so that people can realise what timescales we are working to.

2.43 pm

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) on securing the debate, on his excellent and passionate speech and on being elected chair of the all-party group on the Kurdistan region in Iraq.

Unlike many Members here, I have not yet visited the Kurdistan region, but I have attended many all-party group meetings with the Kurdistan Regional Government’s High Representative, Karwan Jamal Tahir, and others, to gain insight into the region. I, too, would like to thank the peshmerga for their bravery in resisting so-called Islamic State, and I am relieved that Mosul is near to full liberation from a ghastly organisation whose brutality is beyond reasonable comprehension.

Through the all-party group I have heard disturbing direct testimony about girls who were enslaved and raped multiple times but managed to escape. Sadly, I am sure that their psychological traumas will last forever, but at the very least they can be treated. I understand there is just one university department of clinical psychology in Kurdistan. I fear that the department will be overwhelmed by the anguish that will become ever clearer and more in need of urgent attention over the coming weeks. Therefore, I appeal to the Government to play any role they can in increasing the number of clinical psychologists in Iraq and Kurdistan. Those young women—their victims—deserve nothing less than being able to look forward to a future when they can at least manage their traumas, and so manage their lives.

We know that there are more than 1 million internally displaced persons—IDPs—currently accommodated in the Kurdistan region, as well as more than 200,000 Syrian refugees. Resettlement is limited because of poor security and the lack of basic services. However, the Catholic Church, working in the region, has played a significant role in helping IDPs and refugees since the beginning of the crisis. The diocese of Irbil currently supports about 70,000 people with accommodation, subsistence, education and employment. Many of those people are from religious minorities, including Christians and Yazidis. Cardinal Vincent Nichols, Archbishop of Westminster, has welcomed the Kurdistan regional Government’s decision to extend the vulnerable person resettlement scheme to non-Syrian refugees in the region. I hope that the Minister can say what support the Government plan to provide, during this Parliament, for Churches and religious communities that are helping IDPs and refugees in Kurdistan.

I join colleagues in supporting the right of the Kurds to express their self-determination through the referendum in September. I commend the Kurdistan leadership’s decision to ask the people for a mandate to negotiate full independence and new relations with Iraq. I also understand the position of the British Government, as set out by the Foreign Secretary, who visited Kurdistan in January 2015 as the then Mayor of London. He visited British troops training the peshmerga and was even pictured alongside one of them with an AK47. He wrote that he had previously met “a dynamic and forward-looking young politician”—

Nechirvan Barzani—

“the prime minister of the fledgling state of Kurdistan.”

He further stated:

“Then we should help because we have a moral duty to that part of the world. It was the British who took the decision in the early Twenties to ignore the obvious ethnic divisions, and not to create a Kurdistan”,

which he described as “one of the few bright spots in the Middle East.”

I accept that such solidarity and the right hon. Gentleman’s recent statement as Foreign Secretary are not incompatible, but I also recognise that the referendum will proceed.

We will see whether the long negotiations achieve independence or a firm guarantee of equality in a new Iraq. It is not for me to say what is best for the Kurds, but I suggest that the UK and its diplomats use their experience and expertise to facilitate progress.

I want to highlight how the struggle of the Kurds has captured the hearts and minds of many ordinary British people who are practising their own version of diplomacy, and I am proud to speak about an example from the north-east. The Newcastle Gateshead Medical Volunteers have held charity fundraising events in both Gateshead and Newcastle. Its founder, Kurdistan-born Professor Dietary Kader, mobilises health professionals from the north-east to visit Kurdistan two or three times a year, to provide free orthopaedic care. He and his colleagues are literally putting Kurds back on their own two feet through many free hip and knee operations, which are beyond the capacity of the health system there, or for which people would have to wait many years. The charity undertakes formal educational events to raise the standard of surgical care, as well as providing blankets and winter clothing to the Yazidi refugee camps in Duhok. The charity is also building a connection between Kurdish doctors and the International Committee of the Red Cross in Lebanon, to transfer war-injured casualties to the committee’s war-wounded trauma reconstruction centre there.

Although I have yet to visit Kurdistan, I am an enthusiastic advocate of deep and broad links with our friends in the Kurdistan region, which is inclined to friendship with us and describes us as a partner of choice. The Minister has travelled to Kurdistan in his former official capacity and on an all-party group delegation. He was prepared to put aside Foreign and Commonwealth Office briefings to meet the passionate pleas of many Members here when the Commons discussed and agreed to formally recognise the genocide by Saddam Hussein against the Kurds. I hope his wisdom will enable him to understand that the Iraqi Kurds have a special place in British hearts and do his best to help ensure their freedom, equality and justice.

2.50 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. It is also an honour to follow the hon. Member for North Tyneside.
(Mary Glindon) and, in particular, my genuine hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti), who introduced this debate and knows a huge amount about the region. Without sounding too sycophantic, I could not be more pleased to have my right hon. Friend the Minister back in his rightful position as the Minister for the Middle East.

I have been privileged to join all-party group delegations to Kurdistan—I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests—five times since becoming an MP. Kurdistan has its problems, but it successfully has the essential ingredients for a flourishing society. It is an extraordinary place run by a progressive Muslim Kurdish Government dedicated to improving property rights, boosting private enterprise and encouraging inward investment. Unusually for that part of the world, the Kurdistan Government have determined that the rule of law must prevail. There are the beginnings of a vibrant civil society. I have met the trade unions several times on my visits, and I wish them well in developing sharp elbows to ensure that working people get a fair slice of the cake, although I would not recommend they follow the example of Len McCluskey and others. I have spoken to women’s organisations that have put domestic violence on the agenda and helped reduce the incidence of female genital mutilation. I salute the religious pluralism, and commend Prime Minister Barzani who said:

“What differentiates [us] from most of the countries around us is religious and ethnic tolerance. Accepting and defending each other’s rights strengthens the principle of humanity in this country, particularly in difficult times.”

It is astonishing to see religions from all over the region—Turkmen, Christians and others—literally fleeing to Kurdistan, because they know that it is the one place where they will receive protection.

I note that the KRG has appointed an official in charge of Jewish affairs. Jews once made up 17% of the population in Slemani before they were expelled in the bad old days, and there is a large Kurdish Jewish community in Israel. I remember driving past a Jewish area synagogue that was being preserved. Not many other nations in the middle east would preserve synagogues; they are usually knocking them down or demolishing them. I was interested when President Barzani told me that if Iraq recognised Israel, there would be a consulate-general in Irbil the next day. The relationship with Israel could be a major asset for both countries in future. Just imagine, Mr Davies, a progressive Muslim nation building relations with Israel, working together to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. That would set an example across the middle east.

There is one place, however, that I will never visit again: the Red House in Slemani. It was a horrific Ba’athist torture centre where thousands were murdered, tortured and raped. It is now a museum. More than anything, it shows the devastating inhumanity of Saddam’s regime. I remember going into a room inside the prison that was called the “party room”. In that room, women were raped by the guards and the subsequent foetuses were thrown into furnaces, in echoes of the holocaust. I remember going into the rooms of the prison, which were bugged. That was not for the prisoners, but to bug the guards in case they were giving anything to the prisoners of S-16, which has echoes of Stalin and Nazism. When we visited the Red House the second time, I refused to go in; I just sat outside.

The visits encouraged me to lead the Kurdistan Genocide Task Force, which united the KRG in the UK with MPs, academics and legal practitioners. In 2013 it helped persuade the Commons to formally recognise the Anfal genocide. We wanted to encourage the UK Government to do the same, but as my right hon. Friend the Minister will remember very well, the Government did not agree on the grounds that the decision should be legal and not political. I suspect we will still disagree, but I ask him to rethink. I give my real thanks to him for agreeing that the British Government should formally mark Anfal Day every April. I passionately believe that given the suffering of the people of Kurdistan, it is vital that we recognise the genocide, because it was the demonisation, marginalisation and annihilation of the Kurdish people.

Some people at the time asked why we focused on the past, but the history of genocide remains relevant to the Kurdistan story. Let us remember that they lost nearly 200,000 people, most notoriously in the chemical weapons attack on Halabja in 1988. Let us also remember that Saddam bombed the area before he used chemical weapons, so that the windows of all the Kurdish people’s houses were broken. That meant that when the chemical weapons were dropped, the people could not protect themselves by shutting themselves in their houses and shutting their doors and windows. More than 4,000 villages were razed to the ground. That was the beginning of forcible urbanisation, which makes it difficult nowadays to persuade people to leave the cities and make their money from agriculture. It could be a major source of income and help Kurdistan diversify away from a reliance on oil.

The past is never far from the surface. Just a few months after the Commons recognise Halabja and Anfal, the Syrian Ba’athist regime used chemical weapons in Ghouta. It is no coincidence that that was done by a Ba’athist party. In 2014, ISIL attacked Iraq and later Kurdistan. I am sure I have no need to persuade the Minister that ISIL undertook a genocide against the Yazidis and the Christians. I would welcome his update on the measures the UK is taking to help preserve evidence to mount criminal prosecutions. I remember being in Kurdistan and being warned by Kurdistan Ministers that, “In some months, we will have al-Qaeda in Mosul.” I think the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton), was at that meeting. They called it al-Qaeda, not ISIL, but they said that that would happen. All the awful things they predicted would happen tragically did happen.

The genocide against the Kurds ended when they rose up against Saddam in 1991 and evicted him from most of Kurdistan under our armed protection. For that the Kurds will always thank the then British Prime Minister, John Major, and British public opinion, which was appalled at the sight of so many people dying in the freezing mountains which had, in the old Kurdish saying, been their only friends. It is a privilege to sit next to my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), who was so involved at that time.

Whenever one thinks of the Iraq war, the thing we must always thank Tony Blair for is the fact that but for the removal of Saddam Hussein, the Kurdish nation would likely still face an existential threat. Saddam has gone. Leaders that followed may not have been like him, but their actions did much to break the hope of federalism.
That is why the Kurds are now seeking their sovereignty. I worry, however, that the mentality that allowed thousands of soldiers to conduct genocide is still obvious in the condescending and high-handed manner in which the Kurds are treated by Baghdad. I am also concerned about the attitude of the Shia militia towards the Kurds.

I have much sympathy with the Kurds’ desire for independence so that they can always protect themselves. I certainly believe they have the right to exercise self-determination by holding a referendum in September. I have signed the early-day motion stating that, and would be willing to observe the referendum. I understand that the Government’s position is to ask them to be proactive in seeking to facilitate the negotiations that will follow a successful referendum result, so that the Kurds and Arabs currently in Iraq can negotiate a more productive relationship. The UK must do everything possible to support this remarkable nation, which is at the vanguard of the fight against ISIS and for democracy, rule of law and a free economy in Iraq and the middle east.

Robert Halfon

3 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): It is truly an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I declare an interest: I have travelled to the region as the guest of the Regional Government of Kurdistan. I was invited to visit as part of a cross-party group of fact-finding parliamentarians. Aware that the conflict in the region is one of the biggest issues facing our world, I was very keen to go, and having spent a number of years volunteering in London with victims of torture—some from the region—I jumped at the chance to find out more.

On arriving in Irbil, I was shocked by the progressive and sophisticated surroundings. I was expecting a war zone, but the city could be mistaken for Dubai in its high-rise ambition and elegance. Sadly, war was not very far away. Half an hour’s ride out of the city, we were in a Syrian refugee camp near the border with the Kurdistan region.

Chatting to families, surrounded by playful children, I heard so many stories of pain and suffering: loved ones missing believed dead, people injured by mines, children made orphans by war. Most of those I spoke to had been there for more than three years, with no guarantee of when they would return home. They were weary and exhausted; all they wanted was to be reunited with their families and get back to their homes.

Kurdistan is host to not just refugees from Syria, but 1.5 million people displaced by war from other parts of Iraq. Although refugees have special status in international law and are cared for by the UN, internally displaced people are the responsibility of the host Government. Sadly, Baghdad seems to be doing little to help and leaves the task to Kurdistan, which is already suffering an economic tsunami thanks to a dramatic fall in oil prices, the hostility of Baghdad, which has cut its budget since 2014, and Kurdistan’s own dysfunctional economy, which needs massive reform.

As the Kurds and Iraqis move to liberate Mosul from the brutality of the self-styled Islamic State, more displaced people are heading into Kurdistan—the population has expanded by a third, which is the equivalent of the

population of Birmingham moving to Scotland. Understandably, there are electricity and water shortages, and schools and hospitals are overwhelmed.

Travelling to the frontline in Mosul to talk to peshmerga fighters and Iraqi special forces, we saw clearly the sacrifices made by those men and women. Over the border, in Mosul province, we visited the Christian village of Bartella, which had been seized by the Iraqis after a brief firefight. ISIS did not have time to destroy houses or set booby traps, but many houses were pockmarked by bullets, while some were entirely destroyed by airstrikes. Later, visiting a local hospital, we saw soldiers suffering life-changing injuries. I was humbled to witness a female peshmerga fighter passing away. We and the rest of the world owe them so much.

Another poignant visit was to a camp that is home to Yazidis, who practise a pre-Islamic and pre-Christian religion. Many have been murdered as apostates, sold into sexual slavery between one IS emir and another across Iraq or Syria, or killed because they were deemed too old to sell. Women survivors saw their men slaughtered before their eyes and their babies killed for fun. Of the 5,000 Yazidi women abducted as spoils of war, 2,000 have escaped, but they must still endure daily nightmares and flashbacks, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) alluded to.

At the SEED project, which operates from a schoolhouse building, assiduous professionals were working carefully to help victims overcome such traumas. A couple of therapists had studied clinical psychology at Koya University, but that is the only such course in the whole of Kurdistan: the country is in desperate need of people who understand post-traumatic stress. It must be our priority, and the Government’s, to offer that support, alongside physical reconstruction and the political reform the country so desperately needs.

Another way to heal psychological wounds can be through culture, which can be a force for rebellion and resistance, as well as for rebuilding empathy and tolerance in communities. The Kurds’ love of poetry and music attest to that. The legendary Iranian-Kurdish folk singer Mazhar Khaleghi, who now runs the Kurdish Heritage Institute in Sulaymaniyah, says:

“We have lost our lands and we’re probably never going to get them back. But we have to fight to save what is left of our culture. If we lose that, we have lost everything.”

As 150,000 peshmerga fighters push back against IS, Khaleghi’s team of a dozen ethnomusicologists, anthropologists and historians are fighting to preserve the Kurdish identity.

Kurdistan is an exceptionally beautiful country and I was privileged to meet a number of film makers and producers, who were anxious to use the beautiful location to create greater creative links with the rest of the world. I was shown around a disused cigarette factory by a local producer who had some of the finance in place to create a film studio to rival Shepperton or Pinewood. Nearby Turkey has a vibrant film industry and the Kurds are treated by Baghdad. I am also concerned of the brutality of the self-styled Islamic State, more displaced people are heading into Kurdistan—the population has expanded by a third, which is the equivalent of the

We can help by supporting Kurdistan’s ambition for inward investment, domestic production and private-sector employment within the Kurdistan region and working...
with the UK film industry to secure an efficient unified film industry organisation, merging the cinema directorates within the KRG. Kurdistan has huge potential to be a film-making centre in the middle east, bringing economic, social and cultural benefits to the region and its people. I hope there are people listening to this debate who could make that happen.

To visit Iraqi-Kurdistan was an absolutely fascinating opportunity. Yes, there are grave challenges in that part of the world—but where terror has done untold damage, a rose is growing through the cracks in the cement. Beauty and creativity is growing. I think we can all agree that that is testament to the Kurdish people. Over the coming years, they will look to us for support, and sometimes guidance. I hope that, in years to come, such support will be more forthcoming from our Government.

3.7 pm

Nadhim Zahawi (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con): It is a privilege and a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. From the outset, I declare a significant interest in the Kurdistan region in Iraq. I refer colleagues to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

As I have so often said in my parliamentary contributions since being elected for the first time in 2010, I am very proud to be the first British Member of Parliament of Kurdish descent. I therefore feel, perhaps more strongly than most, that the people of Iraqi Kurdistan have an inalienable right to self-determination, as do all peoples. That is why it is my belief that September’s referendum should be welcomed by our Government, without the need for the Minister to express a desire or opinion for or against independence.

There are many who say that Kurdistan could not survive as an independent state, that it is not ready for such an important vote, or that now is not the time for it. Whatever the outcome of September’s vote, I believe Kurdistan can and will prosper.

Although the most recent delays to holding September’s long-awaited and long-overdue referendum are understandable given the conflict in the region, I cannot help but draw attention to the deficiencies of previous Iraqi Governments in helping to facilitate the vote. In so doing, I am sympathetic to arguments that claim previous Iraqi Governments have effectively contributed to the mood for separation in Iraqi Kurdistan. The so-called Iraqi Barnett formula works in the opposite way to ours. I say that slightly in jest: since 2014, Iraqi Kurdistan has been almost totally cut off in terms of central Government funding. The region questioning its independence is shouldering a greater financial burden than other regions of the country, rather than the other way round.

In 2005 Iraq approved its new federalist constitution, with 79% in favour and 21% against. However, significant parts of the constitution are, sadly, yet to be implemented by Baghdad, denying regional Governments the autonomy for which an overwhelming majority of Iraqis had voted. Perhaps the most significant part of the constitution for Iraqi Kurdistan that is yet to be implemented is article 140. It has long been the expectation that the disputed Kurdish regions within particular governorates would be dealt with as Kirkuk was: they would have a referendum on whether they should become part of the Kurdistan Regional Government or remain within the greater Iraq. Article 140 makes it imperative that significant and sufficient measures to reverse Saddam Hussein’s Arabisation process in the disputed regions are undertaken so that the referendum is seen to be fair.

Thousands of Kurds returned following the events of 2003, and those regions are now under the control of the KRG after it claimed them from Daesh, but a formal referendum has not taken place. We now face a referendum on Iraqi Kurdistan’s independence while the status of the disputed regions remains unresolved.

President Barzani has confirmed that residents of the disputed regions, which Baghdad still considers not to be part of Iraqi Kurdistan, will be allowed to partake in September’s referendum. My fear, however, is that whatever the outcome of September’s vote, without the prior resolution of the regions’ statuses, Baghdad or Irbil will use the treatment or inclusion of those regions as a means to negate the result or make the referendum illegitimate. If it is a no to independence, Irbil may say that the result would have been different had disenfranchised Kurds been formally reunified with Iraqi Kurdistan prior to the referendum. If it is a yes, Baghdad may say that the result would have been different had the disputed regions not been included in the plebiscite as, they would argue, should have been the case all along.

I realise that I may be painting a rather bleak picture of a post-referendum Iraqi Kurdistan. Despite the concerns I have raised, I am still on balance far more optimistic than pessimistic. Although we may see a minor war of words between Irbil and Baghdad in the wake of September’s result, whatever it is I think the wider and longer-term result will be greater stability in the whole region. We will almost certainly see greater devolution to the KRG as a result of the vote: either total devolution in the case of independence or more devolution in order to placate the unsuccessful side in the case of a no vote. It is this devolution, the autonomy and power to control its own economic affairs, to manage its public services and to raise its own army, that has made Iraqi Kurdistan such a powerful force for regional stability.

The peshmerga have enjoyed immense success in combating Daesh-Isil, as many of my colleagues have mentioned, and in bringing stable and lasting liberation to large parts of Iraq and the adjoining parts of Syria. They have played an instrumental role in the liberation of Sinjar, and are continuing to do so as we speak on the eastern front in the battle to liberate Mosul. The leaders of western forces, our great military leaders, are all too ready to praise the peshmerga as the most effective military operators in the region. It is precisely their status as a regional army that has led to their effectiveness. I see a clear causal link between greater devolution to Irbil and the liberation and eventual political stability of Kurdistan and the country of Iraq as a whole. For that reason, I welcome the prospect of any further devolution, whatever the degree.

I would also like to make reference to the very strong relationship that the KRG has with Turkey—another critically important power in the conflict taking place in Iraq and Syria. A relationship on which regional stability also depends. I further welcome more devolution to Irbil in the hope of closer and more unified co-operation with Turkey in the campaign against Daesh.
My overall point is that rather than seeing a fully independent or more powerful Kurdistan as indicative of an increasingly divided and chaotic Iraq, one should see it as an opportunity to bring greater stability to the region. I urge the Government, represented here so ably by the Minister, whom I thank for giving up his time, to look closely at the opportunities that an Iraqi Kurdistan with more devolved power could bring.

I know from conversations with leading politicians in the KRG, including the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister, that the Iraqi Kurds would never resort to any violence of any kind against the Iraqi Government to make their case for more control over their own affairs. The KRG, and indeed the people of Iraqi Kurdistan, see Baghdad as their closest and most important strategic ally. My message to my Government is this: let us learn the lessons from our invasion of Iraq in 2003; let us recognise that we may have won the war but we certainly did not win the peace; and let us be open-minded about the role we can now play in Iraq in 2017; let us recognise that we may have won the important strategic ally. My message to my Government is this: let us learn the lessons from our invasion of Iraq in 2003; let us recognise that we may have won the war but we certainly did not win the peace; and let us be open-minded about the role we can now play in restoring stability to Iraq by being positive about a more autonomous Kurdistan, whatever path it chooses for itself in September.

Leo Docherty: Thank you for the opportunity to speak, Mr Davies. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) for securing this important and timely debate, which is testament to his long-standing interest in Kurdistan.

I will be brief and restrict myself to two main points. First, Iraqi Kurdistan is and should continue to be an important strategic ally of the United Kingdom. I have had the privilege of making several visits to the Kurdistan region of Iraq—most recently in June 2014 when I visited Kirkuk, where I was very pleased to meet, among many others, members of that city’s Christian community. They were extremely relieved that the peshmerga had prevented Daesh from capturing the city because, for the Christians, that would have meant certain death.

At that time, Daesh were sweeping across Iraq. The Iraqi national army had collapsed and had abandon’d Mosul, leaving a great deal of equipment behind when they fled south. The Kurdish peshmerga were a bastion against Daesh and managed to contain the tide of that murderous death cult. I am glad that the British Government recognised that.

We should acknowledge that since August 2014 the UK has supported the peshmerga with significant material and other support, such as training for peshmerga fighters, counter-IED detectors, heavy machine guns, and thousands of rounds of ammunition. Most importantly, there has been the support of Typhoon and Reaper strikes and air reconnaissance. We should be very proud of that support. Does the Minister think we should build on that and support the peshmerga further?

We in the United Kingdom have helped the Kurdistan Regional Government defend not only themselves but the interests of Iraq as a whole and also our interests. Their position is now a strong one and the impending liberation of Mosul is a testament to the sacrifices that they and their allies have made. It is the current disposition in Iraq today that leads to my second point.

Jack Lopresti: Thank you my hon. Friend for allowing me to intervene; I am enjoying his speech. On the military support we have given to the peshmerga, some have said it has been inadequate and some have said we could do a bit more, but, importantly, there has been a shortage of body armour, helmets and respirators. Does he agree that we have a responsibility to make sure not only that they are properly equipped and armed, but that they have access to medical care and treatment as well?

Leo Docherty: I agree with my hon. Friend. The issue is not only about arming, but about protecting and providing facilities.

We are still living with the legacy of the unintended consequences of the 2003 liberation of Iraq and the end of Saddam’s tyranny. One of the most important unintended consequences is the fact that Iran is strategically dominant: the presence of Iran-backed Shi’ite militias across Iraq indicates a new-found political dominance of the Shi’a crescent by Iran. When Mosul falls, an Iran-controlled land corridor will link the Islamic Republic to its ally Hezbollah on the Mediterranean. That is likely to have increasingly serious regional implications.

We must plan accordingly, with our allies.

Furthermore, today the viability of the state of Iraq is called into question, as it has been on a number of occasions since 2003. I want to be clear that I hope that the state of Iraq as a federal state is indeed still viable. However, the Kurdish hold on Kirkuk, the impending referendum, which hon. Members have mentioned, and the likely antipathy, when Mosul is liberated, from among the Sunni population towards the Baghdad Government, are factors that will shape the future of Iraq and they are beyond our control.

My experience as a soldier in Iraq has taught me that British direct involvement in its politics rarely meets with success. However, we are doing what we must continue to do and what we do best: engaging in full-throttle defence diplomacy to help the Kurds to defend their interests, and ours at the same time.

Douglas Chapman: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I thank the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) for his speech. His knowledge of and passion for the Kurdistan area came through strongly, and his work for the all-party group is impressive.

The imminent recapture of Mosul from Daesh control by Iraqi security forces is a welcome development, and it will bring multiple complex challenges. The transition from offensive combat operations to a post-conflict stabilisation phase—notably the performance of constabulary police—has not always been well handled by the Iraqi Government forces. Above all, it is critical that there should be no repeat of the stories and allegations that emerged, for example, from the recapture of Fallujah when Iraqi Government forces were accused of reprisals against suspected Daesh fighters and the civilian population alike. Of equal importance are humanitarian aid, stabilisation and the restoration of functioning state institutions. As things stand, there are 820,000 Iraqis currently displaced from Mosul and the surrounding areas since military operations to retake the city began in October 2016. Their needs must become an immediate priority.
Although it is not part of Kurdistan proper, Mosul’s position within the disputed territories of northern Iraq, its multi-ethnic demography and its overall importance for the economy and governance of northern Iraq make it imperative that the authorities in Baghdad and Irbil should collaborate effectively in the aftermath of its recapture. We urge the UK and the other members of the international coalition to exert their influence to make sure that the collaboration works. I believe that yesterday the Foreign Secretary met Iraqi Foreign Minister Jaafari, and we expect to hear how that message might be communicated to him at a later time.

As many hon. Members have said, the people of Iraqi Kurdistan have the right to decide their own future, and we urge all parties to work together to ensure that Kurdish self-determination is supported. My hon. Friends and I support the right to self-determination for all, provided it is expressed through peaceful democratic processes. We welcome the fact that the Government in Irbil intend to pursue their legitimate aspirations by means of a popular vote, but we would stress the importance of dialogue with Baghdad and with all regional actors to ensure that it passes off peacefully and contributes to regional stability.

I was taken by an article by President Barzani who, writing in The Washington Post, made a compelling case for Kurdistan to be an independent country. He wrote:

“On Sept. 25, the people of Iraqi Kurdistan will decide in a binding referendum if they want independence or to remain part of Iraq. The vote will resolve a conflict as old as the Iraqi state itself between the aspirations of the Kurdish people and a government in Baghdad that has long treated Kurds as less than full citizens of the country.

Iraqi Kurdistan’s exercise of its right to self-determination threatens no one and may make a volatile region more stable. It will not alter the borders of any neighboring state and, if done right, will make for a much stronger relationship between Iraq’s Arabs and Kurds. We are determined to do everything possible to accommodate Iraqi concerns in the likely event that the vote is for independence.”

The President argues that Kurdistan’s case for independence is compelling and he points out that 100 years ago, in the peace negotiations that followed world war one, the Kurds were promised their own state. Instead they were divided against their will, and their lands were carved up among Turkey, Iran, Syria and Iraq. The newly-established state of Iraq was supposed to be an equal partnership between Arabs and Kurds, but that hopeful dream gave way to a grim reality. All Iraqi Governments suppressed the Kurds, and the resulting atrocities culminated in the 1980s, when Saddam Hussein used poison gas extensively on Kurdish towns and villages, levelled more than 5,000 Kurdish villages and deported Kurds to the south, where they were murdered and buried in mass graves; 182,000 Iraqi Kurds—nearly 5% of the population—including members of the President’s family, perished in that period.

The article continues:

“With the overthrow of Hussein’s Baath regime, the Kurds worked hard to build a new Iraq, including drafting a constitution that guaranteed Kurdistan’s autonomy and protected the rights of all Iraqis. Fourteen years later, Baghdad has failed to implement key provisions of that constitution, and we have good reason to believe that it never will. This failure of the political system is also responsible for the drastic deterioration of relations between Sunnis and Shiites that led to the rise of the Islamic State, with disastrous consequences for all Iraqis, including the Kurds.”

The President notes that the principal argument that is made for Iraqi unity is that a single Iraq is better able to protect its citizens, but that that claim is not supported by evidence and experience. When the Islamic State attacked Kurdistan in 2014, using advanced US weapons abandoned by the Iraqi army in Mosul, the Iraqi Government refused to give Kurdistan its constitutionally mandated share of the federal budget, and it certainly did not provide soldiers—known as the peshmerga, as other hon. Members have noted—with weapons. As an independent country, Kurdistan would have been able to finance and equip its own troops and to bring the fight to a much swifter conclusion.

The article states:

“The war on the Islamic State since then provides a model for how Kurds and Arabs might cooperate in the future. In the battle to drive the Islamic State from Iraq, the peshmerga and the Iraqi army have been in an alliance of equals. Each army has its own chain of command. The peshmerga’s joint operations with the Iraqi military support each other in ways that never occurred in an Iraq where Baghdad sought to dominate and control Kurdistan. Regardless of the referendum, we will continue our close cooperation with Iraq and Western forces until the final victory over the Islamic State.”

That statement tells us a lot about how Kurdistan would be a stabilising force in the region, should it be able to move to independent status and not have to rely on Baghdad for its orders.

The President argues that an independent Kurdistan could have a much stronger relationship with Baghdad and would be a great neighbour, co-operating against terrorism and sharing resources, including water, petroleum and many kinds of infrastructure, in ways that would benefit both countries:

“Without the sanctions that Iraq has applied to our imports and exports, we could jointly develop our human and natural resources in a common market to the benefit of both Kurdistan and Iraq.

While the results of the referendum will bind future Kurdistan governments, the timing and modalities of our independence will be subject to negotiation with Baghdad and consultation with our neighbors and the wider international community.”

That is not the view of an aggressive state trying to have things all its own way. There is room for negotiation, and I am sure that the way the President has phrased his article means that his approach would be very peaceful and reasonable.

The article goes on to say:

“In our negotiations with Baghdad, we will be practical. The issue of what territory joins Kurdistan will be the most contentious issue in the separation. Despite a Dec. 31, 2007, deadline, the Iraqi government refused to implement a key constitutional provision... that would have provided the people of the disputed areas make a choice...”. Nearly ten years later, we propose to give them that opportunity.”

That is a fantastic step in the right direction.

“We wish to incorporate into Kurdistan only those territories where the people overwhelmingly want to be part of Kurdistan as expressed in a free vote. The last thing we want is a long-lasting territorial dispute with Iraq that could poison our future relations.”

The hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) talked about Kurdistan’s culture and diversity, which it values. It is home to Christians, Yazidis, Turks, Shabaks and Arabs, all of whose separate identities are recognised by its laws. Since 2003, many Iraqi Christians have moved to Kurdistan to escape the violence and persecution elsewhere in Iraq. Since Islamic State seized part of Iraq in 2014, Kurdistan has also provided
support for more than 1.5 million Iraqi refugees, with only minimal help from Baghdad and the international community.

I appreciate the input from the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), who talked about having a vibrant civil society within a progressive Muslim nation. He referred to the disgraceful Red House—I was not aware of it, and I think most Members would look on it with disgust.

The hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) talked about having respect for the peshmerga, which has support in the north-east. The hon. Member for Batley and Spen talked about the people of Birmingham all moving to Scotland—I am not sure that is a very good idea at the moment, although they would be very welcome—which indicates the scale of what has happened in that country.

Finally, the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi) said that the people of Kurdistan have the inalienable right to decide their own future. I hope that the Minister will confirm the Government's position, and that they will reconsider their attitude to Kurdistan and the referendum that is about to take place.

3.32 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti), the chair of the all-party group on the Kurdistan region in Iraq, on securing the debate. He has taken over a very important position in a group that has had a profound effect on this Parliament over the 10 years of its existence. I was involved in the group in its early days, and I was privileged to travel under its auspices to Irbil on two separate occasions. It helped to inform me and ensured that Labour Members—many of my colleagues also visited—are well informed about Kurdistan and what it has to offer the world.

Like many right hon. and hon. Members, I have many Kurdish constituents—now naturalised British citizens—who bring with them the history of their nation and region. They are mostly from Iraqi Kurdistan, but some are from Syria, Turkey and, of course, Iran. In his opening remarks, the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke said that Kurdistan cannot be subjugated, and he talked of a resetting of relationships with Baghdad—not through a universal declaration of independence, like former Rhodesia, but through the referendum that will take place on 25 September. He urged the United Kingdom to send official observers to the region for the referendum.

The hon. Gentleman and others also alluded to the bravery of the peshmerga. When we see their operations, the work they have been doing, their fighting and the bravery they have exhibited, we cannot but admire them. He also mentioned the issue of the unfair assessment of visas for Kurdish people—especially those injured in war—who hope to come to the United Kingdom. I hope the Minister will address that issue in his winding-up speech. The hon. Gentleman also said that the United Kingdom and the Kurdistan Regional Government have a lot in common. That is something that struck me when I was there on my two visits.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) said she was delighted by the liberation of Mosul, and appealed to the Government to provide clinical psychologists and psychiatrists to help with the trauma of Daesh’s rape victims in the city. I hope the Minister will tell us a little more about that.

The right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon)—I hope he does not mind my addressing him as my right hon. Friend—with whom I visited the region in 2011, I think it was, talked about the thriving civil society, the religious pluralism, the tolerance and the defence of each other’s rights, which he, I and many other Members found on our visits to Kurdistan. He said something that I was not aware of: Jews once made up 17% of the city of Sulaymaniyyah. It would be nice to see Jewish people returning to that city and other parts of Kurdistan. Like the hon. Gentleman, I remember being told that if Iraq recognised the state of Israel today, tomorrow we would have a consulate in Irbil—such is the Kurdish people’s admiration for the Jewish people.

We were told at the time that the Anfal brought the Kurdish people closer to the suffering that the Jewish people underwent during the second world war with the holocaust. They understood what that meant, because they had suffered a genocide themselves. My right hon. Friend ably led the Kurdistan genocide taskforce in 2013, which resulted in the United Kingdom Parliament’s recognition of the Anfal genocide. I recall speaking at that conference myself. We heard from a young man—he is still a young man—who as a child witnessed the genocide in Halabja. He was there hiding in a basement, watching his family, friends and neighbours dying from the poison gas attack. It is one of the most moving things I have ever heard since my election to this House 20 years ago. It was absolutely extraordinary—I hope we never have to hear such testimony again. That is another reason why the people of Kurdistan deserve and need our support.

My dear hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin), who has done so much good work since her election to this House in the by-election nearly a year ago, talked about the 1.5 million people internally displaced by war in Kurdistan, and said that the Kurdistan Regional Government receive very little help from the Government of Iraq. The fall in oil prices has affected the Kurdish economy, as many hon. Members said. She said that we must try to offer post-traumatic stress counselling to those who have been affected.

My hon. Friend also made an important point about something that those of us who have been to the region also noticed very strongly, especially in comparison with other countries in the same region: the Kurdish people’s very strong culture. I remember visiting a school in Sulaymaniyyah and watching young people dancing the most joyous dance to the most extraordinary music in the most wonderful costumes—something that would not go amiss in one of the films she mentioned. Why not? Kurdistan bills Sulaymaniyyah and its other cities as a hub for film-making in the region. Turkey has a vibrant film industry, as she rightly pointed out, so why not Kurdistan too? It would be lovely to see that. It is a most extraordinary culture.

The hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), who, as he pointed out, is the first British MP of Kurdish descent, talked about the referendum. He said that since 2014 Kurdistan has been almost completely
cut off from central Government funding in Iraq. He rightly mentioned the problems relating to holding the referendum, but he was optimistic that there will be greater stability in the region, not the reverse. I certainly agree.

The hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty), who is welcome in this debate—I welcome him to the House—is a former director of the Conservative Middle East Council, and therefore has considerable knowledge of the region. He was also an Army officer and fought in Iraq. He brought his wisdom and experience to us. He said, very importantly, that the viability of the state of Iraq has already been called into question. He mentioned the political significance of Iran’s Shi’a dominance in the region, against which Kurdistan is a bulwark. He also said—I definitely agree with him, having voted against the invasion of Iraq in 2003—that UK interference in Iraq has not been entirely successful.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): The hon. Gentleman talks about the United Kingdom’s role in Iraq and interference. Does he agree with me about what happened post-2006? The Government of Mr Maliki came in with the backing of the Shi’ite blocking vote and conducted the persecution in Anbar province. The United Kingdom Government should have dissociated themselves much earlier from support of the Maliki Government, rather than doing so many years later. That persecution of the Sunnis led to the havoc we see in Iraq now.

Fabian Hamilton: That is entirely why I voted against this country’s participation in the invasion of Iraq. Yes, it resulted in the deposing of the dictator Saddam Hussein, but it also resulted in some of the appalling things to which the hon. Gentleman alluded.

As we have heard, the Kurdish minority in Iraq numbers more than 6 million, which is about 20% of the population of Iraq. Mutual suspicion and acrimony between Baghdad and the Kurdish autonomous Government have led to the Kurdish Regional Government’s announcing the independence referendum that is to take place on 25 September. No outside Governments are in favour of the referendum, which it is widely believed will create more instability in the region. I beg to differ.

The UK Government assist the Government of Iraqi Kurdistan in fighting ISIS and helping with refugees, for which we are all profoundly grateful. Iraqi Kurdistan and its army, the peshmerga, have been very beneficial and helpful, and extremely brave in fighting ISIS in Iraq over the past three years. A January 2015 report of the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee—the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon was a member of the Committee at the time—stated:

“It is for the Iraqi people to decide their future, but it appears to us that a looser federal model, permitting greater self-governance by its diverse mosaic of communities, offers best hope for Iraq remains united and sovereign. Highly centralised rule under a ‘strongman’ in Baghdad will never work.”

I certainly agree.

Iraq’s neighbours—Turkey, Iran and Syria—all oppose secession, fearing that separatism will spread to their own ethnic Kurdish populations. We can understand that, but none the less should all believe in the right of peoples to self-determination. European Union Foreign Ministers have acknowledged the right to nationalist aspirations for Iraqi Kurdistan, but cautioned against “unilateral steps” that threaten the unified state of Iraq. The United Nations will not involve itself in debates concerning independence, and the only country that seems to be warming to the idea of independence is the state of Israel.

Human Rights Watch estimates that between 50,000 and 100,000 people were killed or disappeared during Saddam Hussein’s Anfal campaigns between 1987 and 1989, with 2,000 villages destroyed by Saddam’s regime by 1993. So, finally, I want to state the Labour party’s position on the referendum. We believe, as I am sure all in the House do, in the right of self-determination for peoples living under oppression. The Kurdish Regional Government, it could be argued, are not a group of people living under oppression, but they are in an invidious and difficult position and have been for many years, especially in the light of that history.

The Labour party will recognise the result of the referendum if we are convinced that it is conducted openly and honestly, and freely and fairly—that, of course, will require international observers—and if the borders of Kurdistan are agreed and recognised internationally. Perhaps the Minister will comment on whether the United Kingdom Government, of whom he is a well-respected Minister, would consider doing the same in such circumstances.

3.44 pm

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): In common with everyone else, it is a great pleasure for me to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and I thank you for relaxing the jacket rule, which is welcome and much appreciated by a number of us.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) on securing the debate and on his recent election as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the Kurdistan region in Iraq. I will return to some of his remarks, but he set his case out ably and firmly, as I had had no doubt that he would, and I listened extremely carefully.

A number of colleagues have made some kind remarks about my return to this ministerial role, which are genuinely appreciated. Although I needed no reminder, having this as a first debate has reminded me of the pain and complexities of a region that I have come to know well, because I have many friends there. The debate illustrates how the politics of the region are rarely simple and how a Government have to tread with great care, because all words have consequences. Appropriately, our Government will treat the situation with extreme care, for we recognise—as the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) set out—that what any particular region may do in the middle east has ramifications, and Kurdistan is no exception.

I, too, must make a declaration of interest. As has been referred to, not only did I visit Irbil and the Kurdish region as a Minister, but I visited it as a member of the all-party group. I enjoyed and appreciated both visits very much indeed. I thank my courteous hosts, who told me a great deal about the region. The respect that I have for the civilian Government and for what they were achieving in Irbil, as well as my respect for the extraordinary performance of the peshmerga and all those who have defended our freedoms through their actions, have left a deep impression. Those who
are responsible for the Kurdish region know that those are my feelings strongly. It was also nice to be reminded of John Major and his work. He is well thought of for his work to protect people in the region at a crucial time.

I am grateful for the contributions of hon. Members and will do my best to respond to a number of the points made, although I am mindful of how difficult that is in a short time. I could spend five minutes on each and every point made by colleagues during the course of their remarks, but I cannot do so. There will be other opportunities, however—again, only so much can be said in public and on the record, and many things can be discussed in different forums. I tried to do that when I was in this role previously, and I certainly intend to do so again, because colleagues’ interest in the area is profound. Accordingly, appreciation of as many of the complexities that the United Kingdom Government have to deal with as possible is of benefit to Parliament as a whole: Parliament speaks with great wisdom and knowledge on such matters.

The debate has come at an historic moment for Iraq and its people, with the battle to liberate Mosul approaching its conclusion. Iraq’s security forces have shown immense courage, suffered significant losses and demonstrated strong capability in a long and complex operation against a ruthless enemy with no regard for human life. The contribution of Kurdish forces to that process has been remarkable. Even though the fighting is not yet over, Iraq is entering another even more critical phase.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I am grateful to the Minister for paying tribute to the Kurdish forces in their fight against Daesh. Does he share my concern about some of the actions of the Turkish air force, which has targeted Kurdish forces in north Iraq and Syria? What more can the British Government do to bring influence to bear on Turkey, which after all is a NATO ally?

Alistair Burt: It is indeed. The hon. Gentleman’s remarks again require the House to be aware of the complexities of the region, the different forces operating there, the reactions of different states in the area to such forces and whether everyone is working to the same agenda. I cannot comment specifically on the matter he raises, but I am well aware of the difficulties and of some actions of forces that may be interpreted in more than one manner. However, I take his point.

Once the liberation of Mosul is complete and the fighting is over, the peace must be won. Military success has to be consolidated through building a more stable, inclusive and prosperous country. The hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) reminded us that the consequences of recapturing a city or an area can be harsh, and the world will be watching to ensure that that is not the case in Mosul. Some of the reprisals visited upon people in the past only laid the foundations of more anger and conflict, but I am sure that the forces in Mosul who are responsible to the coalition understand that well.

Enabling and encouraging Iraq to achieve the goal of a more stable, inclusive and prosperous country is one of this Government’s fundamental objectives. It is certainly true, as several colleagues mentioned, that the failure to include the Sunni community in the future of Iraq was fundamental to the emergence of what became Daesh. The concerns that have been raised since it is absolutely vital to ensure that it is included in the future. Supporting a more stable, inclusive and prosperous country includes supporting a strong and successful Kurdish region within a unified Iraq.

The Kurdish people, the Kurdistan Regional Government and their security forces have been pivotal to the military campaign to defeat Daesh. They have been generous providers of humanitarian support, and they will be instrumental to the effort to secure peace. They are a critical partner of the UK and the global coalition, but also a close friend and key ally of the UK.

As part of the global coalition against Daesh, the United Kingdom Government are providing practical support to the Republic of Iraq and its Kurdish region in their shared fight against Daesh. Alongside the training we provide to the Iraqi security forces, around 150 UK military personnel are based in the Kurdish region to provide the peshmerga with military training, which the Foreign Secretary has seen at close quarters, as is well known. We have trained nearly 8,500 Kurdish peshmerga in light infantry skills, counter-improvised explosive device techniques and military medicine. We have supplied military equipment, including heavy machine guns and ammunition, and delivered military equipment on behalf of our coalition partners. We also give strategic advice to the Kurdistan Regional Government’s Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs.

I echo the welcome that has already been given to my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty). Many Government colleagues have benefited greatly from his expertise in this area and his selfless generosity in sharing it. That it is now available to the House as a whole is a good thing for us all, and I welcome that. He mentioned further equipping the peshmerga. I remind the House that, as he knows, all UK military assistance is direct and provided through Centcom, the central command of the military coalition, which assesses the needs of the peshmerga, but colleagues have in the past returned from the area and provided advice about what might be necessary on the ground at a particular time, and that has been taken through by the British Government. I assure him that he will always be listened to with great care.

Rehman Chishti: I pay tribute to the brilliant work that the Minister did before at the Foreign Office, and I am sure that he will do so again. I have huge admiration for what the peshmerga do, but one of my constituents went to the Kurdistan region of his own free will to fight with the peshmerga against Daesh. Does the Minister agree that that kind of action is completely unacceptable, as is that of those individuals who fight with Daesh? There should be stringent measures for people who want to offer their assistance; they should do so through appropriate channels rather than by taking actions of their own will.

Alistair Burt: My hon. Friend makes his point well. The United Kingdom provides support to those who are imperilled by Daesh and those who fight it through legitimate means. The British military is involved in a coalition—that job is being done. Much though people
may feel inspired to go out to the region, the United Kingdom Government does not support that, as we are engaged in other ways.

Jack Lopresti: Will the Minister give way?

Alistair Burt: Briefly. I am keen to make progress to get on to my hon. Friend’s questions.

Jack Lopresti: Although I recognise, accept and agree with the Minister’s position on British nationals going to fight for the peshmerga, does he agree that there is no moral equivalent between people who go to fight with Daesh and people who volunteer to serve with the peshmerga?

Alistair Burt: Absolutely. There is no moral equivalent whatever, and I was not making that point; I was merely making the point that the United Kingdom Government are supporting those who are countering the most evil force, and that is the right way to do it. We counsel caution to those who wish to do it any other way.

In addition to the military support that I mentioned, the UK Government have provided £169.5 million in life-saving humanitarian aid to Iraq since June 2014, which has helped to support internally displaced people across Iraq, including those hosted in the Kurdistan region.

The hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) mentioned the women who have been captured and used by Daesh forces. I absolutely take her point about support from clinical psychologists; I will make inquiries about that. Yet another previous role of mine was Minister for mental health, so I am aware of the importance of that work and I will look to see what may be available. I am the United Kingdom’s commissioner for the International Commission on Missing Persons, and at a recent meeting in Stockholm I met a Yazidi woman who had escaped but whose mother and sister were still being held captive. As was mentioned, providing evidence for what may well turn out to be war crimes is of significant importance. Gathering evidence and, in time, using that evidence is as important as ensuring that those who are lost are recovered and missing no longer.

Let me turn to the specific questions that my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke asked. I will look at the specific item that he mentioned about medical assistance. Such assistance is not disaggregated, so I will look at what specifically goes to the Kurdish region. I take his point about visas, which are a constant issue in the middle east. I will discuss that with the Home Office, which is responsible for visas. We will welcome Kurdish officials meeting the Prime Minister in due course. The Prime Minister has not yet met Prime Minister Abadi, which should come first, but I take my hon. Friend’s point carefully.

I must mention the referendum before I give my hon. Friend the chance to wrap up. We understand the aspirations of the Kurdish people and will continue to support them politically, culturally and economically within Iraq, but we also believe that a referendum on independence risks detracting from the more urgent priorities of defeating Daesh, stabilising liberated areas and addressing the long-term political, social and economic issues that led to Daesh’s rise. That is why we maintain that any referendum or political process towards independence must be agreed with the Government of Iraq in Baghdad and that unilateral moves towards independence would not be in the interests of the Kurdistan region, Iraq or wider regional stability. Our position is shared by many of our key allies. My sense is that those responsible in the Kurdish region understand that well, and we expect this matter to proceed with due care, recognising the sensitivities of disputed areas as well as other parts of Iraq.

3.58 pm

Jack Lopresti: Thank you for your chairmanship of this debate, Mr Davies. I am hugely grateful to every colleague who came along to support it; there have been some very good interventions and great speeches.

The debate has, to a large degree, demonstrated and reinforced the British Parliament’s support, affection and understanding of the Iraqi Kurdish people. I want again to put my thanks and appreciation on the record with respect to the peshmerga. The Minister referred to this, but I remind him that although training, equipment and war-fighting capabilities are important, those things have a cost and we must be mindful of the medical care and support that some of the peshmerga are not getting. Whatever the Kurdish people decide in the referendum in September, the British Government need to get fully behind them and continue to develop our relationships on security, trade, business and democracy.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Kurdistan region in Iraq.
That manifesto commitment was welcome, and I am pleased that it has survived the cull of so many other commitments from that unfortunate document. However, we are looking to the Minister for some outline of what the commitment will actually mean in practical terms. If you will forgive me, Sir David, there is quite a history here, and it is important that we remind ourselves of some of it. A lot of the issues that underpin this history come from the fact that Ofgem—for reasons that are understandable in relation to non-renewable technologies—has for some time adhered to a system of locational charging. For renewable projects, far from the centres of populations and the ultimate points of consumption, that does not necessarily make the same sense, so we have looked for different ways around that over the years.

Back in the days of the late Malcolm Wicks, we tried the idea of a cap on transmission charges. That was brought in by him and the then Labour Government, and was then extended by Chris Huhne when he was Secretary of State for Energy, but that in itself did not provide the solution we had hoped for. We then moved on to the new contracts for difference regime, and within that it was suggested that we could have a dedicated islands strike price. Unfortunately, at the point that that was being submitted to the European Commission for state aid approval, it was felt that it could be delayed by the islands element, so it was removed for later submission. It was resubmitted at a later stage and went through the pre-approval application process, which concluded some time around the end of 2015.

In the meantime, we had a general election, and the Conservative Government that came in in 2015 had a manifesto commitment to have a moratorium on onshore wind developments. The point at which the Government decided to go ahead with the CfD auction round that we are currently part of, without any provision for the islands, sticks in my memory for two reasons. First, it was the morning after the American people had elected President Trump, and secondly, I remember very clearly taking the call from the Secretary of State on my mobile phone while I was going through Edinburgh airport. However, a consultation period followed, which should have ended in the early part of this year and to which we are currently part of, without any provision for the islands, sticks in my memory for two reasons. First, it was the morning after the American people had elected President Trump, and secondly, I remember very clearly taking the call from the Secretary of State on my mobile phone while I was going through Edinburgh airport. However, a consultation period followed, which should have ended in the early part of this year and to which we I think we still await the Government’s formal response.

I remind the House of that history at this point because it is germane to the debate. Although the commitment in the Conservative party’s manifesto from last month is new, the issue is not—it has been within the machinery of government for some considerable time. Although we hope that that commitment will be given the green light, it is far from the case that the work needs to start from scratch. What is now needed is the degree of political commitment to implement the commitment and to tell us exactly what it means, because time is not in plentiful supply.

If provision for the islands of Scotland is to be included in the next round of CfD auctions, we are looking at something that has to go through the machinery of government and possibly even the state aid consent procedures in order to be in place by the end of next year, so there is a need for some degree of urgency in the approach to this. When the industry hears from the Minister later, it will be looking for a degree of clarity. We are not looking for the blueprint on everything that
is meant by the manifesto commitment, but we want to hear some sort of outline or framework through which this can be turned into a reality.

What are we looking at here? Are we revisiting the idea of an islands strike price, or are we looking at something that might, somehow or another, find a mechanism for including onshore island generation with offshore wind? I do not know just how doable that would be, or how workable it would be from the point of view of the industry, but those are some of the ideas that have been floated. Alternatively, does the Department have some new mechanism that is going to be brought forward?

In any event, when in all those processes will the work start in order to obtain state aid approvals? I understand that the Government will proceed on the basis that, regardless of what happens with Brexit, state aid regulation compliance remains a feature of our regulatory landscape for the foreseeable future. Is it the Government’s aspiration that any projects that would be brought forward under this new scheme would be eligible for the next round of CfD auctions? If that is the case, will the Minister at this stage consult within Government to get a commitment that the next auction round will not go ahead unless and until this scheme is in place and island-based projects are able to compete?

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for allowing me to intervene in the limited time he has. Will he explain to the House whether there is any other route to market for island wind if there is no access to the next round of CfD funding?

Mr Carmichael: The answer to that depends on what we mean by “route to market”. There are other ways in which the energy generated can be used, and a lot of innovative work is being done in relation to non-distributing technologies such as the use of hydrogen, but for all intents and purposes, for the projects being considered at the moment across the country, there really is not. Those in the industry will have a view on that, and if they bring forward something we are not currently considering, I think we will all be in the market for hearing it.

Finally and most obviously, we will want to hear in fairly early course exactly what is meant by the expression “community benefit”, which has been around the renewables debate for as long as I can remember and has meant different things to different people in different places at different times. If it is to form part of policy, a clearer definition will be necessary.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I appreciate the opportunity to intervene. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that a significant motivating factor for accelerating the development of renewable technology has to be reducing household energy bills as part of the community benefit? Those bills are often higher in island communities such as the Isles of Scilly in my constituency, owing to the inaccessibility.

Sir David Amess (in the Chair): We are fresh from an election, and there are lots of new Members here. The usual procedure in a short half-hour debate is that there should be prior discussions with the person whose debate it is as to whether they are prepared to take interventions. Of course, there is nothing to stop any Member intervening on the Minister’s speech.

Mr Carmichael: I am grateful for that timely reminder, Sir David—although it has driven from my mind the question that the hon. Gentleman asked. Perhaps I could write to him about it in the fullness of time. It was about driving down price, which is one of the important opportunities of a more diverse and flexible market structure than the one we have. The issues faced by my constituents are not dissimilar to those facing the hon. Gentleman’s constituents in the Isles of Scilly.

We want to hear a bit from the Minister today about something beyond the situation regarding wind generation. We would like to see a willingness from the Minister, his Department and the Government to engage with the renewables industry beyond the onshore, or even offshore, wind sector. The United Kingdom already has a pipeline of wave and tidal stream projects that could be some of the most significant and forward-leaning projects to be found anywhere in the world. The estimates we have seen are in the region of £76 billion-worth of development by 2050. It is a significant global market for which we are doing the initial heavy lifting at this point. I have seen in my constituency, and especially in Orkney over the years, how the industry has pulled itself up inch by inch, but in recent years it has been pushed backwards by a lack of dedicated support for wave and tidal projects. I hope that the Minister, in his time in the Department, will have some proper regard for that.

We need a proper ring-fenced pot for wave and tidal power. A pot of that sort could be transformative. It would not need to be particularly significant in size, but for it to be guaranteed would make a massive difference to those involved in the development of these technologies and would give a very positive signal to those who are looking at bringing their projects to this country to develop them and to put devices in the water at places such as the European Marine Energy Centre in Stromness. I know the Minister has not yet visited that centre, but I strongly encourage him to do so in the earliest possible course, because there he would see for himself the potential that is being thwarted by the inclusion of wave and tidal projects within the pot for emerging or less established technologies, where they are competing with offshore wind.

To give an illustration of what is involved here, the offshore wind sector currently has 5,100 MW of installed capacity, with a further 4,500 MW under construction. The marine renewables industry, by comparison, has 10 MW of installed capacity. In that context, it is pretty straightforward and easy to see which is the genuinely less established technology that requires the support found in the title of the pot.

To bring down the costs is not rocket science. We have been here before and seen it with other low-carbon industries. We have to get the devices into the water. We see what happens to them there, learn the lessons, innovate, improve and repeat. That work is still being done by those who demonstrate a commitment to marine renewables.

We have a burgeoning supply chain. We have investment from local councils in Orkney, which I would be happy to show the Minister. As I indicated to him this morning, we have a sector that is desperate to re-engage with him
and his Department. I hope that in the time he has in this position—which I hope is both long and productive—he will engage with the sector, because the opportunities that it brings to the future development and the industrial strategy to which the Government still lay claim are significant indeed.

4.16 pm  

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington):  
Sir David, it is as ever a great pleasure to serve under your constituency—under your chairmanship; I am sure your constituents feel the same about your activities on constituency days. In my first Westminster Hall debate, you were a mere Mr Amess. I am delighted you are here.  

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael)—I remember when he was my right hon. Friend—is a gentleman in the true sense. The way he has conducted the debate, on a subject in which he has a lot of interest and expertise, and the way he speaks up for renewable energy generation in island communities, is truly commendable. As he is fully aware, he has me at a little disadvantage, as I have been in the job for precisely three weeks. I am not yet the expert he is, but I would like to make it clear to him and other Members that I have listened carefully to every word and intend to set out the Government’s position in what I hope he will accept is the right way at this stage.  

We know that the islands have long been a hotbed for innovations in renewable energy generation. The Burghill wind turbine site in Orkney, for example, hosted some of the most innovative experimental turbines in the ’80s and early ’90s. As has been said, the European Marine Energy Centre, which is also located on Orkney in the right hon. Gentleman’s constituency, has since its creation more than 10 years ago maintained its position as the world’s leading wave and tidal stream testing facility. The fact that it has hosted the prototypes for almost all the world’s leading devices, including the Atlantis turbines deployed in the Pentland Firth last summer, is a testament to its premier global status.  

I also understand that the grid infrastructure necessary to support the proposed wind farms on the remote islands of Scotland could, if built, act as a springboard for further development of our wave and tidal sector and give this emerging industry a further boost towards commercialisation, helping to maintain the UK’s leading position in these technologies. The challenge for the wave and tidal sector will be to innovate and to reduce its costs sufficiently that it can compete with other renewable technologies. Those costs have fallen significantly during the past few years, and we fully expect that downward trajectory to continue. This is now a very competitive market, and developers will need to respond to that challenge: the sector can no longer take high subsidies for granted.  

As the right hon. Gentleman is aware, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy visited the Western Isles this year to learn about this issue at first hand. The hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) kindly hosted the Secretary of State’s visit, and I shall take this opportunity to thank him again for what my right hon. Friend described as a productive and informative trip. I know that it will not help or please the right hon. Gentleman unless some action is taken, as he has pointed out to me.  

The issues are clear, and we know what the gains are. I shall go through the issues in no particular order. The first is ensuring healthy competition to support the best projects and get the best value for the consumer, while recognising that it may take a certain volume of projects to justify building the all-important new island-to-mainland links. I am aware that those are a vital piece of the overall picture, with their own timeframes and set of complex decisions, so there are really two areas of decision.  

The second issue, as the Secretary of State made clear, is ensuring that local communities, which have been enthusiastic about this industry, receive appropriate benefits for hosting these projects.  

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): Excuse me, Sir David, if I do not quite get some of the etiquette right.  

I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for what he has said about the importance of the popularity of tidal and other energy-efficient projects. It is right to say that islanders can play an important role, but does he agree that energy policies should take into account other policies such as regard for the landscape? Wind turbines were very unpopular with many of my constituents, because of the damage that they did to the landscape in areas of outstanding natural beauty, but solar panels are more popular. Should wave and tidal power take off, there would be, again, an aesthetic element as well. It is wonderful to have these things, but that should not be at the expense of a tourism economy in a place such as the Isle of Wight.  

Richard Harrington: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. Time does not permit me to answer in full, but I would be happy to meet and discuss this subject with him on behalf of his constituents.  

Thirdly, we have to define what is meant by “island wind projects” in a legal context, and that is being done; we are working through the issues. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland is very aware of that matter.  

Last but not least, we need to give clarity to the developers of island projects while being fair to developers of other projects elsewhere and to consumers across the UK.  

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): This issue is also very dear to my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), who has been unavoidably delayed while travelling here today. He is very concerned, as I am. Given the promises made in the Tory manifesto and by Tory candidates at the general election, when will the Government act to introduce an island CfD? The lack of a CfD and the locational pricing model are severely hampering the industry on the islands, and this is a vital sector that we need to survive.  

Richard Harrington: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we are aware of that issue and we are fully on it. I am happy to meet him if he would like to discuss it
separately, but I have only five minutes left now and I do not want to break into the time for the key points that I need to raise.

There is a range of options for overcoming the issues that I have outlined, and I hope that by taking a pragmatic approach we can do so quickly. We need to understand the costs of the projects and the impacts on consumers’ bills. My officials have begun the process of updating the evidence base to set an appropriate strike price—the maximum that these projects could get paid for each unit of electricity that they produce. We must not forget that any additional costs that arise as a result of awarding support contracts are ultimately paid by households and businesses in their electricity bills.

Our approach to supporting new renewables, of competitive auctions with limits on the maximum price that we will allow, ensures that we support only the more cost-effective projects. That approach is not new but has been applied very successfully to other technologies, such as offshore wind. The industry is confident that the renewables support auction currently under way, whose outcome is expected in the coming months, should lead to a significant further drop in price. Whatever approach we take will need to work in this context of quite rapid price changes, and we want to see the outcome of our current auction before making decisions regarding the remote Scottish islands.

