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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Monday 12 October 2015

HER MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SIXTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 18 MAY 2015]

SIXTY-FOURTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 600

FIFTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2015-2016

House of Commons

Monday 12 October 2015

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: I am sure the House will wish to join me in mourning the passing, since the House last sat, of two distinguished former Members of this place: Lord Healey of Riddlesden in the County of West Yorkshire, and Lord Howe of Aberavon. By any yardstick, and without any doubt, both those individuals were outstanding parliamentarians, and people who served their constituents, their parties and their country with unwavering loyalty and distinction. Intellectually and politically formidable, they will be greatly missed. They both had impressive hinterlands, and the House will wish to join me in extending condolences to their families and friends.

Today at Home Office questions we must manage without the Minister for Security, who graciously informed me in advance that he is absent on important parliamentary and Government business in Japan. We shall endeavour to bear up under the burden of his absence.

Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Police Funding Formula

1. **Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): What modelling has been conducted by her Department on the potential effect on individual police forces proposed changes to the police funding formula. [901481]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): How funding should be allocated to the police in future is a complex and important matter, and we conducted a detailed analytical review before launching a public consultation on reform of the current funding arrangements. We have considered carefully the responses received from that consultation, and my right hon. Friend the Policing Minister has written to all police and crime commissioners and chief constables with refinements to the proposed model in the light of the feedback received.

Nick Smith: In 2013-14, just 22% of the 7.3 million emergency and priority incidents that the police responded to were crime-related. The police are being asked to shoulder the workload caused by cuts in other Departments, and the Public Accounts Committee has stated that the Home Office has no data about that added burden. How will the Home Office work with other Departments to ensure that the impact of spending decisions is not borne wholly by the police service?

Mrs May: The Home Office is already working with other Departments to ensure that, if matters are better the responsibility of other Departments, those other Departments take them on board. A good example is what we have been doing for people with mental health needs. We have worked with the Department of Health, and it has provided funding to ensure more places of safety that are not police cells. We have significantly reduced the use of police cells for those in mental health crisis or with mental health problems. As a result resources have been released for the police and, crucially, there are much better outcomes for people with mental health problems and issues.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is important for police forces to spend their money effectively, and that the police innovation fund helps them to do that? Does she share my delight that Kent police have decided to issue every front-line officer with a body-worn camera that increases the effectiveness of police patrolling, as well as helping to keep officers safe?

Mrs May: My right hon. Friend makes a good point, and I commend him for the work on the innovation fund that he did when he was Policing Minister. This is an important development and he is right to welcome and commend Kent police for what they are doing with body-worn video cameras. That is an important step forward. We are also looking at the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 to ensure that every part of the system can support the use of evidence from body-worn video cameras. I am sure the whole House recognises that that important step forward is of benefit to the police but also to victims.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): Chief Constable Steve Finnigan of Lancashire police recently described the cuts to policing as “nothing short of madness”. Although I welcome the Government’s decision to consult on the funding formula, and the Policing Minister’s ability to engage with local forces, under the proposed model a constabulary such as Leicestershire could lose up to £700,000 a year, while others would gain. Does the Home Secretary agree that it is time to make the case to the Chancellor that the Home Office should be a protected Department because it deals with the security and safety of the British public?

Mrs May: I am interested in the right hon. Gentleman’s question. In his capacity as Chair of the Home Affairs Committee he has previously questioned the funding formula for policing, and indicated that an alternative formula might be a better way forward. That is what we are doing; we are trying to find a formula that will work across police forces, and that is why we held and responded to a public consultation. As I said earlier, my right hon. Friend the Policing Minister has written to police and crime commissioners and chief constables with a revision of that formula, and he will discuss the matter with them.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Northamptonshire police have been particularly innovative in finding joint operational and cost-saving initiatives with the local fire service, but it faces a particular challenge involving violent crime. How might those two important factors be factored into the new police funding formula?

Mrs May: I welcome my hon. Friend’s comments on Northamptonshire police, who have indeed been very innovative. They have been at the forefront of work to join together the police force and the fire authority to ensure savings and a better service for the people of the county of Northamptonshire. We are trying to adopt a funding formula that is simpler than the previous one, that is fair across the board and that people can look at and understand; a funding formula where people can appreciate why the elements are in there. That cannot be said of the current funding formula.

Police and Crime Commissioners

2. **Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of police and crime commissioners. [901482]

5. **Sir Simon Burns** (Chelmsford) (Con): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of police and crime commissioners. [901485]

11. **Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of police and crime commissioners. [901491]

The Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice (Mike Penning): Elected police and crime commissioners provide accountable and visible leadership, which I hear the whole House now supports. PCCs are an excellent body taking the lead role, as we have just heard, in driving collaboration between forces and other emergency services to deliver more effective services and better value for money.

Daniel Kawczynski: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. In West Mercia, the main advantages of having commissioners are accountability and transparency, which local people very much appreciate. We have just selected our new Conservative candidate, Mr Campion, who, if elected, will do an excellent job. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that he will continue to look at ways to devolve power and responsibility to police and crime commissioners, as this experiment is working?

Mike Penning: My hon. Friend raises a very important point and I wish Mr Campion well in his bid to represent his community as a PCC. We will soon be introducing legislation that will allow more collaboration and more help to be brought to the police, fire and ambulance services—that is the sort of thing we would expect.

Sir Simon Burns: Will my right hon. Friend enable PCCs to follow up complaints about policing made by the people they serve?

Mike Penning: That is exactly what we would like them to be doing. All too often, complaints go all the way through the system when they could actually be dealt with locally.

Huw Merriman: Rother District Council is one of only 17 remaining local authorities that have not decriminalised on-street parking offences, meaning that the Sussex police and crime commissioner is required to provide police resources to ticket cars that stay longer than two hours in a bay. Will the Minister consider freeing up police resources by requiring those remaining local authorities that enforce in their own car parks to additionally enforce on-street parking?

Mike Penning: Although this is a matter for the local government department, I want as much capability as possible on the streets in every constituency. I do not think issuing parking tickets is a role for a police officer.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is anticipated that Government cuts to Merseyside police could reach £27 million next year. This has been brought to my notice by the police and crime commissioner for Merseyside. Police community support officers and the mounted police section are under threat of disappearing altogether. Teams tackling sex offences, hate crimes and serious and organised crime are also likely to be seriously affected. Does the Minister share my concern about the impact the cuts could have on crime rates?

