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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 7 July 2015

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH

The Secretary of State was asked—

Hospital Acute Services

1. **Mark Garnier** (Wyre Forest) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of recent reviews of acute services in hospitals. [900776]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ben Gummer): The configuration of front-line health services is a matter for the local NHS. It is for NHS commissioners and providers to work together with local authorities, patients and the public to shape their local NHS in such a way as to improve the quality, safety and sustainability of healthcare services.

Mark Garnier: The review of acute services in Worcestershire has taken nearly two years longer than anticipated, and that has had subsequent negative implications for the health economy in Worcestershire. It is absolutely right that trusts carry out proper reviews from time to time, but has the system been written in such a way that it creates imbalances that prevent a conclusion from being reached? What steps is my hon. Friend taking to bring in practical measures to expedite the conclusion of such reviews?

Ben Gummer: I agree that the process in Worcestershire has taken too long. I am glad that the West Midlands Clinical Senate has made recommendations that are being looked at by commissioners at the moment. I have encouraged commissioners to come to as quick a resolution as possible—I hope within the next few months.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): Will the Minister conduct a review of car parking charges? Patients in Dudley are absolutely furious after the people running Russells Hall hospital put up prices by as much as 50% for a short stay. Will he get together with NHS civil servants and the people running the hospitals to sort this out?

Mr Speaker: Because of the impact of parking charges on those seeking to access acute services.

Ben Gummer: Thank you Mr Speaker—helpful as ever.

The hon. Gentleman is entirely right that those who seek to access acute services on a regular basis require special treatment. That is why we issued guidance in the

previous Parliament. I very much hope that his local hospitals will be looking at that with due care and attention.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Kettering general hospital is looking to develop a £30 million urgent care hub—one of the first of its type in the country—to replace and enhance the accident and emergency department, which is under growing strain. This project enjoyed the support of the previous Government. Will my hon. Friend agree to meet me and the two other MPs from north Northamptonshire to make sure that it remains on track?

Ben Gummer: I very much look forward to meeting my hon. Friend and his colleagues, and I have already committed to doing so. I hope that the lead he has taken with his colleagues in forging a cross-party consensus will be copied across the House.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): Each week, 1,000 diabetics suffer hypoglycaemic attacks, which require urgent medical treatment and access to acute services. Does the Minister agree that better management of diabetes services by GPs will lessen the pressure on our A&E services?

Ben Gummer: I do agree with the right hon. Gentleman, who is an expert in this field. We have a diabetes and obesity strategy coming later in the year. The Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Jane Ellison), who is responsible for public health, will be leading that effort.

GP Appointments

2. **Bridget Phillipson** (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): What recent estimate he has made of the proportion of patients who waited for at least one week for a GP appointment in the past 12 months. [900777]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): While we do not record the proportion of patients waiting a week for their GP appointment, the latest GP patient survey results show that 85% of patients reported that they were able to get an appointment to see or speak to someone, and only a very small percentage ended up not speaking to or seeing someone.

Bridget Phillipson: Unfortunately, many of my constituents would not recognise the picture that the Secretary of State seeks to paint. The British Medical Association recently said that waits of one to two weeks were becoming the norm for patients. Why is it becoming harder, on his watch, to get a GP appointment?

Mr Hunt: If I may gently say so, the under-investment in general practice has been going on for decades, according to the BMA and the Royal College of GPs. We have announced that we are putting that right with our plans to recruit 5,000 more GPs during this Parliament. That is the biggest increase in GPs in the history of the NHS, with £1 billion going to upgrade GP and primary care premises, and 18 million people by the end of this financial year benefiting from evening and weekend appointments. That is a big, positive change, and I hope she would welcome it.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): Has my right hon. Friend had a chance to read the report by the Professional Standards Authority for Health and Social Care, which says that pressure would be taken off doctors and nurses if greater use were made of the 63,000 practitioners that it regulates on 17 separate registers covering 25 occupations? Will he look at the report and write to me?

Mr Hunt: I am very happy to do that. My hon. Friend is right to point out that the solution to the problem is not just about expanding the number of appointments offered by GPs, although we are doing that; it is also about looking at the very important role that pharmacists and other allied health professionals have to play in out-of-hospital care.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The Secretary of State mentions recruiting 5,000 extra GPs, but I note in a recent speech that that was downgraded from a guarantee to a maximum. With 10% of trainee posts unfilled and the BMA's recent survey suggesting that a third of GPs will leave in the next five years, is that not going to be difficult? Has the Secretary of State had any consultation with the BMA and the royal college to ask why they are leaving?

Mr Hunt: It will be difficult. The commitment has never been downgraded: we always said that we needed about 10,000 more primary care staff, about half of whom we expected to be GPs. We have had extensive discussions about the issues surrounding general practice, such as burn-out, the contractual conditions and bureaucracy. We are looking at all of those things. The commitment is to increase the number of GPs by about 5,000 during the course of the Parliament, and that is a very important part of our plan to renew NHS care arrangements.

Dr Whitford: I assume the Secretary of State is aware that two of the pilot sites for the seven-day, 8 till 8 working—one in north Yorkshire and the other in County Durham—have abandoned the project due to poor uptake by patients, with only 50% of appointments used on a Saturday and only 12% on a Sunday. Given that they found that it had a detrimental effect on recruiting cover for out-of-hours GP urgent services, does not he feel that this needs a rethink and that consultation with the profession and looking at cover would be of most benefit?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Lady is presenting only a partial picture. In Slough there are about 900 more appointments every week as a result of the initiative for evening and weekend appointments. Birmingham has dramatically reduced the number of no-shows and Watford has reduced A&E attendance measurably. Some really exciting things have happened, but of course we will continue to consult the profession to make sure that the programme works.

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): Radical and innovative steps were taken in Plymouth this April to integrate not only front-line health and social care services in the city, but all the council and clinical commissioning group resources into a single fund. Will

my right hon. Friend describe how the success regime in the Plymouth and Devon area will build on those achievements?

Mr Hunt: Absolutely; I had the pleasure and privilege of visiting Plymouth during the election campaign to see some of the radical changes being offered in community care. There is huge enthusiasm for transforming the situation in Devon. It is a very challenged economy, but by bringing together the health and social care system and by putting more resources into primary and out-of-hospital care we will be able to give a better service to my hon. Friend's constituents, which I know he will welcome.

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): Ten years ago, this great city lived through one of the darkest days in its history. Our thoughts today are with all those who were affected and we pay tribute to the heroic staff of London's NHS, who did so much to help them.

The latest GP patient survey is important for the simple reason that it covers the first full year of the Government's GP access challenge fund. The results do not make good reading for the Secretary of State. The percentage of patients dissatisfied with their surgery's opening hours has increased and patients found it harder to get appointments last year than the year before. Will the Secretary of State admit that his policies are simply not working and that GP services are getting worse on his watch?

Mr Hunt: First, I echo the right hon. Gentleman's comments about the extraordinary bravery of the emergency services, particularly the London Ambulance Service, in response to the terrible tragedy of 7/7.

I do not accept the picture the right hon. Gentleman paints of general practice. The Prime Minister's challenge fund has been extremely successful: by the end of this year, 18 million people will be benefiting from the opportunity to have evening, weekend and Skype appointments with their GP. We have also announced the biggest increase in the number of GPs in the history of the NHS. The Labour party left us with a GP contract that ripped the heart out of general practice by removing responsibility for evening and weekend care and by getting rid of personal responsibility by GPs for their patients. The right hon. Gentleman should show a little contrition and modesty about Labour's mistakes.

Andy Burnham: People who have been ringing surgeries this morning unable to get appointments will not be convinced by what they have just heard. The truth is that the disarray in the Secretary of State's primary care policy goes much deeper. Not only has he made it harder for people to get a convenient appointment, but he now wants to charge people who miss the appointments they are able to get. We all want to reduce waste, but there are many reasons why people do not turn up, including family emergencies. That is presumably why No. 10 slapped him down. He will have worried people, so for the avoidance of doubt, will he today confirm that he will not return to that idea in this Parliament?

Mr Hunt: There are no plans to charge people who have missed appointments. That is precisely the sort of scaremongering that the British public rejected at the

last election. The right hon. Gentleman put the NHS on the ballot paper, and the country voted Conservative; he might want to think about the lessons from that. Missed appointments cost the NHS £1 billion a year. We want that money to be spent on doctors and nurses. Labour spent billions on wasted IT contracts and the private finance initiative, and did not spend enough on front-line staff. We are putting that right.

Muscle-wasting Conditions

3. **Harry Harpham** (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure that clinical commissioning groups routinely fund cough-assist machines for people with muscle-wasting conditions when a clinical need has been identified.

[900778]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Life Sciences (George Freeman): Muscle-wasting conditions associated with neurodegenerative disorders affect about 60,000 people in England at the moment. The Government are supporting research through the National Institute for Health Research, totalling £39 million. NHS England, CCGs and Muscular Dystrophy UK have come together and are jointly working on the “Bridging the Gap” report to improve neuromuscular disease, and the Department of Health is supporting this work with funding of £600,000. Decisions on the funding of cough-assist machines are rightly the responsibility of CCGs on a case-by-case basis.

Harry Harpham: As revealed in Muscular Dystrophy UK’s “Right to breathe” report published in February 2015, in some areas of the country patients have access to cough-assist machines which the local clinical commissioning group will not fund in other areas, despite a clinical need being clearly identified. These machines can help to prevent potentially fatal respiratory problems and to reduce costs and lengthy, unplanned hospital visits. A cough-assist machine costs £4,500, whereas a long stay in an intensive care unit can cost more than £13,000. [Interruption.] Will the Minister meet me and representatives of Muscular Dystrophy UK to discuss how better consistency in provision of vital respiratory equipment—

Mr Speaker: Order. We have got the gist.

George Freeman: My answer of a few moments ago stands. Decisions on the commissioning of those machines are taken on a case-by-case basis locally. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence has set out in guidance that cough-assist machines may be appropriate for some patients, but not in every area.

Eye Surgery

4. **Richard Harrington** (Watford) (Con): For what reasons his Department categorises corrective refractive eye surgery for medical purposes as cosmetic surgery.

[900779]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ben Gummer): The Department does not categorise refractive laser eye surgery for medical purposes as cosmetic surgery. Laser eye surgery is regulated through providers registered with the Care Quality Commission.

Doctors carrying out the surgery must be registered with the General Medical Council and, like all doctors, they must recognise and work within their competence.

Richard Harrington: My constituent Mr Shabir Ahmed, whom I have visited, was repeatedly recommended, by the optician he went to for his NHS eye test, to have an eye operation involving complex refractive laser surgery. Over two years, the optician called him every month, bringing the price down until it was half what it was originally. It did not work out: the surgery led to a significant deterioration in his eyesight, and the company denies all responsibility and liability. It seems to me—

Mr Speaker: Order.

Richard Harrington: Mr Speaker, please bear with me for two sentences. Surgery as complex as that needs the same kind of regulation as if it were in hospital.

Mr Speaker: Questions do need to be shorter, otherwise they will eat into everyone else’s time.

Ben Gummer: There are two parts to my hon. Friend’s question. The first is about the high-pressure tactics employed by providers. They will be covered by the new regulations brought in on 1 April by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), who is now the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, by which we have given powers to the Information Commissioner. I suggest that my hon. Friend refers his question to our right hon. Friend. On the second point about failed procedures, refractive eye surgery operators are governed by the same regulators as hospitals, and achieve exactly the end that my hon. Friend wishes.

Mr Speaker: Pithiness personified, I hope—Mr John McDonnell.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): The regulatory procedures are not working. Ten years ago, our late colleague Frank Cook introduced a ten-minute rule Bill calling for regulatory reform, and I reintroduced that Bill three years ago. The Keogh report called for regulatory reform two and a half years ago, and nothing has happened. People are losing their eyesight as a result of some of the companies operating in this field. Will the Minister meet me and the hon. Member for Watford (Richard Harrington) to talk about progress in this field?

Ben Gummer: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman is not right. Progress has been made. Ten years ago, that might not have been the case, but the Care Quality Commission was strengthened under the previous Government and it is regulating refractive eye surgery. Moreover, the doctors who perform those operations are regulated by the GMC, and the Royal College of Ophthalmologists is bringing forward a certification scheme because of the moves that were taken by the last Government.

Hospitals in Special Measures

5. **Rehman Chishti** (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): What progress the Government have made on improving safety in hospitals in special measures.

[900780]

10. **Heather Wheeler** (South Derbyshire) (Con): What progress the Government have made on improving safety in hospitals in special measures. [900785]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): The 21 hospitals that have been put into special measures under the new inspection regime have recruited 458 more doctors and 1,012 more nurses, and all of them have made good progress, including the Medway and Burton hospitals.

Rehman Chishti: I thank the Secretary of State for the support that he has given Medway Maritime hospital. Will he welcome the appointment of a chief quality officer at Medway hospital? It is one of only two trusts to have done that, and it is helping to improve safety and bring Medway out of special measures. Will he join me in paying tribute to the brilliant staff at Medway hospital, who are working day and night to turn things around?

Mr Hunt: I do pay tribute to them, and I welcome Dr Trisha Bain to that post. Ten years ago, that hospital had one of the worst mortality rates in the country. Since then, it has recruited nearly 100 more doctors and 83 more nurses, and has teamed up with Guy's and St Thomas'. There is a culture of transparency and honesty about failings and a rigorous focus on improvement that were not there before. I hope that the whole House will welcome that change in culture.

Heather Wheeler: My local hospital, Queen's hospital in Burton, has worked closely with Monitor to improve while it has been in special measures. Does the Secretary of State agree that, although spending four nights in ward 7 was not the best way for me to start the general election campaign, all the staff should be congratulated on the way they have approached the need to improve?

Mr Hunt: I am sorry that my hon. Friend had to go to hospital at the start of the election campaign, but I congratulate her on being probably the only Member of the House to have launched their campaign from an NHS hospital ward. I trust that all the nurses voted for her as a result.

Inexplicably, the trust that my hon. Friend talked about was made a foundation trust in 2008, despite a number of problems that were not recognised. Since then, it has made dramatic improvements in its care, with more doctors and more nurses. I am delighted that it is on track to deliver better care.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): How many of the hospitals in special measures have implemented recommendation 13 of the final Francis report on fundamental standards?

Mr Hunt: I would expect that all trusts have done so. If they have not, they will not come out of special measures. That is the benefit of a rigorous, independent inspection regime. Seven trusts have come out of special measures. I hope that the others will come out in due course, but that is not a decision for me; rightly, it is a decision for the chief inspector of hospitals.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): The NHS in my constituency has moved beyond special measures into the success regime. Will the Secretary of State consider innovative models of care, because my constituency is

very different from others and the trust will not achieve success without looking at how it can deliver safety in different ways?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. The big change that we need in the NHS is to move away from the dependence on hospital care as the only way to deliver safe, effective care. That is why we put £200 million into the vanguard programme last year, which is looking at such models. I hope that the success regime will hasten the innovation in her area.

20. [900795] **Amanda Milling** (Cannock Chase) (Con): Now that the Mid Staffs trust board has been dissolved, will my right hon. Friend advise me on which is the appropriate body to deal with historic complaints against the previous trust, not only to provide answers for patients and family members, but to ensure that lessons are learned to improve patient safety?

Mr Hunt: In the first instance, patients who are concerned about safety should contact the trust concerned, even though it is a different trust legally than the one that was there before. The CQC is there to ensure that any lessons about the safety of care are disseminated throughout the NHS. That is an important part of the transparency culture that we are introducing.

Mental Health Services

6. **Matthew Pennycook** (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): What progress the Government have made on achieving parity of esteem for physical and mental health services. [900781]

7. **Angela Rayner** (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): What progress the Government have made on achieving parity of esteem for physical and mental health services. [900782]

15. **Pat Glass** (North West Durham) (Lab): What progress the Government have made on achieving parity of esteem for physical and mental health services. [900790]

The Minister for Community and Social Care (Alistair Burt): The Government take mental health as seriously as physical health. We have introduced legislation to ensure parity of esteem, and with additional investment and the first access and waiting standards for mental health, we will hold to account and work with the NHS to achieve that aim.

Matthew Pennycook: There is understandable scepticism across the mental health sector about whether real-terms funding for mental health services has increased over recent years. In the interests of transparency, will the Minister commit to report on the levels of funding for mental health services that are provided nationally and to clinical commissioning groups, so that my constituents can have confidence that the Government are serious about achieving that parity of esteem?

Alistair Burt: I am happy to do that. There was an increase of £302 million in mental health spending in 2014-15, and there is an injunction on CCGs to ensure that a proportionate amount of any additional money they receive goes to mental health services. That is as transparent as it has ever been, and we will ensure that that standard is maintained.

Angela Rayner: Mental health budget cuts have hit us hard locally. I hope that the Minister will join me in paying tribute to the work of the Anthony Seddon Fund, which has raised thousands of pounds for mental health and wellbeing projects in Tameside and Failsworth? Will he promise real parity of esteem and pledge to increase mental health spending, not to cut it?

Alistair Burt: I refer the hon. Lady to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook). Mental health funding is increasing, and parity of esteem is demonstrated by having access targets and targets for waiting times for the first time. Those measures could have been introduced by a previous Government but they were not, and the demonstration of parity of esteem shown by that legislation and by the increase in investment should help to reassure the hon. Lady's constituents. I pay tribute to those who work in a voluntary capacity to assist those with mental health issues.

Pat Glass: In the previous Parliament the Education Select Committee said that child and adolescent mental health services were not fit for purpose, and it called them a "national scandal". The situation is getting worse, with children and families left for up to five months without appointments. What is the Minister doing to deal with that national scandal?

Alistair Burt: The way that children and young persons' mental health services have been handled over a lengthy period has been extremely poor, and many MPs have similar concerns on behalf of their constituents. That is why one of my major priorities for this Parliament is to build on the good work of the previous coalition Government, with £1.25 billion to be spent on transforming care services for children and young persons—a commitment that I think the Labour party would struggle to match.

Sir Simon Burns (Chelmsford) (Con): Despite the excellent work done over the past two decades, does my right hon. Friend agree that the challenge facing us all—not only in government but among members of the public—is to end the disgraceful stigma that is associated with mental ill health, and break down the barriers of prejudice so that people suffering from mental ill health are treated in the same way as those suffering from a physical infirmity?

Alistair Burt: My right hon. Friend is correct. The damage that has been done over many years by not regarding mental ill health as seriously as it should be regarded, and by not having that parity of esteem, has been immense. The campaigns that have been launched against stigma, often fronted by brave people—including some in this House—have done much to correct that, but he is correct to say that the campaign against stigmatisation must continue.

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): The first NHS point of contact for many people with mental health issues is often their GP. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it remains vital that GPs and primary care staff have proper understanding and training in mental health care, and more broadly that such training forms a greater part of medical qualification and training?

Alistair Burt: Last Wednesday I spoke to 2,500 psychiatrists—if colleagues think that this audience is scary they should try speaking in front of them. The chairman of the Royal College of Psychiatrists said that there had been an increase in the uptake of the psychiatry training given to doctors before they enter general practice, which was leading to a greater interest in mental health issues. I entirely agree with my hon. Friend: it is important that such training exists because that first point of contact with GPs is crucial.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): To build on that greater awareness and understanding of mental health among general practitioners, will the Minister look at ways in which we can rebalance mental health care away from an overreliance on acute care towards greater and more consistent primary care?

Alistair Burt: Yes, and the adaptation of new and innovative therapies will also assist. Ensuring that GPs are aware of the increased access to psychological talking therapies is making a huge difference. Initial reactions to that programme indicate that, since 2008, nearly 3 million people have had access, 1.7 million have completed their treatment, and 1 million have recovered. Increased awareness of that in primary care will be very important.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): Last month's Care Quality Commission report revealed serious shortcomings in emergency mental health care, including that too many people do not have access to urgent help around the clock. The lead mental health inspector said that those findings must act as a wake-up call. How is the Minister ensuring that people in a mental health emergency get the same support that we would expect them to get in a physical health emergency?

Alistair Burt: The extremely important report to which the hon. Lady refers was commissioned by the Government. It described the crisis care concordat, which is at the heart of dealing with mental health crises, as a "remarkable initiative". It states:

"An extraordinary range of public services and other bodies have acknowledged their responsibilities".

For me, it serves as a baseline for what we should do. The word "efficiency" is pointed out, not least in respect of A&E treatment of those with mental health crises. I regard it as a very good base on which to work and to gauge the success of what we do to deal with mental health crisis care over the next few years. I commend the crisis care concordat—it is in operation all over the country—as a first step towards ensuring that the sort of treatment we want in mental health crises becomes the norm.

NHS Efficiency Savings

8. **Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab):** Whether he expects that the efficiency savings identified in NHS England's most recent "Five Year Forward View" will entail a reduction in staff numbers. [900783]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): The "Five Year Forward View" is about meeting increasing demand through new models of care, not cutting staff numbers. In fact, we are planning an additional 10,000 staff in primary and community settings, including around 5,000 doctors.

Margaret Greenwood: The Secretary of State will be aware that Sir Robert Francis specifically recommended that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence provide guidance on safe staffing levels because it is independent and can establish guidance based on the needs of patients. The Government's decision to suspend that work and transfer responsibility to NHS England has been met with criticism from patients' groups right across the NHS. Will the Secretary of State please explain why he thinks NHS England is better placed than NICE to carry out that vital work?

Mr Hunt: The important thing is that that work happens. NICE did a very good job in delivering safe staffing guidance for acute wards. It is important to recognise that that guidance was interpreted as being about simply getting numbers into wards, but the amount of time that doctors and nurses have with patients is as important. The work will continue and we are proud of the fact that we are dealing with the issue of badly staffed wards. We will continue to make progress.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): In trying to reduce waste as part of the drive for efficiency savings identified in the "Five Year Forward View", the Secretary of State spoke recently about the possibility of putting a price label on high-value items in prescriptions alongside a label saying that they are paid for by the taxpayer. Will he reassure the House that such a measure would be carefully piloted and evaluated first, so that we can avoid any unintended consequences for those who might consider discontinuing very important medication?

Mr Hunt: We will look at all the evidence. The evidence we have seen from other countries is very encouraging. Apart from ensuring that NHS patients and the public understand the cost of NHS care, one of the main reasons why we want to do that is to improve adherence to drug regimes by making people understand just how expensive the drugs are that they have been prescribed. We will of course look at all the international evidence.

16. [900791] **Mr Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab):** NHS England consulted in the last Parliament not just once but twice on downgrading the economic deprivation part of the funding formula, which would have had the effect of taking some £230 million per year out of the primary care budget for the north-east and Cumbria. Will the Secretary of State give the House a commitment—we got one from the Minister in the last Parliament—that he will not downgrade the economic deprivation part of the funding formula?

Mr Hunt: I give an absolute commitment that economic deprivation will be a very important part of the funding formula, but the right hon. Gentleman will appreciate that things such as the number of older people in a particular area is as important in determining levels of funding. We are committed to reducing health inequalities, but that also means making sure that similar levels of care are available in similar parts of the country. That has not always been the case.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the efficiency savings our Government are introducing have led to the lower waiting

lists and the better access to cancer drugs for patients in England that are the envy of my patients in Wales? What can I tell them about how we can get greater access and better standards in Wales while the NHS in Wales is run by Labour?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend can tell them that when Labour Members opposed the Health and Social Care Act 2012, we were doing the right thing for patients, with 18,000 fewer managers, 9,000 more doctors and 8,500 more nurses, whereas the Labour party was posturing. We can see the results of that posturing in Wales, where more people wait for A&E, more people wait for their cancer operation, and 10 times more people are waiting for any kind of operation.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): The Secretary of State talks about having similar levels of care, but we do not have similar levels of safe staffing around the country. Peter Carter has said about the decision on NICE:

"If staffing levels are not based on evidence there is a danger they will be based on cost."

Is my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) not right? NHS England should reverse that decision and let the independent body be the judge of safe staffing levels.

Mr Hunt: I gently say to the hon. Lady that we will not take any lessons in safe staffing from the party that left us with the tragedy of Mid Staffs. We have recruited 8,000 more nurses into our hospitals because we have learned the lessons of the Francis report. The important lesson in the report is that it is not simply about the number of nurses; it is about the culture in hospitals and making sure that nurses are supported to give the best care. We want to learn those lessons as well.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): In reference to the "Five Year Forward View", the Secretary of State talked about new modes of working. A very simple thing that could be done is for women's smear test results to refer to the fact that it is not a test for ovarian cancer, and to then list the symptoms of that cancer. That would not cost any money, but it would save lives.

Mr Hunt: I am very happy to look into that. The general direction of travel my hon. Friend is talking about is right. We need to empower patients. We need patients to become expert patients, so that they take responsibility for their own healthcare. That means giving them much more information to help them to make the right decisions.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): The Secretary of State is trying to avoid the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood). It was a key recommendation of the Francis review into Mid Staffs that safe staffing guidelines should be drawn up independently from Government and NHS managers to make sure people are confident that they are based on what is best for patients, not budgets. Why has he gone against Francis? What was wrong with what NICE was doing? He has published no new criteria for NHS England and no process or timetable for action. Will he

now commit to doing that, so that patients, staff and Members of this House can be confident that this is not just a cover for cuts?

Mr Hunt: We will not take any lessons from the Labour party about what needs to be learned from Mid Staffs. Labour Members should be ashamed of the state of hospital care they left behind. There are 8,000 more nurses in our hospitals as a result of the changes that this Government have made. They should welcome that, not criticise it.

District General Hospitals

9. **Helen Jones** (Warrington North) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with NHS England on the future of district general hospitals; and if he will make a statement. [900784]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ben Gummer): The NHS was launched in a district general hospital. The continuing commitment of NHS England to DGHs is shown in their serial mentions in the “Five Year Forward View”. I recommend that the hon. Lady reads that to see the future for district general hospitals and the important role they will play.

Helen Jones: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer, but it ignores the reality on the ground. In opposition, the Prime Minister promised a bare-knuckle fight to save district general hospitals. Since he came to power, Warrington has lost its vascular services and some of its spinal services, maternity services are under review, and a £15 million deficit threatens the future of the trust. Did that bare-knuckle fighter get knocked out, or did he not even bother to enter the ring?

Ben Gummer: I gently remind the hon. Lady that the difference is that changes to services provided at hospitals are now made on the recommendation of clinicians, rather than of bureaucrats and Ministers, as it was under the previous Government, in which she served. In respect of her own hospital, the number of diagnostic tests for cancer are up by 22,000 since 2010, the number of MRI scans by 6,000, the number of CT scans by 7,000 and the number of operations by 1,800. That is a record of which to be proud.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Wycombe hospital could benefit from one of the excellent models in the “Five Year Forward View”. Will my hon. Friend make sure these excellent proposals are carried through with energy and alacrity?

Ben Gummer: The strength of the NHS forward view is that it is a creation of the NHS itself, and we, as the only party to back it in full with cash, will give it the kind of support it needs to make sure it is delivered.

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): How many maternity wards or emergency surgery departments currently located in district general hospitals will close as a result of the Government’s seven-day NHS plans?

Ben Gummer: It is telling that the hon. Lady wishes to talk about wards rather than outcomes. Over the last five years, we have seen a significant increase in the number of patients treated in emergency wards, and we will continue to see an increase, and the difference is

that they will operate seven days a week, rather than just five days a week, as is currently the case for many services across the NHS.

A&E: Dorset

11. **Mr Christopher Chope** (Christchurch) (Con): Whether his Department has discussed with the Dorset clinical commissioning group the provision of accident and emergency services in Dorset; and if he will make a statement. [900786]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jane Ellison): I understand that Dorset CCG is reviewing the provision of healthcare across the county under its clinical services review, and that includes emergency services. Obviously, any changes to services must be clinically led, in the best interests of patients and, certainly for acute services, in line with the principles of the Keogh review.

Mr Chope: In that case, will my hon. Friend assure me that the Government do not support the CCG’s bizarre proposal to close 450 beds at the Royal Bournemouth hospital and force 40,000 in-patients each year to go to Poole general hospital?

Jane Ellison: I understand that the process is not even halfway through—the CCG’s plans are about to enter the consultation phase—and I would expect my hon. Friend, along with other Dorset MPs, to be engaged with that. I would be disappointed if they felt that they had not been so engaged. However, the House might be interested to know about just one of the proposed improvements. There is currently no 24/7 consultant cover anywhere in Dorset, and the proposed improvement plan aims to correct that.

NHS Funding

12. **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What changes in funding he plans to make to address the NHS funding shortfall forecast in NHS England’s most recent “Five Year Forward View”. [900787]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): We have committed to providing additional funding to the NHS of at least £8 billion by 2020-21, over and above inflation. This is in line with the funding identified in the NHS England “Five Year Forward View” and in addition to the £2 billion extra for NHS front-line services this year.

Rachael Maskell: With trust deficits reaching £822 million at the end of the last financial year, commissioners, chief executives and NHS professionals are saying that it is impossible to achieve £22 billion of efficiency savings without cutting services, staff numbers or staff pay or even stripping out the market. Which will the Secretary of State choose?

Mr Hunt: Of course, it will be very challenging to find those savings, but I gently remind the hon. Lady that Labour’s manifesto at the last election promised £5 billion a year less for the NHS than we promised, and that was because of our confidence in a strong economy, which is what the NHS needs.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The five-year forward plan will need to deal with the outstanding issue of the contaminated blood scandal, as a result of which one of my constituents suffered devastating consequences, including having to take the terrible decision to terminate their unborn child. When might we expect a statement and final resolution on this matter?

Mr Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. It was a terrible tragedy—I had constituents who died—and I can confirm that we will be meeting the commitments made by the Prime Minister to bring forward a solution very shortly.

Mr Jamie Reed (Copeland) (Lab): The House will have seen that the pitch is being carefully rolled by the Secretary of State today for future service closures around the country. Last week, a former care Minister was reported as saying that the £22 billion of efficiency savings the Government had signed up to were “virtually impossible” to achieve and that everyone knew it. Given that he is one of the few people to have seen the detail of the efficiency savings, this does not fill anybody with confidence. Will the Secretary of State now commit to publishing the details of the efficiency savings so that Members, the public at large, patient groups and medical professionals can have a proper and open debate about what it means?

Mr Hunt: We will of course publish how we are going to make these efficiency savings. We have already started with a crackdown on agency spend and a crackdown on consultancy spend, and with the work that Lord Carter, a Labour peer, has done to improve hospital procurement and rostering.

Let me gently say to the hon. Gentleman, however, that he went into the election promising £2.5 billion more for the NHS—£5.5 billion less than we did—and most of that was from the mansion tax that Labour now says was a bad idea. So there would have been nearly £8 billion more of efficiency savings under Labour’s plans than under this Government’s plans, and he should recognise the progress we are making.

Pregnant Women: Alcohol Consumption

13. **Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of guidance from the chief medical officer on the consumption of alcohol by pregnant women. [900788]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jane Ellison): We know that too many women may be unaware of the health risks from drinking during pregnancy. The chief medical officer’s review of the alcohol guidelines—the hon. Gentleman knows, because we have spoken about it—includes consideration of the Government’s advice on drinking during pregnancy. The UK chief medical officers are meeting to discuss this in September, and we expect to consult on the new guidance in the autumn.

Bill Esterson: I thank the Minister for her answer and remind Members that 7,000 children are damaged every year from irreversible brain damage as a result of alcohol consumed by their mothers during pregnancy. I urge the Minister please to clear up the confusion in the advice available to pregnant women at the moment,

which on the one hand says, “Do not drink at all”; and on the other hand says, “If you do drink, have only one or two units”.

Jane Ellison: The message is actually very clear, as we have labelling on over 90% of bottles. As the hon. Gentleman knows from the debates we have had on the subject, it is a difficult area and there is no consistent evidence of adverse effects from low to moderate pre-natal alcohol consumption. I have talked this through with the chief medical officer: we have to get the balance right between warning women and responding to the important stats the hon. Gentleman has mentioned, without causing unnecessary worry for the around 50% of women who do not plan their pregnancy and might have drunk alcohol before they realised they were pregnant.

Mental Health: Children and Young People

14. **Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to improve support for children and young people with mental health problems. [900789]

The Minister for Community and Social Care (Alistair Burt): Improving children’s mental health services is one of my highest priorities. We want to achieve this by integrating mental health services for children and young people through a major transformation programme backed by additional funding; by expanding the children and young people’s access to psychological therapies; and by working with the Department for Education to develop single points of contact for mental health in schools.

Henry Smith: I pay tribute to the West Sussex youth cabinet that is looking into the issue of mental health provision for young people. Why does the Minister believe this area has been chronically underfunded for so long, and will he give me an assurance that this will not be the case in the future?

Alistair Burt: I agree with my hon. Friend when he commends the involvement of young people in discussing their services. Only last week, the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah) and I attended a youth select committee organised by the British Youth Council to do something very similar.

There are two reasons why I think these services have not been so good in the past. First, there is the difficulty of collecting information and data; and, secondly, there is the complexity of financing for services. I hope that we will address both of those, and we will ensure that people know about this so that things do not slide back by being more transparent about both.

Topical Questions

T1. [900766] **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): The Government’s priority for the NHS this Parliament is to put Mid Staffs behind us by transforming the NHS into the safest healthcare system in the world, and in

particular, through seven-day hospital care so that we end the tragedy of up to 6,000 lives lost because people do not have access to consultants or diagnostics at weekends. It means recognition that safer care costs less, not more, which is why we are cracking down on expensive agency staff who cannot give the continuity of care that is best for patients.

Vicky Foxcroft: Almost two years ago, Lewisham took the Secretary of State to court over the closure of Lewisham A&E and maternity services—and won. In the light of the new report, “Our Healthier South East London”, can the Secretary of State promise me that any further shake-up of the NHS in south-east London will not involve the closure of services at Lewisham Hospital?

Mr Hunt: What I can assure the hon. Lady is that we inherited deep-seated problems in the old South London Healthcare Trust and we have dealt with them. We have more doctors and nurses looking after her constituents, and care is getting better as a result of the difficult decisions we have taken.

T2. [900767] **Maria Caulfield** (Lewes) (Con): Part of my constituency is served by Eastbourne District General Hospital, which is run by East Sussex Healthcare NHS Trust. The trust was recently deemed “inadequate” by the Care Quality Commission. Residents are obviously concerned, and both East Sussex County Council and Polegate Town Council have gone on record as saying that they have lost confidence in the hospital’s management. Will the Minister look into the matter urgently, in order to reassure my constituents?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jane Ellison): My hon. Friend has been an extremely active champion of healthcare services for her local community, and I congratulate her on continuing to raise this matter. The CQC is due to publish the findings of its latest inspection of the NHS trust shortly, and we expect the trust to work closely with the regulators to deal with the concern that has been expressed. I know that there is concern locally, and I believe that Polegate Town Council will be discussing the matter soon.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): We have heard a number of fair questions from Opposition Members, and, I am afraid, nothing but woeful and inadequate answers from Ministers so far. Let me try again by asking the Secretary of State about GPs. As we have already heard, before the election he promised that there would be an additional 5,000 GPs by 2020. However, now that the election is over, he says that that promise requires “some flexibility”, and he was similarly evasive in an earlier answer. Given that there is, in the words of the Government’s own taskforce, a “GP work force crisis”, will the Secretary of State now clear things up? By 2020, will there be 5,000 extra GPs—on today’s figures—as he promised, or is this yet another example of the Conservatives not being straight with people on the NHS?

Mr Jeremy Hunt: I think that those were woeful and inadequate questions. What I said after the election was exactly the same as what I said before the election,

which was that a number—[*Interruption.*] Yes, we will have about 5,000 more GPs by the end of the Parliament, which is just what I said before the election. I said that a total of 10,000 more people would be working in primary care. I also said before the election that the woeful problems in general practice would be dealt with only if we unpicked the terrible mistakes made by Labour in the GP contract. That is why this year we are bringing back named GPs for every single NHS patient.

T4. [900769] **Mr Christopher Chope** (Christchurch) (Con): Does the Secretary of State accept the verdict of the Competition Commission, which decided recently that it would be against the interests of patients for Royal Bournemouth General Hospital and Poole Hospital to merge? The clinical commissioning group has responded by saying that one of the hospitals will have to give up all its services.

Mr Hunt: I think that we must respect the independent view of the Competition and Markets Authority, but I also think that there are lessons to be learned by the NHS more generally from the way in which that process was conducted. There will have to be changes on the ground if we are to give patients the care that they need in the very constrained financial circumstances in which we operate.

T3. [900768] **Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): In March this year I had a very useful meeting involving Devonshire Green & Hanover Medical Centres in my constituency and the then Under-Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter), who recognised the threat posed to practices that serve patients with complex, demanding, and therefore costly needs by the withdrawal of the minimum practice income guarantee. The hon. Gentleman promised to follow up that meeting, but since then we have heard nothing. Will the Secretary of State guarantee that no practice will close as a result of the withdrawal of MPIG, and what will he do to ensure that that is the case?

The Minister for Community and Social Care (Alistair Burt): The withdrawal of the minimum practice income guarantee was announced in 2013 because it was unfair. In fact, more practices will benefit from its removal than will lose from it. As for those that will lose, NHS England is already in contact with people about transitional care support. The practices that the hon. Gentleman mentioned have received some of that support, and I understand that the conversations are continuing.

T5. [900770] **John Glen** (Salisbury) (Con): Following my fourth Adjournment debate on the future of Public Health England at Porton Down two weeks ago, I remain concerned about value for money for the taxpayer. Will the Minister confirm that she has assessed the full value of the life sciences work at Porton Down to the United Kingdom economy, and that she remains committed to maximising the site’s potential regardless of the outcome?

Jane Ellison: I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing so many Adjournment debates. Our most recent debate took place only a couple of weeks ago. He is right to

continue to remind us of the contribution that the Porton Down site makes to the UK economy. I can assure him that the outline business case has been and is being scrutinised by Ministers, and that that includes an economic assessment. However, as I have said on previous occasions when we have debated the matter, Public Health England will remain committed to the site even if research staff are relocated.

T6. [900771] **Mr Douglas Carswell** (Clacton) (UKIP): What concrete steps is the Secretary of State taking to increase the number of GPs and ensure my constituents can be seen by one when they need to be?

Alistair Burt: As has been discussed extensively during this Question Time, the Secretary of State has announced a programme that will include increasing the numbers training to be GPs, improving not only the recruitment but the retention of GPs, and work to make general practice more attractive to those who are worried about that. With all these measures, we will do our best to boost the position of general practice within an expanded primary care system in future, and I hope we can meet the concerns of the hon. Gentleman and his constituents.

T7. [900772] **Heidi Allen** (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): This is a request really: will the Secretary of State please meet me and GPs from the surgery in Cambourne—which we could call a new town—who are significantly underfunded? The funding model does not work for them; they are at breaking point, and they need your help.

Mr Speaker: They do not need my help, but they might need that of the Minister.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Life Sciences (George Freeman): I can confirm that the Minister for Community and Social Care will be delighted to meet my hon. Friend. NHS England is looking into how the fair funding formula works between different clinical commissioning groups, which is the reason for the uncertainty, and I, too, would be happy to meet my hon. Friend and confirm the process.

T8. [900773] **Richard Burgon** (Leeds East) (Lab): Millions of people are worried about the privatisation of our national health service, so it is a real concern that the health sector remains part of the negotiations on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. Tomorrow the European Parliament votes on TTIP, but the European Commission has already said it will not remove health from those negotiations, so can the Government confirm that they will defend the NHS and support the removal of health and other public services from future TTIP negotiations?

Mr Jeremy Hunt: Really, the Labour party has got to stop this scaremongering that it did so much of, and to so little effect, at the election. Privatisation is not happening, but I will tell the hon. Gentleman what is happening: at his hospital, 85 more doctors in the last five years, 185 more nurses, 7,700 more operations, 20,000 more people being seen within four hours at A&E—progress in the NHS with a strong economy.

T10. [900775] **Julian Sturdy** (York Outer) (Con): The disparity in health funding allocations due to the imbalance in the system which favours deprivation over age has yet again been highlighted, this time by the British Medical Association's annual meeting a couple of weeks ago. Having met the Secretary of State in the last Parliament, I know he is looking to address that. Will he update me and the House on this issue?

Alistair Burt: Yes, age and rurality come up quite regularly in discussions about funding for the contract. It can plainly be seen that there might be an increase in costs for rural areas, but it has been difficult for those involved in contract negotiations to pin it down to specific evidence. I assure my hon. Friend, however, that both age and rurality issues will remain very important for those deciding on the future contract and he can be sure that they will be taken into account.

T9. [900774] **Natalie McGarry** (Glasgow East) (SNP): Given the proven link between poverty in childhood and ill health in adulthood, what advice has the Secretary of State given the Chancellor about not driving more children into poverty and ill health through cuts to tax credits?

Jane Ellison: We take the issue of childhood health extremely seriously. We want every child to have the best start in life. That is why, for example, we are bringing record numbers of health visitors into the health service and why health is now part of the troubled families programme. In my area of responsibility, public health, it is why we have taken measures on matters such as smoking that particularly affect children in deprived communities.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): On adolescent mental care, capacity in my constituency can require lengthy in-patient care to be undertaken from Roehampton in south London. A constituent of mine makes regular visits to her young daughter making work impractical, but is unable to qualify for travel assistance as she is deemed physically able to work and does not qualify for benefits. As transport reimbursement is normally available only to those eligible for out-of-work benefits, will my right hon. Friend consider recommending widening the parameters to include those who have to travel outside their area?

Alistair Burt: I will look at the issue my hon. Friend raises. Clearly, in the first place, we want to make sure that more beds are available more locally, so that the issue does not arise. Greater concentration is being given not only to that, but to the level of care that can be provided before in-patient treatment is considered. I will take the point he makes about benefits and raise it with the relevant Department.

Mr Speaker: Extreme brevity is now required. I call Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): A recent study suggests that the NHS is starting diabetics on insulin much later than in other countries. What will the Department do to address that issue?

Jane Ellison: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his interest in this important subject. As he knows, we are looking at care right across the diabetes pathway, with a

view to building on the first ever at-scale national diabetes prevention programme. I will take up the issue he raises and look at it in the context of all the other aspects of diabetes care we are examining.

Rishi Sunak (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con): Last week, Reeth medical centre in my constituency received an “outstanding” Care Quality Commission rating. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating it and recognise that small practices in rural areas are still an important part of our healthcare system?

Alistair Burt: I am always ready and very willing to congratulate rural practices and general practices anywhere on the work done by our family doctors and those in primary care. It is so important and it is nice that they get a big boost and a thank you every now and again, which they do not get nearly often enough. My dad would be really pleased, thank you.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): A large number of my constituents have advised me that they are unable to obtain a dental appointment and inquiries reveal that not a single dental practice in my constituency is accepting new NHS patients. Will the Minister meet me as soon as possible with a view to resolving that unacceptable situation?

Alistair Burt: I will indeed meet the hon. Lady. Access to NHS dental practices has been improving, but I am aware that there are some difficulties in some areas. The best thing we can do is meet and talk about it, and see what I can do.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): In the last Parliament we made great strides using transparency to drive improvement in the quality of patient care. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we can and should go further, particularly on the transparency of performance in primary and community care?

Mr Jeremy Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right and has great experience in this area. We are now having a lot of transparency at an institutional level, but individual doctors and nurses in primary and secondary care are still finding it too hard to speak out if they have concerns. Getting that culture right has to be a big priority for this Parliament.

Mr Speaker: Emulating Strangford brevity, perhaps, I call Mr Greg Mulholland.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): Thank you, Mr Speaker. On 22 June, the Life Sciences Minister said in a written answer:

“The decision on the interim funding of Vimizim...will be made by NHS England by the end of June 2015.”

The families involved, and also families affected by Duchenne muscular dystrophy and tuberous sclerosis, were then told that there would be a decision on 30 June and 1 July—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman will resume his seat. It is a discourtesy to the House to be long-winded,

especially when exhorted not to be. The hon. Gentleman has got—*[Interruption.]* Order. Do not argue the toss with the Chair, Mr Mulholland. Don't shake your head, mate. I am telling you what the position is: you were too long. *[Interruption.]* Leave, that is fine—we can manage without you. *[Interruption.]* You were too long and you need to learn. That is the end of it. I call Mr Peter Bone.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that hospital parking charges are unfair?

Mr Hunt: They cause a lot of grief to many people, which is why we have issued new guidance that tells people to take particular trouble for people who have to visit hospitals on a regular basis.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): Will the Secretary of State outline when compensation will be made available to those who were infected by contaminated blood products in the 1970s and 1980s?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Lady is right to draw attention to this tragedy, and we will be bringing our plans forward to the House shortly.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): When will the Secretary of State be making a full statement in response to the Penrose inquiry into those affected by contaminated blood?

Mr Hunt: As I have just said, we will bring our plans to the House very shortly.

Mr Speaker: Last but not least, Mr Barry Sheerman.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): When will the Minister do more for parents whose children are on the autism scale?

Alistair Burt: Only last week, I met the autism board in the Department of Health. There is a widespread piece of work being done to improve access to services involving those with autism. Just last week, I went to see Linden House, which is run by the National Autistic Society. The matter is very high on our agenda, and the hon. Gentleman was right to raise it.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. May I say thank you to colleagues? I am sorry but demand always exceeds supply—as it does in the health service—*[Interruption.]* Under any Government.

For the avoidance of doubt, I hope that colleagues will understand that I appreciate—I have been on those Benches—that all Members' questions are important. Of course Members feel very strongly about them. I am sympathetic to that and I respect that, but people cannot simply take the attitude, “My question is important and therefore I can be much longer” because that is not fair on other Members. I am simply trying to be fair to all Members.

BILL PRESENTED**HEALTH SERVICES COMMISSIONING (EQUALITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY) BILL**

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Rehman Chishti, supported by Tom Brake, Yasmin Qureshi and Jeremy Lefroy, presented a Bill to make provision to reduce inequalities in the commissioning of health services for people with mental illness and learning disabilities; to require commissioners of health services for people with mental illness and learning disabilities to make an annual report to the Secretary of State on the equality of service provision to, and the health outcomes for, such people and of their qualitative experience of health care services; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 11 September, and to be printed (Bill 49).

**Football Governance
(Supporters' Participation)**

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

12.36 pm

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require football clubs to offer for sale to their supporters a specified percentage of shares in the club upon a change of ownership; to require that a minimum number of places on the club's board be set aside for election by a qualifying supporters' organisation; to define what constitutes a qualifying supporters' organisation; and for connected purposes.

With my Bill today, I intend to begin the process of giving football fans their voice. From the very top of the game at FIFA and UEFA down to club boardrooms, fans have little representation. It is a sad fact that as football has become more and more of a global business, fans' influence on their clubs and the governance of the game has become less and less. Many have talked about empowering fans, but when I have asked how that can be done, no one has had the answers. What do they mean when they say that they want to empower fans, to give them representation on club boards, or to give them the power to buy shares? I undertook to find out what was possible and whether that would fit with what the fans are asking for and meet EU competition rules.

I held a consultation with fans up and down the country, and I am grateful to the Football Supporters' Federation and Supporters Direct for their help in communicating with fans' groups. A total of 95 representatives of fans' groups responded to my survey. One hundred per cent. responded positively to the question, "Should fans have more influence over the way their club is run?" Around 85% agreed that fans should be represented on club boards, and 97% said that supporters' organisations were not given significant recognition by those involved in the governance of the game.

In July 2011, in its report on football governance, under the section headed, "A way forward for supporter ownership", the Culture, Media and Sport Committee recommended that Ministers looked at two areas, the second of which was

"measures that increase the opportunity for supporters trusts to achieve a share in their clubs, whether on a minority or majority basis."

In response, the Government said, in paragraph 40, that they urge

"the football authorities to consider ways to actively encourage and incentivise methods of including supporter representatives on the Boards of clubs."

Under paragraph 67, they said:

"The Government is fully committed to ensuring that the changes put forward by the football authorities make a lasting and substantive difference. If that does not happen the Government will introduce a legal requirement on the Football Association to implement the appropriate governance clauses by the swiftest possible means. To do that the Government will seek to secure, using all available channels, appropriate legislation as soon as Parliamentary time allows. There is a strong case for such legislative proposals to be formally considered in pre-legislative scrutiny."

On the issue of fan ownership, in the same response to the Select Committee, the Government said:

“The Government will consider bringing together an informal expert group to report on the degree to which there are other issues that create genuine barriers and to provide recommendations for practical action.”

That was in October 2011 and it was not until October 2014, six months before the general election, that the Government set up the expert working group. I am certain that the Government will say in response to my Bill that we should wait for the working group's recommendations, but it took three years for the Government to set up the group and they did so knowing that there was no chance that they would have to respond to its conclusions before the general election. Until I am convinced that the Government intend to act, I shall proceed with my Bill.

The Bill seeks to do three things. The first is to give fans the power to buy up to 10% of shares that are offered for sale when there is a change of ownership, which is recognised as being when 30% of the shares are up for sale. The fans' right to buy will not stop any transaction being completed and anyone purchasing shares will know that fans have the right to buy up to 10% of the shares purchased for up to 240 days after the transaction is completed. These will be bought at the average price paid by the buyer for the relevant securities in the year preceding the change of control. This automatic option will be capped once the fans have acquired 10% of club shares, but that would not prevent fans from buying more shares if they wanted.

In addition, fans will be given the right to elect and remove two representatives on the boards of clubs or 25% of the board membership, whichever is the greater number. Fan reps will have to undergo training to understand the sensitivities of their role as board members.

Finally, in order to take up these powers, a club's fans must organise themselves into a single representative body. I would suggest the model of an industrial and provident society, but I appreciate that fans will want to be consulted on the best way forward. I will undertake to do that. There is no escaping the fact that there will be a requirement on fans to act collectively to set up a single democratic and accountable body for the election and scrutiny of board representatives and the management of shares. The Bill will set out what constitutes a viable fan body for this purpose.

We have talked around this issue for too long. Some have said that the people in the fan groups are not

representative of ordinary fans, but they are the ones who helped me to consult the members of the fan trusts and fan clubs. They are the ones represented on the Government's expert working group, whom the FA consult and who step in when an irresponsible owner has destroyed their club. We need only to think of Hereford, which has been resurrected by fans, of Portsmouth and Swansea, and the remarkable story of AFC Wimbledon. They all have one thing in common: football fans have had to step in and save their local club when the owners have destroyed it. As football fans, our passion for our clubs is lifelong. We do not change our clubs like we change the supermarket in which we shop.

We have seen how the game has become increasingly remote from the people who make it what it is today. Football fans create the atmosphere in the grounds and make our leagues so exciting to watch, which in turn makes money from the sale of the TV rights, yet on issues such as ticket prices, club names, sponsorship deals, stadium naming rights, club colours and moving clubs, they are too often an afterthought.

Our football clubs are not simply businesses. They exist because generation after generation of people from the communities in which they are situated have sustained their clubs through thick and thin. I do not present the Bill as a solution to all the problems, but giving fans a voice is a stepping stone to more accountability in the game. Fans are not the solution to every problem, but they can and will be the eyes and ears of an early warning system for emerging problems.

Today we take a step towards putting fans on club boards, but in time it will be the FA board and the boards of UEFA and FIFA. It is time to trust the people who make the game special—the fans, who will be there long after the owners have moved on.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Clive Efford, Mr Gordon Marsden, Ian Lavery, Barbara Keeley, Daniel Zeichner, Matthew Pennycook, Jenny Chapman, Bill Esterson, Vicky Foxcroft, Anna Turley, Andy Slaughter and Jim Shannon present the Bill.

Clive Efford accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 4 December and to be printed (Bill 50).

English Votes on English Laws

Emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

12.46 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the means by which the Government seeks to deliver the objectives outlined by the Leader of the House in his Statement on English Votes on English Laws.

I am exceptionally grateful to you, Mr Speaker, and to hon. Members throughout the House for the support that they have given me in bringing this matter to the Floor of the House today. It is a matter that is genuinely urgent, given the time scale that has been presented to the House by the Government, although it need not necessarily have been so. The urgency is of the Government's own making. The matter had been under consideration already and would benefit from further mature consideration.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I would have liked to put in to speak in this debate, but I have to return at 2 o'clock to Committee to consider the Education and Adoption Bill, which I believe I would be barred from participating in under the terms of the Government's proposals. Does not the depth of the proposals mean that we should have proper, thorough parliamentary scrutiny of these matters, rather than the proposals being railroaded through in this unconstitutional manner?

Mr Carmichael: I am not entirely sure whether the hon. Gentleman is right that he would be barred from that, certainly at this point, but I can see that that is the logic of where we eventually go, although I suspect that logic might be resisted by the Government and Opposition Whips Offices because I know from my own experience that getting people to serve on such Committees is not always easy. It will be interesting to see what influence the Government business managers bring to bear on that in the fullness of time.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): Is there not further reason why we would charge the Government with haste on this issue? Many of us on the Opposition Benches—a growing number, I hope—think the impact of the Scottish referendum will be to move this House to an English Parliament, with Parliaments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. That ought to be at least part of the discussion, rather than being excluded from the discussion, as the Government have done.

Mr Carmichael: Rather than saying that that should be part of the discussion, I think it comes to the very heart of the discussion. I fully accept that the devolution process that was started in 1999 has created within the United Kingdom a number of anomalies. I entirely understand the concerns felt by right hon. and hon. Members representing constituencies in England, in particular. In order to address these anomalies, we need mature considered measures, instead of replacing the existing anomalies with further anomalies, as I very much fear the Government are about to do.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): Surely it is true to say that discussions about future devolutionary change can go on. What is proposed is a change in the

Standing Orders simply to give a veto to the representatives of the people affected. That does not lead to an English Parliament or to English initiative; it finally brings a little justice into the system. It is based on what we had in our manifesto, and it should be proceeded with quickly.

Mr Carmichael: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. Indeed, I suspect that I am more grateful than his colleagues on the Treasury Bench are, because he has nailed one point very early on: this does constitute a veto. As a federalist, I have no problem with vetoes, but if they are to be part of our parliamentary procedure we have to be prepared to have them going in different directions. The veto now being anticipated for English Members of Parliament would not be available to Scottish Members of Parliament, because they are governed by the Sewell convention and legislative consent measures. That is only the subject of a convention; it is not a veto. That is what I mean when I say that the Government, by bringing their proposal forward in this manner, risk creating further anomalies. The anomaly is one not of detail, but of fundamental constitutional principle. Were the House to bring together its collective mind, I do not doubt that we could eventually find a solution. Perhaps we would reach a compromise that was a little messy, but it is something we could reach. However, we are not going to reach that in the one day that will be offered to us to debate the changes to the Standing Orders.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): Is the right hon. Gentleman not ignoring history? Scotland has had special arrangements in this House since the Victorian period. From 1948 Bills could be dealt with by the Scottish Grand Committee, and that was expanded in the 1990s, as he knows very well, and eventually Scotland ended up with its own Parliament. He cannot stop some change on the basis that it is not the final change.

Mr Carmichael: I am by no means resistant to some change, and I will return to that point shortly. The hon. and learned Gentleman will be aware that the Scottish Grand Committee could debate Bills, but it could not vote on or amend them. That is how Grand Committees work. They are a perfectly sensible mechanism by which debate can be conducted by those who have the most direct interest, although they are perhaps a little redundant in this age of devolution, but they are by no means an attack on the fundamental principle that once we leave the Committee Rooms and enter this Chamber we are all equal and have the same right to participate in votes.

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): Does the right hon. Gentleman not accept that the biggest danger facing the Union is not Scottish nationalism, but English nationalism? If we fail to deal with English votes on English laws in a timely manner, as set out in our manifesto, which the people voted for, English nationalism will see off our Union.

Mr Carmichael: I absolutely agree 100% with the hon. Gentleman. The threat comes from English nationalism. However—it pains me to say this—that English nationalism is to be found on the Treasury Bench. The Leader of the House, when he came to the

Dispatch Box last week, took great pains to say that he was speaking as a Conservative and Unionist. I hate to say it, but he has brought forward something that no Unionist should. It is perfectly understandable for people in England to identify a national interest in response to a mood of Scottish nationalism forming north of the border, but the answer is not to meet it with more nationalism. The answer, I suggest, is a proper federal structure across the whole United Kingdom.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Mr Speaker, as an historian, you will know that the history of these islands is one of constitutional abnormalities. We are a nonsense, but somehow it works. It works because in this Chamber we are all equal, no matter where in the United Kingdom we come from. Therefore, to destroy that is nonsense.

Mr Carmichael: This is where I will try to make some progress. I have been generous in taking interventions so far.

As I said yesterday, I want today's debate to focus on the means by which the Government are seeking to achieve English votes for English laws, rather than the principle of English votes for English laws itself. As I have said, I am not without sympathy for the principle. I think that ultimately the solution will be for the people of England to decide what they want their constitutional future to be. Are they to have an English Parliament? If so, they should have an English Parliament, and this is the United Kingdom Parliament. Are they to have a network of regional Assemblies or something of that sort? That is a decision for the people of England, not something that we should seek to shoehorn into our Standing Orders.

My concern about what is proposed is that it is the most modest of proposals. It does not deal with the over-centralisation of power in Whitehall that blights people in England. It does not deal with the lack of proportionality. It does not deal with the fact that there is only one UK Independence party MP for 4 million votes. Those issues are also a democratic affront that require urgent consideration by those on the Treasury Bench, yet they do not seem to be attended to by the determination to introduce changes to the Standing Orders before the House rises for the summer recess.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): What does the right hon. Gentleman say to my constituents who see the inherent unfairness of a situation in which he can vote on education matters affecting my constituency but I cannot vote on education matters affecting his? My constituents might quite rightly accuse him of wanting to have his porridge and eat it, and that is unfair to England.

Mr Carmichael: Hopefully that is the last time I take an intervention intended for a local press release. Had the hon. Gentleman been listening, he would have heard me say a number of times already that I completely understand that point and am sympathetic to it. It is an issue that needs to be resolved by the people of England and for the people of England, but not by trashing the Union and the United Kingdom Parliament, of which we are all Members. I do not know what the ultimate solution will be, but I wish the people of England every bit as much joy in that debate as we in Scotland have

had over the past 50 years. It is a debate that they must now have if we are to remain part of this family of nations.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the Government, by ignoring Sir William McKay's advice and proposing to give some MPs a veto, are creating a two-tier system of MPs and attempting to create a new Parliament by the backdoor?

Mr Carmichael: I am afraid that is exactly what is happening. The Government are trying to create an English Parliament within the United Kingdom Parliament, instead of doing the long and difficult thing that we had to do in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. It is a real threat to the United Kingdom if MPs from England regard this place as an English Parliament, rather than a United Kingdom Parliament. That used to be what it meant to be a Unionist. That is why I lay the charge at those on the Treasury Bench that they risk losing the right to call themselves Unionists.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Carmichael: I am going to make some progress, because the range of voices heard in this debate should be as wide as possible and I want to allow as many Members as possible to make speeches.

The Government brought forward a number of supporting papers with the Leader of the House's statement last week. They are helpful, in as much as they give some detail on the proposals, but they give no indication of what they are seeking to achieve and where this will ultimately take us. The question of the double majority was raised earlier by the hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart). It does constitute a veto. If we are to have a double majority, that means, in effect, that we will have two tiers of MP. We cannot have a double majority without having two tiers of MP; it is illogical nonsense to insist otherwise. Once we have crossed that threshold—crossed the constitutional Rubicon—we have to wonder where it will ultimately take us.

Mr Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): Is it not the case that we already have a two-tier system of MPs in Parliament—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"]—in that some Members who represent Northern Ireland constituencies refuse to take their seats and yet are paid allowances by this Government?

Mr Carmichael: I do not think that is quite the kind of two-tier system that Conservative Members were cheering. The right hon. Gentleman is correct in his analysis. An appropriate change could be made to Standing Orders for that, because it is perfectly—

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Carmichael: Forgive me—I really do need to make some progress, or nobody else is going to get to speak.

That would be an appropriate use of the way in which the Chamber responds to issues through Standing Orders. Matters of constitutional change, by convention—and rightly so—are taken on the Floor of this House at all stages, and likewise in the other place. They are given

[Mr Alistair Carmichael]

the fullest consideration because it is understood that they become exposed only with proper debate and scrutiny.

One of the novel aspects of the proposal that the Leader of the House laid before the House last week is the extension of these matters to Finance Bills. That opens up a whole range of questions that were not answered by him at the Dispatch Box or by the papers that he placed in the Vote Office. Finance Bills are, and have been for a long time, treated differently by this House. The fact that they are considered only by this House and not by the other place is the obvious difference, but there are also differences in the way in which they are introduced and considered in a mix of time spent here on the Floor of the House and in the Committee Room upstairs.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): Are not Finance Bills a classic example of the way in which our unwritten constitution has developed? We trust Governments to be careful with it and to nurture it, whereas in this process we see a Government lighting the blue touch paper on the Union and not being careful with our unwritten constitution. Should not this House say, “Take care, take time, reflect”?