We have been through very clearly the importance of local support. Not everyone in the islands will support the development of the wind farms, but I am told that the majority of residents do. I understand that a poll of 1,000 Isle of Lewis adults commissioned by Lewis Wind Power found that seven in 10 supported having wind farms on their island. That is encouraging, but such support should not be taken for granted. It needs to be rewarded in the way that has been discussed—through community benefit funds and other systems. The Scottish Government have informed my officials that all the developers on the islands have committed to pay at least £5,000 per megawatt of capacity per year into such funds for the lifetime of a wind farm. That means that the Viking wind farm on Shetland, for example, could provide up to £1.85 million every year to the community. That money could be used for all sorts of projects: schools, local support groups, scout groups—the list is endless. Developers are also offering communities the opportunity to own a stake in projects, which is something that the UK and Scottish Governments are keen to see more of. Beyond direct income, we should also acknowledge the other benefits that these projects could bring. For example, jobs will be created not just during construction but throughout the lifetime of the projects.

Wind energy can play an important role for the country as a whole in producing the electricity we all need to support the running of our economy and our daily lives and in helping to reduce the harmful emissions associated with our energy systems. We all appreciate the commitment that island communities will have to make to ensure that we have access to long-term clean power. That is why it is absolutely right that they should benefit from hosting the projects.

We recognise that there are different ways of delivering the benefits, but of course it is important that any commitments that developers make are real and go beyond warm words. The Scottish Government are considering this issue closely, and I very much welcome the opportunity to discuss these issues further, and I would be happy to meet any other Members of this House.

Question put and agreed to.
Safety of Riders and Horses on Rural Roads

4.30 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the safety of riders and horses on rural roads.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David, and to open this important debate; a number of colleagues have been very active on this issue and would also like to have secured it. I will welcome interventions and speeches later. I congratulate the new Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), on his appointment and welcome him to his first Westminster Hall debate. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) on his role. Welcome.

First, I have two confessions to make. I am not a horse rider; I have been on a horse twice in my life. The second occasion was because my wife is a horse rider: when we were courting, I was not really getting the opportunity to spend as much time with her as I intended, so I went horse riding with her. There was only the one attempt, and I eventually won the argument and we married. The earlier occasion was when I was younger, and I cannot really recall that experience.

My second confession is perhaps more serious. I am one of the Members in this place who has had to take a speed awareness course—I was caught speeding in Bristol some years ago. During that course, I was made aware of what damage a moving vehicle can do to vulnerable road users: children, motorcyclists, cyclists, and horses and riders. I welcomed that opportunity and wake-up call about why it is so important to keep to the speeds that are set out for us. So when a constituent, Debbie Smith—she is here this afternoon; welcome, Debbie—came to me wanting to raise the issue of the safety of horses and riders in west Cornwall, I had an open door and was ready to listen and do everything I could to support her campaign and the campaign of many of her friends who ride horses.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Does he agree that one of the problems is that most drivers are unaware that they should not pass horses any faster than 15 miles per hour? They are often just guided by the speed limit, thinking that it is okay. Would he commend the work of the British Horse Society, which has advocated raising greater awareness of the speed at which one should pass a horse?

Derek Thomas: Thank you, Dame Caroline. I thank my right hon. Friend for bringing this debate forward. As somebody who has ridden all my life, I understand the problems that we have with roads and horses and riders. When I first met Debbie in November 2015 and required little persuasion to join her cause to make our roads safer for horses and their riders, our initial encounter led to a meeting in February 2016 with the former roads Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), and civil servants from the Department for Transport. We discussed the need for a concerted effort by the Department to make our roads safer. Since then there has been a horse-riding awareness day—earlier this year, in which 15 different locations in the UK took part—and 110,000 signatures on the petition, as I said.

Horse riders make up a significant group of vulnerable road users, but despite there being 2.7 million across the UK, they often find themselves as the forgotten demographic—an afterthought in the minds of drivers and unacceptably low down many politicians’ priority lists. It is for this reason that the British Horse Society launched the horse accidents website in November 2010. Since that launch, 2,510 reports of road incidents involving horses, including near misses and collisions, have been logged by the BHS. That is but the tip of the iceberg. Most significantly, since the launch 222 horses and 38 riders have been killed. This problem is not in decline. In the past year there has been a 29% increase in the number of road incidents involving a horse reported to the British Horse Society.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very sound case. In fact, it is shocking. I am very nervous of horses, so I go incredibly slowly whenever I am near them because I am afraid of the damage that they might do to me, but does he agree that on the whole many people who drive cars just think of a horse as a horse and forget that they are individuals and that one has to be even more careful if it is a young and nervous horse? The 15 mph and distance from the horse are crucial.

Derek Thomas: Thank you, Rebecca. I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I live in west Cornwall, where most of the roads are very narrow and horses and riders enjoy their valuable and important pursuit. It is absolutely right that we raise awareness and help drivers to understand that horses are living beings—they have brains. Something that they see, but we in the car behind perhaps cannot, may well cause them to get spooked. We need to make drivers aware of the risk not only to the horse and the rider, but to them and their vehicle. That might gain their attention. Statistics such as those should cause alarm.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Derek Thomas: Certainly, although I would like to make some progress this afternoon.

Chris Davies: Thank you, my hon. Friend. Friend for bringing this important topic forward for debate today. As somebody who has ridden all my life, I understand the problems that we have with road safety and horses. My wife—just like his wife and the Minister’s wife—rides, so this is a very important matter. My hon. Friend mentioned the British Horse Society, so will he join me in congratulating wide and slow, calling for stronger legal protections for riders on our roads, has reached almost 110,000—maybe now it is 110,000—signatures on the change.org site. I first met Debbie in November 2015 and required little persuasion to join her cause to make our roads safer for horses and their riders. Our initial encounter led to a meeting in February 2016 with the former roads Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), and civil servants from the Department for Transport. We discussed the need for a concerted effort by the Department to make our roads safer. Since then there has been a horse-riding awareness day—earlier this year, in which 15 different locations in the UK took part—and 110,000 signatures on the petition, as I said.

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Chris Davies: Thank you, my hon. Friend. Friend for bringing this important topic forward for debate today. As somebody who has ridden all my life, I understand the problems that we have with road safety and horses. My wife—just like his wife and the Minister’s wife—rides, so this is a very important matter. My hon. Friend mentioned the British Horse Society, so will he join me in congratulating
it on the “Dead? Or Dead Slow?” campaign? It won the Driver Education Campaign of the Year, awarded by the Driving Instructors Association, in 2016.

Derek Thomas: Certainly. I am glad to do that and work with whoever across this House and the various organisations to raise awareness about the dangers on our roads. My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I thank him very much.

Yesterday, this debate was subject to a House of Commons digital debate: the first of this Parliament—and, I am told, without question the busiest of this Parliament, although there has been only one. The debate reached a total of 119,288 Facebook accounts, with almost 1,500 contributors. Obviously, I did not respond to every single one. Among the many excellent suggestions and sincere concerns expressed, the contributors articulated a strong belief among the horse riding and horse driving community that their safety has become a low priority.

The sentiment that all too often tragedy is not followed by justice is underpinned by high profile cases such as that of Mark Evans and his horse Wil. Mr Evans was a funeral director who also ran a horse-drawn carriage service. Years spent building up his business were undone in 2016 when a car ploughed into a funeral procession, leaving one horse dead and the family of the deceased devastated. The incident has left Mr Evans physically and mentally unable to work and in a position where he may have to give up his home due to loss of income. That is just one example of how lives are affected and why this debate is so important.

Cases such as these, repeated up and down the country, are far from inevitable. In fact, 80% of recorded incidents were caused by vehicles passing too close or too fast for a horse. We are debating an issue that is eminently preventable.

Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for allowing an intervention. Has he made any assessment of the type of accidents that occur—between those that may be a result of ignorance or neglect and those that are a result of people who, for some reason, take leave of their senses when in the vicinity of horses and become almost temporary class warriors, getting annoyed and driving close to horses? Is there any assessment or statistic that he can bring to our attention?

Derek Thomas: I will not cite any statistics, but in the debate yesterday many people raised that very point. There is a perception that people on horses are not necessarily welcome on the road. My personal belief is that nearly everyone is a taxpayer, so we all contribute in some way to the maintenance of our roads; everybody has a right to outdoor activity, however they choose to do it. It is important that we break down any attitude or prejudice, to drivers, save those made in moments of intense frustration, are rarely understood and seldom acknowledged. CCTV from hat cameras is not routinely followed up by police, which makes it difficult for riders to hold other road users to account. Increased usage of electric cars poses a new threat to riders that must now be considered; silent vehicles have already been the cause of several near misses.

Finally, the speed limit on many rural roads is too high. Many of the country lanes in my constituency are little more than adopted unmarked tracks, but they retain a speed limit of 60 mph—just 10 mph less than a motorway. The vulnerability of riders and the increase in road incidents involving horses on rural single-lane carriageways are symptomatic of a wider problem.

The Department for Transport has stated that around two thirds of UK road deaths take place on country roads. It issued guidance in 2013 that stated that local authorities should take the presence of vulnerable road users—including people walking, cycling or riding horses—fully into account, along with the concerns of local residents, when setting local speed limits. Despite this, inadequate consideration is being given to using the lower limit on high-risk rural roads. In effect, this has created legal havens for reckless driving. One participant in the digital debate yesterday told me how a driver rounded a bend at 45 mph on a very narrow road, striking and killing her horse, but police were unwilling to prosecute because the speed limit was 60 mph.

Campaigners have repeatedly stressed their sense of frustration that drivers who fail to exercise due care when encountering riders on the road, and in some cases exhibit a total disregard for the safety of both horse and rider, are rarely reprimanded by the police. I recently spoke to a solicitor who specialises in seeking compensation for clients injured in accidents that involve horses. She expressed surprise that many of the cases that she undertakes in civil court are not pursued as criminal cases, despite the submission of strong evidence—including headcam footage—of possible criminal behaviour. We need to consider how we can help police to make use of existing powers to pursue drivers who do not act with due care and attention when in the vicinity of riders.

I shall draw to a close with three recommendations for the Minister. I propose that we continue the discussions we had a year ago with the then roads Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough, to develop a national “THINK! horse” campaign. Although
many of the incidents that I have talked about today were not malicious, that does not make their consequences any less devastating. Some 80% of these accidents are avoidable because drivers are travelling too fast or too close to horses. I ask the Department for Transport to think carefully about expanding its existing work and running a sustained marketing campaign to promote safety measures for riders and horses on rural roads. It could borrow from the successful model employed by the “THINK! bike” campaign.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a really passionate and constructive speech and is reaching his peroration. Does he agree that this issue does not affect exclusively rural roads? Constituents of mine in semi-rural parts of Cheltenham such as Charlton Kings have written to me; they are equally affected and should not be forgotten either.

Derek Thomas: I thank my hon. Friend for that good intervention. I am sure he will have the opportunity to raise the matter with the Department. My concern particularly relates to rural roads, because narrow unmarked roads present a particular hazard to horse riders, but I take his point; I hope the Minister has heard it and will respond.

I ask the Department for Transport to borrow from the successful model employed by the “THINK! bike” campaign and focus on inspiring empathy between road users, as well as raising awareness of steps that both parties can take to avoid collisions. A greater emphasis on good driving practice around horses might be considered for driving lessons and tests. The Government might also think about possible measures to strengthen the rights of riders to control their immediate environment through the use of hand signals.

My second recommendation is that we empower the police to ensure that they can make use of their powers to pursue drivers who do not act with due care and attention in the vicinity of riders. We must establish common national police practice for recording and dealing with road incidents that involve horses. We should also increase the use of section 59 of the Police Reform Act 2002 to act as a viable deterrent.

Although some incidents may not meet the threshold for prosecution, that does not mean that there are not serious concerns about the standard of driving that is often shown in headcam CCTV footage. Officers should automatically consider the use of section 59, which enables them to warn a motorist that any repetition of similar driving within 12 months may result in the seizure of their vehicle and in recovery charges. The Government might also consider encouraging a standard online system to enable incidents and video recordings to be submitted for retention, action and feedback. Some police forces, including Greater Manchester and North Yorkshire, have already implemented such systems; I know that they are willing to share good practice with other forces.

Finally, we need to reduce speed limits. The Government must consider what action is needed to reduce the speed on rural single-lane carriageways. Guidance is issued by the Department for Transport but is under-utilised by local authorities; rural roads are consequently exploited as rat runs. Will the Government consider whether a 40 mph speed limit is more suitable for high-risk rural roads, particularly those that are unmarked? I urge the Minister to consider stronger measures to protect our most vulnerable road users, not least those in the riding community.

Sir David Amess (in the Chair): Wind-ups will start at 5.15 pm. There will be no contribution from the Scottish National party group on this occasion, so it will be for the Government and the Opposition to split the time between them. Mr Speaker has said firmly that interventions and speeches can be made only by Members who have been present from the start of the debate.

4.49 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak on this matter. I congratulate the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on setting the scene so well for us. I regularly deal with this issue in my constituency, where a lot of people are interested in horses. There is nothing like the grace and poise of a horse, and many people in my constituency enjoy riding. To be truthful, I am not someone who knows much about horses, but I do have a particular interest in horse-and-carriage and driving competitions. I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing this issue forward.

I hail from a constituency that is a combination of rural and urban areas, which is why I often boast—quite rightly so, if I may say so myself—about having it all in Strangford. The constituency is not just beautiful; it has all these other things as well. Just a few miles from my home is the picturesque village of Carrowdore, in which it is not uncommon to see horses and traps and carriages trotting down the main street. We see them all the time. People who live in the area know to slow down, as the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) said, and go at a certain speed. They learn to live with the horses on the road. They are used to having cars in front or behind and have learned to take their time.

More importantly, cars stay back and drive slowly by, giving them a wide berth, so there is a way when people have an understanding of the area they live in.

I want to turn to why this issue is compounded in my area. On occasion, I have had the opportunity of judging the concours d’elegance class—picking a horse and carriage that I like; one that is pleasing to the eye—at the game fair and other events in Ballynahinch, Carrowdore and elsewhere. I believe those events add character to a village and give so much enjoyment to so many people. However, all it takes is one uninformed or inconsiderate person to turn what is a delightful sight into a horror scene, and unfortunately that is the reason for this debate, as the hon. Member for St Ives has outlined.

Those who hail from the countryside know how to drive around horses. They know to take their time, they know to drop their speed to 15 mph and they know to drive very slowly. However, we are increasingly seeing new build houses, bringing what are affectionately known as “blow-ins” into the area. For those who do not know what a blow-in is, it is someone who does not have a third-generation grandparent buried in the local cemetery. I am 58 and I am looked upon as a blow-in in my constituency, which might give hon. Members a perspective on blow-ins.

It is good to see more people moving into the area—let us be honest—and breathing life into the local economy, filling the schools and enjoying the peace of living in the
countryside, but this is about knowing how to live effectively alongside horses, or horses and carriages, on the road. With that influx has come people who perhaps do not fully appreciate how easy it is to upset the delicate balance of an area. That is in no way to be interpreted as placing blame on city folk. That is not what this is about—I am lucky that I am a country boy; I have lived in the country all my life, so this comes to me first hand. I am only highlighting the fact that everyone needs to be aware of the dangers of passing horses and riders.

The British Horse Society has found that in the last five years, since the launch of its horse accidents website, about 2,000 road incidents involving horses have been reported to the charity. I presume that they were all reported to the police as well—if they were not, they should have been. Of those incidents, 36 caused rider deaths and 181 resulted in a horse dying from their injuries or being put to sleep—the hon. Gentleman referred to that at the beginning of his contribution. Some 75% of accidents happened because a vehicle passed a horse without allowing enough space. It is just about understanding life in the countryside and how to pass safely; it does not take a great capacity to do so. More than a quarter of respondents said that they had also had to deal with driver road rage during the incident, which further compounds the issue and adds to the frustration of the horse owner and those of us who perhaps have a better understanding of the countryside and how overtaking should be done.

The majority of these incidents happened on a minor road, in a rural area. The incidents that I am aware of happened in the countryside: nearly half the horses involved—

Sir David Amess (in the Chair): Order. I was rather hoping that hon. Members would be generous to each other and take about five minutes each, in order to get everyone in.

Jim Shannon: I will be very mindful of that. I am sorry, Sir David. I should have realised that.

It should be noted that only 10 such accidents were reported in Northern Ireland, but anyone who has loved a horse will know that that is 10 too many. I believe that more information must be available UK-wide to help to prevent such accidents.

To conclude, we need signage on the road that adequately describes what should happen. There is undoubtedly room for all on rural roads—indeed, there is a need for all—but we must share the roads, and be wise and sensible in our approach. This information needs to get through to those who perhaps do not understand it yet. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response.

4.55 pm

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I would like to put on the record my thanks to the good people of South East Cornwall, who have ensured that I could do that and speak here today.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on securing this debate. I am grateful for the opportunity to make a brief contribution. I want to thank my constituent Audrey Cole, a retired police officer and a highly experienced equestrian who was sadly injured while riding last week, although not in a road traffic accident collision.

Horses and their riders are an integral part of rural life. I spend many days going round my constituency, hearing the familiar sound of the clip-clop, clip-clop of horses’ hooves on the roads and seeing riders on the byways of the countryside in my constituency. We are all aware that our roads are increasingly busy and congested, and rural areas are no different. In addition, constituencies such as mine have problems that can be exacerbated by the otherwise very welcome influx of holidaymakers. Some of them are inexperienced in rural road conditions, and that inexperience, when combined with local agricultural traffic and the fact that not all local people drive in a responsible way, can present real challenges to horses and their riders.

More awareness and education are definitely needed, as other Members have said, and perhaps the driving test should be refined to ensure greater emphasis on rural road conditions and on horse rider and driver activity. Also, I understand from the British Horse Society that there is currently no safety requirement for any equestrian-related road accident to be recorded unless there is human injury that requires hospital treatment directly from the scene of the accident. I would be grateful if the Minister could consider these issues when he responds to the debate.

However, improving the safety of rural roads is not just about improving driving and encouraging responsible behaviour by those on four wheels, two wheels or two legs. Many responsible horse owners do the sensible thing of providing early road training for their horses at home before ever venturing out with them on to public roads, learning to pass a stationary vehicle, bicycle or dog walker. Another great help for any horse doing road hacking is to go out for the first few times in the company of a more experienced animal that is used to the sights and sounds of public roads. For many riders, this is a matter of good common sense and good practice.

I know that every rider is encouraged through their respective sporting organisation to respect an unwritten code of conduct as far as courtesy to other road users is concerned. Sadly, it has been reported to me that the actions of a small minority of riders do not reflect those good standards of behaviour. I understand that there is a rider road safety test that the Pony Club and other riding clubs have offered in the past, but it is not compulsory. Perhaps we could consider introducing suitable incentives to encourage people to take up such courses. For example, horse insurers could be encouraged to offer a discounted rate to those who hold such a safety certificate.

Finally, I encourage the Minister to work closely with all stakeholders, including road user groups and the British Horse Society, to enhance safety for riders, horses, drivers and pedestrians. There is much good practice that can be built on to improve driver and education, and to ensure more efficient road preparation training for horses, including greater use of common sense and courtesy by people in the first instance.

4.59 pm

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): Sir David, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.
I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) and thank him for securing and introducing this very important debate. Horses are very important to me: horses brought my wife and me together, many years ago, and I have ridden many, many times. I therefore know that horses, as well as being very big and powerful, are very nervous and volatile, and consequently very unpredictable. That is a big part of this debate.

I also have an interest in the debate as I used to be the chairman of the all-party group for the horse and currently serve as the joint chairman of the all-party racing and bloodstock industries group, and I draw the House’s attention to my entry in that respect in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. It is very important that we understand that there are very many horses in this country.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) that this is not just a rural issue. There are many horses in London, for example, as well as in Cheltenham. I am very fortunate that the Cheltenham racecourse falls within my constituency, not his—nevertheless, he is very supportive indeed. My point is that there are very many horses around our towns and cities and, in particular, around our country roads.

I want to pick up on one point made by my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives: speed on rural roads. I myself have been involved in a car accident because someone was driving down a narrow country lane so fast they could not stop—I had stopped and they ran into me. If it had been a horse in that position, there could have been a serious accident. Only some four weeks ago, during the general election campaign, I was called away from campaigning to another similar accident down a very narrow lane, where someone was again going so fast they could not stop. I do not know whether the car they hit was a write-off, but it certainly looked that way. I do not know what the speed limit for that country lane technically was, but, as has been suggested, surely the important thing is that people drive according to the road conditions rather than any arbitrary speed limit. I urge the Minister to consider that serious issue and to review the situation.

Rebecca Pow: I know we are tight for time, but my hon. Friend has really sparked my attention. I, too, suffered an accident, in a rural lane in Taunton Deane. The driver had just passed his test and was going at least 65 miles an hour. I had stopped, because I had seen the lights, and he crashed into me. I could have died; a horse would have had no chance. I wonder what my hon. Friend thinks about the earlier suggestion of a 40-mpg speed limit for some of these rural roads, not just because of the horses but for the safety of other drivers.

Mr Robertson: I am grateful for that intervention. Even 40 miles an hour on the wrong kind of road could be too quick. This goes back to what my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) said about education being very important, in connection with horses but also with driving safely according to the road conditions. It is often not possible to go faster than 10 or 15 miles an hour on a very narrow country lane to remain safe, so education is crucial.

My final point is that in order perhaps to take horses off roads that might be dangerous we could do with reviewing the rules on bridleways. It might be that many existing footpaths could be made dual use, and function as bridleways as well. That would help to ease the problem.

Dame Caroline Spelman: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, as I know time is tight. Precisely on bridleways, close to urban settings there is a terrible dearth of them and they do not connect up. I think it is the fact that they are seen as multi-purpose—for pedestrians, cyclists and even motorised transport as well as horses—that leads to great reluctance on the part of landowners to extend any sort of bridlepath network. Might we appeal to the Minister to consider a new designation for off-road safe riding for equestrians?

Mr Robertson: I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend’s remarks. I will not take up any more of the House’s time except to stress that horses are part of our countryside and our country. We only have to look at the startling statistics that have been cited to realise that we really must do something about the issue.

5.4 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on securing this brilliant debate on what is an important issue for rural areas and also, now, for towns.

One reason why I wanted to speak in the debate was to have the opportunity to thank my constituent Christine Brindle, who invited me to her stables in Hadleigh in July 2016 to meet her and her fellow campaigners. She is part of the “Pass Wide and Slow” campaign group. I was brought up in London but moved to South Suffolk in 2011 and am a keen cyclist. What I have observed is that the key word is simply “respect”. Someone living in the countryside comes to respect equestrian road users and know that they should slow down and pass wide and slow. The question is: what happens when someone—either from the community or from outside—does not show that respect and drives aggressively or carelessly? What measures can we take to make a difference?

Several measures have been suggested, including with regard to speeding. A particular concern is about anticipation, because my constituency, like many others, has bendy rural roads, and drivers have to anticipate more what is ahead of them. If they come sharply round a bend and there is someone there with a horse, they have to react far more quickly. This is about sensible driving, but speeding is also an issue. I would be interested to hear from the Minister whether there are any ways in which we can affect the law. I know this is not optimal timing for changes to legislation, but it would be good to know if we could make any changes, which I think would have support, to enforce the idea that drivers should be considerate in the presence of vulnerable users, including horses. However, I think this is a public messaging issue in particular. We all know about the very good “THINK! bike” campaign, which has promoted the idea of taking motorcyclists into account and checking for them in our side mirror; we should have a similar campaign—it has been referred to as “THINK! horse”—for equestrian road users.
I want also to mention driverless vehicles. We have had driverless horses for many centuries, but driverless cars will bring their own issues. Members might be aware that Volvo has an issue with kangaroos. The company has recently reported that its driverless cars, initially tested to detect and avoid moose in Sweden, have struggled with marsupials. I am no expert, but I think it is because they bounce rather than approach steadily. This is a serious point, because we want to lead the world in the industrial field of driverless automotive: I hope that in developing large-animal detection systems in driverless cars companies will be cognisant of all road users.

My final point is that this is a predominantly rural issue. I have a predominantly rural constituency. We live in an age when people in the countryside sometimes feel ignored, and on this issue we could show that we have a transport policy for the whole country that takes into account and is fair to all users, in particular those on horseback and those riding with horses.

5.7 pm

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I very much thank my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) for securing the debate and look forward to working with him on many issues that affect his islands and the Isle of Wight. I was fascinated to hear my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) talking about kangaroos. I think it will be some time yet before we start riding them but that will be an issue when we come to it.

On the Isle of Wight, we have the highest percentage of horses per acre in Britain and our riding stables are an important part of island life and of our economy. I share the concerns about the dangers of riders and cars colliding on busy roads. On the Isle of Wight, we have been fortunate enough to have a new contract to resurface all our roads so we will soon have some of the best roads in England, if not Europe. However, riders have expressed concerns that the new road surfaces will, at least for the first few months, be slippery and not all horses can have studs fitted, so I look forward to talking to Island Roads about what more we can do. Although I am generally impressed by the consideration that islanders in my part of the world have for riders when they pass them, there are complaints from a small minority of drivers that horses should not be on busy roads. However, riders clearly do not want to share roads; they do so only when there is no other choice.

So what do we do? In my part of the world I will raise with our council the issue of what can be done to improve the conditions of some bridleways, to encourage their use by not only riders but cyclists, who are also vulnerable users. I think there could be a role for the ferries in reminding people coming to the island that we have a lot of very small lanes, like west Cornwall, and to remind people of distances and to be considerate of more vulnerable road users.

More generally, I wonder whether more could be done to encourage minimum distances. We have heard about the excellent campaign from the British Horse Society, and others, but can minimum distances be stipulated, apart from in emergencies? Can they be in the driving test? Can it be brought home to people in towns and villages that there needs to be a minimum distance between cars and horses, cars and cyclists and cars and motorbikes? I say that partly out of self-interest: while a car is very dangerous to a horse, a horse is reasonably dangerous to a car if it kicks or spoons.

Thoughtfulness and consideration should be our bywords.

I share the concerns about single-lane roads. I live one and a half miles down a single-track lane. On my patch, someone going round a corner at more than 15 mph will have a problem if something is coming at more than 20 mph from the other direction. I share that lane with lots of horses, because it is a popular route for them and lots of other lovely members of the animal kingdom. I wonder whether the answer is to have what have become known as quiet roads, where drivers do not have priority, but pedestrians and cyclists and riders do. We have one or two quiet roads on the island. There is a cost to them, but they could be in part an answer to national speed limits, which make driving very fast on single-track roads legal, but extremely foolish.

To sum up, my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives mentioned his national campaign ideas, with which I fully agree, but I stress that more might be done with the driving test to reinforce minimum safe distances.

5.12 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to make my first contribution as a shadow Transport Minister under your chairmanship, Sir David. I thank the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) for securing this debate today, which has focused on the significant issue of safety for vulnerable road users, whether they have two legs or four legs, or are on a bicycle or perhaps even a unicycle. It is important that all road users feel safe and are not put at undue risk.

The subject of today’s debate is horses and their riders, and it is vital that that matter receive attention in this place, because there have been more than 2,500 incidents involving horses over the past seven years, of which 222 resulted in the death of the horse and 38 resulted in the death of the rider. In the past year alone, almost 40% of riders were subject to road rage or abuse, with 81% of incidents occurring because the driver did not allow enough room between their vehicle and the horse. One out of every five such incidents resulted in the vehicle colliding with the horse. Clearly the Government need to address that pressing issue.

The British Horse Society reports that since its “Dead? Or Dead Slow?” campaign launched in 2016, reports of road incidents have creased by 29%. That proves that safety campaigns on their own are not enough. The Government must do more to protect riders and their horses. In a Westminster Hall debate in the last Parliament on road traffic accident prevention, the Minister at the time, the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), stated that he did “recognise the problem” for horse riders, yet no concrete policy has materialised. While I do not doubt the Government’s sincerity on road safety, their record has been a disappointment in recent years. They failed on their 2015 manifesto commitment to reduce casualties year on year, and their manifesto in the recent general election only mentioned road safety in passing.

Alex Chalk: Does the hon. Lady share my disappointment that more Opposition Members have not come here to take an interest in this important issue?
Cat Smith: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that I have a keen interest in this issue as an Opposition Member who has a constituency that includes a lot of rural areas. Indeed, my constituent Susan Armitage has raised the issue with me on a great number of occasions. It obviously affects the whole country, although the demographics of constituencies represented by Opposition Members might be considered to be more urban than rural.

By contrast with the Government’s manifesto, ours stated very clearly:

“Labour will reset the UK’s road safety vision and ambitiously strive for a transport network with zero deaths, reintroducing road-safety targets”.

We implore the Minister to follow our lead and reintroduce the targets that were brought in under the last Labour Government. I have no doubt that those targets successfully reduced the number of those killed or seriously injured by about a third. During a Westminster Hall debate on road traffic law enforcement in the previous Parliament, the Minister at the time, the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough, stated that while other countries might wish to have road safety targets, his belief was that we did not need them. However, road safety targets focus minds and attention, and the Opposition simply do not see the reason or logic behind the Government’s persistent refusal to bring them back. When we support international targets at the United Nations and European level, why do we still reject them for our own country?

The Government have also overlooked the significance of road safety figures with their failure to release the 2016 national road safety statistics on time. The release has been pushed back to the end of September this year. As a consequence of the delay, casualty figures for the first quarter of 2017, previously scheduled for release in August 2017, will now not be published. The next quarterly update is expected in October, covering the period from January to June 2017.

If the Minister is determined to disregard road safety targets and figures, perhaps he can provide us with some assurances that the Government are progressing with other policy ideas. He may be aware of the petition mentioned earlier that has gathered more than 100,000 signatures on Change.org. It calls for a law to be introduced that would require road users to pass a horse with at least two metres’ distance and to slow to a maximum speed of 15 mph, as well as ensuring that all road users abide by horse riders’ hand signals. Have the Government considered any of those proposals? If not, what other policies can the Minister lay out today to safeguard riders and horses on rural roads?

We must see some action from the Government on road and horse safety and the safety of road users in general. Opposition Members are determined to keep pressure on the Government until we see a return to the progress made under the last Labour Administration. It must be stressed again: inaction risks lives. The Labour party wants to reduce risk on our transport network to zero. The Government should be prepared to show the same ambition and act accordingly.

Sir David Amess (in the Chair): Before the Minister responds, I want to ask that a little bit of time be left at the end for Mr Thomas to wind up the debate.

5.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): Thank you, Sir David. It is a delight to serve under your chairmanship. If I may, I will start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on securing this very important debate on the safety of riders and horses on rural roads, a debate that has been dignified by some terrific contributions, albeit generally from one side of the House.

It is an honour to respond in my first Westminster Hall debate as the Minister with responsibility for roads and road safety. I do so as a rural MP who is extremely familiar with the issues from first-hand and constituency experience. I would also like to congratulate my hon. Friend on the e-debate, or online debate, that he has so successfully promoted. It has obviously proved to be an interesting and useful way to develop ideas, to share understanding and to promote awareness of these issues. I could not end the opening section of my remarks without congratulating the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) on taking her position on the Opposition Front Bench. It is testimony to her colleagues’ belief in her skills and abilities that none of them has seen fit or found it necessary to attend the debate themselves.

As my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives said, this is a very important issue, but that is not merely because horses and equestrianism have an important role in local communities across the whole of the United Kingdom; nor is it because of the huge benefits of health and leisure and the sheer joy that come from riding. If I may, I will quote a somewhat unusual source in this area, Ronald Reagan, who once said that no problem does not look better from the saddle of a horse. I think that many people in the Chamber would share that view.

This debate is important because of the impact of accidents and fatalities in horse-related incidents on human lives. We need all road users to feel, and to be, safe on our roads. This country has a very strong safety record overall on roads—indeed, our roads are among the safest in the world—but we must not and will not be complacent in any sense.

It is important to flag up that there were 1,730 reported road deaths in 2015, which is the most recent year for which data are available. While this represents a 45% reduction compared with a decade ago, it still represents many wasted lives and shattered families.

A question has been raised by implication in this debate about numbers and statistics. I want to put that front and centre of the discussion, before I go on to talk about some of the ways in which we are trying to improve the situation. According to police statistics, there were no recorded incidents of horse rider fatalities during 2015. There were, however, 17 serious casualties and 77 slight casualties. Those numbers had fallen by something like a third over the previous 15 years. I recognise that these numbers do not by any means tally with the numbers reported to the British Horse Society or, indeed, the numbers quoted by colleagues here today. I start by saying that I absolutely welcome the potential for co-operation between the BHS and our own statisticians in the Department for Transport. I offer them for the purposes of establishing a set of accepted, worthwhile statistics from which we can all calibrate and understand the problem.
However, one thinks of the number, it represents only a fraction of total casualties on our roads, but each one of these is enormously distressing to those involved. The Government remain very keen to support the safety and wellbeing of our roads and horses alike.

I am aware of requests, and we have discussed them today, that the Government prescribe speed limits and minimum distances when drivers are passing horses. There are different concerns here. One is that it would be difficult to enforce and impractical in some circumstances, where roads are very narrow. Road speed limits are in many cases local matters and are locally configured. Judging from Herefordshire, frankly, there is a serious issue, which is the extraordinary slowness with which local authorities bring in changes to speed limits. That is something that my Department can properly look at, either directly or indirectly. The clips are refreshed and updated periodically, and the move to computer-generated imagery may mean that we are able to incorporate situations that would otherwise be too difficult to film.

In relation to the driving test, the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency has recently concluded a two-year trial, which aims to make the practical driving test much more reflective of a real-life driving journey, and a revised test will be in place from December. Changes include increasing the duration of the independent driving section from 10 to 20 minutes, and following directions from a satnav instead of an examiner. One of the aims of the changes, which I am sure colleagues will welcome, is to open up test routes and make sure that candidates can be assessed effectively in more natural or higher-risk situations, including driving on national speed limit roads.

Rules for all road users are set out in The Highway Code. As well as advice specific to horse riders, there are rules and advice for other road users when passing horse riders and horse-drawn vehicles.

Wider efforts are also in place to improve road safety. Many things combine to create safe and responsible road users, as has been noted, young and novice drivers are at the highest risk of being involved in a road collision. That is why the Department has recently invested £2 million in the design phase of a research programme to identify the best technological and behavioural interventions for learner and novice drivers, and has awarded funding via the Innovation Challenge Fund to develop new hazard perception training.

I could dwell on changes that have been made to increase penalties for mobile phone use and many other initiatives, but let me just say in closing that I think the debate has been dignified by a large number of important and interesting changes. One I would like to touch on is the importance of effective policing. This can be done at several levels, and I would encourage all colleagues to raise the issue with their police and crime commissioners locally. I am delighted that the national roads lead for policing is Anthony Bangham, chief constable of West Mercia, my own police authority, and also a very near neighbour of mine in Herefordshire. I assure the House that I will be raising the issues personally with him.
I close by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives on securing this debate and by reassuring him of the Department’s commitment to improving road safety for all users, including our most vulnerable.

5.28 pm

Derek Thomas: I thank the Minister for his response. We know our communities are working together. That includes groups such as the Pass Wide and Slow campaign and the British Horse Society, but also cycling and motorcycling groups. They are bring forward sensible recommendations and ideas, and I look forward to seeing how the Government can increase their participation and do the right thing for vulnerable road users, including horses and their riders.

I note that the shadow Minister attempted to make this a party political issue. Having spoken to the Minister, I know that he wants to work with everyone who cares about the issue to do the right thing for rural roads. I thank all Members who have participated and contributed, because together we can bring about a safer environment for all who use our rural roads.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the safety of riders and horses on rural roads.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Wednesday 5 July 2017

[MRS CHERYL GILLAN in the Chair]

Road Infrastructure

9.30 am

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered road infrastructure.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. I am conscious that many right hon. and hon. Members are in the room; I shall try to give way as much as I can and leave time for other Members to make speeches.

It is somewhat fortuitous that this debate is taking place today. According to the front page of The Times—I am sure it can, as ever, be believed—today is the day when the transport investment strategy for the next decade is to be announced, which will include a £1 billion per year fund to allow local authorities to bid for bypass projects. Can I be the first hon. Member in this House to make an oral application to the Roads Minister—for bypasses for Little Common, off the A259, and for Hurst Green, off the A21? I am sure I will not be the last applicant today.

Both those roads are busy, single-lane A roads that cause congestion and danger through two villages in East Sussex. They have the misfortune to be managed by Highways England. If the Roads Minister came and visited both roads—he would be absolutely welcome—he might be surprised that they are part of the Highways England portfolio. The reason is that they are deemed to be trunk roads, off the A27 and M25 respectively. The villages badly need to be bypassed, but Highways England naturally focuses its resources on the motorway or dual carriageway network within its portfolio.

As my colleagues here today will be aware, there are only 11 km of dual carriageway in the entire county of East Sussex. My ask is that the new fund should be accessible for local authorities to deliver bypasses, even if that bypass would be off a Highways England road. It is a misfortune for the two roads that I mentioned that they are controlled by Highways England—it is illogical—but my concern is that the new, £1 billion fund is available only to local authority-managed roads. That would be an obstacle for those two roads. I ask the Roads Minister that the issue of qualification should be reconsidered. That would be an obstacle for those two roads. I ask the Roads Minister that the issue of qualification should be reconsidered. That would be an obstacle for those two roads. I ask the Roads Minister that the issue of qualification should be reconsidered.
of Little Common, which would deliver a bypass for the entirety of Bexhill and make it easier for the Sussex coastal towns to join up.

I have asked my local authorities and the local enterprise partnership to consider whether the housing infrastructure fund—the £20 billion fund announced by the Chancellor last year—could be tapped for Hurst Green and Little Common. The issue is that, having delivered the link road with its room for 2,000 houses, the local authorities rightly feel that they have already delivered housing and do not need any further. I will certainly be asking them to apply for the new bypass fund, but we first need clarity from the Roads Minister that they will be allowed to apply, given that the road is managed by Highways England.

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. On housing, would he agree that particular consideration needs to be given to key arterial routes that link major motorways, such as the A5 in my constituency, which connects the M69, M1 and M42? It is already under huge pressure, and will be even more so due to proposed housing and the development of High Speed 2.

Huw Merriman: I agree. Perhaps my hon. Friend will agree with me on some of the points that I will come on to talk about with respect to Highways England and some of the problems that many hon. Members may have had in facing that agency.

At the A21 reference group, which I sit on with my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) and for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd), we asked Highways England representatives what we could do to dual the rest of the A21 all the way down to Hastings: how we could commission an economic study and what boxes that study would need to tick in order to meet Highways England’s programme. I am afraid to say that the Highways England reps before us displayed a lack of dynamism and a “no can do” attitude, which is caused, in my view, by the fact that it has no competition on its strategic road network programme for building.

The link road that I described was delivered by a small outfit called Sea Change, in conjunction with the county and our local enterprise partnership. They were able to deliver that road to time and cost. I ask the Roads Minister whether it is possible to let counties, LEPs and their agencies put tenders together to bid for Highways England-managed roads. I put that proposal to the chief executive of Highways England during a sitting of the Transport Committee, on which I sit, and he claimed he is confident that Highways England cannot be beaten on value for money. Let us put that to the test and allow others to tender for the work.

Time does not allow me to speak for much longer, because I want to let others in, but I want to open up the debate by talking about a few more points. This is about not just building more roads, but ensuring that the roads we currently have are moving for traffic. To that end, I would like traffic enforcement provisions to be moved from the police to the local authority for moving traffic offences. I would also like there to be some form of compulsion to ensure that local authorities that still rely on the police to enforce parking on the highways take responsibility for that. There are only 15 remaining, and two of those districts are in my authority. As a result, it is a free-for-all when it comes to parking and blocking up space.

For the visually impaired—I have some sympathy, having undertaken a guide dogs test in a blindfold—we have to ensure that it is an offence to park on the kerb outside London, as it is inside London. We have to change the situation. I would also like new roads and existing roads to encourage cycling. London does a great deal for cyclists, and I would like that practice to be adopted throughout the country. I will finish my speech now to allow others to make their own cases.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Order. Before I call the next speaker, I am minded to put a limit of five minutes on speeches. I am not going to do that at this stage; I am just going to ask people to exercise some self-denial, bearing in mind that 13 or 14 Members want to speak. I would be grateful if Members kept standing if they wish to contribute to the debate.

9.41 am

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) on securing this important debate. We heard about the need for improvements to the A21 and the A259. Given that the road investment strategy is reaching a critical phase, this is a timely discussion.

Improving road infrastructure is a priority for many of our constituents. I was proud to be part of a cross-party campaign to secure the widening of the A453—the main trunk route between Nottingham and the west midlands. The project has improved the lives of thousands of my constituents.

I want to focus on two of the immediate issues confronting the Department for Transport: the delivery of the road investment strategy and the condition of local roads. The investment strategy was launched to significant fanfare. More than £15 billion was promised for investment in motorways and major A roads. Unfortunately, two years on, the progress report is decidedly mixed. Highways England is failing to meet its target for maintaining road conditions, as the Office of Rail and Road warned in February. The pledge to resurface 80% of the strategic road network, which was so widely trumpeted, is also set to be missed. I hope the Minister will update hon. Members on what the actual figure is likely to be.

Most seriously, the delivery of new capital investment schemes worth £11 billion is also in doubt. Many hon. Members might be familiar with Network Rail’s current problems. Major projects were committed to at an early stage in their development when there was a limited understanding of their costs and deliverability. I am concerned that a similar story looks to be playing out on our roads. In the ORR’s February update on capital planning, the regulator warned that there are significant differences between the initial cost forecasts and the latest estimates, and that the investment strategy “is not fully demonstrated to be affordable”.

There is currently an £800 million gap in Highways England’s capital works budget, on top of the £140 million of extra funding that the Department granted last year. Those overruns are at least partly due to headline-grabbing claims taking precedence over realistic pledges. I therefore suggest that those who are dusting down their bids for a bypass do not start to celebrate just yet.

Internal Highways England minutes that I obtained through the Freedom of Information Act blamed the cost increase on a "lack of focus on affordability in an environment where an emphasis has been placed on the imperative to deliver as quickly as possible".

Given that 60 projects—more than half the total—are due to begin construction in the final year of the road investment period, there will be an exceptional strain on Highways England and external contractors. The regulator said that there is “limited evidence” that the construction timetable is "deliverable or efficient". That could have a knock-on effect on investment in the roads investment strategy, too, so we need to look at which projects are priorities within the strategy.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): Prioritisation is very important, but, moving away from Highways England, does the hon. Lady agree that local authorities find it difficult to allocate funds to produce feasibility studies and business cases to move projects forward? There has been a problem in my constituency with moving forward the York outer northern ring road, which is regularly congested—many constituents call it a car park. Does the hon. Lady agree that if the bypass fund is properly targeted, it might allow local authorities to move some of those long-term projects forward?

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Order. May I remind Members that interventions should be short?

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend is a doughty advocate for cyclists. Of course, when planning investment in our roads, we should consider the needs of all road users, including pedestrians and cyclists.

According to the Department’s own data, spending on routine maintenance has fallen by 30% in real terms since 2010, and the situation is set to get even worse. We have to consider the amount of funding available, especially in the light of the emerging problems on some of Highways England’s projects. It is time for Ministers to look again at whether we have the right mix of national capital spending and local revenue allowances.

I am conscious of time, so I will just mention a couple of things. This is not just about spending more; it is about being smarter—that relates to the point made by the hon. Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy). With annualised budgets, councils are forced to adopt a rather limited patch-and-mend approach, with the result that the busiest roads often receive temporary repairs over and over again. In the longer term, that is a highly inefficient approach to maintenance. The Department should look at the case for granting local authorities their highways budget up front for a period of five years, which would enable the entire resurfacing of the worst affected roads. It should not be in the business of writing blank cheques, but that mechanism could allow longer-term planning to take place.

Before I finish, I will say a quick word about suicide prevention, which has perhaps not received widespread attention but which should be prominent on the Department’s agenda. Obviously, every death is a private tragedy, and the recovery stage can be a traumatic process for staff. With about 1,000 suicide attempts on the strategic road network every year, we urgently need a national road suicide prevention strategy. We know from the railways that we can be effective and make a difference, but the best time to incorporate changes into new infrastructure is at the design stage. The Highways England health and safety five-year plan commits the organisation to establishing a suicide prevention group and developing an action plan by March 2018, but that is three years into the investment strategy. That is not good enough and I urge the Minister to prioritise the issue and to instruct Highways England to bring the work forward.

Many challenges confront road infrastructure in this Parliament, and on some important points the Department needs to change course. I appreciate that many hon. Members are waiting to speak, but I hope the Minister will address the points I have raised when he replies to the debate.

9.51 am

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) on initiating this debate.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): It is projected that by 2020 the spending on roads will be £86 per head, whereas the spending on cycling will be reduced to just £72 per head. Does my hon. Friend think that, when we are talking about road infrastructure, we should include cycling, which the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) mentioned?
I will talk about the A27, which runs through my constituency. It was envisaged as a coastal highway although, as anyone who has travelled along it knows, it is too often a coastal car park. Stretches of dual carriageway give way to very congested spots that cause severe delays. Every single day, 25,000 traffic movements, most of them not local, pass through the historic town of Arundel, with severe delays every morning and afternoon. That exacts a price from the local economy in the relatively deprived areas of West Sussex—there are some, in fact—and places such as Littlehampton need better transport infrastructure. Sussex Enterprise estimates that the cost to the local economy of poor infrastructure links, including a poor rail service, is £2 billion a year, so there is certainly an economic case for upgrading the A27. There is also, however, an environmental case, and that is important.

The consequence of traffic queuing for long periods at Arundel is of course air pollution. Furthermore, people seek to avoid the congestion in Arundel either by rat-running through the historic town itself, which makes for high volumes of traffic there—so often the story up and down the country is that towns and villages suffer as a consequence of delays and of people seeking to avoid those delays—or by making the south downs suffer. In order to get from east to west, people will go above Arundel, driving up through the south downs.

The South Downs national park is therefore affected, and so are its villages and adjacent villages. Storrington, just above the national park, has some of the worst air quality in the whole of south-east England, caused by queuing traffic. It is important to weigh claims that the construction of a much needed bypass at Arundel might damage the environment against the environmental damage caused by queuing traffic and traffic passing through the national park.

On one route, an Arundel bypass would have to pass through a short section of the South Downs national park, but the A27 already passes through extensive parts of the national park, including at Arundel. The part of the park in question, right at the bottom of it, is not chalk downland but replanted woodland. My contention, which I hope will be borne out, is that there will be a net environmental gain from construction of the bypass, even though a small section of the national park would be passed through; that could be mitigated.

The environment could even be enhanced—I have made this case before, although my hon. Friend the Member of Parliament, as it is the judgment of local councils, that there is overwhelmed support for the bypass among the local population. Indeed, that support increases the further away from Arundel one is—but even in Arundel, my judgment is that there is strong public support for the bypass.

In December 2014, when the Government announced that they would invest in an Arundel bypass under the roads programme, we were delighted. That came after the previous Labour Government had shelved the scheme. In conclusion, I simply ask: will the Minister confirm that the public consultation that Highways England is due to hold on the Arundel bypass route will go ahead this summer, or later this year?

Highways England states not only that the scheme will still go ahead, that the cost will be between £100 million and £250 million and that the start date will be before the end of March 2020, but that the public consultation remains subject to agreement with the Secretary of State. I noticed that the list of schemes announced last week by the Department for Transport, although not exclusive, made no mention of the Arundel bypass. I therefore seek the Minister’s assurance that the bypass will still go ahead and that the consultation will be announced this year. I am convinced that this road scheme will benefit the local community, the economy and, crucially, the environment.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Order. Twelve colleagues have indicated that they would like to speak. That will be difficult so I am again appealing for contributions to be kept short, because I would like to get in as many as possible.

9.58 am

Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): Thank you, Mrs Gillan, for calling me to speak in such a broad debate on road infrastructure. I will not make it too broad because in my constituency investment in road infrastructure is a matter for the Welsh Assembly and the Welsh Government. Montgomeryshire, however, has a very long border with England—Shropshire—and I want to speak specifically about the general principle of how we deal with cross-border road schemes, making reference to two schemes in particular.

Several schemes cross the border between England and Wales, but the two in my constituency are hugely important. The first one that I want to speak about is usually known as the Middletown bypass—you will know it well from your previous responsibilities, Mrs Gillan. It is an 8-mile road between Welshpool and the English border, and the gateway to central Wales. However, it is hopelessly inadequate and a real bottleneck.
The problem is that the cost-benefit analyses are different. The two Governments have to agree for a scheme to go ahead, and the cost-benefit analysis in each of the two countries is different. In Wales it is hugely important that we have access to the market in England, so the cost-benefit analysis in Wales is high and we are keen for the project to go ahead, but of course in England it is not. When I became a Member of the Assembly, then a Member of Parliament, my main interest was for devolution not to have a negative effect on the way in which Britain operates—but it does. In this specific instance, it certainly does.

Two schemes are good examples of this negative effect. The first is the Middletown bypass. It is 90% in Wales and 10% in England, but it cannot go ahead unless the UK Government commit their 10% to a scheme that any cost-benefit analysis would say was not worth while for England. But of course it is hugely worth while, and the scheme would go ahead if we had that agreement between the two Governments. That is absolutely crucial for the way Britain’s economy operates.

The second scheme is the Pant-Llanymynech bypass, for which 90% of the investment would be in north Shropshire and 10% would be in Wales. The case argued locally is often about the environment of the villages of Llanymynech—it is a village, not a town; I do not want to cause any offence—and Pant, and about traffic danger issues, but the key issue for me and for the economy of Wales has always been that the scheme concerns the A483 Manchester to Swansea road, which is a key piece of infrastructure into Wales. Again, the cost-benefit analysis is different on each side.

I conclude with a general point. When the British Government look at investing in roads in England—roads are devolved to Wales and to Scotland—they must look at the benefit to the United Kingdom as well as the benefit just to England. That is absolutely crucial if we are going to make certain that devolution does not have a negative impact, as it currently does, on the two road schemes that I mentioned and on other road schemes between England and Wales. We must look at how such schemes benefit the United Kingdom overall.

10.1 am

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) on his incredible timing. How he knew that this debate would take place on the same day as the Government’s announcement, I honestly do not know.

Many people want to speak, so I will get straight to the point. There are two main schemes in my constituency about which we are particularly concerned. One concerns the A12, which is the main A road through East Anglia. We sit on the Essex border. The A12 will soon have three lanes from Chelmsford to Colchester. It then gets to our stretch, which is extremely bendy. Our main concern is safety. Roads from villages join the A12, where the speed limit is 70 mph, at extremely short junctions into bends. Those junctions are lethal. I can only presume that the casualty count is not higher because of the caution that local drivers take approaching the junctions, but there is massive anxiety in surrounding villages, and I will look to pursue that issue.

Since it is bypass day, the main scheme that I want to refer to is the Sudbury bypass. My right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) spoke about public support for a scheme that has been around for decades. The Sudbury bypass has been around for many decades. In fact, there has been an outline of the bypass in the local “A to Z” for a long time.

The essence of the issue will be familiar to many hon. Members. The A road goes right through the heart—right through the historic centre—of Sudbury, our main market town, which is full of heavy goods vehicles and all the pollution and impact that that implies. The historic town centre includes Gainsborough’s house, where Thomas Gainsborough was born—a museum that will shortly receive millions of pounds of lottery funding. We are desperate to regenerate our town, but the sheer pressure of HGVs is a problem.

I am pleased to say that Suffolk County Council has brought forward an initial business case for a Sudbury relief road, which it found could lead to a 60% reduction in HGVs and would have a 3:1 cost-benefit ratio in terms of economic gain, but the most important point is the environmental impact, which others have referred to. Our scheme was previously rejected on environmental grounds because, unfortunately, the only way to avoid the town—I am sure this is true of other rural areas—is to go into the countryside to some degree, but I think there is a trade-off. On the streets that the bypass would avoid, nitrogen oxide levels are very high—they are, in effect, illegal. The safe level is 40 micrograms per cubic metre of air; in Cross Street, the main road that we seek to bypass, the level is 59.4 micrograms. That is dangerous and unsafe. I therefore think the environmental argument is now in favour of the relief road, not least because the road would also protect the historic heritage environment of our town, where there are many fine wool town buildings going back hundreds of years.

Unfortunately, Sudbury’s biggest employer, Delphi Diesel Systems, which is a major exporter, has just announced a consultation on the entire closure of its plant, which would lead to the loss of 520 highly skilled jobs. We are obviously worried about that. While we are doing our best to prevent that from happening, we need to think positively about ways to revive the town. We have a strong industrial base that would benefit very much from a new bypass that would mean lorries could avoid the centre of town.

I hope that the Minister will be able to visit and give our schemes due consideration. I welcome this timely debate and the Government’s timely announcement. We all need greater support and, when it comes to relieving congestion in a historic market town, you can’t beat a good bypass.

10.5 am

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) on securing this debate on today of all days. Who would have thought it?

I shall not detain hon. Members for too long. No doubt they will show no surprise at all that I will spend three minutes unashamedly banging on about the North Devon link road. In the extraordinarily unlikely circumstance that anyone here does not understand the
vital importance of the North Devon link road, let me give Members the 20-second lesson. It is the A361 between Tiverton and Barnstaple and onwards to the beautiful North Devon coastline. It links our part of the world with the M5 and the rest of the country. However, we do not see it as North Devon’s only link to the outside world; we see it as the outside world’s only opportunity to visit us.

We therefore need real investment in the North Devon link road. We must ensure that it is fit for purpose. At the moment, it is not. It is single carriageway for about 85% of the distance between Tiverton and Barnstaple—two towns some 30 miles apart. Where it is not single carriageway, it has short stretches of overtaking lanes that merge quickly into the main carriageway with little warning. That leads to risk taking, speeding, dangerous overtaking and, sadly, a high incidence of accidents in which people are killed or seriously injured. Sadly, two summers ago, three people were killed on the link road just a mile or so from my home in North Devon.

We need to change that, but not just because we need holidaymakers to be able to get to North Devon more quickly in August. We need real investment in the North Devon link road because it currently hampers economic investment in our area, which has so much to offer as far as a growing economy is concerned.

We have made real progress. Devon County Council is doing absolutely fantastic work, and we have secured £1.5 million from the Government to carry out detailed planning work, including putting together a comprehensive business case. We are currently in the third phase of a public consultation, with a series of exhibitions—I was at one in South Molton myself less than a fortnight ago—that show what could be done to improve the road. We have a plan. We are, to use the awful phrase, shovel ready. We now need the money. I am not the first and I am sure I will not be the last to say to this Minister—this excellent Minister, this wise Minister, this almost noble Minister, whom it is a pleasure to see here—“Please look at this scheme, because you will get so much bang for your buck if you invest in it.”

Normally, people would not find a cigarette paper—perhaps these days we should say an e-cigarette paper—between me and my good friend the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle, but it rather suits our purposes in North Devon that it seems that the new £1 billion roads fund announced today will be targeted at roads that were de-trunked and are purely the responsibility of local authorities. That is exactly the situation in which we find ourselves in North Devon. Why? Because a Labour Government chose to de-trunk the A361. That happened under a Labour Government’s watch and, I have to say, under the watch of a Liberal Democrat MP in North Devon. [Interruption.] Absolutely. That should not have happened, but it did happen, and it hampered investment in this road. I am however pleased to say that, if The Times is to believed—of course it is; it is The Times—we can see the way out of this and, through the new fund being announced today, we can get some real investment in the North Devon link road.

Let me look wider across the south-west, because it is no good people being able to get to North Devon if they cannot get beyond there to the rest of the south-west. Last week, I was delighted to see media reports of a new £6.1 billion programme to open up road access to the south-west. In particular and for so long, many colleagues in the south-west have been asking for a proper dual carriageway linking the M3 with the M5. Too many bits of the A303 and A358 are single carriageway and not fit for purpose. The Government have announced real investment, which will see a major change in that, and I warmly welcome it.

I say to the Roads Minister that we will be knocking on his door. The Government have invested £1.5 million in ensuring that we are shovel ready for this vital scheme to improve the North Devon link road. The message that needs to go out today is, “Come to North Devon. Come and do business in North Devon. Come and spend your tourist pound in North Devon, and come and live in North Devon and contribute to the local economy.” I want to be able to say, “You can do all those things and get there safely, sustainably and efficiently, thanks to investment by this Conservative Government.”

Several hon. Members rose—

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Order. I will call Layla Moran next, but as I have nine colleagues standing I will put on a time limit of about three minutes, and maybe even less, if people cannot keep their contributions short.

10.11 am

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Thank you, Mrs Gillan. This is my first debate in Westminster Hall, and I am delighted to be here. I would be remiss not to mention the A34. Many hon. Members will know about the issues of Lodge Hill junction, and I will be speaking to the most wonderful Minister about that junction. It has been the subject of cross-party campaigning for 25 years and it is reaching the point where, if we do not secure it now, it will impede the unlocking of Abingdon’s future forever.

My point is actually about taking people off roads. Oxford is one of the UK’s great cycling cities, and we should be doing much better. There are many reasons why we should consider taking people off roads completely. We have many active groups in the area who are campaigning for, in particular, a path from Eynsham to Botley. I am delighted to see my fellow Oxfordshire MP, the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) in his place and I hope we will work together on that issue. That community path, which will go along the B4044, has been well documented—there have been lots of warm words—but what we need now is investment to get it going. We also have many groups in Didcot who have lobbied for a cycle path from Oxford to Didcot—that is quite a long way, so it is not something I would do, but those groups are insistent that they would and I would love to be able to deliver it for them.

A parent in Abingdon contacted me within days of the election because her son had been mown down by a car. Luckily, he survived, although sadly in 2009 a child died on a cycle route approved by the school—a route that goes through 14 major junctions. We need to do much more to protect our children.

Finally, I want to talk about air quality. It is a danger to children’s health to be knocked down by a car, but also to breathe in the noxious fumes released by cars.
It is estimated that a third of nitrous oxide emissions in the UK come from road use, and 14% of children’s asthma is estimated to be caused by air pollution. That, incidentally, is the same as passive smoking. What it is no longer acceptable to light up in front of children for fear that they will breathe in the fumes, we have yet to make the case for taking children out of dangerous air pollution areas, such as those around North Hinksey and Botley schools, for the sake of their health.

I ask the Minister to apply a lot of creativity to the way we look at local infrastructure. It is not just about roads. Let us also look at different ways we can take people off the roads, because in the end it is better for the environment and better for their safety—but, above all, for their wellbeing, too.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Order. I am going to put on a time limit of three minutes.

10.14 am

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) on securing this debate. I will not go over the preamble of how pleased I am, but I hope that today’s announcement will help the bottlenecks in places such as Bury St Edmunds and alleviate problems in the historic town for the reasons my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), gave earlier.

I want to turn to the A14. I must declare an interest as chair of the “no more A14 delays” campaign. The route is vital for Suffolk, the region and the nation, with 70% of the cargo out of Felixstowe—our biggest container port—travelling down it, and 80% of Suffolk businesses relying on it. In my constituency, I have the headquarters of Greene King, Treatt and Muntons, large businesses and enterprise zones in Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket. The economy of Norfolk and Suffolk is £28 billion-plus, but the A14 holds us back.

To build a vibrant, modern economy we need a functioning A14. The 20-mile stretch in my constituency gives people the chance to enter for business, tourism and leisure, but UK congestion costs us £2 billion per annum. We could generate £362 million in additional gross value added, saving each commuter 13 minutes a day. There is potential for some 45,000 more jobs in the next 10 to 15 years if we get on and do this work to the A14. The accompanying homes and growth in the economy must be worth something in that argument. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle and for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies) said, we need to think strategically about total values across the piece and not always look at what the value is for one singular constituency.

We have congestion around junctions in Bury, but we have dreadful problems around Nacton and Ipswich in freeing up the Felixstowe traffic, and we also have issues going up to Newmarket. We have poor lay-outs, short slip roads and lack of capacity, which causes frequent delays. That does not encourage getting business done, and we need to get on with the job of building the roads quickly.

There is a lack of adequate pull-offs, and there are frequent delays. A constituent told me it had taken her three and a half hours to do 28 miles between Bury and Cambridge. Under RIS 1, the Suffolk map was white: I really look forward to meeting the Minister and ensuring that we have some coloured dots for investment under RIS 2, that the consultation goes ahead in the next few months and that we are listened to. Remedial work is welcome, but that is all we are up for. Please invest in Suffolk.