Mike Penning: Can I first say to the hon. Lady that my thoughts and prayers are with the family of the police officer lost on Merseyside? I had the honour and privilege of going to Merseyside to pay my own respects, as well as meeting with officers.

I fully understand different PCCs trying to negotiate a position, but scaremongering is not the best way forward. I will come back with further ideas—that is what the consultation is all about, and that is what I promised I would do when I started it.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The turnout in north Wales for the police and crime commissioner elections last time was 14.83%, which under the Trade Union Bill would make them null and void. Will the Minister look at how he can improve turnout, perhaps by considering again what he refused to do last time—a freepost in all PCC elections?

Mike Penning: I have a great deal of respect for the right hon. Gentleman and his work in his role as a Minister, but we did that during the west midlands by-election and it made absolutely no difference to the turnout. What will make a difference to the turnout, without any shadow of a doubt, is having that coincide with other elections, which is what is going to happen this time. I am really pleased that the Labour Opposition now realise the work that PCCs do and are now supporting them, rather than trying to abolish them.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I echo what the Minister said about the tragedy in Merseyside last week, but I disagree profoundly with his description of Jane Kennedy's comments as "scaremongering". The impact on Merseyside of the proposed changes to the police grant will be very damaging. Will he meet her and Merseyside Members to discuss the matter?

Mike Penning: I will meet again with Jane Kennedy. She knows my door and has my personal phone number and personal email, as do all the PCCs—I made sure of that from day one. I am saying that no one knows exactly what we will end up with in the formula. We have consulted and said it would change. We have come back with other ideas. I expect other ideas to come back. No one knows the numbers. No one knows the size of the cuts, so let us wait and see. As I said, the consultation continues.

25. [901505] **Amanda Milling** (Cannock Chase) (Con): I recently joined Staffordshire's police and crime commissioner and other local MPs to call for greater integration of the back-office functions of our police and fire services. That option was presented to avoid front-line fire services being cut, but we have now seen fire engines removed from both Cannock and Rugeley stations. What are the Government doing to encourage police and fire authorities to share back-office services?

Mike Penning: We are already seeing around the country the sort of innovations my hon. Friend talks about, and I have no idea why they are not doing it in that part of the world. It is common sense to break down silos and get the emergency services working together to secure more money for the front line. It is what we would all expect.

Sub-Saharan Africa: Visa Applications

3. **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the visa application process for visitors from sub-Saharan Africa. [901483]

The Minister for Immigration (James Brokenshire): The Government regularly monitor the effectiveness of the visa application process in sub-Saharan Africa as part of their monitoring of the global visa service. We are committed to the UK benefiting from a safe and secure visa service while providing a first-class operation to genuine visitors.

Patrick Grady: Next month marks 10 years of formal co-operation between the Governments of Scotland and Malawi, but I have heard from the Scotland Malawi Partnership that Malawian nationals are finding it increasingly difficult to apply for visas, making strengthening community links more difficult. Given that the partnership has told me that every part of the system seems to be becoming about charging more and delivering less, will the Minister meet me and representatives from the partnership to discuss these concerns in more detail?

James Brokenshire: I am always pleased to meet hon. Members to discuss the work of the Scotland Malawi Partnership, and I fully recognise the close bonds and ties that have existed for many years. Our focus is on delivering a high-quality service, and I am pleased to note that about 86% of applications from Malawi are successful. We are considering closely how we can improve the service further, however, and I am certainly happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss the issues on his and the partnership's mind.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The Mayor of Calais has a point, does he not, about there being a unique pull factor—[HON. MEMBERS: "She!"] I do apologise. I am sure she is a most impressive lady and a friend of our nation. Anyway, she has a point about there being a unique pull factor in the benefits we pay, how we deal with discretionary leave to remain and the fact that people can vanish into the black economy. Rather than just concentrating on visa applications, therefore, will the Minister undertake to remove all these pull factors into this country?

James Brokenshire: I think my hon. Friend, in his own distinct way, has highlighted the important distinction between legal and illegal migration and the challenges we have faced in terms of migratory flows and those putting their lives at risk on the Mediterranean sea and in the hands of people traffickers. We are examining all options, as part of the Government's comprehensive stance, and focusing in particular on those people traffickers and smugglers selling people false hope and putting their lives at risk.

High-Profile Policing

4. **Mr Nigel Evans** (Ribble Valley) (Con): What guidance she has issued to police forces on high-profile policing. [901484]

The Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice (Mike Penning): Naturally, the Government do not issue specific guidelines for police forces on high-profile policing. The College of Policing sets the standards for professional practice to support police forces and other organisations so that the public are protected.

Mr Evans: I have been going to Conservative party conferences for more than 30 years. [HON. MEMBERS: “No!] They’re only jealous. The policing at these conferences has always been high profile, but this was the first one where I have witnessed those working in hotels and the conference centre, as well as delegates, having to run a gauntlet of demonstrators shouting vile abuse at people—tantamount to hate crimes—spitting and throwing eggs. The police response was totally inadequate. What conversations will the Minister have with the police chief for Manchester, and what action can be taken in future to ensure that those attending conferences can do so safely?

Mike Penning: I think we would all agree that people attending any party political conference or people working there should not need to go through the type of abuse that took place there. This is a matter for the Metropolitan—I mean the Greater Manchester police; it is usually a matter for the Metropolitan police—and, to be fair, I have already had conversations about this issue. A review is going to take place, and I believe that the Conservative party will be having consultations, too.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): May I say that Labour Members share the disgust of the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans) for what was seen to happen there, which does not have any place in legitimate protest? Those involved in no way spoke for anyone on the Opposition Benches.

High-profile policing is incredibly important in Chesterfield, and the Minister will be as alarmed as I was to learn that there has recently been a significant increase in the number of burglaries in Chesterfield and Derbyshire. Will he listen to representations from the police and crime commissioner about the real pressure on our police force and will he help the police and the police and crime commissioner to cut burglaries in Chesterfield?