Mr Carmichael: That is exactly what I hope this debate will achieve, because I know that the concerns about the constitutionality and the process of this are shared by right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House.

Sir William Cash *rose*—

Mr Carmichael: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman just this once.

Sir William Cash: I am exceedingly grateful. The problem with the proposition that the right hon. Gentleman is putting forward is that it ignores the fact that there are already two classes of functions that were passed by the United Kingdom Parliament, which created not two tiers of membership in this House but two functions as between the Scottish Parliament, with its devolved functions, and those in the United Kingdom, which have been left swinging in the wind. Does he not accept that?

Mr Carmichael: I do, but the hon. Gentleman must surely accept that what is being proposed through changing Standing Orders is not an appropriate way of addressing it. As I have already said times without number, I fully accept that several anomalies have been created by devolution, starting in 1999, but the answer to that is not to trash our own procedures in this House.

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con) *rose*—

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Carmichael: No; let me make a bit of progress because I want to stay on the question of Finance Bills.

Even with the measure of devolution of some taxes—I stress “some”—I would suggest that the setting of the Government budget as a whole is, again, treated differently from the passing of legislation in individual policy

areas. Will the Leader of the House explain how his proposed new system is going to work for the consideration of estimates? For example, will estimates debates continue to be a vehicle for Select Committees, and how will that work when Select Committees draw their members from England, Wales and Northern Ireland, which will be the case in this Parliament, as we can see from the Order Papers for today and tomorrow?

This goes to the point that the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) made about serving on Committees. I do not doubt that the Committee concerned, with good will, and perhaps even a measure of discussion among the usual channels, could deal with this, but the anomaly has been created and as yet the Government have no answer to it. Where is this going to take us in future? How are Members of Parliament from areas of the country that exercise devolved powers going to interact with Select Committees? If the principle of veto is to be accepted, and if members of the Health Committee or the Education Committee, for example, are to be drawn only from England and Wales, then I very much look forward to seeing how the Government are going to set up the Scottish Affairs and Northern Ireland Affairs Committees—good luck to them on that one.

If the principle of the veto is to work, it has to work both ways. For the Scottish Parliament, that means the end of the Sewel convention and the end of the conventional sense—the classic sense—of parliamentary sovereignty as it has been understood in this Chamber in the past, because if we give a veto to the Scottish Parliament on legislative consent motions, then that is the end of Dicey’s classic definition of sovereignty. I am not too unhappy about that—I am quite relaxed about it—but if the House is to undertake something of this sort, then surely it requires more than the debate that we are being offered.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): I think that the right hon. Gentleman misses the key point about this being done through Standing Orders, which is that Standing Orders can be suspended by the House in a specific instance or permanently, and that therefore the sovereignty of this House remains unaffected.

Mr Carmichael: No. If we are to take this to its logical conclusion—that is to say, to give a veto to the Scottish Parliament on areas that would currently be dealt with by the Sewel convention—then that will not be reclaimed by Standing Orders; it is the end of the supreme sovereignty of this House. That is why we need a sensible, more reasoned debate for which Standing Orders will always be inadequate.

Jesse Norman: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Carmichael: No, I am sorry—I have been generous with my time.

The logic is that we should be considering this, if it is to be considered at all, by virtue of primary legislation. I know that that brings concerns particularly to those on the Treasury Bench, and that the Leader of the House will say that it raises questions of justiciability and reviewability of decisions that would ultimately have to be taken by you, Mr Speaker.

Jesse Norman: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Mr Carmichael: Oh, okay.

Jesse Norman: I am grateful. Is there not a clear distinction between two things? The first is whether this should be introduced by means of Standing Orders, and the second is what procedure, or method of reflection, the House may go through in deciding how and whether to adopt it, and under what circumstances. I thought that the right hon. Gentleman was drawing the House's attention to the latter point and the apparent lack of a timetable for proper consultation on this issue.

Mr Carmichael: The two propositions are not mutually exclusive. There are elements that could be capable of remedy through Standing Orders if we were to have a proper debate. The Government's proposal goes too far, too fast. In principle, other changes may be possible, as we discussed in government before the general election. I do not completely exclude the possibility of proceeding in that way, but going as far as the Government want to us to go, and within their timescale, brings with it an attendant level of risk that I would consider to be irresponsible in these circumstances.

The last Government discussed whether the proposal could be addressed in a single Bill. If there is a will in the House to consider how it could be done, that would be a much more sensible way of doing it. The Government are saying that we should do it for a year and that it should then be reviewed by the Procedure Committee. I hold that Committee in very high esteem, but the only thing that would happen under that process is an examination of how the system had worked. It would not put a dangerous genie back in the bottle after it had been let out. I think we all know that that is the political reality.

Personally, I am quite relaxed about the use of primary legislation and the justiciability of decisions then made by Mr Speaker. I do not think that anybody in this House should be making any decision that would not stand up to judicial scrutiny. However, if that is to be the block, let us have a proper debate, because it must be possible to use primary legislation to deal with that very point. Surely it is necessary to have a proper description of the boundaries of judicial review and any proscriptions. Frankly, this House has never undertaken such an exercise. Judicial review as a body of law has been allowed to grow like Topsy, led by the judiciary itself.

I am aware that I have already taken up quite a lot of time, albeit with interventions.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Does not the presence of so many Tory Members—they are considerably greater in number today than they have been for sittings on the Scotland Bill—and the amount of animated interventions they are making indicate the need for a very full and proper debate?

Mr Carmichael: I believe so. It also highlights the need for a debate that goes well beyond the walls of this Chamber. The debate needs to be conducted throughout the country and to take in not just the political parties, but the Churches, the trade unions and civic England in the widest possible sense.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Carmichael: No, I will not give way.

That was how we built the consensus in Scotland that then led to the creation of a Scottish Parliament. Ultimately, that is what the people of England are going to have to do. They are not entitled to use the United Kingdom Parliament as a proxy for an English Parliament.

That brings me to my final point. In Scotland last year we went through a painful process that ultimately led to the people of Scotland deciding to remain part of this United Kingdom. We did it on the basis that we are all equal participants in this Union. I made those arguments in good faith and I believed at the time that the Conservatives did so, too. It is difficult for them to sustain that proposition if they insist on proceeding in this way.

1.13 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Chris Grayling): I am pleased to have a further opportunity to set out the Government's plans for strengthening the Union by providing fairness for England.

At the centre of the plans I announced last Thursday is the concept of fairness for all four countries of our United Kingdom. Fairness requires that further devolution of powers to Scotland and Wales be accompanied by a louder voice for England at Westminster on English matters. If we are devolving tax rates to other countries of the United Kingdom—the House is currently legislating to do so—it is only fair that Members of Parliament in those constituencies affected by that change have the decisive say over any tax rates that apply in their constituencies. If Members of the Scottish Parliament are in future to decide a Scottish rate of income tax, is it actually unfair that English Members of Parliament, or English and Welsh MPs, or English, Welsh and Northern Irish MPs, have the decisive say over tax rates that affect their constituencies?

Mr Alistair Carmichael: Will the Leader of the House tell us, then, whether it is now Government policy to end the Sewel convention on legislative consent motions and to give the Scottish Parliament a veto when it does not consent?

Chris Grayling: Not at this moment, no. We have an established method of using legislative consent motions. It is not unreasonable that we should use that same device in this House when an English-only matter affects English-only constituencies. Why does the right hon. Gentleman think that he should resist the idea of a legislative consent motion approved by English Members of Parliament on matters that affect only their constituencies?

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): May I take the Leader of the House back to January 2004, when Tony Blair's Government were proposing top-up fees for English students? At the time, I was lobbied by the then Conservative Opposition and by Labour rebels, who told me that the Scottish National party should vote against that proposal on the basis that top-up fees for English students would have a knock-on effect on Scotland through the Barnett formula. Why has the Conservative

[Alex Salmond]

party changed its mind? If these proposals go through, would I be in a position to exercise a vote on such a measure in the future?

Chris Grayling: Let me take that example and the question raised by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) about estimates. It is not our intention that estimates be voted on by individual groups of Members. They are, and will continue to be, a matter for the United Kingdom Parliament. On the question of tuition fees, what the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) must understand is that one of the things that was not understood by those in England who were affected by that change—which, if I recall correctly, was carried by a majority of five—is that, although English MPs voted against it, it was only as a result of the votes of Scottish MPs that it was carried, but it did not apply to students in Scotland. That is a very simple example. If a measure is to be applied to a group of people in England and not in Scotland, is it really unreasonable to suggest that English Members of Parliament should have the decisive say over that change?

Geraint Davies: Is the Leader of the House not acting a bit like a male rights activist who thinks that when females get extra rights there is a zero-sum game that takes rights away from him? If Wales passes a law to give more education rights, that has no impact on England, but if a health law is passed in England it has a Barnett consequential for Wales. There is an asymmetry and it is wrong for the right hon. Gentleman to plod forward and demand these rights when this is not a zero-sum game.

Chris Grayling: That was a very strange analogy. I remind the hon. Gentleman that he can vote on education in my constituency but not in his own constituency. Surely, if anything creates an anomaly, it is that.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Could my right hon. Friend tell me how it can possibly be right that I as a Welsh MP should be able to tell his constituents how to run their education and health service, or even why I should want to spend my time doing so? We have a Welsh Assembly and a Scottish Parliament, so is it not absolutely right that English constituents should have exactly the same right to self-determination?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have all lived with this situation for 20 years. The difference now is that we are legislating again: first for Scotland, to give significantly more powers to the Scottish Parliament, and later in this Session we shall legislate for Wales, to give significant additional powers to the Welsh Assembly. It is surely therefore right that, as part of our desire to protect our Union, we make sure that any resentment in England about the fact that those powers are not replicated there is addressed to the maximum degree.

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Last night we discussed Scottish laws and whether they and Scottish powers should preside at Westminster or Holyrood. Ninety five per cent. of Scottish MPs in the House of Commons, as well as the Scottish Government

and the Scottish Parliament, want those powers to be moved to Scotland, but 500 Labour and Tory MPs who are not from Scotland walked through the Lobby and applied a veto. Why does Scotland not have a veto when the Leader of the House wants an English veto?

Chris Grayling: There are two parts to the answer. The first is that in the referendum last year the Scottish people voted to protect the Union. At the same time, we offered them a raft of additional powers for the Scottish Parliament that will enable it to take a far broader range of decisions than it could in the past. That is the difference. If we are to make that change, we must in my view address the issues raised by constituents in England who ask, “What about us?”

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Does the Leader of the House not understand from this very intense debate that what he is doing is ill-prepared? If we had proper legislation, we could have pre-legislative scrutiny, consult the public and get academic experts in, but he is denying the House a full look at all the implications.

Chris Grayling: Let me make this clear for the hon. Lady. Will she explain, therefore, why last year when my predecessor invited members of her party to take part in the discussions about constitutional reform, they declined? I will not take any lessons from Labour Members about why this has all come late to them. When we published the proposals six months ago, we invited them to take part, and they ignored us. Do you know, Mr Speaker, the now acting leader of the Labour party did not even bother to respond to the letter? I will not take any lessons from them about this.

Several hon. Members rose—

Chris Grayling: Let me cover some of the points made by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland, and I will then give way again.

The right hon. Gentleman’s first point was about two-tier MPs. He and other Members on the Opposition Benches are concerned that the proposals will create two tiers of MP or will impinge on the equal status of Members of Parliament. That is simply not right. All Members of Parliament are equal, and all of them will be able to continue to debate and vote on every piece of legislation passing through the House of Commons. It is simply incorrect to say that any Member of this House will be excluded from voting on or debating any piece of legislation. That is not what the reforms say: it is absolutely clear that everyone will be able to continue to participate.

Mr Alistair Carmichael: What, then, is the point of the right hon. Gentleman’s double majority?

Chris Grayling: The point is that if a measure affects wholly and exclusively English or English and Welsh Members of Parliament, they should have the decisive say on whether it is passed. Such a measure cannot be agreed without a majority of the United Kingdom Parliament, but nor can it be agreed without a majority of the MPs whose constituencies are affected by the change.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): One of the issues that has upset me over the years, initially as a Minister and during all the time since, is the annual motion on distributing grants to English police forces and to English local authorities. They are surely examples of what should be dealt with by English MPs only.

Chris Grayling: The distribution of grants will be part of this procedure. That, like all of this, was very clearly set out in our manifesto. I know that the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland's party has not always believed in sticking to manifesto commitments, but that is precisely what we are seeking to do. We think the proposal is important—it was clear for the country to see, and the country was able to debate it—and we are sticking to that promise.

Sir Oliver Heald: Does my right hon. Friend accept that what he is proposing is a measured response based on precedent? Over the years, we have made changes to Standing Orders to deal with Scottish Bills, for example, in the way he suggests. We have amended Standing Orders when changes have been needed over time. Is not what he is doing absolutely in the tradition of how the House of Commons deals with these matters?

Chris Grayling: That is absolutely right. Indeed, my hon. and learned Friend might like to know that those with long experience of the workings of this House, including Members of the other place who have worked in positions of authority in this one, are all united in the view that changing Standing Orders is the right way to proceed. As I made very clear in my statement last week, hon. Members may form a different view over the next 12 months. When we review these matters in 12 months' time, I shall be very open to such views. I am very clear, however, that changing Standing Orders is the starting point.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): I have the document with the proposed changes to the Standing Orders, which were suddenly presented last week. There are 22 pages of new Standing Orders. My understanding of the procedure in the debate next week is that unless the Government table a motion that allows amendments to be made to them, we will have only one chance to amend them at the end of the debate. Given that there are 22 pages of Standing Orders introducing a range of very complex things, will the Leader of the House use this opportunity to confirm that he will table a motion for next week's debate that will allow the draft Standing Orders to be amended appropriately, rather than to allow them to be amended just once at the moment of interruption, which would be a farce?

Chris Grayling: One of the reasons for publishing the Standing Orders two weeks in advance was to give Members the opportunity to raise precisely that sort of question. I am very happy to discuss that with the hon. Lady. She has not come to my office to ask me to do so, but if she wants to I shall be happy to discuss with her after this sitting how we are going to handle that debate.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I absolutely endorse the spirit of what the Leader of the House is trying to do, but will he deal with the issue of whether we should do it by altering Standing Orders or through

primary legislation? The problem with changing Standing Orders is that, as we know from experience, Governments can just suspend them on the day, without any recourse; if the changes were made in primary legislation, Governments would have to repeal the Act. Is there not therefore a stronger argument for primary legislation?

Chris Grayling: It is clear that primary legislation is one possibility. As I have said, however, the advice we have received from the Clerks and those who have been involved in overseeing the House in the past is that such changes are normally done through Standing Orders. We have sought to deal with this measure, which was in our manifesto, through Standing Orders. I made it very clear in my statement last week that if Members have a different view when we review all this in 12 months' time, as I have committed us to do, we will look at such an issue very carefully.

Patrick Grady: What legislation will the Government try to get through during that 12-month period, and how legitimate will that legislation be if, at the end of that period, we decide to reverse all this?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman does not seem to understand that Standing Orders are not some "obscure mechanism", as one newspaper called them, but the means by which the House is governed on a day-to-day basis. They determine all the ways in which we operate in this House, so we are using the conventional mechanism by which the House operates. There is nothing strange about that. The question is whether we should do something different, and I am saying that we can discuss that as part of the review in 12 months' time.

Ms Angela Eagle: I rise to ask the right hon. Gentleman my question again, because I did not get an answer. I do not understand why he cannot give an assurance now that he will table a motion that will allow us to amend different parts of the 22 pages of draft Standing Orders, rather than have to deal with them in only one amendment. I see that he has received a note from the Box, and I hope that he can give me an answer.

Chris Grayling: As I said, I want to be as helpful to the House as possible. There will be an opportunity to debate and vote on more than one amendment to Standing Orders. It is of course up to the Speaker whether to select an amendment, but I expect amendments to be tabled and to be debated. If the hon. Lady wants to sit down with me afterwards to work out how best to handle that debate, I will be very happy to do so.

Ms Eagle: I am sorry to persist, but my understanding of the way we work is that unless the Government table a motion allowing votes on more than one of the changes to the Standing Orders at the moment of interruption, we will not have time to take other amendments. Will he undertake now, at the Dispatch Box, to table an appropriate motion so that we can amend—or, at least, attempt to amend—some of the 22 pages of changes to Standing Orders and have a vote on them at the end of the debate next week?

Chris Grayling: As I have just said, there will be an opportunity to debate and vote on more than one amendment to the Standing Orders. I give the hon. Lady that undertaking. There is absolutely no intention of limiting the debate.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I believe that the Government are entitled to fulfil their manifesto commitment. What worries me is that the Union is at stake, and we have to be seen to be doing this in a very fair way. I hope that my right hon. Friend will be open to the idea of allowing extra time so that Members can debate this fully, are not be limited to speeches of just three or four minutes on a complex area and have all the time they need to table amendments and get them debated. I really think that that is in the interests of the Union and of the Government.

Chris Grayling: As I said, there will be an opportunity to table and vote on more than one amendment. I am happy to look at whether we can provide a little more time for the debate. This change is intended to fulfil our manifesto commitment, but if there is a desire among Members to have a little more time, I am happy to look at how best we can provide it.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give way?

Chris Grayling: I will make a little more progress, because a lot of people are waiting to speak.

I am reticent about using legislation, because this House currently determines its own rules and procedures, rather than the courts. The boundaries between the courts and Parliament are long established and well respected. There is a principle of mutual respect, which means that the courts will not generally challenge the means by which legislation is passed or decisions taken in Parliament. There is a strong feeling in the House that using legislation to govern our legislative process would risk opening it up to legal challenge and that ultimate authority may pass from you, Mr Speaker, to the courts. We therefore have to be immensely careful.

Parts of the processes of the House have been legislated on, but I think that it would be better to consider the issue of legislation in 12 months' time as part of the review, when we have seen the detail of how this works and invited the Procedure Committee to look in detail at how to make it work as effectively as possible. It is important that we are careful.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): So far, the Leader of the House has talked about the position of Scottish and Welsh MPs. Some of us in this House believe passionately that there should be devolution to local authority areas in England. If there was devolution to combined local authority areas in England, would it be his intention to come back with proposed changes to Standing Orders to affect the voting position of the MPs who come from those areas?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman is not taking into account the fact that what we have in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland is legislative devolution—they have the power to make laws. When there is devolution in England, for example to the Mayor of London, we do not devolve the power to legislate. The Chamber that legislates for England is this one. That is why we have to ensure that within what is and must remain a United Kingdom Parliament, we offer to English or English and Welsh Members of Parliament the decisive say over matters that exclusively affect their constituencies.

Ian C. Lucas: Will the Leader of the House confirm that on England-only issues, as defined by the Speaker, the practical effect of the changes to Standing Orders will be to increase the Conservative majority from 12 to more than 100?

Chris Grayling: This is nothing to do with the majority in an individual Parliament; it is about doing what is right. I remind the hon. Gentleman that the Conservative party has a United Kingdom majority in this Parliament, so this is not about the numerical position in this Parliament, but about making sure that we can answer English constituents when they say, "You are providing additional powers to Wales and Scotland and considering devolving the right to set corporation tax to Northern Ireland, but what about us? Where do we fit in? Where is England in this new devolution settlement?" That is what we are seeking to sort out.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): The Leader of the House seems to be making a perfectly good pitch for an English Parliament, which is a perfectly legitimate pitch to make. Why will he not make the case for that, rather than for this constitutional fudge?

Chris Grayling: Because I value the strength that this Chamber brings. To take away its remit over English matters would be to devalue it. We need to ensure that there is fairness in this Parliament; we do not need to dismantle our constitution to the point where we have an English Parliament as well.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Chris Grayling: I will give way one more time and then I will conclude so that other people may speak.

Clive Efford: In 1997, the incoming Labour Government had devolution in their manifesto, which is similar to the position of the current Government, but there was extensive consultation before they created a Parliament and two Assemblies. What we have here is a shabby little alteration to Standing Orders. How is that suitable for the people of England, even for those who agree with what the right hon. Gentleman has to say?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman clearly did not read our manifesto and clearly did not pay attention to what took place before the election, because these proposals were published months ago and have been discussed extensively. They were also set out in fine detail in our manifesto. He is claiming that we should not be implementing our manifesto commitment. There may be other parties in this House that do not believe in fulfilling their manifesto commitments, but we do.

Ian C. Lucas: Will the Leader of the House give way?

Chris Grayling: No, I have given way to the hon. Gentleman already.

Before I finish, I want to make one point about double majority votes. The important thing to say—

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Chris Grayling: Let me conclude the point on double majority votes and then I will give way one more time.

We have proposed double majority votes for the consideration of Lords amendments and for other votes in which the agreement of English MPs in the whole House is required, simply to avoid the House having two Divisions, rather than one. Since we have the technology to do it in a single Division through a double majority vote, we can make things a lot easier for the workings of this House. That will be a lot more efficient than having everybody walk through the Division Lobbies twice in a row.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Chris Grayling: I will give way twice more, then I will sit down.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that he is muddling up process and substance? Process is one thing, but the substance is that he wishes to strengthen the Union—something I really agree with him about—by creating a division within a Parliament that is meant to represent the Union. In that sense, the proposal is half-baked. It is neither fish nor fowl, and he should go back to the drawing board.

Chris Grayling: The Labour party has a decision to take over the next few days on whether it will back these proposals or oppose them. It is now as near an English party as anything else. If Labour Members are going to go back to their constituents, who are undoubtedly saying the same thing as my constituents and my colleagues' constituents, and say, "When we had the chance to give you fairness in the constitutional arrangements, we said no," then bring it on.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): I want to ask the Leader of the House a very simple question. As I understand it from his proposals, the Speaker will have to adjudicate on what is an English-only Bill. Where is the definition of an English-only Bill set down? The right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) raised the issue of tuition fees and its Barnett consequentials. Where in the proposals is the definition set out?

Chris Grayling: The test that will be used is very simple: is it a devolved matter or not? Health and education are devolved. If it is a devolved matter, it will be covered by the proposals. The premise is simple: given that education is a devolved matter in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland and that MPs from Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland therefore cannot vote on education matters in their constituencies, they will not have the decisive say on education matters in the constituencies of English MPs.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I am most grateful to the Leader of the House for giving way. May I just explain to someone who really ought to know that many students leave Northern Ireland because we simply do not have sufficient university places? Very bright students—my constituents and the constituents of my colleagues—go to English and Welsh universities, of which I am enormously proud, having attended Aberystwyth University. Therefore, increases in tuition fees in England—so-called English laws—affect my

constituents and constituents across Northern Ireland and Scotland. It is wholly untenable for the Leader of the House to claim that if education is devolved to Northern Ireland, it is an English-only matter in this place. That is completely wrong.

Chris Grayling: There has been a dilemma over tuition fees. We have a situation where an English student going to university in Scotland is liable to pay tuition fees, whereas a Scottish student is not. Indeed, a Lithuanian student going to study in Scotland is also free of fees. English Members have had no say at all in that. What we have is a constitutional anomaly. Of course, the hon. Lady cannot vote on student fees in Northern Ireland, so she is already living with an anomaly. We are trying to ensure that there is fairness for English Members of Parliament.

Alex Salmond *rose*—

Chris Grayling: I will give way one more time before I finish.

Alex Salmond: To pursue the point that was made by the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), the former leader of the Labour party, the Leader of the House indicated to me earlier that tuition fees would be a matter reserved for English MPs, but under the proposals, it is for the Speaker to certify which matters are reserved. How does the Leader of the House know, before the Speaker's certification, that that matter will be certified, despite the Barnett consequentials that affect my constituents and many others?

Chris Grayling: If I remember rightly, I said to the right hon. Gentleman that it was an anomaly that Scottish MPs secured an increase in tuition fees in England when there was no equivalence in Scotland. Of course it is a matter for the Speaker, but the test that will be applied in the Standing Orders—against which the Speaker will make his decision—will be whether or not a matter is devolved. That is set out clearly in the Standing Orders and it is the simplest test of all.

I think that these measures are necessary. I know that they deliver to you, Mr Speaker, a challenge that you do not have at the moment, but I think you will agree that as we move towards an extra level of devolution for Scotland and Wales, and as we devolve additional tax powers to Northern Ireland, it is vital that English citizens of the United Kingdom think that the system is fair. That is what we pledged in our manifesto, and we have set it out in detail, step by step, while implementing those changes. We are keeping our promise, and those who elected us would expect nothing else.

1.40 pm

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): I rise to support the motion tabled by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), and I congratulate him on his successful application for this debate. Debates under Standing Order No. 24 are relatively rare and take place only in exceptional circumstances when you permit, Mr Speaker. That we are having this debate at all speaks volumes about the reckless and shoddy way that the Government have chosen to pursue their proposals on what they like to call English votes for English laws. Their partisan, self-serving solution to this question is

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highly controversial and divisive, and their method of introducing it is a constitutional outrage. I hope that even at this late stage they will see sense and think again.

To avoid any scintilla of doubt, the official Opposition accept that with the prospect of greater devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the voice of English MPs must be heard on matters that relate purely to England. That could be achieved in any number of ways, but we believe strongly that such changes would best be achieved by the widest consideration and proper consultation with all political parties and wider civil society. Cross-party support would also be desirable, and it is regrettable in the extreme that the Government have made no meaningful efforts to facilitate that. Instead, they have played narrow party politics when they should have been putting the national interest and the Union first.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): All those potential flaws were debated in this House at the time of devolution to Scotland and Wales. The settlement was asymmetrical, and the Labour party failed to institute a constitutional convention at that stage.

Ms Eagle: We had the guts to come forward with proper legislation and a referendum before any of the Assemblies were put in place. If only the Conservative party had even considered doing that.

Clive Efford: Further to the intervention by the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), if we had known at the time that through a simple change to the Standing Orders, the issues that were devolved to the Assemblies and the Scottish Parliament would be handed down to some makeshift English assembly or Parliament, would that have had an effect on our debates on those devolved matters? It could have resulted in a completely different outcome.

Ms Eagle: I am sure my hon. Friend is right. The principle—

Sir Oliver Heald: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Eagle: In a minute. I am trying to respond to the point that has been put to me. If the hon. and learned Gentleman will allow me a sentence or two, I promise I will give way. My hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) is right: devolution is a desirable process but it must be done properly if it is not to create resentment. I give way to the hon. and learned Gentleman who is eager, as always.

Sir Oliver Heald: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that rather pleasant attribute. Does she agree that this matter was raised during debates on the Scotland Bill? I spoke from the Dispatch Box where she now stands, and the issue of English votes for English laws was put forward at the time. Labour ignored it.

Ms Eagle: The devolution settlements for Wales and Scotland took time to develop and evolve, and—as I was in the middle of saying—there are clearly issues for England that we now need to consider. We consider that

that issue should be properly dealt with as part of a constitutional convention that should be charged with examining how the United Kingdom is governed, in a much more profound and holistic way than the reckless and partisan fiasco with which we are currently presented. Instead, we have a Prime Minister who chose to exploit the bitterness and division created after the Scottish referendum for his own narrow electoral advantage, rather than attempt to heal the wounds that had opened up. We now have a Government who seem more interested in pursuing a partisan procedural fix than in showing any intention of keeping our Union together.

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): Does the hon. Lady recognise that devolution has not worked in Northern Ireland? We have different forms of devolution everywhere, and it is not working; Scotland is wanting more and more. We do not have a mechanism for looking at a long-term strategy for how we should go forward. Should we have a Committee of the House of Lords or the Commons that will look for a long-term strategy so that we get a much better way forward?

Ms Eagle: We are in a complex position, and the hon. Gentleman is right to say that Northern Ireland has its own particular issues that are mixed up with the peace process. We think that we need a constitutional convention to consider where we are in the round and across the piece—including the ever expanding House of Lords, which grows larger and larger every year, even as the Government want to cut the number of elected Members of Parliament. All that suggests that time is right for us to consider a constitutional convention.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): My hon. Friend is right: we need to separate out the serious issue of how our whole constitution works together alongside devolved Assemblies and Parliaments in the United Kingdom. Is the real point that we need to discuss how the House of Commons, the House of Lords, and city regions that will get increased devolution, fit into that model?

Ms Eagle: My hon. Friend is right. We can do a range of things to devolve power and ensure that any resentment about the way we are governed, of which in this anti-politics era there is much, is properly responded to by a constitutional convention that reaches out—

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Eagle: I am in the middle of a sentence. Let me just finish answering my hon. Friend, then I will be more than happy to give way to the hon. Gentleman. Before I was so graciously interrupted, I was saying that it feels right this time—there has been so much change and so many more demands for devolution—to consider the issue as a whole and involve civil society. We should have a proper debate on that, and we certainly do not want to be involved with these procedural fixes.

Sir Gerald Howarth: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her graciousness in giving way, and I apologise for intervening on her mid-sentence. Does she accept that her party bears a heavy burden of responsibility for the trials and tribulations that we face today? The Labour

party was desperate to appease Scottish nationalism in 1999 and failed to address the West Lothian question posed by her former hon. Friend, Tam Dalyell, the one-time Member for West Lothian. Had Labour addressed the issue at the time, we would not be in this position today. My right hon. Friend the Leader of the House is proposing a simple remedy that addresses a long-standing sense of grievance in England.

Ms Eagle: I do not think the proposed remedy is simple; I think it is an abuse of process. These changes are controversial and complex and have profound implications for our constitution and for the Union. As such, they ought to be subject to proper scrutiny and consultation, but instead the Government hope to sneak them into place just before the summer recess, in one single debate and in only one Chamber of our Parliament.

They have chosen to use a procedural fix in an attempt to bring about profound constitutional change. Next week, they will seek to amend the Standing Orders of the Commons to introduce their partisan version of what they have chosen to call English votes for English laws, virtually without any parliamentary oversight and completely without the possibility of any judicial oversight.

We are due to debate the details of the proposals on 15 July, but from the earlier confusion it is unclear quite how many of the draft Standing Orders the procedures of the House will allow us to address in that debate.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Why did the Labour party ignore the needs and voices of England when it first created lopsided devolution, and why has it come up with absolutely no ideas to meet the requirements and needs of England in 18 years of lopsided and unfair devolution?

Ms Eagle: I would not have given way to the right hon. Gentleman had I realised that he has only just come into the Chamber and has missed the rest of the debate. The answer to his question was given earlier when he was not attending.

Mr Bone: The shadow Leader of the House makes her case in her usual strong way. On timing, a debate is scheduled for Wednesday next week. Has she approached the Leader of the House and asked for a suspension of Standing Orders so that we can speak through the night on all the issues? He has given confirmation that he will allow amendments and votes on the proposals, but has the shadow Leader of the House asked for that time?

Ms Eagle: I have not, but I might consider it. The hon. Gentleman has taken the assurances, or non-assurances, I got from my earlier question a bit too much to heart. Twenty-two pages of changes to Standing Orders will be up for consideration. Our normal procedures allow a vote on only one or two amendments. If the Government were to move a motion that allowed many, many more amendments to be voted on at the moment of interruption at the end of the debate, we might be in a position to have more of an effect. Currently, it is a fait accompli.

Mr Bone: I assume that that is exactly what the Leader of the House will do—move that motion—but even if that happened, and even if we had votes at the

moment of interruption, we will surely not have enough time to debate 22 pages of Standing Orders. Surely we should go through the night.

Ms Eagle: My solution would be very different, as I will make clear, but I understand the hon. Gentleman's point.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I am minded to agree with the points the shadow Leader of the House has made. Does she agree that the logical extension of what the Leader of the House has said on double voting implies that, in future, if any of the nations of this kingdom wish to exit by way of referendums, all of the peoples of this kingdom should have a say in those plebiscites?

Ms Eagle: The hon. Gentleman pursues his Northern Irish interests in his usual way. Many such issues need to be looked at very carefully, which is why we advocate a constitutional convention, so that we can look at the thing in the round and in balance, and so that we can make proper decisions that weigh and balance with one another, rather than changing something not realising that there are unintended consequences.

Sir William Cash: To follow up on the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), it might be of interest to the shadow Leader of the House that, back in 1997, I tabled an amendment to deal with the result of the Scotland Act 1998 through amendments to Standing Orders. Of course, the Government at that time disregarded the matter.

Ms Eagle: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman. He is assiduous in his attendance and I could never accuse him of not being here from the beginning of a debate. The use of Standing Orders to make that change is a terrible precedent.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): The shadow Leader of the House will be aware that the McKay commission studied the issues in some detail a couple of years ago, and came to the conclusion that any proposals

"must be widely regarded as fair...and respect the prerogatives of all MPs."

Why does she believe the Government have rejected the McKay proposals?

Ms Eagle: I tried to ask the Leader of the House that question during his statement last week, but answer came there none. I agree with my hon. Friend's interpretation.

Ms Gisela Stuart: Does my hon. Friend know whether the Leader of the House has consulted the Procedure Committee? My understanding is that the Conservative party manifesto proposal involved consulting that Committee before putting it to the House.

Ms Eagle: I have no knowledge of whether that is the case. However, I am sure we will hear from the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker). He can give us any answers, because he was there at the time.

Today's debate is about process rather than content, so I will confine myself to observations of the process the Government have chosen to use. I note in passing

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that the Government have gone much further on English votes for English laws than the McKay commission suggested would be wise. They have not explained why they have chosen to do so, as my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) has just observed.

The McKay report contained serious warnings about the effect of creating an English veto, a double majority and two classes of MPs. The Government's proposals ride roughshod over those warnings and instigate all three. They also extend the application of the rules to Finance Bills and create the extraordinary probability that a measure passed by a majority in both Houses can be vetoed by a minority. It is possible to concoct a procedural fix to introduce major constitutional change, as the Government have done, but my contention is that it is not wise to do so. In fact, it is a constitutional outrage.

Mr Rees-Mogg: On that aspect, the hon. Lady is missing the point. If there were a majority in both Houses for a specific piece of legislation, there would be a majority in the House to suspend Standing Orders. That is crucial in ensuring that a Government that is dependent on non-English votes can get its business through.

Ms Eagle: The proposals for a double majority, as far as I understand them, are extremely worrying. They are likely to act as a dampener on the activities of the House of Lords as a revising Chamber. That is part of the debate we must have next week. Today I want to talk about the process—how the Government have decided to make the change.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The issue of Standing Orders is absolutely at the heart of the matter. The proposals make no suggestion of entrenchment of Standing Orders and no requirement of a special majority to suspend them. The House regularly suspends Standing Orders in particular circumstances—to speed up the passing of a Bill, to change the sitting hours or whatever it may be. The flexibility of Standing Orders ought to be a reassurance to the Labour party. If a future Labour Government are dependent on Scottish votes, they will be able to get their business through the House because they can suspend Standing Orders.

Ms Eagle: It is terribly kind of the hon. Gentleman to give us that assurance, but we need to base changes to our constitution on more than that.

The process the Government have chosen to use to create EVEL goes against every precedent. Substantial constitutional changes should be implemented by Acts of Parliament and examined in both Houses. They should not be rushed through in changes to Standing Orders. Changes to Commons Standing Orders cannot be challenged in the courts because of article 9 of the Bill of Rights, nor can they be subject to proper, open scrutiny in both Houses of Parliament. They are clearly not suitable for introducing a de facto English Parliament within the existing Union Parliament, as the Government have proposed.

All major constitutional changes, from the supremacy of the Commons in the Parliament Acts through to our membership of the European Union and the devolution

process, have been introduced by Acts of Parliament—the Parliament Act 1911, the Parliament Act 1949, the European Communities Act 1972, the Human Rights Act 1998, the Government of Wales Act 1998, the Scotland Act 1998 and the Greater London Authority Act 1999. Each of those Acts was properly scrutinised over a period of time, with days of debates in both Houses and the proper consideration of amendments. Many were preceded by Green Papers, White Papers and a thorough debate in the country. Some could only be commenced after a referendum had been won. All those measures are subject to interpretation in the courts. Under the Government's proposals, the introduction of English votes for English laws would not be.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): The hon. Lady is of course right in reading that list, but I say to her gently that the point we are at today is the logical consequence of the way in which devolution was carried out. The logical consequence at its end is that, if we wish to reform the structures of this House in the way she wants, we need a written constitution and a completely different basis on which we are to operate. That was one of the things that those on the Labour Front Bench at the time said persistently they did not wish to see happen. Bringing forward measures to change these matters by Standing Orders is the only way to honour the commitment made by those on the Labour Treasury Bench at the time.

Ms Eagle: The right hon. and learned Gentleman has perhaps not read the manifesto on which Labour fought the election, but it said we wanted a constitutional convention. The time is right to have a much closer and more holistic look at what is happening in the House of Lords and in the devolved Parliaments to see where we have ended up. That is our current policy.

No previous changes to Standing Orders have contained such substantial constitutional change. I have already dealt with why this is a lamentable precedent.

Sir Oliver Heald: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Eagle: I have already given way to the hon. and learned Gentleman. I want to get on, because many people wish to speak.

Previous changes to Standing Orders, which were nowhere near as radical as these, were introduced initially on a temporary basis, often at the suggestion of the Procedure Committee, and tested out before either being abandoned or made permanent. Many innovative changes to Standing Orders have been introduced on a temporary basis initially. For example, the changes introduced by the previous Labour Government allowing for debates in Westminster Hall were temporary and subject to renewal. So too were the changes introducing the programming of legislation and deferred Divisions. Yet the Government have not even asked the Procedure Committee to report on the changes it has sprung on the House. They have merely suggested that it should have a review into the new arrangements, but only after they have already been implemented.

It is usual for changes to procedures of the House to be approved by free votes, as they are House business not Government business. This was the case with House of Lords Reform; changes to the legislative process,

including the introduction of public evidence for Committees; the programming of Bills; and the election of the Speaker. The EVEL proposals, however, are Government business and they are especially partisan because of their explicit inclusion in the Conservative manifesto.

Chris Grayling: Will the hon. Lady confirm that Labour will be having a free vote on this next week?

Ms Eagle: I am arguing that this is the wrong way to do this kind of change. The procedures and Standing Orders of the House should be House business. They should not be infected by Conservative or Labour Whips. It is the Government who have chosen to make these changes in this way. The right hon. Gentleman should be ashamed of himself.

We are now to believe that the Government should mandate changes to the Standing Orders of the Commons as set out in their manifesto and force them through using a whipped vote. This is a very, very sad day. The Government's changes will turn their slim majority of 12 into over three figures if both Scottish and Welsh MPs are to be prevented from voting. I believe this is the real driver behind the changes, and it makes the outrageous procedural fix, of using Standing Orders rather than legislation to produce the change, even more unacceptable. I hope that even at this late hour the Government will think again. The unintended consequences of what they are doing could be very large indeed and the precedents they are setting are dire.

Alex Salmond: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. We all heard the Leader of the House indicate that tuition fees in England might be a measure subject to the procedure that he is outlining, anticipating not just the changes to Standing Orders but your certification if the change to Standing Orders take place. I know the Leader of the House does not understand the Barnett formula, but I know you do, Sir. Would that not therefore put you in a position of having to certify and disallow the votes of Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish Members of Parliament despite the clear direct and indirect effects that that would have on their rights to vote and on their constituents? Would that not be not just an invidious position, but greater than the shoulders any one man could bear—if I remember the quote correctly, when just such a measure was rejected in the 19th century?

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman has demonstrated very clearly that he knows his Gladstone and we are grateful to him for that. The short answer to him is that if these measures take effect, the responsibility of the Chair will be to fulfil his duties in accordance with the Standing Orders. That is the factual position. How people interpret that, what gloss—I use that term non-pejoratively—people put on it, is a matter for them. The Chair will do the duty of the Chair. People may like that duty or dislike that duty, think it beneficial or hazardous, but the duty would have to be done.

Lady Hermon: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. My point of order relates to the response that has just been given, of which I am very respectful indeed. The Speaker will know that under the proposed changes to Standing Orders, the Speaker is actually forbidden to give reasons in the House for certification.

However, the Speaker is not forbidden outside the House to give reasons for certification. Is the Speaker minded to give reasons outside the House for certification?

Mr Speaker: I think we are ahead of ourselves. The possibility that the hon. Lady is ahead of me, and indeed most us, is certainly not one that should be discounted. I say she is ahead of herself with no spirit of surprise at all, but there are no such Standing Orders yet. My counsel to the hon. Lady is to wait and see, or, in the words not of Gladstone but of the late Lord Whitelaw, it is probably best to cross bridges only when you come to them. Perhaps we can leave it there for today. If there are no further points of order, we will proceed with the debate.

2.7 pm

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): Thank you for calling me to speak in this debate, Mr Speaker. It is my first speech in the new Parliament and I rejoin the fray in another highly charged debate in this Chamber.

First, may I say that the Leader of the House has met me on a number of occasions in the past six weeks to keep me informed of the Government's proposals? The problem we have, which afflicts the whole House, is that at this moment we have no Select Committees. Not a single Select Committee is meeting yet, because the relevant orders have not been laid.

The politics of what we are debating today and what we will debate next week are for the Government and this House to decide. I very much want to focus on a few areas that the Procedure Committee will want to cover later in this Parliament. As I said, the Committee is yet to meet. I hope we will meet before we rise for the summer recess, but that is not guaranteed. I will be sending a letter, as the elected Chairman of the Procedure Committee, to the Leader of the House later this week.

Ms Gisela Stuart: Is it therefore not distinctly odd that the Leader of the House wishes to take great pride in sticking to his manifesto commitment, when that commitment said he would consult the Procedure Committee before he brought the proposals to the House? He is trying to bring the proposals to the House before the Committee has met.

Mr Walker: The pursuit of perfection is always to be desired, but it is not often achieved. That is the best answer I can give to the hon. Lady.

If the House votes for these changes next Wednesday, the Committee will want to consider how future Bills are drafted and whether their scope might be narrowed to enhance their Englishness. Will there be a temptation to narrow a Bill so that England comes to the fore and other parts of the Union are excluded? In due course, we will want to take evidence from Clerks and parliamentary counsel. In the last Parliament, there were some hard-won successes to make Report and programming more effective.

Mrs Moon: The hon. Gentleman is outlining a new idea for Parliament—post-legislative scrutiny—because the Standing Orders will already have been approved. His Committee might say they are rubbish, but we will be stuck with them for a year. What are we going to do about that?

Mr Walker: With the greatest of respect to the hon. Lady, I am not entirely sure what the Procedure Committee can do about that on its own. As she will be aware, when the Committee comes up with recommendations, they have to be brought to the Floor of the House for a vote. We can bring our ideas to the House, but we cannot require it to adopt them; there has to be a vote on the Floor of the House.

Sir William Cash: My hon. Friend might recall that the Leader of the House wisely said that the arrangements would be subject to review within a specified period, which would give the Procedure Committee the opportunity to consider not only the 22 pages, but the seven lines of proposed changes to Standing Orders that I have proposed and which would also give the Speaker the power to issue a certificate.

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. The Committee will take a close interest in these changes, if they are implemented by the House next week—that is my guarantee to the Chamber.

The changes, if adopted, will insert up to four extra stages after Report. It is important that the Leader of the House identifies in the near future where this time will come from. We cannot have the Report stage being pared back. If anything, there is an enormous appetite in the House for its being extended to provide greater scrutiny, so we would be concerned if no additional time was provided for the extra stages.

Helen Goodman: Does the hon. Gentleman not find it the tiniest bit ironic that when the Procedure Committee asked the previous Leader of the House for extra time on Report, it was turned down, but that now, all of a sudden, extra time and extra possibilities seem quite feasible?

Mr Walker: I hope that extra time is indeed feasible. That is what I am asking for. It would be disastrous for the House and its ability to scrutinise and amend Bills if Report were truncated to take account of these new stages. Indeed, we might have to accept that the legislative process attached to certain Bills will become longer. Something will have to give. Either we will have to spend more time scrutinising fewer Bills, or we will have to extend the parliamentary day. More time will have to be found in the parliamentary week, or we will have to consider having fewer Bills.

Ian Paisley: Does this not sound more and more like the proverbial dog's dinner in terms of its resolution and the procedures that will have to be introduced as a result?

Mr Walker: It is for the hon. Gentleman to make that point. As I said, I want to keep out of the politics. I know that that is difficult for a Member of Parliament, but I will try my best.

I have briefly covered my concerns about Report, which I believe are shared by other colleagues I have spoken to.

Mr Alistair Carmichael: The hon. Gentleman talks about more time being available for Report. Would not the guarantee of that be a House business committee? Is that not the logical conclusion of where we are

heading? In his many discussions with the Leader of the House, has he detected any enthusiasm from the Treasury Bench for that proposition?

Mr Walker: The right hon. Gentleman makes a wonderful intervention, because I am a huge fan of a House business committee, but he will recall that he was in the previous Cabinet, which did not bring forward such a committee. If the Government are minded to support one, they would obviously have my support in that ambition.

Mr Bone: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech, especially in his role as Chairman of the Procedure Committee. Would his Committee be minded to look at having a business of the House committee specifically in the light of the problems today?

Mr Walker: Our Committee is very open minded and broad minded. We are a new Committee—I believe we are beginning to gather our members together—but of course all colleagues are welcome to make representations, and if they do, they will get a fair hearing.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman just said he wanted to keep out of the politics and talk only about the procedure. I noted earlier the Prime Minister's Parliamentary Private Secretary bending his shell-like. Was he talking to him about politics or procedure?

Mr Walker: I can assure the hon. Gentleman, whom I know very well, that we were not talking about this proposal. I shall tell him what it was about outside the Chamber.

I want to make some progress because plenty of other people want to speak and I do not want to crowd them out. The Government will need to be careful in the language they use when introducing a Bill. It is right that an explanatory memorandum asserts the Government's view about the scope of the Bill, but that assertion should not be made overtly or aggressively. We do not want a Bill introduced with the Government saying, "This is absolutely unquestionably relating to England only, and anyone who disagrees is a total and utter idiot"—that would be the subtext. They need to be careful in their language so as not to be seen to be putting undue pressure on the Chair—I dare suggest—to come up with a certification one way or another.

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): On the question of whether a Bill should apply to England only or some other combination, all Bills currently contain a territorial extent clause. Does that not give a very good indication of whether a Bill applies solely to one part of the kingdom or another?

Mr Walker: It might well do. However, in the Conservative party's manifesto for England, we say:

"The Speaker will be required to certify bills or clauses where English MPs must give their consent to equivalent English decisions where provisions are devolved to another part of the UK, or they have a separate and distinct effect for England. In reaching a decision the Speaker will have regard to any cross-border effects and the national significance of any legislation, for example infrastructure projects."

I think, therefore, that there is still some debate around the issue my hon. Friend raises.

John Redwood: Is it not a good sign that we have had the Scottish Parliament for some years now and there have been no great issues about deciding what is a Scottish matter? If it is possible to know what is a Scottish matter, it must be equally easy to know what is an English matter.

Mr Walker: My right hon. Friend makes a good point that I am sure will be appreciated by both sides of the House—as he is appreciated by both sides of the House.

Alex Salmond: I know that the Chair of the Procedure Committee will understand that decisions of the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the Northern Ireland Assembly cannot have a financial consequence on this House, but that decisions of this House can have a financial consequence on Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. I know that someone of his expertise will have appreciated that point, even if it is lost on others.

Mr Walker: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and, of course, I appreciate that point and the sincerity with which it has been put to me.

In seeking certification of various clauses as the Bill progresses after Report, it could be that on some occasions the Speaker needs to clarify the advice he has been given and will require additional time to seek advice, particularly where judgments are finely balanced. The Speaker must be allowed that time. I know that the Government have an imperative to get their legislation through as quickly as possible, but in bringing forward these proposals, the Government must recognise that on occasions there will need to be delay as advice is sought and considered by the Speaker.

Lady Hermon: Before the hon. Gentleman moves on to his next point, I want to ask whether he is concerned that the Speaker is wilfully and deliberately prohibited from giving the reasons for certifying that Bills are exclusively English or English and Welsh only? What justification could there possibly be for prohibiting the Speaker from explaining why he has provided such a certification?

Mr Walker: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, but it is a convention that the Speaker does not give reasons for his rulings. If I am wrong in that, I am sure another procedural expert will correct me.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Walker: Briefly, and possibly for the last time.

Susan Elan Jones: I am intrigued by the hon. Gentleman's reference to "cross-border". Will he clarify whether there are even more parts of this jigsaw than we thought hitherto? If we take an issue such as HS2, those of us who are close to the English border and the connection at Crewe could be more deeply affected than, say, my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith). Does that mean that some Welsh MPs could vote and others could not?

Mr Walker: The hon. Lady makes a very good point. It is not for me to defend the Government's position on this matter, or to make the arguments that the Government

will make. Her point will, however, have been heard by the Leader of the House. In fact, I was almost coming on to the direct part of my rather long speech that most closely relates to the very observation she has made.

The guidance attached to the proposed Standing Order No. 83(j) says that the judgment of what is "minor or consequential" is for the Speaker. I think the Government should provide some examples of what they feel count as "minor or consequential". We also need greater clarification of what the "or" means. As the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) knows, Standing Order No. 97(1)(a) relates to the Scottish Grand Committee, and the term used there is "minor consequential amendments"—there is no "or". On the definition of "or", I suggest, the fate of nations may turn, so we need to define what it means.

I have spoken for longer than I anticipated. Indeed, this is probably my longest speech in the 10 years I have been in Parliament. I have enjoyed taking interventions and hope I have responded as best I can. What I would say is that I take this place very seriously; I take the concerns of Members very seriously; and the Procedure Committee will look at this issue very seriously.

2.23 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this important debate. As already mentioned, it is very rare that we have the opportunity to debate an important issue under Standing Order No. 24. That suggests once again just how important this matter is and why we need to turn our attention to the many issues already identified in some of the fine contributions of right hon. and hon. Members today.

What we are doing is quite extraordinary. We have not done anything like this for centuries. It is of historical significance because it is of such constitutional importance. Nothing has been done like this since the days of Gladstone. I look nervously at the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), who might well confirm that. Back in the days of Gladstone, this was being done in an attempt to curtail the voting rights of Irish MPs, and history is able to judge just how successful that was in maintaining the then Union in those times.

Ian Paisley: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to cite the Irish example. No one predicted then the crises that would follow for the next 30 years of parliamentary history and then the subsequent crisis, which ended up partitioning our island. Does he agree that no one can now predict the crisis that could engulf Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland as a result of what is happening here?

Pete Wishart: The hon. Gentleman will not be surprised to know that I would not have defined it as a "crisis", but as constitutional progress, but he is right in one respect—if this is an attempt to try to save the Union, God help them! It seems as though the Government are absolutely determined to push us out. They are introducing English votes for English laws in the same week as we have been debating amendments to the Scotland Bill, and 58 out of 59 Scottish Members of Parliament supported measures that were agreed in the

[Pete Wishart]

Scottish Parliament by every single party in it. To be voted down by English Members of Parliament shows that this is not just English votes for English laws; it is English votes for Scottish laws. It is totally and utterly unacceptable.

We are hearing about vetoes. Yes, that is a major characteristic of what the Government intend to do—to have a veto on issues that will be for England only. How are they are going to achieve that? They are going to give Members of Parliament iPads in the Lobbies. It is not only English votes for English laws; it is English iPads for English laws. Why do they not just tattoo our foreheads as “Scottish”—then they would not have to vote on the iPads and they would be able to identify us. Apparently, though, that was turned down for this more high-tech solution. It is utterly and absolutely bizarre.

One would think that, with something as constitutionally important and of such historical significance as this, we would have the fullest possible debate and full scrutiny. To create something as important as this, one would expect debate not just in this House, but in every single constituency and community across the United Kingdom. We would have thought there would be a Bill and an opportunity for it to be properly debated, and that the Bill would have different stages, at which hon. Members would be able to table amendments to be discussed, debated and decided on.

What do we have, however? We have two weeks in which to consider this issue. It was introduced by the Leader of the House last Thursday. This House has been invited to make up its mind a week on Wednesday. The Leader of the House would not even answer any parliamentary questions about English votes for English laws, but we got one yesterday, did we not, and by Jove, was it a cracker.

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman talks about two weeks, so may I ask him why he has not made reference to the fact that these proposals were first presented to the House in December last year?

Pete Wishart: May I say to the Leader of the House—this is an important point—that we have been discussing, debating and looking at these issues for a long time in the House. We hear again and again about the West Lothian question and how it has to be addressed. I have a great deal of sympathy with English Members when it comes to this. I think there is a point to be addressed and that something needs to be done. However, to do it on the basis of the mad proposals of the Leader of the House is almost an insult to the House. To present his paper last Thursday and then to ask every Member to reach some sort of conclusion about what we should do is just about the worst possible disrespect to this House. The Leader of the House has to reconsider the amount of time he is going to give us to discuss the matter because this is huge. It is massive. It has never been done before.

This is an intriguing and interesting point. I still do not get English Members’ point. They are creating a quasi-English Parliament in the unitary Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. They cannot be bothered—

Sir William Cash: I have asked the hon. Gentleman this question before, but he has not given any kind of answer. How does he distinguish between the proposals as he puts them and the fact that the UK Parliament deliberately decided in 1997 to create two different functions—not two different classes of Member? It was the UK Parliament that decided. What is his beef?

Pete Wishart: I am actually grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that important point. What we did—I will say this ever so gently and carefully to the hon. Gentleman—is this. We went around the difficult business of creating a Parliament. We did the work. We had a constitutional convention, and we consulted with communities and with interests across Scotland. What he wants to do is to create this quasi-English Parliament in two weeks. “Go and do the work.” That is what I say gently to English Members. “You cannot create a Parliament on the basis—on the back—of just changing the Standing Orders of the House. You must debate, you must consult, and you must make sure that you take the nations with you. Do the work, English Members!”

Iain Stewart: The hon. Gentleman and I may be able to continue the debate that we had on the radio a few days ago, but will he first remind me whether the Scottish National party took part in the Scottish constitutional convention?

Pete Wishart: When it comes to constitutional reform, the engine for change in Scotland is the Scottish National party. Every time we see a leap forward for the Scottish Parliament, an increase in powers or an independence referendum, it is based on the votes of the Scottish people and their representatives, such as my hon. Friends who are with us today. Let us not try to pretend that this is anything other than an attempt to create an English Parliament in the House of Commons, which is unacceptable to the rest of the people in the United Kingdom. I have a great deal of sympathy with English Members. I know of their unhappiness, because we hear about it again and again. English Members are so unhappy about the unfairness of it—about these evil, dreadful Scottish MPs who come down here and vote on their legislation—but if they want an English Parliament, they must go and do the work.

Mr Grieve: I certainly do not think that the presence of members of the hon. Gentleman’s party in the House is an evil presence. They have a legitimate reason to be heard and to make their points. However, the hon. Gentleman seems to me to be arguing that we should not be taking the current Scottish legislation through Parliament at all, and that we should be having a national constitutional convention. We are responding to the vow, which he said was absolute, but I must gently point out that there was also a vow to the electorate in England and Wales and the rest of the United Kingdom that we would legislate to change the Standing Orders of the House. That, surely, encapsulates part of the problem. It is a bit difficult for the hon. Gentleman to come and argue against it when he asks for exactly the same position for the purpose of his own agenda.

Pete Wishart: What the right hon. and learned Gentleman has said in his rather lengthy intervention is partly right. What we have in this House, and what we have in this nation, is an issue and a difficulty. It is called “asymmetric

UK”, although Members may prefer to call it “asymmetric Britain”, and what it has led to is our own unhappiness. We agreed to—we voted for—a particular dynamic or trajectory of Scottish politics. We wanted to see further powers for our Parliament. That has been turned down by English Members, so we are unhappy. I sense that my Welsh colleagues are unhappy as well. In a debate last week, I heard them raise some of the cross-border aspects of what is being suggested. I know, because we are hearing it non-stop, that English Members are unhappy, and they are probably right to be unhappy. I know that they are furious about Scottish Members. How dare we come down and vote on their precious public services? However, there is a solution: it is called federalism, and it is what we thought we were voting for last year. What we were promised was as close as possible to federalism, or to home rule.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Pete Wishart: No, I will not.

We could do our own thing and decide what we want, English Members could decide what they want in their own Parliament, and Welsh Members could decide what they want. I see that the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Mr Allen) agrees with all that I am saying. What is wrong with it? We could then come together in the House to decide on important matters such as foreign affairs, defence, international relationships, the monarchy and the currency. That would resolve all the outstanding issues, and would deal with some of the unhappiness on these Benches, on the Government Benches, and on the Benches to my right. Why can we not do it? I will tell the House why we cannot. It is because English Members do not want to pursue a logical solution to a question that is deeply hard to answer.

Ms Gisela Stuart: I am interested in the hon. Gentleman’s argument about federalism. Germany is often cited as an example of a federal structure that works, but it did not work until Prussia was broken up. If one component of federalism is disproportionately larger than all the others, that imbalance cannot be overcome. I think that federalism in England may not be possible, given the current structure of the United Kingdom.

Pete Wishart: I say this to the hon. Lady: we will put up with it. We will deal with it. I know that it is difficult, but it is better than what we are securing now, because that is not working.

This places you, Mr Speaker, in the most unenviable, pernicious political situation—a situation that is almost intolerable. Given what was said by the Leader of the House, I think that you will be receiving your orders about certification from him. That is very much what seemed, from his remarks, to be intended. He will tell you what is English-only legislation, and you will have probably the most political role in the House. You will either have to stand up to the Leader of the House as he attempts to bully you, or you will have to—

Mr Speaker: Order. In what is a highly charged debate in which strong feelings are being expressed, I must of course leave the House to make its own assessment of the merits of these proposals, but, for the avoidance of doubt, let me just say to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) that I have never

been pushed around by anyone in the House. To be fair, the Leader of the House has never tried to push me around, and I think he knows that it would be a forlorn mission.

Pete Wishart: I know you very well, Mr Speaker, and I also know that that is what the Leader of the House will attempt to do. He will tell you what you should—

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman may not be aware that, under proposed Standing Order 83R, votes on tuition fees will automatically be subject to the new rules. Let me also say to him and his colleagues that I regard their presence in the House as a great asset. I would much rather have them than 57 Liberal Democrats.

Pete Wishart: I do not really know what to say in response to that, other than “Yes, so would I.”

The Speaker of the House of Commons will now be thrust into a political role in which he will have to decide—if he is not to be bullied or pushed around by the Leader of the House—what will constitute Barnett consequential. He will have to decide what will have an impact on our Parliament, and what will have an impact on the constituents whom we are all here to represent. The Speaker of this House will have to decide whether a Bill has a spending impact on the Scottish Parliament, and on public services in Scotland. That is a dreadful, dreadful position for him to be in. I say to the Leader of the House, “Shame on you for placing our Speaker, our cherished Speaker, in such an invidious political situation.”

John Redwood: Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that his party has had a policy of not voting on English issues, and that it has been able to identify the issues not to vote on?

Pete Wishart: That is exactly the point that I was coming to. There are ways of dealing with it. I suggested a solution in the form of federalism, but I did not sense any warmth towards that proposal from the Government Benches, so let us try another way. The right hon. Gentleman is right: we do not vote on English-only legislation. What we do is this. Every time a Bill is introduced, we scour it for the Scottish interest. We look for the Barnett consequential issues, and we establish whether it will have an impact on Scotland. If it will not have that impact, we leave it alone. We stay well away: of course we do. With all due respect to my English friends, I have better things to do than scour legislation about policing arrangements in Plymouth when I am looking after the people of Perth and North Perthshire.

As the right hon. Gentleman says, if there is no Scottish interest, we take no interest ourselves. How about building on that? How about saying, “This is a voluntary arrangement that seems to work reasonably well; why do we not continue to pursue it?” There may be issues on which the Leader of the House and I do not entirely agree, but surely we could try to resolve them by means of a voluntary arrangement, without creating two classes of Member of Parliament in the House of Commons. Why should that not be a solution?

Tom Pursglove: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Pete Wishart: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman, because he seems very keen.

Tom Pursglove: I thank the hon. Gentleman. Does he agree that one of the problems—my constituents raise it with me regularly—is that Labour set up asymmetric devolution? My constituents watched Scottish Labour Ministers troop through the Lobbies to vote on education and health issues that simply did not affect their constituents, and that, to me, was unacceptable.

Pete Wishart: It was not so much Labour as the demand from Scotland that set up asymmetric devolution, but the hon. Gentleman is right to say that it must be addressed. I am suggesting a way of doing that: I am trying to be helpful to Members.

Sir William Cash: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Pete Wishart: I have already given way to the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), so I will give way to the hon. Member for Peterborough.

Mr Jackson: The hon. Gentleman is being very generous. Is he really saying that we should replace a settled position which is part of the constitutional architecture of the House with a discretion for the Scottish National party in respect of what is or is not a Barnett consequential issue? Surely he cannot be suggesting that we do that.