10.17 am

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) on securing this important debate. House building, not just in my constituency but in the area surrounding it, has been an issue of huge concern for many years. It has created huge pressure on the local roads, and that pressure is getting greater and greater with the current proposals and with yet more house building coming down the line soon. Junction 7 of the M61—I realise that is not in this narrow remit—should have been built many years ago. The fact that it has not been built means that the roads in Horwich are under far more pressure and strain than they ought to be, and the A roads and other roads suffer because of a lack of motorway investment.

If we look at Westhoughton, a bypass should have been built decades ago. We think about joined-up government. Equally, when we have house building we must also look at the infrastructure needed to support it, whether that is medical, educational or other infrastructure such as sporting facilities. Joined-up government really has not happened on a local level. Symbolically, locally, the boundary between the Wigan borough and Bolton borough highlights that lack of thought-through decision making.

People travel along the Wigan borough on the Atherleigh Way A5225, which is a pretty good road, so they can travel pretty fast, but when they get to the boundary with Bolton they come across huge concrete blocks where the road stops, because Wigan and Bolton did not work together to deliver the most obvious local road. So all the traffic that travels through Wigan gets to the concrete blocks and is diverted through Daisy Hill and Westhoughton, creating huge misery for residents. Bolton Council, or previous Governments, should have delivered on that road many years ago, but they have failed to do so.

One of the worries now is that given the huge amount of house building, without nearly enough useful infrastructure, that is planned for the Greater Manchester spatial framework, it is more than likely that building will begin on the options for the Westhoughton bypass. Houses will occupy the land where we need the bypass to be built; so we urgently need it to be built before Bolton Council builds there and prevents it from ever happening.

10.20 am

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) on securing this important debate. I shall take hon. Members through the issues affecting
Robert Courts

my constituency, travelling through them quickly, as it were—which is more than anyone could do trying to travel on the roads themselves. I assure our excellent and generous Minister that, despite what may be heard from other hon. Members present, there is no project more worthy of investment than the A40 running through West Oxfordshire.

As anyone who has visited West Oxfordshire or spoken to a local MP will realise, the A40 is the pre-eminent issue there. Not only do my constituents spend hours stuck in traffic doing the short journey from Witney to the centre of Oxford, but the economic potential of an enormously successful area is being constricted. One need only look at Carterton, where world-beating industries such as Boeing and Airbus are present on the base, but where the slip road access to the A40 is restricted; or Eynsham, where Siemens, with its world-beating medical engineering, is restricted in relation to travel on the A40. There are many other businesses there, as is shown by the West Oxfordshire business awards, but I cannot mention them all because time is limited. They are restricted in the economic growth that they could deliver, because of the road.

The A40 is the central issue in West Oxfordshire, but not the only one. It has spin-off side effects. Traffic trying to avoid the A40 travels, for example, on the A4095 through Bladon, where I live. It is a world-famous village because it is where Winston Churchill is buried, and we have many coaches per day. Visitors are of course welcome, but through the narrow pinch point and the coach parks further on there is excessive congestion. There is also particular congestion in Burford, with its world-famous hill, with traffic backed up along it.

Hon. Members will realise that that high street is called the gateway to the Cotswolds; nearly every building is listed, and there are HGVs stacked up on it, because there is nowhere to go. A bypass for Burford would also be high on the list for residents in that part of the world. Horsefair in Chipping Norton and Bridge Street in Witney are two areas in West Oxfordshire that have high levels of pollution, and a bypass around Chipping Norton to remove the weight of traffic—figuratively and literally—is absolutely necessary.

There is also a great need for public transport. We have already heard from the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) about cycle paths, and I would like the B4044 cycle path to happen. I cycled from my home in Bladon to Oxford, when I worked there, along the A44. There is an excellent cycle path there, but we need more of them. I have now concluded my quick canter through issues of health and economics, in relation to road infrastructure, and I am grateful for the opportunity to speak.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Order. If hon. Members can keep their remarks to two minutes, we may get everyone in.

10.24 am

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): My main aim in this short contribution will be to talk about the condition of the A180, but perhaps I may join other hon. Members in mentioning two quick asks. I feel somewhat guilty in doing so, because last Friday the Minister of State, Department for Transport, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), was in my constituency opening the upgrade to the A160, which improves access to the port of Immingham. That was a £100 million project. We were pushing for it during the entire 26 years when I was a councillor in the area, so things do not happen all that quickly; but I am pleased that the coalition Government gave the go-ahead, and that the Minister of State duly attended to open it.

If we are to finish the jigsaw of routes that give us access to the south Humber port, the dualling of the A15 and/or the A46 are the next asks, and it would be helpful if I could bring a delegation to meet the Minister to discuss that, as I have done with his many predecessors.

My main aim this morning is to draw attention to the condition of the A180, parts of which, from junction 5 to the Grimsby boundary, a concrete surface that causes no end of problems, particularly to residents. I have sat in the homes of constituents living as much as a mile from the road, and heard the constant rumble of HGVs over the surface. In 2000 the then Labour Government said in their transport plan that all concrete roads would be removed by 2010, on a priority basis. Surely the clinching factor in the need for the work was a report in the Cleethorpes Chronicle of 25 March 2010 that directors of Grimsby Town football club said prospective footballers were being put off signing, because of the poor state of the A180. If that does not clinch it, nothing will.

As we know, the Minister is a rising star, and he would not want to be compared unfavourably with one of his predecessors. In a 4 pm debate in Westminster Hall on 17 December 2003 a certain Mr McNulty, who was then Under-Secretary of State for Transport, said at column 320 that residents near the A180 needed a rest, and promised that he would ensure they got one. Improvements followed, and the Minister would not want to be overtaken or beaten by his illustrious predecessor. My plea is for him to arrange for Highways England to make a proper assessment of the costs and alternatives. If he wants to join me and residents to listen to the constant rumble, he will be very welcome.

10.27 am

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I want to draw the Minister’s attention to something that I hope is already front and centre of his desk: the well progressed application for a Middlewich eastern bypass. It has been a 30-year wait, and the support in Middlewich and beyond is strong. It would open up employment land for 2,000 jobs, which would help to transform the local and wider economy. It would reduce congestion, and not only through Middlewich. That congestion is chronic, and not only at peak times. The bypass would improve transport efficiency from the M6 across that part of Cheshire to the west. Middlewich is a severe bottleneck, which is holding back economic development in the area.

I am grateful that the Government granted business case funding last year under the fast-track scheme of the large local major transport schemes programme. The business case was produced this spring. As time prohibits my speaking about it in detail now, I hope that the Minister will allow me to hand him an executive summary of the business case after the debate. It was...
produced by Cheshire East Council with the support of the local enterprise partnership, and it was the only one proposed by that large unitary authority.

The council leader and I were due to discuss the matter in a meeting with the Minister's predecessor—now the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones)—before the election intervened. I hope that the Minister will look favourably on the idea of putting such an appointment in his diary soon.

Middlewich is a fine historic town with an aspiration to grow, including by taking in new housing, which the scheme would also support. That is not something that every town in Cheshire wants. The road would also bring benefits by facilitating HS2 construction and operation for the nearby link with Crewe, and the reopening, we hope, of Middlewich railway station for passengers.

I want finally to make a brief mention of Congleton. The Congleton Sports Trust’s vision for the future, following the successful Tour of Britain through Congleton, is a project spearheaded by the deputy mayor, Councillor Suzie Akers Smith, to improve circumnavigation of the town. Obtaining funding for that is proving challenging. The project would facilitate the improvement of infrastructure across the town, and make safe cycling possible—including for children going to school. My key message to the Minister is that for rural and semi-rural areas it is proving challenging to find cycling funding. Will Ministers look at that again?

10.29 am

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Thank you for calling me, Mrs Gillan. I will briefly talk about the ideas brought forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman).

Something I have found in my constituency is a lack of joined-up thinking between the local enterprise partnership, the county council and Highways England. For example, Highways England and the county council would like to work together to create an air quality management site on Hamble Lane near junction 8 of the M27, but that has not happened; there are air quality management sites around the Eastleigh Borough Council offices and through Botley village in my constituency. Indeed, the bypass around Botley has been waiting to be built for 20 or 30 years, and we are progressing, but this kind of fund is exactly what we need to get it over the line.

The other road we have been waiting three decades for in Eastleigh is the Chickenhall link road. Not having that affects Tower Lane and the village of Bishopstoke, traffic coming from Southampton and up towards Winchester and, indeed, air quality. It also means that some people in my constituency do 12-mile journeys each day that can take up to an hour and a half. Several Roads Ministers have said, “I’ve been to lots of congested places; I am sure Eastleigh is nothing different”, and all of them have found it quite surprising. In fact, one was so delayed that he missed an appointment.

HGVs running through villages such as Botley really do affect the quality of people’s lives, including our children’s. As a Conservative majority Government, we can do better. During the coalition with the Liberal Democrats, my constituency got nowhere. I would like to prove that this Conservative majority Government can actually do things that affect people’s lives, because that is what politics does. It can deliver what really matters to people: getting home at night to see their children and making sure that they have a good, productive day at work—if they can get there.

10.31 am

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan; I congratulate you on managing to fit in 12 additional speakers after the opening speech. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) on securing the debate, and further congratulate him because the debate was originally due to be about Southern Rail; it was changed following the debate in the main Chamber yesterday. That saves me from having to speak in another debate on Southern Rail. We have seen how popular the hon. Gentleman’s debate is.

Given the comments from the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), I had to keep checking the title of the debate in case it was called the “Bypass Bid” debate; it certainly felt like that is what it was. It shows just how passionate and understanding of the needs of their communities hon. Members are, and how much demand there is on the road infrastructure network. I look forward to the Minister’s replies to each individual bid as we go forward.

The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle highlighted a good mix of local issues and the strategic thinking that needs to accompany their resolution. He was correctly angry about having the UK’s most dangerous road in his constituency, and I wish him luck in his ambition for improving its safety with the speed camera solution and through other bypasses that were mentioned. That brought back memories for me: I remember doing a school project way back in 1988 about local bypasses. I had actually been able to access plans from 1947, when the bypasses were first planned, and we are still waiting on them. That story has come out time and again today.

I also agree with the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle about strategic issues around traffic enforcement moving from the police to local authorities. I think that has benefits, although it can also put pressure on local authorities. I also fully support the comments about pavement parking. I also did a blindfold tour of my local town centre, which certainly illustrated to me that vehicles on pavements are a further obstruction that does not need to be there.

We certainly had quite a run through of hon. Members. The hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) focused on strategy, delivery and issues including further funding pressures. I look forward to the Minister’s response to that. I liked the good, interesting comments from the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) about beautiful infrastructure; I am actually a civil engineer by trade, so I appreciate infrastructure. Clearly, the issues of congestion, air pollution and national parks need to be addressed.

The hon. Members for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies) and for South Suffolk also bid for bypasses, while the hon. Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) talked of a North Devon link road to allow holidaymakers quicker access to Devon during August. Perhaps if the road gets the upgrade he is looking for, more Scottish
holidaymakers will be able to access it before August, because our holiday period starts at the end of June. That might extend his area’s holiday season.

The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) highlighted issues about major junctions, while the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) highlighted issues with the A14. The hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) highlighted that house building can cause issues, which again shows the need for strategic thinking. For me, that is also an issue for strategic local planning, in terms of the council looking ahead at where it will build houses and what infrastructure is needed to accompany that.

The hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) highlighted the A40. Listening to some hon. Members’ contributions, including his, took me back to listening to maiden speeches, which can give us a tour through constituencies and a reminder of the beautiful villages that exist. The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) again highlighted a bypass, while the final contributions from the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies), again highlighted the lack of joined-up thinking between Highways England and local councils, which needs to be resolved.

I genuinely wish hon. Members all the best with their bids for funding. It seems to me that the £1 billion fund announced today will not go far enough, so I ask the Minister to look down the back of his couch to see if he can find more money. Certainly, investment in infrastructure leads to job creation, an economic return and, as we have heard, can increase safety and improve air quality. Any additional investment in roads in England and Wales will hopefully have Barnett consequentials and would lead to further investment in Scotland.

I remind the hon. Member for Eastleigh that this is not a majority Conservative Government but a minority one. Perhaps the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle, who put in the first bid, may have seen how successful the Democratic Unionist party was in securing money from the UK Government. Maybe Conservative Back Benchers need to get together and do a wee bit of backroom bidding with their Government colleagues.

Some people are for investment in road infrastructure and some are against, but nobody here today spoke out against. Earlier, I touched on my being a civil engineer by background; I also now have the role of spokesperson for transport and infrastructure for the Scottish National party, so I am certainly all in favour of strategic road upgrading. However, it needs to be strategic, and it also needs to link in with other transport upgrades. We have heard about safe cycling, which is important, and we also need to invest in rail and public transport so that we have better connectivity; that all goes hand in hand.

On Scottish Government investment and looking at trunk road maintenance, the Scottish Government look for three strategic outcomes: improved journey times, reduced emissions to tackle climate change, improved air quality and health, and improved accessibility and affordability. Those have to be the Government’s key objectives when they look at their £1 billion investment fund. All hon. Members here certainly have local issues, but the Government have to look a bit more strategically.

Under the previous UK settlement, Scotland suffered from a lack of investment in roads. It took devolution and the Scottish Parliament’s coming into being to actually increase road investment. The SNP Government have taken that to a new level, with the M74 and M80 motorways and the recently completed M8 motorway between Glasgow and Edinburgh; it is actually incredible that it has taken until 2017 to have a continuous motorway link between the two biggest cities in Scotland.

We have heard about single carriageway roads in the debate, but rural Scotland actually has single-lane roads, which only allow cars to travel in one direction, with pull-off passing bays. Again, that shows the lack of investment over the years. Also, the “Road to the Isles”, the A830, was the last single-lane trunk road in the UK and was only upgraded in 2009 with the aid of European funding.

That is another concern going forward: what will happen to that European funding? Will the UK Government backfill that lack of money? Scotland secured £1.3 billion of investment from EU structural funds, which has allowed those important road upgrades. I would appreciate it if the Minister could answer that. I wish the Minister luck in answering all the bids for bypasses. I certainly support any additional expenditure on infrastructure and would like to see further Barnett consequentials and expenditure in Scotland.

10.39 am

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Gillan. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) on securing this important debate on a matter that has broad implications for all our constituents.

This debate is particularly timely, because by chance, the Government made an announcement overnight that they will be shifting £1 billion of vehicle excise duty away from investment in main roads and towards a bypass fund. I suspect that the announcement was made not just to give the Minister something positive to say in this debate, but as a result of constant pressure from the Opposition. On that point, I put on record my gratitude to my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) for the work she did as shadow Secretary of State for Transport to push these important issues.

While Labour welcomes the news that local roads will be receiving some much-needed investment, we note that the money will not be seen by local authorities until 2020, as the Government conduct their consultation. The announcement therefore does not deal with the immediate backlog of billions of pounds’-worth of work to fix potholes—a backlog that will only increase over the next three years. Moreover, the announcement does not increase the overall spending on roads. In fact, it could be seen as the Government slashing £1 billion from investment in main roads.

Our road network needs proper investment across both main and local roads. In recent years, our road infrastructure has been severely neglected. The Asphalt Industry Alliance says that roads need to be resurfaced every 10 to 20 years. Only London comes close to that, with the capital’s roads repaired every 23 years on average. Across the rest of England, roads are resurfaced every 55 years on average. That is clearly not sustainable.

A report published by the Office of Rail and Road in February highlighted that Highways England—the company responsible for the management of motorways
and main A roads in England—will have a funding shortfall of approximately £0.8 billion. It seems that the Government want to add a further £1 billion to that figure with their announcement this morning. Highways England has committed to delivering the Government’s road investment strategy, which includes investing more than £111 billion between April 2015 and March 2020, maintaining and renewing the network, delivering 112 major improvement schemes and carrying out targeted improvements through dedicated funds. In doing so, the company is also required to deliver £1.2 billion of efficiency improvements.

However, the Office of Rail and Road report showed that despite efficiency savings made by Highways England’s improvement plan that have reduced the funding shortfall from £1.7 billion to £0.8 billion, the company has plans to propose a range of changes to the road investment strategy, with schemes likely to be reduced in scope, delayed or even removed entirely. Labour has warned consistently that the Government have been over-promising and under-delivering on investment in England’s roads, and the report lays bare their entire failure on this. The road investment strategy is beginning to look like a wish list, and even more so with the decision today to take away £1 billion of funding.

The Office of Rail and Road report was published only months after Highways England reported a drop in its network condition key performance indicator that reports road surface condition, which fell to 92.3%—significantly below the road investment strategy target of 95%. We were promised the biggest upgrade to roads in a generation, but Highways England is now having to come up with plans to address a budget shortfall of nearly £1 billion, as well as to guarantee driver safety after allowing the condition of our roads to fall short of targets. Labour is very concerned about the fundamental mismatch between the Government’s expectations and the effectiveness and efficiency of Highways England, the Secretary of State having refused to rule out cancelling or delaying promised schemes. Will the Minister explain today which projects will be delayed and which will be cancelled, or if projects will be neither delayed nor cancelled, where the additional funds are coming from, especially now that the Government have announced a £1 billion cut to investment in main roads?

The situation is no better for local roads, which make up 97% of the UK transport network. As I said earlier, there is an estimated £12 billion backlog of road repairs. The funding that the Government have so far committed is a drop in the ocean, even with the extra £1 billion of funding, which will not be seen for three years. Local authorities are finding it impossible to catch up. The permanent pothole fund announced last year set aside additional funding of £250 million over the next five years to tackle potholes, on top of nearly £5 billion of funding for road maintenance announced previously. However, the additional £50 million a year until the funding announced today comes into effect, if spread over the same 148 highways authorities as last year, is clearly not enough to address the £12 billion backlog.

The recently published annual local authority road maintenance survey, produced by the Asphalt Industry Alliance, found that almost a fifth of roads were in poor condition, while local authorities have said that one in six roads across England and Wales are in such a bad state that they must be repaired within the next five years. The ALARM survey showed that last year, more than 16,000 potholes were filled per non-London local authority, costing £111 million, and more than 4,000 potholes were filled per London local authority, costing £11.4 million. In 2012, around 12,000 potholes were filled on average per non-London local authority, costing £80.6 million.

In England, excluding London, the average local authority budget for highway maintenance saw a decrease of 16% from £23.4 million last year to £19.8 million this year. That was unexpected, given the Government’s commitment to £6 billion of funding for local road maintenance over six years, which began this financial year but appears not to have yet been seen by local authority highways teams.

Every journey begins and ends on a local road, so the ALARM report’s warning that Britain’s roads are in “terminal decline” is deeply concerning. It is time the Government acted to give this vital part of our road network the attention and investment that it deserves. These findings lay bare the Government’s failure to maintain Britain’s local roads, which are blighted by potholes, causing real danger to road users. Indeed, three quarters of claims received by authorities for compensation for damage to persons or vehicles as a result of poor road condition relate specifically to pothole incidents. The Office of Rail and Road report on Highways England stated:

“While there is not a direct correlation between the road condition indicator and safety, a reduction may indicate an increase in safety risk which Highways England must manage. The company has given us assurances that the safety of the network is not compromised. We have required the company to evidence the actions it has taken to mitigate any safety risk and how it will improve road condition to meet the target.”

Will the Minister tell us today what action has been taken to mitigate the increased safety risks brought about as a consequence of the mishandling of the road investment strategy?

A total of 24,620 people were killed or seriously injured on our roads in the year ending June 2016, and hon. Members have talked about road deaths in their constituencies. Over the past two decades, the UK has earned a reputation for having among the safest roads in the world, but in the past seven years progress has stalled and begun to reverse. The Tories have scrapped road safety targets and caused a decline in the number of dedicated road traffic police officers in England and Wales. In contrast, Labour’s manifesto stated clearly that we would reset the UK’s road safety vision and ambitiously strive for a transport network with zero deaths, reintroducing road safety targets. In conclusion, will the Minister set out exactly where the £1 billion will be spent?

10.49 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): It is a delight to see you in the Chair, Mrs Gillan, and a privilege to be able to speak on these very important issues in the presence of so many hon. Members, and particularly Government Members, who have taken a great interest in them over the years.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) on securing this debate about road infrastructure. He is a kind of prognosticator of prognosticators; I do not know what goats were
opened or other auguries consulted that allowed him to ensure that this debate coincided with the announcements this morning, but I congratulate him on his Delphic powers of prophecy. I also think he has done no little good in advertising his own claim to potential membership of the Select Committee on Transport. I place that on the record without, of course, expressing a view on any candidate for such a position.

Following the Air Travel Organisers’ Licensing Bill on Monday and a debate in this Chamber on road safety for horses and riders yesterday, this is my third debate in three days. I can only salute the courage and indefatigability of some of my colleagues, who may have sat through all three debates—and the strength of their stomachs. I hope colleagues feel that taxpayers are getting their money’s worth from this exercise.

I had originally planned to go through in some detail some of the many schemes that will be covered under the Government’s present plans, but such has been the level of interest in and importance of the debate that after some opening remarks, I would like to engage specifically with the points raised by colleagues throughout the Chamber.

In many ways, as has been rammed home many times today, our road network is the backbone of Britain.

**Trudy Harrison** (Copeland) (Con): Will my hon. Friend the Minister give way?

**Jesse Norman**: I would be delighted to do so.

**Trudy Harrison**: Could I ask about the Government’s commitment in relation to the improvements on the A595 in my constituency of Copeland and, in particular, the Whitehaven relief road?

**Jesse Norman**: I am glad that my hon. Friend has mentioned that; it is entirely appropriate for her, not having spoken in the debate so far, to do so. I am aware that there has been some very inaccurate reporting locally about the status of that road. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has told me that he is looking forward very much to setting the record straight himself. I would say that there is very strong recognition of the importance of that scheme in its relation to the new nuclear programme—I say that as a former Minister in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy—or the Whitehaven relief road.

**Jesse Norman**: Am I glad that my hon. Friend has mentioned that; it is entirely appropriate for her, not having spoken in the debate so far, to do so. I am aware that there has been some very inaccurate reporting locally about the status of that road. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has told me that he is looking forward very much to setting the record straight himself. I would say that there is very strong recognition of the importance of that scheme in its relation to the new nuclear programme—I say that as a former Minister in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy—or the Whitehaven relief road.

**Graham Jones** (Hyndburn) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

**Jesse Norman**: If the hon. Gentleman does not mind, I will crack on, because I have taken three minutes already and I have a lot to get through.

As I was saying, the road network is the backbone of Britain. Roads are vital lifelines for our economy. They matter whether people drive or cycle, or travel by bus or coach. They matter when people travel to work or to buy goods, and 95% of people use our road network every day. That is why the Government are in the midst of a £23 billion programme of investment in England’s roads; £15 billion of that is going on England’s motorways and major A roads—the long-distance roads that link regions together, connect us to our ports and airports and enable economic growth. That funding underpins the “Road Investment Strategy”, a five-year plan, launched by the previous Government in December 2014, that sets out the schemes and funding levels for the period 2015 to 2020. That covers more than 100 major schemes up and down the country. At the same time, there was the creation of Highways England and of a watchdog, the Office of Rail and Road, to ensure that motorists get what they are promised.

The investment plan is well under way. Since 2015, 16 major schemes have opened for traffic and 15 more have started construction. They include major investments such as the £1.5 billion A14 improvements between Cambridge and Huntingdon, and the £191 million upgrade of the M1, M6 and A14 Catthorpe junction near Rugby. However, that is only the start, and the pace is picking up.

As announced last Friday, over the coming six months, the Government will take the next steps on 55 road improvements across the country—opening eight schemes, consulting on 10 more and publishing final plans for another 29. In the course of that, we will be seeking to hear from local people, organisations and businesses to help to shape our plans and ensure that they benefit local communities.

This has been an extraordinarily interesting debate. I can only congratulate colleagues on the many schemes that they have brought not only to my attention, but that of officials and Highways England. I look forward to the debate’s being closely scrutinised in my Department and by Highways England for those points.

Several key themes have emerged from the debate. The first is the necessity of increased investment. The welcome nature of today’s news was, I think, recognised on both sides of the Chamber. The second theme is the importance of bypasses—the environmental case for them, and their heritage effects and economic effects. The third theme is the integrated nature of the road network. In other words, one does not want to beggar Peter to pay Paul; there has to be parallel investment in motorways and in A roads. Finally, there are the themes of the importance of safety and of cross-border funding and the like, on which I think all colleagues would agree.

Before I respond to some specific comments, let me turn briefly to the remarks of the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner). I was surprised that, judging by their comments, there is so little recognition by Labour of what has actually happened. The new investment should be absolutely welcomed. I can tell the House that the investment by the last Labour Government, in the period 2005-06 to 2009-10, was a little over £6 billion, and the amount currently being planned is £11.4 billion. I think that is a difference—

**Karl Turner**: Will the Minister give way?

**Jesse Norman**: No, certainly not. That is not a difference—

**Karl Turner**: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?
Jesse Norman: The hon. Gentleman had his chance to speak. [Interruption.]

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Order.

Jesse Norman: The fact of the matter is that this is twice as much money as the last Labour Government put in, and that should be recognised. To fail to do so is, frankly, to insult our motorists—to insult the people who use these roads.

If one looks down the list, it is perfectly true that the National Audit Office has talked about a degree of over-programming. It has also praised the significant improvement in the road investment strategy, and I think rightly so. The NAO report should indeed acknowledge what is well known in transport circles, which is that there is always a bit of over-programming in these things; not all these schemes arise, in terms of public investment, at the same time. An over-programming of 7%, which is what it amounts to, is not substantial. Where there are bottlenecks, undoubtedly we as a Department will be looking at them.

Let me turn now to some of the specific points. I absolutely welcome the points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert). I can confirm that construction will begin this year, as he has requested, on the A27.

Nick Herbert: “Consultation”.

Jesse Norman: Sorry, consultation; I cannot read my own handwriting. Consultation will begin on the schemes that my right hon. Friend mentions. He rightly highlights the importance of beautiful bridges and infrastructure—a point made by my right hon. Friend the Minister of State. His points have also been raised—

Graham Jones: Will the Minister give way?

Jesse Norman: I will not. The points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs were also raised elsewhere by my hon. Friends the Members for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) and I welcome those comments.

In the few seconds that I have left before handing back to my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle, let me say that the point about cycling was well made by the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran)—I am a very keen cyclist myself. The Government are investing £1.2 billion to support cycling schemes, and rightly so. The point about constraints on economic growth from lack of investment in roads was very well made by my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts). I am running out of time and I want to be sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle has the chance to close the debate if he wishes, so let me end here and thank colleagues on both sides of the Chamber very much indeed for their comments.

10.58 am

Huw Merriman: I thank you, Mrs Gillan, and all colleagues for making this such a fascinating debate. I also, as I should have done earlier, welcome the Minister responsible for roads to his place. If I continue as a member of the Transport Committee, I shall look forward to spending more time with him.

If I may, I will mention my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), who did not have an opportunity to speak. She is my constituency neighbour and has worked tirelessly to get the A27 upgraded. She has fantastic ideas, which we were not able to hear today, but we are, and will continue to be, led by her to get the A27 upgraded, and it will be to her credit, on this particular side of the geography, if that occurs.

I absolutely welcome the extra investment from the Government announced today. I perhaps should have welcomed that a bit more strongly when I opened the debate. It is interesting that so many Government Members are in the Chamber today. That suggests that they are working hard on behalf of their constituents. There are fewer Opposition Members, which suggests either that all the money was spent in their constituencies or perhaps that they are not as interested in this issue as we are. However, I thank all hon. Members for their contributions, and I look forward to more bypasses being built across the UK.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered road infrastructure.
Srebrenica Genocide Commemoration

11 am

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the support for the Srebrenica genocide commemoration.

I am very grateful for the opportunity to hold this short debate today, one week before the official anniversary commemoration of the terrible massacre that took place in July 1995 in Srebrenica. I begin by drawing the House’s attention to my interest in this matter. In October last year I visited Bosnia as the guest of the UK charity Remembering Srebrenica, and I am now a member of the charity’s north-west regional board. I know that other colleagues have also visited Bosnia with Remembering Srebrenica, and every single one of us who has done so has been profoundly affected by what we saw and heard there.

The House is familiar with the history of this terrible atrocity. In July 1995 Bosnian Serb forces overran and captured Srebrenica, a town that in 1993 had been declared a UN safe area. In the days after the fall of Srebrenica more than 8,000 Bosnian Muslim boys and men were separated from their families, systematically massacred and buried in mass graves—some after desperately trekking for days to seek safety. Many of those graves were then dug open again and the remains removed and scattered across new graves in a bid to hide the evidence of what had happened, leaving families with the agony of not knowing where their loved ones have been buried. Thousands of women, children and elderly people were forcibly deported, while throughout Bosnia between 20,000 and 50,000 women and girls suffered rape and sexual violence. The appalling events that took place at Srebrenica have rightly been characterised by international courts as genocide.

Serbian aggression and a determined process of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia lie at the root of this atrocity, but the international community also has charges to answer. UN troops responsible for protecting the safe area status of Srebrenica turned away thousands of Bosnian Muslims who had travelled there to seek their protection, in some cases delivering them directly into the hands of the Serb army. Then they ran away themselves. It is not surprising that the sense of having been let down by the international community is palpable in Bosnia, and not just in Srebrenica. Again and again, during my visit last year, Bosnians told me of their anger and bafflement at the US decision, in the autumn of 1995, to end NATO bombings of Serb positions in Sarajevo following the desperate siege that the city had endured since 1992, just as the Serbs were within days of being defeated.

The anger and hurt continues today because 22 years on families are still living with not only the horror of what they saw and experienced but the agony of losing their loved ones—still, in many cases, waiting desperately in the hope that their remains will be found and identified. I pay tribute to the work of the International Commission on Missing Persons, which continues its painstaking efforts to identify the victims.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I first congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate? In Northern Ireland we have a particular understanding of those who are missing and have never been found; therefore, this resonates clearly with us as elected representatives from Northern Ireland. Does she agree that the poignancy of last year’s memorial, when the bones of a further 127 victims were identified and then buried 21 years on, must live in our memories? Does she agree that this House and the Government must look to ensure that this never happens again, whether in Northern Ireland, Srebrenica or anywhere else in the world?

Kate Green: Yes, the hon. Gentleman and his fellow Northern Ireland compatriots have a particular understanding of the horror that occurs when violence and murder take place. He is right that we repeatedly fail to learn the lessons, and yet even in our own lifetimes we have examples close to home, in the Balkans and in Rwanda—around the world—that remind us of the lessons that we should take on board.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. May I also draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests? I have also been on one of Remembering Srebrenica’s visits to Bosnia and Herzegovina, and she is right that it is a profoundly moving experience. I am glad that she mentions the work of the International Commission on Missing Persons, which has been absolutely vital in helping about 70% of families to know what happened to the remains of their loved ones who were missing as a result of the conflict.

There is still a huge amount of work to be done—around 8,000 victims of the war are still unidentified and missing—so the work of the commission is really important, including its groundbreaking work on data matching and DNA matching. That work is useful and crucial not only in Bosnia and Herzegovina but in natural disasters, and I fear it will be increasingly important in tracking down missing persons from conflicts such as the current one in Syria. Does my hon. Friend agree that while Britain and other donors have been quite generous in supporting the international commission, it often lives too much from hand to mouth and we really need much more predictable, long-term funding for its work? Even though it should not have to exist, it does have to; it is vital and sadly will remain so for a long time to come.

Kate Green: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. Anyone who has seen for themselves the exceptional work carried out by the ICMP will understand how protracted, detailed and painstaking it has had to be and that its applicability both to natural disasters and to—should they occur, God forbid—other conflicts could be of importance for many years to come. I hope that in responding to the debate the Minister will say something about continued funding for it, because during my visit last year there were certainly concerns that that could no longer be assured.

It is not just the memory of what happened 22 years ago that causes such concern, consternation and dismay in Bosnia today. Still today Bosnian Muslims experience discrimination and injustice. In 2015, in an aggressively muscular display of power, Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik held an illegal referendum attempting to mark 9 January as an official holiday. It was deemed unconstitutional by the constitutional court of Bosnia and Herzegovina for not drawing on the values shared by all three of the constituent nations.
During my visit I was told of continuing levels of unemployment and poverty, and of young people leaving Bosnia because there is no hope for their futures. I was told that Serbs refuse to allow the history of the genocide to be taught in schools, while the Dayton agreement, which ended the conflict, has bared in territorial and political arrangements that reflect and embed the ethnic cleansing that took place and leave non-Serbs shut out of public office.

It is right to recognise the positive actions of the international community and the convictions secured at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. The UK has been at the forefront of steps to address Bosnians’ continuing sense of injustice, leading the way in drafting a UN Security Council resolution to mark the 20th anniversary of the genocide and calling for 11 July to be established as a memorial day for its victims—a resolution that, shamefully, was condemned by Serbia and vetoed by Russia. But discrimination against Bosnian Muslims continues to this day. The wider threat to peace continues, as do efforts—in particular by Russia—to disrupt the legitimate use of power in the region. I hope the Minister will update the House on UK and international efforts to address that.

In the second part of my remarks, I shall turn to action here in the UK to recognise and honour the victims of the genocide and learn lessons from it. I am sure that the House will join me in paying tribute to the aims and work of Remembering Srebrenica, teaching current and future generations about the consequences of hate and intolerance. Let me give some examples from my own city. In May this year, one of my fellow travellers to Bosnia, Dr Robina Shah—deputy lieutenant of Greater Manchester, working with Greater Manchester police—and Paul Giannasi of the International Network for Hate Studies, organised a hate crime conference in Manchester to raise awareness of how low-level prejudice can escalate to full-scale murder. On 16 July, local community champions in my region will walk 23 miles from Blackburn cathedral to Manchester city centre to commemorate the atrocity and show community cohesion. On 13 July I shall be proud to join predominantly female contributors in Manchester cathedral as part of Remembering Srebrenica’s annual remembrance service.

I know that the Government, too, are working to remind young people and communities of the terrible genocide and encourage them to learn lessons from it. The Department for Communities and Local Government funds activity to raise awareness of the massacre, but it is not clear how well that work is integrated into wider Government strategies to address hate crime and extremism, including work with the Department for Education and with schools. Will the Minister update the House on cross-Government action to ensure that the anniversary and the lessons we must learn from it are never forgotten?

Tragically, extremism and hate are still everywhere around us today, as we have been so painfully reminded by the return of terror to the streets of Manchester and London in recent weeks. We are trying once again to make sense of the hatred and intolerance that give rise to such extremist violence, which is all too often followed by reprisals and, for example, by a rise in Islamophobic hate crime. The lesson from Srebrenica and other genocides is that such violence and hatred creep up on us in stages. They begin with differentiation and discrimination, fostering and fostered by a sense of grievance or perceived grievance. Genocide results when they proceed through stages of organised persecution and execution, followed by denial of what took place. Yet at every stage, as we watch hate unfold, we have the opportunity to break into that journey and halt it.

The Government have promised to bring forward counter-extremism proposals in this Parliament. I suggest that in doing so they could learn from an understanding of the steps that lead to genocide. In particular, I hope Ministers take note of how low-level prejudice can escalate to crime, violence and murder. In our strategy for tackling extremism and extremist hate, we must actively promote tolerance in and between our communities; work with them and encourage them to educate and share with one another; support individuals bravely speaking out against hate speech; recognise and act on inequality and injustice; and intervene at the earliest possible stage.

I am glad that we have the opportunity in Parliament to commemorate the atrocity suffered by the people of Srebrenica. But commemoration must be accompanied by action, so I urge on Ministers a determination to learn the lessons of how intolerance takes root, to be alert to the markers that identify its growth, and to be resolute in working with our diverse communities to tackle it early and comprehensively. That would be a fine memorial to those who died in Srebrenica 22 years ago.

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I congratulate the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) on her heartfelt and powerful contribution to this timely debate. It was also interesting to hear interventions from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden), and I will try to address some of the points they raised.

As has rightly been pointed out, the genocide committed in and around Srebrenica some 22 years ago undoubtedly represents one of the darkest chapters in the post-war history of our continent. Because of my family background, I had more reason than many, perhaps, to have hoped that genocide had been consigned to the history books. My late mother was from Silesia in Germany; she was born in November 1939 and was forcibly removed—a phrase that later became “ethnically cleansed”—in the early part of 1945, towards the end of the war, as the red army advanced. Unspeaking atrocities took place, as many hon. Members will know; perhaps there was less sympathy for the civilian population of Germany at that time, but none the less those episodes were something that I was brought up with and told about as a young boy.

I was 30 when the terrible events in Srebrenica took place. There was a sense that we were seeing them with our very own eyes; in many ways, they seemed more horrific because there were live TV broadcasts. Many of us will remember how the Dutch UN peacekeeping force was pushed to one side by Mladčić. The bellicose rhetoric of Milošević and others in that part of the world, in the years before and immediately afterwards, was close in our minds.

I want to address a number of issues that the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston raised. I am proud, as she is, that the United Kingdom takes the matter
seriously; I hope we will continue to do so, and to fund it accordingly, in the years to come. It is difficult to talk about lessons being learned. The evil that man does, has done since time immemorial and will probably do in future, in a whole range of different ways, is a terrible thing. Clearly we need to try to educate young people about the precise aspects of what has gone on, whether in the holocaust in the 1940s or in this important genocide in our backyard in the western Balkans. However, I am always a little concerned about that easy phrase that politicians use—“lessons will be learned”. That is not to say that we should not address these issues fundamentally, in historic terms, but ultimately I fear that there will always be people with evil in their heart and evil in their mind.

When one looks at the collapse of Yugoslavia, it is very easy to blame it on forces that go back many hundreds of years or on the actions of particular politicians in the early 1990s. There were a number of decidedly evil people who held their sway because of the power that they had, military and politically, in that region at that time.

Kate Green: I very much appreciate the tone that the Minister is taking in responding to the debate and I absolutely understand that the history of humanity is littered with evil and genocide; as I said, there has not been just one genocide even in our own living memory. However, one of the interesting things that Remembering Srebrenica and other campaigners have drawn attention to is the staged process that begins with low-level prejudice and can ultimately lead to the type of terrible atrocity that we saw in 1995. Does the Minister agree that that staged process at least offers some sort of structure for trying to prevent such evil from completing its journey and, if so, can he say whether it is informing the Government’s thinking in relation to counter-extremism strategies?

Mark Field: I very much hope that it is; the hon. Lady, lady, Lady made her point very powerfully. Of course, trying to break the process down so that some concerted strategy can apply across the board does not necessarily bear with the facts, but the hon. Lady has certainly referred to one of the most important strands of the broader counter-terrorism strategy.

The hon. Lady is right that this anniversary is a moment not only to remember those who died but to reaffirm our own determination to prevent genocide in the future. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the work of the International Commission on Missing Persons, which was mentioned earlier. It has identified over 70% of those who were missing at the end of the Bosnian conflict, as the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield made clear. That work includes identifying the remains of some 7,000 of those who were killed at Srebrenica. In a way, that is a remarkable achievement, but I accept that for many hundreds, even thousands, of relatives there is still a lot of work to be done. I take very much on board the suggestion that we remember those who are still missing and stand in solidarity with their families.

In March, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office welcomed some of those who are still searching for their loved ones, including people such as Nura Begovic, whose brother is of course still missing. We had a meeting at that time that was jointly organised with the ICMP. The hon. Lady rightly talked about the ICMP’s work. This Government—like, I hope, all UK Governments of whatever colour in the future—will continue to provide resources for that work. We have provided some £3 million overall since 2000, a period that obviously extends across the political divide. I am delighted that my FCO colleague, the Minister for the Middle East, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), remains a commissioner for the ICMP.

The Government have been a strong supporter of the Srebrenica commemorations, both in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in the UK. On the 20th anniversary in 2015, Her Royal Highness the Princess Royal represented the UK at the Potocari memorial site. Representatives of the British embassy in Sarajevo attend commemoration events every year and in their doing so I hope that we are playing our part in demonstrating that the United Kingdom stands together with Bosnians in expressing our horror at the crimes committed in Srebrenica. Those representatives show our continued support for justice and reconciliation.

As has been pointed out, we also rightly commemorate Srebrenica here in the United Kingdom. Last year, the erstwhile Foreign Secretary, now the Chancellor, hosted a memorial event in the FCO. Her Majesty’s Government support this year’s commemoration at the Guildhall here in London; we will, of course, be represented at it.

We are also giving some £1.2 million to the Remembering Srebrenica project, which works to ensure that this appalling episode in European history is properly commemorated. The project itself aims to bring together people from all walks of life, from all cultures and from all faiths to highlight the destructive nationalism and hatred that lay at the heart of the Srebrenica massacre. In my view, one way of doing that is through raising awareness of genocide by taking people out to Bosnia. I appreciate that the hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield have already been a part of that process.

I know that the hon. Lady has been there and I hope that many other MPs will go out to the western Balkans, not only to commemorate Srebrenica but to see some of the positivity in other parts of that region. Croatia, which is next door, is a member of the European Union, while other nations in that region seek to join the European family. We are rightly very proud in this country of our role in this valuable project.

The United Kingdom also strives for Srebrenica to be remembered around the world. In 2015, we drafted a United Nations Security Council resolution marking the 20th anniversary of Srebrenica; as was rightly pointed out, it was disappointing, but perhaps not entirely surprising, that both Serbia and Russia objected to it and ultimately Russia, which has the power of veto, vetoed it. I hope that we will continue to make similar efforts for similar anniversaries in the future and hopefully we will eventually have a unity of purpose within the UN.

Of course, we wanted at that juncture in 2015 to remember all the victims of the Bosnian conflict, to show solidarity with survivors and to reflect on the UN’s failure to stand up and be counted on that very dark day in Srebrenica in 1995. Of course, that failure is recognised as one of the organisation’s darkest moments. As I have said, sadly Russia vetoed our resolution in
2015, but we remain committed to working through the international organisations to prevent genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes.

The theme of the Srebrenica commemorations this year is “Breaking the Silence: Gender and Genocide”. As the hon. Lady rightly pointed out, it is important to remember that while those killed in Srebrenica were almost exclusively men and boys—they were very deliberately chosen to be killed—many, many thousands of women and girls suffered appalling sexual violence and of course were left behind after the Bosnian conflict came to an end.

The FCO has been at the forefront of international work to tackle this issue since we launched our preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative in 2012. Our current focus is on ending the stigma associated with sexual violence. Last Thursday, the Inter-Religious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina signed a declaration against that stigma. The UK had a hand in that declaration, because the text was brokered by the United Nations Population Fund as part of a UK-funded project. It is just one example of our work to end such stigma, which obviously applies well beyond the issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina; it really applies across the world, with elements of sexual violence in areas where there has been a major stigma associated with it. We fully support the decision by Remembering Srebrenica to highlight the issue of stigma in this year’s commemoration.

As the hon. Member for Strangford will know from his part of the world, it is also important that we look to and build for the future. It is vital that, in looking back, we remember the victims and try to do our best to prevent anything like Srebrenica from ever happening again. However, we also need to look forward, to build for the future and to ensure that Srebrenica is not forever defined by the terrible episodes in 1995 or indeed by the past in general.

As has rightly been pointed out, reconciliation is a vital step on that road, which is why tackling stigma is so important. It is also why the UK has funded projects to help displaced people returning to the Srebrenica area; those projects have helped to create some 90 new jobs for young people in the region.

I conclude by saying that we must never forget the terrible events in Srebrenica 22 years ago. Remembering is important, not only to honour the dead but to remind ourselves that even in these modern times—civilised times, as we like to think of them—such horrors definitely remain possible and we must try to prevent them from ever happening again.

The UK can be proud of what we have done to ensure that the victims of Srebrenica are never forgotten and I very much hope that we continue that work in a similar vein. We can also be very proud of the work we are continuing to do to help the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina to look forward to the future and hopefully to build a more prosperous, harmonious and stable nation for the future. However, I fear that such work will come to nought unless, as my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary made clear during his own visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina as recently as April, the present-day leaders of Bosnia and Herzegovina deliver much-needed reforms. It really is time for the politics of hope to prevail over those of division.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended.
State Pension Age for Women

[Sir Edward Leigh in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the state pension age for women.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward, for the first time in this Session. I thank everyone who has contacted me prior to this debate and all those raising awareness of the issue. I also thank Members for their support for early-day motion 63, which is in my name.

It is a testament to the importance of the issue that though I have been a Member of Parliament for seven years, I have never seen so many MPs in Westminster Hall. Nor have I seen so many people in the Public Gallery. Many others cannot get in. I will be disciplined in my remarks, as you have requested, Sir Edward.

I have been told by Government Members that the proposal in my early-day motion is unrealistic and that no Government would agree with its aims.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I can remember this issue being raised when I was shadow Pensions Minister at the start of the previous Parliament. The situation has been going on for so long, and the Government are doing nothing. Does my hon. Friend agree that they are simply slamming the door in the face of the 1950s women?

Grahame Morris: Absolutely. I am grateful for that intervention. If I may develop my argument, there clearly is an opportunity, particularly given the new parliamentary arithmetic, for the Government to do something and put right a wrong and a glaring injustice. Judging by the fact that early-day motion 63 has been signed by Members of every party, there is cross-party support for such a solution.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Most people would agree that it is about time the matter was resolved. In the previous Parliament, before the general election, we had a lot of debates about it. I asked the Minister then responsible to meet a delegation to discuss it, and they refused. Does my hon. Friend not think that that is a disgrace?

Grahame Morris: Yes, I do. I understand that any pension changes will always be difficult and contentious, but in this case there has been a clear injustice.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is right that there is an opportunity to put this injustice right. The Conservative manifesto said:

“We abhor social division, injustice, unfairness and inequality.”

The Government have an opportunity to put their money where their mouth is so far as the 1950s women are concerned.

Grahame Morris: That is absolutely true. It is widely accepted that many of those affected by the Pensions Act 1995 did not receive adequate notification. As such, they did not have enough time to plan for their retirement.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Lab): It is really good to see my hon. Friend back in good health; I think everyone here would agree. Does he agree that if the Government can find £1 billion to prop themselves up, they can find the money for these women who have contributed to their families, our communities and our economy over so many years? If they can find £1 billion simply to save themselves through a pact with the Democratic Unionist party, they can find the money for these women.

Grahame Morris: I agree with my hon. Friend. Indeed, there is an opportunity, given the apparent support for such a solution from a substantial number of DUP Members and Conservative Members who were members of the all-party group on state pension inequality for women.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I thank my comrade for giving way. There is this mystical letter that so many women are supposed to have received about their retirement age, but I have not met one constituent who received it. The Government say that they do not have enough of a timeframe, but does he agree that many women in this country did not have enough time to prepare for this issue?

Grahame Morris: I am grateful for that intervention, and I was just about to come on to that point. These are not just my opinions; the former Pensions Minister Steve Webb said the same things. He said:

“I accept that some women did not know about it, and not everybody heard about it at the time.”

In fairness to him, he said that “it was all over the papers at the time”.—[Official Report, 13 October 2013; Vol. 568, c. 54WH.]

However, I do not think that is good enough. The Government have failed to contact anyone affected by the pension increase.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. Mr Morris, you can see how many people are trying to get in. You have been very generous taking interventions, but the more interventions we have, the longer your speech and the fewer people who will be able to get in. It is entirely up to you, but you may not want to be too generous with interventions.

Grahame Morris: Thank you, Sir Edward. I will give way one more time.

Dr Whitford: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. Would it not be reasonable for women facing a change in pension age of up to five or six years to expect a direct letter? The responses are, “You could have asked”, and, “We had a leaflet”, but why would women ask when they thought they knew what the retirement age was?

Grahame Morris: That is an excellent point, well made.

Mr Keith Simpson (Broadland) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?
Mr Hepburn: I think the right hon. Gentleman will have heard the admonishment from the Chair, so I am afraid I will have to be disciplined.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Go on, let a Tory in!

Grahame Morris: Go on then, I will. I am generous to a fault.

Mr Simpson: I am very grateful, and I am aware of the Chair’s advice. I have to declare an interest, in that my wife is one of the women who have been affected. She feels incandescent with rage. She had no correspondence whatever, exactly as the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) said.

My second point is that, as I am sure many of the ladies have found out, the website of Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs is incoherent. I was on it on Sunday morning, and the information that people get is contradictory. I hope the Minister will do something about it.

Grahame Morris: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention, and I hope that the Minister is taking due note of it. When a large delegation of women adversely affected by the changes came to see me, I checked the HMRC website, and a lot of the information is out of date, even on the number of people affected. I think that 2.4 million was the number originally quoted, but it is now generally accepted that the number is 3.5 million.

Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Grahame Morris: I will give way just one more time.

Mr Hepburn: My hon. Friend is very generous. Just to place the numbers in context, is he aware that more than 4,000 women in the Jarrow constituency alone have been robbed of their thoughts of a happy retirement? That has been stolen from them by a Tory Government, who are more willing to give a £1 billion bung to the DUP to save their necks in government than they are to look after people who have worked for a lifetime just to be happy in retirement.

Grahame Morris: Absolutely. There is a moral argument and a factual argument. I hope the Minister and his advisers will go away and reflect on the debates that have taken place—not just this debate in Westminster Hall, but the number of debates in the previous Parliament where the arguments were soundly put.

I find it difficult to understand how in any other circumstances the House would not consider this issue of inadequate notice—or, indeed, no notice—to be a case of maladministration. Various Members have raised that issue. Had any other public body failed in such a way, whether that was a Government agency or local government, there would rightly be demands for support and compensation for those affected. Those are legitimate demands, and I understand that they have been made collectively on behalf of the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign in a joint letter to the Department. I hope the Minister will comment on that.

The decision to accelerate the increases in the state pension further compounded the failings, with an impact on the same cohort that had already been failed by the 1995 Act. Age UK research found that some of the people affected, who had not been aware of the 1995 legislation, now face waits of up to six years more than they had been expecting before they can access their pension.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Grahame Morris: I will give way one more time.

[Laughter] It is like the last gala plate.

Derek Twigg: My hon. Friend is making a very good speech. To take up his point, it is the human cost that matters here. Some of my constituents have told me that they have taken up, or plan to take up, caring responsibilities and are facing real financial difficulty—and once someone is over 60 it is difficult for them to get a decent job as well. Those are real issues and the Government need to take those points on board. It is about time that the Government listened and found a way forward, rather than burying their head in the sand.

Grahame Morris: I am grateful for that intervention; indeed, every constituency is affected. I believe my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Mr Hepburn) said that 4,000 women are affected in his constituency; almost 5,000 are affected in my constituency of Easington. The women deserve both recognition of the injustice that they have suffered and some kind of financial help to alleviate the poverty that many of them are now suffering. I know that we are short of time, but I have heard some harrowing stories from women who have worked all their lives and now, through change of circumstance, have found themselves in the dire situation of having to sell their homes. They are facing enormous financial pressures because of changes in legislation that they were not aware of. That really needs to be put right.

The Labour party intends to extend our commitment to pension credit to hundreds of thousands of the most vulnerable women. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) will go into a little more detail about exploring the options for further transitional protections to ensure that all the women have security and dignity in old age.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Grahame Morris: I will give way, Sir Edward, but just because it is the Minister.

Guy Opperman: I accept that I am to be brief, Sir Edward. I want to clarify the hon. Gentleman’s position. I looked at his blog from June 2016, which maintained that the Pensions Act 1995 “timescales were such that they gave sufficient time for people to plan”. The impression from that blog is that the hon. Gentleman had no criticism of the Act. Is that still the case?

Grahame Morris: I do not think that is necessarily a fair reflection. The changes were accelerated in 2011 and, for the record, I do not think that women were given adequate time. In fact, they were not given individual
notification that the legislation had changed, and I think that Parliament and Government had a duty to notify all those affected at the earliest opportunity.

Mr Geoffrey Robinson (Coventry North West) (Lab): On the point about the abuse of procedure inherent in the non-notification of those affected, is my hon. Friend aware that the WASPI women are now seeking legal advice from Bindmans as to whether the non-notification was improper and indeed an abuse of procedure? Would the money not be much better used by the Government to settle this case, over which they have procrastinated disgracefully?

Grahame Morris: I am grateful for that very pertinent intervention; it gives the Minister an opportunity to find a solution. I am not sure what the cost of a collective intervention would be: HMRC suggested £2.4 million; the real figure is probably £3.5 million. If all those cases of maladministration were found against the Government, we could be looking at a huge settlement. Given that the Prime Minister seems to have discovered the magic money tree, perhaps a few leaves could be brought down to mitigate the effects for those who are worst affected.

In this new Parliament, it is my intention to work with all Members, irrespective of party, to secure justice for the WASPI campaigners. As I mentioned before, the arithmetic has changed. It would have been difficult to secure meaningful changes to help the women affected without the support of the Government in the last Parliament. However, we now have that opportunity.

I have received the names of those Members who signed the WASPI pledge and there are 20 Conservative and Democratic Unionist party Members in that number. That is a significant number, for people following the maths—I see the Government Whips here. I am confident that my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North will outline the Opposition’s position and the support Labour would offer to the women affected by the changes. However, in this Parliament, the extent and scope of any changes, transitional arrangements, bridging pensions or compensation depend upon those 20 Members from the Conservative party and the DUP. I would say to those 20 right hon. and hon. Members that they hold the balance of power on this issue.

I urge the Government to take a pragmatic approach. I am concerned that, to date, the Department for Work and Pensions has failed to provide an adequate and substantive response to the letter from Bindmans, the legal representatives of the WASPI campaign, which my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson) raised. That has highlighted the maladministration by the Government—

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Gentleman has now been speaking for 15 minutes. As a courtesy to his colleagues, will he please come to a conclusion?

Grahame Morris: I urge the Government to acknowledge their error, provide all those affected with some level of compensation, and provide those worst affected—those who are waiting six years longer than they had planned before they receive their pension—with some support to bridge the gap between 60 and 66.

I end with a quote from the DUP manifesto. I must confess that in all my days I never thought I would quote from the DUP manifesto; this may be my one and only opportunity to do so. It says that they would “support an end to the unfair treatment of women pensioners.”

Alongside the Conservative MPs who have signed the WASPI pledge, we have the numbers to change this policy. I ask the Minister to take this opportunity; secure the change that is needed and provide dignity in retirement for all the women penalised by the changes.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. In view of the very large number of hon. Members wishing to take part and my intention to try to call as many as possible, I must now impose a two-minute limit on speeches.

2.46 pm

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): I am grateful to be called so early in the debate. I have 4,000 women in my constituency who are affected by this issue, and I have met many; I am sure other honourable colleagues have done the same. I will have to rattle through my speech. I am sorry not to be as eloquent as I would like on their behalf.

It is a complex picture. Not only do my constituents feel that they were not given adequate information about how to plan their future, but they feel cast on the heap, so to speak, now that they are having to look for jobs. Their experience in the jobcentre has been abysmal. People who have been in senior positions are being given advice on how to dress and present themselves at interview and update their CV. There is nearly 0% unemployment in my constituency, so their chances of getting a job are pretty remote and they are finding it incredibly dispiriting to have to take part in that process.

I would like to mention Daphne—I will not give her second name—who has been instrumental in bringing the issue to my attention in St Albans. What she says reflects the position of many women, and I am actually a WASPI woman as well. She says that generations ago, people did things differently. Daphne started work very young and was only informed of the pension age change in October 2012, two and a half years before she was due to retire. She is married to a man five years older. She says that this was not how she planned to spend her life, working to a presumed retirement date, only to speak up for these women, who have worked hard all their life, working to a presumed retirement date, only to

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to join other hon. Members in speaking up for these women, who have worked hard all their life, working to a presumed retirement date, only to
see the Government move the goalposts at the last minute, giving them little or no notice and, as we have heard, causing real financial hardship.

This is the first such debate in this Parliament, but it is just the latest in a long line of debates, questions and lobby calls on the Government to right this wrong. It is necessary now because, up until now, there have been no positive messages from the Government, no mention in the Tory manifesto and no mention in the Queen’s Speech.

The WASPI women I have spoken to made their voices heard clearly in the general election by lobbying candidates, and voting for candidates who listened and committed to fight this huge injustice. The Government should not and cannot take these women for granted any more. Their voice will be heard and needs to be heeded. They are women who have sacrificed their careers for caring; who were unable to take up suitable workplace pensions, often due to unequal pay in the past. Many, because of ill health, are not able to work the extra years the Government now expect of them. That is illustrated by a constituent who asked me to raise her case and sadly died recently. At the age of 62, she had to give up work after 45 years after a long battle with cancer. She had a demanding job, and she just could not continue. The change meant that she was denied more than £38,000. She was unable to enjoy her retirement and was very worried about the financial hardship that that meant. That shows the real human impact of this Government policy. That is just one voice, but I ask the Minister to listen to the many thousands like her and work to find a solution to end this hardship and right this wrong.

2.51 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Here we are again: it is déjà vu all over again. I am delighted to see so many people supporting this debate, as they did for so many of the debates we had in the previous Parliament. I welcome back some of the longstanding supporters of the campaign, and I particularly welcome new conscripts to the campaign and longstanding Members newly converted to the campaign—partly, I am sure, by the fantastic campaigning efforts of the various WASPI campaigners during the general election, who got people to sign the pledge. I pay tribute to them again.

It is essential that we all keep united on this important campaign. I speak as a co-chair of the all-party group on state pension inequality for women. I and the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who co-chairs it with me, pledge that we will be re-forming the group shortly, to ensure that the WASPI women’s voices are heard loud and clear in this place until we get justice for them.

It is worth reminding ourselves that the state pension system is founded on a contributory principle. It is not a state benefit, for which no prior commitment is involved. Yet that group of women, who have been paying national insurance contributions over many years in good faith and have fulfilled their end of the deal, face being short-changed retrospectively. That is the nub of this injustice.

There was an unfair, disproportionate burden on women born in the 1950s. We have heard so much about the poor communication—they were not made aware of what they were going to face—and the promise of transitional arrangements that have still not materialised, despite various Ministers saying they would. In my view, that represents a breach of trust for those hundreds of thousands—indeed, millions—of women who worked hard, did the right thing and did their bit all their life. The problem is more widespread than we were ever led to believe. It threatens real hardship for many of our constituents now—not at some stage in the future, but absolutely now.

This problem is not going to go away. I hope that, with a new Minister and a new Secretary of State, we can have a new start and a clean break, and that we can recognise this injustice and do something about it at long last.

2.53 pm

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): The 1950s women have faced challenges and disadvantage throughout their working lives. Those women—I include myself among them—started work before the Equal Pay Act 1970 came into force, and they predated the principle of equal pay for work of equal value. They regularly experienced harassment and discrimination in the workplace, and they frequently had to resolve to accept low-paid, part-time jobs because flexible working was not then available to them. They are the group of women who, because of a lack of childcare provision and maternity leave, gave up work to raise children, which not only affected their personal occupational pension, if they were lucky enough to have one, but their future earning capacity.

The Government’s decision to accelerate state pension age equalisation is the most recent affront to that group of women, who, despite facing such adversity, have contributed all their working lives and deserve a decent retirement, built on solid foundations of stability and certainty. Unfortunately, the gross unfairness of the Government’s decision, combined with their inability to communicate properly the changes they introduced, has robbed that group of women of the capacity to plan their retirement with certainty and to make informed decisions. They have not been given the time needed to adapt to their new circumstances.

The Government must now act to address that intrinsic unfairness by introducing transitional arrangements for those women. Everyone agrees that the retirement age for the state pension should be the same for men and women. That is not the question. It is not equalisation for the state pension should be the same for men and women. That is not the question. It is not equalisation that is so unfair; it is the pace of the changes and the way the Government are bringing them in, along with the indifference shown towards those affected. That needs to be resolved without delay.

2.55 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): We have had this debate many times previously, and it is unlikely that much that is said today will be new. In the previous Parliament, the Work and Pensions Committee report highlighted some of the issues that the WASPI campaigners themselves raised. Among them is the key problem of communication and the lessons that can be learned from that—in particular, that all those who will be affected by future state pension age changes should be given much longer notice of them, and that there needs to be a much better communication programme to ensure no one has reason to say that they did not know when their state pension would arrive.
There are the real issues of equality and European law, which some people have overlooked—in particular, to do with the Pensions Act 1995. There are also real issues, sometimes under-emphasised by some of my colleagues, about the costs to the DWP, which are estimated to be about £30 billion, with a further cost to the Exchequer of about £8 billion from reduced tax and national insurance contributions. That is a completely different sum of money from, for example, the additional funding given to help mental health in Northern Ireland.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Earlier, the hon. Gentleman referred to communications. How can it possibly be right that when I wrote to women in my constituency whom I identified might be affected, many wrote back and said that was the first time they had ever been told by anybody? That is the injustice of the situation. [Applause.]