Mike Penning: Of course I will work closely with the police and crime commissioner and chief constables in the 43 authorities for which I have responsibility. As for the conference itself, the vast majority of police officers did a fantastic job. It was often decisions made above them that told them what they had to do. I am naturally concerned if there has been an increase, which is against the national trend: crime has continued to fall under this Government.

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): If the Conservative party conference is to return to Blackpool one day, it is absolutely key to get the Lancashire police funding formula right. Increasing concern has been expressed this weekend among Lancashire MPs of all parties, so I would be grateful if the Minister would meet me and other Lancashire Members to discuss the police funding settlement.

Mike Penning: I thought it was you, Mr Speaker, in your days on the Back Benches, who could manage to get such a question in. It was very cleverly done by my hon. Friend, and I will naturally meet any delegation from any party to talk about police funding.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): What a difference 30 years makes. Thirty years ago, we were talking about the police being harnessed by a previous Tory Government to close down the pits, sack the miners and carry out ethnic cleansing of the pit villages. Now we are told by the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans) that they are starting to get worked up about the cuts in pay and cuts in police forces. You want to be careful what you wish for.

Mike Penning: I wish there was a question there.

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): I know that policing is devolved and that we have an extremely professional and able police force in Northern Ireland, but when considering high-profile policing and looking at the other end where cuts are coming through in Northern Ireland and there are fewer police on the ground, is the Minister aware that that means that the paramilitaries and those working in crime will see their opportunities? Will he discuss how to tackle that problem better?

Mike Penning: With all due respect to the hon. Gentleman, this is a devolved matter, and as the former Minister of State with responsibility for Northern Ireland, I know just how devolved it really is, which is right and proper. The National Crime Agency currently operates in Northern Ireland, but this is a devolved matter, so it is something the hon. Gentleman needs to take up with David Ford.

Police and Security Services: Investigatory Powers

6. **Mark Spencer** (Sherwood) (Con): What changes she plans to make to the investigatory powers of the police and security services. [901486]

18. **Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): What changes she plans to make to the investigatory powers of the police and security services. [901498]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): The Government have been clear about the need to provide law enforcement and security and intelligence agencies with the powers they need to protect the public. A draft investigatory powers Bill will be published this autumn for pre-legislative scrutiny by a Joint Committee of both Houses of Parliament.

Mark Spencer: I thank the Home Secretary for that answer. I wonder whether she recognises the growth in internet-based communication systems, such as WhatsApp, Snapchat and many others, of which terrorists might be making use. Will she consider taking powers to support the security services in tracking relevant individuals who might want to do us harm?

Mrs May: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. New services are obviously being developed. The law makes it very clear that any communications service provider offering a service in the United Kingdom should be in a position to respond to a warrant when it has been decided that there should be access to intercept material on the basis that it is necessary and proportionate.

That was made clear by the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000, and we put it beyond doubt in the Data Retention and Investigatory Powers Act 2014.

Alex Chalk: Does the Home Secretary agree that it is incumbent on organisations such as WhatsApp and Snapchat, which routinely encrypt messages, to co-operate with the authorities to ensure that those who may do us harm are prevented from doing so?

Mrs May: I assure my hon. Friend, and my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer), that we want to ensure that our law enforcement and security and intelligence agencies have the powers that are necessary to keep us safe. They do an excellent job, but it is our role, here in Parliament, to ensure that they have the legislative backing to enable them to do it. I believe, and the Government believe, that there should be no safe space for terrorists, criminals or paedophiles on the internet.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): In the light of the High Court ruling in July, may I ask the Home Secretary whether she will now do what should have been done in the first place, and ensure that access to our private data is authorised by a genuinely independent body or a court?

Mrs May: The hon. Gentleman will be well aware that each of the three reviews of the powers and legislation relating to interception of communications and access to communications data came up with a different answer in respect of the authorisation process for access to intercept material. David Anderson suggested that there should be a judicial authorisation, the Royal United Services Institute suggested that there could be a hybrid, and the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament suggested that the authorisation should remain with the Secretary of State. We have been considering the matter very carefully, and, as I have said, a draft Bill will be published in due course.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): Will the Home Secretary tell us which is more important to the Government, national security or accountability, truth and justice for victims?

Mrs May: All those things are important, and I do not see that it is necessary to draw a distinction between them.

Hate Speech

7. **Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to tackle hate speech. [901487]

17. **Kwasi Kwarteng** (Spelthorne) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to tackle hate speech. [901497]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Karen Bradley): No one in this country should live in fear because of who they are. We have made progress in tackling hate crime, but we are determined to do more, including challenging those who spread extremist messages and seek to divide our society. We will therefore develop a new hate crime

action plan, working in partnership with communities and across Government to ensure that we have strong measures to stop these deplorable crimes.

Fiona Bruce: Can my right hon. Friend reassure me that in tackling hate speech, the Government will continue to protect and cherish freedom of speech in this country, and, in particular, that Christian Ministers need have nothing to fear when preaching biblical principles in their own pulpits, as their predecessors have done for more than 1,000 years?

Karen Bradley: I assure my hon. Friend, who campaigns so much for the protection of religious freedoms, that we value the role of faith in society, and will protect everyone's right to practise their faith. Freedom of speech is a fundamental value that binds our society together, and we will always protect that right. Nothing that we are doing, or planning to do, to tackle hate crime and extremism will stop the United Kingdom's long tradition of preaching.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I am very grateful for the Minister's answer. Will she assure the House that nothing in legislation will undermine not just Christianity, but people who preach other faiths?

Karen Bradley: I assure my hon. Friend that we are doing nothing in legislation that will prevent the right to believe, and the right to practise and preach. What we are doing is focusing on people who seek to use religious texts as an excuse to promote hatred and extremism. That is what we want to stop.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Does the Minister agree that the Secretary of State's speech to the Conservative party conference could itself be defined as hate speech, and that it did nothing for her bid for the leadership of the Conservative party and everything for a potential bid for the leadership of UKIP?

Karen Bradley: I can give a one-word answer: no.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): Is the Minister aware of the current case of Pastor James McConnell in Belfast, who is being prosecuted for a sermon he delivered in his church to his congregation, and does the Minister accept that, with all the best will in the world, it is ordinary, decent citizens who are fearful of stepping over a line who will be prosecuted and persecuted under the crime of hate speech, and not those paramilitaries and terrorists we need to focus on?