Pete Wishart: This is the way mutual respect works across this House—by doing things constructively and through having a relationship. If the Leader of the House disagrees with me about a Barnett consequential issue, let's talk about it; do not impose legislation to make us second class in this House. How about resolving things through discussion, negotiation and partnership, instead of trying to ensure that we become second class in the united UK Parliament of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Sir Edward Leigh: I actually think the SNP has quite a good record in not voting on English business unless there are Barnett consequentials. If an amendment is tabled to exclude from this provision matters where there are Barnett consequentials, which I favour as I do not want to put the Union at risk, will the hon. Gentleman be minded to support it, and the general principle of English votes for English business if there are no Barnett consequentials?

Pete Wishart: The hon. Gentleman is tempting me; I have to say that sounds quite an attractive offer and proposition, if Scottish Ministers and the Scottish Parliament could have a veto and suggest something does have significant Barnett consequentials.

Alex Salmond: To continue this dialogue, can the Leader of the House confirm that were such an amendment to be tabled by the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) or any other hon. Member, we could vote on it next week? Was that a nod or a shake of the head by the Leader of the House, or a gesture suggesting "I don't know"?

Pete Wishart: My right hon. Friend did a good job there, and almost teased out a response from the Leader of the House suggesting we would have an opportunity to vote on these very important amendments—because

we do intend to table such amendments. We want to try to improve this measure, because what we have at the moment is an absolute and utter disgrace and shambles.

Sir William Cash: I say this in a respectful manner: the hon. Gentleman and the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) will remember that a few weeks ago there was a lot of language about the suggestion that the SNP would come down and determine our Budget and so forth, and, in respect of these specific questions, both the hon. Gentleman and the right hon. Gentleman said they would vote on matters relating to English questions and did so.

Pete Wishart: That is a poor caricature of what actually happened. The hon. Gentleman, a distinguished Member of this House, is here to represent the interests of his constituents, and we on the SNP Benches are here to represent the interests of the constituents who elected us. The hon. Gentleman wants to make me and my hon. Friends second-class Members of this House.

Sir William Cash: No.

Pete Wishart: The hon. Gentleman will get to vote on every piece of legislation and participate in every single debate, and be able to table amendments to all critical Bills, whereas my hon. Friends and I will not.

Sir Edward Leigh: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Pete Wishart: No, as I have given way to the hon. Gentleman before.

Lady Hermon *rose*—

Pete Wishart: I give way to the hon. Lady.

Lady Hermon: I am grateful to, on this occasion, my hon. Friend for giving way.

It would be helpful if the Leader of the House clarified this matter and put some of us out of our misery on it. As currently drafted the Standing Orders are worded in terms of the Speaker being told or instructed; it is stated that the Speaker "shall" treat minor or consequential effects and disregard them. It would therefore be very helpful to the SNP and the rest of us if the Leader of the House confirmed that consequential effects do not include Barnett consequentials.

Pete Wishart: The hon. Lady is always my friend regardless of the occasion, and she is absolutely and totally right. The Leader of the House could get to his feet at this very moment and say that anything that has a Barnett consequential will not be subject to this English votes for English laws provision. He has that chance, but sits defiantly in his place. This is the difficulty my hon. Friends and I have.

Mr Bone: *rose*—

Pete Wishart: Maybe the hon. Gentleman can answer on behalf of the Leader of the House.

Mr Bone: No, but the point is that that issue is for the debate that is to be had, on an amendment. Will the hon. Gentleman support extra time for the debate next Wednesday? At present the Adjournment debate is proposed for Thursday. Why not have all of Wednesday and all of Thursday on this very important issue?

Pete Wishart: Yes, but I do not just want that; I want what every other meaningful and significant piece of reform of this House receives, which is a Bill—a piece of legislation we can properly scrutinise. I do not want just an extra day; I want the process that involves this House looking properly at all this.

This is an absolute and utter shambles and it is falling apart in front of the Government as we speak. The Leader of the House has divided the whole House on these issues, with Labour, the SNP, the Liberals and everybody else against the Conservatives. I suggest that the Leader of the House takes these plans away, looks at them properly, and brings them back when we have an opportunity to debate them properly and scrutinise them effectively, and this House gets its say on these issues. As things currently stand, you, Mr Speaker, are placed in a dreadful situation and this provision does not command anything like a spirit of partnership or a consensus across this House. Take them away, bring them back, do something better, and do not treat us as second-class citizens in the unitary United Kingdom Parliament of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. That is unacceptable to us.

2.46 pm

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): I have received your message that you wish me to be relatively brief, Mr Speaker, and I shall do my best to abide by that and not model myself on Gladstone, whom we have had earlier reference to, and who Disraeli said was a

“sophistical rhetorician, inebriated by the exuberance of his own verbosity.”

I shall try to avoid verbosity and inebriation at the same time.

It has been said in this debate that this process has been rushed. That things have been rushed is the classic objection to almost any constitutional change, and it is one I am fond of using personally, but on this occasion it would only be rushed for a member of the Roman Curia or perhaps part of the mandarin class of imperial China. The issue we are considering has been debated since the 1880s. I do not think a period of 130 years is unduly rushed. The West Lothian question itself was raised by the hon. baronet the former Member for West Lothian, Tam Dalyell, in the 1970s, but we have had plenty of time to consider and deliberate on these issues.

The second major objection is that two classes of Members are being created. If I believed that to be true, I would oppose this proposal because I think there is a unity within this House that is of fundamental constitutional importance, and, looking at the SNP Benches opposite and considering the contribution its Members have already made since their election in May, it is striking how important that point is: every Member needs to be free to participate in the debates on the laws that we make. That is a reasonable and fair principle.

In a characteristically forthright speech from the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), we have heard that the Scotland Bill does not give Scottish MPs the same type of veto as English MPs, but I think that is wrong. It is a misunderstanding of what the Scotland Bill is doing, because if this Standing Order were already in place, the Scotland Bill would be

devolving the issues to Scotland and to English MPs in this House at the same point. Yesterday we debated the Crown estates and how they would be a devolved matter to the Scottish Parliament. If that goes through the House of Lords, it will be a matter that in England will only be voted on by English MPs, or at least they will have a veto on it. What is devolved to Scotland is equally and simultaneously devolved to England. That seems perfectly reasonable.

Ian C. Lucas: Why does the double voting only apply to MPs from England?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The double voting does not only apply to Members from England; it applies to Members from England, Wales and potentially Northern Ireland, if the issue is devolved to one Assembly but not the others. If there is a matter that is not devolved to Wales, Welsh MPs would be involved in that second lock on legislation. That is right and fair, because it ensures that those who represent the relevant constituencies have a say on how the law is made and a block on it, but, crucially, they cannot make the law unless all UK MPs support it in a majority.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): What would happen in the case of a welfare reform Bill, which we would be told applied to England and Wales because, on paper, Northern Ireland would have welfare reform devolved? As we see from the Treasury, this is entirely karaoke legislation and the money will not flow unless the Assembly passes the legislation that has already been passed here. Would Northern Ireland Members be told that they did not count in the double majority for welfare legislation?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman makes a very interesting point. I think this is covered in the Standing Order, but it may need further revision. The Standing Order makes provision for the Speaker to certify that where a matter is about to be devolved, it has already been devolved and therefore in the legislation should require an English vote. It therefore follows logically that if a matter is about to be undeveloped, because the relevant devolved Assembly cannot come to a decision, the Speaker ought to certify differently. It may be that the Standing Order needs an amendment to clarify that, but it is certainly within the spirit of the Standing Order as currently written. It is ensuring an equality of all Members of Parliament because no legislation can pass without a majority in this House.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who was nearly the Member for Central Fife many years ago. Just to make sure that I have understood this proposal, does it also apply to Member of the other place? Or are we creating a situation in which Scottish MPs who successfully retain the trust of their constituents and get re-elected to this place become disqualified from legislating, whereas former Scottish MPs who get kicked out of here but then get appointed to another place are rewarded for their failure by being allowed to legislate on matters from which the democratically elected MPs are excluded?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman tempts me to go down the path of the elected Scottish peers, which there used to be in the other place, but that is not

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

relevant to this debate, which is on the process within the House of Commons and its Standing Orders. He does, however, bring me neatly on to why I think it is so crucial that this is done through Standing Orders, not through legislation.

John Redwood: Is not the asymmetry in the new proposals still against England, not against Scotland? The Scottish Parliament can vote any law it likes within its powers, whereas English MPs will not be able to do that in this Parliament.

Mr Rees-Mogg: That is of the greatest importance. The English must recognise that if we want the Union to maintain, we must not require exact parity. The United Kingdom is 85% English, and the English demanding exact parity is the way to destroy the Union. The English, in this context, have to be generous. It is important that we remember that; otherwise we destroy the Union that we are seeking to protect. That is why Standing Orders are important—they can be reversed. If the Opposition Members had a majority, whatever form of coalition it took, they could suspend Standing Orders on a single vote to proceed with the business they want—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) is shaking his finger at me and getting frightfully exercised, but we see Standing Orders suspended on a regular basis. Standing Orders have been suspended to rush through Bills in a single day, and they are suspended almost weekly on minor matters so that deferred Divisions do not take place. Standing Orders are not constitutional holy writ; they are a mild way of making an alteration.

We must avoid the temptation of taking this process towards an English Parliament. An English Parliament would usurp the United Kingdom Parliament. [*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Ms Ahmed-Sheikh) shouts, “Why?” She might want it, because it would create the division of the United Kingdom that the SNP seeks. Those of us who are English and Unionists must be careful of the siren voice of that exact equality—that exact parity—that might be sought by those who favour independence in Scotland.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Rees-Mogg: Mr Speaker wanted me to do eight minutes. I am already over so I must desist.

2.54 pm

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), a constitutional scholar who spoke with great authority.

There is no doubt in my mind that the Conservative party has a right to take action on this issue. It won a majority at the general election. It has a right to take action and it has the power to do so because it has a majority in this House. The question for Conservative Members is: what is the right way of doing this? That is what I want to talk about.

Government Members are in the Conservative and Unionist party. I suggest that the way the Leader of the House is going about this is true neither to the Conservative

tradition nor the Unionist tradition. No good will come of the way he is going about his proposals, and I want to explain why. This goes to the point that the shadow Leader of the House made about how this is done: whether it is rushed through next week, through Standing Orders, or done in a considered way. I wish to focus on the issue of English-only Bills. This is not just about English-only Bills, because English-only clauses are mentioned in the Leader of the House’s proposals. You, Mr Speaker, will have to certify not only whether a Bill is England only, but whether a clause is England only. That will be an unenviable task.

The hon. Member for North East Somerset said that this issue has been around for 130 years. He is absolutely right about that, but why has it been around for that long? This is what Gladstone said in 1893 when he abandoned his second home rule Bill:

“it passed the wit of man to frame any distinct, thorough-going, universal severance between the one class of subject and the other”.

In other words, this is what is now the English-only question. In his time, it was a distinction between the Irish legislation and so-called “imperial legislation”.

Let us fast-forward to 1965, when Harold Wilson was the Prime Minister. He was furious because his Bill to nationalise the steel industry was defeated by the votes of MPs from Northern Ireland, so he told one of his Cabinet, “We’ve really got to do something about this.” The person in question said, “I think that is not very wise, Prime Minister, because it is really hard to make the distinction. Gladstone tried it.” Wilson therefore set up a royal commission, which reported in 1974, concluding that we could not distinguish between the so-called “ins” and the “outs”.

The reason I made the intervention I did on the Leader of the House is that this is at the heart of why this problem—it is a problem and an anomaly—has not been solved in 130 years. With all due respect, he proposes to do it on the back of a fag packet next week. I therefore intervened on him, following the intervention by the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond), to ask how you, Mr Speaker, were supposed to decide on what was an England-only Bill. The Leader of the House said it is simple—it is a devolved matter. But then we have to deal with the issue of tuition fees, as clearly a rise in tuition fees has Barnett consequentials. So goodness knows.

This is where I come to the real thing, and why I appeal to Conservative Members to think how they are going to vote next week. The question before us is: does this strengthen or weaken the United Kingdom? There is clearly an English question to address, as the general election illustrated to me very clearly, but the issue is how we address it sensibly.

Let us just fast-forward to this Session of Parliament once this proposal goes through, if it does. It is not as though the problem is going to be solved—the problem just begins, because the arguments made by the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) and the right hon. Member for Gordon will be played out not just in this House but throughout the United Kingdom. People will be saying, “That is an outrage. The Speaker has ruled that is an England-only Bill but it affects us.” Other people will be saying, “That is an outrage. He said it is not an England-only Bill.” That takes me to the simple point: we are talking about something of such

huge constitutional significance. I say to Conservative Members: you have the power, of course you do, but do not use it next week because it is not true to your traditions. Your traditions are to be the Conservative and Unionist party, but this is neither for Conservatism nor Unionism.

Chris Grayling: Let me simply ask the right hon. Gentleman something. If he feels so strongly about this, why did we not get a response when he was leader of his party and the invitation was extended for his party to participate in cross-party talks?

Edward Miliband: Because a few months before the election the Conservative party thought it was a useful weapon at the general election—it turned out that it was, but let us leave that to one side. This goes beyond the disagreements between us; this is about the agreement between us, because we are both Unionists. I find myself agreeing with the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond), which does not happen very often—I totally disagree with him on the United Kingdom. Now, when I am agreeing with the right hon. Member for Gordon, the Leader of the House and Conservative Members should be thinking, “That’s not so good really. There’s something up here.” What is up here is how we make this change happen. I ask this question again: is this true to the traditions of Conservatism? No, it is not, because the last thing the Conservatives should do is rip up hundreds of years of constitutional practice in a Standing Order vote just before the House goes into recess. Is this for Unionism? No, it is not. That is my final point, because I wish to respect the time limit.

Mr Graham Allen (Nottingham North) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend concede that solving this conundrum cannot be done by moving the deckchairs inside the Westminster bubble and by changing Standing Orders? It can only be seriously addressed by looking at devolution for England, just as we want devolution for all the other nations in the Union.

Edward Miliband: Of course that is an issue that needs to be considered. My proposal is for a constitutional convention, which I know the Government will not take up. At least let us not go down this road of Standing Orders, because it will, all of a sudden, change the whole practice of the House of Commons.

Let us be frank in this House: the cause of Unionism has been going pretty badly since 19 September 2014.

Mr MacNeil: Well said.

Edward Miliband: Thanks very much. We won the referendum. My party was in alliance with the Conservative Party, as the Scottish National party has pointed out, but the cause of Unionism has not been well served since then. I will not start laying blame; people will know what I think about this. The question for the Conservative party, which has a majority, is how does it properly serve the cause of Unionism? Following this procedure in the way that has been proposed is frankly an act of constitutional vandalism. It is not true to the great traditions of the Conservative and Unionist party, which is why I urge Government Members to vote against this measure next week.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. A five-minute limit will now apply. We will try to get through as many Members as possible in the time available. Sir Edward Leigh.

3.1 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): It is a great honour to follow the former Leader of the Opposition, who spoke with great passion. I wish to share and agree with some of the points that he made. The Conservative party is not an ideological party; it is not a party of narrow party interest. The Conservative party is a party of the nation. It is a party not just of England, but of the United Kingdom. Our aim, our will and everything that we should strive for in this Parliament is to maintain the United Kingdom, because the United Kingdom hangs by a thread. We should not give any succour to those who wish to break up the United Kingdom.

This debate is about not just the principles of these issues, but the time, and that is what I wish to speak on. We must have adequate time. We must assure everyone in the country as a whole that we have not just debated this matter in an afternoon, constrained by statements or urgent questions, with no real time to debate the 22 amendments to Standing Orders. Next week, we will debate this on Wednesday, but we have an Adjournment debate on Thursday. How often do the Whips run around, trying to fill up this Chamber, with no one taking any interest? Here we have a major constitutional issue with only a part of a day in which to discuss it. In all sincerity, I say to the Leader of the House that he should use his power to allow another day—a full day—for amendments, as this is a matter of vital concern.

I hope that I am not giving away any confidences here, but when we were having these discussions in the 1922 Committee before the general election, I constantly warned about the threat to the United Kingdom. I was assured by my colleagues, “No, we must have a full exclusion of all Scottish Members, as that is what the English want. They will be the Parnellites, and they will misuse this Parliament to filibuster and delay matters. We should exclude them entirely.” I said, “No, don’t exclude them, because that will be a lever to break open the United Kingdom.” I was then told by my colleagues that the Scots do not care. “The Scots don’t want to take part in English business,” they said. The trouble is that the SNP will make them care. We have already heard the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) making that point again and again. This will become a real issue, because the SNP will say, as it is perfectly entitled to do, that this is not only English business, as it has consequences for Scotland because of the Barnett formula.

Sir William Cash *rose*—

Sir Edward Leigh: All right. Very quickly.

Sir William Cash: I simply want to make the point that in his impassioned speech, the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) called on federalism. In practice, as we all know, the SNP wants independence.

Sir Edward Leigh: Of course the SNP wants independence, but why are we making it easier for it? What we are discussing today—what we will achieve in Standing Orders—will not change the result of a single

[*Sir Edward Leigh*]

vote in this Parliament, because the Conservative party has an overall majority. If we lose the next general election, the Labour party, or whatever is in power, will simply reverse it, so why are we giving this gift to the SNP? What we need is an amendment to this motion to ensure that when there are Barnett consequentials, there are not two classes of Members, and that the Scots, the Welsh and anybody else can vote during the entire process. That is a perfectly fair amendment and a compromise. The House might not like that, but at least it will ensure, Mr Speaker, that you are not put in the invidious position of having to certify a Bill that the Government may tell you affects only England, but that, because of Barnett consequentials, affects Scotland too. It is well known that I believe that we should get rid of the Barnett formula and replace it with a needs-based formula and that we should give full fiscal autonomy to our Scottish friends, which would solve all these problems. But the Secretary of State for Scotland has resisted those amendments, so we are where we are.

I finish on this point. The Conservative party is always best when it recognises that the Union is asymmetrical. We do not believe in neat constitutional solutions, as advocated by our liberal friends. We are a party of tradition and history and we recognise that our nation is asymmetrical. The English, who comprise 85% of the population, must take a bit of stick on this—carry a bit of a burden. We must recognise that, occasionally, the West Lothian question cannot always be resolved. We know that, but we must be generous on these issues.

In the few seconds left to me, I make one final appeal to the Secretary of State. Let us at least allow proper time for debate, and let us get this right.

3.7 pm

Mr Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this debate. I am unashamedly a Unionist, and passionately believe in the integrity of this United Kingdom. What I say to the Government is that their proposal is muddled and incoherent, and will lead to many problems and a very fractious House of Commons, which really should be the forum in which we bind together this United Kingdom. When various questions have been raised today, the response has been lacking in clarity. Sometimes we will have votes in which English MPs only can take part. Occasionally, we will have votes in which Northern Ireland MPs, Welsh MPs or Scottish MPs can participate. That is a recipe for divisiveness in this House and it plays to the separatists' agenda, and not to the integrity of the United Kingdom.

Mr MacNeil: It has been said that we would be second-class citizens. Given what the hon. Gentleman has said, Scottish MPs will be not second-class or third-class citizens, but fourth-class citizens.

Mr Donaldson: I value Scotland's place in the United Kingdom, and I will fight passionately for the right of Scottish MPs to have a say in matters that affect Scotland. The point that was made about the Barnett consequentials is very important. We lack clarity, and we need clarity in this discussion.

When it comes to legislation in Northern Ireland, we have different types of devolution. For example, an important issue in Northern Ireland at this time of year is the question of parading, which is a non-devolved matter. We are in ongoing discussions between the political parties, and we hope to come up with a new system for dealing with parades. We need it badly, but it will be this House that will legislate on the new system. What if we follow the logic of the argument that is being made? As it is a matter that affects only Northern Ireland, only Northern Ireland MPs would be able to vote on it. That is muddled thinking. I am not suggesting that that should be the case, but how do we define what is and is not devolved? Parading is a non-devolved matter, but elements of the legislation would be devolved. Policing is a devolved issue, as is justice, and those things impact on parading, so where do we draw the line? That is my difficulty with the Government's proposal.

The Democratic Unionist party recognises that the issue needs to be addressed. There have been comments about the need for generosity on the part of the English, and I recognise that the question is important to people who live in England and needs to be addressed, but this is the wrong way to do it. I agree entirely with the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), and the DUP supported the concept of a constitutional convention. The Union is too important. The integrity of the United Kingdom is too important to be left to a debate on Standing Orders in this House. That is not how we should be dealing with these issues, and I say that as a passionate Unionist.

Antoinette Sandbach: I had the privilege of serving in the Welsh Assembly, where the Presiding Officer regularly issued legislative consent motions on matters that were before this House. Is the right hon. Gentleman suggesting that that process could not be undertaken by Mr Speaker in a way that is impartial and fair?

Mr Donaldson: All I am saying is that it places you, Mr Speaker, as the Speaker of this House of Commons, in an invidious position. You will have to adjudicate on these matters daily and I do not think that is how we should deal with the question of how to handle English laws. It requires a much wider constitutional debate and this is not the appropriate way to defend and protect the integrity of the United Kingdom. It raises too many questions and, frankly, plays into the hands of those who want to go down the road of separation. Will we look back in a few years' time and rue the day that this happened?

I do not for a moment believe that the Leader of the House is acting out of any other motivation than a desire to address this issue, and to do so from a Unionist perspective, but I cannot agree with the method that he is suggesting. We need to go back to the drawing board and to find a way forward on which we can all agree. That is why there is a need for greater discussion and I would welcome more engagement with the Leader of the House on these questions.

This proposal raises many issues about how the matter will be handled in the future. For example, a lot of legislation for Northern Ireland and other parts of the kingdom is dealt with by Orders in Council and statutory instruments. We need to tease out how all that will be handled. Points have been made about the Barnett

consequential and this is important, because, as the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) mentioned, we have a crisis in the Northern Ireland Executive over welfare reform. We have full legislative devolution on welfare reform, but the difficulty is that the Treasury has made it clear that we must implement welfare reform as it applies in the rest of the United Kingdom or we will not get any more money. How do we handle such issues in this House? How do we, as Northern Ireland MPs, have an influence on that issue in this House? I cannot see the answer to that in the Government's proposals. That is why I think that there is a need for a deeper and wider discussion on these issues. This is too important to be left to a one-day debate on Standing Orders in this House. That is why today the DUP is joining others with whom we might not see eye to eye on constitutional issues. We want the best for the United Kingdom and, frankly, this proposal is far from the best.

3.14 pm

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this debate, which was badly needed. I do not want to rehearse all the issues that have been raised about how we got ourselves to this position, but it seems to me that it was inherent in the devolution settlement of 1998 that the questions we are now discussing would have to be addressed. The truth is that we have ducked them consistently and for a long period. Indeed, we have done more than that and have created over time legislation that is often incoherent and difficult to understand, particularly in the Welsh context of devolution, and legislation that did not meet the needs.

The problem we now have is that there is a ghost in the room as well. We will have to move towards using Standing Orders because we do not wish to have a measure carried out in this Chamber through the ordinary legislative process, which is justiciable. That raises the whole question of whether we are moving inevitably towards a written constitution. The House has consistently set itself against that, but we are asking our unwritten constitution to stretch more and more to respond to complexities for which it was never designed. I do not believe that it will in the long term be able to cope. However, that is the reality of our position and it requires a sea change in opinion in this House if we are ever to get ourselves through it. It also requires good will. Forgive my having to say this again to SNP members, but one of the problems with these debates is that the question of their good will towards the United Kingdom in general is rather in doubt and for that reason, achieving a sensible dialogue is made much more difficult.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): What does my right hon. and learned Friend think cannot be achieved by an Act of Parliament that can only be achieved by a written constitution in this regard?

Mr Grieve: My hon. Friend will forgive me, but I am not sure that I entirely follow his point. My point was that in terms of the process of this House, an Act of Parliament will be justiciable, which is why it is not the route that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House wishes to take.

Mr Jenkin: So will a written constitution.

Mr Grieve: A written constitution will be justiciable as well, but at least it will be justiciable within a framework that is settled and established. However, that requires the sea change for which I accept there is no majority in this House at present.

Mr Graham Allen *rose*—

Mr Grieve: I would like to make progress. I know that the hon. Gentleman is interested in this question, but I want to get on to my main points.

My concern, and this is why I raised it yesterday, is that the only way in which my party will honour its vow to the electorate is by proceeding by way of amending Standing Orders. We certainly should not underestimate the enormity of that change. It is a profound change and needs to be properly debated. At the moment, I have serious anxieties about whether there is time available to carry out that scrutiny. I know that the Government have set aside a day next week, but it does not seem to me that that allows the opportunity at present to table the necessary amendments, to consider the 22 clauses and changes one by one so that Members of this House can make an informed assessment of whether they want to support some and not others, and to have the level of debate that will be required if this is to be implemented.

The point has been rightly made about the Barnett consequential. I have said on previous occasions that I fully accept that, in view of how we carry out our funding in the United Kingdom, many measures that might appear only to affect England and Wales have a consequence north of the border and a legitimate interest for Scottish Members to vote on. I wish to see that preserved. I happen to think that the Barnett formula is due for review and well past its sell-by date. I very much regret that, following the referendum last year, we seem to have reaffirmed something which even a Committee of the Scottish Parliament had indicated was becoming increasingly unworkable and not in anybody's—including Scotland's—interests.

But that is where we are. We have to work with what we have got. If we are to proceed, the changes to those Standing Orders must be properly scrutinised, and we must do it in a way that commands confidence both here and among the public. I have to say to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House that I do not think we are there. I hope very much that before the close of today we will hear that sufficient time is to be allocated to do justice to these proposals. We can then have a proper debate and reach outcomes which, though they may be far from perfect—I acknowledge that—nevertheless are not so imperfect that I feel rather ashamed of our having perpetrated them. I very much hope that we will take the opportunity in today's debate to ensure that we can have that proper debate next week.

3.20 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): I am strongly in favour of a distinct English voice in so-called English-only legislation, but I am totally, implacably against the proposals before us today. There are four reasons for that.

The first is that the proposals create two classes of Members of Parliament for the first time in our history: English Members of Parliament and everyone else—

[Wayne David]

Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish. That is a fundamental departure from what we have seen in British constitutional arrangements since time immemorial. The proposals do this by giving a veto to English Members. The political and constitutional result will be that a great deal of resentment is created throughout the whole of the United Kingdom. The proposals are fundamentally anti-United Kingdom. They create division and discord. We should be pulling together, not pulling apart.

Secondly, the proposals do not understand the reality of asymmetrical devolution in modern Britain, and do not understand the new relationship that exists between the nations of the United Kingdom. That relationship is more important than ever before, but the proposals do not acknowledge that the largest part of our Union is England, with 85% of the population. What happens in England inevitably has a huge impact on what happens in the rest of the United Kingdom, especially with an asymmetrical devolution arrangement. I am a Welshman and proud of it. I am British as well, but I recognise that legislation determined in England has a huge impact on Wales, and Welsh Members should be involved in the determination of that legislation.

The border between English and Wales is porous. It is not a hard and fast border. What happens in England has a huge impact on what happens in all parts of Wales, particularly in border areas and particularly in north-east Wales. There is often cross-border movement, with people from one part of the country going to visit hospitals in another part of the country. Therefore what happens in the English health service, for example, affects people in Wales, and there should be some facility to allow us to make that point.

Antoinette Sandbach: Does the hon. Gentleman recognise the fundamental unfairness for my constituents, who cannot vote on legislation produced by the Welsh Assembly, despite the porous nature of the border that he referred to?

Wayne David: I am all in favour of dialogue and of different opinions being taken into account. What I am against is people effectively being vetoed out of any possible arrangements. That is very harmful.

Let me give another example of how the proposals could deny Wales a legitimate voice in the deliberations of this House. We may well see in the near future legislation for a new runway at Heathrow. It could be decided by a planning application or by a hybrid Bill. If such a Bill comes before the House of Commons, it will have a huge impact on the people of Wales. We will be strongly in favour of an extra runway at Heathrow. It will have a huge and positive impact on Wales, yet we will be excluded from any say or deliberation on that. That is fundamentally unfair. There would be an English veto against us if we promoted something that would favour Welsh interests, when it legitimately should do so.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): My hon. Friend identifies an important point, which is the determination of what is an English issue? The point that he has just made shows that something that may appear on the surface to be an English issue actually has a great effect on Wales.

Wayne David: Indeed—that is the essence. The proposals create artificial divisions in our United Kingdom.

Chris Grayling: The right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr Donaldson) made the same point. It is important to put on the record that no debate will take place in this House from which any Member of Parliament will be excluded.

Wayne David: Members will have a debate, but their voice and their vote will be worth a heck of a lot less. They will be made second class, and the right hon. Gentleman cannot get away from that reality. He is creating second-class Members in this House and fuelling English nationalism.

The third reason why I am fundamentally opposed to these arrangements has been admitted—the proposals do not take account of the funding arrangements that exist within the United Kingdom, especially the Barnett consequential. Decisions will be made in this House which have a huge bearing on Wales and other parts of the UK, and Welsh Members will not have a full participatory role. That is morally wrong.

Finally, I am against these proposals because they are complex, incoherent, unclear and obtuse. I am particularly concerned that there is no process of consultation of the House of Lords, yet there is a new procedure for dealing with amendments from the other place—amendments that might well be worthy of consideration. They will be subject to a new voting procedure but will not be fully debated.

As other Members have said, I am extremely concerned about the new and onerous responsibilities that will be placed on Mr Speaker. One of the great strengths of this Parliament and of this House of Commons is that we have as the Speaker someone who is objective and impartial and has the confidence of the whole House. It is a huge mistake to drag the role of the Speaker into deliberations about what is English-only legislation or clauses, because that is effectively politicising the role. That is something that the House and democracy will live to regret.

Therefore I am extremely concerned about the proposals before us. I am extremely worried about the way they are being rushed through this House. I urge the Conservative party, in the interests of democracy and in the interests of the United Kingdom, to think again, please.

3.27 pm

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): I am grateful to be called in this debate. I am unusual in that, having represented North Wales for some time and having seen devolution in action in the Welsh Assembly, I find myself over the border, representing an English constituency where the voices of my constituents cannot be heard in the way that my constituents in Wales were heard. I would have had a great deal of sympathy for the Opposition, but these arguments were known at the time of the asymmetrical devolution settlement.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) spoke powerfully about the impact of an Act and why it is so important to introduce these proposals through Standing Orders. We saw with the Agricultural Sector (Wales) Act 2014 how powers given away from this place by Act were changed by

judicial law making. That effectively changed the constitutional settlement in Wales and made it a reserved powers model, expressly contradicting the provisions of the Bill. Furthermore, that substantially delayed the impact of legislation and changed the settled will of this House through judge-led law making.

It is for those reasons that many Members on the Government Benches have considerable concerns about a written constitution. I hear the cries for a constitutional convention, but the opportunity was there in 1999 and the vital question of English votes for English laws was not addressed, and it should have been. To paraphrase what my right hon. and learned Friend said in another debate, “If not now, when?”

We need this change. English voters are increasingly resentful. Research shows a consistent message that the people of England do not think that it is right that MPs from Scotland should be allowed to vote in the House of Commons on laws that affect only England. That research is from the National Centre for Social Research. *[Interruption.]* Does the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) wish to intervene?

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): I was simply saying that the hon. Lady really ought to have listened to her hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), who effectively said that English Members need to be far more generous, considering the size of England compared with the other parts of the UK, and not legislate on the basis of imagined resentment.

Antoinette Sandbach: These are proper findings established by the National Centre for Social Research. What I am saying is that changing the Standing Orders is an appropriate way to do this. I heard the powerful and appropriate speech from my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), in which he made some very relevant points. He was arguing against an alternative English Assembly, and I agree with him entirely. The matter should be dealt with in this Parliament. This Parliament should put in place the processes to ensure equality—*[Interruption.]* No, we do not need a referendum, because we have just had a general election in which the majority of the British public voted for these measures. The people of the United Kingdom have spoken in support of English votes for English laws.

Fiona Mactaggart: The hon. Lady refers to the general election. What does she think of Professor Vernon Bogdanor’s statement that the general election decides who will run the United Kingdom for the next five years, but not whether there will be a United Kingdom to run?

Antoinette Sandbach: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for that intervention. I will reply with the comments of Professor Robert Hazell of the Constitution Unit. He has expressly endorsed the process of introducing English votes for English laws through the Standing Orders. There is clearly a disagreement in academic opinion in the country.

The concern is that, if the matter came forward in the form of a Bill, rather than by Standing Order, the processes of this House would be subject to endless challenge in the courts, which clearly must be avoided. That has been seen clearly elsewhere.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP) *rose*—

Antoinette Sandbach: I am going to make some progress.

The Presiding Officer in the Welsh Assembly is very capable of deciding and certifying whether or not a matter is devolved. I have great confidence that the Speaker of this House would be able to do the same without any suggestion that that role has been politicised. I find it extraordinary that it is suggested that the role of Presiding Officer in the Welsh Assembly, or indeed in the Scottish Parliament, is politicised, as legislative consent motions and matters of legislative competence are dealt with regularly. I have no doubt that once the changes in this House have been allowed to bed in, the same process will apply here, with the full confidence of the Speaker.

3.34 pm

Martin John Docherty (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I am grateful, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to address the House on the occasion of this debate on English votes for English laws, which is an issue that will have a substantial impact on the constituency that I represent—the one and only West Dunbartonshire. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on bringing this emergency motion to the House—well played, sir!

Before I proceed, I wish, with your approval, Mr Speaker, as I make my first speech, to address not only you but, directly, the communities of the great borough of Clydebank, the ancient borough of Dunbarton, and the mighty Vale of Leven. Knowing the constituency as well as I do, and knowing that that community expects the very best of its Members of this House, I would like to acknowledge my predecessor, Gemma Doyle, who carried out that role with dedication and conviction. I wish Gemma all the very best for the future.

Since taking a seat on these green Benches—forgive my very sore throat, Mr Speaker—I have heard Members from various parties stress the importance of engaging with the population of these islands. Well, we seem to have had a profound failure within three months in the presentation of these proposals by the Leader of the House. A number of Members have spoken of our need to lead. I believe that this is the wrong approach and that it has failed this House miserably, given that an engaged population in Scotland—a physically engaged population—has returned my 55 hon. Friends, as well as myself, to this House. They are engaged and dynamic and have brought us in force to this House of Commons.

My perspective on how we should lead and how we should engage is about the failure of the political process of this political state. It is not our job to lead; the communities who elect us should dictate the terms of our presence and the policies that we bring forward to this House. I invite you to come north to the 59 constituencies of Scotland—the greatest, of course, is West Dunbartonshire—if you want to see an engaged population. The people of Scotland and of my community have gained a new-found confidence in themselves and in the country that is Scotland. That sends a strong message to those in this House, on both sides, about who should lead and who should follow.

I am deeply honoured to represent my constituency. It is home to three of the greatest communities of the

[*Martin John Docherty*]

industrial age and also inextricably linked to the horrors of war and devastation and the legacy of conflict. Its story is not often relayed in Chambers as grand as this.

Clydebank is my home town. It gave birth, along with Dunbarton and the towns of the lower Clyde, to the greatest ships in modern maritime history. My grandfather worked on the Queen Mary and the Queen Elizabeth. My father, a coppersmith by trade, worked on the Queen Elizabeth as well as the QE2—and, by rights, I should have followed suit. Not to be outdone, our close neighbours in that ancient borough of Dunbarton built the world-famous Cutty Sark, which lies not far from this House. One of the last tea clippers to be launched, it was heavily involved in expanding overseas trade and sailed to all corners of the globe.

From the towns of Clydebank and Dunbarton, we go to the villages of Duntocher, Gartocharn, Old Kilpatrick and Bonhill, not forgetting the people's republic of Renton, as well as Faifley. My constituency contains a great deal of history unmatched by many others. Although it is not commonly known in these parts, the Vale of Leven takes great pride in having a part of it in every corner of the globe through having produced and exported "Turkey red" dyed and printed cottons.

It is often said that politicians have people in their lives who they see as heroes; I have none. I see heroes as mystical creatures of fantasy who are to be found in the pages of comics wearing their underwear on the outside. Other than heroes, however, I have those who inspire me such as the members of my family who survived the Clydebank blitz—people such as my father, my late mother, and many others.

On the matter of the vote before us, critically, Mr Speaker, this proposal places you directly, and those who come after you, in a precarious position. It denigrates the position of the Chair of the House of Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Finally, I am no Unionist or home ruler, but I will stand shoulder to shoulder with Members on all Benches to ensure that your integrity and dignity, Mr Speaker, and those of the people who come after you, are maintained as we work as politicians in this House.

Mr Speaker: I expect Mr Carmichael to begin no later than 3.43 pm.

3.40 pm

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): May I start by congratulating the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin John Docherty) on a fine maiden speech?

I speak as a Scot who represents a seat in England, who regards his nationality as British and who is a staunch Unionist. It is because I am a staunch Unionist that I support the measures under discussion. This issue is not new. As my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) has said, it has been around for more than a century. It is four decades since Tam Dalyell brought it up and two decades since devolution legislation went through this House. It is time we had an answer to the West Lothian question. This issue goes with the grain of public opinion on both sides of the border. All the opinion poll evidence north and south of

the border shows support for English votes on English laws, and I congratulate the Government on introducing the measures.

I only have time to make one substantive point. I grew up in Scotland in the 1980s, when the devolution argument was coming to its fore. At the core of the argument was the question: what legitimacy did the United Kingdom Government have to legislate for Scotland on matters on which Scottish Members disagreed? Devolution addresses that. Why cannot that question also apply to England?

I would have a lot of sympathy for the argument rehearsed in today's debate if we were discussing excluding Members from debating and voting on bits of legislation, but that is not what is being discussed. All we are doing is inserting into legislation that applies only to England the same principle of consent that applies elsewhere in the country. That is fair. It is a modest proposal.

Mr MacNeil *rose*—

Iain Stewart: I do not have time to give way.

I would not support measures that excluded Members, for the very good reasons that have been expressed, but my constituents also want that consent so that measures that apply only to them will not be unduly influenced by Members from elsewhere in the United Kingdom. This country has a flexible constitution and it should evolve to take account of the new realities. That is fair for my constituents. It will strengthen the Union. Doing nothing will endanger it.

3.42 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael: First, may I congratulate the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin John Docherty) on a truly magnificent maiden speech? He was unfortunate that his time was limited, but I am sure the House will hear more from him in the future.

If there were any doubt about the need for this debate, it has surely been dispelled by the way in which it has been conducted and by its content. Several issues have come to light. First, the Government are going to create two tiers of MP: that will be the inevitable consequence of their double majority. Secondly, English Members of Parliament will have a veto, but, according to the Leader of the House, a veto will not be afforded to the Scottish Parliament, because the Government insist on the continuation of the Sewel convention.

The most important issue, and that which causes most concern, is the politicisation of your role, Mr Speaker, because you will be put in the position of having to arbitrate on these questions and then not have to give any reasons for your decision. Surely that means that we will be left to speculate on the Chair's reasons, and such speculation cannot be sensible or, indeed, healthy in a political forum. We will be excluded not from debate, but from decisions. That is no way to run a Parliament.

The hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) said that she was acting on the resentment of her constituents. I do not doubt that that resentment is real, but I invite her to reflect on whether that is really the proper basis on which to proceed with changes of this sort. What she is supporting will merely reinforce that resentment, rather than address the underlying reasons for it.

I am not going to burst into song, but if I were I would turn to the late great Johnny Nash, who said:

“There are more questions than answers
And the more I find out, the less I know”.

I am afraid that that is where we are.

Pete Wishart: I beg to move—

Mr Speaker: Order. The Question is going to be put anyway. I thought that the right hon. Gentleman had finished his speech at any rate.

Mr Carmichael: I had finished.

Mr Speaker: Indeed.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 2, Noes 291.

Division No. 41]

[3.45 pm

AYES

Tellers for the Ayes:
Heidi Alexander and
Tom Blenkinsop

Bone, Mr Peter
Hollobone, Mr Philip

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
Ali, Rushanara
Allen, Mr Graham
Anderson, Mr David
Arkless, Richard
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Ms Mhairi
Blackford, Ian
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Boswell, Philip
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
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Cherry, Joanna
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, Julie

Cooper, Rosie
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Cox, Jo
Crausby, Mr David
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Danczuk, Simon
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
Docherty, Martin John
Donaldson, rh Mr Jeffrey M.
Donaldson, Stuart
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Dowd, Peter
Dromey, Jack
Dugher, Michael
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Elliott, Tom
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Fellows, Marion
Ferrier, Margaret
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fleelo, Robert
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul

Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Glass, Pat
Glendon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harpham, Harry
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Mr Mark
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hermon, Lady
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Hunt, Tristram
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Kerevan, George
Kerr, Calum
Khan, rh Sadiq
Kinahan, Danny
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Leslie, Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.

Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan
Mactaggart, rh Fiona
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCaig, Callum
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, Dr Alasdair
McDonnell, John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGarry, Natalie
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McLaughlin, Anne
Meacher, rh Mr Michael
Meale, Sir Alan
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Monaghan, Dr Paul
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Morris, Grahame M.
Mullin, Roger
Murray, Ian
Newlands, Gavin
Nicolson, John
O'Hara, Brendan
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Oswald, Kirsten
Owen, Albert
Paisley, Ian
Paterson, Steven
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Pugh, John
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Jamie
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Marie
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Robertson, Angus
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rotheram, Steve
Ryan, rh Joan
Salmond, rh Alex

Saville Roberts, Liz
 Shah, Naz
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Sherriff, Paula
 Shuker, Mr Gavin
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simpson, David
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smeeth, Ruth
 Smith, rh Mr Andrew
 Smith, Angela
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Owen
 Smyth, Karin
 Spellar, rh Mr John
 Starmer, Keir
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Stuart, Ms Gisela
 Tami, Mark
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Mr Gareth

Thomas-Symonds, Nick
 Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Michelle
 Thornberry, Emily
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turley, Anna
 Twigg, Derek
 Twigg, Stephen
 Umunna, Mr Chuka
 Vaz, rh Keith
 Vaz, Valerie
 Watson, Mr Tom
 Weir, Mike
 West, Catherine
 Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Williams, Hywel
 Williams, Mr Mark
 Wilson, Corri
 Winnick, Mr David
 Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
 Wishart, Pete
 Woodcock, John
 Wright, Mr Iain
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:

**Phil Wilson and
 Karl Turner**

Question accordingly negated.

Ms Angela Eagle: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. We have today seen the Government abstain from voting on the process of introducing English votes for English laws because they knew they had lost the argument. What more can we do to prevent the Government from railroading these controversial changes through the House in one single day of debate? They have not even bothered to vote to support the process that they decided to implement.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I will take other points of order in a moment—[*Interruption.*] Of course I will come to the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner). We are saving him up.

There is a sense in which the hon. Lady's point of order contains a rhetorical question, and it is fair to say that the Government abstained on the question before the House, namely that this matter has been considered. A point has been made; nothing has been decided.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I should like your guidance on a similar point. Because, as you have told the House, the motion was simply saying that we discussed the issue today, many of us abstained rather than vote for it because we, too, feel that we need more time to discuss the matter at greater length. I am seeking your guidance as to how we communicate that to the Government.

Mr Speaker: I would say that the right hon. Gentleman had communicated his point directly to the Leader of the House if the latter were here, but he isn't and therefore the right hon. Gentleman hasn't. That said, I have a feeling that his point of order will have been

heard by other representatives of the Government, notably a distinguished ornament of the Government Whips Office in the form of the Comptroller of Her Majesty's Household, the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Gavin Barwell), so the Government will have heard. In so far as the right hon. Gentleman is arguing for more time, possibly next week, his point has been heard. We will now hear the point of the order of the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond).

Alex Salmond *rose*—

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: We are taking the point of order of Mr Salmond. I will come to you, Mr Skinner. Apologies. I had already pointed to the right hon. Gentleman.

Alex Salmond: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I ask your reassurance that you had not certified that measure as something on which Conservative MPs were not allowed to vote. We are hoping that the abstention is the first of many to come on Government measures—the Leader of the House seems not just to have abstained but to have fled the field entirely.

The point of order made by the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) is an important one. On both sides of the Chamber, most of us detected a feeling that, at the very minimum, a lot more discussion needs to be had before any such measure is railroaded—if the Government have the power to do that any more—through this House of Commons. Is that not the import of the massive vote against the Government we have just had?

Mr Speaker: In response to the right hon. Gentleman, it is clear to me that there are many Members in all parts of the House who believe that more time is required. It is not for the Chair to decree that, but many Members in all parts of the House and of all hues of political opinion have indicated that that is their view. I am sure that view will have been heard. What is more, if the right hon. Gentleman is dissatisfied that it has been adequately heard, I have a feeling that he will practise, perfectly properly, the repetition principle, and that he will keep making the point until he is satisfied that it has been heard. Meanwhile, note my apology to the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner).

Mr Skinner: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. There is another way of looking at this event. The Government introduced this idea with a lot of bravado. The truth is that they failed to convince a majority on their side. They have a majority of 12. Most of the Opposition were in the No Lobby. It is now evident that some of the Government's supporters were not prepared to walk through the Aye Lobby and decided to pull the plug. A decent Government would resign.

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, which requires no response from me.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it possible that we are being unfair to Conservative Members? Is there not a possibility that most of them did not hear the Division

bell for various reasons? In those circumstances, is there not a case for the Division to be called again for absolute clarification?

Mr Speaker: Far be it from me to suggest that the hon. Gentleman is trying to cause trouble—I would not suggest anything of the kind to such an illustrious and long-serving Member—but he has made his own point in his own way. He has a puckish grin on his face and I think he enjoyed it.

Opposition Day

[5TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Tax Credits (Working Families)

4.5 pm

Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab):
I beg to move,

That this House believes that people should be given support and incentives to find employment and stay in employment; notes that, at a time when the recovery is still fragile for many, the impact of a significant reduction in in-work tax credits could increase hardship and undermine the importance of making work pay; believes that any meaningful effort to address the real causes of high welfare costs should tackle the underlying drivers of low pay, housing costs and insecure working conditions; further notes that the threat of a £5 billion reduction in child tax credits would see 3.7 million working families lose an average of £1,400 a year in income; and urges the Chancellor to guarantee that any assistance in the July 2015 Budget is focused solely on people on middle and low incomes.

I am pleased that we have finally come on to our Opposition day debate. It was postponed last week and has been delayed today owing to the emergency debate on English votes for English laws. It is important that we have this debate ahead of the Budget, because what the Government decide to do tomorrow in relation to tax credits will show up the rhetoric they have been using since the election and prove whose side they are really on. It is not the side of working people. They say that they are now the workers' party. Indeed, the Chancellor's op-ed in *The Sun* this weekend started with the line:

"We were elected in May as a party for working people; that's how we'll govern; and that's who my budget this week is for."

On reading that line for the first time on Sunday morning, I would have choked on my cereal were it not for the fact that it is Ramadan and I am fasting. Saying it—asserting it—simply does not make it true. It is about what we do and the choices we make. If the decision the Government make tomorrow on tax credits is as we expect, it will prove that their rhetoric is very far removed from the reality.

We know from what the Chancellor said over the weekend that £12 billion of savings from the welfare budget have been found. It is reported that a substantial chunk of that money will come from cuts to tax credits. Certainly, the Government's attempts to discredit the tax credits regime suggest that they are laying the groundwork ahead of tomorrow's Budget. The independent Institute for Fiscal Studies has suggested that the Government could cut the childcare element of child tax credit back to its 2003-04 level, saving £5.1 billion per year. The IFS says that a £5 billion cut in tax credits in this way would mean some 3.7 million families losing £1,400 a year on average and would push a further 300,000 children into relative poverty. Those are huge sums of money for working people on low pay—people who are trying to do the right thing, who are at the mercy of a labour market that, at the lower end, is insecure and of high housing costs that keep going up and up. Without tax credits to help them through, those who are working and stuck on low pay simply cannot make ends meet.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for very kindly giving way during her remarks, which are so incredibly important. I am so glad we are having this debate today. She talks about the millions of families who will be affected by the announcement we are expecting tomorrow. Does she agree that behind those millions of families are individuals, such as my constituent Joanne Todd, who is already struggling to feed and clothe her children? If these cuts go ahead, she does not know if she will be able to put the heating on this winter.

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend makes a really important point in her customary powerful way. She is absolutely right. Behind each of these statistics—3.7 million families and 300,000 children are shockingly large numbers—are individual stories of hardship and toil: people trying to do the right thing and being punished by the choices the Government will make tomorrow.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Does the hon. Lady accept that in my constituency the number of jobs has increased since 2010 and that unemployment is down? The people behind those statistics are individuals. Does she accept that they are individuals the coalition Government helped to get into work and get paid to support their families?

Shabana Mahmood: And many of those people going into work, I gently say to the hon. and learned Lady, will be in receipt of tax credits. The only way that that work will pay for those individuals moving from unemployment into work is through the tax credits her Government may well cut tomorrow.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head: tax credits are also in-work benefits. Has she sensed any intention on the part of the Government to offset cuts to tax credits to working families in my constituency and hers with an increase in the minimum wage, which would have to rise by about 25%?

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The national minimum wage would have to rise by 25% overnight tonight if the Government make these changes tomorrow. I shall come later to the difficulties and to the changes we need to make to the national minimum wage.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): To help reinforce that point and in response to the hon. and learned Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer), was not mark 1 of welfare reform—moving large numbers of people from benefits into work—one of the successes of the last Labour Government and the coalition Government—and is not mark 2 of welfare reform how we now help those individuals to so increase productivity that they can be paid a fair or living wage? Should we not have been relaxed about this, given that we have five years to make these changes and make mark 2 a success? Instead of punishing people in work—the strivers—should we not be encouraging them up the career ladder?

Shabana Mahmood: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, and this is where I disagree with the tenor of the comments from Government Members in the debates on the economy thus far in this Parliament. For them, a job is a job is a job, whereas we have a better, bolder

vision for people moving into work, not just for their first job, which could be any job, but for progressing. We do not do that by punishing people and taking away the support they rely on when stuck in low-paid work. We have to chart a course towards a higher skilled, higher wage economy, but that is not going to happen before tomorrow's Budget. The support for those on tax credits should not be removed before we have that high-wage economy.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Will the hon. Lady join me in welcoming the fact that the personal allowance rose to £10,600 in the last Parliament, putting £800 a year directly back into the pockets of the people on the lowest pay?

Shabana Mahmood: I gently say to the hon. Gentleman that 60% of those in receipt of tax credits do not pay income tax anyway. If someone is working 30 hours a week on the national minimum wage, they are below the £10,600 personal allowance threshold.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): The last comment and the one earlier from the hon. and learned Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer) amply illustrate Government Members' failure to understand the impact the proposal will have. It will affect 22,000 children in my constituency alone—children who live in homes of families who work but are on low wages, through no fault of their own.

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend makes her point powerfully, but it is not that Government Members do not understand—I think they know full well the impact of their decisions; they simply want to pretend it is not going to be as bad as everybody knows it will be.

A Resolution Foundation study of these proposals just a couple of weeks ago suggests that “over two-thirds of the families affected would be in-work”, that “almost two-thirds of the cut would be borne by the poorest 30 per cent of households; and”

that “almost none of the cut would fall upon the richest 40 per cent of households”.

On what basis, then, can the Tories claim to be the party of working people? These are the working people the Government are choosing to hit and hurt. If they are happy to make these choices, they should at least admit that, rather than hiding behind the rhetoric of being the party of working people, as if somehow that will get them through the next five years.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The hon. Lady is making a powerful case. Like many others, I have been inundated by constituents who are really frightened by the impact of these cuts. One wrote to me saying:

“Child Tax Credit allows people to get over difficult times which happen despite working hard, and cuts will end up forcing more people into poverty”.

Does the hon. Lady agree that these cuts will be counter-productive as well as deeply cruel?

Shabana Mahmood: The hon. Lady makes a powerful point, and I absolutely agree with her. Of course, it was the support available via tax credits that meant that in the recession some people could remain in work even

when their employers had to cut back on their hours as a result of the global financial crisis. That is an important point.

The Government's critique of tax credits over the last couple of weeks has implied that this is a flawed regime that does not work and simply subsidises so-called poverty pay, but a simple examination of the facts shows that the case undermining tax credits is weak. If the Government were serious about tackling the reasons why people have to rely on tax credits, they would come forward tomorrow not with planned cuts or immediate cuts to tax credits, but with longer-term measures to tackle the underlying factors of low pay, high housing costs and insecure employment.

There are 4.6 million households in the UK claiming tax credits. Four million of the families claiming them have children and 2.7 million of those families are in work. There are 5 million children in working families receiving tax credits, and over 70% of all of those, with or without children, claiming tax credits are in work. They were introduced in 2003 to tackle poverty and make work pay. Much of the debate at the time was focused on helping single parents to get into work. We know that the lone parent employment rate rose by 28% between 1997 and 2010, and by a staggering 43% between 1997 and 2014.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Shabana Mahmood: I want to make some progress, but I will give way a little later.

A study of tax credits by the Resolution Foundation in 2012 found that the introduction of working families tax credit, which was the predecessor to working tax credit, provided a

“small but direct boost to employment”,

particularly for single parents. The economics editor of the *Financial Times* recently said:

“Britain's financial support for low income working families is a key reason why we now have a high employment rate and...the Prime Minister must take care not to put at risk a 20 year success story”.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The hon. Lady cites the Resolution Foundation report. Does she agree with the same foundation's report which says tax credits have

“a predictably negative impact on work incentives”?

Shabana Mahmood: No, I do not agree, and there is a difference between eliminating support from working people in the Budget tomorrow and charting a course that would look more like long-term reform of working tax credits to deal with some of the issues relating to clustering at 16 hours, which Members have spoken about previously. However, that should not be done before tackling the underlying factors that are driving people into low-paid employment and keeping them stuck in that employment.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. She touched on a point mentioned in the motion: dealing with the causes of high social security spending, not just the effects. One such cause to which she adverted and that can be found in the motion is housing costs. We have shockingly high housing costs all around the country,

caused by huge housing shortages. Can she indicate what the Labour Front-Bench team thinks should be done to address high housing costs?

Shabana Mahmood: In the end, it is about building more houses. That is something that this Government have singularly failed to do over the five years during which they have already been in government. In view of what is being briefed ahead of the Budget tomorrow, it does not seem to me that they are going to come forward with a game-changing plan when it comes to house building in our country.

Tax credits and child poverty are inextricably linked. The same Resolution Foundation study of 2012 found that there was a clear inverse link between spending on tax credits and child poverty rates. The latest households below average income figures show that progress in tackling child poverty has ground to a halt since this Government came to office, with 2.3 million children remaining in relative poverty and 2.6 million in absolute poverty.

The Work and Pensions Secretary spent most of last week trying to distract from the Government's record on child poverty, first by trying to claim a win on child poverty on the basis that the figures were not as bad as some suggested they might have been—in itself indicative of a shocking complacency—and then by changing the definition of child poverty. The reality remains that too many children in our country struggle with a poor and difficult start in life that directly impacts on their life chances as adults. If not dealt with early, this means that we will all face higher costs further down the track. As I mentioned, the IFS says that cutting £5 billion-worth of tax credits tomorrow will push a further 300,000 children into relative poverty. Tax credit cuts will do nothing to address child poverty; they will simply add to it.

Government Members would have us believe that by cutting tax credits, wages will automatically rise to compensate workers, but that is simply not going to happen. Employers will not give everyone a pay rise on the day the Chancellor cuts tax credits. As I said, the national minimum wage would have to rise by 25% overnight to compensate a lone parent working 16 hours a week for the loss of tax credit, and the wage of a worker on average earnings of £22,000 a year would have to rise by 6% overnight. That would require employers to raise pay overnight by twice the amount by which the Office for Budget Responsibility has said that they will raise pay over a full year, and we know that there is not a chance in hell that that will happen.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): A reduction in tax credits will be not only a kick in the teeth for working people, but totally counter-productive. A constituent who contacted me this week is a single mum who is struggling to put a roof over her head for her young son and teach him a strong work ethic. If the cut goes ahead, she will no longer be able to afford the childcare that enables her to go to work in the first place.

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend has made a powerful point, and I agree with all that she has said.

Graham Evans (Weaver Vale) (Con): When Gordon Brown introduced tax credits in 1998, he said that the

[Graham Evans]

cost would be £2 billion. It is now £30 billion. Will the hon. Lady tell us whether that is too much, too little, or about right?

Shabana Mahmood: I think that what we are talking about is the cost of making work pay in the economy that we have at the moment. As I will explain in more detail later, the Government are doing things the wrong way round. As was pointed out by the Chair of the Work and Pensions Select Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), we must establish a higher-skill, higher-wage economy before we remove the support for those who are stuck on low pay. I would prefer people not to be in that position.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): My hon. Friend is advancing powerful arguments. Does she agree that there is a compelling need for the Government to spell out how they intend to increase pay to a living wage, and increase economic growth, so that people can have more access to jobs in our economy?

Shabana Mahmood: I think that it is for the Government to tell us what they plan to do about the living wage, and I hope that the Minister will enlighten us when he winds up the debate. At the time of the general election, we made a manifesto commitment to incentivise employers to pay the living wage. The Government are welcome to steal that policy, but they should steal it—and allow it to embed a living wage, and higher wages, in our economy—before they start messing around with tax credits.

Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con) *rose*—

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con) *rose*—

Chris Philp *rose*—

Shabana Mahmood: I will give way to the hon. Member for Bedford (Richard Fuller), but then I must make some progress.

Richard Fuller: The hon. Lady mentioned the Labour party manifesto. Will she be a bit more specific? For example, does she favour the granting of tax credits for training contracts to take people from the minimum wage to the living wage, does she support a requirement for local authorities that commission care to commission it in a way that enables employers to pay the living wage, and does she agree that, given the persistence of zero-hours contracts for less than two years, there should be a requirement for such contracts to carry the living wage?

Shabana Mahmood: The hon. Gentleman has made some interesting and important observations about the way in which we can encourage employers to pay the living wage, and I hope that Ministers take up his suggestions. Ours was a clear, straightforward policy to incentivise the paying of the living wage by sharing with employers the benefit that the Government obtain because people are earning more money.

Alan Mak *rose*—

Chris Philp *rose*—

Shabana Mahmood: I am afraid that the boy-band operation on the Government Back Benches is a little unimpressive. Rather than give way for a further Whip's question, I shall make a little more progress.

Another argument advanced by Government Members in recent weeks is that tax credits have been subsidising poverty pay. There is academic and expert evidence that they have not depressed wages at the lower end, and that there has been no general slippage in the part of the earnings distribution where they bite. For the sake of argument, however, let us agree that in an ideal world we would not even take the risk that tax credits might depress wages, or subsidise low or poverty pay. Indeed, let us agree that we would ideally want a system in which they were not needed at all, because everyone could earn a high enough wage to manage perfectly well without them. If the Government were serious about that, they would come forward first with proper and realistic proposals for increasing wages and tackling low pay, and then start thinking about reform of tax credits. Instead, they are putting the cart before the horse and doing things the wrong way round, salami-slicing the tax credits budget but without any credible plan to get wages up before the cuts bite. The Government have no plans to ensure working families do not lose out from their tax credit cuts.

Instead of tackling low pay, the Conservatives are attacking the low paid, and they have form: they cut tax credits 14 times in the last Parliament, including cutting the childcare element of working tax credits from 80% to 70% of a child's childcare costs, costing some working families up to £1,560 a year—an average loss of £570 per year—and increasing the working hours threshold for couples to qualify for WTC from 16 to 24 hours per week, with an average loss of £2,600 for families unable to increase their working hours, according to research commissioned by us from the House of Commons Library. We also know that there are a number of indicators to suggest that the recovery is not feeding through to job security and pay growth for those who have to rely on tax credits.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Has there been an equalities impact assessment of this measure, which will be introduced tomorrow?

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend raises an important point, and we will have to see whether we get any additional information on the impact on equalities ahead of the Budget, but we already know from what we saw over the last Parliament that women are disproportionately affected when the Government start to cut tax credits, as are black and minority ethnic communities.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Shabana Mahmood: I am going to make a little more progress.

As I have said, we also know that a number of indicators suggest that the recovery is not feeding through to job security and pay growth for those who have to rely on tax credits. The number of jobs in low-paid sectors grew at twice the rate of those in non-low-paid sectors between the second quarter of 2010 and the second quarter of 2014. The number of working people paid housing benefit has risen by 400,000 since 2010,

because working people are not bringing home enough money to pay the rent. The number of people earning less than the living wage has increased by 1.8 million since 2009. Now it seems that these same people—the strivers, the doers and the workers whom the Chancellor claims to want to put his arms around and hug close—are, having been hit hard over the last five years, going to bear the brunt again.