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. I know this is a very important issue, but I am afraid it is a custom of the House that the Public Gallery has to remain silent. I apologise.

Richard Graham: I understand the point the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) is making. That was covered in considerable detail in the report of the Work and Pensions Committee, which was chaired by his colleague, the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field). There are claims both ways on that. I suspect that there were definitely people who did not know, but perhaps not quite as many as has been suggested.

Let me come on to the Opposition parties’ proposals. In the first debate in this very Chamber some time ago, which, as the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) should know, was as well-attended as this one is, I warned the WASPI campaigners that they were in real danger of being led up the garden path by Labour and the Scottish National party. I note that, in 2016, the Labour party said it would commit £860 million to extend pension credits. That was reduced in its manifesto to £300 million, alongside a line that said:

“Labour is exploring options for further transitional protections.”

After two and a half years, I would have thought that it would have come up with some result from its explorations, but there is none so far. The Scottish National party, which simply said in its manifesto:

“We will also continue to support the WASPI campaign”,

now has the devolved powers in Scotland to give additional discretionary sums of money to those affected.

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Richard Graham: No, I will not take any further interventions. There are many people who want to speak.

My strong recommendation to the Minister is this. He is a new, capable Minister, and I know he has looked at this issue. He should focus on what extra support he and the Government can give to those women who are still in work longer than they otherwise expected to be. In particular, he should spell out more about what the Government’s strategy for “fuller working lives” involves. Meanwhile, he has in his in-tray two important issues to look at, which affect other pensioners: the fact that there are real issues for people who are getting net pay and not benefiting from their employer’s contributions, and those people with too little to get over the hurdle to get the pension at all—

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. Time out, I am afraid.

2.59 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Let me correct the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham). If he reads section 28 of the Scotland Act 2016, he will see that the Scottish Government are prohibited from doing anything about pensions or relating to age.

The key issue is communication. The Work and Pensions Committee said that people should have 15 years. The Government said, “Well, you did. It changed in 1995”. But they wasted 14 of those years by not informing women. They only started to write to women in 2009, one year before the first batch of women found that their pension age had changed. Many only discovered in 2011, when they were informed of the second change, that they were being hit by a double whammy.

The problem, as I mentioned earlier, is one of communication—an article in the Financial Times is not an acceptable way to inform women such as me, born in the 1950s, that our pension age is changing. HMRC and the DWP can certainly find us when they want to, so I would have thought they could send a personal letter. The idea that we should have to ask for our pension age is ridiculous when we have known what it was for our whole lives. The Government owe those women a duty of care; those women who have suffered the gender pay gap, raised children and cared for the sick—

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr Whitford: I will give way.

Norman Lamb: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way—

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. The right hon. Gentleman has to approach the microphone. Strictly, under the rules of the House, he should be sitting before he stands. I know it is difficult, but he has to be near a microphone.

Norman Lamb: I was sitting.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): I apologise, but he must speak into a microphone.

Norman Lamb: I am very grateful. Is it not part of the problem that all those women who have given up much of their adult lives to caring responsibilities then face real discrimination when seeking work at this age? They are therefore left in unacceptable poverty.
Dr Whitford: Those women have also faced discrimination while they were working. As a Member said earlier, they have been in poorly paid jobs—part-time or flexible work was not available. Women still occupy the bulk of low-paid jobs; women have faced and suffered 86% of all the austerity cuts since 2010. Those women have paid and paid and paid, and some of them are losing almost £50,000 of pension in the move from 60 to 66. That is utterly unjust. The Government could correct it. They should sit down on a cross-party basis to work it out, to deliver some justice, fairness and dignity for the WASPI women.

3.1 pm

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): This is a simple question of justice, of fairness and of righting a wrong that has been done to women of the 1950s generation. I was born in the 1950s—many in the Chamber will not remember them—and women did not work. We were told that we would have to rely on our husband’s pension.

Later, when we went into work, given the opportunity, we were told, “You’re working part-time; you cannot enter a private pension agreement.” We did not work not because we did not want to, but because there were no employment opportunities for working women. Some women could not be in teaching if they were married in the early 1950s; they had to give up work.

Now, those same 1950s women are called—I find this quite offensive—the “sandwich generation”: we are the ones looking after grandchildren and our elderly parents. At the same time, we are having to give up work because our pension is not there. Too many women are now living in poverty. Too many women, when they can get work, are having to accept zero-hours contracts, temporary jobs and low pay, no matter what their qualifications or skills base.

It is wrong that a generation of women have been treated in this way, ignored by Government and not even communicated with—the contempt that that generation of women have had to cope with all their working lives has been exacerbated by this Government. It is time for justice for the WASPI women.

3.3 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on bringing forward this debate at a convenient and appropriate time.

Last October, I presented a petition signed by 2,249 Waveney residents in support of the WASPI campaign. At the same time, Waveney District Council unanimously endorsed that campaign on a cross-party basis. The general election campaign, when I was knocking on doors, confirmed for me that this is a very real problem for many women who face serious hardship. It will not go away.

The all-party parliamentary group on state pension inequality for women, which will be re-formed shortly, will I am sure play its role in finding a solution. I ask the Minister, whom I know well, to consult and consider with his ministerial colleagues and to come forward with proposals to start a process to find a solution that is fair, fully considered and affordable.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): I call Chris Bryant.

Chris Bryant: I had not asked to speak, Sir Edward, but if you force me to—

Hon. Members: No!

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): I call Mary Glindon.

3.5 pm

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on securing this debate.

Five thousand women in North Tyneside are affected by the changes to the state pension age and many of them have contacted me about the acceleration of their state pension age. Women in this age group went straight into work after leaving school, so by the time they reach their state pension age they have already worked more than the 35 years expected for a full state pension. They have at least 39 to 44 qualifying years and have paid more than their fair share of contributions, but are losing at least three to four years of pension entitlement.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that those women who did not contract out of the state scheme but remained in it are disadvantaged against those who did contract out, in that a pension can often be drawn early if it is a private pension that someone contracted out to, but a state pension cannot be drawn out early?

Mary Glindon: Quite right—I have nothing to add to that.

My point is that the Treasury is making quite a saving. One of my constituents, who worked until she was in her late 50s and gave up her job to look after her father—who had dementia—thought she could manage because she thought that she would get her pension at 60, but she found she was unable to claim her pension. She then had poor health herself and was forced to claim employment and support allowance with the support of her GP. That claim was denied and, despite ill health, she now has to work two cleaning jobs to support herself—that is a disgrace.

I feel both sorry for and angry on behalf of the 5,000 women in North Tyneside and the other millions of women who have been cheated of their pension entitlement by the coalition Government and this Tory Government. I hope that the Minister will disagree with his predecessor, who claimed that going further than the Government have already gone could not be justified.

Our welfare state began on 5 July 1948. On 5 July 2017, I say to the Minister that a commitment by him to further transitional arrangements for those women would be a fitting birthday tribute to that great institution.

3.7 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I had a very long speech—but that will now become a very short speech.

I want to make one particular point. I was a personal finance journalist, writing about pensions, for about 15 years; also, my mother is one of those affected by
the changes. She was informed about them, but she found out relatively late, and I have many constituents in the same position.

I accept and genuinely believe that over the past 13 years—remember, the Labour Government saw through the majority of this—Governments have fallen down on the job of informing people directly, as they should have done. There was some discussion in the personal finance press—I know that because I used to write about it—but now Labour are coming along and saying, “Everything is terrible under the Conservatives”, or whatever. They were in charge for 13 years during the period in question.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Julian Knight: I will not give way, I am afraid, as I am short of time.

My other point is that the current state pension arrangements will have to rise as well. When we meet those issues in the future, we have to get them right because this country is heading for an enormous black hole. The figures are frightening—absolutely frightening.

People talk about £30 billion here, £30 billion there, but the reality is that if the Opposition parties want to form the pension system in this country needs continued radical reform. If they do not do so, and continue grandstanding, taking on policies and ignoring their own past errors, that is not going to do any good whatever.

In 2003, the Turner commission report—

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Julian Knight: I am sorry, I cannot—I did not give way to the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) either.

In 2003, the Turner commission report was born out of cross-party consensus on pensions. That has broken down. Going forward, we need a bit more co-operative work so that it does not happen again.

3.9 pm

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire (Grahame Morris) on once again securing a debate on this important matter. He has already stated the reasons why the policy is so unfair: the lack of adequate notice given to the 3.5 million WASPI women and the lack of opportunity to make contingent plans for the future in the face of such injustice. More than 4,000 women are affected in Haslingden and Hyndburn.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Catherine Vernon is one of more than 4,000 constituents in Weaver Vale affected by this issue. The only garden path the WASPI campaign led me up was to election victory and the removal of the Conservative Member for Weaver Vale. Do the maths: the majority of the former MP was 806; I had 4,400 very powerful WASPI women. I want to thank them for their campaign and I hope they continue to shake this place up until they get justice.

Graham Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. Many people want to raise concerns. This debate has been thrashed alive. I will turn to some of the comments that my constituents have made to me.

Jennifer Smith, aged 63, works as a nurse on night shifts and does not see why she should run around an extremely busy ward while her pension has been moved back. Kath Talbot, also in her 60s, has described the change as a six-year sentence and says it is heartbreaking to watch her plans go up in smoke because she has to use savings to get by. Elaine Walker, aged 62, has worked all her life, but is now disabled. On top of the changes to pensions, the Government have also cut her benefits. Joanie Fraser, aged 62, worries about an uncertain future for her and her friends, who simply cannot cope with further demoralisation after more than 45 years of hard work.

Sylvia Cottam, aged 63, wrote that she is undergoing chemotherapy and worries whether she will receive her pension if she stops work for good. Helen Grace wrote that she has had to take medication because of the stress of this change. She works in early years but said she would not have chosen that career if she had known about the pension equalisation. She and Julie Sanderson both want to emphasise the problems of means testing and the so-called transitional arrangements of 18 months. Helen Brewin says the very least that the Government could do is to look at the effect it is having on people in their 50s. Thousands of women are suffering. Finally—time is short, and I want to allow other people to speak—Wendy Critchley wrote to point out that the 1950s women were brought up in an age when working hard was encouraged. How have we ended up with such injustice?

The Government need to step up now and implement clear transitional arrangements for the women that remedy the situation they face. Their financial situation is insecure and the Government need to recognise that.

3.12 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): As other Members have observed, we have had many debates on this subject so it is fair to say that the WASPI campaign has been a success in raising its profile. However, the only measure of success that hon. Members and campaigners will judge things by is a change in Government policy.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Is it not the case that because of the arithmetic of this Parliament, the Government will have to come forward with a proposal? That is absolutely clear. The only question is whether it is a derisory one. The Minister needs to understand that point before he comes up with his inevitable offer in the near future.

Justin Madders: My hon. Friend is right that there is an arithmetical inevitability about this matter. That is a tribute to the WASPI campaign and the way in which campaigners focused on people who stood for Parliament and gained their support. Given the timescales and the people we are talking about, the sooner something comes forward, the better, because the women cannot afford to wait any further. I urge the Minister, as my hon. Friend has suggested, to come up with proposals sooner rather than later.
As we have seen following the election, Ministers have changed their minds on a range of matters, so why should the WASPI campaign be any different? Anyone who has spoken to campaigners cannot help but be moved by the compelling case that they make. I have met many of them and they have told me about how they have been affected. Many have received little or no notice at all about changes to their pension age, forcing them to reconsider retirement plans or, worse still, rejoin the jobs market some time after they thought that they would not need to work again.

I have heard from constituents who volunteered to take redundancy to save the jobs of younger colleagues on the false assumption they would receive their pension at an earlier date. They deserve better. It is no longer acceptable when we hear the Government say that change is unaffordable. As we have heard from various Members already today, we need only to look at what has happened in Northern Ireland in the past week to know that where there is a political imperative, money can be found.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP) rose—

Justin Madders: I will not give way any more.

What about the cost in unintended consequences? Constituents have told me that the position they find themselves in now has had a detrimental impact on their mental health. That has a cost to the public purse as well. If the moral and financial arguments are not persuasive, perhaps the Minister will reflect on the message that this sends out not only to the WASPI women, but to everyone.

The state pension is part of the social contract that the Government have with the people of this country. It is an important part of the state’s guarantee to people that if they pay their taxes they will be looked after in their old age or when they fall ill or otherwise face misfortune. If people do not trust the Government to deliver on that promise, we are heading down a road that we will come to regret.

3.15 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): First, I want to make clear the commitment in our manifesto; the proposer might find more enlightenment and balance in our manifesto than he does in his own. Our manifesto has committed us to continue this campaign and to continue giving the support that we afforded in the previous Parliament.

The issue is one of fairness. People have already said that the main problem is not that the pension age should be changed, but that when it is changed people ought to know that their circumstances have changed. The issue does not concern only one Government, but a range of parties. Perhaps it does not do any good to point fingers here today, but the Liberal Democrats, the Conservatives and the Labour party have all been in power during the time when information should have been given, but was not. As a result, many people have found that their pension age has been substantially changed and they are left without any provision for their immediate needs.

We are not wedded to any particular outcome. First, we have to recognise that there are some fiscal restraints. Having said that, some suggestions have been put forward, all of which would help to address the problems faced by those who first face an immediate loss of income and secondly have no provision made for filling the gap that has been caused. During this Parliament we will work with the Government and use whatever influence, however minimal or maximal, to try to get a solution. It will inevitably have to be cross-party, but the solution must help to address the problems faced by people who bear no responsibility for their problems, but had them foisted on them.

3.18 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): The WASPI campaign has been hugely effective and I congratulate the campaigners. They have been especially effective in my constituency and in my party, and we are steadfast in our support for them. As we have heard, millions of women have worked hard but had their lives totally disrupted. They are angry and they are not going away. Often they face unemployment with little hope of getting a job that is well paid, especially in a constituency like mine, which is a low-pay area. That is a poor reward for long years of work.

We do not oppose equalisation of the state pension age. Everyone says it is the way that it has been done that shows such disregard and indeed contempt. The Minister knows that it has long been the case and that it is argued on all sides that such profound changes require at least 10 years’ notice. For example, the House might be interested to know that most recently the Cridland review published in March this year recommends raising the age to 68 over a two-year period between 2037 and 2039, 20 years hence.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): My hon. Friend is completely right to point out the despicable way in which women born in the 1950s have been treated. Does he agree that women in Wales are disproportionately affected by the administration of the changes?

Hywel Williams: It is not just in Wales that that happens, but in other deprived areas of the UK—the north-east and south-west.

The Government claim to be making the changes in response to increases in life expectancy, but life expectancy varies significantly from region to region. Wales will be particularly hit. In some parts of England newborn babies might now expect to live to the age of 87, but in parts of Wales they might expect to live to just 76. Payments in might be equal, but payments out vary enormously. I urge the Government to phase in transitional state pension arrangements for all WASPI women. That requires a bridging pension and compensation for those affected, to cover the period between the age of 60 and the new pension age.

The voices of the women who have been so badly treated must be heard and heeded. Otherwise it might seem that the Minister believes that accepting unfairness and keeping quiet is just a girl’s job.

3.21 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Today’s attendance is testimony to the depth of feeling on the issue, and the Minister will know how passionate I and my colleagues are about such a grave injustice. I am sure that his
[Carolyn Harris]

predecessor left him a health warning about my personal passion on the issue. I need say nothing more about it, because my colleagues have been saying it for me. However, I feel compelled to say that the Government have betrayed the women. They have stolen their security and shattered their dreams. Without the time to prepare and make the necessary alternative arrangements, many women born in the 1950s have been left in financial despair. They do not ask for special treatment—merely for respect and fair play.

In the recent general election all my Labour candidate colleagues, most of those in the current Opposition parties and, indeed, some Conservative candidates signed the WASPI pledge. I believe I saw that on many Twitter accounts, including that of the hon. Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones), who showed support for the west WASPI campaign. I applaud those who made that brave move. Now is the time for the Government to respect their colleagues, if not the WASPI women, and to do the right thing. The women have suffered for too long. The injustice must stop now. It cannot be allowed to continue.

3.22 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The WASPI women are angry and the Government are mistaken if they think, as I suspect they have thought up to this point, that if they hold firm the women will get bored—that they will be broken or beaten in the face of intransigence and give up. They will not give up. Even if they wanted to, they cannot. It is not a matter of pin money, but money to put food on the table and keep a roof over their heads. It is about being paid the pension to which they are entitled, so that they can have some kind of dignity in their retirement. They are not asking for a handout. They are not even asking for a hand up. They are asking for what is rightfully theirs—for what they should be able to expect.

The women have every right to be angry. Any fair-minded person who knows anything about the issue must surely be angry on their behalf. The delay to their pensions effectively deprives them of, potentially, tens of thousands of pounds. It is a travesty and must be addressed. Let us not forget that an attack on their pensions is ultimately an attack on the pensions of us all. The contract between the governed and the governing lies in tatters.

If the Minister feels that the Government have painted themselves into a corner and that retreat is difficult, I say this: there is courage and strength in admitting being wrong, in doing the right thing and in giving the women their due, not because the parliamentary arithmetic demands it but because it is right. I urge the Minister today to make the right choice and right a terrible wrong—to pay the women what they are owed, so that we can start to have a serious, mature and grown-up discussion about the future of state pensions. No one is opposed to the equalisation of state pensions. That is the way forward and I urge the Minister to start walking that path today.

3.24 pm

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): I have yet to meet anyone who does not agree that the WASPI women are in a terrible position, and that the failings are the Government’s, not theirs. It is hard to dispute the idea that not enough energy or resources were put into informing the women of the changes early enough for them to prepare psychologically and comprehend what the rest of their working life and their retirement plans would be.

Approximately 5,000 of the affected women live in North West Durham, and I have not met many who have been able to save. They now live in hardship. What an indignity that is, after they have served their communities through their labour for so many years—to end their lives in poverty. I do not think that it is disputed that adequate notification was not given. The DWP’s own research said that six out of 10 women expected to reach state pension age earlier than they will do.

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is right on that point. There are 4,000 WASPI women in Leigh and they have had to set up their own group to support other women who are affected by the changes. From the time they found out what they had not initially been made aware of, the issues have been ongoing.

Laura Pidcock: My hon. Friend is right to point out that when the state fails people will organise.

I have witnessed what is happening at first hand. My mum only found out about her pension changes because of the WASPI campaign and I saw her disappointment, worry and anger that after working from the age of 13 she had to work more and more, and was robbed of nearly £40,000. For those women, who have not had enough time to prepare, who have had inadequate correspondence from the DWP and who through no fault of their own have ended up in poverty, the right thing to do is to compensate those who have already reached state pension age and provide a bridging pension for those who have not, in humble recognition that, as other hon. Members have said, it is not a benefit—it is rightfully theirs.

As other hon. Members have recognised, in the past couple of weeks we have seen that, when the political will is there, money can be found quickly to remedy a problem. I urge the Government to apply the same urgency to the present situation. There are many lessons to be learned from what is happening, but there is no justification for not putting it right. I want pension justice for those women now.

3.27 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): What a difference a few months can make in politics. At the start of June the Prime Minister told us that there is no magic money tree. At the start of July the UK Government could magically find £1 billion to save her career—at least for the short term. Of course, if things do not go to plan it is helpful to have a safety net to fall back on. That is a luxury that many women have not been given, since the UK Government unfairly and unexpectedly changed their pension rights. Those women are often forced to accept low-paid and insecure work because some employers are unwilling to take on workers who are close to retirement age. The resulting financial hardship has forced some to sell their homes. Others have developed health problems, or have had aggravations of existing long-term health conditions, because of the stress and anxiety of their situation. Too many still face an uncertain future.
It is estimated that around 3,900 women have been affected in my constituency. Local campaigners such as Elizabeth McQuarrie have done a tremendous job of making sure that the issue is not brushed aside by the Government. If it were not for our local WASPI campaign many more women would be caught out by the pension changes, some of whom stand to lose £35,000 over five years. If the UK Government can find £1 billion to help save the Prime Minister, why have they not devoted a single penny to helping the 2.6 million women affected by unfair pension changes?

Affordable solutions are available. An independent report commissioned by the Scottish National party outlined five options that the UK Government could take to mitigate the impact of the changes. The research found that for £8 billion over five years we could return to the original timetable set out in the Pensions Act 1995. It concluded that the money could come from the national insurance fund, which is predicted to have a surplus of £30 billion by the end of 2017-18.

The women of the WASPI campaign have fulfilled their part of the bargain by being productive citizens, some of them having worked since they were 15 years old. Now it is time for the UK Government to honour their side of the contract.

3.29 pm

**Julie Cooper** (Burnley) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) for bringing another debate on this important issue. In the short time available to me I want to make a couple of points. First, the Government have set a dangerous precedent by breaking a contract with the people of this country. What does that say about what will happen in the future?

Those women have been cheated. I resent—and I am sure they do too—the implication that the Government cannot afford what they seek, and that the women are asking for Government spending. There is a contract, which the women entered into with the Government, in good faith. They worked hard, they paid in and they reasonably expected that, at 60, they would be able to collect their pensions. As many Members have said, there was no desire to fight equalisation, but there is a right of fair notice. Many of my constituents found out—some of them on their own initiative—only six weeks before their 60th birthdays that they would not be able to retire at 60 as they had expected. This is not about them fancying putting their feet up but having to work a bit longer; many women are having to continue working in physically demanding jobs when they clearly are not fit to do so.

Julie, a nurse in my constituency, relies on her income to support herself. She has worked in the NHS for 47 years. She recently experienced ill health. She thought she could just stagger on in what is a very physical role, but she now has to work for another three years. She got no notice whatever.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that, although it is crystal clear that this is a state error, only women are having to pay the price of the financial deficit in this country. Those women, who have worked hard, deserve to get what they are entitled to.

I spoke to another woman in my constituency who works in a foundry doing heavy physical work. She said she drags herself to the bus station at the end of the day and she is in bed at 7.30 pm so that she can get to work the next day. She thought she could stagger on for another 18 months until she was 60. Now, she finds she has to work extra years. Not working is not an option for her; she cannot choose not to work. She is not qualified to do anything else. She is 61; who is going to employ her to do anything now? This is unacceptable. Those women were not notified. The very least the Government could do is make transitional arrangements so there is at least a semblance of fairness and those women are allowed some sort of dignity in retirement.

**Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair):** I am grateful for Members’ co-operation. I am sorry for the short time limits, but I think we have got everyone in. We now pass to the winding-up speeches. I call Mhairi Black.

3.32 pm

**Mhairi Black** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I was going to congratulate the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on bringing this subject to the House again, but I actually find myself wishing that he had not, because I cannot believe that we are still debating it. I am absolutely scunnered with banging on about the injustice to this group of women. The fact that we have to have another debate is an absolute disgrace and says a lot about the Government and their priorities.

We are at the stage where these debates are almost scripted for me. I know exactly what is going to come back from the Government Benches and, like most people here, I know what I am going to say. We have heard the Government argue, “Well, the 1995 Act gave 15 years’ notice. That is exactly what the Turner commission recommended, so what is the problem?” Let me say it as clearly as possible: the problem is that nobody knew about these changes. The first letters were not sent out until 2009—14 years after the changes. To put that in context, I have been alive only eight years longer than that. That is 14 years in which consecutive Governments sat on their backside and did nothing, and the Government are now complaining that women are—quite rightly—angry that they never knew about the changes.

The thing is that the Government did not tell us about this issue with their hands in the air and say, “Aye, you’re right, sorry. We got that a wee bit wrong.” The information came from the hard-working women behind me in the Gallery through freedom of information requests and constant letters to the Government. The Government have been nothing but obstructive and downright stubborn the whole way through this campaign and since the issue was raised—so much so that the SNP actually went away and re-did its own work. We used our own money to commission our own report, which shows that this issue could plausibly be sorted and the legislation could at least be amended a wee bit.

All it would take is £8 billion spread across five years. That is a substantial amount, but as was said by the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham)—I had the pleasure of serving with him on the Work and Pensions Committee—the idea that the Government will genuinely stand in front of everyone here and say,
Mhairi Black:

"We can't afford it," is quite frankly laughable. It has been pointed out many times that they found £1 billion for a deal to cling on to power, but they say they cannot find the money to give women the pensions they are due.

Ian Blackford: My hon. Friend is a very reasonable person; let us see whether we can help the Government. We know that the national insurance fund has a surplus of £30 billion. Let us lay to rest the myth that there is a black hole. The Government Actuary's Department's own figures suggest that that fund will remain in surplus until at least the mid-2030s. May I suggest to the Government that they use that surplus? Women have paid in to the fund; let us make sure they get their pension, and let us do it today.

Mhairi Black: Not surprisingly, I agree with that statement. I heard some muttering from the Government Benches about how that is a lot of rubbish. Let me just say this: if that is a lot of rubbish in their heads, they should bring their plans forward. They do not get to criticise other parties' plans when they have not even bothered to come up with their own.

Like I say, the debate is almost scripted, because I know that the Minister will say at some point, "We did look at this in 2011 and we did make the concessions at the time." I guarantee that the Minister will say that. Let my reply be this: that is not how the world works. That is not how society works. If citizens come to them with a time-sensitive problem and say, "This still isn't working," it is the Government's job to listen. It is not the job of the Government to look back and go, "We talked about that a couple of years ago, so I'm afraid there's no movement there whatsoever." If that is the case, I am looking forward to the next time the Army needs new funds, the next time this Parliament needs doing up, and so on. The idea that we cannot afford it is ridiculous.

Fundamentally, the worst part of this whole issue is that these women are targeted. The Government like to sit back and act as though these women are just unfortunate casualties of austerity and say, "Our hands are tied; we can't do anything." That is not the case; they are targeted. These are women who have suffered pay inequality and social inequality all their lives. We even heard earlier that women were told to use their husbands' pensions. Society has changed a lot since then. What are we doing for these women now? And what about lesbian couples—women who are in equal marriages with other women?

I am amazed that I feel the need to point this out. These women are blameless. They are guilty of nothing. They have done nothing wrong other than, for instance, not reading the back pages of the Financial Times in 1995. The only other two things they are guilty of are being born in the '50s and being women. The Government do not get to plead that this is all in the name of equality; when only women are suffering under their definition of equality, it is time for them to re-assess that definition.

Fundamentally, Governments should look after their people. When their people are coming to them and saying there is a problem, it is their job to fix it. Let me put a little reality into this. I got an email today from a WASPI woman. I cannot remember where she is from—it is somewhere in England. She told me that her friend committed suicide after seeing the general election result because she could not face what would happen to her. Citizens are committing suicide over an issue that could be solved just like that—an issue that the Government could do a U-turn on at any given moment.

The Government managed to fork out a magical £1 billion to cling on to power; they must really want the job of having to fix these things. When they can find £1 billion for self-interest, they do not get to claim that money is the reason they cannot help.

The Government quite rightly dropped their manifesto pension plans—two of them in total, I think—because they saw how damaging, unworkable and unpopular they would be. That was wise. In actual fact, I have a bit of respect for them for being able to go, "Aye, we got that wrong, guys, so we're pulling back. We're listening to you." I say, I hope for the last time; just drop one more plan. Realise that this issue is cross-party and affects people from different backgrounds and different areas. These are people's mothers, aunties, sisters and cousins. Please do the right thing. Do the job of the Government—fix the problem and start looking after people.

3.39 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I thank my hon. Friend and north-east England colleague the Member for Easington (Graeme Morris) for securing the debate, and I thank everybody who has contributed this afternoon. Speaking of north-east colleagues, I also congratulate the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman) on his promotion to Pensions Minister—it appears his jockeying for position in the political world has finally paid off. I was pleased to have a good—even friendly—working relationship with his predecessor, the hon. Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), and hope for the same with him.

We can start that right here with a friendly offer from the Opposition to work together across the House to deliver much fairer transitional arrangements for the much-wronged 1950s-born women, who saw their pension age accelerated by several years with little or no notice. The Minister is in a strong position to deliver change. All of us on the Opposition side, including the Government's allies in the DUP, back the '50s-born women's cause.

My hon. Friend the Member for Easington spoke of the all-party parliamentary group or through election pledges; others have done so today. That is enough to provide a majority in the House of those who want to see action taken to alleviate the difficulty faced by the most vulnerable women, now in their 60s. I am sure that each and every one of those Members will want to report back to their constituents that they have fulfilled their promises. It is quite a list, and I would love to share it with the Minister if he wants it.

I have spoken for the official Opposition on '50s-born women more than half a dozen times since I accepted my role nine months ago, with other parties throwing
their weight behind some form of support for the women who have been affected by these changes. Still—perhaps just until today—the Government have stuck their collective head in the sand. Yes, we now have a new Secretary of State and a new Pensions Minister—and, as has already been said, even a new Parliamentary Private Secretary, the hon. Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones), who is a declared WASPI supporter, having signed one of WASPI’s pledges to “do all he can to work for a solution if elected”.

He could not be better placed to influence change for the better. Perhaps now the Government will take positive action and introduce new measures to reduce the strain on the most vulnerable women and men who have been affected by these increases in the state pension age.

I have heard from numerous women affected by the changes, and heard stories of their desperation and fear about how they will cope now that they have to wait even longer for their state pension. Does the new Minister understand how difficult it is for a woman in her 60s to retrain and gain employment? The job market and skills needed in today’s workplace are a different world from that of 40 years ago. What we have is a system that does not help older people retrain and get back into meaningful employment, a welfare system being torn to pieces, disabled people being humiliated through repetitive assessments, and now a state pension that is becoming increasingly difficult to access. Once again it is Labour, and others, who are standing up for the vulnerable. It is Labour calling out the injustice that ordinary people face, and Labour is the loudest voice demanding action. I know what the Conservatives are doing: they are trying to ignore the issue in the hope that the years will drop, and they will get away with leaving older people to struggle for many years to come.

We heard during the election that there is not a magic money tree—others have referred to that—but whenever the Government need funds to support their aims, they find it. There is no magic money tree, but they found that £1 billion to which others have referred to secure that deal with the DUP, to keep Theresa May in power. That strengthens the case for the Government need funds to support their aims, continuing to look at other ways to ensure that those who need support receive it, but we need the Government to get on board and work with us. If the Minister would like a conversation about how we can deliver a cross-party approach to secure fair transitional arrangements to the most vulnerable ’50s-born women, I will be pleased to meet him. The general election result delivered a verdict that the Conservatives no longer have the full confidence of the country to govern. That strengthens the case for a joint approach in this case.

I have a number of questions for the Minister. Has he had any discussions with the new Secretary of State about the plight of ’50s-born women? Do they accept that many women had little if any notice of the change in their pension age, and that those women ought to be recompensed in some way? Will he and the Secretary of State agree at least to a review and then change their policy, offering at least the most vulnerable women something to get by on? That is what it is about—getting by.

Previous DWP Ministers wanted to help these women, but they had the Treasury doors slammed shut in their faces. In these very different days of unstable Government, I hope the Minister will now be able to assure the House—including those 37 Members of his party—that he takes this matter seriously and that he will work with us and others to deliver a fair and meaningful solution to this problem and, above all, win some friends and make himself the Government champion for these very wronged women.

3.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): We are from different sides of the political fence, but the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) and I are united by one key thing: we have both beaten cancer. I would like to start by saying how pleased I am to see my fellow tumour survivor back in his place. I wish him well with his future treatment. He can imagine my joy when, on day three of my new job as Minister for Pensions and Financial Inclusion, I was told that he had secured a debate on women’s state pensions—the first debate I would have to answer here in this House.

Jo Swinson: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: Not yet, no—I am not going to. All of us here, as constituency MPs, have met women who have been affected by the state pension age rises. I have met them ever since my election as Member of Parliament for Hexham in 2010, and during the passage of the 2011 Act. Whether they are affiliated to the WASPI campaign or not, I have seen them in and out of my surgeries, like all colleagues have done. Like many, I have answered correspondence on the issue. I make it clear that I will be delighted to meet the all-party parliamentary group when it is re-formed, as I am sure it will be, and will be in a position to sit down with them to discuss their ongoing situations.

The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) said that she expected me to speak only about the 1995 Act, the 2011 Act, all the transitional arrangements and so on. I accept, and she will understand, that I have to make the case on those matters, not least because of what has been said, but I want this debate to be done in a different way. I want to say two things at the outset.

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If individual Members of Parliament have specific cases where they feel their individual constituents are affected by state pension age changes and find themselves in financial hardship, whether they are people who have to reduce their hours because of sickness, disability or caring responsibility, I and the London DWP team will look into those individual cases. As Members pass them on to us, we will do what we can to provide assistance, whether that is understanding of the availability of carer’s allowance, housing benefit, tax credits, income support, employment and support allowance or other benefits. However, the essence of what I want to address the House on is this.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: No, I will not. It is not the Government’s position that we will make further concessions by the 1995 or 2011 Acts. The fundamental point—at this point I really wish to address the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South—is that the Government have done a massive amount on a progressive basis to get people back into employment or retraining in their pre-pension years.

First, we created, and we have now extended, a network of older claimant champions in all 34 Jobcentre Plus districts in the country. The champions work with Jobcentre work coaches to provide advice and best practice on skills provision, digital and social support and job-search support, which leads into the “Fuller Working Lives” strategy issued by the Government on a cross-Government basis in February this year.

Secondly, we have committed massively to lifelong learning. The reality is that more than 200,000 people aged over 60 have entered further education since 2014-15.

Guy Opperman: Thirdly, we have also extended apprenticeship opportunities—one of the best routes into skilled employment—for people of all ages and gender. For example, in England in 2014 to 2015, 12% of those starting apprenticeships were aged over 45.

Carolyn Harris: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: I am going to set out these matters; please bear with me. In the 2017 Budget, the Chancellor allocated £5 million to increase the number of returnship schemes. We are working with employers across the public and private sectors to understand how returners can be supported back into permanent employment, building on successful examples run by companies such as Centrica.

I realise it is not going down well, but the point I am trying to make is that the Government are actually doing a significant amount to address the individual difficulties for those persons attempting to enter the labour market. Last year, the Government appointed Andy Briggs, CEO of Aviva, as the dedicated business champion for older workers, to spearhead work with employers on a business-to-business basis. I met Mr Briggs two days ago. He is clearly passionate about his mission to persuade employers to increase the number of older workers they employ by 12% by 2022.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. The Minister is entitled to give way or not.

Graham Jones: On a point of order, Sir Edward. Did the Minister just say that women aged 64 could go on an apprenticeship course? I could not hear because of the noise. Perhaps he could clarify that.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): The hon. Gentleman is very experienced and knows that that is not for me.

Guy Opperman: In May 2017, Mr Briggs launched the “Commit and Publish” campaign, challenging employers to monitor the age of their workforce and publish figures by the end of 2017. A significant number of companies have already bought into that, including Aviva, Barclays and the Co-op. I assure colleagues that I will be assisting Mr Briggs in pursuing that campaign with all the rigour that I brought to my campaign for the introduction of the living wage.

In February 2017, the “Fuller Working Lives” strategy was launched on a cross-Government basis. I urge colleagues to read it, because if we are frank, an assertion has been made in the debate that the Government are doing nothing to try and encourage persons who are prior to pensionable age into employment. There are a number of different matters, which I have set out, and those are particularly set out in the “Fuller Working Lives” strategy.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: I will not, because I have a lot of points to make. The strategy aims to increase the retention, retraining and recruitment of older workers, and bring about a change in employers’ perceptions and attitudes—surely something that we would all endorse and wish for. We know that many people approaching the state pension age want to continue working or would like to be in work, and we have changed the law to abolish the default retirement age. I do urge colleagues to read the strategy.

After extensive debate, the 1995 Act changed the 55-year-old status quo by equalising pension ages for men and women at 65, with that change taking place between 2010 and 2020, depending on age. That statute was debated at length, and the changes were then the subject of widespread advertising, debate, leaflets, letters and 16 million state pension forecasts.

I am not here to criticise the 1995 to 1997 Conservative Government, nor the 1997 to 2010 Labour Government; I suggest that they made real efforts to communicate the change passed by Parliament in 1995. I rely in support of that on what the hon. Member for Easington said when he wrote of the 1995 Act in his blog in June 2016:

“The timescales were such that they gave sufficient time for people to plan for their new circumstances, and legislation was already in place that would have seen the equalised State Pension Age rise…in gradual stages”.

Grahame Morris: I ask the Minister to recognise that the issue was not the timescale; everyone agrees that 15 years is enough time. I was trying to highlight in my blog that the individuals were not given notice.
Guy Opperman: With great respect to the hon. Gentleman, the whole thrust of what he said in June 2016 was that there was no objection to the 1995 Act, due to the passage of time. He has now changed that position. I am only pointing out that the 1995 Act had a 15-year time limit. He knows full well that that is the case, and that that was his position at the time.

Sixteen years later, the coalition Government changed the approach in the Pensions Act 2011. The change was in a context where the impact of the post-war baby boom years is clearly still being felt. The number of pensioners is going up dramatically; notwithstanding any of the changes made by the 1995 and 2011 Acts, there will be around 25% more pensioners in 2050 than today. That is an extra 4.5 million pensioners compared with now.

Life expectancy has increased massively. In 1940, Government policy making indicated a retirement age at 60, and our forebears looked at a life expectancy of three score years and 10. Those days are long gone. A girl born today has an average life expectancy of 93. Those changes in life expectancies are significant, and the reality cannot be ignored. It is not ignored, and is set out in greater detail in the Cridland report, which looks at the future situation in relation to long-term pension age changes.

Carolyn Harris: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: I have a minute and a half to finish, so I will culminate on this point. In 2011, there was extensive debate on those changes in the House of Commons. The matter was debated on a number of occasions between February and November 2011 in both the Commons and the Lords. Subsequently, the Department for Work and Pensions and the coalition Government made efforts to notify those affected, with 5 million letters sent out and a range of information provided, to make individuals aware of their state pension age.

I will make three final points. In relation to the transitional provisions, it is the case that the position was different in the original 2011 Act. Following extensive parliamentary debate in both the Commons and the Lords, that Act was changed such that no woman affected by the 2011 Act would have to wait more than 18 months from the date that they might have been expecting their pension. For some, the time will be much less. I also make the point that the new state pension introduced in 2016 is better and much more generous for many women than that which existed under the old system.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Easington on securing the debate. It is not the Government’s proposal to repeal or ameliorate the 1995 or 2011 Acts, but I accept that we must do all we can to assist everyone affected into retraining and employment, and to provide support if that is not possible. The commitment to provide support is clear, unequivocal and ongoing.

3.58 pm

Grahame Morris: I thank all Members from all parties and on both sides who have attended the debate and spoken with such passion on behalf of WASPI women. In defence of the Minister, who is a good and honourable man, I hope he will have a chance to reflect on the arguments that have been made and the passions that are running high, and apply the principles of natural justice to the women affected by these changes. As a nation, we owe a debt of honour to the WASPI women, many of whom are now in ill health, who have paid their contributions and who are not looking for apprenticeships at age 64 but for some recognition of their contribution—sometimes over 44 or 45 years or more. I ask the Minister to discharge his responsibilities; otherwise, the people may discharge this Government.

Question put and negatived.
**Working Conditions in the Private Hire Industry**

[**Mrs Madeleine Moon in the Chair**]

4.1 pm

**Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair):** I ask colleagues to leave quietly, so that time is not lost by the mover of this debate.

**Frank Field** (Birkenhead) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the regulation of working conditions in the private hire industry.

I am immensely pleased to introduce the debate under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I hope that the Minister can be more accommodating on this issue than his colleague was in the previous debate. Indeed, I shall begin by buttering him up, if I may, although I realise that there is a limit to what buttering up will do in the House of Commons, particularly of this Minister. During our parliamentary lives, we have often debated, and debated well, across the Chamber, and I know perfectly well that if he is able to make or clarify the Government’s position before the Taylor report is published, he will do so. However, I also know that he is a loyalist and will probably be the last Minister standing who believes in collective responsibility, so the buttering up must be accompanied by a sense of reality about how far Ministers can go in helping to clarify Government policy.

My aim in this debate, as I hope the Minister knows, is not to have a preview of the Taylor report—although if he wished to give one, that would be wonderful—but to ascertain whether he can help the transport executives to clarify the powers that they have to give licences to companies such as Uber. I shall dwell in a moment on where I see Uber both contributing positively and being a destructive force for many people’s living standards.

I begin the debate with a reference to a report on Hermes, “Wild West Workplace”. That and two subsequent reports have my name on them, but also that of Andrew Forsey, who works with me. The truth, as MPs know, is that it is often the other name on the report who has actually done the work, and I pay tribute to Andrew for the extraordinary way in which, among all his other activities as chief of staff in my office—including steering me away from elephant traps and helping me to make as positive a contribution as I can to the House of Commons—he can take on work of this nature.

The second report, “Sweated Labour”, was on Uber, and the third one, which will be published tomorrow, is “A new contract for the gig economy”. I want to record in this debate that when Andrew and I—it was very much Andrew—completed the first report, “Wild West Workplace”, we wrote to the Prime Minister, and we said that the circumstances that we had described had shocked me and my guess was that they would shock her. They were certainly at variance with her statement when she became Prime Minister about the sort of society that she wished to create and the protections that she wished to extend to those who were weakest.

If we look at any of the three reports—if people would like copies of “A new contract for the gig economy”, which is published tomorrow, they can by all means have them—we see that four forces are pushing down wages in this area. Let me explain what I am not saying, and I hope the Minister will accept this. Nothing I have ever said or published does not admit that Uber-type conditions certainly serve a large part of consumers’ wishes for quick and cheap transport, or that perhaps many Uber workers are very content with their lot, as shovelled out by Uber under what I think is a bogus self-employed contract. I am talking about people who regularly write to Andrew and me, giving more examples of how bogus the self-employed contract that they are forced to work under is, and of the appalling conditions that those employers get away with. As we know, they not only get away with paying incredibly low wages to some workers; they do not pay their fair share of taxes, so I would hope that the Chancellor of the Exchequer would be on the Minister’s side. If we are interested in VAT, national insurance and income tax returns, we should be rather keen on what the Minister says today and what the Taylor review will come up with, I hope, next week—perhaps the Minister will be able to give us a date for its publication.

Wages have been pushed down for those who suffer worst in this gig economy in four ways. The first is the very low fares, which have been cut in recent years, which some people think is great fun because they can get home cheaply. Second are the high rates of commission which some people think is great fun because they can make a decent living out of being a driver, and older drivers, who—thank God—are more protected, although now that I have made that statement, perhaps that image will be challenged by people who contact us after the debate. Third is the cost of renting a vehicle that meets Uber’s very strict requirements, and fourth is the cost of refuelling and maintaining those vehicles. Those are the downward forces in the economy that make it very difficult for people to make a decent living and, indeed, as I shall argue, to make a living in which they are covered by the statutory minimum wage.

I welcomed it when George Osborne initiated the minimum wage strategy in the previous Parliament. It is very important to try to cover and protect people at the bottom of our society. I saw the then Chancellor of the Exchequer’s move as a very welcome one, but we know that it is failing by the way Uber and other companies get round regulations on how people earn, what they earn, the hours that they undertake, and their employment status.

The Government responded to Andrew’s report by establishing the Taylor review, which is to report soon. We hope that it will accept the main recommendation on which Andrew and I have been campaigning, which is that the definition of hours of work is immensely important in this area and that, on the basis of a satisfactory definition of hours worked—satisfactory to the workers rather than to Uber—the minimum wage should be applied on an hourly basis.

That brings me to the real kernel of the debate—the part to which I would love the Minister to respond. Uber and similar companies are registering in London, Leeds, Liverpool and Glasgow, getting the necessary licences from those areas’ transport executives. Is it because the legislation is uncertain or difficult to interpret that these transport executives are not saying, “These are the minimum conditions that you, the company, must meet if you wish us to grant you a licence to operate in our area”? I would like to hear the Minister’s view, but I think the position is quite clear.
It would take just one transport authority to say, “This is the interpretation.” We have not heard any of them say that, although, thankfully, here in London Sadiq Khan has said that he is unsure about Uber and is giving it a very short licence to continue to carry out its business while this essential issue is debated. Is the Minister in a position to give us a clearer ruling on the encouragement that he might give to transport authorities to recognise that they do have powers, and to such companies to behave within the culture that the Prime Minister spoke of when, perhaps unexpectedly, she became Prime Minister?

Before I conclude, I shall be more than happy to let any hon. Member make an intervention.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): My right hon. Friend has touched on some troubling issues in the current employment market, particularly in relation to private hire vehicles. The Law Commission looked at some of those issues in its 2014 report, but new factors have since emerged, including Uber’s increased share of the market and the Deregulation Act 2015. Does he agree that there is a clear case for looking again at the regulation of the taxi and private hire sector more generally, even as we await publication of the Taylor review?

Frank Field: Yes, I do. I am grateful that I gave way, because my hon. Friend has put it better than I could have and has raised another question for the Minister.

Let me conclude. There have been two great movements in our recent history as a country. One was the movement of people from the countryside into towns. When that happened, decent people sought to find out what was happening to their fellow citizens, because they were horrified by the exploitation that they suffered. There were local statistical societies in all our towns, and the theme was taken up by the House of Commons in Select Committee reports, by the House of Lords, by royal commissions, and by the Government, who set up a national statistical service.

The second big movement, which has occurred in our lifetimes—one is sometimes unaware of just how big it is—has been the falling away of the bottom of the labour market. We are now in a situation that I would have thought inconceivable when I first came into the House in 1979. People are scrambling around for jobs. When I was growing up, there was the idea—almost a law of nature—that our economy would produce jobs that gave people wages that allowed them to marry and begin their families securely. For an increasing number of our fellow citizens, that world has long since passed.

I will not be controversial, as the previous debate was, but what has been happening at the bottom has been much affected by what the Government call welfare reform, but I prefer to call welfare cuts. However, in the spirit of the Minister—who I know is one of those Tory Members who has a sense of what the human spirit is about and why we are here—I ask him to help us in just one small area: the protective role that transport authorities could play.

I also hope that the Minister will reply in the spirit of the Prime Minister’s pledge to throw a new form of protection over the bottom end—the vulnerable tummy—of English society, which has lost out so greatly from the changes documented to us by our constituents. If we cannot be moved only by a wish to extend human dignity or to make a further commitment to the Prime Minister’s pledge, I hope the old money—the till—will play some part for the Chancellor. The way in which these companies are constructed means that they are fiddling: they do not pay their dues in VAT, national insurance or income tax, which means the rest of us have to pay for them. They are now registering returns on their very limited capital that are out of this world and should be tamed. In the west, with our democratic traditions, we usually look to government as one of the instruments for taming the wilderness of wild capitalism. I happily turn over to the Minister.

4.16 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): What a delight to respond to the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field)! He knows that I admire him almost as much as I admire Lord Birkenhead, F. E. Smith, whom we have discussed from time to time and who said that “glittering prizes” were available “to those who have stout hearts and sharp swords.”

The right hon. Gentleman has both those qualities, as he has illustrated once again by bringing these important matters to our attention.

I had a long speech prepared for me by my civil servants, whom I hold in very high regard, but I am never inclined to deliver speeches written for me by anyone else, and I am certainly inclined to try to answer the right hon. Gentleman’s specific points. It seems to me that Westminster Hall debates have to fulfil a greater purpose than simply parroting what the Government have already thought or said. They have to move policy on, do they not? At least, that is how they should operate. We will try to make sure that that happens today.

In a way, the right hon. Gentleman has already set the scene for me, but perhaps it is worth affirming some of what he said. I am aware of concerns about the changing character of the landscape for taxis and private hire vehicles. He is right that technology has played a big part in that, and technology has a consequent effect on consumer expectations and demands. Supply changes to meet those demands but it stimulates changing demands, too, and that is precisely what has happened in this area.

Taxis play an important part in the life of London. I use taxis a lot, as do my family. My son, who is in the Public Gallery today, is a devotee of London cabs, like many others before him and, I hope, after him. London taxis are iconic. One thinks of London—indeed, the whole kingdom—in terms of certain totems and emblems. One of those emblems is the London black cab. The right hon. Gentleman described my concern for the human spirit, but I also have a profound concern for aesthetics, inasmuch as they are part of how we perceive the world: how we come to terms with our own consciousness of reality. London cabs are a part of that.

London cabs provide a vital service, not just to tourists but to Londoners. It is true that the tourist looks to the London cab for the reasons that I have given—they see them as iconic. If a tourist comes to London, they want to ride in a black cab just as, if they went to New York, they might want to ride in a yellow one, but cabs also provide valuable utility.
The history of London cabs is that people know what they are going to pay, they can be confident of the driver’s ability to get them where they want to go as quickly as possible and London cabs have a good record on safety and security, which of course are important matters when one gets into a vehicle with a driver one has not previously known and perhaps not even met. Those things are of profound and lasting importance.

None the less, requesting a vehicle via an app, whether a taxi or a private hire vehicle, is increasingly popular with the public—and unsurprisingly so. The desirability of being able to call up a vehicle as required is obvious, and that is having a quite significant effect on the market, as the right hon. Gentleman described. The difference, as I am sure those in the Chamber know, is that in addition to dealing with pre-booked journeys, a taxi can ply for hire in the area in which it is licensed. That cannot be done by a private hire vehicle.

These things lead to different models of ownership and employment, as the right hon. Gentleman said. The emergence of a different set of protocols, if I can put it in those terms, in that area is also significant. He mentioned the various reports—I have read them all, by the way, including “Sweated Labour” and the Select Committee report. The Committee did a great service in looking at these matters closely, in respect of not just taxis and private hire vehicles but more widely.

The right hon. Gentleman will be aware of all those reports, as I am, and of the ongoing legal case regarding the employment status of drivers in the private hire vehicle sector. He made it clear at the outset that his expectations of me were set very low—I do not know if you noticed that, Mrs Moon; I thought a bit too low, given what I will say later—and made it clear, in his usual spirit of fairness and reasonableness, that there is a limit to what I can say. I certainly cannot say anything that might prejudice that legal case, which is ongoing.

What I can say is that the emergence of so-called disruptive businesses—I use the term in its strict sense; I hope it will not be misinterpreted—through the application of new technologies enables new ways of working and creates new products and services. As I said, it is a different relationship between supply and demand. That has an appeal to certain consumers and provides a service that perhaps has not been provided before. However, those benefits must be balanced against the impact on those who work in these new ways. Greater flexibility in working arrangements can increase employment opportunities for those who have other commitments or aspirations, but we must equally be aware of the negatives. Nor must we regard the traditional private hire vehicle driver and operator relationship through rose-tinted spectacles and perceive it as some sort of ideal where operators work solely in the interests of drivers.

I am aware of the concerns raised by the right hon. Gentleman and others about the risks in respect of employment. Let me lay my cards on the table: I take a very strong view about the rights of workers. I am proud to be a member of a trade union. My father was a shop steward. I have enjoyed very close relationships with the trade unions throughout my time in each of the six Departments in which I have been a Minister, and continue to do so in the Department for Transport.

One problem with this sector is that because of the character and nature of employment in it, significant numbers of people may well be under-represented or not represented at all by any body that can make a case on their behalf. That puts people at a considerable disadvantage. They may not even have reasonable expectations of what their entitlements ought to be. They may not know that they are being underpaid if they do not have the opportunity to express through the kind of collective arrangement that a trade union brings their entitlements—I hesitate to use the word “rights” for philosophical reasons that I will not go further on about today, because we do not have time.

Lawful entitlements to fair treatment are at the heart of what good employer-employee relationships are all about, and that is what the right hon. Gentleman has once again implicitly advocated by bringing the matter before us today.

Lilian Greenwood: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hayes: I will. It is good to see the hon. Lady, who is now becoming such a regular feature in my transport life that I would have been disappointed had she not been here.

Lilian Greenwood: I listened carefully to what the Minister said about employment rights. Does he agree that because of the nature of mobile applications, there can be a temptation for employees, who feel under undue pressure, to work excessive hours? That can have a severe and detrimental impact on not only their health and wellbeing but, potentially, the health and wellbeing of other road users.

Mr Hayes: The hon.Lady is right. The relationship between the app or gig economy operators and their drivers is very different from what we have experienced previously. She is right, too, that that brings challenges and may even bring significant risks. I do not want to say too much, because a legal case is ongoing and the Taylor report, to which the right hon. Gentleman referred, is also awaited.

What the House needs to know is that I am very conscious of this matter. I do not come to it with any prejudices, apart from the prejudice that I have described, which is that people should be treated fairly in their place of work. I have always believed that and will do all I can to ensure it happens.

Frank Field: While the Minister may not be able to satisfy my demands today, are we able to conclude, from what he just said, that he would encourage transport authorities to interpret the law in the way that he thinks, so that the most vulnerable are protected? Uber says that stacks of workers are so pleased with what it does. If we are to believe Uber, any ruling would affect a minority, but a crucial minority. Can we expect him to say something about that today or will that follow on from the Taylor report, which might deal with this specifically, and about the particular issue that people should be able to earn the national minimum wage by hour of work? Uber gets round that for many people now.

Mr Hayes: I may have some good news for the right hon. Gentleman in that respect, but I will save that for the very end of my speech, in order to build excitement.
When I begin my pre-peroration, he can wait expectantly for the final part of my speech, in which I think I will be able to give him positive news of the kind he just mentioned.

I move now—I like to give people notice of these things, so that excitement can build—to my pre-peroration. The commitment I gave to the interests of working people and their pay and conditions is unsurprising, given the party of which I am a member. In my ministerial office, I have a bust of Lord Shaftesbury. Lord Shaftesbury, the great Tory 19th-century social reformer who, against Liberal opposition, did so much to free children from factories, fought for the ragged school movement and helped to reform asylums for those with mental health conditions. Mine is the party of Wilberforce and of Shaftesbury, as well as Disraeli, so of course I care about the welfare of the people and their interests. It may be unsurprising that I should do so, but that has to be a modern reality too. As the right hon. Gentleman said, we live in a different world now from the one that Shaftesbury, Disraeli and Wilberforce encountered, but human frailties remain, and the human willingness to do bad things, unfortunately, is endemic following the fall from the state of grace.

Having said all that, let me move to what I propose to do about this matter. It is not good enough simply to wait for the Taylor report, although we must consider that carefully, for it is a wider report. Dealing with the changing employment conditions we have briefly considered today, I am going to set up a working party in my Department, with an independent chairman, to look at the specific things that the right hon. Gentleman has raised as a result of this debate. I will consider in due course the terms and conditions of that working party, its membership and how it might have an effect on future policy.

Furthermore, as the right hon. Gentleman requested, I will look at the guidance issued to local authorities. They may be unaware of the extent of their powers and certainly of their ability to use them. He is right to say that there are problems with different local authorities interpreting those powers in different ways, and it seems to me very important that we give clarity about that through the advice we offer to local government.

Finally, I will engage with both him—I invite him to come to my Department and meet my officials accordingly—and the representatives of drivers and operators. Let us have a grown-up discussion about this. Let us expose what is wrong and celebrate what is right, but there will be no veil, no mask and nowhere to hide for people who do not do the right thing.

Frank Field: May I say one sentence?

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): Order. We have now reached 4.30 pm.

Frank Field: We started late.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): I appreciate that, but I am advised that we have to keep to time for the next debate.

Frank Field: I merely wish to thank the Minister.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): Order.

Question put and agreed to.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): As people leave the Chamber, may I advise officials that they should not enter the Chamber and loiter around the door before the debate is called? Thank you. It is warm, so if anyone wishes to take their jacket off that is fine.
Yemen: Political and Humanitarian Situation

4.30 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the political and humanitarian situation in Yemen.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today for this important debate, Mrs Moon.

I am delighted to speak on this issue today and to have been granted this debate so early in the new Parliament, particularly given the pressing nature of the humanitarian crisis in recent weeks, not least as regards cholera, as we will all have seen on our television screens.

As many Members will be aware, this is, sadly, one of many debates that we have secured on Yemen in the past year, including in the last Parliament. I must start by expressing my deep sadness, regret and, quite frankly, abject frustration that we have seen so little progress, so much further decline into misery and chaos, and such a failure to grasp the nettle by the international community, the UK Government—I am sorry to say—and the parties to this conflict, who must ultimately bear full responsibility for the shocking scenes that we have seen in recent weeks of emaciated bodies wracked by the preventable, treatable disease of cholera, along with the further needless civilian deaths from bombing, blockades and siege tactics.

This House is already significantly occupied by Brexit, and vast parts of our diplomatic and civil service apparatus have been turned to its machinations, but I fear that it will only exacerbate our apparent lack of focus on Yemen and so many other humanitarian crises around the world.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): May I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. To add to the points that have already been made, does he agree that one thing the UK Government and others could do is urge all sides to allow unimpeded humanitarian access, which would clearly assist with the situation?

Stephen Doughty: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. Indeed, that message has been made clear to me in my conversations with organisations such as Oxfam, Save the Children, Médecins sans Frontières and many others in recent weeks and the past few days.

Unfortunately the crisis in the country is now even worse than we could have imagined a few months ago, with the disastrous failure in governance and the decimation of the Yemeni economy. The United Nations has estimated that it is only a matter of months before Yemen faces total and utter collapse. The sheer scale of the devastation is astounding. At least 18.8 million people, almost two thirds of the population, are in need of some kind of humanitarian aid or protection. Close to one third of the population are in acute need of assistance—that is 10.3 million people. Some 7 million people do not know where their next meal will come from or are at risk of famine. One child under five in Yemen dies every 10 minutes. Cholera has now spread to every part of the country, with more than 200,000 suspected cases and 1,300 deaths, according to Oxfam and other agencies.

The United Nations’ humanitarian chief, Sir Stephen O’Brien—a former Member of this House, known to many of us—described the situation in Yemen as a “man-made catastrophe”. I wholeheartedly agree with that, but I would go further. I am sorry to say that on the one hand the UK has delivered lifesaving aid through the Department for International Development, which I and my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) rightly praised in the last Parliament for its work in Yemen on the humanitarian crisis, but on the other hand the UK is responsible for a clear failure in our foreign policy and the moral approach we have taken to our arms export policy. No humanitarian response can adequately meet the increasing needs that the ongoing conflict is causing, and there needs to be an immediate cessation of hostilities by all sides.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. On the issue of responsibility, yes of course the UK, the European Union and other countries in the UN should be pushing for a peaceful resolution to the conflict in Yemen as soon as possible. But does he agree that the Americans have a lead role as far as the World Food

Nations, not only will that hopefully avert the catastrophe of a famine in this day and age, but it will get the Saudi Arabian kingdom off a terrible hook. It is not going to win this war; it will be humiliated in the longer term. For a cessation of violence, led by the British at the United Nations, to take place now would be advantageous on many different levels.

Stephen Doughty: I wholeheartedly agree with the right hon. Gentleman. He speaks with great eloquence and passion on an issue that I know he has spent much time engaging on personally, both in government and subsequently.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. To add to the points that have already been made, does he agree that one thing the UK Government and others could do is urge all sides to allow unimpeded humanitarian access, which would clearly assist with the situation?

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Programme is concerned, in particular in addressing the famine in Yemen, and that this is not the time for the American Administration to be cutting the budget of the World Food Programme?

Stephen Doughty: I wholeheartedly agree with those comments. I am deeply worried by the comments made by President Trump about wider US aid policy, and the way in which the US appears to be increasingly engaged actively in the conflict, with recent attacks that have led to civilian deaths.

We need to look at the causes of the humanitarian situation. More than half the health facilities that were open pre-conflict have either closed or are now only partially functioning, leaving 40 million people without basic healthcare. A similar number are also facing a daily struggle to access clean water and adequate sanitation facilities, both of which continue to pose significant risks to public health and are contributing to the cholera outbreak. The naval blockade that has been imposed by the Saudi-led coalition is having an impact on food and humanitarian supplies reaching those who need them. Save the Children told me just this week of three ships containing its supplies that were turned around, delays in secondary screening and 17,000 medical items that had to be re-routed.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I pay tribute to the work my hon. Friend has done on Yemen in this Parliament, and in others before it, along with many right hon. and hon. Members across the House. He mentioned the port situation. There must be a solution to try to get Hodeidah port open again, so that these lifesaving medical supplies are not turned away or taken to other ports where they are unnecessary or unused.