Mr Speaker: Order. I listened intently to what the hon. Gentleman said and from the phraseology he used it seems that a prosecution is currently under way. If that is so, the sub judice rule applies and therefore a degree of caution in the ministerial response would be prudent.

Karen Bradley: Thank you, Mr Speaker; you took the words out of my mouth. I clearly cannot comment on that matter, but I do want to assure the hon. Gentleman that using religious texts as an excuse for hatred and as a reason to incite hatred is not acceptable and we will not stand for it.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Last week the Women and Equalities Committee visited Oldham, Manchester and Birmingham and heard from a number of local organisations about their continuing concern about hate crime, and particularly hate speech. I know the Government take this issue very seriously. Can the Minister update the House on the progress they are making in terms of the reporting of hate crime, which is clearly still a considerable concern in many communities?

Karen Bradley: I thank my right hon. Friend for that question. We met last week and discussed some aspects of this. We are looking at the feasibility of the reporting of hate crime and will be making a decision shortly.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Balancing freedom of speech with the need to ensure we have a strong, diverse and cohesive society is a challenge for any Government, but what practical funding does the Home Office offer to support communities like mine that want to run initiatives to bring diverse communities together and promote that more cohesive society?

Karen Bradley: As I just said, we are looking to introduce a new hate crime action plan and we are looking at all the ways we can support those local communities who want to work actively to promote community cohesion and our shared values.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): The Government want universities to ban speakers who say things that do not break the law but which do promote hatred or violence. Can the Minister give one clear example of a statement made in a UK university which should now be banned?

Karen Bradley: I welcome the shadow Minister to her place and look forward to working with her. I think she will agree that this is about how we protect our shared values and how we make sure we work together and keep our citizens safe. I hope she will work with the Government to make sure we do that.

Domestic Violence

8. **Dr Lisa Cameron** (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): What steps she is taking to tackle domestic violence. [R] [901488]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Karen Bradley): Tackling domestic violence is a key priority for this Government. We have created a new offence of domestic abuse, we are making improvements to the police response and this year provided over £20 million to fund specialist domestic and sexual violence services, national helplines and refuges.

Dr Cameron: What steps will the Minister take to improve the witness testimony experience of survivors of domestic abuse through special measures, which may increase reporting and conviction rates?

Karen Bradley: We are looking through the refreshing work we are doing in our whole violence against women and girls strategy and we are considering how we can make sure the victim experience is such that victims are

treated with the dignity and respect they need. We are working with the Ministry of Justice to make sure that happens.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that forced marriage is a particularly iniquitous and hidden form of domestic violence that is going on in this country at the moment, and will she look at funding for the forced marriage unit, which is doing excellent work in the Foreign Office to try and protect young British girls from being married off against their wishes?

Karen Bradley: I have visited the FMU, which is a joint Home Office and Foreign Office unit. It does excellent work and I know that its outreach programme is getting to those girls who may be victims of forced marriage and making sure this does not happen.

23. [901503] **Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Does the Minister support the HeForShe campaign which many world leaders have signed up to as impact champions, and will she encourage her own party colleagues, including the Prime Minister, to sign up to help end discrimination and violence towards women?

Karen Bradley: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. Could she perhaps provide more information about that campaign? We support many campaigns and I would like to find out more about that one.

Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): Will the Minister join me in supporting the work of citizens advice centres across the UK and their Talk about Abuse campaign, a national campaign to help friends and family members to support the victims of domestic abuse?

Karen Bradley: I attended the launch event of that excellent Citizens Advice campaign, which has already helped me with a case in my own constituency, in which I was able to refer someone to the citizens advice bureau to get the specialist and expert support that they needed.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): Reports of domestic and sexual violence are increasing across the country. However, in an attempt to deal with the relentless Government cuts, local authorities and the police are stopping specialist abuse support to victims and instead providing generic services or no services at all. Will the Minister commit to ensuring that everyone, regardless of gender, sexuality or ethnicity, feels safe and supported in their home?

Karen Bradley: I welcome the hon. Lady to her place on the Front Bench and I look forward to working with her. We have worked together on a number of previous campaigns and I know that she will be excellent in her new role. As I have said, the Home Office is refreshing its violence against women and girls strategy, and part of that involves looking at commissioning and local commissioning to ensure that those specialist services, which she rightly says victims need to get the support that they require, get the funding that they need.

Refugee Crisis

9. **Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): What progress the Government have made on their response to the refugee crisis. [901489]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Refugees (Richard Harrington): As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced on 7 September, the Government will expand existing resettlement schemes to resettle up to 20,000 Syrians in need of protection. In the past few weeks, we have established a cross-departmental operations centre for Syrian refugees, based in the Home Office, and we look forward to welcoming refugees in a well-organised way in the months and years to come.

Paul Blomfield: I thank the Minister for that reply, but one further practical step that the Government could take would be to expand the family reunion criteria, which, as he will know, are currently restricted to spouses and dependent children. Will the Government help to keep already traumatised families together by allowing elderly parents and other family members to find temporary protection in the UK, as the Refugee Council and the Red Cross have requested?

Richard Harrington: The family reunion scheme has been used successfully in the past, and it is still being used. In addition, we have the vulnerability criteria of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, which include vulnerable families.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Last week, I visited the jungle camp in Calais. It was clear that the fence and other security measures were making it very difficult for people to get to the UK, but conditions at the camp are desperate and getting worse. Will the Minister tell us what further actions the Government are planning to take in response to this situation?

Richard Harrington: The Government are working closely with the authorities in Calais to make sure that this does not happen.

16. [901496] **Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Oldham and many other areas are under incredible financial pressure at the moment, but we want to do our bit to support refugees. What practical and financial support will be provided by the Government beyond the single-year funding that is currently provided, and will any such support reflect the good practice set out in the UNHCR's gateway programme, which has shown the long-term benefits of financial front-loading?

Richard Harrington: As the hon. Lady will be aware, the year one costs are taken care of, to cover the cost of refugees coming to this country. The Government have looked carefully at covering years two to five, because we are conscious of the fact that local authorities will be incurring extra costs. In the letter that I wrote on 1 October to the chief executives of local councils, it was made clear that the Government would be assisting them with the extra costs incurred.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Does the Minister agree that it ought to be a high priority for the Government to crack down on human traffickers and people smugglers, who profit from the misery of others? What steps are the Government taking to crack down on this evil trade?