Labour believes the way into work and off welfare is by tackling the real causes of high welfare costs: the underlying drivers of low pay, high housing benefit costs and insecure working conditions. The Government's failure to address these underlying causes in a meaningful way over the past five years has meant they have spent £25 billion more than they expected to spend on welfare in 2010. The welfare bill remains higher than expected for the same reason as the deficit remains high: we cannot disconnect what happens in household budgets from the economy overall, and that means we cannot remove tax credits for working people without creating the conditions which allow that to be done in a way that does not penalise workers on low pay.

We want a higher-wage economy where people are less reliant on tax credits to make ends meet. That is why we set out plans to raise the minimum wage to at least £8 an hour by 2019, and it is why we support the living wage and set out proposals in our manifesto to encourage and incentivise business to pay it. I strongly encourage the Government to steal our policy, and if they do steal it they should do so as a first step to embedding higher wages in the economy before they consider going ahead with any changes to tax credits.

The Government also should remember that the way in which the living wage is set assumes that families are already taking up their full tax credits entitlement. The Greater London Authority, which works out the London living wage, says:

"If means-tested benefits were not taken into account (that is, tax credits, housing benefits and council tax benefit) the Living Wage would be approximately £11.65 per hour."

That is more than £2 higher than it is at the moment. The living wage already has tax credits priced in, and it will not be a living wage in the face of tax credit cuts. If the Government come forward tomorrow with proposals on the living wage, they will have to explain either that they are going to go for a much higher living wage than we have at the moment or why they are going to hit working people again and again.

The proposed tax credit cuts tomorrow have attracted widespread criticism across the political spectrum. Everyone agrees that people should be better off in work than unemployed, but removing or significantly cutting tax credits without having charted a course towards a high-skill, high-wage economy means that this Government are not tackling low pay, but are attacking the low paid. That is wrong; those people will be punished for circumstances outside their control as they try to do the right thing. Hon. Members from across the House should send a clear signal to the Government that that is wrong approach and vote in favour of our motion.

4.30 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): A fundamental part of this Government's long-term economic plan is to support working people at every stage of their lives. We have a record we can be

proud of: we are providing our children with the best start in life; we are helping millions of people to secure their first job; we are allowing people to keep more of the money they earn; we are helping families get on the property ladder; and we are providing our pensioners security in their old age. We can do that only on the back of a strong, stable and growing economy. This is the Government who have delivered sustained growth—the fastest in the G7 last year. This is the Government who drove income inequality down, reduced pensioner poverty to record low levels and, according to data released earlier this week by the Office for National Statistics, have seen living standards rise by 3.9% on the year. We now need to finish the job. We need to keep our economy secure; to run a surplus; to start paying down our debts; and to put in place the stable future which this country's citizens voted for.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): How does what the Minister has just said marry up with the International Monetary Fund research showing that taking money from the poorest 20% in society actually stifles growth? IMF figures show that if we invest in the bottom 20%, there would be growth of 0.38%.

Mr Gauke: The hon. Lady quotes the IMF, but this is the same IMF that has praised this Government's record in turning round the economy. The head of the IMF said that she shuddered to think what would have happened had we not got to grips with the deficit. The reality is that if we want to help every part of society, which is what this Government want to do, we need to make sure that we have a strong economy, and that is what this Government are delivering.

Lyn Brown: The Minister says that a strong economy is what this Government are delivering, but the International Labour Organisation has said that between 2010 and 2013 the UK had the biggest drop in real wages of all countries in the G20. How does he square that?

Mr Gauke: In 2014, the UK was the fastest growing economy in the G7 and it looks likely that that will also be the case in 2015. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Lady talks about wages, but they are up 2.7% in the last year. As I said, living standards have risen by 3.9% on the year, despite the fact that we are still living with the consequences of the deepest crash and the biggest deficit, which we inherited from the Labour party.

Rob Marris: Does the Minister not recognise a contradiction in his position? If the economy is as strong as he suggests, there is no need to cut tax credits. If, on the other hand, as Labour Members think, the economy is not nearly as strong as he and his colleagues are making out, we need tax credits because of poverty.

Mr Gauke: The economy is growing strongly, but we are still recovering from the deepest crash. We inherited the biggest peacetime deficit in our history, and we must take difficult decisions to address it. We took difficult decisions in the previous Parliament, which were opposed by the Labour party, and we still have more to do. The Labour party might wish to learn that, if a Government or a political party cannot face up to those challenges, they will not win the trust of the British people.

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree with those of us who were in the previous Parliament that it is strange that the Labour party has learned nothing about welfare reform, deficit reduction and the need to have sound public finances?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend makes a very, very good point. We are in a similar position to that of five years ago: we have one side of the House recognising the need to address our deficit and to put in place the conditions for growth and the other side opposing any measures to try to address the problem.

Mr Jim Cunningham: If the hon. Gentleman cuts tax credits, the difference will be made up by employers, say some on the Government Benches. But how will he do that without legislation? Will we not return to the days of previous Conservative Governments when some people in Coventry were on £1 an hour?

Mr Gauke: The position is that we have to make difficult decisions to address the public finances. Tomorrow, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will announce the first Budget of the Conservative Government. I will not discuss what may or may not be in that Budget, and I do not think that Members would expect me to do so one day beforehand, but I can reassure the House that we will have four days of debate on the Budget to discuss the measures that it contains. None the less, I reiterate that we must address a deficit that remains too large. I am afraid that, once again, as we saw throughout the previous Parliament, Labour is failing to address the issue.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does the Minister accept that, although tough decisions must be made—we all have to realise that they must be made—he should consider whether they are self-defeating. Given the multiplier impact of money in the hands of the poorest people in our economy, they are self-defeating. Secondly, does he recognise that such decisions will have a bigger impact on some parts of the United Kingdom, such as Northern Ireland, which have a high number of people who are low paid, and they are the very parts that he wants to see growing?

Mr Gauke: We want to see growth in every part of the United Kingdom. Again, we have a Budget tomorrow. The record of the Chancellor shows a determination to ensure that there is growth in every part of the United Kingdom. I also make this point: it is a fundamental point of principle that taxpayers' money must be spent wisely to make Government more efficient, effective and accountable. As a consequence, we need to target our spending so that we continue to support those who need supporting while helping millions of people achieve their fullest potential, which we refuse to believe is a life on benefits.

Kevin Hollinrake: Does my hon. Friend agree with this information from the House of Commons Library that says that tax credit changes in the previous Parliament were about focusing support on those on lower incomes? The Institute for Fiscal Studies said that, in terms of net incomes, the average household was £900 a year better off at the end of the previous Parliament than it was at the start.

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend is right on both points. It was only because of the difficult decisions that we took that we were able to restore credibility to the UK as an economy and that we were able to make the progress that we made. Labour said that it is committed to closing the deficit. It voted for the Charter for Budget Responsibility, and the shadow Chancellor told us at the weekend that the Government should run a surplus in normal years. It is therefore disappointing that the Opposition have not yet set out how they will do so, because if they continue to oppose finding savings in the welfare budget they will have to explain whether they would borrow more, tax more or cut departmental spending more.

Debbie Abrahams: Does the Minister consider it a success that the debt to GDP ratio, according to House of Commons Library figures, is running at more than 80% whereas after recapitalising the banks and the biggest global crash in history it was running at only 60%? Is that a success or not?

Mr Gauke: Let me put this as simply as possible. The debt is essentially the accumulation of deficit and for the past five years every measure that the Government took to reduce the deficit was opposed by Labour. Indeed, Labour's economic argument—its whole case—was that we were going too far, too fast in reducing the deficit and that we should have a looser fiscal policy. A looser fiscal policy means borrowing more. If we borrow more, the debt will rise more quickly. The hon. Lady cannot have it both ways. She can argue that we should have been prepared to borrow more and to allow the debt to rise because that was a price worth paying, but she cannot then turn around and say, "We want the debt to be lower, even though our policies called for higher debt."

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister is construing tax credits as a welfare cost, but will he not accept that if someone is starting a small business and can afford to pay someone £10,000 to run a café, or whatever it is, but the person who is being employed needs £15,000, those tax credits would have helped generate a business with a much greater turnover than just the incomes of the individual employees? Tax credits are an instrument for generating new small businesses, not simply an act of charity from the Tories.

Mr Gauke: Cutting corporation tax rates for small businesses, introducing the employment allowance, helping under-21s and apprentices whose employers no longer have to face national insurance contributions, reducing the regulatory burden, restoring the economy to health and ultimately improving access to finance is what helps small businesses, and that is a record that we are proud of.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): On two occasions in this House, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has been challenged on his argument that we can cut tax credits because we can increase the minimum wage or encourage employers to pay the living wage. The problem with that argument is that unless employers are encouraged or coerced to do that overnight, which would hurt small businesses disproportionately, it will hit families with children on tax credits the hardest. Is the Minister saying that the Government will not cut

tax credits without compelling employers to pay the minimum wage? If he is not, the lectures he is giving us on hard choices are nothing compared with the hard choices facing those families.

Mr Gauke: The hon. Gentleman is trying to draw me in on the announcements that will be made tomorrow—

Wes Streeting: Of course.

Mr Gauke: He did it very skilfully, but unsuccessfully, I fear. If we want to help small businesses, we need to put in place a pro-enterprise environment and if he wants to see a Government who have done that, he should look at the record of the Government over the past five years.

Caroline Lucas: The Minister is talking about borrowing, but does he recognise that further cuts to Government spending are leading to a rapid rise in household borrowing? Official forecasts project that household debt will surpass the record pre-crisis levels of 2008 before the end of the decade. Does he not recognise that that instability, which his policies are creating, is likely to lead to yet another financial crash as he is simply moving debt from the public sphere to the private sphere, and making it very unstable?

Mr Gauke: I do not accept that argument. On the question of the fear of further crises and so on, we need to ensure that the public finances are on a sound footing, recognising that there will be times at which there will be turbulence in the economy. This is one of the differences we had at the general election. The Government recognise that we have to be serious about getting debt down, which is why we believe that there should be a surplus in normal years. If the Opposition are coming to that view, I welcome it, but their refusal to consider a role for the welfare budget in making a contribution towards reducing the deficit suggests that their heart is not in it.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In 1998, tax credits were introduced for two reasons—low wages and the high cost of living. They enabled the proportion of children in poverty to be reduced from 35% to 19%. Barnardo's in Northern Ireland has expressed concerns about welfare reforms, particularly to tax credits. It says that 160,000 families will find themselves in child poverty as a result. How would the Minister answer that and reassure Barnardo's and me as an elected representative that that will not happen?

Mr Gauke: We need a fair and sustainable welfare system. Five years ago we inherited a welfare system that was not working for people throughout our country. Those who worked hard found more and more of their earnings being taken away to support a welfare system that was dangerously out of control. On tax credits alone, in 2010-11, nominal spending had increased by an extraordinary 180% compared to the benefits they replaced. Worse, the benefits system as it stood created the most perverse incentive of all: for some people it made financial sense to choose to live on benefits rather than earn a living. It rewarded doing the wrong thing, punished doing the right thing, alienated millions of hard-working people and let down millions more. It was financially and morally unsustainable.

Graham Evans: Working tax credits of £30 billion—my hon. Friend may have noticed my question to members of the Opposition Front-Bench team whether that was too high. They did not answer. Does not the whole debate show that Labour is the party of welfare?

Mr Gauke: I fear that my hon. Friend is right. Given what we inherited, it was necessary to introduce wide, comprehensive reforms to reward work and allow people to fulfil their potential. We have cut taxes. We have capped benefits so that no household earns more in out-of-work benefits than the average household earns by working. We are simplifying the benefits system through the roll-out of universal credit. We tightened the rules to prevent abuse of the system and, perhaps most importantly, we ensured that there were decent, full-time jobs for people to go to. At the same time, we have ensured that benefits continue to help the most vulnerable.

Before I set out how we will continue to help working people to achieve their aspirations, I shall say a few words about tax credits. Tax credits have helped to support many of our most vulnerable families. Over the past five years, we have channelled the support they provide towards the people who need it most—for instance, by increasing the disability element of tax credit in line with the consumer prices index. The next five years will see us continue to roll out universal credit, which will simplify the complex web of benefits and tax credits currently in place.

Jo Cox (Batley and Spen) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Gauke: Let me make a little progress, then I will give way to the hon. Lady.

Universal credit will replace six working-age benefits—housing benefit, jobseeker's allowance, income support, employment and support allowance, working tax credit and child tax credit—with a single application process and a uniform taper rate across the UK. It will improve the incentives for people to work. It will target support at those who need it most. It will diminish the opportunities for fraud or simple error and it will make administering the system much more efficient. Universal credit is the most radical transformation of the welfare system we have ever seen, making it simpler, easier and fairer. Once it is fully implemented, it is estimated that it will increase the number of people in work and make households throughout the country better off.

Jo Cox: I thank the Minister for giving way. Does he agree with the Resolution Foundation analysis that for a hard-working single parent with one child in my constituency working 16 hours a week on the national minimum wage, if some of the cuts go through she can expect an annual loss of earnings of £1,500, which will take 12 years of incremental 2% pay increases to recoup? What is his plan to help her to get a faster pay rise?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. This does not apply only to the hon. Lady: when an intervention is made, it should be short and sharp and address one point. It should not be a written script to be read out in the House. I am not addressing these remarks specifically to the hon. Lady. Everybody has been doing that this afternoon. The Front-Bench speeches have therefore taken a very long time, and there are people

[Madam Deputy Speaker]

who have asked to speak this afternoon who will be here all day and will have only two minutes at the end of the debate, whereas people are making interventions and will then leave the Chamber and not take part in the rest of the debate. That is not fair play in this Chamber and we expect better.

Mr Gauke: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will try to make a little progress. In response to that intervention, I will not speculate about announcements that might or might not be made tomorrow, but I will say that universal credit is a sensible reform that comes alongside a whole raft of other measures by which the Government are helping hard-working people.

Alan Mak: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Gauke: I will give way for a short intervention.

Alan Mak: I know that the Minister cannot comment on future Budgets, but does he share my recollection of previous Budgets in which, instead of managing the nation's finances, Labour cynically increased tax credits as a pre-election sweetener?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend makes a reasonable point. There was a certain correlation between the previous Government's generosity and election years.

The Government are bringing in a raft of measures to help working people. We are giving this nation's children the best start in life. We have increased our spending on childcare and early-years education by £1 billion. We have given 15 hours of free childcare entitlement to all three and four-year-olds, as well as to the poorest 40% of two-year-olds, and we are doubling that for families in which both parents work. We are extending the right to request flexible working to all. Through tax-free childcare we are giving 20% support on childcare costs, up to £10,000 per child. Universal credit will increase the childcare support for low-income families to 85%. Our pupil premium and early-years pupil premium are giving schools, nurseries and childminders additional money to ensure that children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds do not fall behind. Through our childcare business grant scheme we have 4,500 new childminders and over 30,000 new childcare places.

Catherine West: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Gauke: I will give way for another short intervention.

Catherine West: Will the Treasury be doing a proper equalities impact assessment for tomorrow's statement?

Mr Gauke: We will perform the required assessments, as we always do.

The best way to prosperity is still employment. The past five years have seen a jobs miracle—1,000 jobs a day; 2 million in total. For every job lost in the public sector, the private sector has created over five and a half more. I simply do not accept Opposition claims that they have somehow been second-class jobs on part-time or zero-hours contracts. Over the past year 85% of jobs created have been full time and 92% have been high or medium skilled. Unemployment has fallen by 349,000

people over the past year alone. That is 349,000 more people standing on their own two feet, and 349,000 households with greater financial security.

We want to continue our fantastic record on jobs so that we achieve full employment in the UK. We are providing our young adults with a route to employment through a record number of apprenticeships, and we have committed to supporting 3 million new apprenticeships. We will work with our Jobcentre Plus network to provide routes into work experience and apprenticeships for young people leaving education.

When people are in work, we will cut their taxes. We have increased the tax-free personal allowance for 27 million people, from £6,475 to £10,600 this year. That will rise to £12,500 by the end of this Parliament. We will enshrine the concept of a tax-free minimum wage in law. We will also raise the 40p income tax threshold to £50,000, because that should be for high earners, not middle earners. Already, a typical basic-rate taxpayer is paying £905 less income tax than in 2010, and by 2017-18 we will have lifted over 3.7 million people out of income tax altogether.

We have frozen fuel duty since 2011 and council tax since 2010. We have said that over the next five years we will not raise income tax, VAT or national insurance contributions. Our record low inflation is keeping down the cost of household goods. We have increased the national minimum wage by 3.1%—3.3% for 18 to 21-year-olds—thus benefiting over 1 million people. At the same time, wages have increased by 2.7% on the year for the three months to April. That all means more money in people's pockets, more incentives to work, and a fundamental shift from dependency and towards productivity.

Back in 2010 we were a country living beyond our means and with worrying signs of being addicted to that lifestyle. Whenever that is proved to be unsustainable—something that global markets have a habit of proving—the poorest and the most vulnerable are hit the hardest. That is what we wanted to avoid, and that is why we have strived so hard to turn around Britain's economy. Despite the best efforts of the Labour party, which opposed every difficult decision we took on the path towards recovery, we have achieved a lot. We have shielded the most vulnerable and those on the lowest incomes and have asked those with the broadest shoulders to bear a heavier burden. We have given greater economic security and a higher standard of living to millions of people in this country. At every opportunity, we have stood up for those who want to work and do the right thing. We have promoted work and helped create the opportunities to work. We have helped people to achieve their goals and secure themselves a brighter future. We have done all this while cutting the deficit and creating the highest growth of any major advanced economies. It is a record we are proud of, and one we will continue.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Before I call the next colleague to speak, let me say that it is obvious that there are far more people who wish to speak than there is time available. If I were to put a time limit on now, it would be some four minutes. I consider that that is unfair to people who are making their maiden speeches. I trust that everyone else in the Chamber

will wish to give a decent amount of time to people who are making their maiden speeches, as they themselves have had. I therefore ask other Members to limit their speeches to some five minutes or less in order to show courtesy to the other Members of this House who wish to speak, and especially those who are making their maiden speeches. That stricture does not apply to the Front-Bench spokesman for the Scottish National party, Mr Ian Blackford.

4.57 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I congratulate the Labour party on bringing this most important debate to the House. Having listened to the Minister over the past 25 minutes, I think that we on the SNP Benches must live in a different world to the one that he lives in. When we revisit what has been happening over the past couple of weeks, with the scandal of the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions coming to this Chamber and wanting to redefine how we measure child poverty, we can see that that indicates the scale of the problem we face. But the cat is now well and truly out of the bag. We listened to the Minister taunting the Labour party and accusing it of being the party of welfare. On these Benches, we see the importance of what we call social security in Scotland. We believe that society is as strong as its weakest link. The battle that we are facing in this Parliament is an ideological one with a Government who want to demonise the poor of this country.

Let this House take the opportunity to say to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, before he rises to deliver his emergency Budget tomorrow, that he should not use the failure of the Government to fix the deficit as an opportunity to attack the poor and the disadvantaged in our society. In particular, the Government should pause and reflect on the importance of tax credits to those who rely on the contribution that they make to the household budgets of many of our citizens. Tax credits have a significant impact in raising the income of low-income households, particularly those with children. The tax credits system was designed as a key mechanism for tackling poverty and inequality, and the SNP firmly opposes any moves to gut it, as the Tories have hinted at doing.

Tax credits require a significant amount of expenditure, which largely goes to supporting children in lower income families. In 2013-14, tax credit expenditure in Scotland was £2 billion, supporting thousands of people on low incomes. The SNP recognises the vital role that tax credits play in providing such support, and that is why our manifesto proposed to protect their value by increasing tax credits annually in line with inflation.

We need to go much further, however, and do more to raise wages, including raising the minimum wage, promoting the living wage and increasing the work allowance in universal credit. It is the delivery of real wage growth that will lead to a natural reduction in tax credits. These benefits cannot be removed at a time when many are on low pay.

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): My hon. Friend is right to talk about the moral case and the position in which the poorest in our society are being put. The Conservative party also talks about

productivity. Does my hon. Friend agree that cutting tax credits will harm the possibility of raising productivity in the economy?

Ian Blackford: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We hear much in this Chamber about productivity, but the reality is that over the past seven years productivity has fallen by 0.7%. Rather than attacking the poor, which is what the Government are doing, their Budget tomorrow should introduce a programme for investment in this country that will lead to a rise in real wages, improve productivity and negate the need for tax credits. Removing tax credits will not fix the problems this country is suffering.

The failure of driving sustainable economic growth means that many people who are in work are in poverty. As a result, many of them rely on tax credits in order to put food on the table to give thousands of young people a decent start in life. There has to be dignity in work, and much has to be done to drive investment in our economy, enhance productivity and see a sustained rise in real wages.

Tax credits are an investment in our people and, as a consequence, the future prosperity of our country. Tax credits have made an important contribution to tackling poverty and inequality. In 2013-14, 90% of tax credit expenditure went to families with an income of less than £20,000. Families with children received an average of £6,900, and families without children an average of £2,200, from tax credits. That represents a very clear contribution to boosting incomes and tackling poverty and inequality. Tax credits help tackle in-work poverty and child poverty.

It is worth noting that about 70% of tax credits go to families where somebody is in work, predominantly supporting low-income working families. Given that a majority of people in poverty are already in work, tax credits are thus a crucial tool to support working people.

The Child Poverty Action Group estimates that the UK Government's welfare cuts will push an additional 100,000 children in Scotland into poverty by 2020—and that does not take into account the additional £12 billion-worth of cuts that this Government want to push through. Given that 500,000 children benefit from the tax credit system in Scotland, cuts to tax credits would certainly have a further detrimental impact on the wellbeing of children in Scotland and on child poverty figures.

Figures due to be published tomorrow by the Scottish Government show that if the Chancellor cuts child tax credit back to 2003 levels in real terms, as has been reported, the poorest 20% of Scottish families with children will lose an average of nearly 8% of their income. That will have the impact of taking a total of £425 million out of the Scottish economy. How are we to deliver sustainable growth when we take £425 million out of the pockets of the poorest in our society? It beggars belief. We want a caring, compassionate society; that is not what we are getting from this Government.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): Not from those nasty Tories.

Ian Blackford: That comment from a sedentary position is correct. We used to talk about the nasty party when Thatcher was in power; it seems to have returned.

[*Ian Blackford*]

SNP Members will reflect on the choices made by the previous Government and this one. Some £375 billion of new money has been created through the quantitative easing programme. We recognise that some of that was necessary, but it created circumstances in which those in the financial markets benefited massively. A 90% increase in the value of the FTSE 100 since 2009, a huge increase in the value of financial assets, and banker's bonuses that continue to reach eye-watering figures are the impact of this Government's political choices. They have created the circumstances that have delivered increased value in financial markets; they have not created the circumstances in which wages could rise and the country as a whole could benefit. "All in this together"? You've got to be kidding!

Chris Philp: Will the hon. Gentleman join me in welcoming the fact that inequality actually fell during the past five years?

Ian Blackford: I must tell the hon. Gentleman that according to the figures released two weeks ago, child poverty in Scotland is up by 20,000. That is the reality of what his Government have done to people in my country.

Sammy Wilson: The hon. Gentleman made a point about quantitative easing. Does he accept that one of the problems identified was the lack of bank lending to industry, and that banks needed liquidity to increase lending to businesses?

Ian Blackford: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, because we need a debate about that in the House. The real reason behind quantitative easing was exactly that—to produce an increase in bank lending—but if we look at what has happened over the past five or six years, we can see that there has hardly been a significant increase in bank lending. The money has gone into the financial markets and benefited the banks and the bankers, but we as a country have not seen the benefits that we should have had. That is the reality of what has happened. The previous Government had the choice between investing in the real economy and sticking cash into the back pockets of the bankers, which is what they achieved.

Why do the Government not invest in growing the economy and supporting low-paid workers, rather than punishing them for the Government's failure to deliver sustainable economic growth?

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that this Government need to stop persecuting the poorest in society, and instead put pressure on big business to provide a proper living wage?

Ian Blackford: Absolutely. I concur 100% with the hon. Gentleman. When we come to vote on the emergency Budget, I appeal to Conservative Members to examine their own consciences, look at the pain that will be caused if they go ahead with cutting tax credits, and recognise that we need to invest.

Kwasi Kwarteng: Why in such debates do Opposition Members never mention the deficit or the country's financial and fiscal situation? I am curious as to why they make no attempt to address that matter.

Ian Blackford: I must say that I find it remarkable that the hon. Gentleman has asked such a question. I have spent much of the past 10 minutes talking about the need for sustainable economic growth, because that is how we can reduce the deficit, not by punishing the poor in this country. That is what he fails to accept.

Rob Marris: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Blackford: I will make some progress and then I will give way.

The SNP firmly believes that we need to do far more to tackle poverty, and addressing inequalities is at the heart of the Scottish Government's programme for Scotland. We challenge the UK Government to commit to a more ambitious rise in the minimum wage, and to follow the Scottish Government's lead in paying all staff the living wage.

The UK Government have already cut tax credits. In 2012, the eligibility threshold for child tax credit changed from a family income of £41,000 to £26,000 for lone parents and to £32,000 for families with two children. The number of hours that couples with children had to work in order to be eligible for working tax credit went up from 16 hours a week to 24, with one parent having to work at least 16 hours. As a result of those changes, 11,370 Scottish families lost working tax credits worth up to £3,870 per year and 73,300 Scottish families lost child tax credits worth about £545 per year.

More than 500,000 children in Scotland benefit from tax credits. Two thirds of the £2 billion expenditure on tax credits in 2013-14 went to low-income families with children; only 5% went to households without children. That is why we are alarmed. Any removal of tax credits will clearly lead to an increase in child poverty. It is simply inhumane to consider such a move.

In a speech last week, which was widely interpreted as a statement of intent to gut tax credits, the Prime Minister said:

"There is what I would call a merry-go-round. People working on the minimum wage having that money taxed by the government and then the government giving them that money back—and more—in welfare. Again, it's dealing with the symptoms of the problem: topping up low pay rather than extending the drivers of opportunity—helping to create well paid jobs in the first place."

Those comments suggest that the Tories are planning to target child tax credits and working tax credits, which provide support to low-income working people.

Although we agree that we need to take urgent action to tackle low pay and raise wages, removing the vital support that tax credits give cannot be the answer. The SNP has set out a range of policies that aim to boost low incomes and drive wage growth. We have proposed raising the minimum wage to £8.70 by 2020, raising the incomes of the lowest-paid in our society and reducing dependence on tax credits.

The Scottish Government are the first living wage-accredited Government in the UK, and we are actively promoting the living wage by encouraging companies to sign up to our Scottish business pledge. We challenge the UK Government to follow suit and guarantee that all their staff will be paid the living wage.

We want to see a £600 increase in the work allowance of universal credit, which determines when people entering work begin to have their benefits reduced. That would support people on low incomes and boost the income of a worker who receives universal credit by £390.

Removing much need financial support for those on low incomes, in the form of tax credits, simply cannot help make work pay. The SNP wants to make work pay, but we must do so by raising incomes and tackling low pay.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): The problem with the Government's suggestion that cutting tax credits will lead to higher pay is that the labour market is weighted in favour of the employer, rather than the worker. The only way to restore wage growth across the board, especially in the private sector, is through the expansion of collective bargaining. We simply cannot have wage growth in a country where the erosion of trade union rights is right at the top of the Tory agenda. The Government are doing the exact opposite of what they intend, which is to get people back to work and on decent pay—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Order! Honestly, we must have short interventions. I want everybody to get to speak. Interventions are not meant to be speeches. We have to help each other today because a lot of people wish to speak. The shorter the interventions, the more people we will get through.

Ian Blackford: I agree with the gist of what the hon. Lady said. We need to ensure that there is proper protection for trade union rights throughout the UK.

The Resolution Foundation, which has been much commented on, has assessed the proposed plans. It found that more than two thirds of the families affected—2.7 million of them—would be in work. Working families with two children would lose up to £1,690 a year. Almost two thirds of the cut would be borne by the poorest 30% of households; almost none of the cut would fall on the richest 40% of households.

A poll by YouGov and *The Sunday Times* the other week found that there was opposition across the UK to cuts in tax credits, and that the opposition was highest in Scotland: 56% of Scots are opposed to the cuts and only 37% are in favour. Clearly, there is public opposition to any attempt to target tax credits, and that opposition is strongest in Scotland.

The Tory assault on the welfare system is already pushing more and more people, particularly thousands of children, into poverty. There are worrying links between welfare reform and food bank use. The Trussell Trust has reported that 117,689 people picked up a three-day supply of groceries from Scottish food-banks in 2014-15, including 36,114 children. That is eight times the number of people who were helped just two years ago. Given the social harm that is already being done by Tory welfare cuts, the future damage that could be caused by gutting tax credits is unthinkable. The Tories' plans, and the high degree of uncertainty about the future of that lifeline support, demonstrate the need for full powers over Scotland's welfare system to be in Scottish hands, not those of the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions.

5.15 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I am delighted finally to have the opportunity to speak on this subject because I profoundly believe that tax credits are one of the greatest policy errors in the history of the welfare

state. I say that not because of the Resolution Foundation, the International Monetary Fund or any theory; I say it because of my experience in the real world running a small business.

Let me share two key experiences with the House. The first was when I set up as a mortgage broker in 2004. We focused on the shared ownership sector, so most of our applicants were on lower and middle incomes. I was distinctly surprised when I found that people could take out mortgages based on tax credits. It is its wisdom the Financial Services Authority decided that that was suitable, and I would be interested to know whether there are any Treasury figures on the amount of credit—both secured and unsecured—that was taken out on the basis of tax credits, using other people's money to borrow other people's money, and reinforcing the double dependency at the core of the tax credit system.

In my experience, the most serious issue with tax credits was when we started to recruit staff. In 2009, we embarked on our first round of pay rises after the great recession—Labour Members will be familiar with that—and I found it extraordinary when I received emails from staff declining those pay rises. Why did people not want a pay rise? One would expect anybody to want one—we all would; we want to get on in life. People rejected those pay rises because they would lose too much in tax credits, and that is the fundamental flaw in the tax credit system. I found that with various members of staff and parents at our school: people were in a dilemma about whether they should press on in life and try to earn more, even though they would lose money from tax credits and other benefits. I think that the tax credit policy is such a profound error because at a time of general prosperity we should not be seeking massively to expand the benefit system.

Let us consider our three core economic challenges. The first is the productivity puzzle, but it is no puzzle to me that people do not become more productive or work harder when there is no incentive for them to do so. Secondly, why is it a surprise that we have flat wage growth when there is such a disincentive for millions of workers to earn more? Thirdly, and most importantly, we have a real problem with social mobility, which is frozen. Everybody talks about that problem, but why would someone try to get on in life and be socially mobile if the massively expanded benefit system does not reward them for doing so? That is fundamental. To me, the essence of the tax credit system is that we are spending £30 billion a year to put a cap on the wages of British people and a ceiling on ambition and aspiration.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I would like the hon. Gentleman to recognise that quite a lot of Opposition Members lived on tax credits and it is insulting to say that we have no ambition. I am sure he will recognise that we do.

James Cartlidge: I am delighted that the hon. Lady has searing ambition, and I am sure that when she achieves her full ambition she will want to reform welfare and ensure that people make the most of themselves. Tax credits are a massive barrier—that is a fact even if no Labour Member will recognise it—and we are spending £30 billion a year to put a ceiling on the aspiration and ambition of British working families. My hon. Friends

[James Cartlidge]

and I believe in a safety net, but I do not believe in a ceiling. We should not put ceilings on ambition and hold people back from making the most of their natural talents and abilities. We should empower them to make the most of their skills.

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman thinks people are getting a king's ransom in tax credits. The reality is that the Government are taking people on low pay that simply will not keep a person and their family and bringing them just to the breadline. They are not exactly incentivising them to stay in poverty. That is the crucial flaw in his argument.

James Cartlidge: Of course it is not a king's ransom. That is the point. We are trapping people on benefits.

At the end of the day, the money has to come from somewhere. Someone else has to earn the wages to pay for the tax credits of people who receive them. If we reduce them, people will have to be more productive, will have to work harder and will take alternative employment to make that up. That is what happens in the real world. I am proud to be in a party that is ready to take the tough decisions to deal with the fundamental problems we face.

We must look at a solution to the problem the hon. Lady describes. Clearly, we cannot just cut the whole system overnight, but it is worth reflecting that, according to the House of Commons Library, if we spent the £30 billion we spend on tax credits on education, we would have the best-funded education system in the European Union and the fifth best-funded system in the entire world.

There are choices—to govern is to choose—and there is an opportunity cost to spending. My view is that we should reduce tax credits, increase the minimum wage over a long period towards the living wage and reduce employer's national insurance with the savings we make so that employers can cope with the increase. That is a one nation policy. It is radical and tough. I say to my hon. Friends on the Front Bench: be brave, be bold and reform tax credits, because they will be helping working people who are being held back by that massive dependency culture.

5.21 pm

Sir Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I thought South Suffolk was part of Britain, but it is perfectly obvious that it is not. The experience the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) describes bears no relation whatever to reality or to the reality in the constituency I represent.

Tomorrow, we will have a Budget. The Minister said we will hear about the Government's long-term economic plan. I can tell the House what the Government's long-term economic plan is: to him that hath shall be given, and from him that hath not even that shall be taken away.

The fact is that the inequality and inequity that has been deliberately created by the Government is an abomination to a country that is supposed to be a democracy. They have forced schools in my constituency to go into an academy system. I will visit one of those schools next week in one of the most deprived areas of my constituency. The Government forced it to go into a

group and put in charge a woman called Dana Ross, who was the headteacher of Altrincham Grammar School for Girls. She has formed a group, Bright Futures, to run those schools. She has just increased her own pay from £120,000 a year to £220,000 a year. That is the kind of opportunity that this Government give to people.

I represent a constituency of major deprivation, with some of the highest unemployment in the entire country. When I go back to my constituency and see how people are being victimised and deprived, it horrifies me. Let me give the House some statistics. My constituency—Manchester, Gorton—has the 10th highest level of child poverty in the UK out of 650 constituencies. My city, Manchester, is No. 4 among the top 20 local authorities with the highest level of child poverty in the UK. Forty-two per cent. of children in my constituency live in poverty. That is the direct result of the Government's deliberate policies. They have created intolerable poverty in my constituency and they crow about it.

The situation in my constituency, with regard to low-paid parents with dependent children who rely on tax credits to make up the difference between what they earn and what they need to get by, is that there are 21,300 children in families who receive tax credits. Cuts will hit working families with those low incomes the hardest, potentially meaning that more children will fall below the poverty line.

Let us look at four statistics relating to tax credits. The number of families with children claiming tax credits in the Gorton constituency: 11,000. The number of working families with children claiming tax credits in the Gorton constituency: 6,800. The number of children in working families receiving tax credits: 14,800. The percentage of families in the Gorton constituency receiving tax credits: 79%. Tomorrow that lot on the Government Benches, who give money to the bankers and the property owners, are planning to victimise the people who live in that kind of poverty.

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con) *rose*—

Sir Gerald Kaufman: No, I am not going to give way to the hon. Lady, unless of course she has an intervention provided for her by her Whips like the rest of her colleagues who have intervened so far.

Let us be clear about this: working-age households with the lowest incomes lost the most, as a proportion of their income, in the previous Parliament. In working-age households, the incomes of those with children have been hit hardest by the Government's tax and benefit changes. Families with children have been hit the hardest of all. Working families with children lost up to £2,000 a year, which is double the average loss of £1,100. Cuts to tax credits far outweigh the increases in the personal allowance over the period. The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, in its state of the nation report for last year, said:

“We have come to the reluctant conclusion that without radical changes to the tax and benefit system to boost the incomes of poor families, there is no realistic hope of the statutory child poverty targets being met in 2020.”

There will be radical changes tomorrow, but they will not be radical changes to help the people who live in my constituency. They are good, decent and hard-working

people when they get the chance of a job, rather than being unemployed. There will be nothing in the Budget for them. The Government do not care, but we shall remember.

5.28 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): It is a particular pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Sir Gerald Kaufman), the Father of the House.

Tax credit payments play an important role in the finances of many of my constituents, helping them to provide for childcare, meet ongoing expenditure and, crucially, join the workforce. My constituency is the prosperous town of Solihull, but there is still a legion of very hard-working people on not particularly high salaries who are helped by tax credits. I remember one door I knocked on in Shirley about a year or so before the general election. I met a young couple who told me that they both worked full time, brought up two children and earned something like about £20,000 a year between them. They had to drive around in a 15-year-old car. Their lives were difficult financially and tax credits really helped them to get over a hump in the road. It would therefore be wrong to lose tax credits overnight without proper recompense through the tax system and other means of helping individuals. Incidentally, they also commented on how the state provided for people local to them who did not work, but had a much higher standard of living—a strong argument for a sensible cap on benefits, with which it seems that the shadow Chancellor now agrees.

We should not pretend, however, that tax credits are perfect. When they were launched, there was a massive problem with over and underpayments—2 million instances in the first year alone—and this has not stopped. Okay, they are better managed by HMRC, but there is still a great deal of confusion in the tax credits system. If we were designing a system now to help people into work and to support families, would we really design tax credits with the inbuilt pitfall of overpayments that must then be clawed back, often to the great personal distress of the claimant?

There are also long-standing issues of fraud in the tax credits system. The online portal was closed in 2005 when tens of millions of pounds was defrauded, much of it by organised gangs from overseas. I remember reporting on the story in my capacity as BBC News personal finance correspondent and being told by officials that although it was unfortunate, the fraud was seen as a price worth paying to deliver the project. The phrase used was “spray and pay”.

In addition, there is an issue, touched on by hon. Members, about how tax credits effectively top up low pay in the economy. They are effectively a subsidy for big business. I note that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood) disputed this fact, but that august publication, *The Guardian*, carried a story on 20 April saying that £11 billion was being used to top up low pay through the tax credits system.

There is also a strong cultural issue. Does it not damage society and individual entrepreneurialism to have so many people effectively in receipt of welfare and beholden to the state, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) asked earlier? As we have seen in Greece and elsewhere, over-reliance on the state damages society and leaves individuals incredibly

vulnerable to global financial shocks, as well as domestic economic shocks. He made an interesting point about whether many loans now active are predicated on tax credits. Surely that needs to be investigated further by the Financial Conduct Authority.

Also, it is possible that some governing parties have used tax credits as a means by which—heaven forbid—to curry favour with the electorate. We should not forget that the biggest rises in tax credits came just before the 2005 and 2010 general elections. Is it not significant as well that tax credit spend rose by 340% between 1997 and 2010, whereas average salaries rose by only 30%? Tax credits have increased by 10 times the level of average salaries, drawing more and more people into dependence on the state. There is also the wrongheaded situation of people on salaries far in excess of the national average being dragged into tax credits. In particular, single people often do not get any help whatsoever, yet the pattern in this country is of more single households being formed.

No Government Member has so far suggested that tax credits should be done away with overnight. They should, however, be replaced slowly over time by a different, cleaner system less open to fraud and miscalculation. For me, increasing the personal allowance, from £10,000 to £12,500 and potentially beyond, is key. We should cut out the middle man. There is no need to claw cash back. It is also essential to raise the 40p personal allowance. There are many people paying tax at 40p in the pound who should not be; the system should not have been so designed that they have to pay it.

We are doubling the amount of free childcare from 15 hours to 30 hours—a key means by which to enable people to get back into the workforce—while fuel duty is now 18p cheaper than it would have been under Labour's plans, which has made a massive difference to family finances. In addition, ending the green levies on energy, including home energy supplies, should press down on home energy costs. In Solihull, we have just managed to freeze council tax for the fifth year on the trot—another means of delivering tax cuts, in effect, when compared to inflation, for working people. This has happened while unemployment in my constituency has fallen by 67% since 2010.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Chancellor was very specific about how he intends to cut tax credits for poorer working families, but very woolly about how, as part of the so-called long-term economic plan, he would encourage employers to pay decent wages?

Julian Knight *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Before the hon. Gentleman continues, he has spoken for quite a while now, so I am sure that he is right at the end of his speech and wants to let others in.

Julian Knight: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

My answer to the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) is that we will find out a lot more about the future direction of tax credits and other welfare measures from the Chancellor's Budget statement tomorrow, so we should wait on that announcement.

[Julian Knight]

I am running out of time, so let me say that I completely understand why tax credits were invented. They have done a lot of good in our society. There have, however, been unintended consequences. Worst of all, they are making millions of healthy, working-age adults reliant on cash from the state. We must preserve elements of the system for those trying to get into work, but we should augment it by active programmes of raising personal allowances and enhancing childcare provision.

5.36 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to speak and share my thoughts today. Maiden speeches in this Chamber are quite different and unnerving, but I will grasp this opportunity to introduce myself and my constituency to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and to my colleagues.

Being a Member of this House is an honour and privilege that we all share, but to earn the trust of people we grew up with against a backdrop of one of the most vile and personalised election campaigns ever seen in Great Britain makes my smile just that extra bit broader as I stand here today. It is a further honour to be the first woman ever to represent the Bradford West constituency.

It is customary to say a few pleasant words about my predecessor—[*Laughter.*] I have many words, but sadly only a few pleasant ones. My predecessor was, I am told, a great orator. The sad truth is that the only words he ever directed towards me were misogynistic, vitriolic, very dangerous and, to quote him,

“only ever had a fleeting relationship with the truth”.

However, it would be most unwise of me not to compliment him on his sensational acting abilities, not forgetting, as demonstrated in “Big Brother”, his taste for red leotards and black hats. I would like to take this opportunity to thank him for his actions, which united the people of Bradford West. Their patience—and, indeed, mine—certainly paid off when we handed him his P45 on 8 May. The Spandex Cat has truly left the building.

Despite continued attempts to undermine democracy, here I stand. For me, this speech is far from just my maiden speech; it signifies for me the unity of the people of Bradford West. Their voices, which for too long have not been heard, now demand not just to be heard, but to be listened to. My presence here is a testament to many people—my family, friends and local volunteers who were immensely supportive, and a close group of people who supported me throughout my campaign. These include my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood), Ben Gallagher, Jo Miller, the noble Baron, Lord Roy Kennedy, the noble Baroness Glenys Thornton and the many shadow Cabinet Ministers who came to visit and support me.

It is also fitting to pay tribute to my Conservative opponent, George Grant, and the noble Baroness Warsi for issuing statements of support during this vicious campaign, and indeed to the Southall Black Sisters and the Muslim Women’s Network UK, who also issued public statements of condemnation. I would be doing an injustice to the victims of forced marriage and the agenda of violence against women if I did not mention that questioning whether a marriage is forced if a

parent is present, and asking why victims do not seek support, flies in the face of years of campaigning and hard work, undermining the work of our very own forced marriage unit. A forced marriage, with or without parents and families present and regardless of age, is a forced marriage. “Being irresponsible with his rhetoric” is an understatement.

If I had the opportunity, I would talk at great length about the fantastic history and heritage of my constituency and the wonderful contributions made by my other predecessors, most notably the late Marsha Singh, who is remembered fondly both here and at home. The constituency is a rich tapestry of multicultural heritage. It is the birthplace of not just the Bronte sisters but the Labour party itself, which I now proudly represent. It is a welcoming city and it is the curry capital of the country, firmly situated in the north—the north that the Government continue to fail.

I chose to make my maiden speech in a debate about child tax credit because the issue will have an impact on real families in my constituency. Child poverty is not just an abstract notion in respect of which statistics over-represent the true figures; it is a reality. Some schools in Bradford serve lunch at 11 am because they know that it may be the first meal of the day for many children.

As others have pointed out today, many of those who face the worst cuts are people in work. In an ideal world, work would pay fair wages that allowed people enough money on which to live and support their families, but in many parts of the country that is simply not the case. I represent a place that is about to become the youngest city in Europe, where young people are driven to succeed, but lack the opportunities that would enable them to do so. It is a place where the average full-time weekly wage is almost the lowest in the country, and it is a place that the last Government failed to support. Its council faces swingeing cuts in services that are vital to people in my constituency. It has a university whose fees have increased, and a college whose higher education funding is under attack. Not one but three hospitals provide varied and vital care in an NHS that is struggling.

That brings me to the issue of benefits. For me, the question should never be “Do we help people who are struggling, or blame them?” Do we blame those people for an economy that does not work for them, or for an education system that is failing our children? Do we punish them by taking away the small amount of money that we deem to be everyone’s entitlement? That is our safety net—and I say “our” because we should own it. We should be proud that, since the introduction of a welfare state, this country has striven to stop our citizens from going hungry and our children from living in poverty. During my election campaign I visited the Bradford metropolitan food bank, whose output increased from a few hundred bags a year to thousands.

There are challenging times ahead. I have never shied away from a challenge, and nowhere will this challenge be felt more than in constituencies such as Bradford West.

5.42 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) on an excellent maiden speech, on an excellent

election victory, and on the many excellent curry establishments in her constituency, which I have visited on a number of occasions.

Let me start by drawing the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I have been an employer for more than two decades.

This is a debate about dependency: the dependency of the worker. I cannot believe that any workers make their career choices thinking that they will bring up a family and will have to rely on state aid in order to do so; nor am I aware of any business people who embark on their business plan thinking that the state will subsidise their businesses. That, however, is exactly the situation in which we find ourselves. Subsidies are anathema to business people. They suppress innovation and deter investment. Someone earning £10,000 a year who has three children can receive as much as £12,000 in in-work benefits. That is not a sustainable position. The total benefit bill for working tax credit and child tax credit is £30 billion. We frequently talk about productivity in this House. To engender real productivity in our economy we need business people to invest, and not just in the cheapest labour.

The system is very complex. Adam Smith said that the first rule of the tax system is that it must be simple. This revolving door of people paying tax then collecting it back through tax benefits cannot be right. All of us in this House are charged with the responsibility of cutting the cost of government and the cost of this system of tax credit, which must cost hundreds of millions of pounds every year.

The tax credit changes under the last Government were, according to the House of Commons Library, focused on supporting those on the lowest incomes. The 2012 Resolution Foundation report said that tax credits have a negative impact on work incentives and in turn on productivity. That cannot be right. We need people to climb the ladder of success, not stand in the queue.

We need simplicity in order to deliver incentives to work. Universal credit has been introduced to do that. It also makes sure there is transitional protection so that nobody is worse off. I believe that we need to change the tax credit system to make work pay.

Work is paying for more people, however. There are 600,000 more people in work than there were in 2010, and 40,000 households who had never worked are now working. Can there be a finer example to the children in those households than to see somebody getting up and going to work? These are all parts of the change to the system that we need to make.

We need to make work pay by getting the employer to make work pay. The minimum wage is too low and we should move over time towards a living wage. We have a strong economy, and in a strong economy everybody deserves a decent standard of living.

We should reform the tax credit system, and ideally lose the tax credit system if everybody in work is earning a decent amount of money. We need to make these changes progressively and over time.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman therefore agree that wages should rise and tax credits fall accordingly as they rise, rather than take money away from families already living on the breadline and impoverish them still further?

Kevin Hollinrake: Under the universal credit system there is transitional protection so no one is worse off, and I absolutely believe in that. If we increase the minimum wage by 5% a year, over 10 years it would reach the then current level of the living wage. This needs to be done sensitively—sensitively for business, as we do not want it to cost jobs. It therefore needs to be done progressively. I absolutely believe we need to reform the system, and that should be reflected in what employers pay, so that there is something in it for them.

What we need is higher wages, lower tax credits and lower tax for the employer.

5.48 pm

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): Let me begin, Mr Deputy Speaker, by thanking you and the House for the honour you do me by listening to my maiden speech today.

As MP for Blackburn, I follow in the footsteps of illustrious predecessors. After the war, a formidable woman, Barbara Castle, represented my constituency until 1979. When Barbara Castle made her maiden speech 70 years ago, she made a promise that in her career in this House she would be the “pineapple of politeness”, an aspiration I will seek to emulate—but with no guarantees.

Barbara was known as a fighter. She fought for fairness and equality, and she was unquestionably the most successful female politician of her generation. Barbara was somebody with immense personal and political courage. She was able to inspire others and is still remembered very fondly in Blackburn today. She campaigned tirelessly to secure pensions and benefits, particularly child benefits. She would rightly be appalled and angry at this Government's welfare reforms. She would be outraged at the glib statements Ministers make when speaking about poverty and deprivation.

My immediate predecessor, Jack Straw, will be familiar to this House, where his parliamentary career included holding, with distinction, a number of high offices, including Home Secretary, Foreign Secretary, Lord Chancellor and Leader of the House. But in Blackburn we remember a very different Jack; we remember an extremely hard-working Member of Parliament who served our town for over 36 years. Whether it was when on his soapbox—again, I cannot guarantee to copy that; stiletto heels will go through the box—or in his walk-in surgeries, he always made time for his constituents.

I am therefore really pleased that, despite standing down as MP, Jack's connections with Blackburn are due to continue. He is to become chair of the fantastic Youth Zone, an initiative that was led by local business. It is a great example of collaboration between the private, voluntary and public sectors. It gives young people tremendous facilities to develop as individuals and engage in positive activities right next to the new Cathedral Quarter. Jack will also continue to be a governor at Blackburn's University Centre, another facility that is testament to his energy and commitment to bring the best to Blackburn. I am under no illusion that Jack will be a hard act to follow.

To represent Blackburn, you need to know, understand and love the town. I moved there in 1977 from the west coast of Scotland, working in a shoe factory, where, I am proud to say, I worked full-time and received family

[Kate Hollern]

tax credits. I am also proud to say that my two daughters have always worked and, fortunately, have never been in a position where they have had to claim tax credits. In Blackburn, I learned from the best; the people were warm, welcoming and hard-working, and their passion for the place is infectious. We have a rich and diverse community who are only too pleased to play their part in improving the town, as was vividly demonstrated when thousands of volunteers came out to spring-clean the town to honour Her Majesty the Queen's visit on Maundy Thursday last year.

We have a number of initiatives that bring people together: the Your Call campaign, where residents take responsibility for their own area; the 100 Voices initiative, which brings together people from right across the town to discuss issues; and Just Good Friends, which gets older people out to reminisce, have a dance and help tackle social isolation. The diverse communities of Blackburn are strong, and I am immensely proud they have chosen me to represent them in this place. In Blackburn, there is a strong partnership between residents, the council and local businesses. For example, the local college and the council have just, in partnership, built a new state-of-the-art leisure centre. The private sector has committed to having apprentices from more disadvantaged groups and to fund the youth facilities.

I served as a councillor for 20 years, many of which as leader of the council, and I have seen Blackburn go through good and bad times. In every case, the people of Blackburn pulled together. To know Blackburn and to understand where it is going, we have to understand its history. Blackburn was one of the key mill towns that were the driving force behind the industrial revolution. By the end of the 1840s, there were 75 cotton mills. By 1860, that number had more than doubled.

One hundred years earlier, the cotton industry was revolutionised by the invention of the spinning jenny. James Hargreaves patented his invention—[*Interruption.*] Blackburn led the northern powerhouse more than 100 years ago, and I am sure that it will continue to do so.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Thank you.

Kate Hollern: One last bit?

Mr Deputy Speaker: As much as I would love to let you carry on—you are my neighbour—I dare not. Chris Philp.

5.55 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Blackburn (Kate Hollern) on an excellent maiden speech. It is clear that she is deeply rooted in her community, and I have no doubt whatsoever that, when people talk about Members of Parliament for Blackburn, her name will trip off the tongue very naturally behind those of Barbara Castle and Jack Straw, and that she will be a distinguished successor to them.

This debate has been based on a great deal on speculation about what may be in tomorrow's Budget. Before turning to the specific topic of tax credits, perhaps I should focus briefly on some facts. I am talking about the performance of the coalition Government over the past

five years. If we examine the facts, rather than the speculation, we will see very clearly that the Conservatives in the coalition Government did a good job in standing up for working people and ensuring that work paid.

Let us spend a moment rehearsing those facts. During the previous Parliament, 2 million more jobs were created, of which 75% were full time. More jobs were created in this country than in all of the countries in the European Union put together. Indeed, more jobs were created in the county of Yorkshire, in which the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) is located, than in all of France put together. That is a record of which to be proud.

In my own constituency, in the borough of Croydon, the number of jobseeker's allowance claimants halved over the previous Parliament.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): Can the hon. Gentleman tell me the number of food banks in Yorkshire that have emerged over the past five years? Perhaps that would also give us a helpful factual correction.

Chris Philp: Unfortunately, I do not have that figure at my fingertips. What I do know is that, thanks to the tax cut for people on low incomes, £800 a year was put directly into their pockets. One Opposition Member made the point that many people on tax credits do not pay income tax. Well, that is precisely because the coalition Government raised the income tax threshold so high.

We have also heard a great deal about the cost of living, to which the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) alluded a moment ago. The fact is that wages in this country are now growing at around 3% a year, at a time when inflation is at zero. Yes, it did take time to get there, but that was because it took some time to fix the mess that had been left behind for us. The cost of living problem to which the hon. Lady referred is being alleviated with every month that passes, and that trend will continue.

I also welcome the planned increase in the minimum wage from £6.50 an hour to £6.70. That is the first real-term increase since 2008, and it will help. When we pause and consider the facts rather than the speculation, we will see that the record of the coalition Government was extremely strong in helping people on low incomes. Speaking of poverty, there are now 800,000 fewer people and 300,000 fewer children in relative poverty than there were five years ago, and that is fantastic progress. Those are the facts, so let us now consider the topic before us—[*Interruption.*] They are the facts.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. The hon. Lady has just come into the Chamber and we know that Members cannot just come into the Chamber and intervene. It is better for all of us if they do not, and we certainly want to get to the next maiden speech, which will be from an SNP Member.

Chris Philp: I look forward to hearing the point after the debate, perhaps.

Let me turn now to the topic before us. When Gordon Brown introduced these measures in the early 2000s, he told us that tax credits would cost perhaps a

couple of billion pounds a year. The truth is that today they cost £30 billion a year, an astronomic burden on the Exchequer.

Let us think for a moment about what tax credits mean. They are a subsidy paid to top up wages because employers are not paying their staff properly. I deplore the fact that some employers are not paying their staff properly and are effectively abusing the generosity of the Government by underpaying their staff. Any reforms in tomorrow's Budget that end that abuse will be extremely welcome.

Tax credits provide disincentives to work, as some of my colleagues have pointed out already. They are withdrawn at the same time as income tax and national insurance kick in. Effectively we have marginal tax rates at around the 75% to 80% mark, so it is no surprise that employees in the companies run by my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton were reluctant to take pay rises when marginal tax rates were so high. One Member mentioned the 16-hour-a-week limit, now raised to 24 hours a week. I know people who have employed part-time staff who refused, understandably given the system, to work extra hours for fear of losing those extra tax credits. That is all wrong. The fundamental fact is that people are helped out of poverty not through Government handouts but through hard work and earning more money.

Ian Blackford: The hon. Gentleman was asked about food banks in Yorkshire and we have heard a lot about facts, so perhaps I can give him a fact. Between the end of 2012 and September 2014, nearly 150,000 sanctions were applied in Scotland, affecting 85,000 individuals. That is what is driving people towards food banks. Does he think that that is right?

Chris Philp: It is right that wages are now rising, that people on low incomes have been helped with tax cuts and that the Government are directing assistance to people on low incomes. That is what is right. Over time, as the cost of living issues that have been mentioned are eroded by rising wages combined with zero inflation, the problem that the hon. Gentleman has referred to will without a doubt be alleviated.

There are other issues with tax credits. Employers who abuse tax credits by underpaying their staff have no incentive to invest in education, training and technology and, unfortunately, that contributes to our productivity problems. I believe that tax credits, introduced by the previous Labour Government, are a symptom of failure. They encourage companies to underpay their staff and place the burden of that underpayment on the general taxpayer. Any move in tomorrow's Budget to reduce the burden of tax credits on the Exchequer while improving the earnings power of people on low pay will be very welcome. I join many colleagues on the Government and Opposition Benches in supporting moves towards a higher minimum wage. I have publicly called for that in London and I think that it would be a good move for the country as a whole.

We have heard about another cost of living issue: housing. There will be a housing Bill in the autumn that will promote house building and therefore affordability, but I point out to Opposition Members that the number of housing starts last year was about 50% higher than the number of starts in 2009-10. The Government have already made fantastic progress.

The foundations of prosperity and the way out of poverty lie in work, not benefits, and I endorse the Government's approach.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. To try to help everybody, I will drop the time limit to five minutes. Every time someone intervenes, we allow the speaker an extra minute, which is killing us for time.

6.4 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. In the light of that, I shall not take any interventions.

I congratulate all the Members who made their maiden speeches this afternoon. They have been fantastic and it is a privilege to follow them.

As lovely a place as Oldham is—the place where I live and which I represent—it has a very low-wage economy. One in three of the people who work in Oldham earns less than the living wage. That is significantly above the north-west average and the UK average. Associated with that there are high rates of deprivation and child poverty—27% overall, and in some wards it is nearer one in two. We have talked about food bank use: we used not to have a food bank in Oldham, but we have one now. I undertook a fairness commission report to look at the core issues underpinning that and to set out how we could address them. It was not unique; other boroughs and cities have done a similar analysis. One of the key truths, unfortunately, is that the UK is one of the most unequal countries in the world. In its recent report, the International Monetary Fund, which the Minister did not seem to know anything about, says:

“Widening income inequality is the defining challenge of our time”.

Forty years ago, 5% of income in the UK went to the highest 1% of earners. Today it is 15%. We should spare a thought for our cousins across the water, where the figure is even higher.

This is the IMF's second report. In the light of the work of Joseph Stiglitz and others, it found that inequalities are a drag on growth and can make growth volatile. This supports work by the OECD, which rejected the trickle-down economics so popular with Thatcherites. That idea supposed that increasing wealth at the top would trickle down to the rest of the food chain, and that policies aimed at reducing inequality would remove incentives and slow growth. Now the evidence is clear: inequalities have slowed growth, not increased it. According to this analysis, raising the income share of the poorest 20% of the population increases growth by as much as 0.38% over five years. By contrast, increasing the income share of the richest 20% by 1% decreases it.

We have a weak, stagnant economy, and the measures proposed will only make it worse. As colleagues have mentioned, over the past five years IFS analysis has shown that the bottom 20%—the people on the lowest income—have been disproportionately affected by both tax and benefit changes. This is compounded by the cuts to public services, skewing resources away from areas of high need, and by the impact of the disastrous housing policy on housing costs. The Government justify this by saying—we can hear the mood music—“We are far too generous with benefits.” A comparative analysis

[Debbie Abrahams]

of benefits spending as a proportion of GDP shows that we are 17th among EU countries. We spent 15% of our GDP on social security. That does not support the claim that we are incredibly generous.

One of the other myths that the Government are spreading is that everyone will be fine if they are in work. Again, the evidence does not support that. We have one of the highest under-employment rates in the EU, and about 80% of the increase in employment comes from self-employment. The average income drawn by people who are self-employed is less than £10,000 a year. In Oldham 20,000 working families with nearly 30,000 children are claiming tax credits. That is two in three families and three in four children. For them, tax credits mean the difference between just about keeping their heads above water or not. The Oldham fairness commission that I run has produced strong evidence of the impact of parental income on cognitive development, behaviour and health outcomes, which will have a negative effect on those children's life chances—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order.

6.9 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I, too, will take no interventions, following that example. I thank those Members who came in earlier, intervened and then walked straight out again, eating into the time available for my speech in the process.

In opposing the motion, I wish to explore three areas mentioned in—or, in fact, omitted from—the proposal. The first relates to in-work tax credits, what they were designed to achieve and what has happened in practice. “In-work tax credits need substantial reform to end the practice of employers paying low wages which are topped up by the state.” I was heartened to read that they were the those words of Alistair Darling, who introduced tax credits in the early 2000s. I am a firm believer that it is always wise to listen to those who pioneered a measure, as they are best placed to review whether it is meeting the objective it set out to achieve.

I submit that tax credits were not introduced to encourage large and profitable employers to keep wages low and to keep employees on the lowest rung of the ladder or risk losing a taxpayer-funded subsidy. Tax credits were introduced to incentivise employment, but with the view that as the employee showed his or her worth, their pay and prospects would increase and they would move beyond the tax credit threshold. However, I contend that tax credits have instead acted as a drag on real-time pay increases, as to increase pay would mean that the employer no longer received a top-up from the state. As such, they tend to keep employees in part-time work or on lower pay. With hindsight, it might have been better to put a time limit on the payment of tax credits, in the way this Government have done for the two-year national insurance holiday.

The second area relates to whether there is a better model for Government intervention in working pay. The motion talks about a belief

“that people should be given support and incentives to find employment and stay in employment”.