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend rightly mentions Hodeidah. The fear is that a future battle over that port might lead to a full-blown famine, as nearly all Yemen’s food is imported through it. There is also the crucial issue of wages. According to UNICEF and the World Health Organisation wages have not been paid to health and public services staff for nine to 10 months in many areas, meaning a complete collapse in waste collections and water and sanitation facilities, let alone health facilities. That, of course, leads directly to the crisis we see with cholera, which has now surpassed 200,000 cases with the number growing by 5,000 a day. Cholera is a disease that is entirely preventable and easily treatable with the proper resources. It is a symptom of a totally failing state and of the parlous situation that Yemen finds itself in. It is also due in part to the direct bombing of water supplies in the country and the hits on those who aim to help. Shockingly, Oxfam has told me that its own water and sanitation warehouse facilities were hit by bombing, and the Houthis have precipitated a further humanitarian crisis in Taiz by siege and blockade tactics that have left some people, it has been alleged this week, with only leaves to eat.

UNHCR field teams have observed a huge spike in humanitarian needs, with displaced people now living on the streets and many of them seeking shelter on the pavements. Some of the most vulnerable people, including women and children, are turning to approaches such as begging and child labour, which is now rampant across Yemen. The situation on the humanitarian front is utterly disastrous and we all need to step up as an international community to play our part.

As I have said in the past, I accept the serious concerns that have been raised about the wider regional nature of the conflict, and indeed the wider power plays that are going on out there, and I will make it absolutely clear that I have no agenda against Saudi Arabia or a legitimate defence industry in this country that adheres to the rule of law. However, I have great concerns about UK policy continuing in this area. We have heard about the atrocities committed by the Houthis and I will be absolutely clear that I utterly condemn them. We have heard stories about child soldiers, the blockading of humanitarian access, siege tactics, the use of landmines and other indiscriminate weapons, and appalling and indiscriminate artillery attacks that kill civilians. However, we are not selling arms to the Houthis and we are selling arms to the Saudi-led coalition, and the UN estimates that more than 60% of civilian casualties are the result of attacks by the Saudi-led coalition.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): First of all, I congratulate my hon. Friend on a speech that I pretty much agree with; it is welcome that he has brought this debate to Westminster Hall. However, does he understand or recognise that part of the problem that the UN has recognised is the amount of arms that are entering Yemen, and that one reason for the blockade—the UN supports it to a degree, but does not support attempts to stop aid getting in—is to stop the arms getting in to the Houthis? That is one reason for the blockade, as the Houthis control 90% of the population and are getting these arms from places such as Oman and Iran. Of course the blockade has an adverse effect, but does he understand and respect that the issue is that there are too many arms in Yemen right now, and they are not just coming from Saudi Arabia?

Stephen Doughty: There are too many arms in Yemen; I completely agree with that. Indeed, as I have said, all parties to the conflict must bear full responsibility for what is going on. However, we are selling arms to one side in that conflict, which is Saudi Arabia, and we have heard many times in this House of the allegations of Saudi Arabia’s violations of international humanitarian law during its operations in Yemen. Hundreds of attacks have been documented and raised on many occasions in this Chamber and in the main Chamber. The Saudi-led coalition has failed to provide answers about those attacks and the investigations into them. Indeed, we have had hardly any reports of investigations by the Joint Incident Assessment Team and certainly not reports of an independent investigation.

As a result, I and many others have repeatedly called in this House for a suspension of arms sales to Saudi Arabia, pending a full independent investigation. That cull was repeated in the joint report by the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee and the International Development Committee in the last Parliament, and I am delighted to have had strong support from my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Foreign Secretary, the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), on this matter.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and on the hard work that he has put in on this issue in particular.
Does he agree that it is very important in this Parliament that we set up the Committees on Arms Export Controls as soon as possible, and that we do not have the delay in setting them up that we had in the last Parliament, when it took about six months and a lot of pressure from some of my hon. Friends around the table to get those Committees set up? It would be very regrettable if those Committees did not reconvene.

Stephen Doughty: As my right hon. Friend knows, I wholeheartedly agree with her comments, and I hope that all aspiring Chairs to the relevant Committees would perhaps make a public commitment that they are willing to set up the Committees on Arms Export Controls as soon as possible, as part of their internal election manifestos.

As you will be aware, Mrs Moon, UK arms exports are bound by the obligations within arms trade treaty, the EU common position on arms exports and the consolidated EU and UK arms licensing criteria; I make particular reference to criterion 2(c) of the EU common position. All of them refer to the recipient country’s respect for international law and require that export licences are not granted where there is a clear risk that the items might be used in the commission of a serious violation of international humanitarian law.

Mrs Moon, you will also be aware of the judgment that is expected any day now in the judicial review into whether Ministers have properly adhered to criterion 2(c) of the EU common position. I am conscious that these matters are potentially sub judice, but it is clear that some Ministers recognise that they have been treading on very thin ice with regard to UK compliance with the law in this matter. I draw the House’s attention to a partially redacted letter that was recently released due to the proceedings. It was sent by the Secretary of State for International Trade to the Foreign Secretary on 2 February 2017. It states:

“I am concerned that the issue of export licensing to Saudi Arabia continues to be finely balanced…To this end I ask that you commission a further detailed assessment of Criterion 2c and send me updated advice…In the event that your assessment of the Criterion 2c threshold remains the same, I ask that you seek advice from”

senior Government lawyers, whose names have been redacted,

“before making your recommendation.”

I will be frank—this looks like an exercise in covering one’s own actions by the International Trade Secretary, who could ultimately bear responsibility for the authorisation of licences.

Licences have continued to be authorised in huge quantities. New statistics show that new licences under category M4 from October to December 2016 to Saudi Arabia totalled a staggering £1.2 billion. So, can the Minister tell us categorically today whether the assessment requested by the International Trade Secretary was produced, and whether all Ministers have continued to be satisfied at all times that we are adhering to the law? Have any permanent civil service officials issued accounting officer advice or any other warnings to Ministers at any point in the last 12 months on this specific issue? And can he tell us what contingency plans have been prepared in the event of an unfavourable outcome for the Government in the judicial review?

In spite of the grave humanitarian situation in Yemen and our obligations under these treaties, the UK have supplied arms worth a total of £3.4 billion to the Saudi Arabian military during this conflict. Moreover, British companies, contractors and citizens are at the heart of what is happening. I draw the House’s attention to a recent advert that shows just how deeply we are involved in this conflict. BAE Systems recently advertised for “Weapons Load Technicians” at a salary of £38,119, located in Dhahran in Saudi Arabia, with a job purpose “to accomplish safe reliable loading of munitions to Tornado aircraft”.

The arms trade treaty, which I was proud to work on, forbis the authorisation of the supply of arms where there is an overwhelming risk of a violation of international humanitarian law. We have signed up to such commitments, so we need to adhere to them. They are the basis on which a legitimate, responsible defence industry in this country is based, but I have deep concerns that we have not been adhering to them in this case. Indeed, that is the view of others globally. The European Parliament and individual EU member states are also taking steps against arms exports. For example, in March the Dutch Parliament voted to deny arms exports to Saudi Arabia.

This conflict in Yemen has profound consequences for the entire balance of power in the middle east. Despite its superior firepower, the Saudi-led coalition has not been able to achieve much progress in recent months and the military situation can at best be described as a hot stalemate. The coalition has air superiority but it does not have the ground troops to drive the Houthis out of the territory that it holds, and some observers are rightly worried that Yemen might become, or is already, a destination for Daesh fighters or others associated with Daesh who have been expelled from other locations around the middle east.

I will draw people’s attention to another worrying development. Reprieve has been working closely with colleagues on the ground to document the impact of recent US military action in Yemen, which has taken an approach under President Trump that is distinctly different from the one taken under President Obama, both in the approval of and the legal guidance around strike targets, and there have been unprecedented assaults on villages full of civilians. Of course, the UK plays a role in providing extensive operational and intelligence assistance for US strikes, including the location of UK military personnel in US air bases in places such as Nevada. Recent US drone strikes have killed and wounded civilians in Yemen, and they have been followed up by Navy Seal operations into a number of locations, including Yakla and Al-Jub, which have resulted in the deaths of significant numbers of civilians.

I can understand if operations are being conducted against legitimate and tightly defined targets, including those potentially linked to al-Qaeda, Daesh and others, but I cannot understand how it is possible that we seem to have had widely loosened rules of engagement, can be conducted in a place that is already enduring significant civilian casualties and significant disruption.

I will just quote a grandfather from the village of Yakla, where the first US military operation in Yemen took place in January. He said:
“In the...morning, after the operation ended, I went to the scene and saw the volume of destruction. I saw...dead bodies everywhere. While I was searching among the bodies, I found my daughter Fateem lying dead in the street with her child in her arms. She was covered with blood. I did not imagine this could happen. I cannot forget those painful moments...The child was slightly injured in the hand by a bullet that hit and left his mother’s body. Such a scene no one could imagine nor comprehend—this level of criminality and killing.”

The war in Yemen has destroyed the institutions that keep society running, such as utilities, banks, food systems, hospitals and, most importantly, water and sanitation supplies. We are failing the people of Yemen more than ever. Time and time again, research has shown that it is not only violence and bombings that are the killer of civilians in conflict, but the illness, hunger and poverty that come after that. Yemen is a case in point. The deliberate targeting of humanitarian assistance, warehousing facilities and humanitarian operatives, and the blockades are all violations of international humanitarian law and are, in my view, tantamount to war crimes.

Those of us who have influence over the parties to the conflict have a particular responsibility to act now, both at the international level—we have heard about the discussions at the UN—and, in particular, in our relationship with the Saudi Arabians. We have mentioned the situation in Hodeidah. Whatever happens in terms of any military conflict there, we cannot allow a blockade that results in a famine in the country. The international community is not doing enough to provide resources. I hope the Minister will tell us of the efforts he is making to get other countries to pay their fair share to the appeals, which are significantly underfunded. Only a third are funded overall, and only a third in the water and sanitation cluster are funded.

Although I welcome the UK Government’s efforts to secure the presidential statement, which we mentioned, it was quite frankly extraordinary to read the read-out of the Prime Minister’s official spokesperson’s call this week with Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia, which made absolutely no mention of Yemen. I find that particularly extraordinary, given that he led the coalition activities in his previous role, which I described earlier, and given the horrific worsening of the situation in recent weeks. Does the Minister have an explanation for that, or is Yemen simply not important enough for the Prime Minister to mention? Or is it, as I have been told in private on a number of occasions over recent weeks, that the Government are admitting their failure to influence Saudi Arabia on this issue?

Despite all the claims of a special relationship, the facts are stark: no further reports issued by the Joint Incident Assessment Team on any of the hundreds of allegations; continued civilian deaths due to the bombings; a growing humanitarian catastrophe; and a worrying escalation of US direct involvement, resulting in the deaths of civilians, possibly with UK involvement. What is the vision? What is the plan? Where is the coherence across Government policy? Or is this all just too difficult?

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): I have been notified of only two other speakers. I therefore call Keith Vaz, who is the next speaker. If others expect or would like to be called, bear in mind that I intend to call the spokesman for the Scottish National party at 5.10 pm, so we need speeches to be short and punchy.

Keith Vaz: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is not just about Yemen today; it is about the effect on the rest of the middle east and the threat of terrorism in our country. Yemen is a training ground for the people who wish to come and do damage to us. I urge the Minister
to act. I am sorry that I will not be able to stay until the end of the debate—there is another meeting that I have to chair—but I urge him to come up with a rapid solution to this agonisingly difficult problem.

4.56 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I thank the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), for securing this debate and giving such a comprehensive outline of the situation in Yemen. I also pay tribute to Flick Drummond and other colleagues in the APPG who worked so hard in the past two years to keep the issue on the agenda.

While we have not been in this place over the past wee while because of the general election, the situation in Yemen has deteriorated significantly. It is often called the forgotten conflict, but I have been watching the situation as closely as I can, and I am increasingly disturbed by the escalation in violence combined with the famine and the terrible cholera outbreak that is causing so much damage. My understanding, having spoken to many of the aid agencies involved, is that they cannot quite declare a famine; they do not have enough people on the ground to declare that it has happened. There is a technical definition for famine that they cannot meet, because they cannot get access. In all probability, the situation is actually much worse than we are able to ascertain from people on the ground. It is not so much that people are starving; it is that people are actively being starved by the conflict in the area and because no one can get in to administer the food and relief that are required.

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady is right to zero in on the humanitarian situation and to pay tribute to those that are on the ground, such as Oxfam. I had the pleasure and privilege to see it doing quite remarkable work earlier this year. Does she share my concern about the situation we have with the port at Hodeidah where the cranes have been disabled? The Americans have supplied new cranes, but they cannot be erected. One part of the coalition we support is destroying the cranes and stopping access to this vital port at Hodeidah, while another part of the British Government is trying to get food, medicines and urgent supplies into that very port. Does she not think that is one of the key issues that needs to be resolved? I hope the Minister will have some suggestions on how progress could be made.

Alison Thewliss: I absolutely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. I pay tribute to him for going to Yemen with Oxfam, as well as to Oxfam for its work on the ground.

After first mentioning that more than 2 million children under the age of 5 are acutely malnourished, including half a million who are at the most extreme level of that critical danger, I was going to come on to the situation with the cranes and the ports. The World Food Programme has, I understand, been refused access for the four new mobile cranes that it had provided to aid the situation. Could the Minister provide any further updates on the situation with the cranes? If food and medical supplies cannot get in, we are unlikely to see any alleviation of the problem.

It is not just about access to Hodeidah port. There is no access to Sana’a Airport, and the route through Aden is at capacity; people cannot get anything more through there. The aid that is getting through Aden is then subject to an overland journey, which is, as hon. Members can imagine, very difficult and extremely dangerous in a conflict situation for the aid agencies involved. They are having to take aid overland. Had access been possible, that aid could quite easily have gone through Hodeidah port.

On 2 July, the World Health Organisation managed to get a shipment in through Hodeidah, which included 20 ambulances, 100 cholera kits, hospital equipment and 128,000 bags of intravenous fluids. It sounds like big numbers, and it was a 403 tonne shipment that they managed to get in—but there are 200,000 cases of cholera. That is not even enough bags of intravenous fluids for every person that has cholera. It is a drop in the ocean in terms of the need in that region; there is a need to get aid in quickly and to prevent any further delays. We must make all the efforts we can to make sure that aid gets to the people that need it and gets there now. The people in Yemen cannot wait any longer.

I am glad that the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) mentioned the issue of arms sales. It is absolutely clear that aid agencies that are working so hard on the ground are being impeded in their work by the bombs falling from the sky above them and the danger that they face every single day. They cannot provide the services that they would like to, because they are constantly under attack.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a poignant speech. Would she agree that UK Government policy appears to be undermining itself, selling arms on the one hand and trying to provide aid through the Department for International Development on the other?

Alison Thewliss: I agree that it is a huge waste of money to be providing aid and to also be endorsing the bombs that are being sold in such huge volumes and at such huge financial value. That has to stop. We cannot continue to ask aid agencies to put their staff at risk every single day. It is not just international aid agencies such as Oxfam, Save the Children, the Norwegian Refugee Council or Islamic Relief, but the locally based aid agencies as well. They are at significantly greater risk, because they are right there on the ground facing severe dangers every single day. I implore the Minister to act to try to provide the support and ceasefire that we need to allow aid agencies to do their work and to prevent any more children dying from preventable causes. It is a situation that we can fix.

5.2 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you for giving me the opportunity to participate in this debate, Mrs Moon. I join the congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on a powerful speech setting out the pace and scale of the challenge of the humanitarian and the political crisis in Yemen today. He and I served together on the International Development Committee in the previous Parliament and he has been an important voice on these issues, as have my two friends from the all-party parliamentary group, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) and the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss).
There is a paradox at the heart of UK policy, which my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth highlighted. When the International Development Committee looked at the issue in the previous Parliament, our starting point was the scale of the humanitarian crisis, but taking evidence on that took us inescapably to the United Kingdom’s role, including the issue of arms sales.

I very much endorse what my right hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) said about the importance of re-establishing the Committees on Arms Export Controls as early as possible. Certainly, if I am re-elected as Chair of the International Development Committee, I will support that, and I hope that Chairs from other relevant Committees from all parties will feel able to do so, because our ability as a country to say that we have the most robust system of arms control in the world is undermined if we as parliamentarians fail to establish the bodies to ensure that accountability.

The voices of the Yemeni diaspora in this country are an important part of this debate. I have been pleased to work with the Yemeni community in Liverpool and I am delighted to see the new Member of Parliament, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden), in the Chamber. The Liverpool Friends of Yemen have sought to highlight the crisis. On Saturday at Liverpool University, a group of young people from the Yemeni community in Liverpool produced a film called “Aden Narratives”, in which they interviewed British service personnel who had served in Yemen in the 1950s and 1960s. It was a great example of community cohesion and the breaking down of barriers, both of ethnicity and of age.

I want to make two comments relevant to the debate. First, I very much support what my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East said about the urgent need for a political solution—not only urgent but overriding. We want to see that solution. The United Kingdom has a crucial role to play at the United Nations in bringing about a ceasefire and a political solution.

Peace is the top priority, but with peace must come justice and accountability. That is why I want to finish on the crucial issue of an independent, United Nations-led inquiry into violations of international humanitarian law by all sides in the conflict, whether by the Saudi-led coalition, the Houthis or others in the country.

In particular, I want to ask the Minister about the implementation of last September’s resolution of the UN Human Rights Council that mandated additional human rights experts to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Yemen to investigate violations of international law. What progress has been made? The Council resolution did not go as far as I would like—I would like to see a fully independent UN inquiry—but will the Minister update us on progress, and on the Government’s view of when we may be able to move British policy to the support of a fully independent investigation? There have been appalling allegations of violations of international humanitarian law by both the Houthi-Saleh forces and the Saudi-led forces. Accountability is vital.

Stephen Doughty: Does my hon. Friend share my frustration that, over many months, he, I, many other Members and indeed Ministers have expressed our concerns directly to the Saudi Government—with Ministers who have come here to speak to us and with the ambassador—but we are still to see reports on the allegations, even from JIAT?

Stephen Twigg: I absolutely share that sense of frustration described by my hon. Friend. I am hopeful that we will hear of some progress from the Minister. I am keen to sit down now in case the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) wishes to catch your eye, Mrs Moon—but he does not.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): I call Toby Perkins.

5.7 pm

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing the debate and on his campaign—

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): I remind Members that I will call the Scottish National party Front-Bench spokesperson at 5.10 pm.

Toby Perkins: I was on target a few seconds ago.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth has done good work on this. I agree with what my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) said about how we need a humanitarian and political solution to such an urgent humanitarian crisis. We also need to recognise that there will be no military solution—the Saudis themselves acknowledge that there is unlikely to be a military victory and that it will be about terms on which the peace discussions take place.

Any breaches of international humanitarian law are unforgivable. I entirely agree with the need to have an independent UN-led inquiry into them. However, I am conscious that all the discussion in this debate has been about the Saudi side. I understand what my hon. Friend said about the fact that we are supplying only one side, but we should remember that the whole conflict started because the Iran-backed Houthis came in and took over from the internationally recognised Government. If we take a one-sided approach to this, I am concerned about the message we will be sending.

The International Trade Committee supported the UN Security Council resolution to support the intervention by the Saudis in the first place. Of course the Saudis should act in line with international humanitarian law and of course people should be held to account if they have breached that, but if all our focus is on one side we will be heading towards dangerous territory.

I am also keen to hear what the Minister has to say about how we can get a political solution to back up the immediate humanitarian solution that is required that actually puts pressure on the Houthis to recognise that they were the initial perpetrators and holds other people to account.

5.9 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing this debate. He has shown himself to be a voice of authority on this matter over the past few years, so I commend him not just for securing the debate but for all the work that he has done and will continue to do.
What we have heard about this afternoon is nothing short of the weaponisation of food and medicine. Our role in that surely should shame us all. I have heard nothing to disagree with on what people would like to see from the UK Government to help to ease the humanitarian situation. I am not sure whether I can call the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) the Chair of the International Development Committee, or whether I should call him the former or prospective Chair, but I echo his comments. He said that he would like to see an independent United Nations inquiry. We can of course support that.

I come back to our role in this matter—and, more fundamentally, our role with Saudi Arabia, which I make no apologies for focusing on. It seems to me that we weave quite a tangled web. I cannot understand why the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), when he was Justice Secretary last year, was able to withdraw from a contract with the Saudi Arabian Government over prisons co-operation because of human rights concerns, yet we cannot take real action on our role in the Saudi command structure. What exactly are UK operatives doing in that command structure? A joint Select Committee published a report demanding to know exactly that, but all the Government have done is tell us what they are not doing. That strikes me as something particularly dark that needs to be addressed.

I question the need for such involvement with Saudi Arabia. I understand that we need some form of relationship, and that our relationship is important in terms of the intelligence it gives us—that is sometimes overblown, but it is important none the less—but the optics of a Prime Minister rushing off to Saudi Arabia post-Brexit to secure a trade deal leave rather a bad taste in the mouth. The Government seriously need to revisit their entire relationship as far as arms sales and wider trade deals are concerned.

That relationship cuts to the heart of our entire involvement in the Arab world and middle east politics. It sullies and sours our reputation and our ability to get things done. It is quite obvious that America wishes to step back from its responsibilities around the world as far as humanitarian aid is concerned. That provides us with an opportunity—one that we would perhaps not wish to have—to get in there and lead from the front, but the Government seem awfully shy to do so.

This conflict clearly will not end any time soon, and this issue will dog the Government during this Parliament, but the Government seem awfully shy to do so.

That should shame us all. Forty-five per cent. of the population are under 15 years old, and 21 million people in the country, or approximately 80% of the population, are in need of assistance. That is more than in any other country, according to the United Nations. We have the power to do something about that, and are failing to do it, which should shame us all.

I want to consider our involvement in the conflict. According to Oxfam and the House of Commons Library, since 2015 the UK Government have approved arms export licences worth £3.3 billion. Yet at the same time we have pledged just £139 million in humanitarian aid from the 2017-18 Budget. We could do much more, and could do considerably less about supplying those arms. The Labour party strongly believes that Britain must immediately halt arms sales to Saudi Arabia and focus on negotiating a ceasefire. A Labour party press release from April stated:

“As it stands, the British-Saudi relationship is damaging to the people of Saudi Arabia, Britain and the wider Middle East, and helping to export insecurity to the rest of the World.”

Yemen, as we have heard from a number of speakers, is dependent for almost all its food, fuel and medical supplies on the port of Hodeidah; 80% of all imports to the country arrive via that major port, in a densely populated area controlled by the Houthis. The Saudi-supported army of the official Yemeni Government continues to threaten to take the port by force, and other hon. Members have mentioned that that could have an even more serious consequence in relation to the breakdown of society and the humanitarian disaster currently encapsulating the country.

I will conclude by quoting the concluding remarks of a paper of 11 December 2015 by Professor Philippe Sands, QC, Professor Andrew Clapham and Blinken ni Ghraéallaigh—great minds in international law—for Amnesty International, Oxfam and Saferworld:

“In the current circumstances we can be clear in concluding what the UK is required to do to bring itself into full compliance with its legal obligations: it should halt with immediate effect all authorisations and transfers of relevant weapons and items to Saudi Arabia, pending proper and credible enquiries into the
allegations of serious violations of IHL and IHRL that have arisen and that could arise in the future, as addressed in this opinion and the sources here referred to.”

That is consistent with the policy of the Labour party. I hope that the Minister can at least address that important conclusion in a legal opinion.

5.19 pm

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Rory Stewart): First, I pay tribute to the extraordinary range and passion of these debates. The hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) is in formidable company. He knows an enormous amount about this subject. I was privileged to work with him on the Commonwealth Development Corporation Bill Committee, where I developed an enormous respect for his eye for detail and his ability to discover the most vulnerable and important points in an argument.

It will be difficult to touch on everyone’s points in 10 minutes, but I will run through them quickly. The hon. Gentleman produced a large overview of the context of the problems and pushed hard a strong moral line on what he felt the solution should be. The right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), who has been probably the greatest champion for Yemen in the House of Commons since he entered the House—he was born in Aden, like his sister—has kept a focus in endless forums on one of the most horrifying situations in the contemporary world, and strongly on the UN resolution. The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) showed her own focus on this issue and in particular on technical issues around Hodeidah port.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) wanted to focus on specific questions about additional support on human rights. I very much hope he will again be the Chair of the International Development Committee, and I agree with the challenge that came from my friend the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) about the importance of setting up the Committees on Arms Export Controls as quickly as possible. The answer is that we are focused on providing additional support to the Human Rights Commission and have made that clear on a number of occasions—indeed we are already producing support.

The hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) brought us into the discussion about the role of the Houthis-Saleh alliance and its culpability in these affairs. Indeed, the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth focused on that as well. The hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) posed a big moral challenge to the Government, and the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) brought us back to questions that touch in particular on arms sales.

I will try to address those questions in total—they are very deep and important questions. Of course, the honest answer is that we do not have all the solutions to those problems. The British Government are doing an enormous amount—probably more than we are being given credit for in this Chamber—but clearly all the things we are doing are not sufficient to solve this crisis. The problem is—the hon. Member for Leeds North East pointed this out—although it is true that we are spending only about £180 million1 in Yemen, we have to bear it in mind that, unfortunately, the situation in Yemen is not the only situation in the world. We are spending 0.7% of our GDP on international development and we have to make some difficult choices, because—this is the main point—the situation we face in Yemen has similarities with situations we are struggling with all over the world.

Whatever solutions are proposed here—and whatever belief there is from the hon. Member for Glasgow Central that it is within the power of the United Kingdom to sort the situation out—need to be addressed also to the problems in north-east Nigeria, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, Syria, Iraq and Ukraine. I raise that because the fundamental problems on the ground in Yemen are driven by the region and the internal politics of Yemen. Those are fundamentally political problems. Some of their roots stretch back to the original formation of the Yemeni state.

I have not been to Yemen since March 2014. If any Member in the Chamber has been to Yemen more recently, I would love to hear from them. None of us in the Chamber has been to Yemen in the past three years. That is an important fact to bear in mind when we talk about the situation, and it is important because the situation is changing very quickly. Even since my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) went in under his cloak; the rest of us would love to go, but we cannot. If the Minister can help us to get there, that would be great.

Keith Vaz: Members of the APPG are very keen to go to Yemen in order to get the kind of information we need; the problem is that Saudi Arabia has to agree to it, because it is Saudi Arabia that allows aircraft into Yemen. The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) went in under his cloak; the rest of us would love to go, but we cannot. If the Minister can help us to get there, that would be great.

Rory Stewart: That is a challenge for me, and I would love to take it on. Let me try to touch on some things in the remaining five minutes. The one thing that I unfortunately cannot touch on—the elephant in the room—is arms sales. There is a serious legal proceeding looking exactly at the question that has been posed by everybody here: whether the UK Government were, as we believe, in compliance with our international humanitarian obligations. A judge and some expert lawyers will very soon be able to resolve whether Philippe Sands is correct or we as the British Government are correct.

Stephen Doughty: The Minister rightly states that he cannot do that, and I do not disagree with his wider analysis of the roots of this conflict and the wider dynamics in the region. However, can he explain why we are not using the full width of our diplomatic apparatus to put pressure on the Saudis and other parties in the conflict? Why did the Prime Minister not raise it in her call with the new Crown Prince, and why have we not called Saudi Arabia out on its repeated failure to give answers to the investigations into the allegations that have been made? The Minister said that they were running out of time and that we are getting frustrated, but we have not called them out on it.

Rory Stewart: The Prime Minister raised it directly on her April visit to Saudi Arabia, Ministers have raised it repeatedly and we have had senior military staff on the ground.

The overall picture, which I will try to touch on, is how we combine those political levers and our influence on Saudi Arabia with the influence that can be exercised

by others. What influence could we exercise on, for example, the United Arab Emirates, in order to influence Saudi Arabia? What influence can we exercise on the United States? The hon. Member for Glasgow Central raised the issue of the Hodeidah port. One of the most important things that happened in changing our fears around that port was General Mattis’s intervention on the question of a military intervention there, which made a huge difference.

It is really important to understand that, along with those political and diplomatic approaches, we have to combine our humanitarian approach, which I do not think we have talked about enough, and we have to think about a long-term political solution. In terms of that humanitarian approach, we are doing an enormous amount. We are putting in people to focus on cholera and we have a huge focus on food delivery and shelter.

We are also doing an enormous number of smaller things, for which we are not getting credit. We are working with the UN specifically on the crane issue, on funding UN Humanitarian Air Service flights and on specifically funding the office of Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, who is the UN envoy to Yemen. Those are smaller, million-pound projects that are all trying to identify weaknesses in the system that we can then plug. We are also working on financial flows and on trying to make sure that wheat gets in.

However, the overall solution to this situation has to be political. That is where we need to get to—but what does it look like? It is fine for me to stand up here and spout jargon. In theory, that political solution involves a genuinely inclusive answer. It has to include not only the regional powers but, above all, without fear or favour—as identified by Simon Shercliff, our really good ambassador to Yemen—all the warring parties. It cannot be a military solution, and it must include other people.

The solution must include people in Hadramaut, who have not been included in conversations to date, and it must also really think about how we include women. That is not a trivial point. One of the real strengths of what happened in 2013-14 was the genuine inclusion of Yemeni civil society. That made a huge difference, because although Yemen is now being presented to us as though it is nothing but some medieval tribal cockpit of violence, it is in fact a highly sophisticated society with a very active civil society, and the inclusion of women in civil society groups will be central to getting a lasting solution. It will also mean that we, the British Government, will have to be honest with Parliament about the real problems that we face.

There is a huge emphasis on the security side, huge diplomatic pressure and a lot of humanitarian spending. However, above all, these are the questions I will pose to finish on: first, where is the UN going to go on this? One problem is that it will be extremely difficult, in the current context, to get a new UN Security Council resolution through, because some members of the Security Council will oppose it. Secondly, what is the current relationship between Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed and the Houthis? He was shot at when he last went into Sana’a. Thirdly, what is the UAE’s position? Fourthly, how will it be possible to integrate other groups? Finally, what is the long-term position of President Hadi? Those critical, detailed questions will determine our success or failure.

Graham Jones: Is the Minister not missing two final points: the rising threat of al-Qaeda in the Arabian peninsula and the rise of ISIS? It is across all of the UN reports that ISIS is moving into ungoverned spaces. Because of the aggression of the Houthis in threatening Sunni communities, they are responding by raising the black flag.

Rory Stewart: I will finish on this. What are the interests of the Yemenis—

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
I.30 pm

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. If hon. Members wish to remove their jackets, they have the Chair’s permission so to do.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move.

That this House has considered promotion of education for all at the G20 summit.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. Before moving on to the subject of today’s debate, may I take this opportunity to welcome the letter that the Secretary of State for International Development sent to all MPs about the small charities challenge fund? This is a very positive development, which the International Development Committee called for in the previous two Parliaments. It gives smaller UK-based charities the opportunity to access Department for International Development funding to support projects to tackle extreme poverty in some of the poorest countries in the world.

As G20 leaders, including the Prime Minister, meet in Hamburg, this debate is an opportunity for the House to reaffirm the crucial importance of investment in education to tackle poverty and inequality across the world. Millennium development goal No. 2 related to education is that by 2015, all children, boys and girls, should complete primary education. Since 1990, the number of out-of-school children has been cut by 42% since the year 2000. We should pay tribute to all those who made that important progress possible, not least the civil society and campaigning organisations that worked so hard to secure those goals.

However, there remain about 263 million children and young people around the world who are not in school. Most disturbingly, in Africa today the number of out-of-school children is on the increase, and one in five girls there does not receive a basic education. Globally, millions of children are in school but are not getting even the basics of literacy and numeracy. It is estimated that there are 330 million such children around the world.

I pay tribute to Mark Williams, the former Member of Parliament for Ceredigion. Mark represented that constituency for 12 years, from 2005 until this general election. Between 2010 and 2017, he chaired the all-party parliamentary group on global education. During that period, he led two overseas delegations with the all-party group to Nigeria and Kenya. He hosted countless events and meetings, and engaged with several Ministers on this issue throughout his time as chair. I am sure Members on both sides of the House will wish to join me in wishing Mark Williams well for the future.

May I also take the opportunity to encourage Members on both sides of the House to join the all-party parliamentary group on global education, which does fantastic work? I thank RESULTS UK for its work in this area and for helping me prepare for this debate.

Education is at the heart of the battle against global poverty and inequality. The sustainable development goals include SDG 4, which I will return to in a moment, but education is linked inextricably to all 17 of the global goals. Investing in education can improve outcomes in health, empower women and girls, and reduce inequality. Educated populations are much better equipped to build sustainable societies that can move towards the self-financing of development programmes so they cease to be reliant on aid from wealthier countries. We know from our own experience that education is an investment in our economy. An extra year of schooling can increase someone’s earnings by up to 10%, so investing in education is critical if we are to close the global skills gap and secure the jobs of the future.

The Government’s aid strategy has at its core the goal of strengthening global peace, security and governance. Historical analysis demonstrates that inequality fuels social unrest, and evidence suggests that when educational inequality doubles, the probability of conflict more than doubles. Most importantly, education is a human right enshrined in the universal declaration of human rights, the United Nations convention on the rights of the child, and the international covenant on economic, social and cultural rights. Every child should have the right to a quality education.

As we know, the United Kingdom is the only G7 country that allocates the UN-recommended 0.7% of GNI to overseas development assistance. As I said during the Queen’s Speech debate last week, I very much welcome the fact that the Queen’s Speech reaffirmed the Government’s commitment to 0.7%. The UK is recognised as a global leader in providing aid for education, and we rank second only after the United States in the amount of aid we invest in basic education.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the problems in education is that teachers are often poorly paid, if they are paid at all, and have to do other jobs to supplement their pay as teachers? That results in poorer experiences in classrooms where teachers are provided.

Stephen Twigg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his point. He is my long-standing friend, and represents the constituency that I represented in the House between 1997 and 2005. I welcome him to the House. His point is extremely powerful. In a moment, I will refer briefly to the work that the International Development Committee was doing in the previous Parliament.

I am delighted that the hon. Members for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) and for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) are here. They are both in different roles. The hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills is now the Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Secretary of State—I congratulate her on her appointment—and my good friend the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow, represents DFID’s offices in Scotland, but is speaking for the Scottish National party from the Front Bench today. They know that the International Development Committee did a lot of work in the previous Parliament on education, and earlier this year we visited east Africa.

The point that my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) makes is absolutely pertinent, because we saw real issues with the
ability of teachers to get themselves to work. Their levels of pay are such that they often have to work other jobs, and teacher absenteeism is often as big or a bigger challenge than pupil absenteeism in some of the poorer communities of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. My hon. Friend makes a very good and powerful point.

DFID has a world-class team of technical staff who deliver the bilateral education programmes and lend support to some of the key multilateral bodies, such as the Global Partnership for Education and Education Cannot Wait. When the Select Committee visited east Africa and the middle east in the previous Parliament, we saw the fruits of UK aid for education. In particular, when we went to Jordan and Lebanon last year, we saw the amazing impact that aid has had on the refugee population, who came particularly from Syria but also from other conflicts in that region. I want to say once again that we owe a debt of gratitude to the Governments and the people of Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, in particular, which have taken so many Syrian refugees. We can also be proud of our record and that of others on ensuring that many of the children from the conflict in Syria have access to education.

In east Africa, we saw some great examples of UK aid being invested. In Kenya, we visited a truly brilliant project, run by Leonard Cheshire in Kisumu, about identifying children with disabilities or special educational needs—I will return to disability later in my speech. That was a fine example of a very positive programme. In Uganda, we visited a frankly inspiring Saturday school in Kampala, which is funded by DFID and educates child refugees from conflicts elsewhere in Africa who have escaped to Uganda for their own safety, in particular from the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The UK, via DFID, does many things in education of which we can be proud. As a result, DFID has significant political capital and influence among donors and non-governmental actors, which gives the United Kingdom a responsibility to act as a leader and global advocate on education—including, most immediately, at this weekend’s G20. I urge the Government to use their voice to encourage other donors to allocate more funding to education, and to ensure that existing funding is allocated to areas that most need it.

I also believe—the previous International Development Committee felt this strongly—that DFID can use its influence more with Governments in recipient countries to encourage them to allocate a greater proportion of their domestic budgets to education. Aid alone cannot solve the challenges. Aid has an important role to play, but Governments in some of the poorer countries have a responsibility to spend more of their domestic budgets on education.

Internationally, education is underfunded. To achieve SDG 4—

“Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”—

an enormous increase in funding is needed. The Education Commission, led by former Prime Minister Gordon Brown, estimates that annual spending on education will need to more than double, from a global level of US $1.3 trillion to about $3 trillion by 2030, if we are to have any hope of achieving global goal 4. In recent years, however, the sad reality is that we have seen a decline in levels of international aid spending on education. In our own overseas development assistance spending, the amount spent on education is lower than the amounts we spend on health, government and civil society, and infrastructure. The UK remains one of the biggest donors internationally, but the figures show that DFID dedicates only 7.56% of its budget to education.

Over the past 15 years, we have seen spectacular improvements in global health. Those advances are clear evidence that the international community, working together, can bring about genuine transformation if the will is there. Innovative partnerships such as the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, and Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, have helped to reset global health financing standards, saving tens of millions of lives. We have the opportunity to learn from that experience and to do the same for education.

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Rory Stewart): In the spirit of this debate and given the hon. Gentleman’s view that we should increase the percentage of the funding we spend on education, may I ask the hon. Gentleman a question? If he wishes to see a 2% increase, what should we decrease spending on in the DFID budget?

Stephen Twigg: The Minister asks a very reasonable question, which I was going to come on to, but I will answer now.

The previous International Development Committee, which I chaired, was looking at education. In April, we wrote to the Secretary of State with a proposal that I will refer to in a moment. The solution that we identified is one with which the Minister may or may not agree: we should slow down the shift of ODA spending from DFID to other Government Departments. We want to have a good evidence base for additional spending, and the money saved by that slowing down would enable our proposed increase in spending on education. I will come to that in more detail now.

Before the general election, the Committee was taking evidence on education. As I have just said, I wrote to the Secretary of State in April, urging DFID to increase the percentage of its annual spend on education to no less than 10% of its budget, which would represent an additional 2.5% on the current spend of 7.5%. Many organisations, such as the Malala Fund, RESULTS and others, have urged the Government to go much further and commit 15% of the DFID budget to education.

Since we made our recommendation, the latest DFID figures for the budget spent on education have fallen slightly from that 7.5%, so in the first instance the Government need to reverse that decline and then to head to at least 10%. I would be grateful if the Minister—perhaps not in the debate today, but afterwards—provided me with a complete breakdown of all UK ODA spent on education, including that from other Departments as well as DFID.

I now move on to some of the multilateral organisations, which are more directly relevant to the G20 summit. The Global Partnership for Education supports 65 developing countries to ensure that every child receives a quality basic education, giving priority to the poorest, the most vulnerable and those living in countries affected by fragility and conflict. Along with Education Cannot
Wait, the GPE forms an essential part of the multilateral landscape on education, with its focus on low-income countries and basic education, where support is most needed. The GPE has been through significant reform in recent years and, as pointed out by DFID’s multilateral development review, it now aligns well with UK priorities.

The view reached by the previous IDC—I am delighted to welcome to his place my friend, the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), an assiduous Committee member since 2010—was that the United Kingdom needs to take a lead during the Global Partnership for Education replenishment round for 2018 to 2020. A substantial contribution from the UK to that replenishment would ensure that the GPE continues to achieve results and, we hope, would act as a lever to encourage and press other Governments to commit their support to funding the work of the GPE.

I also take the opportunity to urge the Government to press for this weekend’s G20 leaders’ communiqué to include a reference to the importance of fully funding the key multilateral bodies, the Global Partnership for Education, Education Cannot Wait and the international finance facility for education.

One of the greatest challenges to face the world in achieving global goal 4 is tackling inequality in education. The theme of “Leaving no one behind” is indeed at the heart of the sustainable development goals. The most marginalised children, including girls, disabled children and refugees, are those most at risk of missing out. A very large proportion of the world’s children are clearly being left behind, and reaching them will be a critical challenge for DFID in the years ahead.

The education of girls is essential, and DFID has rightly made it a priority in recent years. Breaking down the barriers that prevent girls from getting access to education is a huge challenge. I welcome the innovative approach of the Girls’ Education Challenge and recognise that the lessons learned from its programmes could be vital in finding out what works in supporting more girls to receive an education. The G20 rightly has a focus on female economic empowerment. Education is clearly a crucial component of the economic empowerment of women and of economic opportunity for other marginalised sections of society. I urge the Government and the G20 to recognise the vital role that education performs in the economic empowerment of women, especially in the developing world. This summit is an opportune moment for them to do so.

UNICEF estimates that 90% of disabled children in the developing world—nine out of 10 disabled children in the world’s poorest countries—are out of school. That is an extraordinary statistic. The British Council highlighted that although DFID has had a strong focus on girls’ education, it “has had less focus on children with disabilities and special educational needs”.

The Secretary of State has acknowledged that. She said in March:

“Disability is shamefully the most under-prioritised, under-resourced area in development.”

I agree, as did the last International Development Committee. We recommended in our letter that DFID should place a greater emphasis, akin to its focus on girls’ education, on working to ensure that disabled children have access to appropriate high-quality education. I mentioned the remarkable programme run by Leonard Cheshire that we witnessed in Kisumu in Kenya. That is the sort of programme that I hope DFID not only continues to fund but increases support for, where there is a proven case for doing so.

Let me say something about early childhood education. We know from academic evidence that, by the age of five, a child’s brain is around 90% developed. Early childhood education is crucial for cognitive development and learning outcomes, so investing in pre-primary education can make a real difference to children’s life chances and thereby help to reduce inequality and, indeed, deliver excellent value for money.

It is estimated that, for every dollar invested in early childhood education, the return can be as high as $17 for the most disadvantaged children. Despite that, a new report by Theirworld shows that 85% of children in low-income countries do not have access to pre-primary education. Theirworld states that more than 200 million children under the age of five risk failing to reach their potential.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I apologise for arriving late, Mr Stringer—I was in another debate when this one began.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans) and I saw a good example of the importance of early childhood education in Tanzania earlier this year. We saw pre-school children being educated in a small rural community, in preparation for their attendance at a primary school. That was a DFID-funded project, and it is exactly the kind of thing that addresses the need that the hon. Gentleman so eloquently set out.

Stephen Twigg: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. The example that he gave from Tanzania and my example from Uganda demonstrate that DFID is supporting some brilliant programmes for disabled children and for early childhood. If DFID is able to find the funds to increase its education spending, those are the sorts of programmes that should be protected and, where the evidence is there, expanded—either into other countries or in the countries where they already exist.

Rory Stewart: The hon. Gentleman is being generous in giving way. He raises a vital question: what does one do in a poor country with a stretched education budget that is finding it difficult to provide decent primary education or any secondary education at all? How does he envisage the conversation with the Education Minister in such a country about setting up the entire pre-primary education and early learning structure, and about the competing priorities that that involves? Has he seen any examples of that actually working on a systematic basis in a poor developing country?

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. This is a relaxed debate—it is not over-subscribed—but can Members please keep interventions relatively short?

Stephen Twigg: I am grateful to the Minister for his characteristically thoughtful intervention, which speaks to a broader debate about education and where spending
[Stephen Twigg]

priorities should lie. I certainly do not suggest a one-size-fits-all approach for every country in which DFID operates.

To answer the Minister’s question, we saw evidence of that working well in Kenya, where I was impressed by the existing investment programme for early childhood education. In a sense, this is linked to my earlier point about the domestic budgets of recipient countries. Those of us who went to Uganda and then to Kenya were struck that Kenya devotes a significantly larger part of its budget to education than Uganda, and it has chosen to allocate part of that to early childhood education. My argument is this: DFID should seek to increase its funding for early childhood education programmes and, importantly, to integrate those programmes with other relevant areas of the human development portfolio, such as child health and nutrition.

Many Members will be aware of the Send My Friend to School campaign, which for more than a decade has engaged with Members of Parliament up and down the country and invited us into schools in our constituencies to talk about global education. Last year, the campaign engaged something like 400,000 young people, and this year more than 2,000 schools have signed up to it. Next Wednesday, 12 July, 20 students from around the country will come here to Westminster to discuss their campaigning with key decision makers, both in Parliament and in the Government. I look forward to meeting them, and I know that other former members of the International Development Committee in the last Parliament will meet them too.

Many of the students will meet their own local MPs, the Foreign Secretary’s special envoy for gender equality will meet them, and I understand that they will pay a visit to No. 10 to hand in a letter. I believe that an invitation has been sent to the Secretary of State for International Development, and I hope that she might find time in her busy schedule to meet them too.

I am grateful to Mr Speaker for granting the debate, which gives Parliament an early opportunity to address the challenges of global education. It is especially timely because it comes at the beginning of the G20 summit. If I am re-elected as Chair of the International Development Committee in this Parliament, I will propose that the Committee resumes and completes its inquiry into global education.

I look forward to listening to contributions to the debate, but I am particularly keen to hear from the Minister a sense of when we might expect a full response to the letter that I sent on behalf of the previous Committee to the Secretary of State. I appreciate that I sent it just as we finished for the general election and it covered a lot of issues, but it would be useful to have a sense of when I might receive a full response.

As I said, it would also be useful to have, at an early opportunity, a full breakdown across Departments of all United Kingdom ODA spending on education. Given the focus of the G20, will the Government commit to making a substantial contribution to the Global Partnership for Education during its replenishment for 2018 to 2020 and push for a G20 leaders’ communique that commits to funding key multilateral organisations, including GPE, Education Cannot Wait and the international finance facility for education?

Investment in global education is vital to tackling poverty and inequality, to securing future economic growth, jobs and livelihoods, and to addressing the causes and consequences of conflict. I once again praise DFID for its global leadership in this area, but I urge the Department and the rest of the Government to go further, because investment in education today pays enormous social and economic dividends tomorrow.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Before I call the Front-Bench spokespeople, I advise new hon. Members that, if any hon. Member wishes to speak, they need to stand. I have had no applications to speak; that is just advice.

1.59 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Thank you, Mr Stringer. I will make only a few comments—I had not expected to be called, but I am very grateful to you for calling me.

In the course of my membership of the International Development Committee, I have seen several excellent education programmes that underlined to me how extremely important this subject is. I recall a visit—in 2011, I think—to a small private school that had been set up just outside Lahore by a lady, with some helpers, for the children of the workers of a brick factory. The children had been working in that factory, some of them for many years. This was their first opportunity for education, and the thrill on their faces could be seen as they encountered the wonders of education for the very first time. It was a small private school—the state was not able to provide that—it was basic and it was set up pretty much in the open air by an extremely dedicated lady, but it was doing a tremendous service.

Another programme I recall—I think I was with the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron)—was in Kano in northern Nigeria. We visited a primary school with an enrolment of about 13,000 pupils. It was by far the biggest school I have ever come across. Again, the keenness of all the children could be seen. DFID’s work there was in providing a modern curriculum on the basis of which the children were taught. The school educated boys and girls together, and if I remember rightly, it also had special provision for disabled children. The city of Kano had been subjected to major terrorist attacks just one year previously, but here were boys and girls whose parents were absolutely determined to send their children to be educated.

There is also the example of pre-school provision that I mentioned in my intervention. To answer my hon. Friend the Minister’s point, it was very much supported by the Tanzanian Government, who were determined to put money into it. Young children were being taught Swahili and maths—basic education—in a church made of thatch, mud and wood, because that was the only public building in that village. They were taught by a volunteer from the local community who was paid for by the local community not in salary but in board and lodging. The local community combined with DFID and the Tanzanian Government to ensure that that pre-primary education was in place. We then visited the primary school where some of those children went after spending a year or two in that pre-primary education, and heard directly from the teachers how important it had been that the children had received that education.
I came to realise that education is so important through our work in the International Development Committee in the previous Parliament, under the chairmanship of the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg). He is absolutely passionate about this issue, for which I commend him. I hope he is re-elected as Chair, so that he can continue that work in this Parliament. Education is so important because, unless we have first-class education systems throughout the world, people will not achieve the jobs, livelihoods and other things that they have the potential to achieve, and that are absolutely vital for development. They will not have the health services that we know can be achieved, as we have seen in our own country.

Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to speak, Mr Stringer. I thank the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby for all his work on this, and I trust that this will be a major theme of the International Development Committee’s work in this Parliament.

2.4 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), who as always gave an extremely comprehensive overview. It is a field that he led in both for his party and in the chairmanship of the hon. Member of the International Development Committee in the last Parliament. I hope he continues in that role—he has my full backing in that regard. It is a role he has taken to avidly and for which he has utilised all of his skills, abilities and experience to the utmost.

The timing of the debate is important, given the G20 summit focusing on sustainable growth and development taking place in Hamburg this week. Sustainable development has been one of the key issues we have focused on in the International Development Committee, as have the sustainable development goals, which are a step forward in overcoming poverty and giving potential and opportunity to people of all ages around the developing world. On our sustainable development goals, the key issue for me is that we leave no one behind. That is extremely important for education, and for the post-school education and vocational training that should be available to all.

I reaffirm the Scottish National party’s commitment to the 0.7% foreign aid target—I believe there is cross-party consensus on that, which I am extremely pleased about. Education for girls is something that we have taken a lead role in and have championed, and we should continue to champion it in future. I will focus particularly on secondary education and girls’ access to it. Our achievements in primary education are changing cultural values and beliefs about the worth of girls, and about the cultural stereotypes that we must overcome. However, until girls have equal access to secondary education, equal value and equal opportunity will never be fully achieved.

Our history shows that, when girls and boys have had access to proper education through secondary school and further training beyond, it has been possible for all to reach their full potential, no matter which area of the country they come from or whether they come from a disadvantaged background. We need to learn from our own history, but we also need to support those across the developing world to aspire to achieve that. We need to try our very hardest to leave absolutely no one behind.

In some countries that I had the privilege to visit with the International Development Committee, early marriage continued to be an issue, particularly for girls. It took them out of school at the age of 13 or 14, meaning that they were unable to aspire to careers or think about what they wanted to do in their future outwith a marriage at that very early stage of their lives. Secondary education is key to changing those attitudes and stereotypes, and to affording girls the full potential of their own lives and making choices therein.

There were other worries from our work on early marriage. When I visited Nigeria and Kenya, I spoke with local people who said that, although there appears to be less early marriage, it is because it is often not recorded—it still takes place, but it is a cultural marriage and not an official one. The statistics we have do not show the depth of the difficulty we face. I ask the Minister to target young girls who want to continue education and give them support to overcome early marriage where we can. I would also like the Minister to look at the data to ensure that we have accurate statistics on early marriage.

The Committee looked at the importance of data collection on our sustainable development goals. We can use innovative techniques such as mobile phone data to collect appropriate statistics. I would be interested to know how we are updating census material to show that we are working towards the sustainable development goals utilising all data sources, which will be extremely important in that regard.

Jobs and livelihoods are another key issue. It is important that we look beyond the formal role of education and think about vocational training for young people in developing countries. We should lend our support for apprenticeships, sustainable businesses and employment opportunities. When I was in Nigeria, I was rather disappointed to meet Ministers who appeared to be creating vocational training centres focused largely on opportunities for boys. There appeared to be cultural stereotypes—girls did not have the same access and thought was not given to girls’ vocational opportunities.

I have a particular focus on education for disabled children, as hon. Members will attest. I have been chair of the all-party parliamentary group for disability since the previous Parliament. I was heartened to see the work being done and the progress being made on some of the International Development Committee’s visits. We saw work supported by DFID, including work supported from my own constituency of East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow. It is extremely important that we try to lead the way on inclusive education and prioritise it. We have the skills and the ability to support other countries, and it is extremely important that we use them to help the most vulnerable right across the world—disabled children are the most vulnerable. I believe the public would be behind that type of initiative, and I would like to hear from the Minister on that.

An issue that came up during one of our visits—I think it was in Kenya—is that specialist teacher training for work with disabled children tended to be for those in secondary schools. Most disabled children were not reaching secondary school—many were not able to
[Dr Lisa Cameron]

access primary school, but even when they did, they were not going on to secondary school. Where we can, we must focus our efforts on making teacher training inclusive and ensuring it is at the right level, so that teachers who will be working with disabled children are also available in primary schools, where the majority of disabled children will start their education.

Investment in buildings is important. We saw some good examples of wheelchair-accessible schools in Kenya and the difference it can make to children who can then come into the classroom, socialise with peers and have such a better quality of early life. Overcoming marginalisation and ensuring we help the most vulnerable disabled children to achieve their potential is crucial. I argue strongly that we should be leading on that. We cannot fail if we are to meet the sustainable development goal of leaving no one behind.

One example that touched my heart was in Tanzania, where I spoke to people from Sense who informed me about a young girl who was both deaf and blind. Her parents, out of fear for her safety, would tie her to a tree local to her home for most of the day while they worked in a nearby field, because they worried that she would wander off. Obviously, the risks to her person and the quality of her life were absolutely atrocious, but the parents struggled to know how to sustain the rest of the family while looking after her very specific needs. Sense worked with the family to ensure that a care placement was provided for her during the daytime, to give her an excellent quality of life, comparatively, and to ensure that her parents felt secure in the knowledge that she was safe during the day and that they had the support they needed. Some of these initiatives require additional resourcing, as they are resource-intensive, but the magnitude of change they can make to a young disabled child’s life is without comparison.

I would like to mention the visit I undertook with the International Development Committee to a school in Lebanon that hosted Palestinian refugee children. The work being done there was inspirational. However, the school building lacked windows, and the children had to wear gloves because it was often too cold for them to write and learn. Where we are contributing funds and working on education, I would like us to take a holistic approach to ensure that the environment is conducive to the education of children attending the school.

A worrying issue was raised while I visited camps in Lebanon and Jordan. One camp that we were not able to visit, due to apparent security issues, was for Palestinian refugees. We were told by civil society representatives that the electricity system in the camp, which has been there for many decades, had no health and safety standards, and there were regular reports every week of individuals being electrocuted. Will the Minister follow that up or write to me about the work we are doing there? I understand that we provide education support to the camp, but I was told that we do not provide sanitation, electricity or other basic needs because it is not DFID’s role. However, the very basic human rights are for safety, shelter and sanitation, and people being electrocuted every week is not right. If we are contributing to that camp, health and safety standards must be correct, and we must surely provide for those people’s needs.

While we saw some very good education work by the British Council in the countries we visited, we tended to meet only the most affluent individuals who accessed it. I hope the Minister will tell us how the British Council is reaching out to marginalised and disadvantaged groups and ensuring that children from all backgrounds can learn English with our support.

Finally, I pay tribute to the Send My Friend to School campaign and all the work that our local schools have been doing, which shows how strongly they feel that access to education for all children right around the world is important. I look forward to the Minister’s response and thank the hon. Members for Liverpool, West Derby, and for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), for their excellent contributions.

2.18 pm

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I would particularly like to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) for his invaluable work as Chair of the International Development Committee and for calling this debate today.

It is a great shame that because of the general election, the Committee’s final report on its long-running inquiry, “DFID’s work on education: Leaving no one behind?”, was unable to be published, but I am sure it soon will be. I know that all members of the Committee worked hard on that inquiry and I thank everyone involved, including those who gave evidence and assisted on the Committee’s visits to the middle east and east Africa, for their work on this important subject.

Today has been an excellent opportunity to hear more about the Committee’s findings. As is often the case with international development issues, cross-party contributions have shown the strength of support on both sides of the House for global education. I thank all those who have spoken for their interesting and insightful contributions. I thank in particular my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) and the hon. Members for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) and for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron).

I want also to mention the fantastic levels of public support for education aid, which have been shown through the Send My Friend to School campaign. More than 2,000 schools have signed up to that campaign, calling on the Government to increase their investment in the power of education. I was very fortunate to visit one such school: Starks Field Primary School in my constituency.

As has been made clear throughout this debate, DFID has a proud history as a world leader in helping to transform the global education agenda. During the past 15 years, UK aid has supported 11 million children through education. The UK remains one of the biggest donors to education internationally. DFID has shown commitment to providing education to the most vulnerable in difficult situations—for example, by dedicating resources to girls’ education and to the education of refugees in conflict situations.

Access to education ensures that people have an opportunity to get the best start in life. Education provides hope and empowerment to those who receive it. It is a vital tool in ending poverty, improving health...
outcomes and tackling gender inequality by empowering girls. Investing in education addresses not only inequality, but issues of security and radicalisation. It is the vehicle to create prosperous, stable and safe society. Above all, it is a human right, enshrined in law.

Thanks to the millennium development goals’ focus on achieving universal primary education, the number of children in primary education has greatly improved since the year 2000. According to RESULTS UK, which supported me no end in preparing for this speech, the number of children out of primary school has been cut by 42% since 2000. However, much more needs to be done. Save the Children describes the situation as “a learning crisis”. More than 263 million children worldwide are not in school, and hundreds of millions of children are in school but not learning as a result of the poor quality of their education. How is that right? If the current trend continues, how will we reach the target of ensuring that everyone has access to education? That will become almost impossible.

To provide a quality education for all, we have to address not only the issue of teachers, but the environment in which young children are trying to learn. We have heard fantastic examples today of where DFID is doing the best it can, but it needs to consider holistically how we are to achieve the goals if a school does not have windows, a roof or running water. We must work together to ensure that every child has the best education, and we must do that by setting a strong example, which I know DFID has done.

That is why Labour, in line with the International Development Committee and non-governmental organisations, recommends that DFID publish a new 10-year education strategy. In line with that recommendation, it would be helpful for the Minister to outline how DFID’s strategy of value for money will take into account the higher cost of delivering ambitious education programmes, such as targeting left-behind vulnerable groups. I am thinking of programmes aimed at girls and especially persons with disabilities.

There are two bodies—the Global Partnership for Education and the Education Cannot Wait fund—that, with continued funding, will help to achieve the strategy to which I have referred, so I would welcome an announcement from the Minister on whether those two bodies will see continued funding. The next replenishment conference for the Global Partnership for Education is in early 2018, so will the Minister update the House on whether the Government will be following the International Development Committee’s calls for them to sustain or increase financial support for the Global Partnership for Education? I applaud DFID’s work in helping to establish the Education Cannot Wait fund to provide support for refugee education.

In the light of the excellent work that DFID has done in improving access to education for refugees in the middle east, will it be extending that work to help refugees in east Africa and particularly in Uganda, where there are more than half a million South Sudanese refugee children?

I call on the Minister today to provide an assurance that the percentage of DFID spending on education will not be cut in the next two years or, indeed, after Brexit. I am sure he will join me when I say that it is particularly important for the Government to step up as a strong advocate for global education at a time when there is no explicit reference to sustainable development goal 4 in the G20 agenda. That will show that the UK Government want to be a world leader on education.

If the Government lead with the recommended positive actions—increasing financial support for the Global Partnership for Education and for Education Cannot Wait, along with publishing an education strategy—that will highlight Britain’s continuing commitment to global education and encourage other international donors to follow suit. I look forward to working with the Minister on these issues.

2.26 pm

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Rory Stewart): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. As always, we have had a very good debate. I am particularly grateful to the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) for initiating the debate. He is a real inspiration, as are the other hon. Members in the Chamber. It is quite unusual in politics—it sometimes feels unusual, anyway—to have people who seem so sincere, so committed to an issue and so interested in the detail, rather than simply being interested in posturing, and that really comes across. One reason why the whole House feels strongly that the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby has been an excellent Chair of his Committee is precisely that he approached the role in a very fair, objective and ethical fashion. It is therefore a great pleasure to be involved in this debate.

An enormous number of things have been touched on today. The basic message that I would like to get across is that the real problem in this field is not the big ideas, but the implementation. The really big problem, underneath all the very good contributions and really good points made by hon. Members, is that the situation on the ground in many developing countries is an absolute disgrace. Very sadly, what is happening even in those schools that exist is really depressing. I will try to touch on some of the points that have been made, but the scale of the problem is the central issue.

The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) made a series of really good points—points that it is easy to relate to. They were points about disability, about schools that she has seen in which there are no windows and children are wearing gloves and—I am imagining the Shatila camp in south Lebanon, where there are real problems—about electricity. Very good points were also made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) and the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby about issues such as pre-school education. The shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor), made a very strong statement about refugees in Uganda, and others have made statements about disability.

The fundamental underlying problem is that before we start talking about all those things, we have to acknowledge that the basic primary education in most of the countries that we are discussing is not even beginning to be good enough. Nearly 67% of children coming out of primary schools in the developing world basically cannot read or write. One of the tragic choices that an international development agency faces is how to get the balance right between making sure that the schools and teachers that already exist are teaching
something of value to their children and a dozen really
good ideas about how we can improve things by bringing
new people into schools, getting girls into secondary
school, improving vocational education or addressing
the crisis in classrooms.