Richard Harrington: The Government are well aware of the point that my hon. Friend has made. I am pleased to report that I went to Portsmouth last Friday to visit the naval base to which the cutters run by Border Force returned when they came back from the Mediterranean. During their time in the Mediterranean they apprehended many people smugglers. It is the Government's policy to ensure, through the taskforce, that that will increase, because this is a serious problem.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Today, *The Times* and *The Guardian* have published a statement signed by more than 300 leading lawyers, including 12 retired judges, a former President of the Supreme Court, former Law Lords, 103 Queen's counsel and prominent academics, calling on the United Kingdom Government to take a

"fair and proportionate share of refugees, both those already within the EU and those still outside it."

They say that the UK's "present offer" to take 20,000 is "deeply inadequate". Does the Minister and his Home Secretary think they are wrong?

Richard Harrington: I listened to that interview carefully; the person concerned was asked what they did think was adequate and was not able to answer. I hope that listeners to the programme and people who have read this correspondence will be aware that this Government are doing a lot in the countries around Syria and our expenditure has so far been more than £1 billion to help people in the areas around Syria. In addition, we have our programme to help 20,000 of the most vulnerable refugees, which I am very proud of and want to see delivered very efficiently.

Joanna Cherry: If the Minister wishes to see the advert—I have a copy here—he will see that it was signed not by a person, but by 342 lawyers. Let me follow up with a second question. The Home Secretary suggested in her conference speech that she wanted to work with other countries

"to review the international legal definitions of asylum and refugee status."

Is she really wanting to dilute the international protection offered to those at real risk of serious harm or persecution?

Richard Harrington: My right hon. Friend made it clear in that speech that it was our intention to be able to deal with a lot of fraudulent applications for asylum, so that we can concentrate on those people who really need it. The hon. and learned Lady should be very proud of this Government taking 20,000 of the most vulnerable refugees over the course of this Parliament.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I join the Minister in commending the work of the cutters, HMC Protector and HMC Seeker, which this year have rescued 1,650 people and played a part in the apprehension of no fewer than 26 people traffickers.

Can he explain to the House why these cutters are being withdrawn from service at this time, given that we are clearly not seeing the drop off in the number of people coming across the Mediterranean that we have seen in previous years around about this time?

Richard Harrington: I am sure the right hon. Gentleman will be aware that the cutters' return to Portsmouth was part of their planned period in operation, which was agreed with the other countries. Other ships have taken over, and I know that we play a very significant part in the apprehension of people traffickers.

Innovation in Policing

10. **Lucy Allan** (Telford) (Con): What steps local police forces are taking to lead innovation in policing. [901490]

The Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice (Mike Penning): The 43 forces around the country are empowered to bring forward innovation and different ideas. The integrated public contract command and control system that West Mercia and Warwickshire police have developed with the Hereford and Worcester fire and rescue services is an example of that, and it was partly paid for by the police innovation fund.

Lucy Allan: I thank the Minister for his reply. My constituency is home to a business called SmartWater, which has pioneered forensic marking technology. This innovative technology helps the police to prevent and detect crime. Does he agree that a collaborative approach between the public and the police to encourage the marking of property could revolutionise policing in the UK?

Mike Penning: I am very aware that the Home Secretary visited my hon. Friend's constituency and this excellent company with her in 2013. In my constituency, SmartWater is particularly being used in rural areas to protect very valuable agricultural plant—this is about not only prevention, but tracking it after it has been stolen.

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): Innovation is, of course, to be welcomed, but many forces are finding it increasingly difficult to deliver even on core policing functions. According to the National Audit Office, Northumbria police force has already suffered the highest level of funding cuts in the country. On that basis, can local people really have any confidence that we will get a fair deal from Ministers this time around?

Mike Penning: In 2010, it was said that the cuts would be devastating, policing would suffer and crime would go up—it went down. We will look very carefully at the consultation. I stood at this Dispatch Box and promised that I would come back with different figures and so on, based on the consultation. That was a promise I gave the House and it is exactly what I have done, and I will continue to listen.

Crime Rate Trends

12. **Robert Jenrick** (Newark) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of trends in crime rates in England and Wales. [901492]

The Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice (Mike Penning): It will not be a surprise to hear that police reform is working. The independent Crime Survey shows that crime has dropped by nearly a quarter since 2010 with 150,000 fewer burglaries and almost 400,000 fewer violent crimes.

Robert Jenrick: This autumn, Nottinghamshire police, like many other forces, is rolling out body-worn cameras, which have a huge potential to reduce crime and to increase convictions. Will the Minister encourage the police and the Crown Prosecution Service to embrace that technology and the evidence it produces, particularly in difficult crimes against women such as domestic violence where powerful evidence from the scene of a crime or the aftermath could play a big role in increasing the currently quite poor rates of conviction?

Mike Penning: Domestic violence is one of the more difficult crimes to prosecute, not least because the victim very often changes their mind or does not want a prosecution to take place, but when they see the video evidence of what they look like when the police officers arrive, their confidence often grows, which means that we see more convictions going forward, so I completely agree with my hon. Friend.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): For the past five years, the Government have claimed that they have cut the police and cut crime. Now we know the truth: once fraud and online crime are included in the crime statistics next year, crime will have risen by up to 40%. Will the Home Secretary finally admit therefore that crime is not falling but changing, and that with the threat of terrorism, the demands of protecting our children and of growing violent and sexual crime, this is the worst possible time to cut another 23,000 police officers?

Mike Penning: This Government are not cutting 23,000 police officers, as the shadow Minister knows full well. Yet again I have to say that he is much better than his comments. We would be really happy—I would be really happy—if more people had the confidence to come forward and report domestic violence and those figures went up. I am sure that that would be welcome across the House. It is also right and proper that this Government, unlike the previous one, include fraud in the figures.

Settling of Refugees

13. **Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby) (Lab): What discussions she has had with local authorities on funding and other practical arrangements for the settling of refugees. [901493]

14. **Karl Turner** (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): What discussions she has had with local authorities on funding and other practical arrangements for the settling of refugees. [901494]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Refugees (Richard Harrington): The UK has established networks to accommodate and support resettled people. We know that an increase in numbers will require an expansion of current networks, so we are currently working with a wide range of partners including local authorities to ensure that people are integrated with sensitivity in local communities. In particular, we are working with local government operations to see how the funding for that will operate.