Indeed, with over 2 million new jobs having been created since the Government came to power in 2010, there is compelling evidence that the Government have supported

people to find work. The motion should talk about the need to incentivise employers and employees to move up through the pay scales, which will boost spending in the economy overall and lead to increased productivity. The Government have provided incentives by reducing the tax rates for 26 million workers. However, while the Government, and therefore the country, find the money to give employees more of their own money through lower taxes, we continue to pay employers for employing staff. It is not as if the Government have increased the tax burden on companies to compensate for the cost of tax credits, because corporation tax has been reduced from 28% in 2010 to 20% in 2015.

Assessing whether it is possible to phase out tax credits, with an expectation that employers will cover the pay differential to staff, will free up more money for essential public services, such as health and education, where funding would be better utilised by us as a whole. Under the alternative—stepping out of private pay provisions that should be set by employer and employee, and funded by the employer only—there is a case for the Government sharing the cost of this reduction with employers and employees, with some of the savings being recycled as further corporation tax and income tax reductions.

The third point is more of an omission. It relates to high earners. The motion

“urges the Chancellor to guarantee that any assistance in the July 2015 Budget is focused solely on people on middle and low incomes.”

I fear that is another attempt to try to segregate those on higher incomes from the policies affecting this country. It should be remembered that the top 3,000 earners pay more tax to the Exchequer than the lowest 9 million—a third of all workers. Many in this House would say that is eminently sensible and just. However, it is crucial for any Government to assess whether the tax rates applicable to higher earners make economic sense for the rest of us, and not merely to play politics by demonising those who do so much to keep our public services funded through their own risk-taking and endeavour. In the last financial year, the wealthiest were funding a greater share of Government spending than at any time in history, notwithstanding the reduction of income tax from 50p to 45p. The wealthy are now largely weaned off the state.

In conclusion, the Government have created a remarkable economic climate, with 2 million new jobs and a 40% reduction in out-of-work benefits. The challenge, as we hopefully move to a period of growth and rising pay and incomes, is to set the jobs market free, lift people above the tax credit threshold, and, in so doing, ask employers to contribute the full share of pay.

6.15 pm

Corri Wilson (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me this opportunity to make my maiden speech today. Like others before me, I would like to thank the House staff for being incredibly helpful, with a huge thank you to Estelle, who was assigned the onerous task of stopping me getting lost in all the nooks and crannies. She has been an enormous help to me over the past few weeks.

I would not be here today were it not for the incredible support from family and friends and activists back home. It was a very much a team effort. As I often said,

“This isn’t about me; it’s about us.” I pay tribute to my predecessor, Sandra Osborne, who served the constituency for 18 years. While we had some political differences, there was much we could agree on. I know that Sandra was dedicated to representing the constituency during her time in office. I thank Sandra for her work and commitment over the years and wish her well for the future.

My journey began as a civil servant. During this time, I saw at first hand how people struggled to interact with the benefits system and how successive Governments, of whatever hue, failed to work for the benefit of those less well off. What I have heard in the Chamber today leads me to believe that little has changed for these people—our constituents—in the years since I ceased to be a civil servant. It was my experiences in the civil service that led me into the third sector and to give something back to my community, with voluntary roles in education, health, youth work and criminal justice, to name but a few.

Thyroid cancer in 2010 forced me to re-evaluate my life. It reaffirmed my priorities and I realised that some of the small stuff just was not important. I took charge of my own destiny and started my own business. At the same time, no longer being constrained by working in the civil service I became more politically involved and was asked to stand in a local election, where I was successfully elected as a councillor to the Ayr East ward. This allowed me to address some of the barriers and red tape that people had constantly come up against.

I think the community representative is stronger in me than the politician. I am not here for glory or to be a media star in this pantomime that is called Government. In no other environment is the behaviour acted out here regarded as acceptable. I am here to represent the people in my constituency, who live lives far removed from this Westminster bubble. I see my role here as to work tirelessly for the people who voted for me, and for those who did not. I want the constituency to thrive and the people who live there to have the opportunity to reach their full potential. It is about having a future you choose rather than one that is dictated by circumstances and damaging Government policies.

My constituency is famous for its rugged coast, challenging hills and walks, its history, and a thriving food and drinks industry, which includes a whisky distillery, a microbrewery, a chocolate factory, and of course the famous Ayrshire tatties. From bordering Dumfries and Galloway in the south, it goes past the fishing town of Girvan, towards the reinvigorated Turnberry golf resort, and up to the ancient place of Maybole, which received a charter from the Earl of Carrick in 1193. Across the water is the tiny island of Ailsa Craig where blue hone granite was quarried to make curling stones. Moving inland towards the east, we have the Doon valley, where there are many sites of scientific interest, including the Dark Sky park. Close by are New Cumnock and Cumnock, where Keir Hardie, the father of the Labour party, spent a large part of his life. He started up the Ayrshire Mining Union and was a journalist on the local paper. He spoke at Cumnock town hall, along with Emmeline Pankhurst. It was clear that she was in the area for a reason, because it is noted that in 1914 two suffragettes tried to bomb Burns Cottage and set fire to Ayr racecourse, causing thousand of pounds-worth of damage.

Fast forward to the present, and there are many beautiful, historic, picturesque villages such as Barr, Dailly, Kirkmichael, Straiton, Dalrymple, Drongan and Coynton, to name but a few. Many of these old mining villages have been left marred by abandoned open-cast mines, and many in the constituency are waiting with bated breath to see if tomorrow’s Budget is going to address this. The biggest town in the constituency is Ayr—a university town that hosts campuses for the University of the West of Scotland, Scotland’s Rural College, and Ayrshire College. It is also home to Ayr United.

In 1315, this historic burgh saw King Robert the Bruce convene a parliament in St John’s Tower, which is still there today, to decide the succession to the throne. It is an historic past. Our gory past also includes a ghostly piper at Culzean castle and the burning of Maggie Osborne, the last witch. Our famous baird is Robert Burns, who is celebrated the world over and who said that Ayr had

“honest men and bonnie lasses.”

And who am I to disagree?

It has been 35 years since I first started working with people in need. Let us not make it another 35 years before this House actually does something constructive for our poorest and most vulnerable.

6.20 pm

Mr Roger Godsiff (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): First, may I congratulate the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Corri Wilson) on her excellent maiden speech, which I am sure will be the first of many?

A lot of my constituents are low-paid workers. Many are paid the minimum wage and some receive even less. They work very long hours and some have two or three jobs to bring in enough money to feed their families and pay the bills. Even then, some of them cannot afford to put food on the table seven days a week and have to endure the humiliation of going to food banks with their families.

These low-paid workers are not shirkers or skivers, lazy or feckless; nor, as a matter of interest, are they the people who caused the financial and banking crisis in 2008. If the curtains on their houses are drawn at 7 or 8 in the morning, it is not because they are skiving or being lazy, but because they only got home from work after midnight. These are the people in my constituency who rely on working tax credits to top up their poverty pay, and it is they who suffer if tax credit support is reduced or abolished.

I agree with the Prime Minister that employers should pay the living wage, but many of them do not and will not unless they are forced to do so. If the Government are serious and want to save money on tax credits, they must turn the statutory minimum wage into a statutory living wage. Indeed, the Prime Minister should understand that argument, because Steve Hilton, who was his adviser until recently, has advocated exactly that. I hope very much indeed that that is what the Government will do. I suspect that they will offer incentives to employers to pay the living wage, but by doing so they would just be subsidising employers—they would not save money.

[Mr Roger Godsiff]

In a different world we would have unions that were strong enough to bid up their members' wages, but they are not strong enough. Conservative Members smile and laugh whenever unions are mentioned. Unions have a traditional role of negotiating better terms and conditions for their members. The Conservative party hates trade unions. Indeed, it has made it absolutely plain that it will bring in even more draconian restrictions on them, so trade unions will not be able to do their traditional job of bidding up wages. Therefore, it is down to the Government—if they are serious—to turn the minimum wage into a living wage. Is that what Treasury Ministers intend to do?

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Godsiff: No, I will not take interventions.

The Government could set an example by insisting that the contractors they use pay the living wage, not the minimum wage. That would be positive. Treasury Ministers could set an even better example. When Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, which is the Treasury's responsibility, put out its cleaning contract to ISS and was offered a contract price based on either the minimum wage or the living wage, why did it choose the minimum wage? It could have set an example by choosing the living wage, but it chose the lowest common denominator. Low pay is a national scandal. It is not the fault of hard-working, low-paid families in my constituency or anywhere else in the country. It is the Government's responsibility to address this issue.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I want to call everybody. If Members aim for three minutes, everybody will get the same amount of time.

6.25 pm

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate everyone who has made their maiden speeches today. They have been wonderful to witness and to listen to.

This issue is of particular concern to me. Any cut to tax credits by this Government will hit my constituents in Edmonton especially hard. In my constituency, 18,000 children are in families that receive tax credits. Overall, 72% of families in the area receive tax credits, which is 21% higher than the national average. Those families and children will suffer if tax credits are cut.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies has estimated that cutting £5 billion from tax credits means that working families will lose an average of £1,400 a year. That is not political scaremongering, but the finding of an independent and highly respected organisation. In my constituency surgeries, I already meet many people who are in work but are struggling to get by. The people of Edmonton simply cannot afford this further reduction in their income.

The charity End Child Poverty estimates that 42% of children in Edmonton already live in relative poverty, after housing costs are taken into account. We found out only last week that progress in reducing child poverty has stalled since the right hon. Member for Witney (Mr Cameron) came to power. All the evidence suggests

that cutting tax credits will push thousands more families below the poverty line, robbing children in my constituency of the opportunities they all deserve.

It should be plain to everybody in the Chamber that cutting tax credits for working families is immoral, but we must also realise that this is a bad approach to bringing down the welfare bill. The main driver of welfare spending during the last Parliament was low pay and the shortage of affordable social housing. Both those problems have got much worse since 2010. The coalition Government's attack on working families has meant that the number of people paid less than the living wage has gone up 45% since 2009. That is a particular issue in London, where the minimum wage is already £2.65 an hour lower than the living wage.

If the Government were serious about bringing down the welfare bill, they would take urgent action to move us towards a high-wage economy in which people can afford to live on the wages that are paid. It is clear that cutting tax credits will not help to achieve that. Instead of making further attacks on the low paid, the Government should work to make the minimum wage a genuine living wage, and take much stronger action against companies that flout minimum wage laws. However, this Government have no plans to deal with these issues, but seem determined to push ahead with tax credit cuts that will leave more working families in Edmonton and across the UK in poverty.

6.28 pm

Harry Harpham (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): Thousands of families in my constituency will go to bed tonight with a sense of foreboding. They are waiting for an axe to fall that will take a chunk out of their weekly budget, but they do not know where or when it will fall. I do not expect the Government to spell that out chapter and verse before the emergency Budget tomorrow, but my constituents and people across the country deserve better than the Prime Minister's and the Chancellor's media-teasing statements about merry-go-rounds.

Tomorrow, the Chancellor will announce a series of deep cuts to working-age benefits. We know that tax credits will, in one way or another, be reduced significantly. For many of my constituents who are in low-income work, it is tax credits that enable them to go to work in the first place. They cover childcare and transport costs, which low wages alone do not meet. They provide the security that this Government's low-pay, low-productivity recovery has not. The irony is that without tax credits, many people would not be able to afford to work.

This is the heart of the matter: over 60% of the families with children who receive tax credits in my constituency contain someone in work. It is tax credits that make that work pay. A cut to tax credits will put at serious risk the ability of many of my constituents to support themselves. One of my constituents wrote to me just last week with her fears about the cuts. Her family's situation sums up the vital role that tax credits play:

"My son and his wife are barely surviving with the Tax Credits that they do get. If the Tax Credits get cut, they will end up living in my attic again."

The Government should be ashamed of creating such a situation.

Tomorrow, the Chancellor will no doubt try to justify his cuts by telling us that tax credits are letting employers off the hook, making it easier for them to pay poor wages and leaving taxpayers to make up the shortfall. I say that he is looking at things the wrong way round. Instead of cutting family incomes and hoping that employers will suddenly step in, he should be asking why those employers are underpaying their staff in the first place.

We need a substantially higher minimum wage, and I hope that tomorrow we will see positive action from the Chancellor to get more employers paying the living wage. If he wants to reduce the amount the Treasury spends on tax credits, he should not cut them, which only punishes those on low incomes, but set out a Budget that boosts low incomes, thereby taking people out of a reliance on tax credits and other in-work benefits.

Given the recent speculation in the media about the possible reduction of child tax credits back to their real-terms 2003-04 level, it is worth looking briefly at the impact that such a change would have. It would affect 3.7 million low-income families, costing them £1,400 per year on average. More than two thirds of those who would be hit would be in work, and almost two thirds would come from the poorest 30% of households. Most shockingly, the Institute for Fiscal Studies has estimated that if the cut were introduced, 300,000 children would be pushed into living in poverty.

6.32 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): I welcome this important debate, which I am sure, given the volume of correspondence that I and other hon. Members have received on the subject, is being watched closely by a great number of my constituents.

As other hon. Members have said, we do not know the precise details of what the Chancellor will unveil in his Budget tomorrow, but if the assault on tax credits is anything like what has been trailed in the press over recent days, many thousands of families in my constituency should be bracing themselves this evening for a big hit to their household budgets.

I will briefly examine the implications for my constituents of the potential proposal that has received the most attention over recent days: a reduction in the value of the child element of child tax credit back to its 2003-04 level in real terms. That entitlement is paid to approximately 9,300 families in my constituency and benefits 17,500 children. More than two thirds of those families are in work and the annual value of the child element for each is £2,780. Scaling it back to its 2003-04 level would constitute a reduction in support of 30%, costing those families a staggering £845 a child. A reduction in a family budget of that scale would be deeply damaging. By its very nature, the impact would be felt disproportionately by women, ethnic minorities and single-parent households like the one that I grew up in.

The Chancellor is likely to defend taking the axe to tax credits by pointing to the much-vaunted pledge to lift low-income households out of tax altogether or, in the Prime Minister's words, to end the "merry-go-round" of people paying tax while receiving state support. They are both tilting at straw men. As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood)

mentioned, more than half the families who claim tax credits already pay no tax at all. For those who do pay tax, the likely options of bringing forward a rise in the personal allowance threshold or a rise in the national insurance threshold, while easing the strain, will nowhere near compensate them for the likely scale of reductions in in-work support.

Few, if any, now believe that the growth in tax credit support that occurred over the past 17 years can be repeated, but let us be clear: tax credits are necessary and they will continue to be so, not just to incentivise employment and reduce child poverty, but to address the underlying flaws in a low-pay, low-skill, low-productivity economic model that requires significant amounts of in-work support. For all their flaws, tax credits have provided a lifeline for those on low and middle incomes, and they will still be necessary in some form, even if the UK becomes a living wage economy overnight.

Of course we must be open minded about the need to simplify what is a fiendishly complex system, and we should question rigorously the sustainability of the underlying economic model that has made tax credits necessary. While doing so, let us not delude ourselves that another, deeper, round of cuts to tax credits will do anything other than cause untold hardship for thousands of families in my constituency and across the country who rely on state support to make the most of their lives.

6.35 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): There are 4,200 working families with children who are claiming tax credits in my constituency. That is 4,200 families with parents who are working hard, doing the right thing, trying to stay off welfare, proud to be in work with the dignity that that brings, and trying desperately hard to get through the month, keep afloat and provide for their families. They rely on tax credits to survive. Tax credits are not a luxury.

Tax credits were introduced by the Labour Government because we cared about in-work poverty. We cared about making work pay, particularly for single parents who were struggling in and out of a working life. That is why we introduced the historic minimum wage—despite fierce opposition from those on the Conservative Benches—and why we brought in Sure Start to give kids the best start in life. That is also why we introduced tax credits, which have been a lifeline for so many people and contributed to the huge fall in child poverty on our watch.

Tax credits are vital to help people get through the month. As my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) said, we have received a lot of correspondence in the past few days about this issue. Let me quote from one of my constituents who wrote to me this week about her fear of losing tax credits. She stated:

"I am literally terrified at the idea of losing my tax credits. I am a 29 year old single mother of an eight-month old baby. I have been in full-time employment since the age of 17 and even worked as a weekend pot washer when I was at school. Both my parents worked and I have been brought up with a good work ethic and to understand the value of money. I am currently on maternity leave but start back at work in a week. However, after 12 years of working full time I am going back part time for two years so I can also focus on the upbringing of my son...I am anything but a

[Anna Turley]

‘scrounger’ and have never had to rely on the benefit system, but for the next couple of years tax credits will be essential to help me survive financially. I do not drive a fancy car, I don’t have Sky/cable TV, I live in a tiny terraced house and I NEVER go on holiday, so I live anything but a luxurious lifestyle that these idiots in power seem to think”—

forgive me, Mr Speaker, those are not my words, however much I may agree with the sentiment.

My constituent continues:

“I could quite easily go on income support and be a stay at home mum, but I choose to work to distil into my son from a young age that it is important to have a good work ethic (as my parents did with me). I am very good with money but have no idea how I will survive if my tax credits are cut. I have worked for 11 years, paid into the system and for the sake of a couple of years getting something back to help me just make ends meet, I don’t think this is me being a drain on society or a lazy scrounger the Tories seem to think anyone who claims a penny is. I lay awake at night worrying about all this, the Tories say ‘they are the party for working people’ but they make me sick. I have never heard such a bunch of”—

I will leave the rest of it there as it is probably not appropriate.

Obviously, my constituent does not agree with the hubris and self-congratulation that I have witnessed from those on the Government Benches who seem so delighted with their long-term economic plan, and I will say more about that in debates over the next few days. I would love to say that I am looking forward to the Budget tomorrow, but I am afraid that I will do so with fear and trepidation on behalf of many of my constituents.

6.38 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): This debate is an important opportunity for Members to express concern and show their support for families on tax credits. Tax credits give families in constituencies right across the UK the choice between eating and heating their homes. Unfortunately, the Government’s vision of a society in which work pays is skewed by the reality that many working families are living on the breadline. Parents on low wages are dependent on tax credits to raise their income to a level where they can “get by”—not live the highlife, but possibly stop having to use food banks.

In my constituency of Swansea East, 13,000 children benefit from tax credits. The independent Institute for Fiscal Studies has suggested that any cut to tax credits will push a further 300,000 children into poverty in the United Kingdom. Tax credits provide the vital top-up funds that make a difference for families and allow them a basic standard of living—a basic right, but not something that Conservative Members are comfortable talking about.

A shocking indictment of that catastrophic austerity plan is that the people who face the daily hurdles of feeding their kids and keeping them safe and warm are feeling threatened that their safety net is about to be pulled out from under them. The child poverty targets for 2020 will be missed, the number of households below average income shows that no real progress has been made for two years running in tackling child poverty, and charities tell us that child poverty is increasing alarmingly, yet Conservatives think their policies are working. Ahead of tomorrow’s Budget, I say one thing to the Chancellor: he should think before he speaks. He is putting children’s lives at risk. Bear that in mind.

6.40 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): We have had a good debate. I begin by congratulating my hon. Friends the Members for Bradford West (Naz Shah) and for Blackburn (Kate Hollern), and the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), on their excellent maiden speeches and their contrasting reflections on their predecessors. The House looks forward to hearing much more from them in the years ahead.

The Minister said at the beginning that he wants the Government to be a Government for working people. That is a laudable ambition, but they are failing. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Harry Harpham) is right that working people feel uncertainty and insecurity. Working families are deeply worried about what the Government have in store. They have suffered a long squeeze on their incomes, and they are worried about a fragile recovery and what the future holds for their grandchildren and children.

Their insecurity has been heightened by the prospect of deep cuts to the tax credits that they rely on, and which it appears the Chancellor will announce in the Budget tomorrow. Working families will pay the price for the decision of the Prime Minister and his Chancellor to promise big reductions in social security spending before the election without having worked out a plan to deliver them. The announcements tomorrow will not be about making work pay—in this instance, that is baloney—but about making working families pay.

The Opposition welcome new concern from Conservative Members about low pay—we have heard a good deal in the debate about the living wage and the need for more secure, high-skilled and high-productivity jobs to support that. We all want a higher-productivity, higher-wage economy, but that requires a change of direction in the management of the economy. For example, it would mean delivering infrastructure, not just second or third announcements of future projects, or announcing and then cancelling them, as has happened in the past couple of weeks. It would mean high-quality training and apprenticeships for young people, not just rehashing old courses.

What the Chancellor must not do—it appears that this is exactly what he plans to do—is make working families much worse off by cutting their tax credits long before any increase in their pay. In millions of working families, people work hard but rely on tax credits for the family budget, as was acknowledged by Conservative as well as Opposition Members. It is high time to tackle low pay, but the Government should not attack the low paid, which is exactly what cutting tax credits will do. It will be an attack on working families on low and median incomes.

It would be fantasy to claim—I am glad nobody did so in the debate—that cutting tax credits will in itself lead to higher pay. Research has shown that the introduction of tax credits did not push pay down, and the drastic cuts now envisaged will not push pay up. Raising the personal tax allowance is not the answer—60% of tax credit claimants earn too little to pay income tax. Only about 1% of the cost of the planned personal allowance rises will actually be spent on lifting lower earners out of tax.

Tax credits recognise the needs of children in a household in a way that wages never can. The hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) suggested that tax credits

provided a ceiling on earnings. That is completely untrue. That is not how the system works at all. In fact, tax credits have been by far the most effective move we have ever made in Britain to make work pay. They were introduced by the Labour Government alongside the boost to pay of the national minimum wage, improved and expanded childcare with Sure Start, and groundbreaking welfare-to-work support with the new deal.

The combination was a huge success, boosting employment by making work pay, supporting the incomes of large numbers of working families, and reducing child poverty in large part by making it worth the while of many more lone parents to be in work. The lone parent employment rate was less than 45% in 1997. Today, it is nearly 65%. Researchers have shown that that transformation was largely thanks to tax credits. The benefits have gone much wider. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood) opened the debate. In an excellent speech, she drew attention to what the *Financial Times* said recently, which is that the system of financial support we have in Britain for low-income working families is a key reason for our high rate of employment.

The flagship reform of this Government, universal credit, aims to build on the success of tax credits. We have always supported the principle of universal credit and we still want it to succeed. It is a good idea. The Government, however, have utterly failed to deliver it. Five years after it was announced, less than 1% of claimants are receiving it and 99% are still on the old benefits. In 2011, we were told it would take six years to deliver universal credit. Today, we are told it will take another six years. Now, before it has even properly begun, the Chancellor wants to make drastic cuts in support for working families that would hole universal credit below the waterline.

Will the Minister tell us whether he understands the crucial difference between reforming welfare and labour markets to get people into work and make work pay, and taking an axe to social security and to employment support? These cuts will store up far greater costs if they send into reverse the progress of decades in raising employment rates and reducing child poverty. We will welcome any credible plans to tackle low pay. We have championed the living wage. As my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) pointed out, the coalition Government presided over a 45% rise in the number of people paid less than the living wage,

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): There is consensus on the living wage. I personally hope that there will be fiscal incentives in the Budget, and in future, to persuade employers to look at that. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that unless the issue of working tax credits is reviewed, we will be continuing the practice of de facto subsidising large employers to underpay their staff?

Stephen Timms: If he had been present during the debate, the hon. Gentleman would have heard a lot of agreement on raising levels of pay being a good thing. That is the right way to reduce the cost of tax credits; not taking an axe to them now in the hope that pay will go up at some point in the future. Calculation of the living wage assumes that families receive tax credits.

Those who calculate the living wage say that if families did not receive tax credits, the living wage would have to go up by another 25%.

Working people need a long-term plan to back businesses that commit to paying the living wage—I agree with the hon. Member for Peterborough (Mr Jackson) on the importance of that—and share with them the Exchequer savings, as we have proposed with our “make work pay” contracts. We need to give the Low Pay Commission the remit and the powers to tackle low pay across the country, as proposed in the report by Alan Buckle, the former deputy chair of KPMG. We need economic and industrial policies to support more high-skill, high-productivity jobs created by innovative competitive businesses of the future. Belated conversion to the cause of tackling low pay must not be an excuse for Ministers cutting away the vital support on which so many working families rely. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) pointed out to the Prime Minister two weeks ago, not a single family will be helped into work and not a single worker will see their earnings rise simply as a result of cutting tax credits. Ministers should be tackling low pay, but they must not attack the low paid.

The Government promised to eradicate the deficit in one Parliament and failed completely to do so, but working families must not be made to pay the price for that failure. Can the Minister assure us that any action taken to tackle low pay or in other ways to support the finances of working families will make up for the losses arising from tax credit cuts? I fear he cannot. He will not be forgiven for a shabby raid on the incomes and security of working families simply to get the Prime Minister and the Chancellor out of a hole. I hope that Members on both sides of the House will join us in supporting this important motion tonight.

6.50 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Damian Hinds): The Government’s clear mission is to support working people as they strive to build security and achieve their ambitions throughout their lives. We know that most people want to do their best to provide for themselves and their families; that education and skills are the bedrock of success and security; that productive employment is the only sustainable way of delivering them; that the state should incentivise independence and self-reliance; and that when someone is working, they should keep more of what they have earned.

We need to make welfare savings so that we do not have to ask other working families to pay more, but when people need support, of course it is right that we support them. These are the principles that have underpinned our welfare and employment policies: making work pay; creating jobs and apprenticeships; improving childcare, education and training; cutting taxes, especially for the lowest paid; and, for those who need extra support, making the benefits system simpler and fairer for them and other taxpayers. On all these fronts, we have achieved a great deal, and we have done it at the same time as cutting the deficit and restoring growth.

Before responding to some of the points made during the debate, I want to make one thing clear. We have set out our commitment to reducing the deficit, which, among other things, requires £12 billion of savings to be

[*Damian Hinds*]

realised on welfare, on top of the £21 billion we saved in the last Parliament. Further details, of course, will come from my right hon. Friend the Chancellor in tomorrow's Budget, and clearly I am not going to pre-empt any of that this evening.

We have had a very good debate today. In particular, we have heard three distinguished maiden speeches. The hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) spoke of the sartorial act she had to follow, and she united the House—a rare occurrence—in sharing her pleasure at giving her predecessor a little more time to work on his wardrobe. She was also very generous about her Conservative opponent and the positive role he played in that difficult campaign. That was very much appreciated.

The hon. Member for Blackburn (Kate Hollern) spoke about her ambition to be the pinnacle, or indeed the pineapple, of politeness—a reputation she brings with her from her leadership of Blackburn with Darwen Council—and reminded us of the long historical roots of the northern powerhouse. She also reminded us of our schools days with her comments about Hargreaves and the spinning jenny. She, too, has a hard act to follow, in the shape of Jack Straw and Barbara Castle—two great parliamentarians.

The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Corri Wilson) spoke about maintaining a sense of perspective. She also spoke movingly about her battle with serious illness and about how that helped her get perspective on what was most important in life. In reminiscing about the election, she also reminded us that, in our work in the House, it is not about “me”; it is about “us”.

There were some other excellent speeches. My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) advised that we should always listen to the originator of a policy and what they intended. I am sure that in this case the originator did not intend, and never expected, that the total cost of tax credits would eventually top £30 billion. My hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) talked about the uneven generosity of the Labour party in reaching that figure and about the particular increases just before 2005 and 2010. My hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartledge) spoke about the jagged edges in the welfare system that universal credit—that great reform—is set to smooth out.

My hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) spoke about the importance of productivity, which is what underpins real-wage growth and is an absolute focus for this Government. We shall hear more about the productivity plan very soon.

Today's debate occasionally strayed into realms of speculation about what may come in the days to follow, but in a powerful speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) reminded us to focus on the facts. Some of those facts include this Government's strong record on reducing income tax, which has already seen a typical basic rate taxpayer benefit to the tune of £825 since 2010, with that figure set to rise to £905.

Responding to some points raised by Opposition Members, I first remind them that the number of children in workless households is at a record low, which is something we should all celebrate. I say to the Father of

the House, the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Sir Gerald Kaufman), that according to the most recent statistics, the number of children in low-income households in Manchester has fallen.

In contrast to what the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) said about the quality of the enormous 2 million jobs created since 2010, there has been a 1.5 million increase in the number of people in full-time employment and a 1.27 million increase in the number of people in high-skilled employment. I remind the various hon. Members who spoke about zero-hours contracts that they account for something in the region of 2.5% of the total jobs in this country, delivering an average of 25 hours' work a week.

Even the Labour party nominally agrees that tens of billions of fiscal consolidation will be necessary over the course of this Parliament. I have to remind Opposition Members that the Charter for Budget Responsibility was passed by 505 votes to 18, and we will have to continue the journey towards balancing the budget. I hope that that is a journey we will be able to go on together.

In 2010, spending on tax credits had spiralled out of control, with nine in 10 families with children eligible for tax credits. We were taking money away from people in the form of income tax and then giving it back to them through another route. That is why we reformed the system to target support at those who needed it most—for example, by increasing the disability element while lowering overall Government spending.

Hannah Bardell *rose*—

Damian Hinds: I am sorry, but I am too short of time.

In the longer term, we will be migrating tax credits into the new system of universal credit, which will improve incentives to work, reduce reliance on benefits, make households better off and increase the number of people in work.

There are three key ways to help people to build success and security for themselves and their families: make sure everyone can get a good start in life; create the strong economy that sustains quality jobs; and let people keep as much as possible of what they have earned. We have been doing all three. We have increased our support on childcare and early years education by £1 billion; radically extended childcare provision; and increased funding for the most disadvantaged children in our schools and nurseries. We have created record job growth of 2 million—more than the rest of the EU put together—moved more and more households out of unemployment and supported millions of new apprenticeships. We have lowered income tax for 27 million people, including moving the lowest-paid 3 million out of tax altogether, and for the next five years, there will be no increases to income tax, VAT or national insurance contributions. These are the policies that our working people deserve—the ones they expect and have recently voted for.

The only sustainable way to raise living standards is to keep working through the Government's long-term economic plan to build a resilient and dynamic economy. Just last week, we learned that living standards had risen again by 3.9% against the same period last year—further proof of how our long-term plan is helping

hard-working families. We have reversed the system inherited from Labour, where it could be more rewarding to live off benefits than to get a job. We have cut income tax for 27 million people. We have capped benefits in a fair way and increased support for those who need it most. We have simplified the benefits system, cracked down on those who abuse it, and helped to provide millions of jobs to empower people to help them get on in life. This Government have continuously stood up for both the vulnerable and the hard working in our society, and we will continue that support every step of the way.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 286, Noes 316.

Division No. 42]

[6.59 pm

AYES

Abrahams, Debbie	Crawley, Angela	Green, Kate	McDonald, Stewart
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina	Creagh, Mary	Greenwood, Lilian	McDonald, Stuart C.
Alexander, Heidi	Creasy, Stella	Greenwood, Margaret	McDonnell, Dr Alasdair
Ali, Rushanara	Cruddas, Jon	Griffith, Nia	McDonnell, John
Allen, Mr Graham	Cryer, John	Gwynne, Andrew	McFadden, rh Mr Pat
Anderson, Mr David	Cummins, Judith	Haigh, Louise	McGarry, Natalie
Arkless, Richard	Cunningham, Alex	Hamilton, Fabian	McGinn, Conor
Ashworth, Jonathan	Cunningham, Mr Jim	Hanson, rh Mr David	McGovern, Alison
Austin, Ian	Dakin, Nic	Harpham, Harry	McInnes, Liz
Bailey, Mr Adrian	Danczuk, Simon	Harris, Carolyn	McLaughlin, Anne
Bardell, Hannah	David, Wayne	Hayes, Helen	Meacher, rh Mr Michael
Barron, rh Kevin	Davies, Geraint	Hayman, Sue	Meale, Sir Alan
Beckett, rh Margaret	Day, Martyn	Healey, rh John	Mearns, Ian
Benn, rh Hilary	Docherty, Martin	Hendrick, Mr Mark	Miliband, rh Edward
Berger, Luciana	John	Hendry, Drew	Monaghan, Carol
Betts, Mr Clive	Dodds, rh Mr Nigel	Hepburn, Mr Stephen	Monaghan, Dr Paul
Black, Ms Mhairi	Donaldson, Stuart	Heron, Lady	Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Blackford, Ian	Doughty, Stephen	Hillier, Meg	Morden, Jessica
Blackman-Woods, Dr	Dowd, Jim	Hodge, rh Margaret	Morris, Grahame M.
Roberta	Dowd, Peter	Hodgson, Mrs Sharon	Mulholland, Greg
Blenkinsop, Tom	Dromey, Jack	Hollern, Kate	Mullin, Roger
Blomfield, Paul	Dugher, Michael	Hopkins, Kelvin	Murray, Ian
Boswell, Philip	Durkan, Mark	Hosie, Stewart	Newlands, Gavin
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Eagle, Maria	Howarth, rh Mr George	Nicolson, John
Brake, rh Tom	Edwards, Jonathan	Hunt, Tristram	O'Hara, Brendan
Brennan, Kevin	Efford, Clive	Huq, Dr Rupa	Onn, Melanie
Brock, Deidre	Elliott, Julie	Hussain, Imran	Onwurah, Chi
Brown, Alan	Elliott, Tom	Irranca-Davies, Huw	Osamor, Kate
Brown, Lyn	Ellman, Mrs Louise	Jarvis, Dan	Oswald, Kirsten
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Esterson, Bill	Johnson, rh Alan	Owen, Albert
Bryant, Chris	Evans, Chris	Johnson, Diana	Paterson, Steven
Buck, Ms Karen	Farrelly, Paul	Jones, Gerald	Pearce, Teresa
Burden, Richard	Fellows, Marion	Jones, Graham	Pennycook, Matthew
Burgon, Richard	Ferrier, Margaret	Jones, Helen	Perkins, Toby
Butler, Dawn	Field, rh Frank	Jones, Mr Kevan	Phillips, Jess
Byrne, rh Liam	Fitzpatrick, Jim	Kane, Mike	Pound, Stephen
Cadbury, Ruth	Flelo, Robert	Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald	Powell, Lucy
Campbell, rh Mr Alan	Fletcher, Colleen	Keeley, Barbara	Pugh, John
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Flint, rh Caroline	Kendall, Liz	Qureshi, Yasmin
Campbell, Mr Ronnie	Flynn, Paul	Kerevan, George	Rayner, Angela
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Fovargue, Yvonne	Kerr, Calum	Reed, Mr Jamie
Champion, Sarah	Foxcroft, Vicky	Khan, rh Sadiq	Reed, Mr Steve
Chapman, Jenny	Gapes, Mike	Kinahan, Danny	Rees, Christina
Cherry, Joanna	Gardiner, Barry	Kinnock, Stephen	Reynolds, Emma
Ciwyd, rh Ann	Gethins, Stephen	Kyle, Peter	Reynolds, Jonathan
Coaker, Vernon	Gibson, Patricia	Lammy, rh Mr David	Rimmer, Marie
Cooper, Julie	Glass, Pat	Lavery, Ian	Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Cooper, Rosie	Glindon, Mary	Law, Chris	Robertson, Angus
Cooper, rh Yvette	Godsiff, Mr Roger	Leslie, Chris	Robinson, Gavin
Corbyn, Jeremy	Goodman, Helen	Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma	Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Cowan, Ronnie	Grady, Patrick	Lewis, Clive	Rotheram, Steve
Cox, Jo	Grant, Peter	Lewis, Mr Ivan	Ryan, rh Joan
Crausby, Mr David	Gray, Neil	Long Bailey, Rebecca	Salmond, rh Alex
		Lucas, Caroline	Saville Roberts, Liz
		Lucas, Ian C.	Shah, Naz
		Lynch, Holly	Shannon, Jim
		Mactaggart, rh Fiona	Sharma, Mr Virendra
		Madders, Justin	Sheppard, Tommy
		Mahmood, Mr Khalid	Sherriff, Paula
		Mahmood, Shabana	Shuker, Mr Gavin
		Malhotra, Seema	Siddiq, Tulip
		Mann, John	Simpson, David
		Marris, Rob	Skinner, Mr Dennis
		Marsden, Mr Gordon	Slaughter, Andy
		Maskell, Rachael	Smee, Ruth
		Matheson, Christian	Smith, Angela
		Mc Nally, John	Smith, Cat
		McCabe, Steve	Smith, Jeff
		McCaig, Callum	Smith, Nick
		McCarthy, Kerry	Smith, Owen
		McDonagh, Siobhain	Smyth, Karin
		McDonald, Andy	Spellar, rh Mr John

Starmer, Keir
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Stuart, Ms Gisela
 Tami, Mark
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick
 Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Michelle
 Thornberry, Emily
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turley, Anna
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twigg, Stephen
 Umunna, Mr Chuka
 Vaz, rh Keith
 Vaz, Valerie

Watson, Mr Tom
 Weir, Mike
 West, Catherine
 Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Williams, Hywel
 Williams, Mr Mark
 Wilson, Corri
 Wilson, Phil
 Wilson, Sammy
 Winnick, Mr David
 Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
 Wishart, Pete
 Woodcock, John
 Wright, Mr Iain
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Susan Elan Jones and
Bridget Phillipson

NOES

Adams, Nigel
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy
 Allen, Heidi
 Amess, Sir David
 Andrew, Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, Edward
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, Stephen
 Baron, Mr John
 Barwell, Gavin
 Bebb, Guto
 Bellingham, Mr Henry
 Benyon, Richard
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, Jake
 Berry, James
 Bingham, Andrew
 Blackman, Bob
 Blackwood, Nicola
 Blunt, Crispin
 Boles, Nick
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Borwick, Victoria
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bradley, Karen
 Brady, Mr Graham
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Brokenshire, rh James
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buckland, Robert
 Burns, Conor
 Burns, rh Sir Simon
 Burrowes, Mr David
 Burt, rh Alistair
 Cairns, Alun
 Carmichael, Neil
 Carswell, Mr Douglas
 Cartledge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex

Chishty, Rehman
 Chope, Mr Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
 Cleverly, James
 Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse
 Collins, Damian
 Colville, Oliver
 Costa, Alberto
 Cox, Mr Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crouch, Tracey
 Davies, Byron
 Davies, Chris
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Glyn
 Davies, James
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Dinenage, Caroline
 Donelan, Michelle
 Dorries, Nadine
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duncan, rh Sir Alan
 Duncan Smith, rh Mr
 Iain
 Dunne, Mr Philip
 Ellis, Michael
 Ellison, Jane
 Ellwood, Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Charlie
 Evans, Graham
 Evans, Mr Nigel
 Evnnett, rh Mr David
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fallon, rh Michael
 Fernandes, Suella
 Field, rh Mark
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark

Frazer, Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Marcus
 Gale, Sir Roger
 Garnier, rh Sir Edward
 Garnier, Mark
 Gauke, Mr David
 Ghani, Nusrat
 Gibb, Mr Nick
 Glen, John
 Goldsmith, Zac
 Goodwill, Mr Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, Mr James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
 Griffiths, Andrew
 Gummer, Ben
 Gyimah, Mr Sam
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matthew
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hart, Simon
 Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
 Hayes, rh Mr John
 Heald, Sir Oliver
 Heappey, James
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Heaton-Jones, Peter
 Henderson, Gordon
 Herbert, rh Nick
 Hinds, Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hollingbery, George
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Mr Adam
 Hopkins, Kris
 Howarth, Sir Gerald
 Howell, John
 Howlett, Ben
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
 Hurd, Mr Nick
 Jackson, Mr Stewart
 James, Margot
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Mr Bernard
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, Robert
 Johnson, Boris
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnson, Joseph
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kennedy, Seema
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kwarteng, Kwasi

Lancaster, Mark
 Latham, Pauline
 Leadsom, Andrea
 Lee, Dr Phillip
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leigh, Sir Edward
 Leslie, Charlotte
 Letwin, rh Mr Oliver
 Lewis, Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lidington, rh Mr David
 Lilley, rh Mr Peter
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Lumley, Karen
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackintosh, David
 Main, Mrs Anne
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mann, Scott
 Mathias, Dr Tania
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McLoughlin, rh Mr
 Patrick
 McPartland, Stephen
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Milling, Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Milton, rh Anne
 Mordaunt, Penny
 Morgan, rh Nicky
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morton, Wendy
 Mowat, David
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, Dr Andrew
 Neill, Robert
 Nokes, Caroline
 Norman, Jesse
 Nuttall, Mr David
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Pery, Claire
 Phillips, Stephen
 Philp, Chris
 Pickles, rh Sir Eric
 Pincher, Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Daniel
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, Tom

Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, Mr Dominic
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Rudd, rh Amber
 Rutley, David
 Sandbach, Antoinette
 Scully, Paul
 Selous, Andrew
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, Alok
 Shelbrooke, Alec
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Soubry, rh Anna
 Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stewart, Rory
 Streeter, Mr Gary
 Stride, Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Mr Desmond
 Swire, rh Mr Hugo
 Syms, Mr Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie

Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Tredinnick, David
 Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Turner, Mr Andrew
 Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
 Vaizey, Mr Edward
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, Mr Ben
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watkinson, Dame Angela
 Wharton, James
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Heather
 White, Chris
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggins, Bill
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, Mr Rob
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
 Sarah Newton and
 Simon Kirby

Question accordingly negatived.

Business without Debate

HIGH SPEED RAIL (LONDON - WEST MIDLANDS) BILL

Ordered,

That Ian Mearns and Yasmin Qureshi be discharged from the High Speed Rail (London - West Midlands) Bill Select Committee and Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, Mr David Crausby and Mr Mark Hendrick be added.—(*Jackie Doyle-Price.*)

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Ordered,

That Mr Richard Bacon, Harriett Baldwin, Deidre Brock, Kevin Foster, Mr Stewart Jackson, Clive Lewis, Nigel Mills, David Mowat, Teresa Pearce, Stephen Phillips, John Pugh, Nick Smith, Karin Smyth and Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan be members of the Committee of Public Accounts.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

PETITIONS

Ending violence against children

7.14 pm

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): I am delighted and indebted to Minehead Middle School in my constituency for this petition. It has collected more than 200 postcards.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that the petitioners support Unicef's campaign to end violence against children; further that the petitioners note that not all children have the opportunity to speak and therefore need people to speak for them; and further that Minehead Middle School recently held a campaign day on this subject and 200 pupils signed postcards calling for action. The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to support Unicef's campaign and to commit to working to end violence against children now.

And the petitioners remain, etc. [P001531]

Pedestrian access at White Cross (Hallatrow)

7.15 pm

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): This petition concerning pedestrian access at White Cross comes from scores of my constituents to The Honourable The Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Parliament Assembled.

The petition states:

The Humble Petition of Miss Lucy Loakes and Mrs Mary Loakes,

Sheweth that the installation of a pavement running from the A37/A39 traffic lights to Bookbarn International would significantly improve access for pedestrians, particularly those who are disabled. Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House considers that this pavement be considered by Bath and North East Somerset Council.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray, &c.

[P001532]

Disabled Students (University of Cambridge)

Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—(*Jackie Doyle-Price.*)

7.16 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I am grateful to have secured the Adjournment debate this evening. It is on the important and sensitive subject of unseen disabilities. May I make this speech in the memory of my schoolboy friend, James Adams, who was killed 10 years ago at Russell Square in the 7/7 bombings? James had an unseen disability, which was the disability of a stammer. He had a deep interest in the workings of this House. Although he took a different political position from me, he would have taken an interest in this debate.

Let me highlight the great progress that we have made on how we treat people with seen disabilities. It is perhaps best illustrated by the success of the 2012 Paralympics. But even here, we still have a long way to go. On celebrating his 50th year as a fellow at the University of Cambridge, Professor Stephen Hawking felt compelled to comment:

“I wonder whether a young ambitious academic, with my kind of severe condition now, would find the same generosity and support in much of higher education.”

Professor Hawking was speaking about seen disabilities. The issue I wish to raise today is specifically regarding the treatment of young people with unseen disabilities and the stigma associated with them.

It is now 70 years since Asperger’s syndrome was discovered, 12 years since the publication of the novel “The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time” by Mark Haddon drastically improved public understanding of the condition, and three years since that play came to the London stage. Yet little progress has been made on how we treat vulnerable people, particularly vulnerable young people with unseen disabilities such as Asperger’s syndrome.

Let me talk about a talented and remarkable young man from my constituency with hidden disabilities who was accepted to study at Cambridge, starting in the autumn of 2012. Azhir Mahmood had a long journey from the noise and bustle of Tottenham to the hushed quadrangles of Cambridge. It started with Azhir teaching himself his maths A-level in his bedroom at home aged only 14, while studying for his GCSEs at the local comprehensive, Gladesmore School. A gifted student, Azhir nervously opened his results letter a couple of years later at a local state sixth form college, Woodhouse, to see that he had got the straight As—an A* and 2 As—that he needed to go to Cambridge.

Growing up in Tottenham, Azhir had not known much about the University of Cambridge, aside from its reputation as a school of international distinction. He was unaware that Cambridge has a college system, which means that most teaching, accommodation and socialising takes place within each college. He did not know which colleges had the best facilities, which were arty or which were science-focused. He certainly did not know which societies and activities he might get involved with once he arrived. Azhir did not even really know how far away his college was from the centre of town. In fact, all he really had to go on when he applied was a

bewildering patchwork of college websites that all looked remarkably similar, with shiny pictures of fairytale buildings, green fields and wooded grounds. Through a random selection, Azhir picked Homerton College simply because he thought that it looked like a nice place to study.

Azhir had worked hard. That was how he won his place at Cambridge. He had even become a bit of a hero to everyone back home in Tottenham in doing so. It was a source of huge pride in our community that one of our boys was going to study at Cambridge. All that hard work had paid off. He had finally made it. He was there, or so he thought.

Soon after starting at Cambridge, Azhir began to feel isolated at Homerton, which has a preponderance of arts and education students. He felt slightly out of place. He did not know whether it was because of his accent, or how he dressed, or because he was from Tottenham, but living four or five miles away from the centre of Cambridge, where most of his science friends were living, he began to feel utterly alone. His anxiety increased and began to affect the

“flashes of genius and brilliance”

his director of studies could see.

Homerton College seemed unable to support him through this increasingly difficult time as the severity of his panic attacks and anxiety disorder increased. Five months in, feeling utterly isolated and defeated, Azhir was forced to return home to Tottenham, which is known in Cambridge as “intermitting”, without even sitting his first exams.

While he was intermitting, Azhir was diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome. The following October he returned to Homerton College and was hopeful that, after his struggles, his college would understand the importance of having his needs assessed. He hoped that proper support would be put in place to assist him with his hidden disabilities and to help him feel less anxious and less alone but again, despite many efforts on his part, no successful measures were put in place by Homerton College to help him cope. He was told to get a bike to cycle into town to see his friends, even though his GP said he had

“already had three cycle accidents so I think it’s safe to say this mode of transport is not for him”.

Azhir tells me that by March 2014 he was forced to intermit for the second year in a row. Time passed and by November 2014 Azhir was still stuck in Tottenham. Having been home for eight months, he was desperate to change college within the university. He knew that other students had done it but despite all his emails and phone calls nothing happened. His senior tutor at Homerton had promised the previous July that, if he went home to Tottenham a second time, she would be able to make inquiries to other colleges within the university. Four more months passed by and Azhir was only too aware that current year 13 students’ applications were being considered. Time was running out, yet Homerton staff had not approached even one of Cambridge’s other 29 colleges.

Meanwhile, a friend of Azhir’s, a student representative, had been trying to arrange a meeting with his senior tutor for months. When the meeting finally took place Azhir was not even allowed to attend. His friend, advocating on his behalf,

“got the vibe they didn’t really want him to return at all”.

Azhir reread his senior tutor's letter of 20 March 2014 and its list of demands, including her order that he must

"focus on recovery from the depression",

suggesting that he do so by booking himself a room at Cambridge's YMCA as opposed to remaining on university property, and

"developing skills to live as an independent adult"

before he would be allowed to return to his lectures, which he loved. His tutor's final paragraph, which said "it may be in your best interests to move to a different university" kept repeating in his head. Azhir's dreams of going into research and of doing something meaningful and worth while seemed to him to have gone. But Azhir's medical reports from his psychiatrist and GP stated that, if Azhir could transfer to a central college, close to the science society he liked to take part in, and close to his friends and lectures, he would not be socially isolated. He would then be far less likely to suffer anxiety and depression. He would be better able to concentrate on his studies. His supervisor, Louis Kovalevsky, was able to observe:

"Azhir is probably one of the brightest students I met."

So why cannot Cambridge, one of the world's oldest and wealthiest universities, which receives at least £260 million of taxpayer funding each year in addition to fees from students and generous bequests, meet Azhir's disability needs and facilitate a change of college?

In an email dated 21 November, his tutor said that the college had to

"weigh up our considerable sympathy for Azhir's predicament with the necessity to protect other students."

Azhir has never put any other student at risk, let alone caused them harm. Why then, in approaches to other colleges, has Azhir repeatedly been told that each college has to "prioritise their other students", seemingly because of Azhir's depression? Do they think that depression is somehow catching?

If we are serious about encouraging the brightest and the best from all different backgrounds to attend our top universities, Azhir is exactly the sort of devoted and dedicated student that his university should be encouraging and supporting. He has been told to

"look at other alternatives where he would be under less pressure"

outside Cambridge. He has also been told that he lacks

"a compelling reason why a change of college"

would solve his problems. Worse still, reference has been made to

"the necessity to protect our other students, themselves going through very challenging and stressful times in their lives".

I was the Minister responsible for higher education when the Equality Act 2010 was passed in Parliament. The Act defines disability as

"a physical or mental impairment,"

which

"has a substantial and long-term adverse effect"

on a person's ability

"to carry out normal day-to-day activities."

Under the Act, parity of esteem is given to physical or visible conditions and unseen disabilities, such as the Asperger's syndrome and depression from which Azhir suffers. The Act states that disabled students should not

be treated less favourably than other students. It places a duty on higher educational institutions to make reasonable adjustments to ensure that, in accessing higher education, students who are disabled are not put at substantial disadvantage compared to those who are not disabled

Section 149 of the Equality Act contains the public sector equality duty, which requires public bodies to comply with a general duty to eliminate discrimination, promote equality of opportunity, and foster good relationships between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not share that characteristic. Does the Minister think these stipulations have been met in the case of Azhir?

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I commend my right hon. Friend for bringing this important debate to the House. He has made a number of serious points and anyone listening to his account of his constituent would have huge sympathy. Does my right hon. Friend agree that part of the issue here is the problem of a collegiate university? Often, we talk about the university, but those responsible are in fact the individual colleges. Perhaps the relationship between the two is at the heart of the problem. The university itself has a rather good record of trying to deal with some of these issues and has been singled out for the work that it has done.

Mr Lammy: The collegiate system is causing a tremendous problem for my constituent. My hon. Friend will understand that we must have a system that bends to the needs of those with disabilities and creates parity with those without disabilities. In this case, it seems that there are huge problems, which I believe this House and the university must seek to overcome.

Cambridge University does not seem to understand that unseen disabilities must be recognised as just as debilitating as seen disabilities. The 2010 Act makes it clear that students with Asperger's, anxiety or depression are just as entitled to additional support as paraplegic or blind students. What is most shocking to me is that when young Azhir asked for help with his mental health, he felt that the problems he was suffering were used as a weapon to attack him. In normal circumstances, colleges are supposed to act as a kind of surrogate family for young people, but instead of being given help, he was told to go to a different university. Despite there being 29 other colleges at Cambridge where he could successfully complete his course and fulfil his potential, to date that has not happened. My constituent is currently sitting at home in Tottenham.

That brings me to my involvement in Azhir's case. At the beginning of March this year my office first contacted the vice-chancellor's office to try to arrange a call between me and him. My office was told that he would not be able to talk to me about the matter because the independent status of each college as a charitable institution meant that when a transfer was requested it was entirely up to each individual college whether to accept a student.

Nevertheless, after some negotiation Lisa Dery of the university's student advice service took my call. Lisa has been trying to assist throughout this complex process, and we agreed that I would be regularly updated. The student advice service also undertook to make efforts to secure Azhir another college through a "diplomatic, co-operative and professional" approach. Unfortunately, despite Ms Dery's considerable efforts, no place has yet been found.

[Mr Lammy]

When my team was informed that there was only a 20% chance of success, I again sought to contact the vice-chancellor. Again I was given the runaround. My letter of 27 May 2015 met with this reply:

“I would politely point out that my office did not refuse to speak to you... A clearer statement would be that it was suggested that you write to me in the first instance.”

By that point I had of course already written to the vice-chancellor, so I wrote again to express my concerns, in the hope that I could discuss Azhir’s case with him personally. That was followed by a phone call from my office seeking clarification that the vice-chancellor really did not wish to discuss the matter. I received this response on 10 June 2015:

“to confirm, decisions of both admissions and accommodation are matters for the independent Colleges. The Central University has no remit on these issues.

The senior tutors of the Colleges are aware of the case and they have been working with the student for some time in order to find a solution. They are aware of your concerns. Please contact the principal of Homerton College... if you wish to take this matter further”.

On receipt of that reply, my office immediately telephoned the office of the principal of Homerton College, Professor Ward, on 11 June to request a call, and then again twice last week and yesterday. Today I received an email from Professor Ward, and I spoke with him this afternoon. He promised today that he will do his utmost to look after Azhir and support him throughout his studies if he returns to Homerton College this year. That is helpful, but given that Azhir’s psychiatrist’s report supports the move to a central college, and given that Azhir has felt very isolated and excluded at Homerton twice before, does the Minister believe that would really meet Azhir’s needs?

It is clear to me that I have been given the runaround and that until this afternoon the university did not wish to discuss Azhir’s case with me. It ought to be deeply embarrassed that the apparent lack of a joined-up, inter-college transfer policy is leading to students with hidden disabilities being denied a move to meet their diagnosed needs, even when failure to do so is having an adverse impact on a student’s studies, health and, ultimately, their future. It seems it would prefer to sweep the issue under the carpet.

I remind that House that, very sadly, in 2010 Ronjoy Sanyal, a 26-year-old student at Cambridge, took his own life. He, too, had complained that he was not best served by the university. He, too, had Asperger’s syndrome. It is for that reason, and for all the reasons I have indicated, that I have brought the matter to the House today, and I do so with huge regret.

The way I see it, Azhir and surely many other young, gifted but vulnerable students like him have put the work in and overcome many obstacles to win their place at that world-beating, historic institution, yet because of what appears to be a profound misunderstanding of the impact of hidden disabilities, they are being prevented from realising their ambitions and completing their courses. Azhir and many young people like him have shown extraordinary spirit, dedication and determination to succeed against the odds. They are exactly the sort of hard-working, dedicated young people we should be encouraging. I ask the Minister to look

carefully at this case, to speak to the university, if he has not already done so, and really to bring this to a satisfactory conclusion.

7.34 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): My right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) has made some very powerful points. I do not think that anyone listening to his account could fail to be moved by it. There are some serious issues to be looked at. As I said in my intervention, this points to the difficult problems in a collegiate-based university system, although there are also strengths. Over the years, I have looked at the college-based system—I am partly a product of it—and sometimes asked myself whether it is the most effective way to operate in the modern world. However, the University of Cambridge is one of the most successful universities in the world. There are some real strengths in the college system but also some weaknesses, as my right hon. Friend clearly identified.

I am sure that people in Cambridge will want to look closely at this, not least because many of those in the university have worked very hard on some of these issues. In fact, when the Quality Assurance Agency looked at the university a few years ago, dealing with students with disabilities was singled out as one of the areas where it did well. Clearly, even getting a good report like that does not mean that the system works in all cases, because it obviously did not work in this case. The University of Cambridge is one of the few higher education institutions that has a person dedicated to Asperger’s syndrome, and the number of students with Asperger’s has risen from 27 in 2009 to 135 today. While there are clearly people making an effort in the university, it is obviously not enough, because it has not worked in this case, as sometimes happens.

I thank my right hon. Friend for bringing this matter to the House. As I say, I am sure that people in Cambridge will want to look at it closely. We all want to make sure that we get a successful outcome for his constituent.

7.36 pm

The Minister for Universities and Science (Joseph Johnson): I thank the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) for the opportunity to debate this important topic. Access to higher education is an issue that he has long championed as a constituency MP and as a former higher education Minister.

I was extremely sorry to hear of the right hon. Gentleman’s constituent Azhir Mahmood’s difficulties with Asperger’s syndrome and the difficulties that have arisen in his dealings with Homerton College in Cambridge. The right hon. Gentleman quoted Professor Stephen Hawking’s comments about whether anyone with a condition such as his—motor neurone disease—would find the same sort of generosity of support available now as he did when he was a younger academic. Let me assure the House that they most certainly should, for we want many more Stephen Hawkings in our universities—all of them, wherever they are in the country.

The wellbeing of students is rightly of great importance for our higher education institutions, and I know that they take their responsibilities in this area exceptionally seriously. As autonomous bodies independent of the Government, universities have the responsibility to ensure

the wellbeing of their students. This includes making reasonable adjustments for those with disabilities, seen and unseen, including those on the autism spectrum. That includes those with Asperger's syndrome. Institutions have clear legal responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010 to support such students, and they are best placed to determine the appropriate support and adjustments that they need to provide to them.

When an individual believes that they have been discriminated against and a dispute arises, there are established procedures in place for raising a formal complaint. As the right hon. Gentleman knows, this is initially through the university's internal complaints procedure. If the complaint is unresolved after completing that process, the student can ask the Office of the Independent Adjudicator to explore the complaint, and that office, which was set up as an alternative to the courts and is free to students, can form its own view. Any complaints can also be referred to the Equality and Human Rights Commission. This is an independent body established under the Equality Act 2006 to stop discrimination and to promote equality of opportunity. It is for each institution to ensure that it is complying with the law and meeting its duties.

Cambridge colleges are independent, and they make their own decisions. The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills is rightly not able to interfere with the admissions process. Similarly, I cannot comment on individual cases, but I understand, as the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) himself made clear, that the University of Cambridge has undertaken considerable work in this area, including a project looking at the support for students with Asperger's syndrome. I am told that it was one of a very small number of such projects operating across this country's higher education landscape. As the hon. Gentleman has said, before the project started in 2009, very few students with Asperger's were studying at Cambridge, but today there are approximately five or six times that number. That is a sign of progress and I welcome it.

It is also very positive that data from the most recent national student survey in 2014 showed that disabled students at Cambridge were more satisfied than non-disabled students with their period of study at the university. That is satisfactory.

There are many other examples of the support that universities have in place. Many universities—almost all of them, I would imagine—have induction systems to help students understand university life and people to turn to if they are experiencing difficulties. Institutions offer counselling services to students to help with their health and welfare issues, and most also offer personal tutors. I know that universities are mindful of the fact that many of their students, particularly those who have moved far away from home for the first time to study, will be undergoing a significant transition and may need extra help.

The Government also provide extra support for disabled students, on an individual basis, through the disabled students allowance, which can provide support to students with mental health issues, including those with an autism spectrum disorder such as Asperger's syndrome. All students applying for the DSA undergo a needs assessment interview to ascertain their specific requirements with regard to their chosen course of study. Support can include items such as specialist equipment—assistive software, for example—and funding for a specialist mentor to provide support to a student to address barriers created by a particular impairment.

It is important that all students, from whatever background and whether they have a disability or not, get the support they need to apply to higher education and be successful in their studies. We are making progress in that respect. The proportion of accepted applicants with a declared disability has increased from 6.5% in 2010 to 8.5% in 2014.

Good progress is also being made on the entry of students from black and minority ethnic backgrounds to higher education. UCAS reports that the entry rate for English 18-year-olds increased for all ethnic groups in 2014. Since 2010 there has been a 4.5 percentage point increase in the proportion of students from Asian backgrounds, and a 7 percentage point increase in the proportion of students from black backgrounds.

We are not satisfied with that, however, and we want to build on that progress, so the Prime Minister has set a goal for increasing the number of students from BME backgrounds progressing to higher education by 20% by 2020. He has also set a goal to double the proportion of people from disadvantaged backgrounds entering higher education by the end of this Parliament compared with 2009 levels. Those are ambitious goals, and rightly so, and for entry in 2015 we have lifted the cap on aspiration, and publicly funded universities can now choose to recruit as many students as have the ability and wish to apply.

In conclusion, the higher education sector has much to be proud of in its work to ensure the wellbeing and mental health of its students and to fulfil its duties under the Equality Act. I expect the sector to continue to meet its obligations in this area and to build and develop the support it provides.

Again, I am extremely sorry to hear of this particular student's experience. The right hon. Member for Tottenham has explained in great detail the steps he has taken to support him, and I commend his work on his behalf as a constituency MP. I must stress, however, the need for both the student and the university to continue to work together for a solution that will enable this talented individual to thrive and flourish in higher education.

Question put and agreed to.

7.44 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 7 July 2015

[SIR EDWARD LEIGH *in the Chair*]

Coastal Flood Risk

9.30 am

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I beg to move,
That this House has considered coastal flood risk.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward, and I welcome the Minister to his role in the new Government.