Money is one of the aspects of this problem. This
excellent report, “The Learning Generation: Investing
in education for a changing world”, put together by the
former Prime Minister Gordon Brown, estimates that
$3 trillion needs to be spent on education annually
within a pretty short period. We can have a discussion
about whether DFID should spend 8%, 10% or 12%,
but the amount it currently spends on education is one
five-thousandth of the amount that would be needed to
address global education. Even if we took up the challenge
from the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby, ramped that up and spent 100% of the entire British aid
budget on education, that would still be only one five-
hundredth, or 0.2%, of the global need.

Huge theoretical problems underlie this endless debate.
One of the challenges is what kind of jobs or employment
opportunities are available to children in the developing
world when they come out of school. One of the
challenges around vocational education is working out
what jobs there are at the end of it. Like the hon.
Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow,
I was in a vocational training centre in Nigeria last
week. I do not know whether we were looking at the same centre, but in the centre I was at the
carpentry and construction schools were indeed dominated
by men; the women were largely in the hospitality and
sewing schools.

The fundamental problem underlying that issue is
that it is not clear that there are any jobs in Kaduna
for people who sew, cook, make buildings or do carpentry—the
skills that those people emerge with at the end. At the
end of a six or twelve-month course, are they skilled
enough as carpenters or construction workers to be
valuable to a business? Many of the employers we
talked to in Kaduna in northern Nigeria are much less
interested in those hard vocational skills than they are
in soft skills—someone’s ability to engage with customers
and their work ethic, discipline and desire to turn up to
school.

There are huge questions in the report around family
planning. All of us can see the correlation between
investment in girls going into secondary education and
girls having smaller families, which is very good for
their health. But what exactly is that relationship? Is it
that what they learn in school makes them less likely to
have children or is it simply about the fact that they are
in school? If it is the latter—if the fact that someone
stays in high school means they are less likely to have
children—will the social pressures that drive people
into early marriage simply mean, conversely, that those
same girls are removed from school?

The claim is made that if someone in the developing
world goes to primary school, their income over their
timeline will be five times higher than that of their
parents. But if we got everybody into primary school, would that be true? We would be claiming
that we could guarantee to quintuple the GDP per
capita of these countries by getting 100% primary education.
That, presumably, is not true.

Above all, we have to start from a position of realism.
We agree violently with everybody in this room that
education matters, but we must get a clear sense about
why it matters and the ways in which it does. There are ways in which it might matter for family
planning, but exactly why does it? How does it work for
skills? Imagine a craftperson in central Asia. What
exactly are they learning in school that will allow them
to supply calligraphy to a Saudi hotel or get carpets into
a London market? Is it their literacy and numeracy
skills or their confidence? What kind of emphasis are
we putting on opportunity, empowerment or getting people into a digital world? What kind of jobs are we
trying to prepare people for?

Ethiopia famously believes in a policy of agricultural-led
industrialisation, but is the industrialisation envisaged
in 1991 going to be an option in 2020? Or will—as
Larry Summers, one of the co-authors of the report,
suggests—increased automation mean that the shoe
factories we were hoping for are increasingly located
close to markets such as Britain and the United States
because the shoes will largely be made by robots? These
are big questions underlying what we are trying to do in
the education system.

Jeremy Lefroy: I am following what the Minister says
extremely carefully and entirely agree with the thrust of
his argument. In his work has he seen good examples of
where this work preparedness and soft skills, which will
be vital for young people if they are to have the jobs and
livelihoods they need in the future, are happening,
either in DFID’s programmes or elsewhere?

Rory Stewart: The honest answer is that I have seen
them, but they are easier to identify in schools where a
great deal of investment is going in to individual children.
I have a particular case study in mind of a vocational
training school that does a three-year course that includes
literacy, numeracy and English along with vocational
skills, has a business incubation process at the end of it,
links people into an industrial park, helps to create the
markets and then moves away. But that requires an
enormous amount of investment in the individual and
is very difficult to replicate at scale.

One of the challenges is that that gold standard,
which really does get extraordinary successes—at that
particular vocational school, 95% of graduates find
their way into employment in those sectors—is being
achieved for an expenditure of about $1,200 per person
per year. How is that going to be achievable with
investment down at $50 to $60?

As I move on with the argument, the key is the very
detailed work done by DFID education advisers—looking
critically at what goes on on the ground, for example.
One of the striking things we see from this conversation
going back and forth is the real differences that exist
between Kenya and Uganda, or Tanzania and Lebanon,
and the different ways in which people are approaching
this issue.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby has
focused a great deal on spending. We will reply to the
hon. Gentleman by letter, having taken on board the
overall ODA expenditure on education; the plea for
the excellent global partnership, which we do believe in;
and the request on the G20 communiqué. All that is
fully lodged in the brain. Fundamentally, however, my
argument is that, although spending is very important, the big question is not about expenditure but about what we actually do. It is not the “how much”, but the “how”.

How do we sort out teacher training in the developing world? How do we deal with the issue of ghost teachers? How do we deal with the fact that in many cases we are paying the salaries of teachers who do not exist? A survey found that in Ghor province in Afghanistan 3,500 teachers on the Afghan Government payroll were not teachers at all—they were just ordinary people sitting at home and receiving a teacher’s salary. That is replicated again and again across the developing world.

How do we deal with political resistance? How do we deal with a country where a particular political party has taken over the teachers’ union? How hard can the teachers’ union be pushed? How do we deal with the fact that many of the teachers being dealt with are spending most of their time teaching in private schools and only part of their time teaching in the public schools for which they were originally employed?

We all agree that education matters. We are really proud in DFID of what we have done. We are proud that we have achieved this 43% change in the number of people going into primary education. It is extraordinary. Countries such as Pakistan and Afghanistan now see primary school registration rates, theoretically, of 88% or 90% of children. If we look back 15 or 20 years, in Afghanistan, famously, no girl was going to school at all. These are incredible changes, but there is so much more to do.

If I may for a second, I wish to pay tribute to the Secretary of State for International Development, my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel), who has, as the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow pointed out, put a lot of emphasis on some of the issues that are raised by Gordon Brown’s Education Commission. One that we have not discussed today is the implementation, particularly on difficult issues such as disability. She has also put a lot of emphasis on some of the things that the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow might have seen in Jordan is the learning centres run by Save the Children and UNICEF, where psycho-social counselling is a strong element of the teaching.

However, there is a more fundamental challenge, which is that in some countries, around 50% to 60% of teachers are illiterate—they cannot read or write. In many other countries, 80% of teachers are educated only one grade above their students: that is, if they are teaching second grade, they have a third grade education.

While thinking about how to ensure that teachers can deal with disabled children, we must begin by ensuring that teachers can read and write. If they cannot, it does not matter how good the textbook is or how fancy the internet provision is; the teacher lacks the most basic skills to communicate. We are all a bit polite in this business. At the moment, those kinds of facts—and the fact that more than 60% of the children leaving such schools cannot themselves read or write—are not being mentioned enough in this debate.

To finish with the shadow Minister’s challenge, yes, we will produce an education strategy, which I hope will address many of these issues and more that Mr Stringer has not given me time to address in this debate. Those will include the seriousness of Governments’ commitments to education. What do we do when the national Government are not committed and do not care very much? What do we do in a conflict situation where there is no state in place and almost nobody to work with to drive through education? How do we think about classrooms? In particular, what is the point of a classroom if affordability is a challenge and if uniform or food costs make it impossible for a child to go to school, or if the opportunity costs of that child not being at home to look after livestock or a baby prevent the parents from sending them to school? What do we do with the digital revolution?
Above all, how do we challenge business as usual? How do we move beyond this excellent report and all the wonderful things that we hope will follow from organisations such as the G20 and the UN to realising that there is an enormous, fatal, terrifying gap between rhetoric and reality in this, as in so much else in international development?

Stephen Twigg: I thank all hon. Members who have participated in the debate. It is always a pleasure to listen to the Minister; he was characteristically thoughtful and thought-provoking. To take up his point about “how much” versus “how”, I have focused a lot on the funding because of my sense that the G20 is an opportunity to make a breakthrough, but I absolutely concur that the “how” is of equal if not greater importance and that learning from the evidence what works is best of all. The example that he cited from Ethiopia is an interesting one from which we can learn.

I welcome the fact that DFID will publish an education strategy. I praise the work done by education advisers, and particularly by some of the bilateral education programmes that DFID runs around the world. Many of the challenges that the Minister described are not dissimilar to challenges in our own domestic education policy. As I listened to his comments on jobs, soft skills, literacy, numeracy and confidence, it struck me that, although the challenges may be of greater scale in the poorest parts of the world, the fundamental issues are very similar.

I am grateful to all hon. Members who have spoken. My good friends, the hon. Members for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) and for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr. Cameron), contributed enormously to the International Development Committee in the last Parliament, and I know that they will continue to be keen advocates for international development in this one. The hon. Member for Stafford has been a particularly great advocate for global health, jobs and livelihoods. The voice that the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow gives to disabled people, particularly disabled children, is powerful and had a big influence on our Committee’s work in the last Parliament.

My hon. friend the Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor), the shadow Secretary of State, referred to a number of things, but I particularly noted her point about refugees in Uganda, to which the Minister also referred. When we were in Uganda, we were struck by the generosity of the Government and the people in their response to refugee flows. Support for that, including education, is vital. I welcome the Minister’s positive response to the specific points that I raised about the G20 and the replenishment of the Global Partnership for Education. I hope to work with him and his colleagues in the weeks and months ahead to take forward that important agenda.

Finally, the Minister asked me, perfectly reasonably, where the money would come from. In our letter in April, the Committee said that we felt that the pace of the shift from DFID to other Departments could be slowed and that the money saved could be invested in education. As well as the inquiry into education that was interrupted by the general election, we had just begun an inquiry into non-DFID overseas development assistance. Whoever the Committee Chair and members are during this Parliament, I am sure that focusing attention on the parts of overseas development assistance that come through other Departments, as well as on those that come through DFID, will be an important priority for our work. I thank you for your chairmanship, Mr Stringer, and I thank all colleagues who have taken part in the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered promotion of education for all at the G20 summit.
Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme

Mike Gapes (in the Chair): Before we begin proceedings, I invite any Member who so wishes to remove their jacket, and their tie as well, if they wish. It is certainly very hot in here.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the seasonal agricultural workers scheme.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. There are two points to this debate: first, to highlight the current problems experienced by many in the horticulture and agriculture sectors in recruiting enough seasonal workers; and, secondly, to propose a new seasonal agricultural workers scheme after Brexit and ensure that the industry has enough seasonal workers to pick British fruit and veg.

It is no secret that this country relies on foreign labour to pick its fruit and veg. Some 80,000 seasonal workers pick and process British fruit and veg every year. The majority of them are from the European Union. Many are from Romania and Bulgaria. For better or worse, that is the current situation. Without those workers, British fruit and veg could rot in British fields, and that is the last thing we want. The problem is that seasonal EU workers are getting harder to recruit. Brexit and uncertainty about the status of EU migrants in Britain have played a part. Improving living standards in eastern Europe, particularly Poland, mean that fewer workers are attracted to Britain for higher pay. Perhaps the biggest factor is the fall in the pound against the euro. The reduction has been between 17% and 20%.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I am sure that Mr Gapes would agree that the soft fruit industry in this country is a big success story. One of the major producers in my constituency is 77 staff short at the moment. That means leaving fruit unpicked. There is a real risk that this major success story could be undermined unless we get a good new seasonal agricultural workers scheme deal in place for the post-Brexit situation.

Neil Parish: The right hon. Gentleman is right. We have an extremely successful soft fruit industry. In parts of the country, we have very good vegetable growing, too. By their nature, those crops are perishable, so we have to have the labour there at the right time.

The fall in the value of the pound has immediately made work in the UK less attractive to EU migrants. It is time that the large retailers did something. If they do not buy British fruit and veg, they will have to buy it from the continent and pay more for it because of the fall in the pound. The reduction has been between 17% and 20%.

Neil Parish: The right hon. Gentleman is right. We have an extremely successful soft fruit industry. In parts of the country, we have very good vegetable growing, too. By their nature, those crops are perishable, so we have to have the labour there at the right time.

The fall in the value of the pound has immediately made work in the UK less attractive to EU migrants. It is time that the large retailers did something. If they do not buy British fruit and veg, they will have to buy it from the continent and pay more for it because of the value of our currency. It is high time that they stepped up to the plate and ensured we are getting a good price for an excellent crop that has nowhere near as many food miles.

Labour shortages are already having serious consequences. A recent BBC survey of members of British Summer Fruits and the British Leafy Salads Association showed that one in five growers already has fewer pickers than they need. Last year, when the Select Committee did an inquiry, an asparagus grower told us that he employed 900 staff. Those staff are needed when the asparagus is fit. A full 78% of respondents said that recruitment had been more difficult in the past year. That shows that the problem might be getting worse and the situation getting tighter.

A separate National Farmers Union survey from May reported a shortfall of some 1,500 workers. It also reported fewer returning workers in the first five months of the year. That paints a worrying picture. In the short term, it means that some food might simply not be picked. It also means higher prices in the shops for the fruit and veg that is picked. In the long term, if British farmers struggle to source the labour they need, that may delay decisions to invest. That could be a real problem. It could even export jobs and agriculture and horticulture industries abroad. We must not export our industry.

We also need greater flexibility in our labour market. Constituents come to see me because they often find it difficult going on and off benefits with short-term work. They get that work, but if they cannot get any long-term work, they have to go back on benefits. They are not always encouraged to get those jobs, and we want to see more of our own labour out there in the fields.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend on securing this debate on an important topic. I bring the Chamber’s attention to my declaration of interest as a major shareholder in a vegetable processing company based in my constituency. Does he agree that businesses such as those in North West Leicestershire are based in areas with sparse populations, but very low unemployment? In my constituency, unemployment is less than 1%. Not only does local labour not necessarily want to take short-term, insecure work, but they are not available to do it, because unemployment is so low.

Neil Parish: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. It is partly because of the success of our economy that we have so much going on and that we need this labour. My constituency has the same situation as his, with very low unemployment. I do not have as much vegetable growing, but I have meat and poultry processing, which are almost entirely done by central and eastern European labour, and that is an issue. We want to ensure that we can find as much home-grown labour as we can, but we have also got to have accessibility to labour from Europe and, in the future, probably from beyond Europe.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. He allows me to segue neatly on to an issue that does not just affect agriculture. We have labour from beyond Europe in fishing. There are fishing boats on the west coast of Scotland and in Northern Ireland that are tied up at the moment due to a lack of people. One boat alone has lost £100,000 in uncaught
people. We want a pro-British policy that keeps our industries here with enough workers to make sure we pick the fruit and veg.

So how do we solve the problem? Luckily, there is a solution that does not require unfettered free movement within the EU and addresses the need for specific skills in each sector: namely, a new seasonal agricultural workers scheme. The scheme has run in various guises since 1945. In short, it allows non-British workers to work in UK agriculture on a temporary basis. The last version of the scheme was closed in 2013, prior to the free movement of labour from Bulgaria and Romania.

Once Britain leaves the EU in March 2019, a new seasonal scheme will become essential to ensure British agriculture has enough labour. A new scheme has three main advantages: first, it would allow the Government to control the numbers. It would not be the free movement of old. Instead, it would allow the UK to import skills and labour for specific sectors of the economy. Secondly, we could extend the new seasonal scheme to EU and non-EU workers. That would give the UK wider scope to source the agricultural workforce it needs. We would not need to rely so heavily on two or three EU nations for seasonal labour. Thirdly, a scheme could be designed so that applicants have to have a confirmed job before entering the UK. That would fit with what looks like the likely immigration model for Britain after leaving the EU.

In giving evidence to the Committee the previous Immigration Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill), stated it would take five to six months to establish a new seasonal agricultural workers scheme. That means it is too late to establish a scheme for this summer’s harvest, but it may be an option for 2018 if labour shortages are still a problem. We are seeing a tightening in the labour market.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I am sure my hon. Friend will know from conversations with farmers that they need to make decisions years in advance of growing fruit. Is it not the case that farmers need positive signals from the Government sooner rather than later and preferably a pilot scheme next year rather than a wait and see approach, which is what we have heard up till now?

Neil Parish: My hon. Friend makes a good point regarding a pilot scheme. I am fond of my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby, but I do not always share his confidence that Government can move quickly to make sure that everything is in place within a few months. We ought to plan ahead much more. A pilot scheme next year, or an even wider scheme, is essential. Here we are in July 2017; two years will pass incredibly quickly and we need to be ready.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this timely debate this afternoon. He has mentioned only in passing a word that has two syllables: one begins with “Bre” and the other begins with “it”. That clueless exercise is at the bottom and at the heart of the difficulties that we have now. The ending of freedom of movement has created massive difficulties and we will not get access to labour. What does his report say about how freedom of movement helps assist the situation?

Neil Parish: There is no doubt that freedom of movement helps to assist the required labour for these industries. In a minute I will talk about having a seasonal workers scheme that I think will help not only those in the European Union, but those who come from beyond the European Union, if they wish to come and work here. The one thing that the Brexit vote showed is that many people who wanted to leave the European Union might have done so because they wanted some control over the number of people coming in and out. I do not think they were necessarily against people coming here to work; I think they wanted to know who was coming and who was leaving. Perhaps that is one of the policies that we will have to get in place.

The alternative is to see food go unpicked and our industry potentially relocated abroad, which we really do not want. We want a pro-British policy that keeps our industries here with enough workers to make sure we pick the fruit and veg.

Neil Parish: The hon. Gentleman raises an interesting point on fishing. As we leave the European Union, there should be greater opportunities for fishing and catches, but we need the labour to do that. Going out to fish is not always seen as the nicest job in the world. We have probably got to look not only at labour availability in the long term, but the types of fishing boats we are using and everything. There is a lot to be done, but we need labour.

This April, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee published a report on labour constraints in agriculture. We came to a clear conclusion: the sheer weight of evidence from a range of farming and horticulture businesses was that they have big problems in retaining labour. We did not necessarily share the Government’s confidence that the agriculture sector does not have a problem. Some of the figures that the Home Office Minister provided were perhaps six or nine months out of date, and the situation is getting tighter all the time. Simply put, the challenge will become a crisis if the Government do not swiftly take measures. The challenge will only become more acute after Brexit, when the free movement of workers ends.

A strategy is urgently needed to ensure that British agriculture has the workers it needs in the short to medium term. Many people ask why British people cannot do the jobs. We all agree we want to see more British workers in the industry in the long term. It is not sustainable to rely on almost exclusively foreign labour for seasonal jobs. We need to think about a long-term shift now. Unemployment is now at 4.6% nationally. As my hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) said, in many constituencies it is much lower. In fact, it is at its lowest since 1995.

In many constituencies we are reaching almost full employment; it could be said we are a victim of our great success. The truth is there are not necessarily enough workers who are able and want to do the jobs. In my own constituency in Devon where agriculture is a key part of the local economy, there simply is not the demand for such seasonal labour among local people, so foreign labour must play a part.

Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme

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On the labour shortage problem, the new scheme in 2018 would allow workers from outside the EU to top up any shortages that EU workers were not able to fill. Secondly, it would ensure the UK is match fit for Brexit after March 2019 and could easily put a new system in place. There would be no cliff edge for British agriculture industries in finding labour because a scheme would be ready to operate from summer 2019.

British food and veg industries are not yet in crisis, but there are signs that the labour situation is getting tighter and we need to take that on board. The Government must take the necessary steps now to ensure we do not face a labour cliff edge in 2019. A sensible, proportionate seasonal agricultural workers scheme is essential to make sure British agriculture has enough workers. The Minister's family has done much in the fruit and vegetable industry, so he understands the need for an availability of labour. As I said earlier, we also want to make sure our own labour market for our own workers is as flexible as it can be so that people are not worried about leaving benefits to get a seasonal job and then not being able to get on benefits again. That is an essential consideration.

If the Government were caught out, the consequences could be severe. We want more fruit and vegetables grown in this country—not less—and we want our businesses to thrive. I look forward to the Minister's response and to hearing what plans the Government have in place.

3.18 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Gapes. I once again congratulate the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) on his timely report and the way that he chairs with distinction the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee. We are almost certain he will be returned to his post and look forward to his being elevated once again to such a robust post.

I hate using the word “peak” when we describe phenomena or an event, but we are currently experiencing peak strawberry. It is the middle of July, Wimbledon is in full session and everybody across the country is enjoying that wonderful symbol of the British summer. It is great that people are consuming vast quantities of food and drink is running out of the door. Scottish farmers in my constituency are increasingly alarmed at the fact that there seems to be no strategy to allay their concerns.

The town of Blairgowrie in my constituency is almost synonymous with the soft fruit industry, and particularly with strawberries and raspberries. Much of the heritage of east Perthshire—Strathmore and the Carse of Gowrie—is wound together with tales of the berry farmers and stories of luggies, cleeks and dreels.

The nature of berry farming has changed significantly since those days because of different cultivation methods, changes in the industry and, of course, the increasing demands of the major supermarkets, which have such an impact on the how soft fruit farmers must design their activities and businesses. Polytunnels are used in Perthshire. I represent the eighth or ninth largest constituency in the United Kingdom and, as I drive around at this time of year, it is covered with them. People enjoying the wonderful experience of driving through Perthshire may not find polytunnels its most attractive feature, but they help to make sure of the crop. The cropping period is now extended, and lasts from about April to the end of October. It is remarkable to be able to get a punnet of strawberries even before the Easter holidays, and still be able to enjoy some when the leaves are falling from the trees. That is what increased use of polytunnels has done, and we should welcome it.

What remains the same is the fact that the crop must be planted, maintained and harvested. When I was a young lad, that work was traditionally done by local people. The young Wishart would enjoy a summer holiday picking raspberries and strawberries. I would put them in my luggie and make sure I had a little bit of a supplement to my pocket money. That was a feature of life for many local people, but those days are long gone. Practically all the fruit is now lifted by people from the other side of Europe, on whom producers rely almost exclusively to get their crop in. That remains an important exercise, and it is crucial for us in Scotland, where the food and drink industry is our base export. Food and drink is running out of the door. Scottish food and drink is probably one of the biggest export industries of the whole UK.

Andrew Bridgen: I seem to remember that when I went strawberry picking as a young boy the strawberries were grown on the ground, and it was backbreaking work. Have the Perthshire berry growers adopted the same practices as in the midlands, where the fruit is grown in a substrate at waist height? Farmers appreciate that labour is valuable and that they must make good use of it. That hugely increases pickers’ productivity; but even having taken those important steps forward, we are still short of labour.

Pete Wishart: The hon. Gentleman is right and that is a good point. Going around polytunnels now, one can see that everything is raised. I am sure the hon. Gentleman respects and appreciates the fact that the work is labour-intensive, and there is no way of getting around that. Some of the producers and berry farmers in my constituency have considered all sorts of ingenious measures and machines to try to find other ways of doing things, but people are still left picking the crop from the plant. We must accept that that will continue to be a feature of the activity on berry farms.

There is huge concern about the future. Soft fruit farmers in my constituency are increasingly alarmed at the fact that there seems to be no strategy to allay
concerns about the availability of labour. I was waiting for the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton to mention Brexit, because it is all about that, and the ending of freedom of movement. Getting rid of the seasonal agricultural workers scheme almost worked. I remember the days of seasonal agricultural workers and participated in several debates when the scheme was being cancelled. We were told it was not necessary any more, because we were all part of the European Union. The accession nations—the Poles, Romanians and Bulgarians who were traditionally part of the seasonal agricultural workers scheme—were now part of the EU and could come in to take part in that activity. They cannot any more, because this clueless Brexit and the ending of the freedom of movement has ensured that it will not happen further.

Norman Lamb: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is an urgency about this? In my constituency a company has halted expansion plans until something can be sorted out with regard to availability of labour. It cannot expand its business in the current situation.

Pete Wishart: Absolutely. I will come to that very point. The issue is time-limited and we must ensure that we get something in place. A feature of the Government’s approach to Brexit is the cluelessness at the heart of it: they fail to accept and recognise some of the consequences of going ahead in such folly, and the way it extends to agriculture—particularly seasonal agriculture. We are left high and dry because all the people whom we relied on to come and pick the fruit will now be limited by the daft ending of freedom of movement, and we will not be able to take advantage of it. That is why it is doubly important to cobble together some sort of scheme, so that farmers like those in my constituency and in North Norfolk are not left high and dry.

We know the difficulty. This month a report from the trade organisation British Summer Fruits predicted that the cost of strawberries and raspberries could soar by 50% if Brexit makes it harder for growers to recruit overseas. We heard earlier from the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton that, if the problem is not resolved, the crop will simply go unharvested and wither on the vine. Such decisions would be disastrous for Scotland’s food and drink sector and its worldwide reputation for quality produce. This is all about the Government’s immigration obsession, and the way the whole debate about Brexit seemed to be focused entirely on stopping freedom of movement. Protecting freedom of movement is vital for the Scottish agricultural sector, and EU workers are important to virtually all parts of the modern farming industry.

The wonderful James Hutton Institute is in my constituency, in the Carse of Gowrie, and it does great work on genetics to improve crops so that they are more resilient and pest-hardy. Most of that work is done by EU nationals. The scientists working in the James Hutton Institute come from across the EU. Thank you, Conservative Government: that will probably be ended almost immediately. The involvement of EU nationals goes from there right down to the fields, where people from Poland, Romania and Bulgaria pick the crop. We are totally dependent on freedom of movement to ensure that the whole sector, from science research institutes to the pickers, can depend on people from the EU. That makes it doubly important to get things together.

As things stand, there is a danger that the UK Government will abandon something that is good for Scotland—membership of the single market—to restrict something else that is good for it: freedom of movement. That is another example of the absurdity of this clueless hard Brexit, and of the case the Government make. It is a good demonstration of why the Government must think again and change their mind and approach.

I have heard something encouraging today. I have been to a couple of debates on this topic before, and, with all due respect to my Conservative friends, we usually hear from them—the hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) today said the opposite—that local people can do the work instead, so we do not need European nationals, as if a tap can be turned on and we can somehow create a volley of people to come and do it. We know that that cannot happen. The hon. Member for North West Leicestershire mentioned low unemployment. There is low unemployment in my constituency, too. Another thing about the soft fruit sector is that farms where seasonal agricultural work happens are in prosperous, rural and hard-to-reach areas. There is not a huge hinterland of people available to do the work. Thank goodness we are not hearing the usual nonsense from Conservative Members that we will just give the work to local people. We know that that is not possible and will not happen, and I am pleased we have got to that point.

We need to hear from the Minister that he will announce a new seasonal agricultural workers scheme. The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton said that it did not work too badly in the past. When I was a new Member of Parliament in 2001, it was still in operation. It was useful and helpful. I have been looking at the figures. Some 21,250 visas were issued in the last year of the scheme’s operation, for people who came to the UK for between five weeks and six months. As the National Farmers Union pointed out, there was a 98% return rate. All the concerns about immigration and people staying did not apply to the seasonal agricultural workers scheme.

It is worth pointing out the other benefits. One of the great pleasures and privileges of someone who has a constituency with soft fruit centres and berry-picking is to go to some of the cultural events. For example, in Perthshire, round about Blairgowrie, a number of the producers have ceilidhs and cultural evenings where people come in and speak. That is a great feature for young people—they are the brightest and the best from their countries, and they are coming across to experience the best of Scotland. They will leave Scotland with a favourable impression of our nation and hopefully at some point in the future will decide to come back for a vacation or a holiday. That is good for us—it is soft power at its very best, and it is something that we very much value as a feature of our community. It is good for the producer, it is good for the person that comes to harvest the fruit and it is good for the country. That is why we need a scheme as soon as possible.

I say to the Minister that the clock is ticking. Some 750 tonnes of Scottish soft-fruit production is hanging on the Brexit precipice. Autumn farmers need to start recruiting for next year, and there is no certainty about
freedom of movement, the movement of labour or even a permit scheme to let workers into the country. Something will have to give.

Producers cannot plant what they cannot pick, so by next autumn, big decisions will have to be made, which could possibly involve ending soft fruit production in areas such as mine. The situation is absolutely urgent. If we do not go ahead, it will be disastrous for the fantastic produce that comes from my constituency, for Pershore, for Scotland's food and drink sector and for its worldwide reputation for quality produce. We could end up in a situation where, although we have a fantastic product, the summer shelves are stacked with foreign strawberries and raspberries, shipped into Scotland because we simply do not have the workers to pick what is hanging from the fruit trees in our own fields.

The solution lies in the hands of the Government. The rest of us can only savour those delicious Scottish strawberries and raspberries for as long as we can. We want to continue to enjoy them. I plead with the Minister to get a scheme together, give security to our producers and growers and ensure that everybody can continue to enjoy the wonderful symbol of our summer that is our strawberries and our raspberries.

3.31 pm

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) for securing this debate. As he said, it is very timely. I congratulate him also on his work on the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee.

I begin by pointing out to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) a couple of macro facts. There was a vote of 17.4 million last year to leave. I know his party do not like it, but we are going to leave. One of the issues was taking back control of our borders. The figures are pretty startling. Last week, our population hit a record number of 65.5 million. The Department for Communities and Local Government reckons that we need to provide housing for 243,000 new households every year for the next 22 years, which means building a new home every five minutes, night and day, to cope with the increase in population. That is one macro fact that Members have to recognise.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Paterson: I will just finish making the point, because I think it is relevant.

The other fact is that, far from banging on about freedom of movement, the movement of labour or even a permit scheme to let workers into the country. Something will have to give. Ukraine. We have to recognise that. It is great news that in Romania, which is very relevant to our discussions, economic growth is running at 5%. Civil servants have had a 25% pay rise. Their wages are increasing and their jobless rate is not far below Scandinavian levels. Those macro elements are completely out of the discussion on Brexit.

Where I would agree with the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire is that the situation is a real problem. I saw it coming when I worked in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. I think the control of borders is a macro element that should be in the hands of the nation state.

To get back to my point I raised earlier: in Scotland we do not have control, because we have a system that is very centralised in London, deciding what we need and do not need, particularly if we want to take people from the Philippines. Switzerland, for example, can run a scheme where the 26 cantons control half the visas and the other half are controlled centrally. Is it not time that the UK changed its approach so that places such as Scotland can control their own destiny?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The right hon. Gentleman talks about “taking back control”. He must have sympathy with the point I raised earlier: in Scotland we do not have control, because we have a system that is very centralised in London, deciding what we need and do not need, particularly if we want to take people from the Philippines. Switzerland, for example, can run a scheme where the 26 cantons control half the visas and the other half are controlled centrally. Is it not time that the UK changed its approach so that places such as Scotland can control their own destiny?

Mr Paterson: The hon. Gentleman’s party lost the argument when it lost the referendum. Scotland is a firm part of the UK. I think the control of borders is a policy area that should be in the hands of the nation state.

At that time, SAWs had already been stopped. From memory, before they had open access, the scheme brought in 21,250 Romanians and Bulgarians, who came to targeted destinations, with proper accommodation, good catering facilities, proper medical facilities and so on. They also had the requirement to go home at the end of the season. I remember that Tiptree was really struggling. I talked to various representatives of the industries at that time and we looked at all sorts of alternatives, some of which have been completely misrepresented in the press. There was talk of reviving the old tradition of urban citizens taking working holidays in the countryside, and seeing whether pensioners could do it. We looked at students. I worked closely with the Department for
Work and Pensions. None of those options was really practical. We looked at them, but they were not really going anywhere.

The only real long-term solution, if we are to use domestic labour—the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire made the right point when he said we all represent rural constituencies with very low rates of unemployment—is automation. Happily, near me, we have the University of Harper Adams, which is doing fantastic work on automated machinery. It will produce a crop in a field this year where a human being will not have entered that field from the moment that it was first touched. However, that is down the line. For the moment, I think we all agree that we have a real problem with our fruit and veg industry, and increasingly with our tourism industry, in finding labour.

We have the opportunity, and I look forward to it, once we get control back of our borders, to look well outside Europe for labour—we will have to. We are going to find—I have just cited the figures—that the Romanians and the Poles are probably going to stay at home. We had better wake up to that. It is absolutely vital that the Minister is working hard at DEFRA on a replacement seasonal agricultural workers scheme.

I would ask him not to do a straight replacement. I will cite one example, New Zealand, which has been running a recognised seasonal employers scheme since 2007. The World Bank has described it as a model for best practice. It has really worked; it has eased labour shortages in the horticulture sector, and the viticulture sector, which is growing very fast of course in New Zealand, while minimising the risks of overstaying and undercutting or displacement of local labour by immigrant labour.

There is a really strong focus in New Zealand on “New Zealand first” in the labour market. Our old seasonal agricultural workers scheme did not incorporate a resident labour market test, unlike the RSE, nor did it include measures of the type included in the RSE to prevent illegal overstaying. That is a really important difference. The number has increased from 8,000 to 10,800 Pacific islanders this year. They are provided places to work during the agricultural season, and mainly come from islands such as Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Kiribati, Tuvalu and Vanuatu, for seven to 11 months.

The conditions are pretty strict. An employer must first register as a recognised seasonal employer. That is stronger than what we had: under our old legislation, SAWS, registration with the Gangmasters Licensing Authority was optional for sole operators and compulsory only for multiple operators, depending on their recruitment arrangements.

New Zealand employers are required to take a number of reasonable steps to recruit New Zealanders to available positions. The language is pretty fierce. The main document given to employers says that they are required to take “all reasonable steps to recruit and train New Zealanders for available positions before seeking to recruit non-New Zealand citizen or resident workers”, and that they must “not use a recruitment agent who seeks a commission from workers in exchange for securing an employment agreement, to recruit non-New Zealand citizen or resident workers”.

That is much more strict and puts more pressure on the employer than what we had.

The other really important thing is that employers are required to pay the market rate for work so there is no competition with domestic labour. “New Zealand first” really does help. Under the SAWS arrangements, SAWS operators were subject to inspection by the GLA and what was then the UK Border Agency. That included their pay systems. In New Zealand, farms are inspected, mainly by the operator, to ensure appropriate standards of health and safety, which is the main focus. Very importantly, employers must pay half the worker’s return air fare between New Zealand and their country of origin. Under SAWS, there was no requirement to pay any portion of the worker’s return air fare.

In New Zealand, employers must bear the cost of repatriating workers if they become illegal. Again, that was not the case under SAWS, although fines were eventually introduced. Importantly, workers under RSE are allowed to be re-employed in subsequent years, and there is a very strong record of their coming back, which I think is a real advantage for the disadvantaged economies from which they come. Although seasonal agricultural schemes around the world seem to use either a resident labour market test as a form of flow control, or a quota, New Zealand uses both. The policy has contributed very much to its development objectives with its Pacific neighbours.

I recommend that the Minister read the report by Professor Alan Winters, professor of economics at the University of Sussex, on New Zealand’s recognised seasonal employers scheme. Let me pick a key quote from a 2010 survey by the New Zealand Department of Labour, which is pretty festive about this. It said:

“Overall, the RSE Policy has achieved what it set out to do. The policy has provided employers in the horticulture and viticulture industries with access to a reliable and stable seasonal workforce. The labour supply crises of previous years have been avoided and employers can now plan and manage their businesses with confidence. As the policy enters its third year”

this was back in 2010—“there are indications many employers are now also benefiting from skilled labour as workers return for subsequent seasons. Significant productivity gains were reported in the second season, together with improvements in harvest quality.”

As I just said,

“Alongside the employer ‘wins’, Pacific workers and three Pacific states have benefited financially from participating in the RSE Policy.”

A World Bank report said:

“We find per capita incomes of households participating in the RSE to have increased by over 30% relative to the comparison groups in both countries.”

Another report found that 50% of workers returned in the next season, and that most—86.9%—returned to the same employer.

Australia’s seasonal worker programme, which I strongly recommend the Minister check out, is a similar scheme. It brings in 12,000 workers from Pacific islands. Workers come to Australia for between 14 weeks and six months.

Employers must be approved by the Government; provide the Government with evidence of labour market testing; organise flights, transport and accommodation for workers; ensure a minimum of 30 hours of labour a week; and ensure that workers depart on the expiration of their visa.

It is vital that we look at introducing a replacement for SAWS. It should be tapered and temporary, and should ensure that British workers are not displaced or
undercut by migrant workers while we wait for technology to catch up—that is the real future for domestic workers. Any replacement of SAWS must include a resident labour market test and be accompanied by robust safeguards against illegal overstaying. We need to start planning that now because, given that prosperity is improving in eastern Europe, as Members have said, workers are not going to come from there. We will happily have the whole world to choose from. Hopefully, people will come here and pick our wonderful soft fruit and vegetables.

3.44 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): To be fair to everyone, Mr Gapes, is there a time limit that we all have to observe?

Mike Gapes (in the Chair): I am not imposing a time limit, but I should be grateful if the hon. Gentleman kept his remarks relatively brief.

Jim Shannon: The deadline is 4 pm, so we will work towards that.

I thank the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) for introducing the debate. I wish him well in his quest to be re-elected as Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee. Without disrespect to any other hon. Member who runs for it, I have no doubt that no one else would fit the job so well and perform it with such ability. [Interruption.] I am sorry, but I have already given him my commitment. I wholeheartedly support him in underlining the importance of seasonal agricultural workers to our agri-food industry.

I spoke on this subject at length in this Chamber in November. Some Members will be pleased to know that I do not intend to speak for too long today, since the Chair has asked us not to. However, the topic bears highlighting once again because of the urgency of the problem: 2018 is six months away, so this is no longer a long-term outlook, but an impending crisis that demands action as a matter of urgency.

I have every faith that the Government—particularly the Minister, whom I know personally from our involvement with fishing and other farming issues—will respond with the message we need to hear. I ask him to give us, either in his reply or, if he cannot get to it today, in a letter to interested Members, an outline of how the shortfall can be met. I also underline the need to address the issue that the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) raised about fishermen, although I know that it is not the subject of this debate.

Since the referendum, labour providers have reported a marked drop-off in interest from EU workers in seasonal work. That was demonstrated by the results of the NFU labour providers survey, in which 47% of respondents stated that they experienced problems in 2015, while 66% predicted that the situation will worsen by 2018. That is the crux of the problem: 2018 is six months away, so this is no longer a long-term outlook, but an impending crisis that demands action as a matter of urgency.

I am conscious of time, so I will conclude. The NFU say there is no question of Brexit not taking place. There are people who continuously throw up obstacles, negativity and problems, but let us look at it positively. The right hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson) outlined clearly the positivity that we need. Within this debate, we all have some thoughts to put to the Minister, and I know he will respond to them very positively. It is imperative that we take steps now to ensure that the worker scheme is open to all—Europeans and non-Europeans alike—who have a skill that they wish to use to fill a space. We have such gaps, undoubtedly; the figures indicate that.

I declare an interest as a member of the Ulster Farmers Union, which is the sister union of the National Farmers Union, and as a landowner. The NFU and the UFU do a marvellous job on behalf of all farmers, but they also have some very good insurance premiums, which is one reason for our membership over the years. The NFU’s 2015 end-of-season labour survey has shown that, for the first time since sectoral agricultural workers scheme closed, growers are starting to struggle to source an adequate supply of seasonal workers to meet their needs. Some 29% of respondents stated that they experienced problems in 2015, while 66% predicted that the situation will worsen by 2018. That is the crux of the problem: 2018 is six months away, so this is no longer a long-term outlook, but an impending crisis that demands action as a matter of urgency.

I have every faith that the Government—particularly the Minister, whom I know personally from our involvement with fishing and other farming issues—will respond with the message we need to hear. I ask him to give us, either in his reply or, if he cannot get to it today, in a letter to interested Members, an outline of how the shortfall can be met. I also underline the need to address the issue that the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) raised about fishermen, although I know that it is not the subject of this debate.

Since the referendum, labour providers have reported a marked drop-off in interest from EU workers in seasonal work. That was demonstrated by the results of the NFU labour providers survey, in which 47% of labour providers said they were unable to meet the demands of the sectors they were supplying.

I am conscious of time, so I will conclude. The NFU says that the industry currently uses about 80,000 seasonal workers. That figure is expected to rise to 95,000 by 2021. Brexit will bring opportunities, and we need seasonal workers for that. In an industry that is worth some £108 billion to the nation’s economy, there is a need for more opportunities and stability for those who wish to help where help is greatly needed.

3.50 pm

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and to support my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) in bringing up this topic and ensuring it stays on the agenda. This is very much a concern for farmers in my constituency, day after day, and right now, because it is peak fruit-picking season, particularly for strawberries and berries, as other Members have said.

It is good to see such a turnout on a Thursday afternoon. I am hopeful that all eligible Members here will come and join the APPG for fruit and vegetable
farmers when it is reconstituted shortly, so that we have a Back-Bench voice for fruit and veg farmers. All of us are here because we have farmers in our constituencies who badly need seasonal workers. There are at least 5,000 seasonal workers, and possibly up to 10,000, in my constituency, which is a significant share of the UK’s annual requirement of 80,000 seasonal workers. One farm alone employs nearly 1,000 seasonal workers.

On the other hand, unemployment is very low in my area, with only about 700 people claiming jobseeker’s allowance. There is no way that local labour can plug that gap, so we need workers from outside the area to help pick the fruit. I hear consistently from farmers in my constituency that it is becoming an increasing challenge to recruit and retain the workers they need on their farms.

One issue is the dropping return rate. Usually, a significant proportion—it is sometimes 80% to 90%—of workers return every year. The important thing is that they are experienced workers, so they are extremely valuable and productive. They are often paid well above the minimum wage. However, the return rate of experienced workers is dropping, and some workers leave early. We now have a wonderful extended season, thanks to the polytunnels to which the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) referred. We need workers to stay for as much of the season as possible, but they are tending to leave early.

The falling pound is clearly a factor in the shortfall. We also know that those workers are skilled, experienced and in demand across Europe—they have choices as to where they work, and some are not choosing to come to us. Another factor is uncertainty about the opportunities they will have to come here in future thanks to Brexit. Some are genuinely uncertain about how welcome they are. Although the Government have tried to put out positive messages about how we welcome people from other countries coming to work here in the UK, there is an increased level of hate crime against immigrant workers, so there is still a sense of them not being welcome. It is vital that that is addressed because it is a factor.

There are things that fruit farmers can do and are doing to address the challenges. Some farmers have improved the accommodation they offer to workers, which is a very good reaction to the challenge. There are also some helpful factors now that mean most of the fruit is being picked. One is the willingness of workers to do overtime, and the other is the unusual late frost we had, which means other jobs on the farm do not have to be done. Unfortunately, some fruit—for example, plums, in my constituency—suffered in the frost and does not need to be picked, so workers can be used for other crops.

At the moment, at least in my constituency, fruit is being picked, but there is real concern that there could be a problem, not only next year and the year after but even as soon as the apple harvest, with ensuring that fruit comes in from the fields. If that happens, prices will rise. The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire referred to the possibility of a 50% increase in prices. That would mean that a punnet of strawberries that currently costs £2 would go up to £3. That is a material price rise, and I am worried that if it is passed on to the consumer, British consumers might be put off buying British fruit. We need British consumers to buy good British products.

Will the Minister look closely at this situation sooner rather than later and work with his Home Office colleagues—particularly the Immigration Minister? It is vital that something is done sooner rather than later. We must ensure that there is some way for experienced EU farm workers to come to the UK to help after Brexit. It is vital that there is clarity, that transitional arrangements are put in place as required, and that some kind of seasonal agricultural workers scheme that allows us to recruit both beyond the EU and within it is introduced sooner rather than later, so that we can keep having great British fruit for the Great British public.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mike Gapes (in the Chair): Order. Two Members are standing and I need to begin the winding-up speeches in about five minutes. If you are both extremely brief, you will both get in. I call Bill Wiggin.

3.56 pm

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): I will be very brief, Mr Gapes. I agree with everything I have heard from my hon. Friends on the Government Benches. More than 20,000 fruit pickers come into my constituency alone every year, and the people who employ them constantly make this plea: if there is a seasonal agricultural workers scheme, the people in it must stay working on the farms that work hard to apply for them to come. There must be some degree of stickiness to stop those people disappearing into the local economy and doing other things. The administration of such a visa will be expensive. The whole purpose of all this is to ensure that businesses are competitive, so it is critical that we keep the costs of any scheme down and ensure that the people who apply come and work for the people who go to the trouble of hiring them.

3.57 pm

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I, too, shall be brief. I would like to emphasise the science element of agriculture. I am pleased to represent East Malling Research, which, as we all know, produced the Malling root stock from which most apples are grown—probably even some in Perthshire. That investment in British agriculture, which has been shared with the world, is essential. When we talk about seasonal agricultural workers, we need to think wider than simply soft fruits. But we are of course in Wimbledon season. Hugh Lowe Farms, which I am proud to represent, produces all the strawberries for Wimbledon and, I am sure, similar competitions around the United Kingdom. Strawberries may be drawn from Perthshire, but the pinnacle of the British summer is drawn from Kent.

Most seasonal agricultural workers are highly skilled. In Kent, many are paid well over the national living wage. We are not talking about a low-wage economy; this is hard work that is properly rewarded. However, we are already seeing some problems. One of the people I have the privilege of representing, Mrs Vivienne Tanna of Orchard Lodge farm, wrote to me to point out the
amount of pears and other fruit that she is finding it hard to pick, for exactly the reasons that many Members highlighted.

I finish with a simple question to the Minister, whom I am glad to see back in his place. When we last debated this matter, in October 2015, we acknowledged huge changes to such things as table-top picking, and he expressed confidence that farming would cope with whatever challenges it faced. I hope that he is as confident today, and I hope that he listens not just to Government Members but to all voices in the House to find innovative solutions and ideas that ensure that the premier fruit in the world, whether it is from Perthshire or from Kent, is picked and sold, because it really is one of the great exports of our country.

3.59 pm

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I am pleased to wind up the debate on behalf of the Scottish National party. It has been a good debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) on securing it.

We know a seasonal agricultural workers scheme is important and necessary, and the feeling from all sides of the House is that it is a no-brainer. There is complete agreement across all regions and nations of the United Kingdom that it has to come into being. In many ways, this will probably be the first of many Brexit damage-reduction measures that we will debate in the next few years. As the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton said, there is not yet a crisis, but it is quite clear that acute pains are being felt, and that a seasonal agricultural workers scheme is essential.

My hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) effortlessly ranged in his speech from soft fruit to soft power, and he was absolutely certain that his constituency produces the best berries in the United Kingdom. I am pretty sure it produces the best berries in Scotland, which probably makes them the best berries in all of Europe; let us not constrain ourselves to the white cliffs of Dover, let us look internationally. He made a very good point about the changing nature of the berry-farming industry, with the planting, maintaining and harvesting of the fruits all having changed, and with polytunnels enabling him to enjoy those fine raspberries and strawberries before Easter and well beyond Halloween. He is lucky to represent such a fine area.

The hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent touched on an important point about the changing nature of the berry-farming industry, which is one of the fastest growing and most internationally. He made a very good point about the changing nature of the berry-farming industry, with the planting, maintaining and harvesting of the fruits all having changed, and with polytunnels enabling him to enjoy those fine raspberries and strawberries before Easter and well beyond Halloween. He is lucky to represent such a fine area.

The hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) echoed my hon. Friend’s point about the benefit of the farmers.

I finish with a simple question to the Minister, whom I am glad to see back in his place. When we last debated this matter, in October 2015, we acknowledged huge changes to such things as table-top picking, and he expressed confidence that farming would cope with whatever challenges it faced. I hope that he is as confident today, and I hope that he listens not just to Government Members but to all voices in the House to find innovative solutions and ideas that ensure that the premier fruit in the world, whether it is from Perthshire or from Kent, is picked and sold, because it really is one of the great exports of our country.

about migrants,
4.7 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes.

I congratulate the Select Committee. It is good to know that it was in safe hands. Some of us left some time ago, but it is still turning out good reports.

I welcome the Minister to his place. My summing up could be very short, because if he intimates that he has accepted all the submissions about how we need a new SAWS by nodding at me, I will sit down and think the debate has been a great success. However, I do not want to steal his thunder and perhaps he wants to say that himself.

Whether the decision taken in 2013 was by the Minister, his predecessor or the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson), the reality is that we have to revisit it and we have to ensure that we get another SAWS. The original scheme was of course one of the achievements of the 1945 Labour Government—one that perhaps most people do not know about but was nevertheless important, because it tried to provide some stability in the agricultural industry and, more particularly, a strategy whereby we could recruit people when we needed them.

The report is a good one and, as I have said, I concur with it and with the points made by right hon. and hon. Members. I will add two caveats on where they might come from longer. We need flexibility built into the scheme, whatever form it takes.

To give the Minister the maximum time to respond to this very good debate, I will ask a series of questions based on where I think we ought to be moving, and how we might be able to help the Government travel in that direction. The first and most obvious question is what research has been undertaken on the impact of Brexit, whether it will lead to a substantial reduction in the number of migrant workers and how that will play out for agriculture. In particular, I know that the Home Office intends to commission the Migration Advisory Committee to review the issue. It would be good to know that DEFRA will have some input into determining the specific implications for agriculture, particularly horticulture.

My second question is about opportunity and where people might come from if not the EU. What research has been undertaken and what discussions had with other Governments to open up opportunities for people to come work here if they can no longer do so as a result of the Brexit changes? Thirdly, I am glad automation was mentioned; it appears in the Select Committee report. The difficulty is that it is a bit like—dare I say it—a cure for bovine TB; it is always 10 years away, as some of us will know. What research has been done on how automation might play a part? One body that is undervalued and ignored in many respects is Lantra, which has responsibility for providing skills training for those on the land. What discussions have the Government had with Lantra to bring forward skills training so that we might have a larger resident population interested in taking on such roles?

The main tenor of this debate has been that we need to go back to where we were, although maybe not to exactly the same places. It is useful for the Minister to at least acknowledge that things may have been misjudged back in 2013, but we have learned a lesson and things must be dealt with. Although one does not use the word “crisis”, the possibility of leaving fruit on the ground sounds as near a crisis to me as it is possible to get. To be fair to him, he has form on this matter. He intimated in an interview in Farmers Weekly:

“Longer term, we will be looking at issues such as work permits and how we can ensure we have the labour we need—while also having an approach that is very much around controlled migration.”

What will that work permit scheme be? Maybe it is being considered in outline at present, but we certainly need some more detail. When is it likely to be introduced? Could it be introduced before Brexit or shortly after? We need to know how people will be able to come to work on the land.

This is an important industry. The whole Brexit debate will centre on aspects of agriculture, partly because £3 billion is a huge sum relative to other industries in terms of what will happen when we leave the EU. It would be good to know, therefore, what we can expect in terms of moneys. I accept that we are looking ahead, but some of the moneys would have to go towards appropriate provision of labour, not just in terms of SAWS but to get people to go on the land, because, as everyone would agree, we want a vibrant agricultural
industry in this country. We are proud of it, and we need food security, but we must also recognise that there will be a huge economic burden if we do not produce more of our own food. In a previous incarnation, some of us spent a lot of time trying to argue that that was both necessary and helpful for the British economy. It would be good to know how this issue fits into the wider Brexit strategy, given that there is already a problem, and the problem will get worse before it gets better. If we do not grasp the nettle now, the situation could spiral out of control.

4.15 pm

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I welcome the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew), back to this place and back to this wonderful brief, DEFRA, where we have so many complex issues to deal with.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) on securing this debate to discuss the important work that the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee has done on migrant labour as it applies to agriculture. It published its report in April, getting it out just before the general election, and it was a pleasure to give evidence to its inquiry earlier this year, alongside the Home Office Minister who is now the Minister of State, Department for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill).

I completely recognise that the Committee has received a number of strong representations from the farming industry. I also understand that, as a number of hon. Members have said, part of the backdrop to the debate is a general apprehension in the farming industry about what might happen once we have left the European Union and what arrangements might be put in place to replace the free movement of labour that it currently enjoys.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton will be aware that the Home Office leads on this issue. He will also be aware that I have personal experience in this industry and understand the challenge well. The challenge has been set out by a number of hon. Members, particularly those with fruit producers in their constituencies, including my hon. Friend the Members for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) and for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin). All those constituencies rely heavily on migrant labour.

I ran a soft fruit enterprise for the best part of 10 years. We used to employ 250 staff. Our farm in Cornwall was nicknamed locally “the United Nations”, because we had people from many different countries. We had staff from EU countries, but also some staff from Commonwealth countries, such as Australia and New Zealand, who were here on the then holiday work visa scheme. I know what it is like, and I know what it is like to have to close the gate on a field of strawberries that cannot be harvested because there are not enough staff.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton pointed out, the seasonal agricultural workers scheme has been around since 1945. It was brought in after the war to ensure that we could provide our farms with the workers that they needed. However, as the EU expanded, the need for the scheme decreased. From 1990, it was subject to quotas, and in 1990 the quota was set at 5,500 places. It went up to about 25,000 by 2003, was reduced again in 2005 after the big accession of a number of new member states whose people were able to come here and work, and was put back up to 21,250 in 2008.

In 2005, the Home Office announced its intention to phase out, over time, existing quota-based low-skilled migration schemes, including SAWS, because labour needs at low skill levels were deemed to be capable of being met from an expanded EU labour market. From 2008 to 2013, SAWS was open only to nationals of Bulgaria and Romania, while transitional restrictions on their labour market access remained in place. The decision to end SAWS was informed by advice from the Migration Advisory Committee, which considered there to be no immediate shortfall in the supply of seasonal labour, although at the point at which it gave that advice, it conceded that in the medium to long term, which it identified as being possibly sometime after 2017, shortages could arise and we should therefore keep matters under review, which we have.

DEFRA established the SAWS transition working group. That met as recently as 6 March this year and discussed some of these issues of anecdotal reports that things are getting harder. Its conclusion in the March meeting, which I will come on to in more detail, was that this was a challenging situation but not a crisis.

My hon. Friend cast some doubt on the figures used by the former Home Office Minister and suggested they were out of date. That is unfair because the figures are clear and correct. The Office for National Statistics figures for January to March 2017 show that the number of EU nationals working in the UK was up by 171,000 to a total of 2.32 million. We also know that around 350,000 EU nationals work in the food chain.

The figures are right, but I agree and concede that they are migration figures. We are talking about something slightly different—seasonal migration, which does not show up in those figures. Seasonal migration is for those who come here for short periods—typically six months—and then return home for part of the year. Estimates of the number of people who come here as seasonal migrant workers and return home every year range from 67,000 to 80,000.

When the SAWS transition group met on 6 March, it discussed the reason for this anecdotal reporting of a tightening in that labour market, and a number of possible reasons were advanced. First, as a number of hon. Members have pointed out, the weakening of the pound against the euro means that it is less attractive to come here and work, particularly if people are sending money back home. Secondly, it was pointed out that there have been changes to child benefit entitlement in Poland, which means fewer people from Poland are coming to the UK. Thirdly, Bulgaria has been taking steps to encourage its workforce to stay and work there, which is also thought to be a factor. A number of factors may have had an impact on seasonal migrant workers, even though we know that net migration from the EU has continued to rise.

A number of hon. Members, including the shadow Minister, asked what research we are doing. The EFRA Committee’s report asked us to review things before the
end of the year. I have asked officials to continue to monitor the situation closely, given the reports we are getting. In fact, they have a meeting tomorrow with some of the employment providers and the NFU. The purpose of the meeting is to establish what data we need to come back from the industry and under what timescale they are able to provide it. Having established that, we have at the earliest opportunity to convene another formal meeting of the SAWs transition group to review the data. It is very important that we are able to review the data across the whole of 2017.

Neil Parish: I thank the Minister very much for that thoughtful and good response. We can collect all these data, but if we see a tightening in the labour market, are we able to put a SAWs arrangement in place for next year? This is the bit I worry about. The Government say they can act fast, but some of the previous fast actions have taken longer than six months—dare I say?—and I am a little concerned. I hope we can be swift of foot. I am not making a party political point, just a point for the Government.

George Eustice: My hon. Friend will be aware that the Home Office leads on this area. He will also be aware that our colleague, the then Immigration Minister, said that he believed it could stand up a SAWs scheme within five to six months. I understand that it would require a statutory instrument, because it is not the case that the SAWs scheme is dormant and reduced to zero. In secondary legislation, the SAWs scheme was discontinued when we passed the legislation allowing the accession and ending of the transitional arrangements for Romania and Bulgaria. I believe it needs secondary legislation, and it would be a matter for the Home Office. My hon. Friend’s Committee heard what the Home Office Minister had to say on that.

There is a difference across the year and between sectors. A number of hon. Members have used the term “peak strawberry”. We know that the third quarter—that is, from July to September—is always the period when demand for seasonal labour is highest and the most important quarter to watch. In other parts of the year the pressure is lower, which can mean that different sectors are affected differently. It means, for instance, that the soft fruit sector reports the greatest problems.

Earlier today I spoke to a farmer I know, a daffodil grower in Cornwall, who employs more than 1,200 seasonal staff, predominantly from Romania and Bulgaria. They reported to me that they did not have any problems at all and actually want to increase the number of seasonal staff. They are looking at Bulgaria, a very large country, and working with jobcentres there. They are not reporting any difficulty in getting the staff they need. Of course, this is the daffodil industry during the first quarter, when competition for labour tends to be low, so I appreciate that it is different for some others. I also mentioned exchange rates, and they pointed out that it is not a big issue for them because although the exchange rate is down, it is roughly back to the levels it was in 2010-11. Exchange rates do go up and down and businesses have to plan for that.

I want to talk a bit about the context of the EU, which the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) raised. Obviously, while we are in the EU, nothing changes. We still have free movement. I understand, however, that people want clarity about what will happen after we leave, and that is part of the backdrop, which the Government understand. While we want to have controlled migration, we are very clear that we are not pulling up the drawbridge. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew), asked about research. In addition to the work being done by the SAWs transition group convened by DEFRA, the Home Office intends to commission the Migration Advisory Committee to look at the UK labour market and our reliance on EU migrant labour across sectors. That will include looking at the SAWs.

Pete Wishart: Will the Minister give way?

George Eustice: I am sorry but I am running out time and I want to give my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton time to respond.

Finally, I want to touch on some of the points made in the debate. My right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson) raised the New Zealand and Australian schemes. I will indeed read Professor Alan Winters’s report, which he highlighted. We have been told by Concordia, one of the labour providers, that it has managed to improve recruitment rates by offering travel and transport to help people to get here.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) has a lot of agriculture in his constituency and I take his points on board. The Northern Ireland poultry sector is very large. It is less about seasonal labour there, and more often about permanent labour. I hope the Prime Minister’s words about settled status will therefore give him reassurance.

My hon. Friends the Members for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) and for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) talked about a number of growers in their constituencies that I know and remember from my time in the industry. Coming back to the point raised, it is the case that there is an opportunity in the soft fruit sector. It has managed to spread the season with polytunnels to stagger the crop so that there are fewer peaks. A lot of very good work has been done on plant breeding so that they can increase the average size of the fruit, reducing their picking costs. A new variety called Centenary, which is just on market, is much more consistent in the size of the fruit. As someone who ran a soft fruit operation, I know that the overall size of the fruit is the key determinant of the cost of picking.

In conclusion, we have had a very interesting debate. These are very important issues. I reassure the House that our SAWs transition group is looking closely at all of them, and that the Home Office intends to commission the Migration Advisory Committee to do a major piece of work in this area.

4.28 pm

Neil Parish: I thank the Minister very much for summing up, and thank the shadow Minister. I thank the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson), the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), my hon. Friends the Members for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin), for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) and for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), and the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil).
I again welcome the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew). It is good to see him here. He made some interesting points regarding how the flexibility of labour in this country has something to do with some of the fixed-term tenancies in housing. That is interesting to put into the mix, because we need more home-grown labour.

I thank the Minister very much for his summing up. He is a man who actually knows the industry and what is happening. He knows that, with perishable vegetables and fruits, we need that labour and we need it now. What I will say to him, as would be expected, is that the Select Committee has done this report and realises that the labour situation is just about okay at the moment, but will follow what the Government are doing. Naturally, we will call the Government to account to ensure that there is a scheme in place when we need it. Otherwise, those fruits and vegetables will go to waste. We want more great fruit and vegetables. Colleagues from across the country decided that their counties and countries were the best for producing fruit, but we can absolutely agree that British fruit and vegetables are great; that we want to grow more of them; that we very much want the labour, from either home or abroad, to pick it; and that we have to ensure the labour is available.