Melanie Onn: I thank the Minister for his response. The refugees who will be granted residence in Britain under the new scheme will be vulnerable victims of torture and sexual abuse and those with acute physical and mental medical needs. Contrary to what the Minister said in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), my local authority in north-east Lincolnshire is unclear about the extent of the extra support that will be provided to help adequately meet the needs of the most complex cases. Will the Minister confirm that, in addition to the funding of basic needs such as clothing and housing, consideration has been given to the funding of other services such as counselling, translation services and training?

Richard Harrington: I can happily confirm that that is the case. I pay tribute to Councillor Dave Green, the leader of Bradford council, for being one of the leaders in this area. I saw for myself how the things that the hon. Lady mentioned take place in Bradford, and those things will be greatly expanded.

Karl Turner: What is the Minister doing to extend the funding that local authorities are given to support refugees from one year to three years? The Minister will be aware that Hull city council has offered to support Syrian refugees and it was very keen to do so, but what are the Government doing to help us fund that work?

Richard Harrington: The hon. Gentleman will know that I have answered that question before. I have written to the chief executives of all the local councils explaining that we will help with funding for years two to five.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): May I touch on a different aspect of housing and migration? When sanctions were introduced for landlords renting to those disqualified by immigration status, it was agreed that there would be a pilot in the west midlands and that that pilot would be evaluated before its roll-out. An evaluation by the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants has shown widespread discrimination—up to 42%—against lawful migrants, those without British passports and those who appear to be foreign. In the light of those results, will the Secretary of State assure the House that the results of the Home Office evaluation will be published before the Second Reading tomorrow and that if similar patterns of discrimination are shown the roll-out will be abandoned?

Richard Harrington: I welcome the hon. and learned Gentleman to his role and look forward to our discussions in the future. I can confirm that the Government will publish the results of the consultation before the Committee stage of the Bill.

Topical Questions

T1. [901536] **James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con):** If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): I am sure that the thoughts of the whole House will be with the people of Turkey after the terrible attack that took place in Ankara at the weekend.

A week ago, in the small hours of the morning, Police Constable David Phillips was killed in the line of duty. PC Phillips' death serves as a terrible reminder of the real dangers that police officers face day in and day out as they put themselves in harm's way to deal with violent criminals and dangerous situations. The murder investigation is ongoing, Merseyside police have made arrests and I am sure that the whole House will agree on the importance of bringing his killers to justice.

Police officers put themselves in danger doing a vital job and it is important that we ensure that their families are looked after if the worst happens. As the law stands, widows, widowers and surviving civil partners of police officers who are members of the 1987 police pension scheme stand to lose their partner's pension if they remarry, form a civil partnership or cohabit. In recognition of the level of risk that police officers face in the execution of their duty, the Government have pledged to reform the 1987 police pension scheme—

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): Yes!

Mrs May: We will reform the scheme to ensure that the widows, widowers and civil partners of police officers who have died on duty do not have to choose between solitude and financial security. The Government will lay these regulations in the coming weeks and the change will be backdated until 1 April 2015.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Home Secretary has clearly brought great happiness to the right hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart), and that will be recorded in the *Official Report*. We are extremely grateful.

James Cleverly: I welcome the statement made by the Home Secretary, and I also welcomed the restatement in the Prime Minister's conference speech of his commitment to end the brutal practice of female genital mutilation among British citizens and those living in Britain. What steps are being made by the Home Department to ensure that those commitments become reality?

Mrs May: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. If you will indulge me, Mr Speaker, I suspect that this might be the first time I have stood at this Dispatch Box and said something that brings happiness to the right hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart), so the moment is historic and not just something to be recorded.

The Prime Minister has taken a particular interest in FGM and last year he co-chaired with UNICEF the girl summit, the first of its kind. At the time, we announced a number of steps that we would take on FGM. The Home Office has set up an FGM unit, focusing Government efforts in this area, and we have, for example, introduced the new protection orders, which we fast-tracked so that they were available in July and

could be used to protect girls who might have been taken abroad during summer school holidays for the practice of FGM.

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): On behalf of everybody on the Opposition Benches, may I echo the Home Secretary's tribute to Police Constable David Phillips, who died working to keep the people of Merseyside safe? I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in sending a message of condolence to his family and of gratitude for his service to the public.

Today, the former head of the Supreme Court, three Law Lords, a former Director of Public Prosecutions, five retired Court of Appeal judges, a president of the European Court of Human Rights and 100 QCs who represent the Government have described the Home Secretary's response to the refugee crisis as "deeply inadequate". Why does the Home Secretary think that she is right and all of them are wrong?

Mrs May: I have to say to the right hon. Gentleman that asking as his first question one that has already been asked by the Scottish National party spokesman might not be a route he wishes to go down in future. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Refugees has answered the question, but I will respond to the right hon. Gentleman.

This country and this Government can be proud of the efforts we are making to support refugees from the Syrian crisis. We have put £1.1 billion in for those in the refugee camps and in communities in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. We are the second biggest bilateral donor to the region and to those refugees after the United States of America. In addition, we have been operating our Syrian vulnerable persons resettlement scheme, which we are expanding so that the 20,000 Syrian refugees who are most vulnerable will be brought to the United Kingdom over the course of this Parliament.

Andy Burnham: Let me tell the Home Secretary why I repeated the question. Could not the public have legitimately expected the Home Secretary to answer a question about the biggest humanitarian crisis since the second world war? Her response reveals her fixed mind on this issue, which is simply not good enough because she is not responding to the unfolding nature of the crisis. Her position is flawed for one reason: she is trying, out of convenience, to draw a false distinction between refugees still in the region and those who have arrived in Europe, whom she describes as the wealthiest, fittest and strongest. I say to her: look at the TV pictures today; these people are not wealthy, fit or strong. They are desperate and they need our help. Is it not time to stop digging in, show some humanity and reach out a helping hand?