I am glad to be able to raise the issue of coastal flooding in my first Westminster Hall debate. Normally, flooding gets little or no attention from Westminster until a major flooding incident occurs; then, politicians of all parties cannot get to the flooded communities quickly enough, armed with their wellies—or not, as was the case with the previous Environment Secretary, the right hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson). Someone being forced to leave their home, seeing their possessions destroyed, or being unable to open their business is an extremely difficult thing for them to go through, so I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss this issue.

We have seen several major flooding incidents over the past few years, several of which have caused huge disruption and devastation to many residents in my constituency, Great Grimsby. In December 2013, the east coast was hit by the largest tidal surge in 60 years. In June and July 2007, Yorkshire and Humberside was the region worst affected by the summer floods, which also affected coastal areas further down the east coast and across the south, as well as many inland areas. That was a consequence of the wettest summer on record. The floods in Grimsby last summer were also the result of exceptionally high rainfall, with some areas getting two weeks' worth of rainfall in just one hour. Elsewhere, the early 2014 floods in the south-west and areas around the Thames came during the wettest winter on record.

What initially seemed like exceptional weather is quickly becoming the norm. According to the Met Office, four of the five wettest years in the UK since records began in 1910 have occurred in the 21st century. According to the Committee on Climate Change, sea levels around the UK coastline are now an average of 16 cm higher than they were at the end of the 19th century. It would be wrong to attribute each and every extreme weather incident to climate change, but it is clear that the climate is changing, and flooding is one of the main ways we are feeling the effects. History will repeat itself. We will see similar or even higher levels of rainfall and tidal surges, so are we doing enough to prepare?

Last week, the Committee on Climate Change reported on the progress being made under the national adaptation programme. The report is the first of its type and is required under the Climate Change Act 2008. The message in it is clear: the Government need to be taking much more urgent action to prepare for the inevitable impacts of climate change.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate. As the Member who represents the most beautiful coastline in the UK, the Giant's Causeway, I am particularly delighted to discuss the issue.

Does the hon. Lady agree that the Government must do much more on planning to prevent building in the floodplains along our coasts? There should be a moratorium—there should be no more building until the issues are resolved.

Melanie Onn: There is definitely a role for the Government in the planning rules for building on floodplains. Not enough consideration is given to the requirements on the builders of large numbers of new properties in such areas. There is clearly a role for the water companies as well, because there should be effective drainage in those areas. We need to increase the number of homes that we build throughout the country, so we must consider these factors.

One of the least controversial parts of the report by the Committee on Climate Change reads:

“Investment in flood and coastal defence assets will need to steadily increase in the future to counter the impacts of climate change.”

That was the consensus reached among all political parties following the devastation of the 2007 floods. Yet on coming into office in 2010, the previous Government abandoned that consensus and cut £100 million of funding from flood protection. Such short-sighted thinking is exactly the opposite of what is needed to protect against the effects of climate change.

After the 2013-14 floods, the Government made an additional £270 million available to repair and restore damaged flood defences. How much of that would have been needed had they not cut the budget in the first place? We will all be better off if we accept that these events are likely to become more frequent and so prepare ourselves better from now on.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has set out in detail its plans for capital investment in flood protection over the next six years, including the Grimsby docks flood defence scheme, which will protect more than 12,000 properties. Nevertheless, now that we are past the election, I urge the Government to support Labour's call for an independent commission to set out flood defence spending in a much longer-term context. The Committee on Climate Change has said that the best-case scenario, on an assumption of 2° C of warming, would lead to at least an extra 45,000 properties being in the highest flooding risk category by the middle of the century. We know the future consequences of rising temperatures and sea levels. There should be parity between the length of time over which our adaptation strategy and our mitigation strategy are set out.

Although capital spending has been set out six years in advance, revenue spending on flood defences has been set only for the current financial year. With huge cuts to DEFRA's budget coming in the Chancellor's Budget statement tomorrow, many will be worried that funding to maintain existing defences will be further reduced. The National Audit Office reports that already half the nation's flood defences are only minimally maintained. According to the Environment Agency, three quarters of defences around the Humber estuary are in less than good condition. On a visit in my

[Melanie Onn]

constituency at the weekend, the council's flood risk officers told me that as cracks in the sea defence walls appear each year, they are cementing over them by hand. We need investment in a continual maintenance programme. Will the Minister reassure us that his Government will put an end to the perverse situation in which new defences are put up while existing defences are crumbling?

As well as calling for greater investment in building and properly maintaining defences, the Committee on Climate Change said in its report that local authorities need to do more to manage the risk of surface water flooding by heavy rainfall. Following the floods in Grimsby last summer, North East Lincolnshire Council's cabinet member for the environment, Dave Watson, is working with Anglian Water, along with his colleagues, to identify where flooding has resulted from Anglian's infrastructure. They have recommended a change in maintenance practices or sewer upgrades to reduce the risk of flooding. But should not water companies be maintaining their systems in that way anyway? They are, after all, private monopolies. Is it not time the Government ensured that the companies do a bit more for the public they serve? They could start by ensuring that water companies provide better maintained drainage systems that can cope with heavy rainfall.

The Government must do all they can to minimise the risks of flooding, but the reality is that there will always be some people affected by it. It is therefore vital that Government relief reaches flood victims as quickly as possible. People in the Yarborough area of Grimsby are still recovering from the floods of last summer. Across the country, we saw delays in the Government stepping in to take action, and in getting relief funding out to affected residents and businesses. One example is the support promised to the fishermen in the south-west who were unable to work because of last year's storms. Six months on from that extreme weather, just one fisherman has received any Government support. Will the Minister tell us whether the Government have prepared a more effective relief programme for the next major flooding incident, both for providing immediate assistance while communities are flooded and for getting payments to them afterwards?

One major problem identified by North East Lincolnshire Council's investigation into last summer's floods was a lack of information for residents. The lack of transparency across the board on flooding is a major problem, and I will set out a few examples. First, there is a lack of a reliable warning system for surface water flooding. River flooding has a 27% false alarm rate, but surface water flooding has a 74% false alarm rate. Last year the lack of warning in Grimsby meant that the council was unable to make preparations in advance of the rainfall. The relevant agencies need to make a lot of progress in improving the warning system, and that is not something that local authorities can pursue on their own. Will the Minister update us on what the Government are doing to improve detection and warning systems?

North East Lincolnshire Council also identified a lack of awareness as a cause for avoidable disruption and stress for those who were flooded last year. Many property owners in high-risk areas do not know that they live on a floodplain, so many of those people were unprepared. With no plans for what to do in the event

of a flood and many not knowing which organisation had responsibility for helping them, flood victims were left feeling that they were being passed from pillar to post as they contacted several different bodies before receiving assistance. We need to make people aware that their property is at risk of flooding and empower communities to protect themselves.

Finally on the subject of transparency, the Environment Agency in particular needs to do a far better job of opening up and starting to have conversations with local people. In my short time as a Member of Parliament so far, I have been contacted by several different constituents expressing their bemusement at actions taken by the agency. For example, more than 1,000 people have signed a petition to get the River Freshney dredged. The Environment Agency has rejected the proposal, saying that it is not a priority. At the same time, however, it has blocked planning permission for a housing development next to the river, because of the high flood risk. I am not saying that the Environment Agency is wrong in either of those decisions, because there might be good reasons for both, but the reasons have not been communicated to the communities that are ultimately affected by them.

Following the 2013-14 floods in the south-west, local people expressed considerable anger that the Environment Agency had failed to dredge the Rivers Parrett and Tone in the Somerset levels. The then Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the right hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Sir Eric Pickles), agreed and said that the Environment Agency had "made a mistake", in effect blaming it for the floods. His motivations were clear—he was directing the blame away from the Government for cutting funding to flood defences. The feeling among the local people was real, however, and the anger shown at the time should give the Environment Agency reason to become far more transparent. If dredging was not the right method in those circumstances, a more open, ongoing dialogue with local communities might have won them over to seeing that, or it might at least have given people an understanding of why the decision was made. Had dredging been appropriate, a two-way dialogue with local communities might have led to the realisation of that before the floods, preventing some of the devastation eventually caused.

In conclusion, the scale and regularity of floods in recent years have shown the costs of the failure to prepare for them, both financially and from the disruption and devastation caused to people's lives. The Government need to be ahead of the curve and not wait for ever-more destructive flooding before taking the real preventive action that we need.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. We have six Members to speak, apart from the Labour party spokesman and the Minister. I want to get them all in, so will they please keep an eye on the clock? Please, on no account, speak for more than 10 minutes. I am sure that I can rely on the first speaker, Mr Martin Vickers, to obey my instructions implicitly.

9.43 am

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Thank you, Sir Edward. It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, and it is particularly appropriate that

you are in the Chair, because you know the Grimsby-Cleethorpes area well and have experienced flooding in your own constituency on a number of occasions.

Since the flood surge in December 2013 I have spoken in a series of debates on flooding, so today will seem a bit of an action replay as the debate continues in pretty much the same way. My constituency was badly hit; in the village of Barrow Haven virtually every home was flooded, and the New Holland and Goxhill area was particularly badly affected. The hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), whom I congratulate on securing the debate, is right that parts of Grimsby and the north end of Cleethorpes would have been severely affected had it not been for the actions of the port master at Grimsby to lower the levels in the dock. That saved thousands of homes in the north end and in the East Marsh area of Grimsby from flooding.

The 2013 surge was 1.93 metres higher than the one that killed 326 in the east coast floods of 1953. Since the 2013 tidal surge, the local authorities, the local enterprise partnership, the Environment Agency and local MPs from the Humber area have come together to produce a comprehensive document that is at present being mulled over by DEFRA officials. In reply to a recent question from me, the Secretary of State stated that there would be an announcement on any progress this month.

In last December's autumn statement, the Chancellor announced the contribution of £80 million towards a proposed scheme, which is an adequate down payment. Yes, £1.2 billion is an enormous amount of money, but I emphasise that it is over a period of 17 years and it is essential for the people in my constituency and in neighbouring Grimsby, as well as to the south, that the work is carried out. The Environment Agency recently completed some flood defence work in the Grimsby-Cleethorpes area, which is welcome, and it no doubt contributed to containing the surge 18 months or so ago. The context for the scheme is that it is a national one, not only local, and I emphasise that the £1.2 billion is for the whole of the Humber estuary. The scheme would protect an enormous number of homes and an important industrial and business area. The Grimsby-Immingham dock complex is, by tonnage, the largest port in the country. Without proper protection, those and other ports on the estuary are particularly vulnerable. A third of the country's coal imports pass through Immingham, and the refineries there constitute 28% of UK refining capacity.

Based on best estimates, there will be another event with the potential to do as much damage as the December event. My constituents and those of the hon. Member for Great Grimsby, as well as everyone throughout the Humber estuary, deserve protection equivalent to that for a once-in-50-years event, rather than the estimated existing once-in-200-years level. Associated British Ports—as I mentioned, the ports are crucial to the local and national economies—has produced a case study and a strategy document expressing its concerns and emphasising the importance of the Humber ports to the national economy. In December 2013, Immingham was out of action for about two and a half or three days. Had that been two and a half or three weeks, the impact on the local economy and the maintenance of power supplies would have been enormous.

The hon. Lady was somewhat critical of the previous DEFRA Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson), but in fairness it is

worth pointing out that he was in Immingham receiving reports from officials and local MPs, among others, within 36 hours of the December 2013 event. It was immediately recognised that the port was of great strategic importance to the country.

I appreciate that the timing of the debate is somewhat inconvenient, because the Budget statement is tomorrow. I therefore suspect that the Minister might not be as free as he would have been in a week or two's time to give us details of how much more money the Chancellor will give us. Since the incident and the compiling of the report, MPs from throughout the Humber region have met with the Chancellor and the Prime Minister to urge them to commit to the scheme. I suspect that the Minister will be somewhat reluctant to say much—although Budget leaks are common these days, so he might like to give us advance warning that we will receive that cash.

It is an awful lot of money, but my constituents, those of the hon. Member for Great Grimsby and those in the wider Lincolnshire area deserve adequate protection. It is fair to say that flooding issues have not been given the priority they deserve in recent years. Local knowledge—for example, from internal drainage boards or the farming community, which is particularly well versed in these matters—needs to be used as well as all the mapping and scientific data collected by the Environment Agency. We need to make better use of the farming community, to serve as flood wardens and the like.

My constituents in Barrow and New Holland live in fear. Twice in the past six years their homes have been flooded. That cannot be repeated. I urge the Minister to give us at least a hint of what might be coming in tomorrow's Budget and commit to the £1.2 billion that is absolutely essential over the next 17 years.

9.50 am

Mr Iain Wright (Hartlepool) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) on securing this important debate. I will make a couple of brief points related to my constituency.

As is the case with Grimsby, the main overall flooding risk for Hartlepool is the tidal flood risk from the North sea. A tidal flood risk mapping study carried out a couple of years ago identified two principal areas of tidal flood risk in Hartlepool. The first is in the area of the south marina and Church Street, where wave overtopping could lead to significant flooding of residential and commercial property, key roads such as Mainsforth Terrace, and the railway line and station. The second is on the headland, where it was projected that wave overtopping from the town wall defences could lead to significant flooding; in a worst case scenario, flooding could cut off the headland from the mainland.

In addition, in the Hartlepool area, Seaton snook and Greatham creek and beck discharge directly into the Tees estuary. Those watercourses are tidal and therefore vulnerable to rising sea levels, high tides and storm surges. Work is taking place to strengthen the sea defences on the town wall. In addition, a £10 million scheme, funded by the Environment Agency and Hartlepool Borough Council, will place concrete blocks on the existing sea wall from the Heugh gun battery to the far end of Marine Drive. That will help 500 households in the area.

[Mr Iain Wright]

Capital works are ongoing in my constituency, but I have a number of questions to the Minister. With coastal flooding risk, there is a need to be constantly vigilant. As my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby said, we are increasingly finding that defences meant to withstand a once-in-100-years incident are insufficient. Given increasing severity of flooding and additional flood risk from climate change, what further funding can be given to coastal defences in vulnerable areas such as Hartlepool?

Secondly, capital funding is very welcome, although I would question whether it is sufficient. However, as my hon. Friend so eloquently said, in many respects the effectiveness of sea defences will be based on adequate maintenance, and council budgets have been reduced by as much as 40%—certainly, that is the case for Hartlepool Borough Council—and are set to be squeezed even further. How will the Minister ensure that local authorities have appropriate resources to ensure that flooding risk is mitigated?

Hartlepool has a nuclear power station on the coast; there are plans both to extend the current station's life and to build a replacement station. Given that the power station is an important part of the nation's energy infrastructure, providing some 2% of Britain's electricity generation at any one time, what additional resources and attention can be given to my area to ensure that that important strategic asset is not put at risk?

My final point is about the Heugh breakwater. The Heugh has protected much of Hartlepool from the North sea for many years. It is astonishing to watch the sea there. I encourage you, Sir Edward, and other hon. Members to come and have a walk along the promenade; you will see how fierce the North sea tides are as they bash in against the breakwater, and how effective the Heugh is at absorbing the strength of the waves, ensuring that Hartlepool bay is as flat as a pane of glass.

The Heugh is owned by a private company. Over many years now, it has been suggested that it would be acceptable to allow the final third of the breakwater to go to rack and ruin and fall into the sea. But people whose families have lived in the area for generations and know it well say that the impact of that on sea defences and flooding risk would be immense. The recently built sea defences I mentioned earlier will help to mitigate that. I know the Minister may not be aware of this particular case, but will he look at the importance of the Heugh breakwater for Hartlepool and see what can be done to preserve it?

This debate is incredibly important. Making sure we can mitigate the rising risk of flooding is absolutely essential. In recent years that has been a lower priority than it perhaps should have been, in my area and others. It is important that we mitigate the risks to ensure that businesses and residents are safe as far as is possible.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): I look forward to taking my summer holidays on the seafront at Hartlepool.

Mr Iain Wright: You will be very welcome, Sir Edward.

9.55 am

James Heapey (Wells) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak for the first time in this Chamber and to do so under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) on securing this important debate.

It is important that we are talking about flooding in the middle of this warm and sunny July. For too long the problem has been that flooding has been discussed only when it is raining or the wind is blowing and the seas are at their most violent. From our experiences down in Somerset over the past few years we have learned that the key to protecting our countryside and towns from flooding is persistent effort rather than going from crisis to crisis.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): On planning ahead, does the hon. Gentleman agree that although there is strong support for targeting areas that are currently affected, and strong empathy for those areas, if the Government are to think strategically on climate change, they should be looking 10 to 15 years ahead, and at areas that are currently not affected but probably will be in that time span? We really need to plan for the future.

James Heapey: I agree with hon. Gentleman to a degree. I invite him to join the queue of those of us seeking Government money to protect ourselves from flooding in our areas.

Today's debate is focused on coastal flood risk, which is an important issue. In my constituency, the town of Burnham-on-Sea is often challenged by storm surges and violent seas. While campaigning in the area over the past few years, on a number of occasions I have seen people filling sandbags when there is not a raincloud in sight. However, the real challenge—and to this end it is interesting that representatives of areas in Lincolnshire and Somerset have opened the debate—is the confluence of high tides challenging coastal defences at the same time as heavy rain inland. That has certainly happened on a number of occasions in Somerset, and the challenges it poses grow ever more acute.

There are therefore three key points that I will focus on this morning. The first is the importance of continuing to invest in and reinforce coastal flood defences. In Somerset, our efforts are currently focused on having some sort of barrier to protect the Parrett, which would defend the whole of the low-lying Somerset levels from high tides. Having just been elected to the Select Committee on Energy and Climate Change, I will use this opportunity to put in the Minister's mind the idea of another barrier, further out to sea, that could lagoon the Bridgwater bay as an energy generation scheme while also providing some much-needed coastal flood protection.

My second point is about the importance of sensible planning. Although there is huge sympathy across the whole of Somerset for those who were flooded last year, there is still not yet acceptance in our county—I suspect this is the case in many other counties around the country—that tackling flooding is not simply a problem for those who live on the low ground but a responsibility of those living up on the hills as well. Upland councils across the country need to pay greater heed to the importance of attenuation, in particular, so that planning

policy ensures that water can be held upstream as much as possible rather than simply running down on to the low ground.

On maintaining inland waterways and drains, I must ever so slightly challenge the criticism from the hon. Member for Great Grimsby of the Government's response to the flooding in Somerset in 2014. My experience is that there has been a fantastic response to our county's problems, with tens of millions of pounds put into the effort there. There has been great success in dredging our waterways and drains.

Melanie Onn: I take the hon. Gentleman's point, but that came after a major incident that gathered national news. That is the only reason his area received the funding. Other areas around the country are equally, if not more, at risk of flooding, and they need funding for preventive work. That is what I am asking for today.

James Heapey: The frustration locally was that the flooding came after more than a decade of under-investment in local flooding protection schemes. The dredging has been a great success. Farmers and local communities report that the water moved off the land much more quickly this winter, so the dredging had an immediate benefit. The improvement of local pumping infrastructure has also been well received, and water has been moving more quickly out to sea.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): I apologise for not being here at the start of the debate, but I was at a meeting of the all-party group on flood prevention—I thought I should make it quorate before coming here.

Did my hon. Friend see the satellite photograph of the Bristol channel at the time of the floods 18 months ago? It showed a plume of soil going out into the sea, which gives credence to his point that we need to take an holistic view in areas such as Somerset and, no doubt, in Lincolnshire too. That needs to be about dealing with not only the problem in rivers such as the Parrett, but land use in the hills surrounding areas such as the Somerset levels. When maize and other crops are planted in the wrong place, Somerset ends up in the Bristol channel.

James Heapey: I absolutely agree: we cannot tackle flooding simply be dredging a river, building an attenuation pond or building better flood defences—taking a dynamic, holistic approach to managing the whole area is key. Within that, it is important to recognise what land is used for, and farmers are becoming increasingly sensitive to the impact of what they plant on their land and its ability to hold water.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): I am pleased the hon. Gentleman responded in the way he did to the hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon); he is absolutely right.

Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the Environment Agency did offer the local authority money for dredging—I am not sure of the figure, but I think it was about £7 million—but the local authority rejected it?

James Heapey: I have a suspicion that the hon. Gentleman may be better informed about that than me, and it is not within my expertise to comment on it. However, it would be churlish not to recognise that in

the wake of the flooding in 2014, there was fantastic investment, which has put right the lack of investment that we saw—for whatever reason—over the previous decades. That investment has been most welcome.

The key point I would make is that the response to the flooding in Somerset, where there was a confluence of high tides and heavy rain inland, allied with out-of-date flood protection infrastructure and land use that was perhaps unwise, saw the emergence of the Somerset Rivers Authority. At the authority's heart is the belief that the solution was a locally sensitive, dynamic organisation that would tackle the causes of flooding across the entire catchment area. That is welcome, although I should report to the Minister that there are, I am afraid, still some conflicts between the community and conservationists. However, I am sure he will agree that, when push comes to shove, the community and local business must win out on this issue.

Finally, I have a request for the Minister. His Department has been looking at enduring options for funding the Somerset Rivers Authority. Will he update us on what point those options have reached and whether the Department is close to being able to offer Somerset County Council its recommendations on how the authority should be funded in the future?

It is vital that we talk about flooding year round, not just when it rains or when the seas are high.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. Will the hon. Gentleman draw his remarks to a close?

James Heapey: Of course, Sir Edward.

The impact of flooding on the Somerset economy, and particularly tourism, has been profound. The people of Somerset have been encouraged by all that has been done to help us over the last few years, but the Minister's commitment to provide future help would be most welcome.

10.5 am

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I am pleased to take part in this important debate, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) for securing it.

Like other Members, I think it is important that the Government put in place measures to deal with coastal flooding and the coastal erosion it causes, not just when they happen, but beforehand, to try to mitigate their impact. Although weathering, the denudation of the land, coastal erosion and floods, which are a consequence of the confluence of storms, tidal surges and heavy rain, are very much natural phenomena, they have been accentuated and accelerated by climate change, which is the result of man's inhumanity to the environment.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): This is an interesting debate, but the emphasis has been on the Government doing x, y and z. Surely, there is a role for other agencies—a cocktail of agencies—to work together in partnership to deal with these issues.

Ms Ritchie: I do not disagree, but the Government need to set the priorities and the strategic policy. Other agencies, along with local communities and councils,

[Ms Ritchie]

need to spell out their particular requirements so that we can determine the best interests of the wider public and what planning policy should be, and so that we can ensure that we protect our environment and our local economy.

In the last Parliament, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, which I was a member of, dealt with flooding. The hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon), who may have been the Minister then, talked to us about the issue, and we asked the Government to assess the possibility of a transition to a total expenditure classification for flood and coastal risk management to allow funding to be targeted at local priorities. We also looked at the Flood Re insurance scheme. Obviously, those issues have to be developed, and I look forward, as an incoming member of the Committee in this Parliament, to discussing any outstanding issues and to giving the Government a plan they might wish to consider, notwithstanding what may be in tomorrow's Budget.

The challenges of climate change are great, with coastal flooding one of the most pressing we face. The marked increase in storms and tidal surges is leading to coastal flooding, at a cost to residents, businesses and farmers. Rising sea levels are a particular issue in my constituency, as climate change leads to coastal surges and rising tide levels in the Irish sea. Government agencies have undoubtedly focused their efforts on erosion in areas close to roads, and they have carried out work, but the problem extends far beyond that. We are experiencing serious, irreversible environmental damage along our coastline. That is having not only a long-term impact, but an immediate impact on businesses, residents and farmers. They may find that they have less land this year than they did two or three years ago and that sewer pipes have been exposed on the coastline. A premier links golf course in my constituency cannot get planning permission at the moment; those concerned are looking for rock armour to protect it from the impact of climate change and the effects of coastal flooding and erosion. There is a need for a sensible path forward, to enable the economy to grow and the environment to be protected, and so that we do not lose funding as a consequence.

In my experience Departments will go a certain distance, but then they and the Crown Estate commissioners invoke the Bateman formula, which says that Departments are each individually responsible for the land in their own territory. As a consequence, there is no joined-up thinking on the matter, whether in central Government or the devolved regions, so—notwithstanding budgetary issues for the Government and the devolved region's responsibilities—they need to come together at a climate summit to tackle this important issue.

My hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby has already suggested a Government climate change risk assessment and national adaptation plan, and that is another collaborative approach. That is needed to prepare the UK for the impact of global warming. It is urgently required to safeguard the environment, to protect the economy, individuals, families and farming and rural communities, and to make provision for financial growth and job creation.

I urge the Minister to spell out directly the direction of future Government action with the devolved regions, and to explain how we will move along the path of climate change mitigation and protection of our local natural environment.

10.11 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate, Sir Edward. I thank the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) for bringing the matter to the Chamber. The presence of so many hon. Members whose constituencies have requirements relevant to the debate shows its importance for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. It is nice to see the shadow Minister the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) in his place; we always look forward to his speeches. I especially welcome the Minister and look forward to hearing how he will respond to our requests.

There will not be many in this place who have not heard me rave about the unrivalled beauty of my constituency, Strangford. Those who have been there will agree with me about it, and will want to return to visit it again. It is truly a gem in the crown of Northern Ireland. It has perhaps—no, not perhaps—the most beautiful, majestic and breathtaking landscapes and shorelines in the entire United Kingdom. That is a fact, and it is a pleasure to put it on record. However, to quote a superhero film that my boys love,

“With great power comes great responsibility”,

and the power of the sea off the Irish coast has brought coastal erosion, which has a great impact on homes and businesses along the coastline of Strangford. For that reason I am very thankful to the hon. Member for Great Grimsby for bringing the issue to the attention of hon. Members.

I want to outline the effect of coastal erosion in my constituency and to conclude by asking the Minister about the strategic response. The problem has risen to a head with massive storms and tides. I and some concerned councillors felt we had to hold a public meeting, at the community house in Ballyhalbert, a beautiful seaside village on the Ards peninsula. I highlighted the fact that it is beyond time for a strategic plan on coastal erosion and better co-ordination between Departments. The matter is devolved to Northern Ireland, but we have tried to consider a strategic response and a way to co-ordinate the response between the regions, as well as to co-operate with Europe. Also taking part in the meeting were Diane Dodds MEP, Michelle McIlveen MLA and Councillors Adair and Edmund, along with the chief executive of Ards and North Down Borough Council, Stephen Reid. All of them have been seeking action on the issue, as have I and the many constituents who took the time to attend the meeting on a wet, windy and inhospitable day. It was abundantly clear that the public need action. It is not too often that there is such co-operation between bodies in Northern Ireland, but it was good to see it, and it highlights how essential the issue is.

Hon. Members may not know the areas on which I am focusing, but it is the same general picture for all UK coastal areas. The storm of the winter before last meant extra costs of some £800,000 for the Department for Regional Development, or Transport NI as it is now

called. The road replacement at Whitechurch Road in Ballywalter cost £280,000; the damage to the Shore Road in Ballyhalbert cost £36,000; Roddens Road cost £86,000; and road repairs were needed at Portaferry Road, Ards, Greyabbey and Kircubbin. The total was in excess of £800,000. What was a once-in-100-years flood became a once-in-20-years or once-in-18-years flood. The frequency then came down to once in three years; flooding now seems to happen with shocking regularity, and the need for money for repairs is building up.

Frustration reigns—and all hon. Members who have spoken have alluded to that. Transport NI, the Department of the Environment, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, the Rivers Agency or the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development cannot or will not accept responsibility for damage to property or take action to prevent flooding. At the Saltwater Brig in Kircubbin in my constituency, high tides led to damage to many houses and business properties; and insurance claims for that small area were in excess of £100,000. The council had a small role to play, and had a small sum of money that it could give to those who made contact immediately. It was a small sum in relation to some of the insurance claims, but it gave people £1,000, which at least enabled them to find alternative accommodation at short notice.

It is now obvious that someone needs to take control. After discussions with the chief executive of Ards and North Down Borough Council, it is intended that the council will be the conduit to pull together all Departments and to address what is needed and what the council priorities should be. That is one of the things that we set about doing. No longer will we be using sticking plasters, or putting a finger in the dyke. As flooding caused by coastal erosion becomes regular and commonplace, we need longer term action, as otherwise flooding will have an impact on the life of the community, on the accessibility of the road network, and the potential of tourism to deliver more jobs and boost the economy; it would be a tragedy if coastal erosion were to hold that back.

I would like the Minister to talk about the role of Europe. I believe it has a strong role to play, and that is why we invited a Member of the European Parliament as well as councillors and a Member of the Legislative Assembly to the meeting that we held. We need a strategic response. The newly installed chief executive of Ards and North Down Borough Council has given a commitment to initiate a study on the impact of coastal erosion, and to prepare. Prevention is the correct policy; that will address the massive expenditure that has resulted from high tides and storms. That strategy must be implemented UK-wide with additional funding from and the co-operation of Europe. I hope that that will be the outcome of today's debate—that it will be a look at how we can do things better.

Many residents have conveyed their concerns to me, and given that my constituency is bounded by the Irish sea and Strangford lough—it has the longest coastline in Northern Ireland, taking in almost three quarters of my constituency—that is no surprise. We need to highlight the seriousness of the situation, given the severe weather conditions that often hit our coastlines, and then take action to preserve our beautiful coastline and people's homes, livelihoods and lives. We are attempting to take action locally, but today's debate and the speeches from all parties and regions of the United Kingdom show

that we need funds to enable us to address the issue adequately. We need a UK-wide strategy on coastal erosion, involving all regions, DEFRA, DARD and the European Union. Europe has a vital role to play and must be part of the solution.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): I call Liz Saville Roberts. There is still another speaker after you, so it would be good if you could try to finish by roughly 10.20 am.

10.18 am

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Thank you very much, Sir Edward, for calling me to speak. I will be brief.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) on securing the debate, and I welcome the Minister to his place. I have listened with great interest to the previous contributions. This is the first time that I have spoken in Westminster Hall, and it is a delight to do so.

A number of communities, large and small, in my constituency have been contacted as part of the consultation on the regional shoreline management plan and alerted to potential flooding threats. I understand that there are 787 residential properties and 710 non-residential properties at high risk of flooding in Dwyfor Meirionnydd, and it is mainly a coastal threat. It should be noted that the third best beach bar in the world, Ty Coch at Porthdinllaen, is named by its owners, the National Trust, as a potential loss in the next 50 years; the bar is possibly a poster boy for the dangers of global warming. Also, if anyone is enthusiastic about golf, I recommend that they visit Porthdinllaen, which is one of the most beautiful places in my region.

I shall refer to one particular community, Fairbourne, on Cardigan bay. Residents have recently established a group, Fairbourne Facing Change, and have worked alongside the local authority, Cyngor Gwynedd, in response to concerns arising from sensationalist media reports in 2014 about the potential impact of combined coastal and river flooding. The local authority has committed to protecting the community for the next 40 years, but the saleability of properties remains a challenge.

I wish to raise three specific issues. First, I draw Members' attention to an innovative buy and leaseback feasibility study in relation to the village of Fairbourne, which will be reported back to the National Assembly of Wales.

Secondly, there are issues related to the saleability of properties. Mortgage providers appear to be committed to a set period of residual life before being prepared to lend against a property. If it is perceived that a house has a residual life of, say, less than 60 years—that is not a formally identified figure, but it seems to be a working number—the property is assessed as having nil value. It would be beneficial if mortgage lenders were prepared to accommodate shorter periods when there is a commitment to protect communities, and if a Government body were to provide a guaranteed value for a period of years to be realised at the end of a mortgage. Of course, that idea will be considered in the feasibility study that I mentioned.

Thirdly, and importantly for my constituency, I remind Members of the significance of the work that Network Rail does locally. I imagine that it does similar work in

[Liz Saville Roberts]

other communities as well. In our case, the work relates to the Cambrian coast railway line. It should be noted that maintaining the line from Machynlleth to Pwllheli serves both as a transport function and effectively as a sea barrier against extreme weather. We saw that 18 months ago in Barmouth, when the railway line effectively protected the town from flooding. It is essential that the Cambrian coast railway line is safeguarded for the future, for both those reasons.

It is important to mitigate the effects of flooding and to consider and address the wider implications of flooding for people's lives. I reiterate what was said earlier about the need for co-ordinated action between the devolved nations and the Government here in Westminster.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Thank you for your brevity.

10.22 pm

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Thank you so much, Sir Edward, for just squeezing me in at the end.

I am delighted to be at this debate, which is so pertinent for Somerset, where I come from. I thank the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) for her pertinent points about what is going on in Wales. I will be very brief.

Yes, we had a crisis because of the floods last year—the worst flooding in our area for 200 years—but because of the joint effort of everybody working together, we got over that crisis, and I welcome the support that we received from the Government. The Burrowbridge wall is just unbelievable to drive past—it is a huge flood protection wall that has been put in place.

I will put in a bid for the Somerset Rivers Authority. There is debate going on this very week back in my constituency about how that authority will be run, how people will work together to provide flood protection in future, and how that flood protection will be funded. That is essential for what we call the wider catchment work, which many Members have referred to. That is attenuation work, which means having ponds and the right crops and trees up in the hills to stop the water rushing off the ground so fast. It also means looking out for what happens in the towns, so that when we have heavy rain all the water does not suddenly rush off the ground to the Somerset levels and out to sea, crossing our coastal area, where the tide is coming up at the same time. I ask the Minister to look carefully at what the authority will bring him, and I urge the Government to continue to support the funding of protection on the Somerset levels, particularly the Somerset Rivers Authority project, because it will be a model for many other areas.

10.24 am

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): This is my first time speaking in Westminster Hall, too, and I do so on a pertinent issue. I congratulate the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) on securing the debate. I represent a coastal community that is surrounded on three sides by the sea, so this issue is particularly close to my heart.

Of course, coastal flooding is a particular problem in England, with 5 million properties in England potentially being affected by it, and we have heard from hon. Members about some of the extreme weather that has impacted on their constituencies.

I will pick up on what hon. Members from Northern Ireland, including the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie), and the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts), have said about the devolved nations. I will talk about where we can learn from one another, which is quite important. Similarly, one hon. Member from Northern Ireland, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), talked about Europe.

Let me talk for a minute about Scotland, where the situation is a little bit different from the situation elsewhere. Our topography is slightly different, but that is not to say that we have not been affected by the devastating impact of changes in the climate, extreme weather and flooding.

The environment is largely a devolved matter in Scotland, and flood risk management has been a priority for the Scottish Government, who have invested quite heavily in flood defences and maintained and protected funding for the Scottish Environment Protection Agency. We have also looked at developing a national picture of flood risk across Scotland, which will help us with investment efforts in the future.

The subject of my first question was raised by the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers). Will the Minister give us a slight insight into tomorrow's Budget? I ask because we are worried about cuts to the budget for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, especially at this time. The UK's own climate change risk assessment of 2012 said that one of the biggest challenges in the UK will be flooding and water shortage. So can the Minister tell us why there is a possibility of DEFRA's budget being cut, and what impact such a cut might have on the Scottish Government?

Richard Benyon: May I offer the hon. Gentleman some comfort, albeit without having any knowledge of what is happening to the DEFRA budget? At times of great austerity, DEFRA managed to protect the flood funding budget; in fact, it spent more on flooding than any Government had in any previous year.

Stephen Gethins: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point, and I am glad that the situation reflected what was going on north of the border; I know that he had a good working relationship with the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Food and Environment, Richard Lochhead. We need to talk about this issue, to find out how we can learn from one another across these islands as we face the challenges of climate change.

The hon. Member for South Down said that we were facing a situation arising from "man's inhumanity to the environment". We are seeing the devastating impact that that is having on communities across these islands, and further afield. That is why we are interested in looking at climate justice, and considering not only adaptation to climate change but mitigation of it. We also need to consider how climate change impacts on people beyond these shores.

We are seeing the increased impact of climate change. We have taken action in Scotland through our national coastal change assessment and our national picture of flood risk. I ask the Minister what he can learn from us and what we can learn from him. I urge that the issue is treated as a priority, because it is a priority for communities across these islands. We must continue to invest in flood defences.

10.28 am

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Sir Edward, it is always a great pleasure to speak in any debate chaired by you, given your wise counsel, but today I specifically thank my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), not only for raising a very important subject but for doing so with great aplomb and the sort of attention to detail that I imagine will endear her to her constituents for many years to come.

I am keen to get off to the right start with the new Minister, so I begin by saying that it is really good that there is a Government Department that takes coastal defence risk seriously. I might think that it is a shame that that Department is the Ministry of Defence and not the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and as a former distinguished Chair of the Defence Committee the Minister might feel that that is a point of welcome contact between us and that we can work from there.

The Defence Estates special focus investigation on flood implications for MOD locations set out plans to abandon the Hythe and Lydd ranges, valued at £200 million, which are next to the flood-prone Romney marshes on the south coast. A report released under freedom of information regulations states:

“The MOD estate will be exposed to greater risk as a consequence of climate change...Many sites, both inland and coastal, are vulnerable to flooding...Climate change and sea level rise means that defending coastlines is becoming more costly and technically difficult. The increasing cost of maintenance means that existing defences may be abandoned in areas with low population or fewer tangible assets.”

The Hythe and Lydd ranges, known as DTE SE—defence training estate south-east—form

“the principal area for operational training. The range complexes comprise the most extensive collection of urban training facilities in Europe and extremely varied terrain. This makes the region unique in its training provision.”

Paragraph 6.9 of the report shows that the Ministry has examined the possibility of locating the training facility elsewhere, but that

“capital costs and compulsory purchase issues aside, this size of space cannot be replicated in another part of the UK, simply because an area the size required to translocate these facilities...is not available.”

Sea level rises and the increasingly severe and frequent extreme weather in the UK show that climate change is an issue not just of national wellbeing but of national and global security. The threat that climate change poses to our ability to live well is growing in many parts of the UK, particularly on our coasts. The risk has risen because of human activity, but until recently people acted in ignorance, and therefore innocence, of the effects of their action on future generations. However, our failure to act today, with the full knowledge of the cost of our inaction, is, in the words of the Pope, “a sin against ourselves”, a sin against the world.

That other fine Catholic in another place, Lord Deben, chair of the Committee on Climate Change, has pointed out that it is unnatural for us to act like ostriches, but it is also irresponsible and immoral. The committee’s first statutory report to Parliament on the Government’s progress in preparing the UK for the impacts of climate change was published last week. It shows that the Government have taken the ostrich approach.

I will get to the committee’s findings in a moment, but first I want to raise two points that appear to me to show the Government’s disregard for their responsibility to protect our economy and wellbeing from the impacts of climate change. First, the Government were asked to put up a Minister to speak at the launch of the committee’s two progress reports. They chose not to. Secondly, no Minister currently has responsibility for climate change adaptation. The role has been handed to a part-time Lord and DEFRA “spokesperson”, whatever that means. It certainly does not mean a Minister of the Crown.

The Conservative-led coalition removed climate change adaptation from DEFRA’s priorities, and this Government have removed ministerial oversight. That is serious. Tens of thousands of homes, critical energy and transport infrastructure and many towns and cities in England are located on the coastal floodplain. The Government’s failure to take adaptation seriously is an insult to all of them.

We know that our efforts to reduce flood risk in the past have saved the lives of those who live on the coastal floodplain, as well as billions of pounds potential damage. No one died as a direct result of the 2013 tidal surge event, whereas the tidal surge of a similar magnitude in 1953 killed 307 people. Improved flood defence structures and reliable early warning systems protected hundreds of thousands of homes and ensured that 18,000 people were evacuated. However, many coastal communities were balancing on a knife edge during the 2013-14 winter floods. The fact is that defences protecting thousands of homes and critical infrastructure, not to mention much of the city of Hull, almost failed.

The Committee on Climate Change addressed a couple of simple questions on climate change adaptation. First, is there a plan? The answer that the committee gave was yes, but that it is inadequate. Secondly, are actions taking place? The answer was yes, but they are not time-bound and most are not being measured. Thirdly, are those actions reducing the risk of failure of our critical infrastructure and loss of life? Answer: no. That is the view of the Government’s independent Committee on Climate Change, set up to advise the Government on these matters.

Over the past four years there has been under-investment in flood and coastal risk management. I am sorry that the former Minister, the hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon), is no longer in his place, because I want to rebut his words specifically. He said that there had been an increase in investment under the last Government. There was not. Over the past four years there has been under-investment totalling more than £200 million. The graphs are there for all to see in the report by the Committee on Climate Change. I counsel the Minister to have a look at those graphs; the graphs and the bar charts showing what was spent are all there.

The committee states:

“Due to this underinvestment, expected annual flood damage will be higher now than it was in 2010.”

[Barry Gardiner]

That is a direct quote from the Committee on Climate Change. Against that evidence, can the Minister please justify his insistence and that of ministerial colleagues that flood risk has been reduced over the past five years? He will know that the only way in which that claim can in any way be substantiated is through the fact that those at low risk and very low risk of flood damage have been taken out of the equation, but those at significant, high or very high risk of flooding have seen that risk increase.

Only 77 local planning authorities out of 340—23%—have local flood risk plans. Of the 20 local authorities in England that have the highest number of households at risk from river or coastal flooding, 17 do not have adopted plans in place under the national planning policy framework. What is the Minister doing to ensure that all local planning authorities have those plans in place?

The Committee on Climate Change has identified that the Government have no plan to reduce flood risk to properties already protected by coastal defences. That means that as sea levels rise because of climate change, the chance that those defences will be overtopped or fail is increasing. However, the Government are focusing only on improved emergency evacuation planning. Why have the Government not informed coastal communities that they should be prepared for increasingly frequent evacuations as flood risk increases because of climate change?

Since 2001, 27% of floodplain development—that equates to 68,000 new homes—has been in areas with a one in 100 or greater annual chance of flooding, and about 23,000 new homes have been built in areas with a high likelihood of flooding; that is a one in 30 or greater annual chance of flooding even where flood defences are in place. Can the Minister explain why all the Government's planning assumes that that development is not taking place? That is their own stated assumption behind their figures.

Ports handle 95% of the country's imports and exports by volume. Half of the UK's port capacity is located on the east coast, where the risk of damage from a tidal surge is greatest. However, it is not clear what improvements in flood protection have been made, or are planned to be made, to Britain's ports. Some ports, having participated in the first round of reporting under the compulsory adaptation reporting power, have decided not to provide an update as part of round 2. Will the Minister confirm which ports have not reported in round 2, but did report in the first round?

Why was the risk of coastal erosion not mentioned in the Planning Inspectorate's assessment of the Hinkley Point C nuclear power station? Coastal defences can fail, as we saw during the 2013-14 winter storms at Dawlish, which has been mentioned in the debate. Projections suggest that the length of the rail network exposed to coastal erosion will increase from 11 km to 38 km by 2050 and to 62 km by 2100. What are the Minister's colleagues in the Department for Transport doing to address that?

When will the Government release the findings of the national resilience review that was launched in response to the 2013-14 floods? Only two of the six wetland priority habitat types currently meet the 90% target for

being in a favourable or recovering condition. The Minister will know that, as well as being extremely important for wildlife, those habitats play an important role in buffering sea defences from waves and storm surges. Only 37% of floodplain and coastal marsh is in favourable or recovering condition, and there is currently no process for reporting progress against the Government's target. That should be a priority for DEFRA from the point of view not only of flood risk, but of habitats and the wider environment. Does the Minister expect to meet his 2020 targets in those areas?

It is the duty of Government to provide strong leadership and the investment that is required to ensure that all parts of the country and all sectors of the economy adapt effectively to climate change. Coastal flooding is not a stand-alone risk; combined with fluvial and surface water flood risk, the effect can be devastating. The Government have not risen to the challenge of matching the risk that we face.

10.40 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rory Stewart): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I begin by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) for securing this important debate. Flooding is one of the biggest challenges that the nation faces, and it is of immense importance, particularly in the hon. Lady's constituency.

Coastal flooding on the east coast is particularly extreme. Hon. Members from all over the country have made moving speeches, but it is difficult to think of any communities that face a more extraordinary collection of challenges than those on the Humber. Events that normally affect coastal flooding, such as low pressure zones and the height of the tides—this year, tides are at an 18-year high—combine with the geography of the east coast of England and the very low-lying land to make the Humber particularly vulnerable. It is good that hon. Members have focused on that problem.

In his good speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) made an analogy with the tidal surge of 1953 and pointed out that the 2013 coastal surge in the Humber was 1.93 metres higher. Although that is true, the coastal surge in 1953 resulted in the flooding of 24,000 properties and the death of more than 300 people; in contrast, in 2013, despite the fact that the surge was much higher, only 2,800 houses were flooded, no lives were lost and—perhaps most importantly for the Government—156,000 properties were protected on the Humber.

The tone of the debate has been, understandably, concerned and occasionally negative, but it is worth bearing in mind the fact that the Environment Agency and the Flood Forecasting Centre have made huge progress in making us safer against flooding. The basic arguments made by right hon. and hon. Members can be divided into three categories: the value of that which we protect from floods, the threat posed by the floods and our response to those floods. Our response includes advance prevention; capital and investment and maintenance to ensure that flood defences are in place; recovery measures; and, underlying everything—and as raised by the hon. Member for Great Grimsby—forecasting.

In the short time available, I will try to touch on all those issues. Powerful arguments have been made about the economic value of that which we protect from flooding. My hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes focused on the unique industrial base around his constituency, and the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright) drew attention to power generation in his. More fundamental than the economic importance of these areas, however, is the protection of human lives. As the Member of Parliament for Penrith and The Border, I have, like everyone in this room, seen the impact of floods, and it is extraordinary to experience something that feels so biblical. I have seen families staring in disbelief at their possessions floating on the floodwater. I have witnessed the terror, the risk to people's lives, and the complete upset of the ordinary relationship between land and water that flooding causes. We have an obligation, in a time of climate change, to make sure that that does not persist.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) described the £800,000 of damage caused by flooding to transport infrastructure in Northern Ireland, which illustrates the problems that flooding can cause in the absence of proper prevention. My hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heapey) and the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) described the damage done in their constituencies by uncontained flooding. Their contributions bring us to the central question of flood response, which can be broken down into prediction, prevention, emergency response and recovery.

I am delighted to welcome to Westminster Hall the hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins), who is following in the footsteps of his distinguished predecessor. He and the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd raised some constitutional issues. As both hon. Members are aware, we are discussing a fully devolved issue, but one on which we can learn from each other. One of the great advantages of devolution has been the opportunity to look at each other's approaches, particularly for my Department. The environment was one of the earliest things to be devolved, so we have been able to learn from Wales on recycling and from Zero Waste Scotland. I hope that we can learn from each other when it comes to flood insurance schemes, and there are certainly things that we can learn from Scotland on planning.

The hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) raised a serious question about strategic thought. Governments are not always as good at strategic thought as they could be, but I am more reassured about the approach to flooding than I am about other aspects of government. The Environment Agency has a 100-year plan for shoreline management, which is a much more expansive and long-term form of planning than we are accustomed to.

Jim Shannon: In my contribution, I indicated the need to bring Government bodies together. In particular, we need to reach outside local government, regional government and Westminster towards Europe. Has the Minister given any thought to how we can best do that? In meetings in my constituency, we have brought all those people together. There is a European aspect to the long-term strategic response, so we need to involve Europe. Will the Minister give us some thoughts on that?

Rory Stewart: I am happy to sit down with the hon. Gentleman and talk about his experience in his constituency. The hon. Member for Great Grimsby talked about detriment to fishermen, and European funds have contributed £400,000 to repairing the damage to fishing equipment that has been caused by extreme flooding events. There are many more ways in which Europe can participate, and I would be interested to hear about the hon. Gentleman's experience.

Partnership is at the core of everything that we are trying to do. We are finding ways to bring together the excellent work of the Environment Agency, the genuine concerns of local authorities, the knowledge of people such as farmers—my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes has touched on that—and the private sector. Port authorities are highly profitable private industries, which have an obligation to invest in their own capital infrastructure.

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): Does the Minister agree that in areas such as mine, where the railway line at Rufford is at risk from flooding, Network Rail should contribute financially to the internal drainage board, which is on the table, and not leave the matter in the hands of farmers and rate payers?

Rory Stewart: That is an interesting proposal. I do not want to be bounced into looking at something that I have not thought about, but the basic principle behind my hon. Friend's suggestion is correct. One would want all those stakeholders to contribute to IDBs. I would be interested to see whether that would work for Network Rail, and I would be happy to sit down with my hon. Friend and talk about that in more detail.

At the heart of the contributions by the hon. Member for Great Grimsby and the shadow Minister was the question of resources. The discussion is becoming a slightly tedious one in which statistics are played back and forth. As the shadow Minister will be aware, because he has heard us say it again and again, we have invested more resources in flooding, in cash terms and in real terms, than the previous Labour Government did during their last five years.

Ms Ritchie: This has been an interesting debate, but there have been suggestions that flood defence spending is at least £500 million below what is needed to keep pace with increased floods and rising sea levels. How do the Minister and his Department intend to address that, notwithstanding tomorrow's Budget and its implications?

Rory Stewart: What exactly does the hon. Lady mean? Does she mean that there should be a particular target such as a once-in-100-years, a once-in-75-years or a once-in-200-years flood risk? How exactly would she weigh up expenditure on two or three isolated houses against other forms of expenditure? I ask because the Environment Agency runs extremely complex and serious models to try to get the right relationship between Government spending, public spending and the risk on the ground. Our models show that we have improved the level of flood protection by about 5%, rather than just keeping up with it, so I am interested in the source of her statistic. If she would like to sit down with me, I would be happy to discuss it in more detail.

Barry Gardiner: I will try to be brief, but I want to enlighten the Minister on the question of funding. Simply, the projections are based on the peak year of 2010, after which there was an initial cut of some £200 million in the following two years. The Government then amended that figure for restoration, which was emergency funding. The bar charts and graphs produced by the Committee on Climate Change show that that funding bumped the figures above the original projected gain line. The Environment Agency has put in two new lines below that level, but those lines are deemed to be “best possible” and “rather optimistic” scenarios by the Committee on Climate Change. I recommend that the Minister looks at the reports and graphs by the Committee on Climate Change because they explain the situation in some detail and show exactly what the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) said.

Rory Stewart: I thank the hon. Gentleman. I looked at the reports by the Committee on Climate Change because he, or somebody else, tried to submit an urgent question. I reassure him that I am the responsible person in the Department because I was being prepared for that urgent question on the climate adaptation report.

The central issue for this debate is not simply whether we define the emergency funding as part of the Government spend over the past five years; it is, at least from my point of view, that the six-year commitment in Government spending has allowed us to do much smarter long-term planning. The Environment Agency has done that well, and we were able to make considerable savings. It is a real model. Whoever is in government next—including the shadow Minister, if he were to take over—the most important thing is ensuring that the Treasury makes such long-term settlements, which have completely transformed the way we do our capital planning.

Stephen Gethins: I thank the Minister for his reflections on where we can learn from each other across these islands. Does he see an opportunity for greater European co-operation in his long-term planning? The importance of the European Union was raised earlier by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). Is this an area where we should be deepening our co-operation with the European Union, and is that part of his planning for the future?

Rory Stewart: In theory, I am very comfortable with that suggestion; in practice, a great deal of this is extremely local. There are four fundamental types of flooding in Britain, and a lot of that flooding is governed by specific weather patterns and geography. Much of the mitigation is governed by local knowledge, but of course I would be interested if the hon. Gentleman has ideas that he would like to share, particularly from Europe.

In the limited time available, I will touch on the four main issues raised by hon. and right hon. Members today. Those issues seem to fall into the categories of new technical solutions, the prioritisation of flood spending, emergency response and recovery. On new technical solutions, the hon. Member for Great Grimsby raised the question of dredging, particularly in relation to Freshney. My hon. Friends the Members for Wells and for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) talked about upland

attenuation. My hon. Friend the Member for Wells also raised the issue of barrages, and the hon. Member for Hartlepool talked about the Heugh breakwater.

Different technical solutions have been proposed. I am happy if hon. Members want to take up those proposals and see why the Environment Agency is pursuing other technical solutions and has different views on the breakwater at Heugh, for example. I assure the hon. Member for Great Grimsby that we will look again at Freshney in this financial year, and she will of course be aware that dredging is not a solution in all cases and can lead to higher and quicker movements of water downstream. Upland attenuation, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wells will be aware, can help in limited areas but is not suitable for large catchment areas and extreme flooding events.

Prioritisation is partly a question of perception. My hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes, for example, raised the concerns of farmers in Barrow. We have committed £4.6 million towards the £6 million scheme that will directly address the needs of the farmers of Barrow. The hon. Member for Hartlepool mentioned the power plant. Again, nobody doubts the importance of that power plant but, as he is aware, it is on relatively high ground. We calculate that, at the moment, there is a one-in-1,000 risk for that power plant, so we do not consider it a priority. If he has different information, he should by all means come to us.

The shadow Minister mentioned the Hythe and Lydd ranges, where I have been on built-up-area exercises. He made an important point, and the Ministry of Defence can be expected to contribute. I am happy to have that discussion again with the MOD. On the general question of the prioritisation of coastal flood erosion over other forms of flooding, I can reassure hon. Members that 43% of the £23 billion that we have committed to flooding is directly directed towards coastal flooding.

The hon. Member for Great Grimsby talked about emergency response, which is the third conceptual issue. We have an increasingly sophisticated operation through the gold commands, the Environment Agency emergency room and Cobra. I take on board the shadow Minister's point about local authority plans, which I am happy to follow up. The hon. Member for Great Grimsby also raised the issue of recovery, on which there is more we can do. The hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd talked about buying. We have chosen the Flood Re insurance scheme model, but there has been some examination on the east coast of exactly those kinds of models, which I am happy to discuss in more detail.

The final conceptual issue is prediction, which reminds us how flooding is so incredibly technical. North Lincolnshire Council asked why we are less good at predicting surface water floods than coastal floods, river floods and groundwater floods. The answer, of course, relates to the source of those floods. North Lincolnshire Council needs to understand that, if we are lucky, we can get four or five days' notice of a coastal flood because such flooding is governed by the height of the tides, by a low pressure system and by the speed of the wind. We can see the height of the water in a river, and we can see groundwater. Surface water flooding, particularly at the moment, is caused by summer thunderstorms. The Met Office finds surface water much more difficult to address because—to make an analogy—although we can see that bubbles will raise the top of a

boiling pot, we cannot tell where those bubbles are going to be. However, we plan to invest some £96 million in a new supercomputer that will increase sixteenfold our ability to do the kind of projections, and provide the kind of support, that are needed.

Over the next six years, we have a £2.3 billion programme covering more than 1,500 projects, and we aim further to reduce the risk to at least 300,000 households. That investment—the shadow Minister is now bored with these statistics—will help to avoid more than £30 billion of economic damage and will help economic development and growth. We estimate that every £1 invested in that way brings us at least £9 of economic benefit. That is why I agree with everyone who has spoken. I therefore pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for Great Grimsby, but I also pay tribute to everyone else for their service to their constituencies and their understanding of local needs. There is almost nothing in government that is more important than focusing on preventing floods and protecting communities against such risks. Nothing else can be as devastating to communities, and there is nothing else in which I am as proud to participate as a Minister.

10.59 am

Melanie Onn: I thank the Minister for taking our concerns so seriously. It is clear from today's attendance that this is a national issue. We have had representations from the north, south, east and west, from the islands and from the devolved nations.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): I remind Members that at the conclusion of the next debate, at 11.30 am, the House will observe a minute's silence to mark the 10th anniversary of the events of 7 July 2005. The silence will begin at the point at which the next debate is to end, so I would be grateful for Members' co-operation in ensuring that we are able to commemorate those events appropriately.

Nuclear Warheads (Transportation)

11 am

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of transportation of nuclear warheads.

I thank the Minister for being here, and I hope that she can answer some of my questions about the transportation of nuclear warheads. It may come as a shock to many, but nuclear weapons are regularly driven past the homes of millions of people as they snake their way across Britain. Nuclear warheads were transported through my constituency at least three times in the last 18 months: in January and July 2014, and in January 2015. They were moved in large convoys of more than 20 vehicles on the M74 through Rutherglen and across the centre of the city of Glasgow.

On each occasion, they were travelling around midnight. Driving in the dark involves particular risks; the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents has pointed out that drivers are far more likely to fall asleep at the wheel at night. Although only a quarter of all journeys take place between 7 pm and 8 am, 40% of all injuries sustained in accidents occur during this time period.

For several years, the convoys avoided the centre of Glasgow and skirted around the city. Now that restriction has been lifted, and they travel openly on the M74 and M8 through the heart of Scotland's largest city. Until 2005, nuclear convoys took their time on the long journey from Berkshire to Couplport. Each trip took three days, with two overnight stops. Now the convoys' journey is continuous, with a crew change halfway and no overnight stops. That means longer stretches on the road, driving at night, driving through urban areas and driving for longer, which all make the dangers of an accident even greater than in the past.

I am aware that the Ministry of Defence will be able to cite numerous safety procedures that are adhered to. I am also aware that the MOD carries out regular safety exercises and will consider its emergency plans to be robustly tested. But accidents can and do happen. In January 1987, in the county of Wiltshire, two nuclear warhead carriers, each transporting two nuclear warheads, came off the road after sliding on ice. One of the carriers suffered damage after rolling on its side. Fortunately, the containerised weapons were not damaged in the incident, but it took 18 hours to recover the damaged vehicle.

The MOD has failed to learn lessons from that accident. It continues to move nuclear weapons in the middle of winter, in icy conditions. At 11 pm on 11 January this year, a convoy drove past a sign on the M74 at Hamilton that said "Winter weather, take care". It then went through my constituency, across Glasgow and over the Erskine bridge, 45 metres above the River Clyde.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that there is no better example of the MOD's blatant disregard for public safety in transporting nuclear warheads than when that convoy crossed the Erskine bridge in my constituency? The Erskine bridge, high above the Clyde, had been subjected to gusts of nearly 100 mph, and

[Gavin Newlands]

high-sided vehicles had been advised not to use the bridge. I cannot imagine a more ridiculous decision, made solely for convenience rather than safety. It is a completely wrong-headed approach to dealing with such a cargo.

Margaret Ferrier: I concur with my hon. Friend. The convoy proceeded despite the high wind warnings flashing on approaches to the bridge. For several days the Met Office had been issuing warnings across the country of high winds or snow. It would not have been possible for the convoy to complete its journey that week without driving at some point through an area where there had been an extreme weather warning.

In addition to the accident in Wiltshire, there have been other accidents: warhead transporters have crashed into each other, a nuclear lorry has been involved in a fatal head-on collision and a convoy has been stranded for hours following a major breakdown. In August 2014, the *Sunday Herald* newspaper reported that more than 70 safety lapses had occurred on nuclear convoys in the five-and-a-half-year period ending in December 2012. Like many others, I was shocked to learn that such safety incidents have occurred more than once a month on average. In 2012 alone, 23 incidents happened, raising fears that the safety of nuclear convoys might be deteriorating.

In 2005, the same newspaper also revealed an internal MOD report warning that nuclear warheads could accidentally explode if involved in a major crash, because a bomb's key safety feature could be disabled, leading to what the MOD terms an "inadvertent yield". That is a rather abstract way of saying that a burst of incredibly lethal radiation would be unleashed. The consequences of an accident could be catastrophic. If there were a major fire or explosion, lethal plutonium would be scattered downwind. Plutonium-241 has a half-life of 24,000 years and is difficult to detect. A accident in my constituency could leave it and neighbouring constituencies a wasteland.

Now it looks as if more convoys than ever will be travelling to and from Scotland. The MOD has a plan to overhaul and upgrade the entire stockpile of Trident nuclear warheads, the Mk4A refurbishment project. Successive Ministers have been coy about telling Parliament about those upgrades. Surely taking all the warheads down to Berkshire and then back to Scotland will mean that we can look forward to an increase in the frequency and size of convoys over the next few years.

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): My hon. Friend mentions convoys. Convoys include both the materials themselves and vehicles meant to deal with accidents when they happen. I am sure that my hon. Friend and the Minister share my concerns that in my constituency in 2007, the convoy vehicles got separated and lost in foggy weather; it took many hours for them to get back together, during which time anything could have happen and they would not have been able to respond.

Margaret Ferrier: I agree with my hon. Friend. In the longer term, this Government want to build a replacement for Trident and to keep nuclear weapons on the Clyde

for at least another 50 years. It is being seriously discussed that those convoys will continue through the heart of Scotland's largest city for the next half-century.

The convoys travel across Britain. The MOD's own publication "Local authority and emergency services information" lists 85 English, 13 Welsh and 21 Scottish local authorities through which the convoys might travel. Those 21 alone account for about two-thirds of all Scottish local authorities. The convoys pass through many towns and cities, including Oxford, Birmingham, Leeds, Edinburgh and Stirling, but the most dangerous route that they take is through the middle of Glasgow. How would Members feel if those weapons of mass destruction were driving down Whitehall? That is the threat that the citizens of the Greater Glasgow area face on a regular basis.