I thank the Minister, the shadow Ministers and all Members for contributing, and you, Mr Gapes, for chairing.

4.30 pm

*Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).*
Written Statements

Thursday 22 June 2017

LEADER OF THE HOUSE

Government’s Legislative Programme 2017-19

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom):
Following yesterday’s State Opening of Parliament, and for the convenience of the House, I am listing the Bills which were announced yesterday:

Agriculture Bill
Armed Forces (Flexible Working) Bill
Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill
Civil Liability Bill
Courts Bill
Customs Bill
Data Protection Bill
Draft Domestic Violence and Abuse Bill
Draft Patient Safety Bill
Draft Tenants’ Fees Bill
European Union (Approvals) Bill
Financial Guidance and Claims Bill
Fisheries Bill
High Speed Rail (West Midlands - Crewe) Bill
Immigration Bill
International Sanctions Bill
National Insurance Contributions Bill
Nuclear Safeguards Bill
Repeal Bill
Smart Meter Bill
Space Industry Bill
Trade Bill
Travel Protection Bill

The following Law Commission Bill will be introduced:
Goods Mortgages Bill

The programme will also include three Finance Bills to implement budget policy decisions.

Detailed information about each of these Bills can be accessed from the gov.uk website at:

NORTHERN IRELAND

Government’s Legislative Programme (Northern Ireland) 2017-19

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): The Government’s legislative programme for the first Session was outlined by Her Majesty on Wednesday 21 June. The legislative programme will deliver legislation required in relation to exiting the European Union, in addition to delivering on important domestic policy.

The following Bills contained in the programme are likely to extend to Northern Ireland in whole or in part:

Agriculture Bill (Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs)
Armed Forces (Flexible Working) Bill (Ministry of Defence)
Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill (Department for Transport)
Courts Bill (Ministry of Justice)
Customs Bill (HM Treasury)
Data Protection Bill (Department for Culture Media and Sport)
EU Approvals Bill (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy)
Financial Guidance and Claims Bill (Department for Work and Pensions)
Fisheries Bill (Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs)
Immigration Bill (Home Office)
International Sanctions Bill (Foreign and Commonwealth Office)
National Insurance Contributions Bill (HM Treasury)
Nuclear Safeguards Bill (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy)
Repeal Bill (Department for Exiting the European Union)
Space Industry Bill (Department for Transport)
Trade Bill (Department for International Trade)
Travel Protection Bill (Department for Transport)

There are currently no plans for the provisions in the following Bills and draft Bills to extend to Northern Ireland:

Civil Liability Bill (Ministry of Justice)
Draft Domestic Violence and Abuse Bill (Home Office)
Draft Patient Safety Bill (Department of Health)
Draft Tenants’ Fees Bill (Department for Communities and Local Government)
Goods Mortgages Bill (Law Commission)
Smart Meter Bill (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy)

Although the High Speed Rail (West Midlands—Crewe) Bill sets out the route of the railway from the West Midlands to Crewe, its provision may have consequential effects relevant to Northern Ireland.

The programme will also include three Finance Bills to implement budget policy decisions, which will apply to Northern Ireland.

The Government will continue to work with all of the parties in Northern Ireland to support the return of devolved Government. We will also work constructively with Northern Ireland Departments Bills as part of the process of securing legislative consent motions where appropriate.

SCOTLAND

Government’s Legislative Programme (Scotland) 2017-19

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): The legislative programme for the first Session was outlined by Her Majesty on Wednesday 21 June.
This statement provides a summary of the new Government legislation for 2017-19 and its application to Scotland. It does not include draft Bills, Law Commission Bills or Finance Bills. The programme will include three Finance Bills to implement budget policy decisions.

The Government’s legislative programme will bring forward important legislation required in relation to exiting the European Union, whilst also continuing to deliver on important domestic policy.

Legislation will be brought forward to support advances in transport technologies, making the UK a leader in industries including electric cars and commercial satellites. The Government will also legislate to provide for greater work flexibility for members of the armed forces, improve the provision of financial advice and will support energy efficiency though the smart meter regime.

The Government’s repeal Bill will help to deliver a smooth and orderly exit from the EU. In addition several further bills on EU exit will legislate in key areas such as trade, customs and immigration.

In addition to this new programme, we remain committed to implementation of the Scotland Act 2016. Moving forward, the UK Government are committed to working closely with the Scottish Government to implement these important powers, including the significant transfer of welfare responsibilities. The powers devolved in the Act will result in the Scottish Parliament becoming one of the most powerful devolved Parliaments in the world.

In line with the Sewel convention, the Government will continue to work constructively with the Scottish Government to secure legislative consent motions where appropriate.

The Bills listed in section 1 will apply to Scotland, either in full or in part. Some of these bills may engage the Sewel process depending on final content. Section 2 details Bills that will not apply in Scotland.

Section 1: Legislation applying to the United Kingdom, including Scotland (either in full or in part).

Repeal Bill
Agriculture Bill
Armed Forces (Flexible Working) Bill
Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill
Courts Bill
Customs Bill
Data Protection Bill
European Union (Approvals) Bill
Financial Guidance and Claims Bill
Fisheries Bill
High Speed Rail (West Midlands - Crewe) Bill (technically applies to the whole UK but concerns the Fradley - Crew route)
Immigration Bill
International Sanctions Bill
National Insurance Contributions Bill
Nuclear Safeguards Bill
Smart Meter Bill
Space Industry Bill
Trade Bill
Travel Protection Bill

Section 2: Legislation that will not extend to Scotland.

Civil Liability Bill

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): I am pleased to inform the House that we have today published the shortlists of companies that will bid for the new West Coast Partnership franchise which will launch the first services on HS2, and the next South Eastern franchise.

The House will be aware that passenger numbers have more than doubled since privatisation of the railways 20 years ago and our country’s railways need to adapt and change to be able to cope with this and future demands. This Government are committed to revolutionising our railways through innovation and investment to transform passengers’ experiences and ensure our railways work for everyone.

This is an exciting time for both franchises, which are changing to ensure passengers are at the heart of their services. The winner of the WCP franchise will be expected to work with HS2 Ltd to launch the first services on HS2, taking advantage of the extra space it will provide for commuters on the west coast main line. The winner of the South Eastern franchise will need to work as one team with Network Rail to ensure passengers experience better journeys and provide longer trains with more space.

West Coast Partnership Franchise

The West Coast Partnership will be responsible for services on the west coast main line from April 2019 and will design and run the initial HS2 high-speed services between London and Birmingham from 2026.

The shortlist contains bidding consortia which sees UK rail network experts working in partnership with companies that operate high-speed railways around the globe, supported by businesses which have an excellent track record in customer services.

They are:
First Trenitalia West Coast Ltd, a joint venture between First Rail Holdings Ltd and Trenitalia SpA;
MTR West Coast Partnership Ltd, a joint venture between MTR Corporation (UK) Ltd and Guangshen Railway Company, with the following key sub-contractors: Deloitte MCS Ltd, Panasonic Systems Europe, Snowfall AB, Trainline.com Ltd and WSP Parsons Brinkerhoff; and
West Coast Partnership Ltd, a joint venture between Stagecoach Group plc, Virgin Holdings Ltd and SNCF C3).

The West Coast Partnership will support growth and better services on the west coast main line while helping to ensure HS2 becomes the backbone of Britain’s future railways. This will create more seats for passengers, improve connections between our great cities, free up space on existing rail lines and generate jobs and economic growth throughout the country.

The winning bidder will collaborate with HS2 Ltd to design, launch and operate the initial HS2 services and deliver the transition of the timetable on the west coast main line as it is revised to take advantage of the extra capacity provided by HS2. There are significant benefits in bringing the two projects closer together to ensure the best outcomes for passengers both before and after the start of the HS2 services.
The new operator will also be expected to work closely with local transport authorities, Transport Scotland and the Welsh Government to ensure passengers receive the excellent experience they demand from the west coast main line.

**South Eastern Franchise**

The South Eastern franchise is one of the busiest franchises in the UK, running almost two thousand services every weekday. We want passengers to be at the heart of everything that the new operator does, enjoying modern, spacious trains on a more punctual and reliable service. We will listen to what passengers say in the current public consultation, and we will seek to make changes and improvements only with their support. We will create more space for passengers in the peak commuting times including by running longer, more modern trains in and around London.

Other ambitions for this franchise include:
- increasing the reliability of trains by using the latest technology while reducing delays by encouraging the operator to work closely with Network Rail;
- improving passenger compensation arrangements and supporting smart ticketing; and
- improving customer service, with staff able to respond quickly and effectively, including during disruption.

The new franchise will also complement the completion of two major enhancement schemes—Thameslink and Crossrail—providing passengers with more trains, more destinations, and significant improvements in reliability and performance. The winner of the next South Eastern franchise will be required to optimise the value of these investments for passengers.

The shortlisted bidders for the South Eastern rail franchise competition are:

- The franchise applicant, South Eastern Railways Ltd, is currently a wholly owned subsidiary of Abellio Transport Group Ltd. If awarded the franchise it would become a subsidiary of South Eastern Holdings Ltd, a joint venture between Abellio and the consortium of East Japan Railway Company and Mitsui & Co., Ltd;
- London and South East Passenger Rail Services Ltd, a wholly owned subsidiary of Govia Ltd;
- Stagecoach South Eastern Trains Ltd, a wholly owned subsidiary of Stagecoach Group plc; and
- Trenitalia UK Ltd, wholly owned by Trenitalia SpA.

The public consultation seeking views and priorities for the new South Eastern franchises runs until June 30. The new franchise is planned to start in December 2018.

**New companies enter the market**

I am also pleased to inform the House that two companies have applied for a pre-qualification questionnaire passport to allow them to enter the bidding process. These firms are now eligible to express an interest in all upcoming rail franchise competitions until September 2019.

Amey Rail Ltd  
SNCF-C3

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**WALES**

**Government’s Legislative Programme (Wales) 2017-19**

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): The Government’s first legislative programme announced in the Queen’s Speech on 21 June contains a wide range of measures that will apply to Wales either in full or in part.

The following Bills and draft Bills will extend to Wales in whole or in part:
- Agriculture Bill (Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs)
- Armed Forces (Flexible Working) Bill (Ministry of Defence)
- Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill (Department for Transport)
- Civil Liability Bill (Ministry of Justice)
- Courts Bill (Ministry of Justice)
- Customs Bill (HM Treasury)
- Data Protection Bill (Department for Culture Media and Sport)
- Draft Domestic Violence and Abuse Bill (Home Office)
- EU Approvals Bill (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy)
- Financial Guidance and Claims Bill (Department for Work and Pensions)
- Fisheries Bill (Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs)
- Goods Mortgages Bill (Law Commission)
- Immigration Bill (Home Office)
- International Sanctions Bill (Foreign and Commonwealth Office)
- National Insurance Contributions Bill (HM Treasury)
- Nuclear Safeguards Bill (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy)
- Repeal Bill (Department for Exiting the European Union)
- Smart Meter Bill (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy)
- Space Industry Bill (Department for Transport)
- Trade Bill (Department for International Trade)
- Travel Protection Bill (Department for Transport)

There are currently no plans for the provisions in the following draft Bills to apply to Wales:
- Draft Patient Safety Bill (Department of Health)
- DraftTenants’ Fees Bill (Department for Communities and Local Government)

Although the High Speed Rail (West Midlands—Crewe) Bill will extend to Wales, this Bill will set out the route of the railway from the West Midlands to Crewe.

The programme will also include three Finance Bills to implement budget policy decisions, which will apply to Wales.

In line with the convention on legislative consent, the Government will continue to work constructively with the Welsh Government to secure legislative consent motions where appropriate.
**BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY**

**Anti Money Laundering Directive: Register of People with Significant Control**

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): On Friday, I laid before Parliament two sets of regulations that modify the existing national measures to implement the UK’s transposition of Article 30 of the EU Fourth Anti-Money Laundering Directive. These regulations are made under powers under section 2(2) of the European Communities Act.

The regulations modify and extend the UK regime for a public register of information about people with significant control over UK companies and limited liability partnerships (LLPs). The register is a core element of the UK’s drive to improve corporate transparency. This statement, the regulations and the guidance have been informed by responses received to the discussion paper “Implementing the Fourth Money Laundering Directive: transposition of Article 30: beneficial ownership of corporate and other legal entities” [1].

Specifically, the regulations:
- modify the existing national measures in relation to the legal entities covered (companies, LLPs and SEs) by requiring information to be updated on the register within a prescribed timescale
- extend the amended measures to unregistered companies and listed companies on UK secondary markets
- apply a modified form of the regime to limited partnerships governed by the law of Scotland and to qualifying general partnerships governed by the law of Scotland, collectively known as “eligible Scottish partnerships”
- amend the provisions on circumstances in which information not shown on the public register may be accessed.

Transposition is not required in relation to limited or general partnerships registered or formed under the law applicable elsewhere in the United Kingdom, in view of the distinct, legal status of Scottish partnerships in section 4 of the Partnership Act 1890.

I have also issued and published, in draft, updated statutory guidance on the meaning of significant influence or control in the context of companies, for the register of people with significant control. This is required by paragraph 24 of Schedule 1A of the Companies Act 2006, and is subject to negative resolution by either House.

The term “significant influence or control” is included in the fourth and fifth specified conditions for being a person with significant control. The statutory guidance is required to explain how that term should be interpreted.

I have also published guidance on the meaning of significant influence or control in the context of eligible Scottish partnerships and have updated guidance on the regime for all legal entities in scope and for people who might become a person of significant control over them.


**TREASURY**

**ECOFIN: 23 May 2017**

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): A meeting of The Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) was held in Brussels on 23 May 2017. EU Finance Ministers discussed the following items: Annual EIB Governors meeting

There was a meeting of the EIB Governors preceding ECOFIN. This entailed a speech by the EIB President Werner Hoyer, a Governors discussion and approval of the audit report.

Early morning session

The Eurogroup President briefed Ministers on the outcomes of the 22 May meeting of the Eurogroup. Ministers then discussed the current economic situation.

Dispute resolution mechanism

Ministers agreed the general approach to the proposal for a Council directive on double taxation dispute resolution mechanisms in the European Union. The UK supported...
this measure. The proposal aims to establish a common
dispute resolution regime for EU taxpayers at risk of
double taxation.

**Common corporate tax base**

Ministers held an orientation debate on the proposal
for a Council directive on a Common Corporate Tax
Base (CCTB). The CCTB proposal suggests establishing
a common set of rules across the EU for calculating
companies’ taxable profits.

**Current financial service legislative proposals**

The Council presidency provided an update on current
legislative proposals in the field of financial services.

**Movement of capital**

Ministers had an exchange of views on a report by
the Economic and Finance Committee (EFC) on the
movement of capital and the freedom of payments, and
a report by the European Commission on accelerating
the capital markets union.

**European semester 2017**

Ministers endorsed Council conclusions on the in-depth
reviews of macroeconomic imbalances in certain member
states carried out by the European Commission as part
The UK was not subject to an in-depth review in 2017.

**Follow-up to the G20 meeting of Finance Ministers
and Central Bank Governors on 20 April 2017 and the IMF
and World Bank spring meetings on 21-23 April 2017 in
Washington**

The presidency and the Commission informed Ministers
on the outcomes of the G20, IMF and World Bank
meetings.

[HCWS8]

**ECOFIN: 16 June 2017**

**The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond):**
A meeting of The Economic and Financial Affairs Council
(ECOFIN) was held in Luxembourg, on 16 June 2017. EU Finance Ministers discussed the following items:

**Early morning session**

The Eurogroup President briefed ministers on the
outcomes of the 15 June meeting of the Eurogroup,
where consensus was reached on a short-term solution
for Greek debt re-structuring and fiscal targets. Commissioner Moscovici also gave a presentation on the
euro, area economy in which he flagged the ongoing
political risks faced by the euro area.

**Reduced VAT rate for electronically supplied publications**

The Council discussed the proposal for a Council
directive amending the VAT directive as regards VAT
rates applied to books, newspapers and periodicals. The proposal could not be adopted due to the lack of
unanimous agreement. The incoming presidency will decide on the further handling of this file.

**Strengthening of the Banking Union/Risk-reduction measures**

Under this item, the Council agreed the general approach
on a proposal for a directive amending the bank recovery
and resolution directive (BRRD) as regards the ranking
of unsecured debt instruments in insolvency hierarchy.

**Current financial services legislative proposals**

The presidency informed Council of the state of play
of legislative proposals in the field of financial services.

**Non-Performing Loans (NPLs)**

The presidency gave an update on the work of the
Financial Services Committee’s sub-group on NPLs.
The sub-group’s report on NPLs will be presented to
July ECOFIN.

**Fight against the financing of terrorism (Commission
Action Plan)**

The Commission provided an update to Council on
implementation of the action plan on the prevention of
terrorist financing, including progress to agree revisions
to the fourth anti-money laundering directive.

**Capital Markets Union (CMU): Mid-term review**

The Council received a presentation from the
Commission on the mid-term review of the CMU action
plan, published on 8 June.

**Contribution to the European Council meeting on 22-23
June 2017: European semester 2017**

The Council approved draft country-specific recommendations (CSRs) on the economic and fiscal
policies of member states. These will be submitted to
the June European Council for endorsement.

**Implementation of the stability and growth pact**

The Council adopted Council decisions and
recommendations in the context of the excessive deficit
procedure, closing the excessive deficit procedures of
Croatia and Portugal, and the significant deviation
procedure, recommending Romania correct a significant
deviation from the adjustment path towards its medium-
term budgetary objective.

[HCWS9]

**EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION**

**General Affairs Council: June 2017**

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting
the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): My right hon.
Friend, Baroness Anelay of St Johns DBE, Minister of State
for Exiting the European Union, has made the following statement:
The General Affairs Council (GAC) met in Luxembourg on Tuesday 20 June 2017. It was the last GAC under the Maltese presidency. I represented the UK.

The main items on the agenda were: preparations for the June European Council on 22 and 23 June; the eighteen-month programme of the Council; the European semester; and inter-institutional agreements with reference to the Commission’s Work Programme.


Preparation of the European Council, 22 to 23 June 2017

The Heads of the EU’s 28 member states, the European Council President and the President of the European Commission assembled at the European Council meeting on 22 and 23 June 2017. To prepare for this meeting, the General Affairs Council examined the second draft of conclusions on the proposed agenda items for the European Council. The agenda included: security and defence; migration; the Paris climate accord; jobs growth and competitiveness; external relations; and digital Europe.

On security and defence, the discussions at the General Affairs Council focused on the European Defence Fund and permanent structured co-operation, to enable member states to develop capability on security and defence matters. Ministers also discussed counter terrorism proposals.

On migration, the Council discussed: internal migration; external migration; measures to address the central Mediterranean route; and the need to work with countries of origin.

On jobs, growth and competitiveness, the Council debated how to secure free and fair trade: the use of defence instruments. Ministers also discussed their ambitions for the single market: the Capital Markets Union; the services sector; and the Digital Single Market.

Ministers were informed that during the external relations discussion, the President of the European Council and the President of the European Commission would update the European Council on recent meetings and summits and leaders would reaffirm their commitment to the Paris Climate agreement.

I intervened to thank colleagues for all the messages of support after the recent terror attacks in London and Manchester. I confirmed that the UK was broadly content with the language on defence but that the proposals on counter terrorism should go further to include references to data retention as a vital tool to fight terrorism.

I underlined the need for a strong EU commitment to free trade and also supported all those who called for ambition and implementation on services, the Digital Single Market and single market strategies.

Eighteen-month programme of the Council

The Council endorsed, without any deliberation, the eighteen-month work programme devised by the incoming Estonian, Bulgarian and Austrian presidencies of the Council of the European Union. The programme will run from 1 July 2017 to 31 December 2018.

European semester

The Council approved the country specific recommendations of the European semester, which is the EU’s cycle of economic and fiscal policy co-ordination, for endorsement at the June European Council.

Inter-institutional agreements

Ministers had a brief exchange of views on the proposals for the 2018 Council Work Programme. The proposals will be formally introduced with the publication of the Commission’s Letter of Intent on 13 September.

The UK also lifted its reservation on the mid-term review of the Multiannual Financial Framework that had been in place during the purdah period and the file was adopted.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

British Indian Ocean Territory

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): On 22 June, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution at the instigation of Mauritius seeking an advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the sovereignty of the Chagos Archipelago, which the UK administers as the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT). Fewer than half of the General Assembly’s 193 members voted in favour of the resolution (94 countries); 15 voted against it, 65 abstained and 19 did not vote. We are disappointed that this bilateral dispute is being taken to the International Court of Justice. This is an inappropriate use of the ICJ advisory mechanism because it is an attempt to circumvent the principle that no state should be compelled to have its bilateral disputes submitted for judicial settlement without its consent, not least on matters of sovereignty. This is a matter for the UK and Mauritius to resolve bilaterally.

We have no doubt about our sovereignty over the Chagos Archipelago, which has been under continuous British sovereignty since 1814. Mauritius has never held sovereignty over the Archipelago and we do not recognise its claim. We have, however, made a long-standing commitment to cede sovereignty of the territory to Mauritius when it is no longer required for defence purposes. We stand by that commitment.

We created BIOT for defence purposes and, in 1966, concluded with the United States of America an agreement for joint defence use of the territory. Our current agreement lasts until 2036. We cannot now predict what our defence purposes will require beyond that point. BIOT plays an active role in regional and global security and defence, to the considerable benefit of the UK, US, other allies and regional partners.

We have engaged in good faith in discussions to try to resolve the issue bilaterally. The UK Government have made significant proposals to Mauritius which respect and recognise their long-term interest in the Archipelago. We have offered, without prejudice to our sovereignty, a framework for the joint management, in environment and scientific study, of all the islands of the territory except for Diego Garcia, and we have offered enhanced bilateral security co-operation. These offers were relevant to the dispute and were seriously made. We are disappointed that the Government of Mauritius chose to reject them and to walk away from bilateral talks and instead decided to use multilateral mechanisms.

The UN resolution also mentions the very important matter of the Chagossians. We are currently designing an approximately £40 million support package, to improve Chagossian livelihoods in the communities where they now live: in Mauritius, the Seychelles and the UK.

The UK will continue to defend robustly our sovereignty over BIOT.

JUSTICE

Justice and Home Affairs Council: Post Council Statement

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Dominic Raab): My noble Friend the Justice Lords Spokesperson (Lord Keen QC of Elie) has made the following written statement.

[HCWS10]

[HCWS11]
“A meeting of the Justice and Home Affairs Council took place on 8 and 9 June in Luxembourg. The Council took place on the day of, and the day after, the General Election. I represented the UK for Justice day. The UK’s Permanent Representative to the European Union, Sir Tim Barrow, and Shona Riach, Home Office Europe Director, represented the UK for Interior day.

Justice day

The Council agreed a number of proposals without discussion on Justice day, including a number of Council conclusions on areas including returns, children in migration and information exchange and information management including interoperability solutions.

Justice day began with the participating member states agreeing a general approach on the European Public Prosecutor’s Office (EPPO) under enhanced co-operation. The UK has always been clear that we will not participate.

A general approach was achieved on the supply of digital content directive. However, some concerns on a specific article remain which suggest that the Estonian presidency are likely to come back to these issues. I expressed the UK’s support for the presidency’s compromise.

There was a policy debate on the European Commission (Commission) proposal for a provision on hearing the views of the child in parental responsibility cases arising from the Brussels III regulation. There was broad support for such a provision. The Commission urged member states to make progress as it would help resolve the problem of refusal of recognition and enforcement of judgments on the basis that the child had not been heard. The UK agrees that refusal of recognition and enforcement of judgments is a problem but I asked that member states keep options open going forward, rather than committing to a provision now.

For the insolvency directive, the presidency presented the Maltese presidency’s paper on the role of national courts in restructuring procedures and the principle that debtors should remain, in whole or in part, in possession of their business. The UK supports the directive and I welcomed the direction of travel on both issues. The presidency concluded that member states had shown support on both issues and work would continue at the technical level.

There was then a discussion on the money laundering directive, for which a general approach was achieved. The UK has not opted in to this proposal.

The presidency reached a general approach on the recast of Regulation 45/2001, which regulates the processing of personal data by EU institutions and bodies, and was being re-cast to bring it in line with the wider EU data protection package. As the proposal has not yet cleared parliamentary scrutiny in the UK, I did not give a position on it.

Over lunch, EU Ministers discussed ways of countering illegal hate speech online. The Commission updated the Council on the second progress report on co-operation with internet service providers. EU Ministers expressed support for the Commission’s work in this area. The Government views co-operation with internet service providers as an important step in the collective work to reduce harm caused by hate online, and I suggested producing a toolkit to help small platforms to apply the same standards as bigger providers.

After lunch, at the start of a joint session of Interior and Justice Ministers, the Council held a one minute silence to remember those killed and injured in the Manchester and London Bridge terrorist attacks. I then provided an update on the attacks. I noted the quick and effective response from our emergency services and that the investigations were ongoing. I also thanked Ministers for the many messages of condolence, and stressed the need to work together to combat radicalisation and deprive extremists of safe spaces to operate online.

The Council then moved on to discuss Criminal Justice in Cyberspace, covering e-evidence, data retention and encryption.

For e-evidence, the Commission presented a number of practical measures as well as possible legislative approaches for improving cross-border access to electronic evidence. The Government agree we must be able to bring to justice cross-border crimes planned, facilitated or committed online irrespective of where the electronic evidence is stored. I underlined the importance of this agenda, in particular for bringing terrorists to justice and set out practical action which could help. The presidency concluded that the Commission should continue to seek expert input whilst developing legislative proposals.

For encryption, the Commission presented an update on the challenges caused by end-to-end encryption for law enforcement, as well as the technical and legal issues.

For data retention, the presidency provided a brief update on discussions held so far in the friends of the presidency group on data retention. The Government have played a leading role in the group and fully support these discussions as a way of building an evidence base for the necessity of retention.

The final discussion on Justice day was focused on safeguarding children involved in irregular migration to Europe across the Mediterranean. EU Ministers agreed that protecting children at all stages is a priority and endorsed the need for a comprehensive approach to migration.

Interior day

Interior day began with the agreement of a general approach on the European Travel and Information Authorisation System (ETIAS). As the UK is not part of the border control aspects of the Schengen agreement, it will not take part in this proposal.

This was followed by a policy debate on the Second Generation Schengen Information System (SIS II) proposals. There was broad agreement among EU Ministers that the SIS II could be used for entering preventative alerts on children at risk of abduction and disappearance, with the caveat that clear definitions were needed. There was also some support from EU Ministers on the creation of a new alert on the SIS II for ‘inquiry checks’ against suspected criminals or terrorists.

There was then a general discussion on actions to address the migration crisis, with a focus on the EU-Turkey agreement and the Central Mediterranean. Member states were encouraged to take an active role in implementing the Malta declaration.

Over a working lunch focused on Counter Terrorism, there was a progress update on the work of the Counter Terrorism Group followed by a presentation of fiches on data sharing with EU agencies from Counter Terrorism Co-ordinator Gilles de Kerchove. There was also a discussion on proposals to bring together the various European bodies responsible for countering radicalisation, including the Radicalisation Awareness Network and the European Strategic Communications Network.

The afternoon session began with a debate on key operational practices and obstacles of returns policy and the use of visas as leverage. It was concluded that member states would need to work together on returns and readmission and that the next step would be to look at where and when leverage should be used.

There was then a discussion on information systems and interoperability, following the final report of the High Level Expert Group on data sharing (HLEG). The HLEG’s priorities were highlighted, including a shared biometric matching service and a common data repository, while the need to improve data quality, implement PNR and improve co-operation with Europol and Interpol were common themes in discussion.

Finally, there was an update on negotiations on the seven legislative proposals on the Common European Asylum System. Of these measures, the UK has only opted in to the recast Eurodac Regulation.

Over both days the Estonian presidency set out their priorities for their presidency of the Council of the EU, which begins in July. The fight against terrorism and serious crime will continue to be a priority. ECRIS will remain a priority file, as will criminal justice in cyberspace and data retention. The incoming presidency will prioritise safeguarding Schengen and free movement in the face of terrorism and mass migration, meaning that the asylum package, the Valtetta Action Plan, returns, and the Blue Card directive will be priority files, as will work on radicalisation, interoperability of EU information systems, the Entry Exit system and ETIAS. Prüm, Passenger Name Records (PNR) and a renewed mandate for EU LISA will also be high on the agenda, as will co-operation between the EU and Ukraine.”
Written Statements

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Joint European Torus Facility: UK Underwrite

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): Today I have laid before Parliament a departmental minute describing the contingent liability resulting from Her Majesty’s Government’s underwrite of the UK’s fair share of the Joint European Torus (JET) costs.

JET is a world-leading nuclear fusion research facility based in Oxfordshire and supports 1,300 jobs in the UK. JET is funded through a contract between the EU Commission and the UK Atomic Energy Authority. As part of this contract, the EU provides around £60 million of funding per year representing 88% of the JET running costs.

The current JET contract is due to end in December 2018 and the EU Commission is currently considering a potential extension of the JET contract until at least the end of 2020. This extension is crucial to the future of JET, the researchers that work there and to ensuring the UK continues to lead the world in fusion technology and research.

I wrote to the EU Commission on 20 June 2017 confirming that, should the JET contract be extended, the UK would continue to pay its fair share of JET costs. This underwriting of UK JET costs aims to provide the certainty needed to secure the extension of the JET contract and minimise the uncertainty around the future of this world-class facility.

The departmental minute describes the contingent liability that the Government will hold as a result of underwriting the UK’s fair share of the JET costs. The value of the liability is subject to negotiation. Estimates as to the possible value of the liability will need to remain confidential so as to avoid prejudicing the UK’s future negotiating position.

It is usual to allow a period of 14 sitting days prior to accepting a contingent liability, to provide hon. Members an opportunity to raise any objections. I regret that on this occasion pressing commercial and industrial requirements to sign the contract within the next few days together with the dissolution of Parliament, have meant that it has not been possible to provide the full 14 sitting days prior to taking on the contingent liabilities. Any delay would have risked losing significant financial benefits for the taxpayer. The Secretary of State for Defence has decided to proceed with the agreement, following scrutiny by the Department’s Investment Approvals Committee which confirmed that the contract offered best value for money for the taxpayer, and subsequent approval by HM Treasury.

Within the contract the exposure of BAE Systems Maritime-Naval Ships to a number of specified claims and to direct losses is limited to £50 million, while in respect of indirect losses and, within certain prescribed categories, catastrophic risks the contractor is indemnified against claims in excess of £50 million. It is the view of the Department that the likelihood of any claim is extremely low.

DEFENCE

Contingent Liability

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Harriett Baldwin): I am today laying a departmental minute to advise that the Ministry of Defence (MOD) has received approval from Her Majesty’s Treasury (HMT) to recognise a new contingent liability associated with the Type 26 Global Combat Ship Manufacture Phase 1 Contract.

The departmental minute describes the contingent liability that the MOD will hold as a result of placing the Type 26 Global Combat Ship Manufacture Phase 1 Contract, which will provide for the manufacture and testing of the first batch of Type 26 Global Combat Ships. The maximum contingent liability against the MOD is unquantifiable and will remain until the latest Out of Service Date of the ships manufactured under the contract, in the second half of the 21st century.

It is usual to allow a period of 14 sitting days prior to accepting a contingent liability, to provide hon. Members an opportunity to raise any objections. I regret that on this occasion pressing commercial and industrial requirements to sign the contract within the next few days together with the dissolution of Parliament, have meant that it has not been possible to provide the full 14 sitting days prior to taking on the contingent liabilities. Any delay would have risked losing significant financial benefits for the taxpayer. The Secretary of State for Defence has decided to proceed with the agreement, following scrutiny by the Department’s Investment Approvals Committee which confirmed that the contract offered best value for money for the taxpayer, and subsequent approval by HM Treasury.

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Written Statement

Wednesday 28 June 2017

TRANSPORT

EU Transport Council

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):
The only Transport Council under the Maltese presidency (the presidency) took place in Brussels on 8 June. The UK was represented by the UK’s deputy permanent representative to the EU, Katrina Williams.

The Council adopted a general approach on lorry and bus driver training (driver CPC directive) as well as Council conclusions on road safety and the EU’s maritime priorities. All three were widely supported by member states. The UK intervened to support the road safety conclusions, welcoming the elements related to safer road infrastructure and connected and autonomous vehicles, and highlighting the UK’s safer road fund.

Under any other business, a range of items were discussed. The Commission presented its new mobility package of proposals which aims to modernise the road transport framework and strengthen the competitiveness and social standards of the EU road haulage sector. Some member states supported stronger social standards in the road transport sector while others felt the Commission’s proposals did not sufficiently support liberalisation in the sector. A number of member states called for the political and geographical balance of the proposals to be carefully considered.

The presidency provided information on the progress of the trilogue discussions with the European Parliament on professional qualifications in inland navigation directive and the European Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) regulation. Overall member states welcomed the substantial efforts of the Maltese presidency in negotiations to date with the European Parliament.

The Commission presented an overview of the “Open and Connected Europe” aviation package which was published on the morning of the Transport Council. The package includes a proposal to revise regulation (EC) No. 868/2004, guidelines on airline ownership and control, guidelines on public service obligations and best practice on minimising air traffic control disruptions.

Sweden provided information on her approach to protection against acts of terror in road transport in light of the terrorist attack that occurred in Stockholm in April. The UK intervened to express its solidarity and emphasise the importance of this issue and of sharing best practice, supported by other member states. Those who intervened offered condolences to the UK following the London Bridge attack on 3 June.

In addition, the Commission updated the Council on recent developments on aviation security and the Netherlands asked the Commission to provide information on their work on social issues in aviation. Luxembourg urged member states to speed up the implementation of the European rail traffic management signalling system (ERTMS) and presented the work she had done to develop a blue-print EU cycling strategy. Germany flagged the high-level dialogue on connected and autonomous driving that would take place in Frankfurt on 14 and 15 September and the Estonian presidency presented its work programme for its presidency beginning 1 July 2017.

Over lunch Commissioner Bulc led a discussion on an initial strategy at the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) on reducing greenhouse gas emissions from ships.

[HCWS15]
The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): On 1 June I said that NATO had requested additional troops to support the non-combat train and advise and assist Resolute Support (RS) mission in Afghanistan. This request went to all countries that are part of the RS mission to implement a new strategy developed by NATO, in partnership with the Afghan Government, to reinvigorate the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF). The strategy’s goal is to expand governance and security throughout Afghanistan and, in turn, set the conditions for progress on a political settlement with the Taliban.

The security situation in Afghanistan remains challenging. The ANDSF are improving but the rate of their development is affected by a range of complex challenges, not least the nature and strength of a determined insurgency. The NATO strategy will address these challenges.

The Government have carefully considered the NATO request and we have decided to increase the UK’s troop contribution to the RS mission by around 85 personnel. These troops will serve in non-combat roles to support directly the implementation of the NATO strategy. We will increase the number of mentors advising the Afghan army and police, and the Afghan air force, and provide further support to ANDSF training and leadership development. This deployment will add to the significant contribution the UK is already making to the RS mission by around 85 personnel. On 1 June I said that NATO had requested additional troops to support the non-combat train and advise and assist RS mission in Afghanistan. This request went to all countries that are part of the RS mission to implement a new strategy developed by NATO, in partnership with the Afghan Government, to reinvigorate the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF).

The ANDSF are improving but the rate of their development is affected by a range of complex challenges, not least the nature and strength of a determined insurgency. The NATO strategy will address these challenges.

The Government have carefully considered the NATO request and we have decided to increase the UK’s troop contribution to the RS mission by around 85 personnel. These troops will serve in non-combat roles to support directly the implementation of the NATO strategy. We will increase the number of mentors advising the Afghan army and police, and the Afghan air force, and provide further support to ANDSF training and leadership development. This deployment will add to the significant contribution the UK is already making to the RS mission. We have around 500 troops based in Kabul serving in roles focused on improving the capability of the Afghan security institutions, developing the Afghan national army officer academy and providing vital force protection for NATO advisors through our leadership of the Kabul security force. Through helping to achieve progress in Afghanistan, our troops have helped to reduce the terrorist threat to the UK from this region.

Military support is only part of the solution. Our continued military, diplomatic and financial assistance is designed to enable and support the advancement of the Afghan-led peace process to deliver a political settlement and lasting stability.

Finally, I wish to record my gratitude and admiration for all of our brave men and women who have served in Afghanistan. The UK will never forget the sacrifice made by the 456 members of the armed forces who died during operations there. They helped protect our country from the threat of terrorism and, through our continued support to the mission, we are working to protect their legacy.

[HCWS16]
production of documents, and to summon witnesses to give evidence on oath. The inquiry will be held in public.

In relation to the appointment of the Chair, the Lord Chancellor asked the Lord Chief Justice for the name of a judge who, in his view, would be best suited to the task and available to start work immediately so that we can get answers to what happened as quickly as possible. The Lord Chief Justice recommended Sir Martin Moore-Bick: a highly respected and hugely experienced former Court of Appeal judge. I have accepted the Lord Chief Justice’s recommendation.

I am determined that there will be justice for all the victims of this terrible tragedy and for their families who have suffered so terribly.

The immediate priority is to establish the facts of what happened at Grenfell Tower in order to take the necessary action to prevent a similar tragedy from happening again. But beyond that immediate focus it is also important that all the wider lessons from both this catastrophe, and the inspections of other buildings around the country that followed it, are identified and learnt.

Before the inquiry starts Sir Martin will consult all those with an interest, including survivors and victims’ families, about the terms of reference. Following that consultation he will make a recommendation to me. I will return to Parliament with the final terms of reference once this process has taken place. Then the inquiry will begin its work.

We must get to the truth about what happened. No stone will be left unturned by this inquiry, but I have also been clear that we cannot wait for ages to learn the immediate lessons and so I expect the Chair will want to produce an interim report as early as possible.

[HCWS18]

TRANSPORT
Crossrail: Annual Update

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): I am pleased to report that earlier this month, the first new class 345 train entered passenger service on the TfL rail line between Shenfield and Liverpool Street. Although the trains were due to enter service in May 2017 some of the testing, assurance and safety indicators demonstrate strong performance over the year with all the key indicators exceeding the corporate objectives for the year 2016-17.

In the past year significant progress has been made across the project. The Crossrail programme is approaching 85% complete. In the central tunnel section all platforms have now been completed, track installation is over 90% complete, power and ventilation installation have reached 70% and 30% complete respectively, and installation of platform edge screen doors has commenced at Bond Street and London Paddington. Architectural finishes are being applied and escalator and lift installation has commenced across the central stations. Testing of the new central section infrastructure and systems will commence by the end of 2017, with the new central section stations being completed during 2018.

The critical works for the stabilising facility at Ilford depot were completed in May 2017, to support the introduction of new trains into passenger service. Further work at Ilford depot to support stage 4 (Paddington to Shenfield) opening continues and is expected to be delivered by May 2019. Works continue at Old Oak Common depot to support stages 2 and 3 (Paddington to Abbey Wood).

Major surface works were delivered by Network Rail on the existing rail network this year. During the Christmas 2016 blockade an unprecedented level of works were successfully delivered on the Great Western and Anglia railways. These works included the entry into service of the new Acton dive-under and the Stockley flyover, both of which will improve capacity and reliability between Heathrow and Paddington. Christmas 2016 also saw the start of the remodelling of tracks at Shenfield, which was completed during May 2017.

Manufacturing of the new trains is progressing. Trains will be progressively introduced over the next few months, with 11 in service by autumn, replacing just over half the existing train fleet. In preparation for the operation of the Elizabeth line services a purpose-built facility has been commissioned to simulate the operation of passenger services and ensure key components and software are tested. The Crossrail integration facility is an essential element to support the next stages and success of the Crossrail opening strategy.

Training of the new operations workforce is well under way. Drivers are familiarising themselves with the new trains and route. There are now circa 700 apprentices who have gained experience across the project. Crossrail’s purpose-built training facility, the tunnelling and underground construction academy, has now become part of Transport for London and will continue to offer apprenticeships and training to support the next generation of skills for rail and tunnelling projects.

The Crossrail board forecast that the cost of constructing Crossrail will be within the overall £14.8 billion funding envelope (excluding rolling stock costs). Cost pressures are increasing across the project and Crossrail Ltd is identifying and implementing initiatives to deliver cost efficiencies until completion in 2019. Crossrail’s joint sponsors (Department for Transport and Transport for London) will continue to meet regularly with Crossrail Ltd to ensure that the project is being effectively managed and will be delivered within funding and on schedule.

During the passage of the Crossrail Bill through Parliament, a commitment was given that a statement would be published at least every 12 months until the completion of the construction of Crossrail, setting out information about the project’s funding and finances.
In line with this commitment, this statement comes within 12 months of the last one, which was published on 30 June 2016. The relevant information is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total funding amounts provided to Crossrail Ltd by the Department for Transport and TfL in relation to the construction of Crossrail to the end of the period (22 July 2008 to 29 May 2017)</td>
<td>£10,860,539,046</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expenditure incurred (including committed land and property spend not yet paid out) by Crossrail Ltd in relation to the construction of Crossrail in the period (30 May 2016 to 29 May 2017) (excluding recoverable VAT on land and property purchases)</td>
<td>£1,636,471,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total expenditure incurred (including committed land and property spend not yet paid out) by Crossrail Ltd in relation to the construction of Crossrail to the end of the period (22 July 2008 to 29 May 2017)(excluding recoverable VAT on land and property purchases).</td>
<td>£10,886,978,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The amounts realised by the disposal of any land or property for the purposes of the construction of Crossrail by the Secretary of State, TfL or Crossrail Ltd in the period covered by the statement.</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The numbers above are drawn from Crossrail Ltd’s books of account and have been prepared on a consistent basis with the update provided last year. The figure for expenditure incurred includes monies already paid out in relevant period, including committed land and property expenditure where this has not yet been paid. It does not include future expenditure on construction contracts that have been awarded.

Notes

1Crossrail’s opening strategy introduces services in five phases to gradually increase the number of services. The phases are:

i. May 2017—The new rolling stock is introduced on existing suburban services between Liverpool Street and Shenfield.

ii. May 2018—The Heathrow Connect service will cease and Crossrail will operate a stopping service between Heathrow terminal 4 and Paddington high level which from this date will double in frequency to four trains per hour.

iii. December 2018—Crossrail services commence in the central tunnel section between Paddington low level and Abbey Wood.

iv. May 2019—Crossrail services commence between Paddington low level to destinations on the Great Eastern route (Shenfield).

v. December 2019—Full Crossrail services between Reading, Heathrow and Paddington in the west to Shenfield and Abbey Wood in the east.

2The total funding amounts provided to Crossrail Ltd by the Department of Transport and Transport for London refers to the expenditure drawn down from the sponsor funding account in the period 22 July 2008 and 29 May 2017. Included within the amount is £642,959,962 of interim funding that has been provided to Network Rail to finance the delivery of the on-network works. This amount is due to be repaid to Crossrail Ltd by 30 September 2017.

[HCWS17]
The Council then discussed energy interconnectors at the request of Spain and Portugal, who sought binding targets for interconnection and funding for the required infrastructure. The Commission reiterated its commitment to the 2015 Madrid declaration on developing interconnectors, and highlighted the future discussion of this issue at the high-level group in September.

Finally, the presidency noted the intention of working groups to move forward on the six remaining legislative files that comprise the clean energy package; the Commission updated Council on a number of external energy relations issues over the past six months, including discussions on energy co-operation with China, Japan, Africa and Iran, and the development of the Eastern Mediterranean as a gas supplier, in order further to improve diversification of supply. The Estonian delegation presented the priorities for its upcoming presidency, which focused on electricity market design but also included negotiations on other elements of the clean energy package and the mandate for Nord Stream 2.

**DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT**

**DCMS: Digital**

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): With agreement of the Prime Minister, we can confirm an addition to the Department name. DCMS will change from Department for Culture, Media and Sport to Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. The Secretary of State’s full title will be the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. All responsibilities and portfolios within the Department remain the same. The Department will still be referred to as DCMS.

**ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS**

**Fisheries**

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): As part of the wider process of becoming an independent coastal state, the UK will be withdrawing from the London Fisheries Convention. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will today formally give notice under the convention.

This is the first step towards taking back control of our fishing waters and creating a policy that leads to a more competitive, profitable and sustainable fisheries industry for the whole of the UK.

We are committed to acting as a responsible coastal state. We look forward to working closely with the EU and other coastal states to ensure the sustainable management of fish stocks in accordance with our rights and obligations under international law including the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the UN Fish Stocks Agreement (UNFSA).
HEALTH

Delayed Transfers of Care

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): I would like to update the House about action we are taking to address delayed discharges from hospital in advance of this winter. Last year there were 2.25 million delayed discharges, up 24.5% from 1.81 million in the previous year. The Government are clear that no-one should stay in a hospital bed longer than necessary: it removes people’s dignity, reduces their quality of life; leads to poorer health and care outcomes for people; and is more expensive for the taxpayer.

In this year’s mandate to NHS England I set a clear expectation that delayed transfers of care (DToCs) should equate to no more than 3.5% of all hospital beds by September. Alongside this, the spring 2017 Budget announced an additional £2 billion to councils in England over the next three years to spend on adult social care services.

The system has worked extremely hard to agree spending plans and put in place actions to make use of the £1 billion provided in 2017-18 to meet the three purposes of the funding:

- meeting adult social care needs;
- reducing pressures on the NHS, including getting supporting more people to be discharged from hospital when they are ready; and,
- ensuring that the local social care provider market is supported.

Since February, there have been significant improvements within the health and care system, with a record decrease in month-on-month delayed discharges in April 2017. We are supportive of the best performing systems where differing at local level if agreed by both organisations.

This is why today we are setting out a further package of measures to support both the NHS and local government to reduce delays. This package supports all organisations to make improvements, and includes:

- The integration and better care fund planning requirements 2017-19, clarifying how this, and other aspects of the better care fund planning process, will operate.
- A performance dashboard showing how local areas in England are performing against metrics across the NHS-social care interface including delayed discharges.
- Plans for local government to deliver an equal share to the NHS of the expectation to free up 2,500 hospital beds, including a breakdown of delayed days per 100,000 of the population and the indicative reduction levels required by each local authority and local NHS, which can be shared out differently at local level if agreed by both organisations.

Considering a review, in November, of 2018-19 allocations of the social care funding provided at spring Budget 2017 for areas that are poorly performing. This funding will all remain with local government, to be used for adult social care.

In addition, I have asked the chief executive of the Care Quality Commission to commission 12 reviews of local areas to consider how well they are working at the health and social care boundary. A further 8 reviews will be commissioned based on the performance dashboard and informed by local authority returns due in July. These reviews will commence immediately with the majority complete by the end of November, with a view to identifying issues and driving rapid improvement.

We are also putting in place a comprehensive sector-led support offer and in early July NHS England, NHS improvement, Local Government Association, Association of Directors of Adult Social Services and the better care support team are publishing the definitive national offer to support reductions in delayed transfers of care to all areas.

The health and care system has committed health and social care staff and managers up and down the country working every single day to deliver the best outcomes for people. Today’s announcement will give our workforce and their leaders clarity on how the Government expect the NHS and local government to work together to achieve this joint ambition.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Resettlement

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): As the Syria crisis enters its seventh year, civilians continue to bear the brunt of a conflict marked by unparalleled suffering, destruction and disregard for human life. This crisis, and wider instability across the world, is driving thousands of refugees and migrants towards Europe’s borders.

The UK has been at the forefront of the international response and has pledged £2.46 billion to help address the humanitarian crisis, complemented by continued diplomatic efforts in the region to end the conflict. Our direct support has reached hundreds of thousands of people in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt. By meeting basic humanitarian needs and helping to create new opportunities, we aim to help Syrians to build a life in neighbouring countries.

As part of our comprehensive approach to the Syria crisis, the Syrian vulnerable persons resettlement scheme (VPRS) was launched in January 2014 and expanded in September 2015. In 2016 the UK resettled more refugees from outside Europe than any other EU member state. The scheme, to date, has focused on Syrian nationals because they formed an easily identifiable cohort of vulnerable refugees who have fled the conflict and whose needs are clearly evident. This focus has enabled us to provide a quick and effective response to the crisis.

The scheme sees us working closely with the UNHCR to identify individuals who are most at risk in the region and whose particular needs can only be met in countries like the UK. Up to the end of March 2017, 7,307 Syrian nationals had been resettled across the UK under the Syrian VPRS, half of whom are children, and we are on track to meet our commitment of resettling 20,000 refugees by 2020. This is in addition to our vulnerable children’s resettlement scheme launched last year, which will see
us resettle up to 3,000 of the most vulnerable children and their families from the middle east and north Africa region by 2020. We remain committed to resettling the overall number of refugees previously announced on both schemes.

However, whilst the Syrian VPRS is aimed at the most vulnerable Syrians, there are additional groups in the region who have fled Syria and are also extremely vulnerable but who may not be able to access one of our resettlement schemes. UNHCR’s advice is that a diversified resettlement quota is needed in order to address the needs of the most vulnerable refugees from all refugee populations in the region.

In light of this, with immediate effect, I am amending the scope of the Syrian vulnerable persons resettlement scheme to enable UNHCR to refer the most vulnerable refugees in the MENA region who have fled the Syrian conflict and cannot safely return to their country of origin, whatever their nationality.

The Government are committed to an effective response in the affected regions and to resettling the most vulnerable; this includes those who had sought refuge within Syria prior to the conflict and been recognised as refugees. We will continue to rely on UNHCR to identify and refer the most vulnerable refugees but will no longer limit the scheme solely to those with Syrian nationality. UNHCR will only refer to us those who are genuine refugees, in that they cannot seek the protection of their home country.

This change will also mean that mixed family groups are eligible for resettlement under the Syrian vulnerable persons resettlement scheme. This change might also open up the scheme to other groups, such as Iraqi minorities who sought refuge in Syria, but had to flee again as a result of the Syria conflict.

This remains within the overall spirit of the then Prime Minister’s 2015 commitment while recognising that other nationalities who had resided in Syria have been impacted by the same conflict. This decision demonstrates the UK remains fully committed to playing its part in the global migration crisis. We continue with our approach of taking refugees from the region—from Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Egypt—as well as providing life-saving humanitarian assistance such as the £2.5 million migration emergency response fund in response to the Mediterranean migration crisis. Our approach is rightly based on targeting our support so that it delivers the most impact, helps those who need it the most, and avoids unintended consequences.

This provides refugees with a more direct and safe route to the UK, rather than risking the hazardous journey to Europe which has tragically cost so many lives. Local authorities and partners play a vital role in helping those arriving here to settle into a new life in the UK. I am grateful for the way in which over 235 local authorities across the UK have stepped up to provide places for those arriving under the resettlement schemes.

We can be proud of the contribution the UK is making to support refugees, including the support and generosity from the British public, and I believe that this policy change will help us to continue to support the most vulnerable refugees fleeing Syria.

[HCWS23]
Written Statement

Tuesday 4 July 2017

WORK AND PENSIONS

Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council: 15 June 2017

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): The Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council met on 15th June 2017 in Luxembourg. I represented the UK.

The Council concluded the annual European semester process; Ministers approved the Council recommendation on the National Reform programmes, endorsed the Country specific recommendations and endorsed the Employment Committee opinion on the labour market integration of refugees. In the table round, in line with all Ministers, the UK welcomed the continuous improvements in the semester process.

The Council received a progress report on revisions to the posting of workers directive. The common theme in interventions was the need for European unity and to build citizens’ confidence in the EU. However, member states expressed different views for achieving that, reflecting a broader debate on the balance between the social dimension of the EU and the single market.

Ministers discussed the European Pillar of social rights over lunch. The presidency provided an oral report to Council afterwards, citing agreement that there should be flexibility about the process for the proposed joint proclamation on the Pillar.

The Council took note of a progress report on the revision of EU Social Security Co-ordination Regulation 883. The presidency outlined how close they thought the Council was to agreement. The European Commission reiterated that this whole file should be concluded in this European Parliament. Supported by Germany, the UK stressed the importance of full codification of case law and of striking a balance on applicable legislation.

Progress reports on the anti-discrimination directive, women on boards and the European Accessibility Act were noted without comment from delegations. The Council also adopted Council conclusions on making work pay and the European Court of Auditors’ report on the youth guarantee and youth employment initiative.

The Council agreed a general approach on the carcinogens and mutagens directive (second batch of substances). Alongside other member states, the UK emphasised the importance of protecting workers and that the revision should therefore be based on scientific and social partner advice. On polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, the presidency’s text strayed from that advice, such that the UK abstained.

Under any other business, Sweden raised pharmaceuticals and the environment. The Commission stated it will publish policy options on these in early 2018, including a new Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR) Action Plan. The UK spoke on the importance of action on AMR in different sectors and following up on progress made through other global fora. The UK also welcomed work through the G7 and G20 particularly with regard to research into new antibiotics, vaccines and diagnostics. Estonia outlined the priorities for its upcoming presidency, to include tackling harmful use of alcohol; opportunities through digital innovation in health; and tackling AMR.

[HCWS25]
Written Statements

Wednesday 5 July 2017

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Grenfell Tower: Support

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): I am announcing today that I am intervening in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) following the Grenfell Tower disaster.

The scale of the recovery effort needed on the Lancaster West estate in the months to come cannot be underestimated. Support to survivors, the families and friends of those who lost their lives and residents in the wider community must and will be ongoing. The challenge of providing that support is and will continue to be significant. I want to help the council meet that challenge.

The immediate response to the disaster is being co-ordinated by the Grenfell response team, headed up by John Barradell. He is ably supported by a number of colleagues drawn from London Councils, the wider local government sector including RBKC, the voluntary sector, police, health and fire services as well as central Government. Their expertise and hard work is making a huge difference. However this is a temporary measure to deal with the immediate need.

As well as providing that immediate support, we must have an eye to the future. This intervention is putting in place the foundations that will support the longer-term recovery. I am therefore setting out my plans for strengthening the structures that will support that recovery effort.

Following an agreement with RBKC, I will appoint an independent Recovery Taskforce with the experience and skills to advise the council on the longer-term recovery needs. The remit of the Recovery Taskforce is to provide advice and practical and strategic support to RBKC. It will work alongside the council to make sure that they have the manpower, expertise and resources necessary to take on the longer-term recovery work beyond the immediate civil emergency response.

The Recovery Taskforce will report to me directly, and will be made up of experienced and senior people with a track record in delivery, including from local government. I will announce details of the chair and membership of the Recovery Taskforce shortly. The Recovery Taskforce will be in place for as long as is required.

The Recovery Taskforce will consider all aspects of the recovery operation but will have a special focus on housing, regeneration and community engagement. It will also consider the governance of the council and the way that it operates to ensure it is able to provide effective leadership through trying and difficult circumstances.

Site Assessment Indemnity

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): On 12 October 2016, a written ministerial statement and minute were laid before Parliament, which set out that DCLG would be providing an indemnity to the official receiver (OR) of the former SSI steel works and would be giving the same indemnity to the South Tees Site Company (STSC) once it was established.

The indemnities are to facilitate the undertaking of site assessments at the former SSI site. These site assessments will help inform: costs to decomposition the site, costs to regenerate the site and provide the necessary due diligence to enable the mayoral development corporation to take forward the regeneration of the area.

Following no objections the indemnity was given to the OR on 20 October 2016. The STSC is a wholly owned BEIS company that came into being on 1 November 2016 and was set up in order to keep the former SSI site safe and secure. On 26 January 2017 the DCLG Permanent Secretary wrote to the Public Accounts Committee and DCLG Select Committee setting out that the indemnity was being given to STSC.

The original indemnities set out that the site assessments would be commissioned by the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA). From here on, the site assessments will be commissioned directly by STSC in order to ensure greater efficiency and to give STSC greater control. The changing of the lead body taking forward the site assessments does not change the risk profile to HMG; it simply changes the lead body and the way the assessments will be procured. While the next phase of site assessments are in place the current indemnities will continue, however, they will be withdrawn following the completion of the HCA phase of work.

Therefore the Government will be reissuing updated indemnities to the OR and STSC to continue to indemnify both bodies against all liabilities, costs, expenses, damages and losses suffered or incurred by them that are arising out of the site assessments.

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. If the liability is called upon, provision for any payment will be sought through the normal Supply procedure.

As a matter of record a departmental minute for both Houses explaining the procedure followed and containing a description of the liabilities undertaken can be found as an online attachment. I can also confirm that I have made and laid an order to establish a mayoral development corporation, the South Tees Development Corporation.

The attachment can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-07-05/HCWS28/
We have made significant progress in realising our ambitious plans for transport infrastructure, built on the investment setting out how we will build on that progress and—through and deliver a transport network that works for everyone.

Heathrow, and are part way through delivering major projects like HS2 and our preferred option for a new runway at Heathrow, and are part way through delivering major transformational projects in place until 31 August 2017.

The Government have been clear that their priority is to ensure that victims of this tragedy get the access they need to vital services, irrespective of immigration status. The Home Office will not conduct immigration checks on survivors and those coming forward to provide information to assist the authorities in their enquiries. However, we recognise that some foreign nationals directly affected by the fire may not wish to engage with the authorities due to concerns about their unresolved immigration status, or if their status is about to expire. I am therefore announcing today that those individuals directly affected by the Grenfell Tower fire who contact the Home Office via a specified process will be given a period of limited leave to remain in the UK with full access to relevant support and assistance. This will be done by using discretionary powers to grant leave to remain outside the immigration rules for a temporary period of 12 months and without a condition precluding recourse to public funds. I will place a copy of the policy document in the Library of the House.

This period of leave will provide survivors with the time to deal with the extremely difficult circumstances in which they find themselves and start to rebuild their lives while considering their future options, as well as to assist the police and other authorities with their enquiries about the fire. No fees will be charged by the Home Office in respect of cases granted leave under the policy.

Everyone affected by this tragedy needs reassurance that the Government are there for them at this terrible time and we will continue to provide the support they need to help them through the difficult days, weeks and months to come.

The policy will be kept under review and will remain in place until 31 August 2017.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): We have made significant progress in realising our ambitious plans for transport infrastructure, built on the investment of over £61 billion in the five-year period to 2021. We have taken big decisions on transformational projects like HS2 and our preferred option for a new runway at Heathrow, and are part way through delivering major investment programmes to maintain and upgrade our road and rail networks.

As part of the strategy I am announcing my intention to launch a consultation on the creation of a new “Major Road Network” for the most important local authority A roads. This would mirror the success of the Strategic Road Network which has created planning and funding certainty for motorways and major dual carriageways, and would mean our most important local authority A roads were actively planned and managed to deliver a better service for drivers. As part of this consultation, we will make proposals to allocate a proportion of the national roads fund to the MRN.

I am also determined that, through our investment, we should go further in helping to raise prosperity and productivity across the country. In the Industrial Strategy Green Paper, the Government committed to taking account of the balance of spending per head between different regions. In addition, we will develop a new assessment standard that will require transport investment programmes to be judged on how they contribute towards the creation of a more balanced economy, as part of the assessment of their strategic case.

I have placed copies of the document in the Libraries of both Houses.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): I wish to inform the House that I am today introducing a policy on leave to remain outside the immigration rules for residents of Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk.

The Minister for Immigration (Brandon Lewis): I wish to inform the House that I am today introducing a policy on leave to remain outside the immigration rules for residents of Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk.

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The policy will be kept under review and will remain in place until 31 August 2017.

The decisions we take now will shape the transport network for decades to come and help to determine the contribution that transport can make to our national success and wellbeing. The Transport Investment Strategy describes what we are trying to achieve through our investment in transport infrastructure, the priorities and propositions that will guide future investment decisions, the institutional frameworks within which those decisions will be taken, and the actions we are taking to help meet our ambitions.

I want our investment to create a more reliable, less congested and better connected transport network that works for the users that rely on it; to build a stronger, more balanced economy by enhancing productivity and responding to local growth priorities; to enhance our global competitiveness by making Britain a more attractive place to trade and invest; and to support the creation of new housing.

As we shape and deliver the balanced investment programmes that deliver these objectives, we will be guided by a set of priorities and propositions that put the needs of transport users at the heart of decision making, whilst getting the best value out of the network and our investment, retaining a resolute focus on delivery and remaining adaptable in the face of change.

As part of the strategy I am announcing my intention to launch a consultation on the creation of a new “Major Road Network” for the most important local authority A roads. This would mirror the success of the Strategic Road Network which has created planning and funding certainty for motorways and major dual carriageways, and would mean our most important local authority A roads were actively planned and managed to deliver a better service for drivers. As part of this consultation, we will make proposals to allocate a proportion of the national roads fund to the MRN.