Mrs May: The question was rightly answered by my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Refugees—an appointment, I remind the House, that the Prime Minister made recently to ensure that there is a very clear focus on the job of making sure that the 20,000 Syrian refugees whom we bring to the United Kingdom are given accommodation and other types of support when they arrive here. As I said, the UK can be justifiably proud of the work that it is doing, and of the people whose lives it is keeping going through the provision of medical supplies, food and water in the refugee camps.

Through our scheme we are taking the most vulnerable—not those who have been able to reach the shores of Europe, but those who are not making that journey. I hope the right hon. Gentleman will send a very clear message that it is better for people not to try to make the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean and through other routes into Europe because sadly people are still dying doing so.

T3. [901538] **Simon Hoare** (North Dorset) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that most goods vehicles coming into the United Kingdom are operated by overseas companies. How can Her Majesty's Government encourage those firms to operate appropriate levels of security to prevent people using those vehicles to gain illegal entry to our country?

The Minister for Immigration (James Brokenshire): We have strengthened our partnership with the haulage sector and food industry to reduce the challenge of clandestine stowing away. My hon. Friend highlights an important point about the international aspect. We hosted a conference in Brussels setting out and sharing good practice because we need to ensure that there are high standards not only among UK hauliers but among EU hauliers.

T2. [901537] **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): Does the recently updated Home Office country information and guidance on Eritrea take into account the recent findings of the UN commission of inquiry into human rights in Eritrea?

James Brokenshire: We keep our country guidance up to date. The hon. Gentleman highlights a particular piece of evidence. Our guidance is constantly reviewed and we look at all forms of evidence in setting out the approaches that our entry clearance officers should take.

T5. [901541] **Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): The Modern Slavery Act 2015 was a great achievement for my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and her colleagues. What progress is she making in working with other European countries to tackle modern slavery, especially in the light of the report from the Centre for Social Justice on organised crime groups that move men, women and children across EU borders into slavery?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Karen Bradley): I thank my hon. Friend for his compliments about the Modern Slavery Act. A number of measures from the Act, including the new offences, are now live. We shall shortly implement the section on transparency in supply chains, which has the potential to change international opinion on slavery. We have also been successful in having modern slavery included in the sustainable development goals at the UN, which should mean that there is increased focus on the issue. We are also working with other European Governments to ensure that slavery is at the top of their agenda too.

T4. [901540] **Anne McLaughlin** (Glasgow North East) (SNP): A month ago a very impressive young woman came to my surgery asking for my help. She is in her mid-20s and is a high-flying accountant—or she would

have been had her wings not been clipped by the shock news that she has no status in this country through no fault of her own, but because her parents have overstayed their welcome. She is now estranged from them. Does the Home Secretary have any sympathy with children in those circumstances who have done nothing wrong? Could I write to her and ask her to use some discretion in looking at this case?

James Brokenshire: It is very difficult to comment on an individual case without knowing all the facts and circumstances, but if the hon. Lady would like to write to me with that information, I will consider it carefully.

T8. [901544] **James Berry** (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): I am proud that in Kingston offers have come in thick and fast to host Syrian refugees since we offered to do so not after the terrible image of Alan, but more than 12 months ago. This has not always been easy because some of the refugees come from incredibly traumatised backgrounds. Is the Home Secretary assessing which Syrian refugees have been victims of torture and ensuring that they are housed close to areas where they can access rehabilitative services?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Refugees (Richard Harrington): I can assure my hon. Friend that we are looking in great detail precisely at placing vulnerable refugees in areas where there are the facilities to deal with them.

T6. [901542] **Caroline Lucas** (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): As Ministers will know, crisis funding for domestic violence refugees ends on 31 March 2016, so where should the many thousands of women and children fleeing violence now turn for lifesaving support after that date? In particular, will the Minister commit to the provision of sufficient permanent funding for women's refuge in future?

Karen Bradley: In response to earlier questions, I talked about the refreshing of our violence against women and girls strategy, which includes looking at how we commission services, but it also looks at prevention. We need to make sure that women are not in the position where they need to go to refugees, so we are looking at how we make sure that the right provision is available and at how we do all we can to prevent this crime happening in the first place.

T9. [901545] **David Morris** (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): In my constituency the CCTV equipment is coming to the end of its functional life. What funding is in place to replace this scheme?

The Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice (Mike Penning): In most cases CCTV is funded by the local authority, working closely with the police in that local area. I have visited many areas where new CCTV cameras have been installed. That is something we will work on together, and I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend.

T7. [901543] **Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I am sure the Minister will welcome the appointment of Ian Hopkins as the new chief constable of Greater Manchester, but the *Manchester Evening News* is reporting

that he could face £157 million of cuts because of the funding formula. Regardless of those negotiations, will the Minister guarantee that any negotiated settlement will not be undermined by the comprehensive spending review?

Mike Penning: The funding formula changes were introduced because nearly every force in the country wanted them. I appreciate that there are concerns out there, but people do not know exactly what is happening, and the changes are separate from the spending review.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): In about two weeks' time we are expecting the return of the last British resident, Shaker Aamer, from Guantanamo Bay, and I thank the Government for their actions in support of that measure. However, the last 16 residents of Guantanamo Bay who returned to Britain had been subject to torture and were paid compensation by the Government. Can the Home Secretary tell us how many of those 16 were subject to gagging orders as a result of the settlement?

Mrs May: Obviously, arrangements were put in place between the Government and the individuals concerned. My right hon. Friend is right to indicate that as part of that settlement sums of money were paid, but I will not go into the details of any individual settlement.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Home Secretary has just said that she does not want people to make dangerous journeys, but the family reunification rules are making them do exactly that. A 17-year-old Syrian boy whose parents have been killed and whose brother lives here was told that the only way he could apply was to travel in person to apply to the nearest embassy or consulate. On the way to Turkey to do so, he was kidnapped and tortured for four days. That was a very dangerous journey, required by the family reunification rules. Will the Home Secretary personally review this case and agree to look at the family reunification rules so that we can support more desperate and vulnerable families? I urge her personally to do this.

Mrs May: My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Refugees referred earlier to the work that we are doing. Obviously, there are the existing family reunification rules, but we are also expanding the vulnerability criteria whereby we identify with the UNHCR those refugees who will be resettled here in the United Kingdom. That includes a category of vulnerable families.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Will the Home Secretary confirm that she has not personally authorised any intercepts of MPs' communications? Perhaps after last week, will she confirm that any future Government that she may head will not intercept MPs' communications?