In addition to moving whole nuclear weapons, the MOD also regularly transports radioactive components of nuclear weapons by road in specially-built high-security vehicles. Those vehicles entered service in 1991 and were due to be retired in 2003, but the date was put back to 2009, then to 2010 and then to 2014. The delay has meant that the MOD is using unreliable vehicles to move parts of nuclear weapons. The trucks have suffered a series of breakdowns and faults. Fred Dawson, former head of radiation protection at the MOD, said of the situation:

"This does little to instil a sense of confidence in the safety of MOD's nuclear activities. One hopes that the MOD has RAC or AA home recovery cover on all its vehicles."

The public found out about the nuclear convoys as a result of the work of campaigners in Nukewatch, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the Scottish CND and Faslane Peace Camp, which have shown great commitment over many years in shining a light on those deadly cargos.

Today we live in a new world of social media. Eight weeks ago, several members of the public were horrified when they spotted the vehicles driving across Scotland. They took to Twitter to pass on to the world what they were seeing. The MOD is deluding itself if it thinks it can keep secret 20-vehicle nuclear convoys travelling on our main roads; they are well documented, with organisations such as Nukewatch tracking and recording them. Given that the convoys are so easily recognisable, they are a target. Road safety is not the only risk. Nuclear weapons cannot deter terrorism; instead, they pose a potential threat from terrorism.

In May, the people of Scotland selected 59 MPs; 57 made it clear in their campaigns that they opposed Trident. That decision should be respected. Continuing to transport nuclear weapons across Scotland is an insult to the people who live there. There is no safe way to move nuclear warheads. As long as there are nuclear convoys, there will be an unacceptable risk of a release of lethal radiation, and calling it an "inadvertent yield" makes it no more acceptable or less dangerous. The safest way forward is to scrap Trident and put an end to nuclear convoys.

The thought of nuclear weapons, which are designed to flatten cities, travelling close to our homes in the early hours of the morning is enough to give anyone nightmares. Parents should be able to put their children to bed at night without worrying about the risk of a nuclear accident. It is time to remove that danger and let us live in peace. I have questions for the Minister,

which I hope she can answer at the end of the debate, and I will then pass over to my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald), who wishes to make a few comments.

Until 2005, MOD rules stated that nuclear weapon convoys should not travel in the hours of darkness. Can the Minister explain why that restriction was imposed and why it has been lifted? Between July 2007 and December 2012, there were 70 safety lapses on nuclear convoys. The highest number—23—was logged in 2012. To what extent have departmental spending cuts affected the apparent rise in safety incidents? What steps have been taken since 2005 to ensure that bomb safety features are not compromised in the event of a crash and how has the risk of an inadvertent yield been lessened?

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP) *rose*—

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. The rules of the House state that if an hon. Member wishes to speak, she must have the permission of the mover of the motion—I assume the hon. Lady does—and of the Minister.

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Penny Mordaunt): She does.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Thank you. I call Kirsten Oswald.

11.12 am

Kirsten Oswald: Thank you, Sir Edward. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) and the Minister.

My hon. Friend has made many important points this morning. Like her, I have substantial concerns about the transportation of nuclear weapons around the UK. Weapons of mass destruction have absolutely no place on our busy roads; in fact, they should have no place in our country at all. Weapons of mass destruction are wrong—morally, on safety grounds, on defence grounds and financially, too. The quoted cost of replacing Trident—£100 billion—is so big as to be almost beyond understanding. The Greek debt crisis, which is causing such concern, relates to figures of around £300 billion, so replacing Trident equates to a full third of Greek debt—an astonishing sum. Yet nuclear convoys continue to travel thousands of miles every year.

The journey from Aldermaston in the south of England to Coulport on the west coast of Scotland is a long one. Obviously, it is not clear exactly what routes are used, and I understand the reasons for that. What is very clear, however, is that, according to the “Local Authority and Emergency Services Information” document to which my hon. Friend referred, the Ministry of Defence has the ability to transport nuclear weapons all across the country. In fact, as she mentioned, it is expressly permitted to do so in 123 local authority areas in the UK—a huge swathe of the country, stretching from Exeter to Liverpool and Powys to Highland, and of course, many constituencies in Scotland, including my own constituency of East Renfrewshire. Transport through other areas is not ruled out if required. In reality, few areas of the UK have no likelihood of nuclear weapons being transported through them. I suggest that that is

not widely known and that any community would feel real concern if convoys of nuclear warheads were driving down its roads.

The convoys drive on many of our busiest motorways, as well as major and minor roads. They travel alongside families going on holiday, people going to work and HGV drivers taking their loads around the UK. They also share the roads with other dangerous vehicles, such as fuel tankers. One of the worst types of accident that could happen is a collision between a tanker and a lorry carrying Trident nuclear weapons. The intense heat that would follow a fuel fire could engulf a nuclear warhead. The smoke drifting downwind would be contaminated with lethal plutonium. A severe fire could also cause the high explosive in the weapon to detonate. Although a nuclear explosion is unlikely, a conventional explosion in a Trident warhead would still have a devastating effect, dispersing plutonium for miles around.

As we heard, the MOD admitted that between July 2007 and December 2012 there were 70 incidents on nuclear weapon convoys: 56 engineering incidents and 14 operational incidents. Some related to support vehicles, but such incidents can still affect the whole convoy and its safety. In July 2011, a command vehicle suffered a dramatic loss of power and the whole convoy was left on the hard shoulder of the M6. Two lanes of the motorway were coned off and nuclear weapons were left sitting there. In July 2010, the convoy commander got lost and took a 45-minute diversion off the planned route. In March 2012, a convoy was diverted because of low-flying aircraft from an MOD establishment; what would happen if a low-flying fast jet collided with a lorry containing Trident nuclear warheads does not bear thinking about. The force of the impact would mean that there would be little left of the truck or its nuclear contents. Many of the 70 incidents might be dismissed as minor, but many had the potential to lead to much more serious situations.

The kind of threats that those in favour of Trident suggest it defends us against are not the threats that we are seeing manifest themselves across the world. None of us needs to be reminded about the terrible loss of life suffered as a result of terrorist attacks. Trident is not a deterrent against that real and present danger to our communities. Terrorists are a real danger to the safety of our Trident convoys. The only way to eliminate that threat is not to have Trident travelling on our roads at all.

We cannot afford to continue with more of these deadly cargos for another 50 years in the blind hope that a catastrophe will not happen. I call on the Minister and the Government to recognise the very significant dangers and to act decisively to bring them to an end. Like my hon. Friend, I would like the Minister to allow us to hear for the first time about the Mk4A project. What does it involve? How much will it cost? What impact will it have on the frequency of nuclear convoys? The truck cargo heavy duty Mk3 lorries that currently move nuclear weapons are due to be retired in 2025. It would be useful to know what provision has been made for a new fleet of lorries in the plans for Trident replacement, and at what cost.

11.17 am

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Penny Mordaunt): I congratulate the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) on securing this

[*Penny Mordaunt*]

important debate and on her appointment to the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs. Nuclear warhead transportation is clearly of concern to her and her constituents. It should be noted that it and related issues are of concern to people across the country, including those in areas such as the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colville). I listened carefully to what the hon. Lady said and I will address her points in turn. She will appreciate that I am limited in what I can say by security considerations, but I will try to give her the fullest answers possible. I start by reassuring her over the issues of cost that she raised. We are committed to all aspects of the deterrent and its security and safety. That has been the Government's policy and it will continue to be. She will know that it was one of the red lines in our manifesto and is one of our red lines as we go into the strategic defence and security review.

The protection and defence of the United Kingdom is the primary responsibility of Government. In a world becoming more uncertain, as seen by the recent actions of a resurgent Russia, the Government are committed to maintaining the continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent to provide the ultimate guarantee of our national security. In recent years we have reduced our stockpile of warheads and the number of warheads on our submarines. The ratio of our warheads to Russia's is roughly one to 40. I hope that indicates to the hon. Lady the scale of what we face and the fact that Trident is a deterrent.

Margaret Ferrier: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. As SNP Members, we will admit that we do not want any nuclear weapons, and her comparison between the UK and Russia does not sit well with us. We would like to see the deterrent abolished completely. If we use nuclear weapons, where would that leave the UK? There would be no UK; there would be obliteration. What are her comments on that?

Penny Mordaunt: I appreciate the hon. Lady's intervention, because although the bulk of my remarks will focus on the safety and transportation concerns she has expressed—I take her concerns at face value—at the heart of the debate is her and her party's position on nuclear weapons. Of course we never want to use such weapons. However, as a Defence Minister who passionately believes that there would be dread consequences for the hon. Lady's constituents and the whole UK if we did not have a deterrent, I believe it is absolutely fundamental that we retain that deterrent and say to those who would do us harm that there would be consequences if they used such dread weapons against us. I am happy to debate that point with the hon. Lady and her colleagues at any time; it is incredibly important and at the heart of what the debate is about. I will take at face value her concerns about the transportation of warheads, so I will address the bulk of my remarks to those points.

The specialist defence sites involved in delivering our nuclear weapons programme are based at Clyde, at Coulport and at the Atomic Weapons Establishment in Berkshire. As such, it is necessary to transport nuclear defence material, including warheads, between those sites, although the movement of such material is kept to the minimum necessary to meet operational requirements

in support of the UK's strategic deterrent programme. It is an important principle of nuclear warhead safety that warheads should not be moved unless it is necessary.

I make it absolutely clear that the safety of the general public and the security of nuclear weapons convoys are our first priority at all times. Safety is paramount during the transportation of defence material, and all appropriate measures are taken to ensure that such weapon convoys can operate safely. Our safety record is excellent. In more than 50 years of transporting such material by road in the UK, there has never been an incident that has presented any risk to the public or the environment. A stringent safety reporting system is in place so that all incidents, however minor, are recorded and assessed for possible improvements to future operations.

The hon. Lady and her colleague referred to the log and expressed concerns, particularly about transportation during severe weather. As Members would expect, I have been through the log. On the Erskine bridge incident, the authorities were consulted. In any scenario where there are adverse weather conditions, Traffic Scotland and the police in Scotland are consulted. The convoy was not crossing the bridge until the weather had moved on. That is recorded.

Concerns have previously been expressed about convoys travelling through residential and urban areas. While the House would not expect me to discuss the specific details of routes for obvious security reasons, I assure Members that the routes are carefully selected as part of a rigorous risk assessment process and are regularly reassessed for their continued suitability. The transportation of nuclear and other hazardous materials is governed by international and national regulations, including the Carriage of Dangerous Goods and Use of Transportable Pressure Equipment Regulations 2009, as amended in 2013. Although there are exemptions for certain defence-related activities, Government policy is to comply with the principles of those exemptions.

The safety of nuclear convoy operations is carefully considered at all stages of the transportation process. Operational planning always takes into account such factors as road and weather conditions, and we consult with all relevant local agencies before undertaking a convoy move. Contingencies are planned for. The convoy is operated by a highly trained crew, consisting of a first-aid team, firefighters, mechanics and others to enable roadside repairs and personnel equipped to monitor for radiological hazards.

Members will be aware that the weapon is by its very nature an extremely robust device, designed to withstand launch and re-entry into the Earth's atmosphere. It is transported in a benign configuration and secured in a custom-designed container that is tested in accordance with International Atomic Energy Agency standards to protect against a range of scenarios, including impact on a motorway at speed, a drop from height and a fuel fire, among others.

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): Will the Minister give way?

Penny Mordaunt: If the hon. Gentleman does not mind, I will make a little progress. The vehicle that carries the container is custom-designed to provide robust crash protection, even in the event of a severe road accident. We have invested in our vehicle fleet and completed a significant upgrade programme in 2014.

Another issue that the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West mentioned was the threat of terrorism with the transportation of nuclear materials. The risks associated with terrorist attack are mitigated by a range of counter-measures, including the vehicle itself, specific warhead protection measures, intelligence, monitoring and armed escort, which includes the Ministry of Defence police. Although the operational details of those counter-measures are understandably classified, Members can be reassured that we have the capabilities to deal with any such threats. Our security arrangements are kept under review, frequently tested and subject to formal inspections to ensure that they meet the required standards.

The limited movement of nuclear defence material together with inherent safety and security features and procedures mean that the probability of an accident leading to a release of radiation is extremely low. Nevertheless, as part of our rigorous approach to safety we maintain wider arrangements to respond to any incident, no matter how unlikely; that includes the Nuclear Emergency Organisation and the necessary contingency plans to deal with any accident. Under the auspices of the Defence Nuclear Safety Regulator and with the participation of the emergency services and local authorities, we also carry out regular exercises to rigorously test the continued effectiveness of our response.

Kirsten Oswald: Does the Minister not accept that that will be cold comfort to our constituents, given that it would take a minimum of four hours for those emergency activities to manifest themselves in our constituencies should an incident occur?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady is not correct. The nature of the convoy means that those necessary responses are built in. Any reaction that would need to go beyond that is rigorously tested and speedy.

I understand that this is not the first SNP debate that focuses on safety concerns. The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West will know from freedom

of information material that the incidents she referred to are very low-level and include putting the wrong fuel into a support vehicle. They have not in any way threatened the safety or security of the material in transit. The level of concern that the hon. Lady expresses is disproportionate to the incidents—I think that comes down to her party's objection to the deterrent full stop.

I hope that the hon. Lady's party will focus on that issue. I would be happy to engage in the debate because I passionately believe that we need the deterrent. Focusing disproportionately on safety—the incidents are in the public domain, so I can clearly show what they were, how meticulously they were recorded and the “lessons learned” programme that followed—does those who support Operation Relentless a grave disservice. These are incredible men and women who, whether they are on the submarines or part of the support and logistics operation, do an incredible job. One thing that I object to about the hon. Lady's line of argument is that it does those people a disservice. If the issue is whether we should have nuclear weapons, I hope the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West will focus on that.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Penny Mordaunt: I will have to draw my remarks to a conclusion, for the reasons that you set out at the beginning, Sir Edward.

I think I will close on this: I am happy to hear any suggestions that SNP Members have about how safety can be improved and any other practical concerns, but I am not sure what they are suggesting. Are they suggesting that we move part of the operation elsewhere? I am not sure, but I would be happy to hear what they have to say.

Question put and agreed to.

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Srebrenica Genocide (20th Anniversary)

[MR CHRISTOPHER CHOPE *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the 20th anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide.

At least 8,372 men and boys were murdered by the Bosnian Serb army within a couple of days, starting on 11 July 1995. At the time, I was in the Army and the Chief of Policy at NATO's Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe at Mons in Belgium. I was there when the first reports of what was happening in Srebrenica came through. The operation in Bosnia then was a United Nations operation rather than a NATO one. Despite Srebrenica being declared a UN safe area under the watch of the UN protection force, Serbian paramilitary units over-ran and captured the town. Then General Ratko Mladic and his Bosnian Serb forces systematically rounded up and murdered well over 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys. It was an act of genocide.

Mladic's men methodically and coldly separated out men and boys, and herded them away. Fusillades of shots were heard throughout the area, as batches of the men and boys were cold-bloodedly and methodically shot. Mladic himself had promised that no harm would befall anyone, but it was immediately obvious to the local people that that was a total lie.

For their part, the 400-strong Dutch battalion under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Karremans, which was charged by the UN with protecting the citizens of Srebrenica, did very little by way of protest, and even surrendered men and boys to the Bosnian Serb army. At the time in Mons, I asked the SHAPE staff why the Dutch battalion charged with protecting Srebrenica had not used its weapons to safeguard the people. I was told that they had been ordered not to get involved, which I found appalling—under the Geneva conventions of war, those in command have a duty to protect civilians. Unbelievably, I was also told that the Dutch had used the excuse that they could not open fire because their anti-tank weapons were out of date. That is astonishing, considering that most of the belligerent forces' weapons were out of date anyway by that time.

There is overwhelming evidence of a huge number of atrocities. Men and boys were taken away and summarily murdered in batches; individuals were cut down at whim; and large piles of bodies were pushed into huge pits by bulldozers. Some of the victims were undoubtedly buried alive. One child, who could not have been more than 10, was ordered to rape his sister and was killed when he could not do so. Mothers had their babies' throats slit before they themselves were raped. Many people chose to commit suicide and some people, particularly women, hanged themselves in the woods around Srebrenica. Agony and death were everywhere, and yet the Bosnian Serb army and its friends carried on committing cold-blooded acts of murder against anyone who they thought was a Muslim. The situation was sheer hell.

Despite being far away in Belgium at the time, I felt a deep affinity with the people on the ground in Srebrenica. Some two years before, it was my soldiers who had first gone into Srebrenica and it was my UN commander, General Philippe Morillon, who had declared on 16 April 1993 that Srebrenica would be protected.

When I learned what was happening in Srebrenica two years after I had left, I felt sick at heart and in some way responsible for what was happening. In truth, the people of Srebrenica had been abandoned to a ghastly fate by the rest of the world. In February 1993, as commander of the British UN battalion in Bosnia, I had witnessed such bestiality at a place called Ahmici in central Bosnia. We even had to dig a mass grave into which we placed more than a hundred bodies—children, women and men. But the horror did not stop there; it continued.

On 1 March 1993, as their commander I ordered soldiers of B Squadron 9th/12th Royal Lancers to cross the lines from Tuzla to see what could be done to help people in Srebrenica, who were being besieged by the Bosnian Serb army. My intelligence organisation suggested that the situation in Srebrenica was very grim, and intelligence officers heard repeated commercial radio calls from Srebrenica for someone—anyone—to come and save them. It was heart-rending.

During the next two days, my soldiers managed to get to Srebrenica after a very difficult passage through hostile Bosnian Serb army territory. When they arrived, they found an appalling situation. About 20 civilians had been killed by incoming shellfire when our vehicles appeared, because they had naturally clustered around us; they were surrounded by people who they believed were their deliverance. One officer—my interpreter, Captain Nick Costello—was talking to a woman holding a baby when the baby's head was blown off by a shell splinter.

A few days later, we escorted General Morillon into Srebrenica. He was welcomed almost as a saviour but after a while, when he said he was going back to his command headquarters in Sarajevo, the people blocked him in and refused to let him leave. Off his own bat, he declared Srebrenica to be a UN protected area. None the less, there was a crying need to get innocent people out of the place and to safety. Between March and April 1993, British soldiers under my command, including pilots flying helicopters provided by French forces and the Royal Navy, evacuated several thousand Bosnian people from the Srebrenica enclave. Shortly afterwards, the UN ordered British soldiers to be replaced—first by Canadians and then, a year or so later, by an ineffective Dutch battalion.

The Bosnian Serb army finally took the town of Srebrenica on 11 July 1995. Upwards of 10,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys attempted to walk 63 miles across mountains, rivers and minefields to reach safety in the nearest Muslim territory of Tuzla. Only about 2,000 of them made it.

When I visited Srebrenica recently, I met Nedžad Avdic, who was only 17 in July 1995, when he was shot. He was with me yesterday in Parliament but cannot be here today. Despite being badly wounded, he survived and crawled out from under the bodies of his friends. I wish to place on the record what he said. His testimony is chilling. This is what he told me:

"In July 1995, when Mladic's offensive started, the Dutch forgot us, left their checkpoints and fled. We had no option but to follow them and wait for help, but it did not come.

We were afraid of going to the Dutch HQ at Potocari and feared for our lives. After days of hiding in the woods and hills around Srebrenica, my father, uncle and I headed in the direction of Tuzla on a long, unknown and uncertain road through the woods and minefields."

Those minefields were extensive: it took us a huge amount of time to negotiate them and get there.

“We were an endless column of men and boys under constant bombardment by Serb artillery from the hills. Many of us were killed and the wounded cried out, in vain, for help.

In the chaos, I lost my father and ran through the crowd crying and calling for him. Lost in the middle of the forest, we did not know where to go. Bare-footed, exhausted and frightened we gave ourselves up. As many as 2,000 men and boys were loaded on to lorries, including me.

We were tortured and were dying for a drop of water. We were forced to take off our clothes. One of the soldiers tied our hands our backs. At that moment, I realised it was the end. We were told to find a place and lined up, five by five.

I thought I would die fast without suffering. Thinking that my mother would never know where I finished they began to shoot us in the back. I don't know whether I lost consciousness, but I lay on my stomach bleeding and trembling. I was shot in my stomach and right arm.

The shooting continued and I watched the lines of people falling down. I could hear and feel bullets hitting all around me. Shortly after that I was wounded heavily in my left foot. Men were dying all around me. I was dying in deadly pains and had no strength to call them to kill me. I said to myself: ‘Oh my God, why don't I die?’

The pain was unbearable. It was midnight and the lorry moved away. Trying to raise my head I noticed a man who was moving. We untied one another”—

can you imagine the pain this boy was going through?—
“and avoided the next arriving lorry.

After days of wandering through woods, hiding in streams, sleeping in grave-yards and crawling with my terrible pains, we reached territory under Bosnian government control. My father, uncle and relatives who sought shelter with the Dutch soldiers in Potocari did not survive.”

The Srebrenica-Potocari Memorial Centre, situated on the opposite side of the road from where the Dutch battalion was based, records the known deaths of 8,372 people murdered by the rampaging Bosnian Serb army. Nobody can be absolutely certain, but most certainly 6,066 bodies are buried in the Potocari cemetery and about 7,000 genocide victims have been identified through DNA analysis of body parts recovered from mass graves.

Karen Lumley (Redditch) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Bob Stewart: I give way to my very good friend.

Karen Lumley: My hon. Friend is making an excellent, powerful speech. Last year, I travelled to Srebrenica to see that centre and worked with a local charity, Medica Zenica, which looks after people who were raped during the war. We met a woman there who had been raped so many times she did not even know who the father of her child was. I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the mums of Srebrenica, because they have tirelessly worked to make sure that this will never, ever be forgotten and should never, ever happen again.

Bob Stewart: I thank my hon. Friend for her very appropriate intervention. It is highly appropriate and a great honour that some of the mothers of Srebrenica have just arrived in this Chamber. All of us in Parliament pay tribute to them for what they have had to endure. Many families in Srebrenica lost all their menfolk.

I have seen some 1,000 body parts that are yet to be formally identified. Of course, some people's remains will never be found. I am president of the British charity, Remembering Srebrenica. It has organised remembrance

events in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. I thank colleagues from those countries who have helped those events take place. Yesterday, there was a large remembrance service in Westminster Abbey—2,000 people attended—and there are continuing remembrance events throughout the country this week.

There is another charity that does sterling work in the Srebrenica area, but it gets scant funding recognition from the British Government and I wish that to be put right. The charity, officially called The Fund for Refugees in Slovenia, was founded in 1992 by my friend, Lady Miloska Nott OBE, who is here today. Despite its name, the charity's main thrust has always been in Bosnia. There it has done long-term, sustainable work in the Srebrenica area—not so much the town, but 20 km out from it, in an area that was deeply affected, too. It has built 144 houses and 14 schools for those most affected by the 1995 genocide. It has also built a medical centre. I pay a huge tribute to all that Lady Nott and her charity have achieved.

Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Bob Stewart: With the greatest pleasure.

Andrew Stephenson: I congratulate my hon. and gallant Friend on securing this debate. Before being elected as an MP in June 2009, I visited Srebrenica. It was an extremely moving experience that left a lasting impression on me. I echo what my hon. Friend says about the charity; Lady Nott helped organised the visit for me and other colleagues. I commend her work and that of the organisation. I echo what my hon. Friend says about working with such charities, to continue the rebuilding in Srebrenica and ensure that this genocide is never forgotten.

Bob Stewart: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, which I endorse and want to add to. One of the things that Lady Nott's charity does is to take Members of Parliament to spend the night in some of the houses that her charity has built. Through that experience, colleagues get a real feel for what is actually happening on the ground.

I ask the Minister to ensure that the Government recognise this great work. Please, if they can, will our Government contribute financially to the work of a charity that is extremely well run, has good due diligence and makes such an impact on the local area?

I will finish now. This morning, we paused to remember the 7/7 bombings. This Saturday, 11 July 2015, we should all pause to remember that, 20 years ago, the hopes and lives of a small town—8,372 men and boys—were agonisingly destroyed by Bosnian Serb bullets. God bless their memory. All our prayers go to those who survived the Srebrenica massacre and to the mothers of Srebrenica, who still live with what happened every moment of their lives.

2.51 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): It is an honour and a privilege to follow the excellent and moving speech by my hon. Friend on the other side of the House, as I like to call him, the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), who had a distinguished career in Bosnia and who has done so much since to raise what happened not only in Srebrenica

[Stephen Doughty]

but in so many other places. I have often been truly moved when he has told me of his experiences during those times, as well as those of his wife and many others. Truly, one can only imagine the horrors that he and many others saw.

It is a bleak week, as my hon. Friend said. Today, we remember those who were tragically killed in the 7/7 bombings in London. It is only a short while since the horrific attacks in Tunisia. Tragically, it is the 20th anniversary of the genocide—it is clear that it was a genocide—in Srebrenica. It is an opportunity to stop and reflect on the consequences that hate, intolerance, ideology and, dare I say it, turning a blind eye can have for men, girls, boys and women—humans who share the same blood and flesh as us, regardless of their religion, ethnicity and background. It was truly moving to attend the memorial in Westminster Abbey yesterday and to have the chance to meet again many people I was able to meet on a trip with Remembering Srebrenica to Srebrenica, Potocari, Tuzla and other locations. I saw the places where such horror and brutality emerged, and I can say without hesitation that it was one of the most moving experiences of my life.

I remember what I was doing in 1995. I was 15 years old. I was out celebrating with friends on the beaches of west Wales, having a good time and relaxing, yet Nedžad Avdic, who my hon. Friend referred to and whom I have met, was just two years older and was being corralled into a building with his family and friends. He saw so many brutally murdered and executed around him. That struggle, which my hon. Friend illustrated so clearly with Nedžad's words, serves as an example to us all. We might live in the same continent, but great horrors can emerge at any time.

While I was in Bosnia, we travelled to Srebrenica and Potocari on a bus. As we approached one of the tunnels on the windy roads through the beautiful Bosnian countryside, one of our guides—he was also a survivor, and his name was Mohammed—said, “This is where I emerged from the tunnel.” I said, “What do you mean?” He was one of those who managed to escape to make that long, arduous march through the mountains, attempting to evade the Serb forces at every step. Those people suffered without food and water in brutal circumstances. He was one of the lucky ones—he survived. He told me that he had done a lot of survival training as a youngster in equivalent bodies to the scouts. He used those skills, but his friends and those around him who did not have that skill of surviving in the wilderness often succumbed or were lured down to what they thought was safety by Serbs who told them to come down from the mountains. In fact they were being lured to their deaths—that was the brutality of it. I was taken aback by the video footage kept by those who committed the atrocities. While we were in Potocari we saw some truly chilling footage of executions, of people being led away and of people being lured falsely to their deaths. It will stick with me for the rest of my life.

We also went, as my hon. Friend reflected, to the mortuary and saw the work of the International Commission on Missing Persons. I was truly shocked not only that brutal murders had been carried out, but that the Serb forces chose to disturb the mass graves and dig bodies up. They knew that the evidence would emerge, so they tampered with the remains. They split them across multiple graves. It is truly shocking.

Andrew Bingham (High Peak) (Con): Like the hon. Gentleman, I have been to Srebrenica, and I think it leaves an indelible mark on the soul of anyone who has been. It was such a dreadful occurrence.

The hon. Gentleman mentions the International Commission on Missing Persons. When I visited, we met ladies who still have not found their husbands and sons because of the atrocities that the Serbs committed with the reburial of bodies. The ladies of Srebrenica cannot lay their loved ones to rest. I commend publicly the work that the International Commission on Missing Persons is doing to try to identify remains through DNA and other means. That would enable those people at least to lay their loved ones to rest.

Stephen Doughty: I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman. I was struck by how so many people were not afforded dignity in their life and were then also denied it in their death, as were their families. Many Srebrenica mothers are sitting in the Public Gallery, and I have been struck by how they just want the matter resolved—they just want to know where their loved ones lay. Advances in technology have enabled identifications to take place, but the extent of the desecration and damage to the graves was such that a number of individuals still cannot be identified. I praise the work of those involved in the International Commission on Missing Persons and others who have done such diligent work over many years trying to bring that sense of closure to the families. I must point out that that feeling is shared by the new generation in the Balkans. One of the workers we met in the mortuary was from Serbia. She was absolutely dedicated to her work, and she wanted to ensure justice and dignity for the families so brutally broken apart by these acts.

Much has been said, and many reports have been written, about the terrible events of that time in Bosnia. Much focus has been put on the situation of the Dutch forces in Potocari and others. To my mind, the actions that took place were deeply concerning and unconscionable. To walk around the battery factory and other locations where thousands were effectively sent to their deaths is a deeply disturbing experience.

It is fair to say that although I am proud of this country's role in recognising the genocide, in holding memorial events such as we saw yesterday and in hosting the President of Bosnia and many others—including the mothers and survivors in the last few days—we must take a step back and reflect as an international community. This weekend, a number of concerning allegations were made in *The Observer* concerning what the wider international community knew about directive 7 and about the speech that Ratko Mladic gave to the Bosnian Assembly where he said of the enclaves:

“My concern is to have them vanish completely.”

There were questions about the messages or signals alleged to have been given to Mladic, Karadžić, the Bosnian Government and others about the tenability of the enclaves. We know that on 2 June, Mladic ordered the destruction of Muslim forces in the enclaves, but it is important that we are frank about the worrying allegations that some members of the intelligence services from other countries—including, I am sorry to say, the UK—knew about some of the Serb plans.

I do not think it would be right to focus on individuals, but the allegations are serious and worrying. I do not know their veracity, but it is vital that the international

community does all it can to own up to whatever faults and failings there were, as happened after the terrible genocide in Rwanda and other international atrocities. I ask the Minister gently for some assurance that those allegations are being looked at and that any evidence that emerges will be shared in full and frank detail. Now, we can only learn from the horrors, and from the failure at all levels to protect all those people in Srebrenica and at other locations. We must do that. We assume that the march of progress is inevitable and that these crimes cannot happen again, but unfortunately it has been shown far too often that they can.

When we were in Sarajevo, we saw a remarkable and moving exhibition of photos of survivors from Srebrenica and the surrounding areas. I encourage everyone to see it, because it is an important indicator of what happened. It was displayed alongside an exhibition about the horrors and atrocities being committed in Syria today. We need to reflect on the fact that, tragically, we often consider situations after the event and look back at what may have gone wrong. There has been much controversy in the House about the votes and decisions that we have taken on Syria, on which Members have different views. Why do we always focus on those decisions, rather than look back two and a half or three years earlier to understand how we got to a position where such atrocities and flagrant abuses of human rights could take place? That is something for all of us to reflect on.

It is all very well to judge or criticise those who have taken specific decisions, but the question is: how did we allow this to happen on European soil just 20 years ago? How can we work, on all sides of the House, across the continent and across the world, to ensure that such horrors can never happen again?

3.2 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope. I add my congratulations my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) on securing this debate and on his work on Srebrenica in the House. I pay tribute to him and to all involved for ensuring that the tragic events in Srebrenica have not been forgotten. The commemoration of those events serves as a warning to all of us, particularly those in government in or positions of influence, of what can happen even here in Europe, which we tend to think of as civilised, and certainly as safe and secure compared with many parts of this troubled world.

Evil can enter the hearts and minds of men. As the service of Compline in the Book of Common Prayer says, we must

“be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour”.

The devil can enter the hearts of mankind, especially when propaganda and evil leadership are involved.

Like the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), I was privileged to join my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham in last year's delegation. Such a visit reminds one of the evil that can take place, even in mainland Europe. Those of us who attended yesterday's commemorative service at Westminster Abbey and the reception that followed heard from a number of people about how important

the UK's voice can be and how much the UK has contributed, over many generations, to the attempt to bring peace and stability to many troubled parts of the world. The challenge continues.

Since he was first elected five years ago, my hon. and gallant Friend has worked tirelessly to ensure that the events of 1995, and those who were brutally murdered, are not forgotten. I thank him for his dedication, not least through his campaigning as the president of Remembering Srebrenica, a British charity founded by its chairman.

As we have heard, 8,372 men and boys were massacred by Bosnian Serb forces. Those murdered were both old and young; I note that the eldest was 94 and the youngest five. Although their ages were diverse, their ethnicity was not. The victims of this horrific moment of barbarity on European soil were targeted based on who they were. They were killed in some of the most brutal and barbaric ways imaginable—they were events that one can find it very difficult to believe. As has been said, the genocide was the worst crime in Europe since the second world war.

My hon. and gallant Friend described in chilling detail how the slaughter came about and was carried out. We must never forget the brutality that man is capable of, and it is right that we use parliamentary time to commemorate the events of two decades ago. The atrocities now taking place in north Africa, Iraq, Syria and so many other places remind us that we must be eternally vigilant. It is worth recalling that the former Yugoslavia was a popular holiday destination for British people, who would have visited many of the places touched by the massacre. A mainstream European country descended into brutality. Let us hope that we can indeed remain eternally vigilant. But will we? Let us hope and pray that we do.

3.7 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) on securing this debate and I salute his leadership in Bosnia. Along with many others in the House, I am deeply impressed by what he did in his time in command. It would be hard not to be moved by the experiences he shared in his speech and by some of the things that have happened since. I thank him for that.

We remember those who were murdered in July 1995—more than 8,000 Bosniaks, mainly men and boys, in and around the town of Srebrenica during the Bosnian war. The killing was perpetrated by units of the Army of the Republika Srpska—the VRS—under the command of General Ratko Mladic. The former Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, described the mass murder as the worst crime on European soil since the second world war. That gives an idea of the magnitude and horror of what took place.

I am sure that we all remember the coverage from 1995—it would be hard not to—and, as we were reminded by the first speech, it was shocking in its intensity. I can vividly recall not being able to believe or understand the senseless genocide that was taking place. I was looking at the TV and thinking, “Is this happening, or is it unreal?” Yes, it was unreal, but it was happening in front of our modern society's eyes.

The paramilitary unit from Serbia was known as the Scorpions. The hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) used biblical language to describe them as a

[*Jim Shannon*]

lion looking for whom to devour. That is what they were doing. They could have called themselves other names, but they chose the Scorpions, and they were known for their evil, wicked depravity and murderous thoughts. Officially, they were part of the Serbian Interior Ministry until 1991, and they participated in the massacre, along with several hundred Greek volunteers.

In January, the conviction of five men from the former Yugoslavia was upheld, which was welcome news to all those who remember the sheer horror of these events. However, more than five men were involved, and more than enough time has now passed by this, the 20th anniversary, for action to have been taken. We all believe it is time that those involved—from inside and outside Serbia—were held accountable.

In 2004, in a unanimous ruling in the case of *Prosecutor v. Krstic*, the appeals chamber of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, which is located in The Hague, ruled that the massacre of the enclave's male inhabitants constituted genocide—a crime under international law. The evidence of the forcible transfer of between 25,000 and 30,000 Bosniak women, children and elderly people that accompanied the massacre was found to confirm the genocidal intent of the members of the VRS main staff who orchestrated the massacre and who need to be held accountable.

In 2005, in a message to the 10th anniversary commemoration of the genocide, the Secretary-General of the United Nations noted that, although blame lay first and foremost with those who planned and carried out the massacre and those who assisted and harboured them, the powers with the ability to respond had failed to do so adequately. He said that the UN had made serious errors of judgment and that the tragedy of Srebrenica would haunt its history forever, and that is clearly the case.

Serbia and Montenegro was cleared of direct responsibility for, or complicity in, the massacre, but it was found responsible for not doing enough to prevent it and for not prosecuting those responsible, in breach of the genocide convention. The preliminary list of people missing or killed in Srebrenica, which was compiled by the Bosnian Federal Commission of Missing Persons, contains 8,373 names. As of July 2012, 6,838 genocide victims had been identified through DNA analysis of body parts recovered from mass graves. As of July 2013, 6,066 victims had been buried at the memorial centre in Potocari. Almost 1,500 victims have still not been identified. Let me put that into perspective. As the hon. Member for Beckenham will know, approximately 3,000 people were killed over a 30-year terrorist campaign in Northern Ireland. In three days, almost three times that number were killed in Srebrenica.

There is a lesson that has been taught so many times, but that I fear we are not learning: we must take action before things reach this stage. An apology for a massacre is not enough. There must be a determination that we never allow these things to happen again. There must be not just words, but deeds. There is so much happening in the world that we need to act on, and it is my firm belief that action must be taken, lest our children stand in this place in 20 years' time lamenting the fact that we allowed the actions of ISIS, among others, to happen. That is for another debate and another day, but it is not

disrespectful to the memory of the men we are talking about to plead for us to learn from the inaction we saw and to take action when needed.

I was proud to be one of the hundreds of parliamentarians who signed the Remembering Srebrenica book of pledges, and I will be prouder still to be remembered as a parliamentarian, in a House of parliamentarians, who learned the lesson taught by atrocities and who honoured the memories of those who so senselessly lost their lives by doing all in my power to prevent a repeat of such atrocities.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): My hon. Friend talks about learning lessons. Does he agree that those of us who have lost loved ones in more normal circumstances cannot even begin to understand the pain and anguish felt by those who, 20 years later, still do not have the remains of their loved ones and who cannot have a burial so that they can begin to grieve properly? We have seen that in Northern Ireland over 40 years, but the scale in this case is unimaginable, and we need to do what we can to resolve the issue.

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is impossible to gauge the unfathomable enormity of what took place. In Northern Ireland, people disappeared, and some of the bodies have not been accounted for. We feel for their families. However, if we magnify that a thousandfold, we get a sense of what these things mean in Bosnia.

In conclusion and as this important anniversary approaches, I hope that all political leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and in the wider region, will focus not on the politics, but on the human tragedy of not just Srebrenica, but the war as a whole, and will take forward reconciliation with greater urgency. There can be no more fitting tribute to the innocent victims of war than that we remember each and every one of them today and that the Government do their best to make changes and to hold people to account. Twenty years after these events, we need to hold those responsible accountable. We all know, of course, that they will be held accountable in the next world and that they will have to come before a judgment seat to answer for what they have done, but I would like to see them get their just rewards in this world before they reach the next one.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. Three more people wish to speak. I do not wish to impose a time limit. If each Member speaks for a maximum of five minutes, we should be able to fit them all in.

3.15 pm

Stuart Andrew (Pudsey) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope. Often, when we contribute to debates in this place, we find ourselves following far superior contributions. In this debate, that was inevitably going to be the case, given the personal experience of my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), whose contribution was poignant and moving, as I have come to expect from him. As ever, the modesty he shows hides much about this difficult and awful time in European history, and I am sure he will always keep that to himself.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for securing this important and timely debate and for the work he has done on many aspects of this awful experience. I also pay tribute to him for yesterday's commemoration service in Westminster Abbey. It was an extremely important moment, which clearly meant so much to the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina and, most importantly, to the survivors and the families who lost loved ones.

Sitting in the peaceful surroundings of the abbey yesterday, and listening to the addresses and readings, I could not help but reflect on the horrors of the events we are talking about. The idea that such genocide could ever happen again on European soil would have been unthinkable before the events in Bosnia, especially given how much the continent had suffered during world war two, and it is staggering and shameful that such things did happen again, just half a century later. Demonising people for who they are was something we had all prayed and hoped would never happen again.

My experience of Bosnia is nothing compared with that of my hon. Friend or many others taking part in the debate. My first visit to Bosnia took place at the beginning of the previous Parliament. I was part of a delegation of Conservative Members of Parliament and MEPs from across Europe. We went to Bosnia as part of a social action project called Project Maya to help refurbish a school for children with special needs, and anyone arriving in Sarajevo is instantly struck by the bullet holes in the buildings and the scars of war.

We were also there to meet politicians, young people and organisations involved in rebuilding the nation and in ensuring that these events are never forgotten and that lessons are learned. One of the first visits we went on was to the International Commission on Missing Persons, which the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) mentioned. It is impossible to understand how anyone would feel losing a loved one in the horrific circumstances we have heard about; however, not knowing what has happened to them or where they are, and not being able to have a dignified burial or the acknowledgment of their death, must make the grief unbearable. The commission was tasked with trying to resolve those issues for families.

What made things even worse was that the bodies of those who had been killed were not only buried in mass graves, but dug up again and buried in other places. Identifying them has been a mammoth task for the commission. If that were not enough, suspicion and fear have meant that many families have felt reluctant to give DNA so that bodies could be identified. We saw how the commission tried to overcome that through confidential bar coding and other measures. I understand that now some 71,000 blood samples have been taken to help with the identification process. So far 91 mass graves have been uncovered in Srebrenica, yielding some 6,800 positive identifications of more than 8,000 missing people. Some people have been able to bury their loved ones, but, tragically, some have had to do so again as more body parts have been found. Not being afforded the opportunity to go through the natural cycle of bereavement makes the atrocity even more cruel.

For me, the most moving visit was to Srebrenica itself. The hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth described the countryside, and that is what struck me: it was beautiful, but we were about to visit somewhere where such a terrible thing happened. There was an

eerie silence in the factory when we went round it, reminiscent of my visit to Auschwitz. In the film I saw the faces of the men who were terrified and knew that something awful was happening. Seeing all the names on the stones at the memorial was really moving.

Going up to the village, I spoke to some of the mothers. They gave a moving speech about what had happened to them. I felt utterly powerless and weak in the company of one of the women; I went up to her and said privately, "I am sorry that the west stood by." Her reply was remarkable. She said, "It is not your fault; you were not around at the time. You were not in a position to make a decision, but if ever you see people suffering again, please don't stand by and watch it happen." Those are words that will stick with me for ever.

I will never forget the visit to that country. It has had a lasting effect on me. On this 20th anniversary, it is right to remember, but it is also important to learn the lessons—to make sure we do not again stand by and let such atrocities happen, and that, when people are persecuted for who and what they are, we stand up and support them. We should also pay tribute to the work of Remembering Srebrenica. It does some great work with young people in our country, including 750 educational visits to enable people to learn.

I pay tribute to all those who continue the fight to make sure that we do not forget—especially the mothers. There was testimony yesterday in Westminster Abbey from the president of the Mothers of Srebrenica:

"Europe and the world bear responsibility for the genocide in Srebrenica. Silence on genocide is its approval. However, I firmly believe that twenty years later, Europe and the world can make things better.

Help us find the bones of our children! Ease our suffering by protecting the mother from the murderer of her child. Take the uniforms off our children's murderers. If there was no justice and mercy for more than 10,000 innocent men, women and children systematically murdered back in 1995, then please show some mercy and justice today.

We still believe in goodness. We believe that truth and justice are on our side. We bear no hatred towards those who executed this inhuman plan, because hatred is weakness and we refuse to be weak."

Those are incredible words from people who have suffered so much, and we can learn much from them.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham again on the debate. It is important to remember, and it is important that as a free nation we should always stand by the people affected if we ever see atrocities happening again.

3.23 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) on securing the debate and on all the work that he has done over the years with Remembering Srebrenica. I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Srebrenica, which was set up about three years ago. I want to thank right hon. and hon. Members who have supported it and its work.

My interest in what happened in Bosnia stems partly from having seen what happened during the war in the former Yugoslavia, as it disintegrated before our eyes. In addition, I worked for two years with the United Nations mission in Kosovo, from 2000 to 2002, so I had a chance to see at first hand some of the things that

[*Yasmin Qureshi*]

happened in Yugoslavia. I did not have the opportunity to travel to Bosnia, because of various security issues and concerns at the time, but I had the chance to speak to people who had been there—and, of course, to people generally across Yugoslavia. I am sure that Members are aware that there were many massacres in Kosovo too, carried out by Milošević and his people. I had a chance to see mass graves there.

I am grateful for the fact that we are remembering Srebrenica and the 8,344 young boys and men who died in the massacre, but it is also right to remember that those were not the only deaths. About 100,000 Muslims died in the disintegration of Yugoslavia. In addition to the killings, as is almost inevitable in wars, thousands of women were raped. We have heard accounts of how that happened consistently—and it seems almost to be a pattern in war.

I was humbled yesterday to be one of the 20 people to light a candle in Westminster Abbey. It was a wonderful event. I thank not only Members of the House who have given cross-party support, but the United Kingdom; we were the country that years ago pushed in the European Parliament for an annual day to commemorate Srebrenica. It is sad that even though the Parliament passed a resolution that the event should be commemorated every year in all the European countries, we are probably the only one still doing it properly. The rest of Europe has a lot of catching up to do.

I pay tribute to our country and our Parliament for what they have done, and for the assistance given by the Foreign Office and the Department for Communities and Local Government. I hope that the commemorations will come to be held in not just a few towns and cities, but every town and city in the country. The events in question should never be forgotten.

Much has been said about the details of the horrific crimes that happened. I met some of the mothers and survivors about three years ago for tea on the Terrace. The hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) spoke about dignity and forgiveness, and how the mothers bear no malice despite everything that has happened to them. Perhaps the world at large can gain understanding from such things. People were killed for their religion, sometimes by neighbours—one of the mothers said that some of the people who turned against her family were neighbours.

We need to learn the lesson from the fact that such dehumanising hatred can build up—that we are mistaken if we target groups and tarnish our view of them because of race, ethnicity or religion. Treating a group constantly as not part of our society, or not fitting in with our values or doing certain things, is the sort of thing that can lead to such genocide and neighbours turning against each other.

I want to touch on genocide or killing that is still happening; Syria has been mentioned. Conflicts are sometimes confusing, and the situation in Burma is also relevant. May I have another minute, Mr Chope?

Mr Christopher Chope (in the Chair): The hon. Lady has the Floor, but I hope to fit in Mr Kerevan as well, and we need time for proper winding-up speeches.

Yasmin Qureshi: I just need two minutes, and I will stop.

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): No, it is important.

Yasmin Qureshi: I thank the hon. Gentleman very much.

I want to mention Burma, where ethnic cleansing is happening and many are being killed. I am sorry that the international community has not been doing much about it. Perhaps we need to move on that.

3.29 pm

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): I pay tribute to my gallant friend, the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), for organising the debate. “Gallant” is an important word, because it is a truism—true in this case—that the people who hate war and its aftermath most are former soldiers who have experienced it. We should remember that.

I will briefly explain why this debate is of significance to me. I was born at the end of the 1940s and am of the generation brought up in the shadow of the Nazi holocaust. It was axiomatic to us that such mass, clinical, industrial murder could never take place again in Europe—but it did. I was shocked when it happened in Srebrenica. I had thought that it could never happen again, but it will always happen again if each generation does not learn the lessons and if we do not preach the lessons to the young of our country. We have to go on doing that; it will happen again unless we go on preaching the dangers.

I also want to speak because I have a Bosnian Muslim constituent. Campaigning in the general election, I knocked on a door in Haddington, a country town in Scotland, in East Lothian. A happy family from an immigrant community answered the door and it turned out that they were from Bosnia; they had come over as refugees in the aftermath of the war. I did not know that a number of refugees at that time had been relocated to Haddington to keep them together and to form a local community. It is now 20 years on, however, so I happily asked, “Are any other Bosnian families still here?” The people in the door laughed and pointed next door and up the street and I discovered that quite a significant community had made its home in Haddington. They were talking with broad Scottish accents, as is the way if someone lives there for a while. We have made them welcome, but they have joined us and entered our community despite all their traumas, so I thank them.

In my past life I was a documentary filmmaker, and I have been so moved by this issue over the years. We made a documentary film about the survivors of the massacre with Samir Mehanovic, an old Bosnian Muslim friend of mine who suffered and lost family in the crisis, but now lives here. It will be shown in an edited form on BBC World and we are premiering it in Sarajevo at the weekend. The film is designed for the cinema; we wanted people to see things on the big screen, in the dark, to achieve immediacy, rather than having it go on in a living room on the small screen, which does not have the same impact.

The hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) mentioned some of the footage taken by the Serbian irregulars and the Serbian army of the cruel things they were doing. I could only watch some of the scenes once. I actually argued with my friend Samir

in favour of taking the footage out of our film, but he would not have it—it traumatises him to watch it, but he wants people to see.

The message of our film is the one I wanted to bring to the Chamber, however briefly: we should not only honour and remember the dead, but remember the living. There are many survivors—most are now in Tuzla—but they have found it difficult to find work, their memories are still in their heads and they still need help, support and solidarity. We must remember that fact, which I commend to the Minister. There is still work to be done for the living as well as the dead.

My final point involves Milorad Dodik, the leader of the Bosnian Serbs, who in the past few weeks has been doing his usual thing of denying the massacre. He has even been to the massacre site and denied that it ever took place. There have been contacts between the Bosnian Serbs and the Moscow regime; pressure is put on Moscow to continue to operate at the United Nations in an attempt to stop proper UN recognition and continuing investigation of the massacre. I commend that fact to the Minister.

There is still work to be done at the UN to ensure that we go on remembering Srebrenica, seeking justice for the victims and remembering those who are still alive.

Mr Christopher Chope (in the Chair): I call Stephen Gethins for a maximum of five minutes.

3.34 pm

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Chope. Others have done this, but I thank in particular the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) for bringing this timely debate to the House. This event was one of the most devastating of the 20th century—something we hoped never to see again, but did. All of us are thinking about the people of Srebrenica this week. They will certainly be in my prayers over the coming days.

I want to say something about the hon. Gentleman; if I may, I shall call him my hon. Friend. The events in Bosnia were important when I was growing up—at school, as a student and when I travelled to Bosnia in 1996. I remember watching the hon. Gentleman on television, giving one of the first positive views that I saw coming out of Bosnia. His bravery at the time came across the television screen to the young man I was. I also pay tribute to the work that he has done since—he never left it behind, but kept going.

The conflict shaped my view of the world; it had that effect on many people. However, in a previous life I also spent many happy times working in Bosnia. It is a wonderful country. The tributes that we pay today must also go to the people who have built Bosnia since. The bravery of the country is reflected in the fact that so many have attended the debate in the Public Gallery. That, too, takes bravery—to come and sit through the debate, keeping the memory of Srebrenica alive. I hope that hon. Members will join me in paying tribute to those who have joined us today.

In the House, we often disagree on issues, but I want to pay tribute to the UK Government for what they are doing at the moment. They are, to quote President Izetbegovic of Bosnia, “leading the way” in Europe in remembering Srebrenica. This week there has been a service

in Westminster Abbey and on Friday I will attend a service in Edinburgh with our First Minister. It is great to see that there will also be a service in Belfast city hall and one led by Carwyn Jones, the First Minister of Wales. That is tremendous.

My hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Angus Robertson) led a Scottish delegation to Bosnia and Srebrenica last year. He said:

“We must never ever forget the act of genocide that happened at Srebrenica and it is a duty of every one, irrespective of race or religion, to teach the generations that follow us to challenge the evils of hatred, racism and extremism at all times, which is why the Remembering Srebrenica’s ‘Lessons from Srebrenica Visits’ are so important.”

I pay tribute to his work.

Many of us have talked about the lessons that are needed. There was a failure of not only the UK, but Europe and the international community only 20 years ago. Paddy Ashdown, who puts it better than I ever could, said:

“Whether through error, misjudgement, an inability to comprehend, or just inattention, we stood aside when we should not have done. We should therefore remember Srebrenica, not just to bear witness to those who suffered, but also as a warning to us all of what happens when we turn our back.”

My hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (George Kerevan) said that we need to honour not only the dead, but the living. In honouring the living, we reflect on man’s inhumanity to man. We think about the other conflicts in the world and the lessons that we can learn from them. We might not always agree on what those lessons are, but it is important to learn them.

I again thank those who have attended the debate and who continue to work hard to keep the memory of Srebrenica alive. They do a service to us all.

3.38 pm

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope.

Every time the story of the terrible events in Srebrenica 20 years ago is told, it is as shocking as it was when the truth was first revealed. As we have heard today, what happened in that small mountain town in the Balkans stands apart as one of the darkest chapters in European history. It is the story of thousands of families who believed that they were in a place of safety and shelter, but who were brutally and systematically put to slaughter. It is the story of how more than 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men lost their lives and of how rape was inflicted on countless women and young girls as a weapon of war. It is the story of how an entire community were stripped first of their dignity and then of their humanity, just because of the names that they were born with. The crime was described by the United Nations as “the worst committed on European soil since the Second World War”.

Many of the details of what the victims experienced are simply too harrowing to put into words. That is why it is so important that we mark this anniversary.

I therefore congratulate the hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) on securing this important debate. He spoke with all the passion and expertise we would expect from someone who served as he did with great distinction in Bosnia. I take this opportunity to thank him for the great service he has done for this

[*Dan Jarvis*]

House in bringing us together to mark this terrible tragedy. I also thank my hon. Friends the Members for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) and for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), and the hon. Members for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), for East Lothian (George Kerevan) and for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) for their excellent contributions to the debate.

What the hon. Member for Beckenham said had particular resonance for me. As a young officer in the British Army, one of my first deployments was to Kosovo during the conflict that took place there in 1999. Although we were several hundred miles away, we could still feel the legacy of what happened at Srebrenica. Forces loyal to Slobodan Milošević were on the march, again seeking to cleanse towns and villages. I saw at first hand how division and hatred can tear a country apart, ripping apart families and destroying people's lives. I remember discovering the scene of massacres and the piles of people's personal possessions. Those memories will never leave me.

We must never allow the terrible crimes of Srebrenica to be forgotten. It was genocide, as has been declared by both the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, and it is important that we use that word. As we mark two decades since those atrocities, I offer three brief reflections.

The first is that justice must always be done, no matter how long it takes. The perpetrators of those terrible acts must be brought to justice. The international community, including the UK, has made an important contribution to that, through both the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia and the Bosnia and Herzegovina state court. Twenty senior Bosnian Serb leaders have been indicted over the past two decades and both Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić are now on trial in The Hague. A further seven people accused of taking part in the massacre were arrested by the Serbian authorities as recently as March this year.

It is right that Britain has provided support to the state prosecutor's office to help ensure that those guilty of war crimes do not go unpunished. We must continue to stand in solidarity beside Bosnia and Herzegovina and provide what support we can. I would therefore be grateful if the Minister updated the House on the latest efforts that are being made to that end.

Does the Minister agree that we need to extend every possible support to the families who lost loved ones at Srebrenica whose fate is still unknown—a point rightly raised by the hon. Member for High Peak (Andrew Bingham)? Many of the bodies of those who lost their lives in those July days have never been recovered, and too many families are still looking for the remains of their loved ones so that they can give them a proper burial. As well as the 8,372 who perished, more than 15,000 men fled across the mountains to Tuzla to try to escape the slaughter. Many of them would never make it. Some were ambushed; others, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth, were tricked by forces wearing stolen UN uniforms to lull them into a false sense of security. The locations of

many of the mass graves that they were buried in are still undisclosed. That must be resolved as a step towards broader reconciliation.

Secondly, we must make every possible effort as an international community to ensure that such appalling events are never repeated. It is easy to say, "Never again"; the hard part is ensuring that our words are matched with deeds, as the hon. Member for Strangford said. There is a particular responsibility on us, Great Britain, to play our part in living up to that, as a leading member of the United Nations. As the hon. Member for Beckenham said, history has long accepted that failings by the UN contributed to what happened at Srebrenica. Those included delays in providing support to a UN peacekeeping force that was ill-equipped and ill-prepared. As Kofi Annan, the former Secretary-General, wrote in 1999:

"Through error, misjudgement and an inability to recognise the scope of the evil confronting us, we failed to do our part to help save the people of Srebrenica from the Serb campaign of mass murder."

The blame for what happened in Bosnia will always rest with the people who carried out those hateful and heinous crimes, but those who stood by or did not act readily enough also have a burden to carry. Our duty today is to ensure that the mistakes of the past are not repeated. We must work together to ensure that the international community has both the will and the capacity to act in response to cases of genocide or crimes against humanity. That approach is enshrined in the UN's responsibility to protect, but in recent years cases such as Darfur and Syria have reminded us that there has not always been willingness to act. Does the Minister therefore agree that, as we mark 70 years since the signing of UN charter, we must ensure that our actions continue to live up to its founding values, to protect

"the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small"?

I welcome the Government's role in drafting a resolution at the UN to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the genocide in Srebrenica. That decision was not without controversy; indeed, some Serbian leaders have called for the resolution to be dropped. If anything, the tensions over the resolution remind us of the challenge that remains in healing the wounds of the past.

3.46 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

4.1 pm

On resuming—

[*HYWEL WILLIAMS in the Chair*]

Dan Jarvis: Before the Division, I was welcoming the role that the Government have played in drafting a resolution at the UN to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the genocide in Srebrenica. I would be grateful if the Minister could update the House on what progress is being made on agreeing the text of a UN resolution on Srebrenica and what efforts the Government are making to ensure that it commemorates the anniversary in a suitable and respectful way.

Let me raise a separate but related point. The Minister will be aware that the French Government and others have floated the idea of permanent members of the Security Council suspending the use of the veto in cases of genocide. That was not the issue at Srebrenica, but it does have relevance for preventing any future atrocities like it, so I would be grateful if the Minister could confirm what the British Government's attitude is to that proposal.

Thirdly and finally, we must continue to bear witness to what happened at Srebrenica. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the countless charities and organisations working to ensure that the lessons of genocide are passed on and never forgotten: Remembering Srebrenica, the Fund for Refugees in Slovenia, the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, the Holocaust Educational Trust and many others.

I also welcome the fact that the UK has contributed funds to the memorial complex near Srebrenica. Nothing will make up for the horrors of the past, but the first step we can take to ensure that they are never repeated is to ensure that future generations know what happened in Bosnia in 1995. They need to know that genocide is not just something that happened many years ago at the end of the second world war. It can happen today, and it could happen in the future if we let down our guard.

I end with this reflection. It is particularly appropriate that we are holding this debate today, a decade on from the terrorist attacks of 7/7. In preparing for it, I reflected on an event that I attended in Parliament last week at which I was honoured to meet survivors of the holocaust. Of course, our country is still recovering from the painful blow inflicted on a beach in Tunisia just 11 days ago. Whether we are reflecting on what happened 70 years ago in Auschwitz, 20 years ago in Srebrenica, 10 years ago on 7/7 or two weeks ago in Tunisia, those events are all bound together by the same thing—hatred, extremism and contempt for human life. Above all, that is what we must overcome if we are to ensure that our world is never again darkened by such atrocities. We need to educate all our young people about the importance of tolerance, respect and always challenging racism, discrimination and hatred. If this anniversary reminds us of nothing else, let it remind us of that. That would be the best tribute that we could possibly pay.

4.4 pm

The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington): The genocide in Srebrenica—the massacre of more than 8,000 Bosniak men and boys—represents the worst atrocity in Europe since 1945. It is also probably one of the darkest moments in the history of the United Nations. Twenty years on, it is right that we recall those events, pay tribute to the victims of the atrocities committed at Srebrenica and remember those from all sides who have lost family members and friends during the conflicts in the Balkans. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) both for securing and leading today's debate and for the way in which he has spoken up for Bosnia and Herzegovina, for the memory of Srebrenica and its victims and for the western Balkans region overall during his time in the House.

Hon. Members have rightly said during the debate that alongside those who lost their lives at Srebrenica, we need to hold in our thoughts the survivors, who to

this day mourn the loss of their family members and friends. The testimony of Nedžad Avdic, which my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham included in his speech, was a searing testimony to the appalling nature of the events that took place in and around Srebrenica 20 years ago. While commemorating those events, we need also to redouble our resolve to continue to push for the perpetrators of war crimes in the Balkans and elsewhere to be brought to justice.

This is an opportunity to encourage greater reconciliation both in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in the wider western Balkans region. It is also a moment to pause and reflect on the lessons learned and commit ourselves to making “Never again” not just a slogan, but a reality.

The United Kingdom is leading the drafting of a United Nations Security Council resolution to commemorate the victims of the genocide in Srebrenica and those who suffered on all sides in the war. That resolution encourages further steps towards reconciliation and a brighter future for Bosnia. The draft text that we have tabled also affirms our determination to prevent genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes and to use all the tools at our disposal to do so. The Security Council is due to vote on the resolution in New York this afternoon.

As the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) said, Srebrenica is an acute reminder of the extreme consequences that can occur when divisions are allowed to prevail and when we fail to stand up to extremism and hatred, so this is also an important opportunity to reflect on what can happen when hatred and discrimination go unchecked.

Of course, part of reconciliation is about justice. It is for that reason that UK funding has provided immense support to the state prosecutor's office, where financial support to the Srebrenica team from 2004 until December 2012 has had a direct impact on the number of successful prosecutions for Srebrenica-related war crimes. Our embassy in Sarajevo continues the valuable work on justice, supporting programmes to bring Bosnia's justice and security sectors into line with international standards.