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I have placed copies of the document in the Libraries of both Houses.

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): DWP is today confirming the future of its estate, including jobcentres and back-office sites.

On 26 January 2017 DWP tabled a statement outlining proposals for changes to its estate, which will come into effect from 31 March 2018 when the current PFI contract with Telereal Trillium expires.

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I am today publishing a Transport Investment Strategy, setting out how we will build on that progress and—through the investment decisions we go on to take—how we will respond realistically and pragmatically to today’s challenges and deliver a transport network that works for everyone.

The decisions we take now will shape the transport network for decades to come and help to determine the contribution that transport can make to our national success and wellbeing. The Transport Investment Strategy describes what we are trying to achieve through our investment in transport infrastructure, the priorities and propositions that will guide future investment decisions, the institutional frameworks within which those decisions will be taken, and the actions we are taking to help meet our ambitions.

I want our investment to create a more reliable, less congested and better connected transport network that works for the users that rely on it; to build a stronger, more balanced economy by enhancing productivity and responding to local growth priorities; to enhance our global competitiveness by making Britain a more attractive place to trade and invest; and to support the creation of new housing.

As we shape and deliver the balanced investment programmes that deliver these objectives, we will be guided by a set of priorities and propositions that put the needs of transport users at the heart of decision making, whilst getting the best value out of the network and our investment, retaining a resolute focus on delivery and remaining adaptable in the face of change.

As part of the strategy I am announcing my intention to launch a consultation on the creation of a new “Major Road Network” for the most important local authority A roads. This would mirror the success of the Strategic Road Network which has created planning and funding certainty for motorways and major dual carriageways, and would mean our most important local authority A roads were actively planned and managed to deliver a better service for drivers. As part of this consultation, we will make proposals to allocate a proportion of the national roads fund to the MRN.

I am also determined that, through our investment, we should go further in helping to raise prosperity and productivity across the country. In the Industrial Strategy Green Paper, the Government committed to taking account of the balance of spending per head between different regions. In addition, we will develop a new assessment standard that will require transport investment programmes to be judged on how they contribute towards the creation of a more balanced economy, as part of the assessment of their strategic case.

I have placed copies of the document in the Libraries of both Houses.
Today’s announcement confirms that the majority of those proposals will go ahead. Some smaller jobcentres will merge with larger ones, and others will be co-located with local government premises. It will mean that DWP will be able to offer a more efficient service, while delivering good value for the taxpayer, saving over £140 million a year for the next 10 years.

The support provided to jobseekers will be further strengthened this year as more work coaches are recruited in every nation and region of the UK.

The plans reflect the fact that eight out of 10 claims for jobseeker’s allowance and 99% of applications for universal credit full service claims are now made online. This means that DWP buildings are used much less with 20% of the estate currently underutilised.

Following more detailed planning work and further discussions with staff, public consultations and feedback from stakeholders, the outcomes for some sites have been revised. The list in the online attachment (DWP Estates Announcements 5 July 2017) details where such a revision has been made. There are a small number of sites where commercial negotiations are ongoing. The Department is unable to announce these plans until this process is complete. These sites are also in the list.

In January, we were unable to announce our proposals for some offices because negotiations with landlords had not been concluded. We are now in a position to provide an update on proposals for these offices and they are listed in the online attachment.

For the vast majority of DWP offices there will be no change in location. Where we are closing a site, we will take all possible precautions to minimise disruption for customers. Vulnerable people will continue to receive home visits and postal claims where it is appropriate to do so.

The attachment can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-07-05/HCWS30/.

[HCWS30]
Written Statements

Thursday 6 July 2017

TREASURY

United Kingdom Debt Management Office

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Stephen Barclay): The United Kingdom Debt Management Office (DMO) has today published its business plan for the year 2017-18. Copies have been deposited in the Libraries of both Houses and are available on the DMO's website, www.dmo.gov.uk.

[HCWS31]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Office for Nuclear Regulation

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt): Later today I will lay before this House two reports on the Office for Nuclear Regulation: the annual report and accounts 2016-17 and the corporate plan 2017-18. These documents will also be published on the ONR website.

I can confirm, in accordance with schedule 7, section 25(3) of the Energy Act 2013, that there have been no exclusions to the published documents on the grounds of national security.

[HCWS32]
INDEX TO THE
HOUSE OF COMMONS
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES
(HANSARD)

SESSION 2016–17

13th June, 2017—6th July, 2017
INDEX TO THE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SIXTH SERIES
OFFICIAL REPORT
SESSION 2016–17
VOLUME 626

13th June, 2017—6th July, 2017

SCOPE
The index is derived from the headings that appear in Hansard.
The index includes entries covering the names of all Members contributing to the Parliamentary business recorded in Hansard, including Divisions.

REFERENCES
• References in the indexes are to columns rather than pages.
• There are separate sequences in Hansard for the material taken on the floor of the House, Westminster Hall sittings, written statements, written questions, ministerial corrections and petitions
  • References consisting of a number by itself indicate material taken on the floor of the House.
  • References ending in ‘wh’ indicate Westminster Hall sittings.
  • References ending in ‘ws’ indicate written statements.
  • References ending in ‘w’ indicate written questions.
  • References ending in ‘p’ indicate written petitions.
  • References ending in ‘mc’ indicate ministerial corrections.
• References under all headings except the names of Members contributing to Parliamentary business and the titles of legislation are listed in one numerical sequence irrespective of whether the material is taken on the floor of the House, is discussed at a Westminster Hall sitting, is a written statement or is a written question.
• References under the names of Members contributing to Parliamentary business are listed in numerical sequence under the following headings-
  • Chamber Debates (which includes interventions and points of order as well as significant contributions to debates);
  • Westminster Hall Debates (covering all debates held as part of the Westminster Hall sittings);
  • Written Statements (consisting of ministerial statements issued in writing);
  • Questions (which includes all written, oral and urgent questions); and
  • Petitions (which includes all oral and written petitions).
INDEX—SESSION 2016–17
13th June, 2017—6th July, 2017

Brown, Alan—continued
Westminster Hall
Road Infrastructure (05.07.2017) 86wh, 102-4wh
Questions
Energy Price Cap 892
EU Citizens in the UK 881

Bruce, Fiona
Chamber Debates
Housing and Social Security 271-2
Westminster Hall
Persecution of Christians, Role of UK Embassies (04.07.2017) 11-2wh, 21wh
Road Infrastructure (05.07.2017) 100-1wh
Questions
Regional Funding, Arts and Culture 720

Bryant, Chris
Chamber Debates
21st Century Fox/Sky Merger 770
Brexit and Foreign Affairs 370-3
Business of the House 760
Education and Local Services 485, 517-8
European Council 319
Grenfell Rehousing 1198
Grenfell Tower Fire/Fire Safety 364
Northern Ireland 342
Persecution of Christians, Role of UK Embassies (04.07.2017) 3wh, 12-3wh
State Pension Age for Women 127wh, 130wh
Questions
Leaving the EU, Human Rights 732

Back, Ms Karen
Chamber Debates
Debate on the Address 53
Grenfell Rehousing 1196
Grenfell Tower 185, 919
Grenfell Tower Fire/Fire Safety 359
Housing and Social Security 228-9, 233, 262-4, 281

Barden, Richard
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 1349
Israel and Palestinian Talks 1245-7
Westminster Hall
Srebrenica Genocide Commemoration 112wh

Barhgart, Alex
Chamber Debates
Economy and Jobs 798-9
Grenfell Tower 922
Health, Social Care and Security 654-6
Jobcentre Plus, Closures 1324-5
Questions
Engagements 1166

Burglary
Sentencing 737

Burt, Alistair, Minister for the Middle East
Chamber Debates
Israel and Palestinian Talks 1224-30, 1271-4
Westminster Hall
Kurdistan Region in Iraq 54-8wh

Business Before Questions
1283

Business Confidence
447
Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy
439, 7ws, 15ws, 25ws

Business of the House
1335
214, 739

Business of the House (Select Committees)
1076

Business without Debate
291, 1138

Businesses (Support)
1285

Byrne, Liam
Chamber Debates
Economy and Jobs 826-8
European Council 319-20
Questions
Business Confidence 447
Extremism 873

Cabinet Office and the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster
1147

Cable, Sir Vince
Chamber Debates
21st Century Fox/Sky Merger 769
Economy and Jobs 813-5
Public Sector Pay Cap 1175
School Funding Formula (London) 703-6

Cabdury, Ruth
Chamber Debates
Debate on the Address 148-50

Cains, Alun, Secretary of State for Wales
Written Statements
Government’s Legislative Programme (Wales) 2017-19 6ws

Cameron, Dr Lisa
Chamber Debates
Adult Social Care Funding 1313
Health, Social Care and Security 645-7
NHS Shared Business Services 468
Westminster Hall
Global Education, G20 Summit (06.07.2017) 181-4wh, 190wh
Persecution of Christians, Role of UK Embassies (04.07.2017) 10-1wh
Yemen, Political and Humanitarian Situation 164wh

Campbell, Mr Gregory
Westminster Hall
Persecution of Christians, Role of UK Embassies (04.07.2017) 2wh
Questions
Security Situation 581

Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Chamber Debates
Northern Ireland 337

Carbon Reduction Plan
453

Carden, Dan
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 754

Carmichael, Mr Alistair
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 746
Northern Ireland 335
Northern Ireland, Political Situation 906-7
Westminster Hall
Renewable Energy Generation, Island Communities 59-63wh, 66wh
Questions
Digital Infrastructure 721

Leaving the EU, NHS Workforce 1001
INDEX—SESSION 2016–17
13th June, 2017—6th July, 2017

Cherry, Joanna—continued
European Council 314–5
Exiting the European Union and Global Trade 1381–2
Grenfell Tower 186
Health, Social Care and Security 614–7, 621, 643
Israel and Palestinian Talks 1234, 1259–60
Northern Ireland 343
Points of Order 925–6
Terror Attacks 200
Questions
EU Citizens in the UK 882
European Convention on Human Rights 730
Child Sexual Abuse Inquiry 869

Chishti, Rehman
Westminster Hall
Kurdistan Region in Iraq 53wh, 56wh

Chope, Mr Christopher
Chamber Debates
Adult Social Care Funding 1311
Jobcentre Plus. Closures 1325
Public Sector Pay Cap 1177

Chris Gibb Report
Improvements to Southern Railway 1089

Churchill, Jo
Chamber Debates
Economy and Jobs 833–4
Jobcentre Plus. Closures 1324

Westminster Hall
Road Infrastructure (05.07.2017) 97–8wh
Questions
Confidence and Supply Agreement 584
Food and Drink Sector 1288–9
Leaving the EU, Business Consultation 441

Clark, Colin
Chamber Debates
Health, Social Care and Security 643–5

Clark, Greg, Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy
Chamber Debates
Economy and Jobs 844–5
Written Statements
Joint European Torus Facility, UK Underwrite 15–6ws
Questions
Business Confidence 447–8
Energy Price Cap 450–2, 891–8
Industrial Strategy 452–3
Leaving the EU, Business Consultation 441–2
Topical Questions 456–7, 459–60

Clarke, Mr Kenneth
Chamber Debates
Debate on the Address 74–84
Election of Speaker
Public Sector Pay Cap 1173–4

Clarke, Mr Simon
Chamber Debates
Housing and Social Security 274–5
Public Sector Pay Cap 1186
Questions
Topical Questions 1019

Cleverly, James
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 219
Economy and Jobs 783, 785
European Council 315
Grenfell Tower 181

Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Chamber Debates
Education and Local Services 482, 516–7
Education, Public Funding 1032
Grenfell Tower 180
Questions
Businesses (Support) 1285–6

Clywd, Ann
Chamber Debates
European Council 309
Westminster Hall
Yemen, Political and Humanitarian Situation 158–9wh

Coad, Emma Dent
Chamber Debates
Grenfell Rehousing 1195
Grenfell Tower 175
Grenfell Tower Fire/Fire Safety 354
Housing and Social Care 248–50

Coaker, Vernon
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 753–4
Education and Local Services 486, 524–5
Northern Ireland, Political Situation 906

Collins, Damian
Chamber Debates
21st Century Fox/Sky Merger 767–8
Select Committees 1085
Questions
Leaving the EU, Creative Industries 715

Commonwealth Countries 1283

Communities and Local Government 33ws

Community Police Officers 876

Confidence and Supply Agreement 584

Confidence and Supply Agreement 473

Construction Industry
Cash Retentions 442

Contingent Liability 16ws

Cooper, Julie
Chamber Debates
Education and Local Services 552–3
Westminster Hall
State Pension Age for Women 137–8wh
Questions
General Practitioners 1009
Police Recruitment 876

Cooper, Rosie
Chamber Debates
Health, Social Care and Security 668–9
Public Sector Pay Cap 1180
Questions
Topical Questions 1023

Cooper, Yvette
Chamber Debates
European Council 309–10
Grenfell Tower 182
Grenfell Tower Fire/Fire Safety 357
Health, Social Care and Security 619–21, 695
Northern Ireland 333–4
Terror Attacks 201
Questions
Fire Prevention and Safety 879
INDEX—SESSION 2016–17
13th June, 2017—6th July, 2017

Crouch, Tracey, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport
Questions
Sport, Young People 723-4
Tennis Tournaments 716-7
Topical Questions 725-8

Crown Prosecution Service
Action against Terrorism 732

Cryer, John
Questions
Topical Questions 459, 889

Culture, Media and Sport
713

Cummins, Judith
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 1341

Cunningham, Alex
Chamber Debates
Education and Local Services 478, 543-4
Grenfell Tower Fire/Fire Safety 361
Housing and Social Security 289
Westminster Hall
State Pension Age for Women 140-2wh
Questions
Engagements 1163
Topical Questions 727

Cunningham, Mr Jim
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 755
Debate on the Address 66
Education and Local Services 510-1
Israe and Palestinian Talks 1224, 1233
Westminster Hall
State Pension Age for Women 119wh
Questions
Free TV Licences, Over-75s 713
Topical Questions 1021

Cyber-security
1153

Dakin, Nic
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 757
NHS Improvement 1018
State Pension Age, Women Born in the 1950s 1296-7

Davies, Sir Edward
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 575
Debate on the Address 66
Education and Local Services 602, 609, 623-5
Terror Attacks 203
Questions
Community Police Officers 878
Energy Price Cap 894

David, Wayne
Westminster Hall
State Pension Age for Women 121wh

Davis, Chris
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 753, 1349-50
Grenfell Tower 917
Israel and Palestinian Talks 1250-1
Westminster Hall
Safety of Riders and Horses on Rural Roads 68-9wh
Questions
Commonwealth Countries 1283-4
Gender Pay Gap 1301
Hate Crime, Aggravated Offences
Regime 736
Topical Questions 1155, 1291-2

Davies, David T. C.
Chamber Debates
Education, Public Funding 1031

Davies, Geraint
Chamber Debates
Debate on the Address 70
Economy and Jobs 781
Health, Social Care and Security 610

Davies, Glyn
Westminster Hall
Road Infrastructure (05.07.2017)
92-3wh

Davies, Mims
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 748, 1340
Education, Public Funding 1031
Jobcentre Plus, Closures 1323
Westminster Hall
Kurdistan Region in Iraq 39wh
Questions
Engagements 595
Ex-prisoners (Support) 1300
Topical Questions 726

Davis, Mr David, Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 226
NHS Shared Business Services 464-5
Questions
Topical Questions 884

DCMS
Digital 26ws

De Piero, Gloria
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 752
Economy and Jobs 781
Health, Social Care and Security 625, 628
Jobcentre Plus, Closures 1322
Public Sector Pay Cap 1176
Questions
Regional Funding, Arts and Culture 720

Debate on the Address
37, 228, 367
477, 600, 776

Dehbenouaire, Thangam
Chamber Debates
Brexit and Foreign Affairs 371, 418
Grenfell Tower 191, 922
Grenfell Tower Fire/Fire Safety 360

Defence
16ws, 19ws

Delayed Transfers of Care
27ws

Corbyn, Jeremy
Chamber Debates
Debate on the Address 41-50
Election of Speaker 7-8
European Council 304-5
Grenfell Tower 170-2
Questions
Engagements 585-9, 1158-61

Cordova, Marsha De
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 222
Questions
Topical Questions 1157

Courts, Robert
Chamber Debates
Adult Social Care Funding 1314
Air Travel Organisers’ Licensing Bill 939-44
Brexit and Foreign Affairs 415-6
European Council 319
Grenfell Rehousing 1196
Grenfell Tower 185, 919
Grenfell Tower Fire/Fire Safety 357
Health, Social Care and Security 664
Housing and Social Security 247
Public Sector Pay Cap 1188
Terror Attacks 206
Westminster Hall
Road Infrastructure (05.07.2017)
98-9wh
Questions
Topical Questions 885, 1291

Cowan, Ronnie
Chamber Debates
Brexit and Foreign Affairs 420-1
Westminster Hall
State Pension Age for Women 136-7wh
Questions
Family Rights 883
Topical Questions 1020

Coyle, Neil
Chamber Debates
Terror Attacks 204

Crabb, Stephen
Chamber Debates
Brexit and Foreign Affairs 389-91
European Council 311
Northern Ireland 334
Questions
North Sea Oil and Gas 440

Crawley, Angela
Chamber Debates
Housing and Social Security 243-5
Questions
Equality and Women’s Rights, DUP
Discussions 1296

Creagh, Mary
Chamber Debates
Education and Local Services 486, 533-4

Creasy, Stella
Chamber Debates
Economy and Jobs 796, 851
European Council 318
Health, Social Care and Security 611, 614, 668-9, 675-7, 697
Northern Ireland 334

Criminal Law (Northern Ireland)
1202

Crossrail
Annual Update 21ws
INDEX—SESSION 2016–17
13th June, 2017—6th July, 2017

Doughty, Stephen—continued
Westminster Hall
Yemen, Political and Humanitarian Situation 155-6wh, 165-6wh, 170wh
Questions
BBC Investment, Nations and Regions
718

Dowd, Peter
Chamber Debates
Points of Order 1041-2

Dowden, Oliver
Chamber Debates
Debate on the Address 60
Housing and Social Security 279-80
Israel and Palestinian Talks 1225,
1231-2

Doyle-Price, Jackie, Parliamentary
Under-Secretary of State for Health
Chamber Debates
Health, Social Care and Security 666
Questions
End-of-life Care 1012
Mental Health Services 1016-8
Topical Questions 1020, 1022

Drax, Richard
Chamber Debates
Grenfell Tower 183
Housing and Social Security 257-9

Drew, Dr David
Chamber Debates
Economy and Jobs 782
Westminster Hall
Persecution of Christians, Role of UK
Embassies (04.07.2017) 8-9wh
Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme
211-3wh
Questions
Energy Price Cap 894
Special Constables 871

Dromey, Jack
Chamber Debates
Economy and Jobs 788
Education, Public Funding 1032-3

Duddridge, James
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 741
Economy and Jobs 782, 795
Education, Public Funding 1029
Exiting the European Union and
Global Trade 1364, 1366, 1387, 1394-5,
1398
Northern Ireland 335
Questions
Commonwealth Countries 1283
Engagements 1168
Police and Fire Services, Collaboration
873-4

Duncan, Sir Alan, Minister for
Europe and the Americas
Written Statements
British Indian Ocean Territory 12ws

Duncan Smith, Mr Iain
Chamber Debates
Brexit and Foreign Affairs 378
Exiting the European Union and
Global Trade 1360, 1367-8
Grenfell Tower 173
Grenfell Tower Fire/Fire Safety 353

Dunne, Mr Philip, Minister of State,
Department of Health
Chamber Debates
Kent & Canterbury Hospital 294-8
Kettering General Hospital 864-7
Questions
Dental Surgery, Children 1015-6
Dermatologists 1006
NHS Improvement 1018
Nursing 1009-10
St Helier Hospital 1006-7
Topical Questions 1019-20, 1022

DWP Estates
36ws

Eagle, Maria
Chamber Debates
Adult Social Care Funding 1345
Business of the House 1344
Education and Local Services 505-6,
583
Grenfell Tower 184, 186
Jobcentre Plus, Closures 1329
Questions
New Mothers (Redundancy Protection)
1299
Topical Questions 885

Eagle, Ms Angela
Chamber Debates
Brexit and Foreign Affairs 394-5
Business of the House 744-5
Education, Public Funding 1036
Grenfell Tower 183
Questions
Zero-hours Contracts 449

ECOFIN
23 May 2017 8ws
16 June 2017 8ws

Economic Development
583

Economy and Jobs
776

Education
Public Funding 1025

Education and Local Services
477

Edwards, Jonathan
Chamber Debates
Air Travel Organisers’ Licensing Bill 930
Economy and Jobs 797-8, 801
European Union (Approvals) Bill
1045-6, 1048
Health, Social Care and Security 601,
609
Northern Ireland, Political Situation
910
Westminster Hall
Kurdistan Region in Iraq 55wh
Questions
Energy Price Cap 895
Engagements 1164
Immigration Rules, Agriculture 881

Efford, Clive
Chamber Debates
European Council 328
Grenfell Tower 191, 923
Grenfell Tower Fire/Fire Safety 360
NHS Shared Business Services 469

Election of Speaker
4

Electoral Fraud
1149

Electric Cars
443
INDEX—SESSION 2016–17
13th June, 2017—6th July, 2017

Eustice, George, Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food Westminster Hall
Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme 213-6wh

Evans, Mr Nigel
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 745
Debate on the Address 59, 85, 147-8 Questions
Commonwealth Countries 1285
Fire Prevention and Safety 879

Ex-prisoners (Support) 1299

Exiting the European Union 10ws
Exiting the European Union and Global Trade 1356

Extremism 871

Fabricant, Michael
Chamber Debates
21st Century Fox/Sky Merger 769
Education, Public Funding 1032 Questions
Free TV Licences, Over-75s 714
Hate Crime, Aggravated Offences Regime 736
Leaving the EU, Human Rights 732

Fallon, Sir Michael, Secretary of State for Defence
Written Statements
Afghanistan, Update 19ws

Family Rights 883

Farrell, Paul
Questions
Democratic Engagement 1152
Leaving the EU, Creative Industries 716

Farron, Tim
Chamber Debates
Debate on the Address 84-9
Election of Speaker 9-10 Questions
Accident and Emergency Departments 1011

Fellows, Marion
Chamber Debates
Housing and Social Security 276-7 Questions
Engagements 594

Feltham Young Offender Institution 1038

Fernandes, Suella
Chamber Debates
Brexit and Foreign Affairs 378, 393-4 Questions
Engagements 592

Field, Frank
Chamber Debates
Select Committees 1084 Westminster Hall
Working Conditions in the Private Hire Industry 147-50wh, 152wh, 154wh

Field, Mark, Minister for Asia and the Pacific Westminster Hall
Persecution of Christians, Role of UK Embassies (04.07.2017) 20-5wh
Srebrenica Genocide Commemoration 114-8wh

Fire Prevention and Safety 878

Fisheries 26ws

Fitzpatrick, Jim
Chamber Debates
Grenfell Tower 178, 919-20
Grenfell Tower Fire (26.06.2017) 430-4, 436
Grenfell Tower Fire/Fire Safety 356

Fletcher, Colleen
Westminster Hall
State Pension Age for Women 126wh

Flint, Caroline
Chamber Debates
Economy and Jobs 810-2 European Council 311

Flynn, Paul
Chamber Debates
21st Century Fox/Sky Merger 772
Business of the House 747-8
Grenfell Tower Fire/Fire Safety 360
NHS Shared Business Services 470
Northern Ireland 336
Points of Order 475-6, 774-5

Food and Drink Sector 1288

Ford, Vicky
Chamber Debates
Air Travel Organisers’ Licensing Bill 951-3
Brexit and Foreign Affairs 371-2
Debate on the Address 137-8 Economy and Jobs 780
Education and Local Services 541
European Union (Approvals) Bill 1059, 1070-2
Exiting the European Union and Global Trade 1387, 1393
Grenfell Tower 190
Health, Social Care and Security 628, 643
Northern Ireland, Political Situation 908
Public Sector Pay Cap 1176
Southend Hospital 1420

Foreign and Commonwealth Office 12ws, 20ws

Foster, Kevin
Chamber Debates
21st Century Fox/Sky Merger 771
Air Travel Organisers’ Licensing Bill 934, 940, 942-3, 987-8
Criminal Law (Northern Ireland) 1217-8
Debate on the Address 150-2
Grenfell Tower 189
NHS Shared Business Services 467-8
Public Sector Pay Cap 1187
Terror Attacks 207
Westminster Hall
Persecution of Christians, Role of UK Embassies (04.07.2017) 7-8wh

Questions
Industrial Strategy 453
Regional Funding, Arts and Culture 720

Fovargue, Yvonne
Chamber Debates
Education, Public Funding 1036
Health, Social Care and Security 673-4

Fox, Dr Liam, Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade
Chamber Debates
Exiting the European Union and Global Trade 1356-67
INDEX—SESSION 2016–17
13th June, 2017—6th July, 2017

Gauke, Mr David, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions
Chamber Debates
Housing and Social Security 288-90
Jobcentre Plus, Closures 1320-31

Gender Pay Gap
1301

General Affairs Council
June 2017 10ws

General Practitioners
1007
Newcastle 1016

General, The Attorney
Questions
British Nationals, Foreign Armies and Militias 730-1
Crown Prosecution Service, Action against Terrorism 732-3
European Convention on Human Rights 728-30
Leaving the EU, Human Rights 731-2

General, The Solicitor
Questions
Burglary, Sentencing 737-8
Hate Crime, Aggravated Offences
Regime 735-7
Public Disasters, Independent Advocate 733-5

George, Ruth
Chamber Debates
Education and Local Services 547-8
Universal Credit, Lowestoft 567-8, 570
Questions
Carbon Reduction Plan 453-4

Gethins, Stephen
Chamber Debates
Brexit and Foreign Affairs 386-9
Perth's Cultural Contribution to the UK 1276

Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Chamber Debates
Adult Social Care Funding 1318
Business of the House 752, 1346

Chris Gibb Report, Improvements to Southern Railway 1090, 1109-11, 1113-4, 1129
European Council 171
Grenfell Rehousing 1196
Grenfell Tower Fire/Fire Safety 356
Israel and Palestinian Talks 1260-2, 1265
Public Sector Pay Cap 1186
Questions
Democratic Engagement 1153
Hate Crime, Aggravated Offences
Regime 736
Tobacco Control Plan 1015
Topical Questions 1305

Gibb, Nick, Minister for School Standards
Chamber Debates
Education, Public Funding 1025-37
School Funding Formula (London) 706-12

Gibson, Patricia
Chamber Debates
Air Travel Organisers' Licensing Bill 944-6
Westminster Hall
Persecution of Christians, Role of UK Embassies (04.07.2017) 14-5wh
State Pension Age for Women 135wh
Questions
Confidence and Supply Agreement 584

Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Chamber Debates
Adult Social Care Funding 1310
Business of the House 1338
Election of Speaker 3-4
Grenfell Tower 178
Housing and Social Security 240-3
Points of Order 1334
Terror Attacks 202
Westminster Hall
Road Infrastructure (05.07.2017) 88-9wh, 92wh, 96-7wh, 99wh, 109wh
Questions
Ex-prisoners (Support) 1299-300

Girvan, Paul
Chamber Debates
Health, Social Care and Security 679-80

Glen, John, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport
Chamber Debates
Perth's Cultural Contribution to the UK 1279-82
Questions
Regional Funding, Arts and Culture 719-21
Topical Questions 727-8

Glindon, Mary
Westminster Hall
Kurdistan Region in Iraq 39-40wh
State Pension Age for Women 130wh

Global Education
G20 Summit (06.07.2017) 173wh

Goldsmith, Zac
Chamber Debates
Brexit and Foreign Affairs 384
Grenfell Tower 176
Housing and Social Security 232, 268-9
Israel and Palestinian Talks 1228

Goodman, Helen
Chamber Debates
21st Century Fox/Sky Merger 772
Business of the House 1353
Economy and Jobs 790, 793-4
Exiting the European Union and Global Trade 1359, 1373, 1392-4, 1414

Gove, Michael, Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Written Statements
Fisheries 26ws

Government’s Legislative Programme 2017-19
1ws

Government's Legislative Programme (Northern Ireland) 2017-19
1ws

Government’s Legislative Programme (Scotland) 2017-19
2ws

Government’s Legislative Programme (Wales) 2017-19
6ws

Grady, Patrick
Chamber Debates
Air Travel Organisers’ Licensing Bill 959
Brexit and Foreign Affairs 388
Business of the House 1352
Debate on the Address 145
European Council 324-5
Exiting the European Union and Global Trade 1385
Israel and Palestinian Talks 1241-4
Jobcentre Plus, Closures 1331
Perth’s Cultural Contribution to the UK 1279

Vol. 626]
INDEX—SESSION 2016–17
13th June, 2017—6th July, 2017

Health, Social Care and Security
600

Healthcare
CCG Guidance 1012

Heappey, James
Chamber Debates
Debate on the Address 88
Northern Ireland, Political Situation 908

Questions
Energy Price Cap 896

Heaton-Jones, Peter
Westminster Hall
Road Infrastructure (05.07.2017) 94-6wh

Hendrick, Mr Mark
Chamber Debates
Brexit and Foreign Affairs 370

Hendry, Drew
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 759
Debate on the Address 71
Economy and Jobs 801
European Union (Approvals) Bill 1060-2, 1066
Telephone Calls to the DWP 157, 160

Questions
North Sea Oil and Gas 440

Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Chamber Debates
Health, Social Care and Security 658-9
Westminster Hall
State Pension Age for Women 121wh

Herbert, Nick
Chamber Debates
Chris Gibbs Report, Improvements to Southern Railway 1101-3
Neighbourhood Planning 1141
Westminster Hall
Road Infrastructure (05.07.2017) 90-2wh, 109wh

Questions
Equality and Women’s Rights, DUP Discussions 1295

Heron, Lady
Chamber Debates
Mandatory reselection of Members of the House of Lords 1177-8
Westminster Hall

Questions
Power Sharing 580

High Court Judgment
Benefit Cap 26wh

Hillier, Meg
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 220, 751, 1354-5
Debate on the Address 93-6, 107-8, 113
European Council 321
Grenfell Tower 185
NHS Shared Business Services 467
Points of Order 1332-3

Questions
Cyber-security 1154

Hinds, Damian, Minister for Employment
Chamber Debates
Phone Calls to the DWP 160-4
Universal Credit, Lowestoft 569-74

Written Statements
DWP Estates 36-8ws

Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council, 15 June 2017 31-2ws

Hoare, Simon
Questions
Public Disasters, Independent Advocate 734

Hyde, Wera
Chamber Debates
Economy and Jobs 839-40
Grenfell Rehousing 1195
Grenfell Tower 922

Hodge, Dame Margaret
Chamber Debates
Terror Attacks 202

Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Questions
Tobacco Control Plan 1014-5

Hoey, Kate
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 1342
Exiting the European Union and Global Trade 1157

Holllinrake, Kevin
Chamber Debates
Belfast Agreement, Impartiality 575
Topical Questions 457

Hollonhore, Mr Philip
Chamber Debates
Kettering General Hospital 860-4
Questions
European Convention on Human Rights 729
Free TV Licences, Over-75s 714

Home Department
869, 28ws, 35ws

Hong Kong Special Administrative Region
20th Anniversary 20ws

Hopkins, Kelvin
Chamber Debates
Air Travel Organisers’ Licensing Bill 930, 933
Exiting the European Union and Global Trade 1361, 1370, 1372

Questions
Prompt Payment Code 1149

Hosie, Stewart
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 754
Election of Speaker 8-9

Housing and Social Security
228

Howell, John
Chamber Debates
21st Century Fox/Sky Merger 768
European Union (Approvals) Bill 1046, 1063-5
Grenfell Tower 190
Housing and Social Security 246
Israel and Palestinian Talks 1253-4
Neighbourhood Planning 1139-43

Questions
Cyber-Security 1153-4

Huddlestone, Nigel
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 1343
INDEX—SESSION 2016–17
13th June, 2017—6th July, 2017

Lake, Ben
Chamber Debates
Jobcentre Plus, Closures 1323-4
Westminster Hall
State Pension Age for Women 134wh

Lamb, Norman
Chamber Debates
Adult Social Care Funding 1311
Debate on the Address 86
Economy and Jobs 842
Health, Social Care and Security 662
Westminster Hall
Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme 193wh, 199wh
State Pension Age for Women 128wh
Questions
Mental Health Services 1017

Lammy, Mr David
Chamber Debates
Grenfell Tower 178, 918

Lamont, John
Chamber Debates
Housing and Social Security 253-5

Law, Chris
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 757

Leader of the House
Iws

Leadsom, Andrea, Leader of the House of Commons
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 214-26, 739-61, 1335, 1337-55
Written Statements
Government’s Legislative Programme 2017-19 Iws

Leaving the EU
Border 582
Business Consultation 441
Creative Industries 714
Free Movement of People 582
Human Rights 731
NHS Workforce 1001
Small Businesses 450

Lee, Dr Phillip, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice
Questions
Ex-prisoners (Support) 1299-301

Lee, Ms Karen
Chamber Debates
Exiting the European Union and Global Trade 1395-7

Lefroy, Jeremy
Chamber Debates
Adult Social Care Funding 1312
Business of the House 221, 751, 1347
Education and Local Services 528-9
Exiting the European Union and Global Trade 1360

Lefroy, Jeremy
Chamber Debates
Adult Social Care Funding 1312
Business of the House 221, 751, 1347
Education and Local Services 528-9
Exiting the European Union and Global Trade 1360

Leigh, Sir Edward—continued
Westminster Hall
State Pension Age for Women 120wh, 123-4wh, 127-8wh, 130wh, 138wh, 143-4wh

Leslie, Mr Chris
Questions
Electoral Fraud 1151
Leaving the EU, NHS Workforce 1002

Letwin, Sir Oliver
Chamber Debates
Northern Ireland, Political Situation 906
Questions
Energy Price Cap 897

Lewis, Brandon, Minister for Immigration
Written Statements
Grenfell Tower Fire (05.07.2017) 35ws
Questions
EU Citizens in the UK 881-3
Family Rights 883-4
Immigration Rules, Agriculture 880-1
Topical Questions 886, 890

Lewis, Clive
Chamber Debates
Public Sector Pay Cap 1182

Lewis, Dr Julian
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 218, 1342
Criminal Law (Northern Ireland) 1206, 1221
Debate on the Address 128
Health, Social Care and Security 603, 610, 621-3
Housing and Social Security 632
Northern Ireland 332
Northern Ireland, Political Situation 907
Terror Attacks 200-1
Questions
Businesses (Support) 1286

Lewis, Mr Ivan
Westminster Hall
State Pension Age for Women 120wh

Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 1344
European Union (Approvals) Bill 1043-4, 1051-2

Lindon, David
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 223, 761
Education and Local Services 338-9
European Council 322
Jobcentre Plus, Closures 1331
Northern Ireland 346
Westminster Hall
High Court Judgment, Benefit Cap 26wh, 33wh
Persecution of Christians, Role of UK Embassies (04.07.2017) 16-8wh, 24wh
Questions
Topical Questions 727

Lloyd, Stephen
Chamber Debates
Chris Gibb Report, Improvements to Southern Railway 1092, 1094, 1111-3, 1137
Housing and Social Security 230, 256, 259-60, 290
NHS Shared Business Services 466
Questions
Engagements 1166
INDEX—SESSION 2016–17
13th June, 2017—6th July, 2017

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Chamber Debates</th>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Topical Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>McDonagh, Siobhain</strong></td>
<td>Chamber Debates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>McDonald, Andy</strong></td>
<td>Chamber Debates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>McDonald, Stewart Malcolm</strong></td>
<td>Chamber Debates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Maclean, Rachel</strong></td>
<td>Chamber Debates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MacNeil, Angus Brendan</strong></td>
<td>Chamber Debates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>McVey, Ms Esther</strong></td>
<td>Chamber Debates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mahmood, Mr Khalid</strong></td>
<td>Chamber Debates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Main, Mrs Anne</strong></td>
<td>Chamber Debates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mak, Alan</strong></td>
<td>Chamber Debates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Malhotra, Seema</strong></td>
<td>Chamber Debates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Lloyd, Tony**
- Chamber Debates
- Israel and Palestinian Talks 1234
- Public Sector Pay Cap 1178
- Terror Attacks 206
- Questions

**Lynch, Holly**
- Chamber Debates
- Adult Social Care Funding 1317-8
- Business of the House 1343-4
- Chris Gibb Report, Improvements to Southern Railway 1094, 1130, 1135
- Education and Local Services 493, 499, 509-10
- Education, Public Funding 1027
- European Council 320-1
- Westminster Hall
- State Pension Age for Women 125-6wh
- Questions

**Lucas, Caroline**
- Chamber Debates
- Brexit and Foreign Affairs 374, 410-1, 427
- Chris Gibb Report, Improvements to Southern Railway 1090, 1125-7
- Debate on the Address 57
- Education, Public Funding 1032
- Election of Speaker 11-2
- European Council 313
- Grenfell Tower Fire/Fire Safety 358
- Public Sector Pay Cap 1183

**Lucas, Ian C.**
- Chamber Debates
- 21st Century Fox/Sky Merger 772
- Health, Social Care and Security 605, 611, 672-3
- Questions
- Energy Price Cap 896
- Engagements 591
- Ex-prisoners (Support) 1299
- Sport, Young People 723
- Topical Questions 887, 1303

**Lynch, Holly**
- Chamber Debates
- Health, Social Care and Security 681-2
- Terror Attacks 210
- Questions
- Topical Questions 888

**McCabe, Steve**
- Chamber Debates
- 21st Century Fox/Sky Merger 771
- Business of the House 219
- Housing and Social Security 232, 252-3, 262-3
- NHS Shared Business Services 468

**McCarthy, Kerry**
- Chamber Debates
- Business of the House 222, 756
- European Council 324
- Grenfell Tower 192
- Grenfell Tower Fire/Fire Safety 362
- NHS Shared Business Services 469
- Terror Attacks 212
- Questions
- Avon Fire and Rescue Service 880
- Topical Questions 1292

**Maclellan, Sir Patrick**
- Chamber Debates
- Topical Questions 1155-6

**McMahon, Jim**
- Chamber Debates
- Grenfell Rehousing 1198-9
- Public Sector Pay Cap 1178-9

**McMorris, Anna**
- Chamber Debates
- Brexit and Foreign Affairs 398-9
- Business of the House 220
- Exiting the European Union and Global Trade 1389
- Questions
- Equality and Women’s Rights, DUP
- Discussions 1294

**MacNeil, Angus Brendan**
- Chamber Debates
- Debate on the Address 45, 70
- Economy and Jobs 793, 825
- Education and Local Services 478, 481
- Exiting the European Union and Global Trade 1379
- Health, Social Care and Security 636
- Public Sector Pay Cap 1179
- Westminster Hall
- Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme 194-5wh, 201-2wh, 209-11wh

**McVey, Ms Esther**
- Chamber Debates
- Business of the House 743
- Education, Public Funding 1029

**Madders, Justin**
- Chamber Debates
- Business of the House 1353
- Education and Local Services 492-3, 551-2
- Westminster Hall
- State Pension Age for Women 132-3wh
- Questions
- Accident and Emergency Departments 1011-2

**Mahmood, Mr Khalid**
- Chamber Debates
- Questions
- Engagements 1164

**Main, Mrs Anne**
- Chamber Debates
- Debate on the Address 56, 103-6
- Health, Social Care and Security 607, 628, 647-9
- Westminster Hall
- State Pension Age for Women 124wh
- Questions
- Energy Price Cap 893-4
- Engagements 594

**Mak, Alan**
- Chamber Debates
- Criminal Law (Northern Ireland) 1215-6
- Questions
- Topical Questions 456

**Malhotra, Seema**
- Chamber Debates
- Debate on the Address 52, 134-6
- Feltham Young Offender Institution 1038
- Israel and Palestinian Talks 1232
- Terror Attacks 210-1
INDEX—SESSION 2016–17
13th June, 2017—6th July, 2017

Nokes, Caroline, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Cabinet Office
Questions
Cyber-security 1153-5 Prompt Payment Code 1148-9
Topical Questions 1156

Norman, Jesse, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport
Chamber Debates
Air Travel Organisers’ Licensing Bill 990-3
Westminster Hall
Road Infrastructure (05.07.2017) 106-10wh
Safety of Riders and Horses on Rural Roads 80-3wh

Norris, Alex
Chamber Debates
Education and Local Services 548-50
Health, Social Care and Security 693
Questions
Cyber-security 1154
Zero-hours Contracts 448-9

North Sea Oil and Gas 439
Northern Ireland 575, 1ws
329
Political Situation 899
Notices of Questions (28 June) 291

Nursing 1009

O’Brien, Neil
Chamber Debates
Air Travel Organisers’ Licensing Bill 982-4
Public Sector Pay Cap 1179

O’Hara, Brendan
Chamber Debates
21st Century Fox/Sky Merger 767
Westminster Hall
Renewable Energy Generation, Island Communities 61wh
Questions
Leaving the EU, Creative Industries 716
Office for Nuclear Regulation 40ws

Offord, Dr Matthew
Chamber Debates
Adult Social Care Funding 1313
Business of the House 1347-8
Israel and Palestinian Talks 1229, 1232-3, 1241, 1263-4
Jobcentre Plus, Closures 1326

Onasanya, Fiona
Chamber Debates
Grenfell Tower 182
Israel and Palestinian Talks 1248-50

Onn, Melanie
Chamber Debates
Adult Social Care Funding 1312
Westminster Hall
State Pension Age for Women 143wh
Questions
Hate Crime, Aggravated Offences 735-6

Onwurah, Chi
Chamber Debates
Northern Ireland 344
Questions
Gender Pay Gap 1302
General Practitioners, Newcastle 1016

Outlawries Bill 33

Owen, Albert
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 749
Debate on the Address 63
Questions
Electric Cars 444-5

Paisley, Ian
Chamber Debates
21st Century Fox/Sky Merger 773
Brexit and Foreign Affairs 368-9, 379, 421-2
Debate on the Address 98, 101
European Council 316
European Union (Approvals) Bill 1053, 1061, 1065-7
Health, Social Care and Security 676
Northern Ireland 342
Northern Ireland, Political Situation 910
Questions
Commonwealth Countries 1285
Leaving the EU, Border 583

Parish, Neil
Westminster Hall
Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme 193-7wh, 215-8wh
Questions
Promt Payment Code 1148

Paterson, Mr Owen
Chamber Debates
Housing and Social Security 264-6
Northern Ireland, Political Situation 905
Westminster Hall
Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme 201-5wh
Questions
Economic Development 584

Pawsey, Mark
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 750
Economy and Jobs 790, 798
Grenfell Rehousing 1193
Questions
Business Confidence 447
General Practitioners, Newcastle 1016

Peacock, Stephanie
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 1340

Pengelly, Emma Little
Chamber Debates
Criminal Law (Northern Ireland) 1216-7
Questions
Education and Local Services 529-30
Power Sharing 580

Mandell, David, Secretary of State for Scotland
Written Statements
Government’s Legislative Programme (Scotland) 2017-19 2-3ws

Murray, Ian
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 755
European Council 322
Jobcentre Plus, Closures 1327
Northern Ireland 341
Westminster Hall
Renewable Energy Generation, Island Communities 61wh

Murray, Mrs Sheryl
Westminster Hall
Safety of Riders and Horses on Rural Roads 73-4wh
Questions
Engagements 585, 1164
Power Sharing 580

Marrison, Dr Andrew
Chamber Debates
Criminal Law (Northern Ireland) 1206, 1212-3
Health, Social Care and Security 642, 651-2
Questions
Belfast Agreement, Impartiality 578
Leaving the EU, NHS Workforce 1002

Nandy, Lisa
Questions
Child Sexual Abuse Inquiry 869
Regional Funding, Arts and Culture 720

Neighbourhood Planning 1139

Neill, Robert
Chamber Debates
Economy and Jobs 821-3
Exiting the European Union and Global Trade 1365, 1401-3
Questions
Engagements 597
Leaving the EU, Business Consultation 441
Public Disasters, Independent Advocate 734

New Mothers (Redundancy Protection) 1298

Newlands, Gavin
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 760
Jobcentre Plus, Closures 1330
Perth’s Cultural Contribution to the UK 1276
Questions
BBC Licence Fee 717-8
Business Confidence 447
Engagements 593
Topical Questions 1306

Newton, Sarah, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Department of Work and Pensions
Questions
Extremism 872-3
Topical Questions 886-8

NHS Improvement 1018

NHS Shared Business Services 462
INDEX—SESSION 2016–17
13th June, 2017—6th July, 2017

Points of Order
(05.07.2017) 1200
365, 475, 774, 925, 1040, 1332

Police and Fire Services
Collaboration 873

Police Recruitment
875

Pollard, Luke
Chamber Debates
Air Travel Organisers’ Licensing Bill 962-4
Brexit and Foreign Affairs 412-3
Business of the House 1352
Questions
Mental Health Services 1016-7

Poulter, Dr Dan
Chamber Debates
Public Sector Pay Cap 1181

Pound, Stephen
Chamber Debates
Criminal Law (Northern Ireland) 1207-10, 1221
Grenfell Rehousing 1198
Questions
Power Sharing 580

Pow, Rebecca
Chamber Debates
Education and Local Services 481-2
European Council 319
Grenfell Tower 185
Housing and Social Security 250-1
Westminster Hall
Safety of Riders and Horses on Rural Roads 68wh, 75wh
Questions
Carbon Reduction Plan 455
Dermatologists 1005-6
Tennis Tournaments 717

Powell, Lucy
Chamber Debates
Education and Local Services 494, 501-2, 561-2
Education, Public Funding 1029
Questions
Healthcare, CCG Guidance 1013

Power Sharing
579

Prentis, Victoria
Chamber Debates
Health, Social Care and Security 664-5
Questions
Cybersecurity 1153-4

Prime Minister
585, 1157, 20ws

Prisk, Mr Mark
Chamber Debates
Education and Local Services 514-5

Pritchard, Mark
Chamber Debates
Grenfell Rehousing 1196
Westminster Hall
Yemen, Political and Humanitarian Situation 156-7uw

Prompt Payment Code
1148

Public Disasters
Independent Advocate 733

Public Sector Pay
1147

Public Sector Pay Cap
1171

Purseglove, Tom
Chamber Debates
Adult Social Care Funding 1319
Business of the House 223
Grenfell Tower 187, 921
Jobcentre Plus, Closures 1325
Kettering General Hospital 862, 866
Questions
Energy Price Cap 897-8
Sport, Young People 723
Topical Questions 888, 1306

Queen’s Speech
(21.06.2017) 34

Quin, Jeremy
Chamber Debates
Chris Gibb Report, Improvements to Southern Railway 1113-5, 1133
Economy and Jobs 793-4
Northern Ireland 335
Questions
Economic Development 583

Quin, Will
Chamber Debates
Israel and Palestinian Talks 1245, 1250
Questions
Topical Questions 459, 1022

Raab, Dominic, Minister of State, Ministry of Justice
Written Statements
Justice and Home Affairs Council, Post Council Statement 12-4ws

Rail Franchising
4ws

Rashid, Faisal
Chamber Debates
Adult Social Care Funding 1314
Business of the House 1352
Economy and Jobs 830-1

Rayner, Angela
Chamber Debates
Education and Local Services 489-95
Education, Public Funding 1025-6

Redwood, John
Chamber Debates
Debate on the Address 67, 69, 78-9, 86, 96-9
European Council 308
European Union (Approvals) Bill 1045-6, 1049
NHS Shared Business Services 465
Public Sector Pay Cap 1175
School Funding Formula (London) 706
Questions
Energy Price Cap 893

Reed, Mr Steve
Questions
End-of-life Care 1012

Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Chamber Debates
Debate on the Address 49, 66, 141-4
European Council 314
Grenfell Tower 183-4
Questions
Leaving the EU, Business Consultation 442

Reeves, Ellie
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 747

Reeves, Rachel
Chamber Debates
Debate on the Address 46
Economy and Jobs 783, 795
INDEX—SESSION 2016–17
13th June, 2017—6th July, 2017

Rowley, Lee
Chamber Debates
Air Travel Organisers’ Licensing Bill 964-7

Ruane, Chris
Chamber Debates
Brexit and Foreign Affairs 368
Grenfell Tower Fire/Fire Safety 359
Health, Social Care and Security 608, 610, 685-6
Questions
Electoral Fraud 1151
Energy Price Cap 450-1

Rudd, Amber, Secretary of State for the Home Department
Chamber Debates
Health, Social Care and Security 604-14
Terror Attacks 195-6, 199-213
Written Statements
Resettlement 28-30ws
Questions
Child Sexual Abuse Inquiry 869-70
Police and Fire Services, Collaboration 874-5
Topical Questions 884-6, 888-90

Russell-Moyle, Mr Lloyd
Chamber Debates
Chris Gibb Report, Improvements to Southern Railway 1091, 1120, 1129-30
Education and Local Services 539-41
Education, Public Funding 1034
European Council 323

Ryan, John
Chamber Debates
Debate on the Address 112-5, 120
European Council 325
Israel and Palestinian Talks 1254-6

Safety of Riders and Horses on Rural Roads
67wh
St Helier Hospital 1006

Sandbach, Antoinette
Chamber Debates
Education and Local Services 525-6
Public Sector Pay Cap 1183-4
Terror Attacks 201
Questions
Electoral Fraud 1151
Electric Cars 444
Topical Questions 728

School Funding Formula (London)
703

Scotland
2ws

Scully, Paul
Chamber Debates
Chris Gibb Report, Improvements to Southern Railway 1098, 1130-2
European Union (Approvals) Bill 1052
Questions
Engagements 1163
St Helier Hospital 1007

Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme 193-218wh
Security Situation 581

Seely, Mr Bob
Chamber Debates
Air Travel Organisers’ Licensing Bill 972-4
Westminster Hall
Renewable Energy Generation, Island Communities 64wh

Sharma, Alok, Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government
Chamber Debates
Grenfell Rehousing 1189-99
Grenfell Tower Fire (26.06.2017) 434-8
Neighbourhood Planning 1143-6

Sharma, Mr Virendra
Chamber Debates
Health, Social Care and Security 686-7

Sheerman, Mr Barry
Chamber Debates
Education, Public Funding 1028
European Council 320
Terror Attacks 205
Questions
Accident and Emergency Departments 1011
British Nationals, Foreign Armies and Militias 731
Businesses (Support) 1286
Electric Cars 444
INDEX—SESSION 2016–17
13th June, 2017—6th July, 2017

Stringer, Graham
Chamber Debates
Brexit and Foreign Affairs 368
European Union (Approvals) Bill 1047
Westminster Hall
Global Education, G20 Summit (06.07.2017) 173wh, 178wh, 180wh
Kurdistan Region in Iraq 38wh
Yemen, Political and Humanitarian Situation 162wh

Sturdy, Julian
Westminster Hall
Road Infrastructure (05.07.2017) 89wh

Sanak, Rishi
Chamber Debates
Exiting the European Union and Global Trade 1358
Questions
Topical Questions 1020

Supply and Appropriation (Main Estimates) Bill 1138

Swayne, Sir Desmond
Chamber Debates
Adult Social Care Funding 1313
European Council 310
NHS Shared Business Services 467
Northern Ireland, Political Situation 904
Questions
Carbon Reduction Plan 455
Leaving the EU, NHS Workforce 1001
Topical Questions 1302

Sweeney, Mr Paul J.
Chamber Debates
European Council 327

Swinson, Jo
Chamber Debates
Brexit and Foreign Affairs 414-5
Grenfell Tower 920
Israel and Palestinian Talks 1237
Westminster Hall
State Pension Age for Women 131wh, 142wh

Swire, Sir Hugo
Chamber Debates
Health, Social Care and Security 606, 629-30
Northern Ireland, Political Situation 905
Questions
Belfast Agreement, Impartiality 576

Symms, Mr Robert
Chamber Debates
Economy and Jobs 804, 815-7

Telecommunications Infrastructure (Relief from Non-Domestic Rates) Bill 1042

Telephone Calls to the DWP 157

Tennis Tournaments 716

Terror Attacks 195

Thames Gateway SMEs 445

Theme Parks
Child Safety 994

Thewliss, Alison
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 225, 756, 1348
Debate on the Address 71, 73
Economy and Jobs 824

Thewliss, Alison—continued
European Council 326
Grenfell Tower 194
Grenfell Tower Fire/Fire Safety 353
Jobcentre Plus, Closures 1329
Northern Ireland 345
Westminster Hall
High Court Judgment, Benefit Cap 26-31wh
Yemen, Political and Humanitarian Situation 163-4wh
Questions
Confidence and Supply Agreement 584
Leaving the EU, Human Rights 731

Thomas, Derek
Chamber Debates
Health, Social Care and Security 659-60
Westminster Hall
Renewable Energy Generation, Island Communities 61wh
Safety of Riders and Horses on Rural Roads 67-72wh, 83-4wh

Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 760-1
European Council 326
Grenfell Tower 193
Housing and Social Security 231, 269-71, 286
Northern Ireland 344
Terror Attacks 212
Westminster Hall
State Pension Age for Women 119wh
Yemen, Political and Humanitarian Situation 156wh
Questions
Extremism 373
Public Disasters, Independent Advocate 734-5

Thomson, Ross
Chamber Debates
Education and Local Services 506-7
Israel and Palestinian Talks 1238-9
Jobcentre Plus, Closures 1327
Northern Ireland 331

Throup, Maggie
Chamber Debates
Economy and Jobs 840-1
Questions
Democratic Engagement 1152
Topical Questions 1024

Timms, Stephen
Chamber Debates
Economy and Jobs 780, 791-2, 819-21
Israel and Palestinian Talks 1226-7
Questions
Thames Gateway, SMEs 445

Tobacco Control Plan 1014

Tollhurst, Kelly
Chamber Debates
Debate on the Address 44
Education, Public Funding 1030
Questions
Leaving the EU, Creative Industries 71-5
Topical Questions 886

Tomlinson, Justin
Chamber Debates
NHS Shared Business Services 468
INDEX—SESSION 2016–17
13th June, 2017—6th July, 2017

Zigg, Stephen—continued
Westminster Hall
Global Education, G20 Summit (06.07.2017) 173-80wh, 191-2wh
Yemen, Political and Humanitarian Situation 164-6wh
Questions
Police and Fire Services, Collaboration 874-5

Twist, Liz
Questions
Digital Infrastructure 721
Topical Questions 1021

Umunna, Chuka
Chamber Debates
Economy and Jobs 837-8
European Council 317

United Kingdom Debt Management Office
39ws
Universal Credit
Lowestoft 565

Vaizey, Mr Edward
Chamber Debates
Exiting the European Union and Global Trade 1379, 1385-8, 1406

Vara, Mr Shailesh
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 219, 744
European Council 314
Northern Ireland 341-2
Terror Attacks 203

Vaz, Keith
Chamber Debates
Debate on the Address 51, 106-9
European Council 310
Theme Parks, Child Safety 994-7, 999
Westminster Hall
Yemen, Political and Humanitarian Situation 155wh, 162-3wh, 170wh
Questions
Extremism 872

Vaz, Valerie
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 214-5, 739-40, 1335-7

Vickers, Martin
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 750
Westminster Hall
Road Infrastructure (05.07.2017) 99-100wh
Questions
Industrial Strategy 452
Topical Questions 727-8, 888, 1021

Villiers, Theresa
Chamber Debates
European Council 309
Grenfell Tower 175
Israel and Palestinian Talks 1231, 1244-5
Questions
Extremism 872
Security Situation 581-2

Wall, Catherine
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 1346-7
Exiting the European Union and Global Trade 1398
Health, Social Care and Security 601
Israel and Palestinian Talks 1225

Wallace, Mr Ben—continued
Topical Questions 885, 887-9

Warman, Matt
Chamber Debates
Brexit and Foreign Affairs 413-4
European Council 323
Northern Ireland 340
Questions
Engagements 1165
Topical Questions 1020

Watling, Giles
Chamber Debates
Air Travel Organisers’ Licensing Bill 970-2
Health, Social Care and Security 609
Questions
Energy Price Cap 897

Watson, Tom
Chamber Debates
21st Century Fox/Sky Merger 765-6
Questions
Free TV Licences, Over-75s 714

West, Catherine
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 1346-7
Exiting the European Union and Global Trade 1398
Health, Social Care and Security 601
Israel and Palestinian Talks 1225

Western, Matt
Chamber Debates
Grenfell Tower 193
Grenfell Tower Fire/Fire Safety 362
Questions
Energy Price Cap 895

Whately, Helen
Chamber Debates
Adult Social Care Funding 1316
Economy and Jobs 778, 787
Grenfell Tower 188
Grenfell Tower Fire/Fire Safety 355
Health, Social Care and Security 662-3
Kent & Canterbury Hospital 292-5, 298
Public Sector Pay Cap 1175
Westminster Hall
Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme 196wh, 206-8wh
Questions
Digital Infrastructure 721
Immigration Rules, Agriculture 880

Whitehead, Dr Alan
Chamber Debates
Education and Local Services 548
Questions
Carbon Reduction Plan 455-6
Energy Price Cap 891

Whitfield, Martin
Chamber Debates
Education and Local Services 544-5
Jobcentre Plus, Closures 1330-1
Westminster Hall
High Court Judgment, Benefit Cap 30wh
Questions
Leaving the EU, Creative Industries 714-5

Whitford, Dr Philippa
Chamber Debates
Adult Social Care Funding 1310
Grenfell Tower 188, 921
Health, Social Care and Security 641-3, 646, 648-9
Westminster Hall
State Pension Age for Women 120wh, 128-9wh
Questions
Doctors and Nurses 1004
Whittingdale, Mr John
   Chamber Debates
      21st Century Fox/Sky Merger 766-7
      Brexit and Foreign Affairs 383-5
      European Council 309
      Questions
      Topical Questions 725

Wiggin, Bill
   Chamber Debates
      Housing and Social Security 282-3
      Westminster Hall
      Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme 208wh
      Questions
      Engagements 1163

Williams, Dr Paul
   Chamber Debates
      Health, Social Care and Security 634-5

Williams, Hywel
   Chamber Debates
      Election of Speaker 10-1
      Westminster Hall
      State Pension Age for Women 134wh
      Questions
      Topical Questions 1290-1

Williamson, Chris
   Chamber Debates
      Economy and Jobs 779-80
      Grenfell Tower 191
      Grenfell Tower Fire/Fire Safety 359-60
      Questions
      Topical Questions 885

Wilson, Phil
   Chamber Debates
      Health, Social Care and Security 630-2

Wilson, Sammy
   Chamber Debates
      Debate on the Address 89
      Economy and Jobs 784, 833

INDEX—SESSION 2016–17
13th June, 2017—6th July, 2017

Wilson, Sammy—continued
   Northern Ireland, Political Situation 908
   Public Sector Pay Cap 1177
   Westminster Hall
   State Pension Age for Women 133-4wh

Wishart, Pete
   Chamber Debates
      Business of the House 217, 742, 1338-9
      Confidence and Supply Arrangement 473-4
      Northern Ireland 332-3
      Perth's Cultural Contribution to the UK 1275-9
      Select Committees 1080-1
      Westminster Hall
      Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme 195wh, 197-201wh, 216wh

Wollaston, Dr Sarah
   Chamber Debates
      Adult Social Care Funding 1309
      Education and Local Services 488
      Health, Social Care and Security 625-7
      NHS Shared Business Services 464
      Questions
      Food and Drink Sector 1290
      Topical Questions 1022-3

Women and Equalities
1294

Wood, Mike—continued
   New Mothers (Redundancy Protection) 1299

Woodcock, John
   Chamber Debates
      Health, Social Care and Security 612, 665-6
      Questions
      Westminster Hall
      Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme 195wh, 197-201wh, 216wh

Wragg, Mr William
   Chamber Debates
      European Council 316
      Questions
      Doctors and Nurses 1003
      Electoral Fraud 1149-50
      Engagements 589
      Power Sharing 579

Yemen
   Political and Humanitarian Situation 155wh

Zahawi, Nadhim
   Chamber Debates
      Brexit and Foreign Affairs 379, 404-5
      Debate on the Address 51
      Israel and Palestinian Talks 1224
      Westminster Hall
      Kurdistan Region in Iraq 45-7wh

Zeichner, Daniel
   Chamber Debates
      Business of the House 757
      European Council 325

Zero-hours Contracts
448