However, there is a great deal more to do. Reconciliation is also about rebuilding the damaged relationships to ensure that communities can live alongside each other in a cohesive and integrated manner and that intolerance never again divides Bosnia and Herzegovina or Europe. I am therefore glad that regional leaders of all faiths and ethnicities will join citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina and representatives of the international community at the burial of more than 130 people and in shared commemorations at Potocari cemetery. Her Royal Highness the Princess Royal will represent the United Kingdom at the ceremony on Saturday 11 July.

My hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham asked about the work done by the Fund for Refugees in Slovenia. I can tell him that Lady Nott is due to speak to my officials later this week, and we will obviously be interested to hear her ideas at that point, although the fact that the Department for International Development does not at the moment have an in-country programme in Bosnia and Herzegovina means that one obvious potential source of funding is not available.

The hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) asked me about the recent article in *The Guardian*. He was generous enough to say that he did not expect me to go into detail about it, but I have

[Mr David Lidington]

read the article. Comprehensive documentation has been published by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, and the detailed Harland report in 1999 gave the official United Nations version of events. I think that the best thing we can do is to learn the lessons and resolve that we will never again stand by and close our eyes to atrocities of the sort that were committed two decades ago.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned the International Commission on Missing Persons. I have seen for myself the work that it does in Sarajevo and Cyprus under extremely difficult and challenging conditions. We have been a strong supporter of the ICMP since it was established and we have provided more than £3 million in funding over the past 15 years. In the last financial year alone, we provided several hundred thousand pounds to help the ICMP to excavate a previously unknown mass grave site at Tomašica in north-west Bosnia and Herzegovina, which could produce evidence that will have an impact on ongoing cases before the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. I assure the House that our commitment to the ICMP will continue.

We are spending about £4.75 million this year on projects that promote security and stability in Bosnia, including on peacekeeping, security sector reform, good governance and community reconciliation. We want Bosnia and Herzegovina to fulfil its potential as a stable, prosperous nation in the heart of Europe. When I have been to Sarajevo, I have found it encouraging to talk to young people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds, who see their future as being in the mainstream of European civilisation and who want not to forget the past, but to come to terms with it and build a better, more united future for their country.

In February last year, the entire international community heard the concerns of the Bosnian people. The demonstrations brought into stark relief the urgency of addressing key political and economic challenges, such as creating jobs for young people in their own country. That is why in November last year, our Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and

Weybridge (Mr Hammond), alongside his German counterpart Frank-Walter Steinmeier, led a new initiative to try to re-energise Bosnia's path towards EU integration, a plan that has been adopted by the EU as a whole. The focus of that initiative is on delivering real reform and changes that will have the most direct impact on the Bosnian people. That does not mean that we can avoid addressing difficult political and constitutional issues, but I believe it is right to move ahead as quickly as possible with changes that will make a difference for the better to the lives of ordinary families from every community in Bosnia. Bosnia's political leaders have signed up to that approach, and they need to implement reforms that will move the country forward and create a society that will bring opportunities for all its citizens. It is vital that old, divisive nationalist politics does not get in the way. Last year, in response to the appalling floods, Bosnians from all ethnicities showed that faced with a crisis, they could work together.

The bloodstained nature of recent history means that the path will not be an easy one, but we have a public commitment by party leaders from across the political spectrum in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The international community has a responsibility to support the people in holding their leaders to account to improve the lives of their citizens. All citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina deserve lasting prosperity and stability, and that will be achieved only when hope and good will for the richness of all members of society prevail over division. Building a secure, integrated, reconciled Bosnia and Herzegovina is, I believe, the best way to ensure that we can in truth say, when we reflect on Srebrenica, "Never again."

4.14 pm

Bob Stewart: I thank everyone who has taken part in this important debate. I end by expressing my gratitude for the support we have had from behind us—from the Mothers of Srebrenica and some of the victims, who are here today. It is probably not parliamentary protocol to say that, but we are here for them. God bless them.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the 20th anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide.

Avon Ring Road (M4 Link)

4.15 pm

Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the M4 link to the Avon ring road.

I rise to make the case for what I believe to be the most important road infrastructure project in my constituency, which could benefit not only my constituents in Kingswood but the whole city of Bristol and the surrounding region of south Gloucestershire. As the local MP, I believe that we desperately need a new junction on the M4 motorway to link to the Avon ring road, which runs through my constituency.

I appreciate that the Minister is new to his post, and I welcome him to the Department. I am sure that he has already received many representations from people calling for roads to be built, extended or dualled, but I believe that the case for an M4 link to the Avon ring road should be considered as a priority for the Department and the Government. Local people in eastern Bristol have the limited choice of accessing the M4 at junction 19, which is the junction with the M32, or at junction 18, which is the turn-off for Bath.

For hundreds of my constituents who journey along the M4 daily to work, the situation proves to be a commuter's nightmare. Those who want to access the motorway are forced to travel up the Avon ring road past the Hambrook lights at Frenchay and access the M32, which takes them on to the M4 at junction 19. The frustration of commuters wishing to take the M4 eastbound, who wait in the traffic that builds up on the ring road at Emersons Green—not helped by the 2-plus lane—is hardly improved by the fact that they can almost hear the sound of the vehicles on the M4, because the motorway at that point is less than a stone's throw from the ring road.

If we look at a map, we see that the Avon ring road, the A4174 and the M4 run so close together in parallel that we could be forgiven for thinking that they are adjoining carriageways on some sort of superhighway. At the Wick Wick roundabout or the Westerleigh Road roundabout on the ring road, where access points already exist and bridges cross the M4, the motorway lies tantalisingly close, but motorists have no other option than to wait patiently in a queue that stretches for miles along the ring road, and then to travel—against their instincts and better judgment—in the opposite direction for three miles before turning back on themselves. In the end—after a wait of, at times, an hour—a commuter will join the M4 at junction 19 and travel back past Emersons Green, where they started.

Understandably, such delays leave my constituents furious. The delays and the ensuing congestion result from the fact that the only way to access the M4 from the eastern side of Bristol is at junction 19. That has caused the M32 to become a pinch point on the M4, which is struggling to cope with the rising volume of commuters. With the development of new housing at Lyde Green, next to Emersons Green, and the planned housing at Filton, the Bristol area is set to expand significantly.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate, and I commend him on a brilliant campaign. Does he

agree that although we want to unleash enterprise and create more jobs, and new housing is much needed, we have to have the infrastructure in place to support it?

Chris Skidmore: I thank my hon. Friend and neighbour for his comments. He has led the way in developing a suitable mix of housing and employment land at the proposed housing estate at Filton airfield. He is absolutely right that we may have employment, land and housing, but we need transport infrastructure in eastern and northern Bristol to ensure that the city can expand appropriately and to reduce congestion. With thousands of extra cars on the roads, there will remain only one access point to the M4. The time has come to provide a solution by delivering a new junction, junction 18A, at Emersons Green. With the M4 and the Avon ring road effectively touching, the project would be moderate on the scale of other Members' requests. A new junction would link with the Avon ring road, providing instant and improved access to the M4 for the eastern side of Bristol, thereby reducing congestion on the M32 and at junction 19.

Junction 18A is such an obvious, and some might say easy, solution that the Minister may wonder why it has not been thought of before. Well, it has: the scheme was first proposed back in 1985—I was four years old—when plans for the Avon ring road were being developed. The junction and link road were given the go-ahead, but they were never built. The blame lies with the local authority of the time, which apparently spent the non-ring-fenced money elsewhere. What may have happened decades ago in the 20th century, however, should not cloud the fact that, as we approach the third decade of the 21st century, Bristol and its surrounding region urgently need a new link road to the M4.

I am determined to press the case for what is known locally as the "M4 link", as I have done repeatedly over the past five years since becoming the MP for Kingswood. I held a debate in Parliament on this issue back in May 2011, and in April 2012 I handed in a petition of more than 1,500 local residents supporting the M4 link. I put on record my appreciation for the determination of local councillors such as Colin Hunt, James Hunt, Rachael Hunt and Dave Kearns to keep fighting locally for an M4 link, which has resulted in South Gloucestershire Council commissioning a feasibility study into the junction that will report later in the year.

Only last year, in July 2014, I met the Minister with responsibility for roads, my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill), at the Department to make the case for a new junction and link road. On 25 March 2015, during the final Prime Minister's questions of the Parliament, I raised the case for an M4 link with the Prime Minister himself. He responded by stating that the Secretary of State for Transport would be pleased to receive representations. I was delighted that, in April, the Transport Secretary was able to visit the proposed site of the M4 link and to listen to local businesses and councillors making the case for a new junction and link road.

Since then, the campaign for an M4 link has, pardon the pun, stepped up a gear, with the launch of a new cross-party campaign, Gateway2Growth. Several representatives of the campaign are in the Public Gallery today, and they are calling for junction 18A to be built at Emersons Green. The campaign includes the Bristol

[Chris Skidmore]

and Bath science park and Business West, which represents 18,000 businesses across the south-west, and its purpose is not only to highlight the transport and congestion need for an M4 link but to make the overwhelming economic case for a new junction. Above all, a new junction would help to put the thriving community of Emersons Green on the map.

Emersons Green is a success story in the making. It is the location of one of south Gloucestershire's largest ever housing developments. A consortium of developers is currently working to deliver 2,500 new homes, schools and community and leisure facilities at Lyde Green, and some 2,800 homes have been built at Emersons Green West since the late 1990s. The area is currently home to the Bristol and Bath science park, Airbus, the Harlequin business park and the National Composites Centre, and it has the potential to grow even further. The area contains a flagship employment site for the west of England, which was recognised by the Government in the establishment of the Emersons Green enterprise area. There is the potential for developing 45 hectares of employment space, which would provide economic growth for the creation of some 7,000 new jobs. At the heart of that employment site is the Bristol and Bath science park, which is home to more than 40 successful businesses and is a crucial hub for young and emerging science and technology companies to grow and thrive. One of the park's success stories has been the National Composites Centre, which has become an internationally renowned asset for the delivery of world-class design and rapid manufacture for sectors including aerospace, automotive and heavy infrastructure.

It is vital, therefore, that the surrounding infrastructure matches the area's ambition so that it is able to reflect the present day Emersons Green while also being able to cater for future demands. A new junction 18A at Emersons Green, providing access to the M4, would help to turbocharge economic growth in the area. Back in 2006, the Bristol transport study estimated that a junction would provide an economic benefit of around £270 million; I believe that figure would be far higher today. In order to understand more fully the economic benefits of the proposed junction, the Gateway2Growth campaign has commissioned an independent study exploring the business benefits of junction 18A. The study will be conducted by Dr Phil Tomlinson, senior lecturer in business economics, and Marc Betton, PhD researcher, from the University of Bath. The comprehensive report will have its national launch at the House of Commons on 16 September, which will be attended by local MPs, councillors, business leaders, academics and residents. I personally invite the Minister and his departmental officials to attend the launch so that they can hear for themselves the economic benefits of the proposed junction 18A and M4 link. I request that the Department seriously and urgently considers the case for junction 18A as part of any future Government transport infrastructure commitments.

The phrase "long-term economic plan" could have been designed with the lengthy campaign for an M4 link in mind—the campaign has certainly been extremely long term. However, I assure the Minister that my resolve, and the resolve of local businesses, the Gateway2Growth campaign, local MPs—including my hon. Friends the

Members for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) and for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall)—and the people of Kingswood and the surrounding area, is to argue that the case for a new junction has not diminished, nor will it. The case for the M4 link has never been stronger and, with the foundation of the Gateway2Growth campaign, never has our local area been so united behind the common ambition of delivering better road infrastructure for the Bristol area.

4.27 pm

Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak in this debate, Mr Williams. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore) for securing the debate, and I welcome the new Minister to his place.

Although my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood was four years old, I was not even born when the scheme was initially proposed. My constituency of Thornbury and Yate borders his constituency at precisely the point between junctions 18 and 19 of the M4 where the new junction is proposed. Since the building of the Emersons Green development, there has been a significant increase in the volume of traffic in the area. The A4174 between the site of the proposed junction and junction 19 of the M4 is particularly congested at peak times, which has a large knock-on effect on the villages in my constituency between the Emersons Green development and junction 18. There has been a steady increase in traffic movements through villages such as Pucklechurch and Hinton, where cars are using country lanes to access junction 18.

The local South Gloucestershire district councillor, Ben Stokes, has highlighted specific concerns about the junction of Cotswold Way and the A46, where traffic regularly tails back due to the volume of traffic on the A46. Motorists are becoming increasingly vulnerable as the pressure on junction 18 and the A46 increases. I also thank Councillor Steve Reade, who has pointed to the increasing volume of vehicle movements along the A420 through Wick in recent years. Residents of Kingswood, Bridgegate and Oldland Common are exiting the M4 at junction 19 and travelling through Wick, rather than using the more congested junction 18.

My constituents have also raised concerns about the increasing difficulty of walking or cycling safely around the village of Pucklechurch. I fear that more pressure will push more people into cars, which will add to local concerns about air quality on the A420. The 2,500 homes planned at Lyde Green, which reaches from my hon. Friend's constituency slightly into my own, will lead to a further increase in vehicle movements and more pressure on our villages' already strained local infrastructure. Pucklechurch and Wick are small villages with a community atmosphere. They were never designed to be used as a daily bypass for commuters, nor were the roads that run through them.

Part of the solution is the construction of junction 18A, giving motorists a quick and effective route to the M4 and creating new capacity to absorb the traffic created by the new housing developments and growing businesses in the area. I know that a great number of my constituents make the daily commute to Bristol to work, and the current congestion means that a journey from Yate to Bristol always takes more than an hour. Although many commuters

would still use the same stretch of road, the pressure on the ring road would be greatly relieved by the proposed junction.

I believe that the proposal will provide us with additional capacity for commerce to enter Bristol, which will connect new businesses, encourage trade in the region, help reduce unemployment and, crucially, create more skilled jobs in my constituency. I ask that the Government consider the proposal as a long-term investment in a thriving part of the country. As more families move into the area, we must encourage businesses to grow and to trade with each other locally and nationally.

In summary, the proposal will significantly reduce journey times into Bristol for many of my constituents, improve access to the M4 and reduce the traffic burden on the villages affected by the growing population. If we want our infrastructure to match our ambition, it should be seen as a vital part of the future of south Gloucestershire.

4.31 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Williams, for the first time in my new capacity. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore) on securing this afternoon's debate on the M4-Avon link road. He is right that since starting in this job, I have been besieged by colleagues with cunning plans for which they are seeking investment. He and my hon. Friend the Member for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall) highlighted how old they are, and therefore how old some of the rest of us are. In 1985, when this campaign started—I remember it clearly—I was working for B&Q. Things move in different directions.

I am aware that this topic has been the subject of previous parliamentary questions and debate. I praise my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood for continuing to highlight the growth that will take place in Bristol and south Gloucestershire and the important role that good transport infrastructure will play in building a sustainable and strong local economy. I am also aware of the excellent work that he has done to represent and promote the interests of Kingswood since he came to Parliament. He has been a vigorous local champion and has won a deserved reputation for it.

I will address the points raised by both my hon. Friends, but I will start by setting out what we have already done as a Government to invest in infrastructure in the area. I applaud the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood and other Members of this House in championing the campaign for access to growth. As he said, the Emersons Green Bristol and Bath science park development will create 7,000 jobs, part of an estimated 60,000 jobs across the wider west of England concentrated on six local enterprise areas and the flagship Bristol Temple quarter enterprise zone. There will be 95,000 new jobs in the west of England by 2030, in addition to much-needed new homes.

The west of England lies at a crucial point in our national transport network, providing road and rail access not only to the south-west and south Wales from the midlands and the south-east but to international markets via the Severn ports. It plays a key role in our national economy and our national transport network. The west of England road and rail network provides

access for local people and businesses and keeps our nation moving. As my hon. Friend highlighted, reliable connectivity enables west of England residents to access jobs and local businesses to reach the marketplace.

The Government believe that investment in infrastructure drives economic growth and improves lives. We have ambitious plans for infrastructure investment, whether in road or rail, as part of our economic plan. We have an infrastructure deficit, as we have a financial deficit; we have not invested in infrastructure. That applies to all parties over many years. We are playing catch-up with the investment that we need at a time when our finances are under pressure, but this Government's clear will is to address that deficit. A significant amount of cash is being allocated to doing so.

Roads play a huge part in that. Nearly every kind of economic activity depends on roads in some way, and a high-performing road network improves the health of our economy. Our commitment to deliver a step change in investment in transport infrastructure was made clear in the road investment strategy launched by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State at the end of the last Parliament. The RIS sets out how £15 billion will be invested in more than 100 schemes across the road network between 2015 and 2021. In the west of England, that will include a new junction on the M49 at Avonmouth, to support access to the 14,000 jobs planned for that area, and work on the A417 near Birdlip. Both schemes have been championed and prioritised by the local enterprise partnerships and local businesses, which has been an important factor in their selection.

Roads are not the only transport mode in which we are investing. In the west of England, the Government are investing £113 million in three metro bus schemes to provide a 50 km bus rapid transit network that will link key economic and employment centres and regeneration and development areas in the greater Bristol area, including the enterprise area at the Bristol and Bath science park in Emersons Green. As my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood will be aware, construction has already started on those schemes. The metro bus is designed to extend the choice of transport modes, particularly for private car drivers, encouraging them to make a modal shift to public transport.

The schemes represent an investment of £182 million, of which £113 million will come from the Department for Transport, with the remainder coming from the council and third-party contributors. As part of the work, the new 23-mile north fringe to Hengrove route will improve sustainable access to the Emersons Green science park area.

South Gloucestershire and Bristol councils have recently received £13.9 million from the Department for Transport for major maintenance and enhancement of the A4174 Avon ring road. The scheme will improve the A4174 between the A38 at Filton and the A4 at Hicks Gate. It will involve major structural maintenance of three structures, extending the life of the existing carriageway and providing footways and cycleway maintenance and enhancements.

Altogether, the West of England local enterprise partnership has secured £230.7 million from the local growth fund over the period up to 2021 to drive forward the growth of the region's economy. It has prioritised more than £50 million for funding the MetroWest phase 1 rail scheme, which will reopen the railway line to Portishead

[Andrew Jones]

and provide other rail enhancements in the west of England area. The LEP has also committed £20 million in local growth funding to support sustainable transport schemes.

I wanted to give the context of the investment in infrastructure taking place in the area. Investment in local transport infrastructure such as I have outlined is critical to local communities and the local economy. It is essential that we continue to develop our transport network to meet new needs. The local enterprise partnership has highlighted the development of the Emersons Green Bristol and Bath science park in its strategic economic plan. I fully understand why both my hon. Friends and the business community in the region support the call for improved links to that growing area from Avon to the M4. It is an understandable economic case.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood will know, the A4174 link road is part of the local road network, whereas the M4 is part of the strategic road network, meaning that there are two main paths through which investment can be secured. Sadly, I have not come here bearing a large cheque to deliver the scheme, but I can provide guidance on routes ahead.

Investment in the strategic road network is handled through the road investment strategy, which involves 100 schemes and £15 billion in investment. We are basically moving to a system of road investment that is comparable to the rail investment system, with control periods and projects identified for delivery in five-year units. We announced the first RIS in December last year, and we are developing the process for the next one, which will run from 2020 to 2025.

The first RIS was built on a detailed assessment of the needs of the road network—existing points of pressure and places where new development would be possible. In many places, that included building better links between the local and national road networks, which is exactly what has been identified this afternoon. I am keen for the second RIS to deliver in exactly the same way as the first. I want the process to be open, find the best way to get value from our roads and encourage all groups with ideas for improvements to get involved and contribute.

The Infrastructure Act 2015 commits us to a series of route strategies that assess the needs of the whole road network. Highways England will use the strategies to engage with local stakeholders, identify current and future constraints on economic growth and explore how investment will address constraints and unlock opportunity. I expect to announce how we will develop the second RIS after the party conference season. Highways England has already committed to publishing its route strategies over the next 18 months or so. They will be the platform from which to take forward the opportunity for a new M4 junction and see whether we can build it into the next RIS. A very strong case has been made, and I would strongly support all my hon. Friends from the area contributing their views and local expertise to the process. I will ensure that officials in my Department and Highways England keep my hon. Friends fully aware of the opportunities to get involved.

I am trying to make the process more open, to encourage a greater contribution from local economic drivers, such as chambers of commerce or local enterprise

partnerships. That is a bit of a change from the earlier RIS. I want to increase the emphasis placed on economic development and what road investment can do to unlock it. The scheme discussed today is exactly the type that would be appropriate for consideration. Ahead of that process, I suggest to my hon. Friends that they continue the campaign and work with local groups to ensure that everyone is aligned and that there is consensus that the link is the best way to address the area's transport needs.

That is the route for national funding for the strategic road network; I shall now address local sources of funding. The west of England councils are undertaking a joint spatial plan and joint transport study. They will consider strategic needs up to 2036 and assess a potential strategic transport package for the area. Prioritisation of potential schemes has not yet taken place, so the debate is timely. Once the local enterprise partnership has established the priorities, it will then explore funding options. Access to Emersons Green Bristol and Bath science park is identified as a shared concern for the agencies that would deliver such a scheme. I would therefore encourage the local enterprise partnership, South Gloucestershire Council and Highways England to work together to develop a proposal that will meet the needs of both the local economy and the strategic road network, in a way that can be delivered in financial and engineering terms and, above all, is safe for road users.

It is important to consider all the options, including the proposal that my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood outlined. He put forward a strong case, and I will ensure that it is considered extremely favourably within the Department. I can commit to joining him on the 16th for the launch of the local plan; it is a kind invitation. The Government are committed to investment in infrastructure and to providing clarity into the future, so that contractors can scale up and skill up and we can have more appropriate planning to deliver greater economies. We must make every effort to address the long-term historical infrastructure deficit I mentioned earlier.

We remain committed to growth deals and to providing ongoing support for LEPs, which are delivering growth and jobs. Funding for proposals such as the link could come through growth deals or LEPs, and there are also opportunities in the road infrastructure schemes. I hope that I have provided a little bit of a clue as to the way forward for the campaign. I would be happy to help, and a very strong case has been made. I understand entirely why the link matters. It would open up opportunities and improve the quality of life in the area. I am aware of the congestion as people come down the M4 before taking the motorway spur into the centre of Bristol. The economic growth of the area is vigorously championed by local MPs.

I again congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood on securing the debate and my hon. Friend the Member for Thornbury and Yate on his eloquent contribution. The Government are committed to modernising local and strategic transport infrastructure. That is part of our long-term economic plan, which is already delivering infrastructure needs that were unmet by previous Governments. That work will continue, and my hon. Friends will have my support in delivering for their area.

Question put and agreed to.

Jobcentre Plus

4.45 pm

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,
That this House has considered reform of Jobcentre Plus.

It is once again an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Williams. It is good to see you back in your place. This is the first time we have been in a debate together since you were re-elected, on which I congratulate you.

Since the early 1970s, we have tried 34 different schemes in an effort to get long-term and young unemployed people back to work, at a cost to the country of more than £13 billion. Each scheme has had varying results, but in the main has failed. Welfare dependency and long-term joblessness continue to scar our society. That is not just a failure of policy, but a moral failure. Joblessness damages families for generations. It sets people and groups against each other. It divides people into tribes with no common purpose. William Beveridge said:

“Unemployment is like a headache or a high temperature—unpleasant and exhausting but not carrying in itself any explanation of its cause.”

From the youth training scheme to the new deal for young people, and now the Work programme, multiple schemes have not tackled the causes of unemployment. Long-term joblessness remains stubbornly high, at over 32% of the unemployment rate. No real effort has been made to reverse decades of long-term unemployment or welfare dependency. Our attitude, across this House, needs to change. We cannot accept that long-term unemployment is here to stay or that people will waste their lives on welfare. People should never accept that they will have to lower their ambitions to go into low-paid, insecure jobs. Our welfare system has to be a ladder to success, not a way of life. It is not attitudes that must be shifted; we can deliver change only if the right processes are in place.

The first port of call for any jobseeker is Jobcentre Plus. Jobcentre Plus should exist to get people back into work. Despite claims over the weekend that Jobcentre Plus has helped 100,000 people into work, it still has a record of failure. Policy Exchange research, as outlined in its report “Joined Up Welfare: The next steps for personalisation”, found that only 36% of JSA claimants found a job within six months of claiming benefits and kept it over a seven to eight-month period. Others did not find employment or cycled in and out of work. Only one in five people sent to colleges to increase their vocational training ended up in employment. That research is underlined by Ofsted, which found that in some examples the success rate of Jobcentre Plus schemes is as low as 1%.

The Policy Exchange report identified the root causes of the problem, which is that the design of our employment services has two main issues: the signposting of services does not occur from identifiable points and the delivery of services is nowhere near specialised enough. Policy Exchange could not have been clearer:

“The dominance of Jobcentre Plus on employment support services prevents the development of more specialist providers and personalised welfare services.”

Policy Exchange concluded that Jobcentre Plus is not fit for purpose. Given my experience as a constituency MP over the past five years, I tend to agree. It does not

reflect the modern job market, where employees no longer stay in the same job for life—it is more like less than a decade, and falling. It also does not reflect globalisation, whereby people have multiple careers in their lifetime. It is not suited to supporting, helping and retraining people, as necessary.

If someone were to ask for help now, Jobcentre Plus would direct them to the Universal Jobmatch site. The good jobcentres would offer to help people with their CV, but in effect someone would have to wait for six months before a jobcentre really started to help them. Jobcentres are not even attractive places to visit. For far too many people, they are the places they go to be sanctioned; furniture is nailed to the floor and there is a security guard at the front door. Beyond that, the system's one-size-fits-all model does not reflect the individual needs of jobseekers or understand what employers are looking for.

The situation is even worse for young people. We all know the stories about the Work programme, whereby people with degrees were forced to leave volunteering programmes that would help their future to work in jobs that would not. Some progress has been made, especially in south-east Wales with the work coach delivery model, which provides a single “work coach” for a jobseeker's entire period of unemployment. However, it seems that much of this activity is too little, too late. Even now, people are getting just a maximum of 20 minutes with a single person—20 minutes to help someone to begin a life-changing process. It is all part of another attempt to make a broken system function just a little bit better.

It is time to change the entire system. Doing anything less would mean that long-term unemployment was not being tackled, and we would create yet another generation of people dependent on welfare. That would fail not only the young people who cannot get a job, their families who often have to support them and the long-term unemployed who are stuck on welfare and want nothing more than to work; it would fail our entire country.

The Prince's Trust calculates that the cost of youth unemployment to the nation is £10 million a day. To put that into context, that amounts to more each year than the combined budgets for the Cabinet Office and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Change will cause pain in many areas, but the decisions that secure long-term, sustainable employment for everyone in our country are worth the short-term hurt that would be caused. It will require a generational effort, but we must start now. The first stage is to abolish Jobcentre Plus.

Jobcentre Plus must be replaced with an agency that exists to contract charities and private recruitment companies to provide a service based firmly in the communities of the long-term unemployed. That service would ensure that there is localised, individualised and specialist support for jobseekers, delivered by groups with a proven track record of success in their locality.

As the Policy Exchange report identified, it would be more effective for funding to flow to different providers, following the individual jobseeker to the service provider best able to get them into work, rather than funding remaining static in one organisation, as it is now with Jobcentre Plus. If someone loses their job on Friday, they should expect to have a personalised discussion with a jobsearch expert by Monday about what employers in the area are looking for, what they want to achieve,

[Chris Evans]

what barriers are stopping them from achieving their goal and how they can get the skills that they need and that employers want.

The providers must work hand in hand with local employers. They must know the skills that employers need, the jobs that need to be filled and how candidates can be successful. Once these things have been identified, the local providers should work with jobseekers to get them the skills that employers want, rather than forcing them into jobs through sanctions.

This is not a matter of right versus left; it is simply a matter of following what works. The OECD's 2010 report, "Off to a Good Start", found that countries such as Australia, which have moved from a "work first" approach to a "train/learn first" approach, achieved much greater progress in helping people out of work into sustainable, long-term employment. The same report highlighted that

"A move towards early and selective intervention...helps to avoid the build-up of a large pool of youth at risk of becoming long-term unemployed".

It is by partnering with the people providing jobs, determining what they need and then delivering it that we will tackle long-term unemployment.

A similar model has worked before. In the 1960s, Bobby Kennedy, the New York Senator and presidential candidate, pioneered a community development corporation in Bedford-Stuyvesant, in Brooklyn. That organisation succeeded in turning Bedford-Stuyvesant from one of the poorest areas of New York into one of the most desirable places to live in New York. The CDC is a not-for-profit, community-based corporation that is free from central Government control. It provides a localised and personalised service, and supplements employment programmes with economic development activities and community development. It is driven by a board made up of established local business leaders, charities and—most importantly—local residents, who are brought together in partnership by government to harness the best of private enterprise and the best of social action, with the clear aim of creating and expanding locally owned businesses, and providing residents with the training they need to work in those companies.

The CDC designates each local entrepreneur with a single contract person, who is given full responsibility for helping them to establish and grow their new business, creating growth, jobs and prosperity for the entire community. The CDC contract-holder provides a range of services, including providing guidance in gaining funding, negotiating with banks, finding the best location, and selecting the right equipment, staff and resources. In effect, it provides the services that an entrepreneur needs to start their company and make it a success.

Once the company opens its doors, the CDC increases its efforts. It will be the responsibility of the contract-holder to make that company a success, so that it adds to the economic prosperity of the community. These new companies will be good for communities and for reducing unemployment. The CDCs will support entrepreneurs and help to grow companies, which will create new employment opportunities.

The CDC model has worked before, but it must be updated for the modern world. Employment service providers must bring about a system targeted purely at

need and demand. We should use this form of partnership and competition to deliver the jobs that we need for the future.

However, as with all things, there is an elephant in the room. Anyone who has worked in business—especially in small and medium-sized enterprises, as I did in my days at a bookmaker—knows that taking on a new employee is a risk, especially one who has been long-term unemployed. I can understand why firms often choose not to do so. That is where the Government must step in and encourage companies to employ the long-term unemployed. The Government are large enough to take the risk away from companies. We can give employers tax breaks for taking on the long-term unemployed. Yes, there will be a cost, but doing nothing has a greater cost; there is a greater cost in allowing joblessness and welfare dependency to continue.

That is why we must be clear to people. The Government will play their part, creating the new jobs and helping the jobless to get the skills they need to fill them, but jobseekers must play their part as well. As the philosopher John Rawls has said, in a just society

"all citizens are to do their part in society's co-operative work."

For me, that means that no-one can be allowed to have a life on welfare. I support the Government's welfare cap—work must always pay more than benefits. However, for far too long sanctions on jobseekers have had exactly the opposite effect to the one we want. Often through no fault of their own, and in many cases because of the faults of Jobcentre Plus, people are being sanctioned, which traps them in a cycle where they cannot find work and cannot receive the support they need.

In the last Parliament, a Work and Pensions Committee report, "Benefit sanctions policy beyond the Oakley review", found that at present the sanctions regime does not achieve its aims, and that often all sanctions achieve is harming vulnerable people and causing financial hardship, further trapping the jobless in welfare dependency.

The solution illustrates how, more than any other problem, the issue can be solved only by using both the left and the right. The Policy Exchange report called for the creation of "citizen support centres", operating separately but alongside employment support providers. These centres would act as the primary and central hub for accessing Government services, including all benefits. That would make the process of receiving payments distinct from receiving help into work.

However, that is not enough. What is also needed was identified in the Institute for Public Policy Research report, "It's All About You: Citizen-centred welfare", and it is welfare responsibility contracts. They are legally binding contracts between jobseekers and the Government that outline in plain terms what is expected of jobseekers, what sanctions they will face if they do not fulfil their obligations, the Government's responsibility to them and the responsibility that they have to the Government and society.

I will end by restating a simple fact. This issue is not about Labour or Tory; it is not about left versus right; and it is not about political advantage. It is about doing what works. In the past 40 years, welfare dependency has been allowed to become a way of life in many of our communities. Joblessness has become the norm for too many families. Low pay, insecure jobs and the lack of a future have been allowed to become part and parcel of

people's lives. Poverty of money and ambition are all too often just facts of life now. No Government of any hue have managed to solve this. Simply put, we have failed our country and our constituents. We have tried the same thing over and over: ineffective training programmes, irrelevant to the real needs of business; sanctions for those who cannot get jobs; and subsidies for low pay through tax credits. We have tried time and again to reform jobcentres, but to no avail.

We need a new approach built around partnership between Government, charities, private enterprise and local residents, in which the individual needs of the jobless and of businesses are properly catered for, in which we harness the right structures and right techniques to create new jobs for the unemployed at a local level and in which support from Government is matched by responsibility from the jobless. We have no future as a country if these problems continue to exist. Communities across the country such as the one I represent have no future when unemployment and poverty are a fact of life.

Let me be clear. It is our duty in this place to get Britain back to work. This is the only future our country has: one in which we work our way out of poverty, out of low pay and off welfare dependency. The great American President Franklin Delano Roosevelt said that to govern:

“demands bold, persistent experimentation. It is common sense to take a method and try it. If it fails, admit it frankly and try another.”

We have tried the current method of getting people back into work for the past 40 years. It has failed. It is time to try another.

5.1 pm

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Williams. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) on securing this important debate.

Job seeking is often a stressful, unpredictable journey that is usually travelled alone. Losing a job is difficult, not only for the individual, but often for their families as well. The search for work—perhaps following redundancy, or however a job is lost—is never easy, and although for most people it is over within six months, many are left to endure cycles of short-term work and long periods of unemployment.

Jobcentre Plus has remained the single biggest gateway into the world of work for generations, with jobseekers culturally bound to the process of examining the jobs board at their local job centre, or dole office as it used to be known. However, research shows that although 75% of people claiming jobseekers allowance gain employment within six months, only about half of claimants leaving JSA are still in work eight months later.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Williams. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) on securing this important debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Christina Rees) sets out powerfully the statistical case relating to Jobcentre Plus. Does she agree that there has been a problem with the Government's rhetoric, which is exacerbating the position of the unemployed, because rather than accepting that unemployment is a difficult

time in a person's life, people have been stigmatised as shirkers? That has made the atmosphere around Jobcentre Plus far more difficult than it needs to be.

Christina Rees: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I agree. The rhetoric often binds people in cultural divisions.

The process simply is not working. The world has changed since the inception of the jobcentre and, indeed, Jobcentre Plus. To be fair, the Department for Work and Pensions has implemented changes that take account of the increasingly digital way in which people access services and information. Its aim of “digital by default” ways to sign on is a clear move to base its services in the computer-centric world where many people exist.

However, the Welsh Government's “National Survey for Wales 2013-14” confirmed that 21% of the Welsh adult population aged 18 or over does not regularly use the internet. In the local authority area of Neath Port Talbot, where my constituency is situated, that figure is almost 41%. Although 82% of people use the internet for email and 74% for general browsing, only 17% used it to look for work. Youth unemployment in Neath Port Talbot in May 2013 was 9.7%, compared with 9.0% in Wales and 7.8% for the UK as a whole, and 2% of young people had been out of work for more than six months. As those statistics suggest, there is a great need for good quality job search, support and advice in Neath, and other constituencies like it.

I wish to highlight two examples of how community-based organisations have improved the job prospects and quality of life for people in my constituency of Neath. One is in a community suburb of Neath town centre, called Neath East, and the other is in a small village called Banwen, at the top of the Dulais valley. The people of Neath East came together to try to regenerate their area, first establishing the Melincryddan Community Conference, known as MCC, and later joining forces to create the Neath East Communities First partnership. This partnership has sought, and continues to seek, the views and participation of community members in deciding on actions to regenerate the area.

One of the first needs identified was provision of advice to be available locally, which led directly to the provision of Melin advice centre. Initial consultations revealed that many claimants were being turned away from Neath Jobcentre Plus, as they lacked the necessary IT skills and/or access to fulfil the three basic criteria of day one conditionality—compiling a CV and having an email address and a Universal Jobmatch registration—and the staff at the jobcentre did not have the time to assist them.

The MCC/Communities First partnership put staff in the jobcentre to provide a two-phase approach, with funding secured in 2014 from the Jobcentre Plus flexible support grant. First, it helped claimants with the immediate task of meeting their conditionality requirements, ensuring that they navigated the systems properly and were armed with the requisite documents. Secondly, it directed claimants to its own advice centre for more tailored, in-depth advice that aimed to secure them better long-term employment prospects.

The Melin centre offers a range of services and facilities, including adult learning classes, welfare rights advice, and employment search and support. It also

[Christina Rees]

delivers a range of health and wellbeing activities, employing more than 15 members of staff. It is now working with between 50 and 130 people each month, all seeking support to meet the day one conditionality criteria.

MCC has succeeded in helping people in Neath East to gain employment opportunities by helping them to navigate the systems properly. That has vastly improved the services being offered by Jobcentre Plus and is therefore improving the quality of life for those in the community.

The Dove Workshop in Banwen was formed during the 1984-85 miners' strike as a response to the need for the community to come together and share skills and solidarity. Led by women, for women, the organisation began as a way of offering adult education and skills training, so that local women were better equipped to find work during the year-long strike that saw their partners and fathers out of work and on the picket line. Although the strike came to an end, Dove Workshop did not. Instead, it grew in strength, scale and scope, working not only with women, but with all parts of the community, providing education and a range of services and projects. It has acted as a union for the community during times when not everyone worked, and it recognises that those who are working work in disparate sectors, industries and places.

Dove now employs 30 people in a community where jobs are rare. It continually supports its staff to undertake training and further education, providing a number of services associated with learning, offering opportunities for volunteering, work experience, IT drop-in services, employment support, CV writing, and much more. One project delivered by Dove is "Building Livelihoods and Strengthening Communities", funded by the Big Lottery Fund in partnership with Oxfam Cymru. This project, together with Dove's own advice service, works to support local people in their pursuit of good quality, sustainable employment.

As with MCC, for many years Jobcentre Plus in Neath has sent many jobseekers to Dove because Jobcentre Plus staff were unable to assist them directly, as they lacked the time and resources to do so. Dove also applied for the Jobcentre Plus flexible support grant, but was unfortunately denied funding. However, Dove has never turned away someone seeking help, and it continues to provide advice today. To me, Jobcentre Plus is a conveyor belt whose purpose seems to be to offer unemployed people the prospect of six months' work. However, MCC and Dove cater to an individual's needs, ambitions and quality of life, so that they can fulfil their potential and make a meaningful contribution to the community.

5.10 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): It is a pleasure, Mr Williams, to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) on securing this important debate on a matter that we discussed at some length recently in our discussions on the Scotland Bill. I speak as the Scottish National party spokesperson on fair work and employment, and this issue is close to my heart. I will come on to that point later.

It would be fair to say that Jobcentre Plus and related employment support programmes have at times been seen as unfit for purpose, and that has been said by Members on the Opposition Benches today. Many aspects of the system have had a damaging impact on people looking for work. The SNP wants to see the full devolution of welfare powers and the Jobcentre Plus network to enable the Scottish Parliament to create a fairer system of welfare and employment support. Recent statistics show that nearly 150,000 sanctions were applied in Scotland between the end of 2012 and September 2014, affecting nearly 85,000 individuals, including nearly 3,000 disabled people. We have said that we should be getting people off benefits and into work, but how can making them hungry and unable to pay bills and increasing their debt support them in finding a job?

Professor David Webster has highlighted the fact that the number of sanctions resulting from the Work programme has been considerably higher than the number of people obtaining jobs from the Work programme. In Scotland, 46,265 sanctions were applied between June 2011 and March 2014 because claimants failed to participate in the Work programme. In the same period, 26,740 job outcomes resulted from the Work programme.

Moving on to sanctions and conditionalities, the UK Government have reformed Jobcentre Plus in recent years as part of their welfare and employment support reform programme. As we have acknowledged, there is no doubt that those working in jobcentres are doing their best, but one of the most pernicious aspects of the Government's changes has been the intensification of the welfare sanctions and conditionality regime. Under the Government's welfare regime, jobseekers are monitored on the jobs they apply for. If they fail to apply for enough vacancies, they are faced with sanctions, whether those are reductions or suspension.

The hon. Member for Neath (Christina Rees) made reference to the digital aspects of the system. Scotland, like many parts of the UK, has many rural areas. It is often a challenge for people to get online to access the system to apply for jobs. If a jobseeker voluntarily leaves work or refuses a notified vacancy, the first sanction period can be up to 13 weeks, the second up to 26 weeks and the third up to three years. The Work programme, which took effect in 2011, is mandatory for all jobseekers who have been out of work for more than nine months and requires jobseekers to take unpaid work experience, often in poor-quality opportunities such as retail. Those who fail to comply with certain conditions are often sanctioned.

The sanctions and conditionality regime, which is administered by the Department for Work and Pensions and Jobcentre Plus, has had a particularly worrying impact on poverty and inequality in Scotland, and it is fair to say that the powers being devolved will not give us the opportunity to intervene early. We tabled a proposal on that for the House's consideration, but sadly we were defeated. Child poverty organisations have warned that by 2020 an additional 100,000 children in Scotland could be living in relative poverty after housing costs because of UK Government welfare reforms, and those estimates do not yet factor in the additional £12 billion of cuts to the annual welfare budget that we will no doubt hear about extensively in tomorrow's Budget and the debates on it.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The hon. Lady talks with passion about the impact of sanctions, but does she agree that the whole business of claiming JSA is based on a contract signed by the benefit seeker and Jobcentre Plus? It is a commitment on both sides. Jobcentre Plus rarely uses sanctions. They are used only as a last resort. It is a stick and carrot approach. The reducing level of unemployment across the country shows that the approach is working effectively. Does she agree?

Hannah Bardell: I am afraid I do not. I have a number of examples, and I will happily cite one that comes from Citizens Advice Scotland. An east of Scotland citizens advice bureau reports that a client was sanctioned for failing to attend an appointment that he missed because he was on a forklift training course. He was advised by the jobcentre to attend after he finished his course, but was sanctioned for not coming on his normal signing-on day. The client was married with a young child and required a food parcel to feed his family.

Sadly, the stream of people coming through my constituency office door has not indicated that the job programmes are working. We want full devolution to Scotland so that we can have Scottish answers to Scottish questions on some of these matters. I have no doubt that there may be areas where sanctioning is working, but there seems to be a consensus that modernisation is required. A Poverty Alliance report in February 2015 found that action to increase state benefits, end the punitive sanctions regime, address in-work poverty, raise the minimum wage and promote the living wage that will ultimately have the biggest impact on stemming the growth of food poverty in Scotland.

The Scottish Government have done a lot to mitigate some aspects of the UK Government regime, and they continue to do what they can with the resources they have to alleviate the impact of welfare reform and cuts. Current and planned Scottish Government funding will result in an investment of around £296 million over the period 2013-14 to 2015-16. The Scottish Government are also providing £33 million in funding for the Scottish welfare fund in 2015-16 to mitigate the impact of benefits reform. We will have to see what we can do on the further cuts. They are also providing local authorities with £35 million in 2015-16 to allow them to top up discretionary housing payments to meet the estimated £44.8 million required to compensate for the cost of the bedroom tax.

The proposals in the Scotland Bill to allow the Scottish Government to top up reserved benefits are welcome, but Scotland is expected to mitigate the impact of welfare cuts from a budget that is being cut year on year. Scotland must have full control of working-age benefits to create a fairer system that provides adequate support for those who need it.

We have done a huge amount on the living wage—we are halfway towards our target of having 500 private companies paying it. We reached the 250 mark two weeks ago with a nursery just outside my constituency in West Lothian. However, the Scotland Bill as it stands restricts the devolution of employment support programmes to those for long-term unemployed and disabled people. That would prevent the Scottish Government from providing effective early intervention for those recently out of work and from joining up employment support

services with previously devolved services, such as skills and education. The Smith commission report stated:

“The Scottish Parliament will have all powers over support for unemployed people through the employment programmes currently contracted by DWP (which are presently delivered mainly, but not exclusively, through the Work Programme and Work Choice) on expiry of the current commercial arrangements.”

We must intervene early, and we must have the powers to do that so that we can effectively help people out of benefits and into work. Roseanna Cunningham, the Cabinet Secretary for Fair Work, Skills and Training, has said:

“The Work Programme as it stands is not fit for a modern Scotland but there may be aspects of the current system that do work for individuals and organizations and we want to hear those views too. Professor Alan McGregor and members of the advisory group will play a key role in drawing in views from all areas of the country in as many sectors as possible.”

The Scottish Government will have responsibility for the Work programme and the Work Choice programme within two years. They have set up an advisory group so that we can work on that.

The Smith commission's recommendations went further than the Scotland Bill's limitations on employment support, and the SNP wants to go further yet and devolve the Jobcentre Plus network in Scotland to Holyrood. That would deliver the complete and coherent devolution of welfare-to-work functions, ensuring co-ordinated support for those out of work. Having responsibility for universal credit sanctions and conditions would also empower the Scottish Parliament to ensure a more effective, supportive and socially just approach to getting people into work. With those powers in Scotland's hands, we could rectify the failings of the jobcentre network and the damaging changes to welfare and employment support that are harming so many in Scotland.

I want to finish by explaining why this subject is so close to my heart. I recently employed a young man called Marcus Woods who had worked passionately behind the scenes on my campaign. He had been out of work for some time and gave his time to my campaign free of charge, with great dignity and passion. I recently employed him full time. I am proud to have taken someone who had been on benefits and long-term unemployed out of unemployment and into work. I have seen with my own eyes how the opportunity to be involved in the democratic process in Scotland has inspired someone to come into full-time employment.

5.10 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Williams. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) on securing this debate.

Jobcentre Plus performs a crucial public service, and I put on record my thanks to the staff who are coping with immense changes to the welfare system. Many Jobcentre Plus staff are doing an excellent job in demanding circumstances and are dedicated to improving the lives of the people they serve. Nevertheless, as we have heard clearly this afternoon, there are undoubtedly concerns about service quality, claimant experience and outcomes. There are also questions about staff morale and whether Jobcentre Plus has the resources and capacity it needs.

The major reforms with which Jobcentre Plus staff are grappling—such as universal credit and Universal Jobmatch—have been beset by systems problems, resulting

[Kate Green]

in poor service to claimants and major delays. Although more people are moving into employment and Ministers like to claim that welfare reforms are the reason, people are not moving into work and out of poverty, and in any event there is considerable dispute about the contribution of welfare reforms to the rising employment rate.

Last year, the then Work and Pensions Committee carried out a review of Jobcentre Plus that looked at some of the major challenges it faces and how it is coping with them. The Committee made a number of suggestions for improvements, on which I hope the Minister will be able to update us today. Perhaps I can start with universal credit, which Ministers have claimed will transform the prospects of those who are out of work. The project is in total disarray. Today, some 65,000 people are on universal credit; when it was first introduced, we were told that 1 million people would be on it by April 2014. That is less than 1%—

Hywel Williams (in the Chair): Order. I am afraid that that is outwith the scope of the debate.

Kate Green: I accept your ruling on that, Mr Williams, but universal credit has of course been argued to be the tool by which Jobcentre Plus will be able to move people into employment. Clearly, if the universal credit programme is way behind in the number of claimants it is supporting, it cannot be fulfilling its function and Jobcentre Plus cannot be taking advantage of it in order to move people into work. The problem with universal credit is that it is shrouded in secrecy. We have not seen the business case that would show us whether it is indeed going to be an effective tool for Jobcentre Plus staff to use to fulfil their role of supporting people into work.

My right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) has recently written to the Secretary of State with some questions, and I want to ask the Minister the same ones. Will she ask the National Audit Office to publish quarterly progress reports on universal credit, to be laid before Parliament, and will she publish the full business case and plan? Will she also explain how Jobcentre Plus staff are being supported with the roll-out of universal credit?

As we have heard, Jobcentre Plus has the important role of supporting people into employment and, if they are further from the labour market—perhaps they have been out of work for a long time—routing them on to more specialist support programmes. There are a whole range of interventions under the “Get Britain Working” banner, and for the long-term unemployed there is the opportunity to be routed on to the Work programme or, for some disabled people, the Work Choice programme. My hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn was right to observe that those programmes have not often performed well for jobseekers and those experiencing long-term or youth unemployment—particularly long-term youth unemployment.

That is why Labour proposed a compulsory jobs guarantee so that every young person who was unemployed for more than a year would be guaranteed a job, education or training, or the opportunity to undertake proper work experience. That would be modelled on the future

jobs fund that we introduced in 2008, or the more successful programme in Wales, which, as my hon. Friend highlighted, draws on factors that make for a successful labour market programme: it is commissioned locally; it involves local authorities, specialist local organisations and, crucially, local employers; and it is designed around the needs of the local labour market.

Hannah Bardell: The hon. Lady mentions working together and programmes that have worked both throughout the UK and in devolved areas; will she join me in welcoming the Scottish Government’s Opportunities for All scheme? The Scottish Government have worked with local authorities, and it has been a huge success, with more than 90% of young people going on to positive destinations. In my own county, West Lothian, that proportion is over 96%. Perhaps, with the Minister, we can have cross-party discussions on the potential to incorporate the various programmes that have been mentioned today into Jobcentre Plus in the short term. That way, we could see how to achieve future success.

Kate Green: I note what the hon. Lady says. She highlights the importance of devolving to a local footprint—although perhaps not to one as small as a local authority area in all cases—that can properly recognise the players in and needs of the local labour market. She is right that Ministers should be working with all authorities, local, regional and national, as well as with Members, to look at which programmes have been successful and what can be learned. It is clear that for many people the Work programme has not been successful.

Last year’s Work and Pensions Committee report on Jobcentre Plus highlighted some significant difficulties with expertise in the needs of people who experience worklessness. It highlighted a particular lack of experience in relation to lone parents, and the need for related training. I hope that the Minister will be able to update us on that. Will she also tell us what is happening with lone parent flexibilities? How are Jobcentre Plus staff applying them?

Will the Minister say something about the disabled people who are being routed by Jobcentre Plus on to the Work Choice programme? The programme was intended for the most severely disabled people who are furthest from the labour market, but increasingly it seems to be used for those who are likely to be able to get into work quite quickly and easily. Mencap in Trafford told me recently that as a Work Choice contractor, it was being measured on getting people work-ready within 13 weeks, and that it was unable to get outcome payments for those with whom it would need to work for a much longer period.

The Select Committee also raised doubts about the flexible support fund. The workings of that fund, referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Christina Rees), are opaque. We cannot see what the money is being spent on and we cannot see who is receiving it. Will the Minister say, for example, whether it is being used to help lone parents with childcare costs? Will she begin to make proper information available to Parliament about the use of the flexible support fund?

My right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) identified problems with Universal Jobmatch in 2014. He highlighted duplicate jobs, fraudulent scams and posts advertising jobs at the other end of the

country. The Select Committee highlighted an overemphasis on Universal Jobmatch as a tool to monitor compliance with conditionality, which it said should be secondary to helping claimants find a job, with Universal Jobmatch enabling more time to be spent on advice and support.

What help is being offered to jobseekers and employers to make the best use of Universal Jobmatch? Can the Minister say that scams and duplicates have now been eliminated and that claimants are not being penalised if they do not apply for jobs that are unsuitable or miles away? Do the Government intend to continue with Universal Jobmatch when the contract is up for renewal next year?

My hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn and a number of other hon. Members mentioned conditionality and sanctions at Jobcentre Plus, which are an area of big concern. Labour Members are not against a conditional system for benefits, nor are we against sanctions that are fair, proportionate and transparent, or come with appropriate safeguards. Rates of sanctioning, however, remain high. Ministers were caught out only this week by the UK Statistics Authority in a letter to Jonathan Portes of the National Institute of Economic and Social Research, accusing them of presenting figures in a way that is not supported by rigorous statistical analysis.

We have repeated anecdotal reports of irrational and unreasonable decisions. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that Jobcentre Plus is measured on getting people not only into sustained employment, but off flow—so sanctioning people and driving them to cease claiming benefits altogether, because to do so is too difficult and awkward. As a result, we are measuring the wrong thing. I strongly support last year's call by the Select Committee to move from a measure of those going off flow to one of sustained employment.

Everything points to an oppressive culture. We still have reports of informal sanctioning targets in some Jobcentre Plus offices, which Labour is absolutely opposed to. I hope that the Minister will be clear today and deny the existence of all targets, formal or informal, once and for all, across the whole network, or say that she will be taking steps to stamp them out.

Jobcentre Plus has a vital role in supporting people to look for work, find work and get the financial support that they need. For many years it performed extremely effectively, but now it is under huge pressure and is fraying at the seams. I am interested to hear from the Minister her vision for the future of Jobcentre Plus—for the claimants and its staff. At present it is translating into a poor experience for too many claimants and poor value for money when it fails to get people into sustained work.

5.31 pm

The Minister for Employment (Priti Patel): I congratulate the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) on securing the debate and I pay tribute to many of his remarks. He rightly stated that Jobcentre Plus is important and nothing to do with left or right on the political spectrum. The debate is about people; it should not be about structures or institutions, although I will come on to speak about the jobcentres and various programmes and partnerships.

Importantly, the debate is about many of the bigger societal issues to do with unemployment and about the challenges that we face as a society in all our communities,

given what unemployment and the spiral of worklessness mean for individuals and families. That was the focus of our welfare reforms in the previous Parliament under my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, as it will be of this Government's agenda. We are on the side of working families and individuals, and we aspire to achieve full employment and, rightly, to do more to support those individuals who are furthest away from the labour market. Those are the individuals on whom we must concentrate Government resources, to help and train them and to secure real opportunities for them.

I thank everyone who has contributed to this important debate, which has covered a range of significant employment issues, including support to help people in work. In my view, work helps to transform people's lives, which is about the wider world consisting of individuals as well as of society.

Jobcentre Plus, however, is the core theme of today's debate. Labour Members will not be surprised that I will categorically disagree with claims that Jobcentre Plus is not fit for purpose. Like the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), I pay tribute to everyone who works in our jobcentres and in Jobcentre Plus. Every day up and down the country our advisers work with individuals, local authorities and local organisations in the community to support and help people not only to come off benefits in the long term, but—importantly—to get access to the labour market. We want to help them on the journey to secure long-term employment.

Every day our work coaches conduct nearly 100,000 interviews across a network of more than 7,000 jobcentres. They work closely with local employers—as is right and proper—which I have seen for myself in my constituency. If I remember rightly, back in 2010 in Witham, I too was almost critical, because my perception was that jobcentres did not have enough of a locus in the local employment market and were not making enough connections with local employers. That has now changed, and I have seen that for myself in the jobcentres I have visited. I can speak with some conviction about the Witham jobcentre, which now works with local employers.

Importantly, our jobcentres and work coaches have a clear understanding of the local labour market. They know where the skills shortages are and who the training providers in their community are. They provide the guiding role to support claimants who come to them in search of local employment opportunities. Therefore, I take issue with the overall assertion that Jobcentre Plus is not fit for purpose. It is doing a good job and we should pause for a minute and recognise that we now have one of the highest employment rates in the developed world and the second lowest unemployment in the European Union. That has been achieved through our network of jobcentres, obviously, but also through rightly focusing on support and assistance to people who need that to access the labour market. That has been achieved, yes, through the wider economic reforms of the Government, but also by creating the right economic conditions for businesses to grow and thrive. It is important for sustainable businesses to employ people, to sustain employment and to invest in people, jobs and economic growth. Jobcentre Plus also has a vital role in all our local communities.

Hannah Bardell: I am sure that everyone in the Chamber and across the political divide pays tribute to the work of people in the jobcentres. However, we are discussing their expertise and increasing their powers, as the Minister rightly said. What is her response to my example of twice the number of people in the Work programme being sanctioned as are actually getting work through it? Surely that statistic suggests that such programmes are not working.

Priti Patel: We touched on this during debate on the Scotland Bill last week and I told the hon. Lady that if she wants to bring me the evidence of such cases, I will look into them myself. I have also said that to her party colleagues—bring me the cases and I will intervene personally, look into them in more detail and see what can be done. I want to come on to the Work programme as well.

Hannah Bardell: I thank the Minister for that commitment.

Priti Patel: It is important. We want to ensure that we are doing the right thing for individuals and supporting them, because the issue is not only one of institutions, processes and structures, although they are there for a reason.

I will highlight a couple of points about Jobcentre Plus. There has been some criticism of it, but the National Audit Office reported that it responded well to the challenge of the recession from 2008 onwards and the recovery. The OECD stated:

“The UK experience suggests that merging the public employment service and benefit agency has improved employment outcomes”.

Furthermore, Jobcentre Plus has added £5.5 billion to UK GDP since its introduction. In the previous Parliament, the Work and Pensions Committee commented that Jobcentre Plus has performed “effectively” and “is cost-effective”. Last year, Jobcentre Plus achieved or exceeded every one of its labour market performance measures. That is important.

Jobcentre Plus is a high-volume national organisation, and so not every experience will be perfect. That is a fact of life with such an organisation—not everything will be right. We monitor performance and have service standards, but more can always be done to improve quality and professionalism. We are conscious of how we can improve services, and improvements are based on feedback that we receive. I experience that personally when I visit jobcentres.

I turn now to the issue of partnership. The Government cannot achieve our objectives on employment on our own. We can do so only by working in partnership with others in the private and voluntary sectors, at national, regional and local levels. I have touched briefly on my own experiences going out and about to jobcentres, and I have seen that partnership work in action. I know about the partnership work taking place in the constituency of the hon. Member for Islwyn—we see it in case studies and he will be fully aware of it—and I pay tribute to all the community-based and local organisations in his constituency. One is Groundwork’s Routes 2 Life, which provides work experience and skills training for over-50s—again, this issue does not just affect young people but runs across the age range. It is relevant to the fuller working lives agenda, as well as how we can

support those young people who may face challenges when trying to get a foot in the labour market because they do not have the right work experience or CV. Borough councils are involved as well. Across Wales, there are plenty of great examples of partnership, and they should be developed further.

Importantly—this is always a challenge for central Government in my view—this is a question of integration: how we join up working, and how that joined-up approach delivers results. We need the right outcomes, not just for the structures and systems but for individuals. I am also clear that I want more local authorities, in particular, to work more closely with voluntary sector, charity and other community and labour market partners.

On a national level, there is much more integration. Following the general election, my party has committed to achieving full employment, with more focus on young people getting the support they need. We have also made a commitment to help more women get work and to support more individuals with disabilities getting into work. We can do that only by working across Government. That is right and proper, and we will use every lever at the disposal of central Government to integrate our services and support everyone across the age range, as well as young people and people with disability or health issues.

On devolution, there is, for example, the Manchester devolution deal for the combined authority. Projects in central London are working with local authorities, and—together with Glasgow City Council—we will launch a programme to support employment and support allowance claimants in finding and remaining in employment. That is the right way forward. We should devolve to our communities, and the Government support that agenda.

I am pleased to say that there is greater partnership integration with the Work programme, including getting people access to apprenticeship opportunities, and there is more to do on that. We want a more constructive joint-working approach to ensure that, for example, claimants in Wales are able to access the full range of support that they need. That includes projects funded through the European social fund, which are targeted at particular disadvantaged communities; naturally, we want to do more to support them.

The Work programme aims to support claimants at risk of long-term unemployment. It has been successful and, to date, has supported over 400,000 long-term unemployed people in getting back into work. As a result, we have been able to get more people back into work and support people through very challenging circumstances.

Kate Green: The Work programme has been improving after a shaky start, but it is still not performing well for disabled people. Will the Minister tell us how she intends to improve performance for disabled people and answer my question about the role of the Work Choice programme in that?

Priti Patel: Absolutely. I will. My point is that the Work programme has been successful—it has been one of the most successful employment programmes in the United Kingdom’s history. At the end of the day, that should be welcomed and supported by all of us.

The Government are clear that we want to support more individuals with disability into work. A lot of work is being done with Work programme contractors and providers to concentrate more resources and investment in that area. If I may just share an anecdote, last week I sat down with Work programme providers to look at what has been working and some of the successes and strengths of the Work programme, and how we can address some of the real challenges for individuals with disabilities. That is the right thing to do, and we should all be focusing on that. We should also look at what support and interventions we can put in place not just for individuals with disability but for other individuals who are further away from the labour market—for example, those with health conditions.

Richard Graham: Am I right in thinking that there will at some point, probably before the end of the year, be a review of some of the criteria for selection for

contractors for the Work programme? I believe that the current contracts come to an end at the beginning of 2017, so there is an opportunity for all Members—and for Select Committees, all-party groups, and so on—to chip in ideas for the Government to consider over the next few months.

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is right. We can never stand still on this issue and it is important that we learn the lessons as we go forward. On that basis, I would welcome Members' views.

To conclude, Mr Williams—

Hywel Williams (in the Chair): Order.

5.46 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

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