Mrs May: My hon. Friend will be aware that we do not comment on individual applications for intercept. Indeed, under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 it is an offence for anyone to identify an individual warrant or an individual interception that

takes place. The Wilson doctrine applies, but of course it is subject to proceedings that are taking place at the moment.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): PC David Phillips was the very best of all of us in Wirral. His death has shaken people everywhere, but especially his family and friends in my constituency. An amazing £145,000 has already been raised in his memory. Will the Home Secretary confirm that the Government stand absolutely ready to assist Merseyside police in their efforts to bring the guilty to justice, to help PC David Phillips's family and to properly mourn and praise this dedicated and courageous officer?

Mike Penning: I do not think I could have put that any better as the Policing Minister. I made my offer to the chief constable to visit if he wanted me to—if they had not wanted me to go, I would not have gone—and he asked me to do so. I had the honour and privilege of talking to police officers who were on the shift that David Phillips was part of, and to the other officers who

were there. It was probably one of the most moving experiences I have ever known. I also had the privilege of laying flowers just after his family had left. We will give all the support we possibly can to the chief constable and the investigating officers, but we now need to let them get on with the job.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. As I intimated was likely at the start of Home Office questions, we have been notably deprived by the absence of that intellectual iconoclast, the Minister for Security, the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), but we have pressed on as best we can, regardless of that deprivation.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Points of order come after urgent questions, so the right hon. Gentleman has time for tea.

NHS: Financial Performance

3.36 pm

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the financial performance of the NHS.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ben Gummer): I thank the hon. Lady for giving me this opportunity to come to the House and make a statement on the financial performance of the NHS.

On 9 October, Monitor, the regulator of NHS foundation trusts, reported that foundation trusts ended the first three months of the financial year with an estimated net deficit of £445 million. Monitor's publication noted that performance in the first quarter of the financial year is usually worse than it is over the rest of the year. The NHS Trust Development Authority also published that day the financial position of NHS trusts for the first quarter of 2015-16, which showed that the NHS trusts sector ended the first quarter of the year £485 million in deficit.

The financial position of the NHS is undoubtedly challenging. It is important to recognise that, despite the difficult decisions we have had to make as a result of the calamitous deficit we inherited, it is the Conservative party that has chosen to prioritise funding for the NHS. That is why we are committing an additional £10 billion over the lifetime of this Parliament, starting with £2 billion this year.

However, additional Government spending is not the only answer to the challenges faced by the NHS. The Government have taken action with our arm's length bodies to support local organisations to make efficiency savings and reduce their deficits. In the first three months of this year NHS trusts spent £380 million on agency staff, while foundation trusts spent £515 million. That is nearly £10 million a day across the NHS. We need to reduce that spending and challenge the agencies that are charging, frankly, outrageous amounts for their staff. To that end, a package of measures, including a ceiling on the amount each trust can spend on agency nurses and mandatory central framework agreements, was announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State in June.

The Government and NHS leaders have taken national action to support local leaders in managing down those deficits. I very much welcome a constructive discussion with the Opposition on where we might be able to go further in driving the efficiency savings that the NHS must find if it is to provide the exceptional standard of patient care that we all, on both sides of the House, wish to see.

Heidi Alexander: I thank the Minister for that response. Where possible, I hope that we can have a mature and constructive relationship. However, he should make no mistake that when responses are as poor and lacking in detail as the one we have just heard, I will provide strong and robust opposition.

Ministers are accountable to patients, and their silence on the growing black hole in NHS finances has been deeply disappointing, as is the absence of the Health Secretary today. Not a single Minister was available to be interviewed about the NHS on Friday: it is not good

enough. The deficit for the first three months of this financial year was larger than the deficit for the whole of 2014-15.

So, first things first: what advice has the Minister issued to hospital chief executives and finance directors about managing these pressures? Does he honestly think it is still possible for hospitals to balance the books, maintain current services, and deliver safe patient care? Given that the figures relate to quarter 1 and we are now in quarter 3, will he provide his latest assessment of the NHS financial outlook?

There is clearly not enough money in the current budget to cover existing costs. How on earth does the Minister plan to fund more services spread over seven days? The Conservatives' election promises of more money have yet to materialise, and now their commitment to transparency in the NHS is looking decidedly shaky. For someone who prides himself on being open, the Health Secretary has been suspiciously silent about the delayed publication of these reports. Let me quote what a senior official in Monitor said just over a week ago:

"We are being leaned on to delay them and I have a suspicion that the sensitivity would be less after the Tory party conference".

Will the Minister say whether these allegations have been investigated? The figures were presented to the board of Monitor on 30 September, so when was he told? Was it before the Tory party conference?

It may be an inconvenient truth for the Health Secretary and his Ministers, but the public have the right to know what is going on and what the Government plan to do. People across the country depend on NHS services, and Labour Members will stand up for them.

Ben Gummer: First, I welcome the hon. Lady to her place. Although he is not in the Chamber, I pay tribute to her predecessor, the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), who occupied her position, both as shadow Secretary of State and as Secretary of State, for a considerable period. I hope we can develop our relationship as constructively as possible in the months and years ahead.

The hon. Lady rightly said that Ministers are accountable to patients. That is precisely why we will not make the same mistakes as her predecessors in trying to trade off patient care and patient safety with the finances of the NHS. That is why we have been entirely open not only about the size of the deficit but, in a manner that the previous Administration were not, the failings of care in the NHS when they occur.

The hon. Lady said that the deficit is larger than it was in the whole of last year. That is not accurate. The deficit is traditionally larger in the first quarter of any one year. [*Interruption.*] She questions that, but it is a statement of fact.

We took action as soon as we came into office to give providers the opportunity and ability to bear down on deficits: it was one of my right hon. Friend's first actions in coming into government. In three specific areas—agency staff required because of our need to take urgent action following the calamitous and scandalous events at Mid Staffs, the high and excessive pay of NHS managers and consultancy spend, and NHS property—we have given trusts the ability to bear down on deficits. We expect to see the use of those new tools in the past few months bear fruit in the months to come.

[Ben Gummer]

The hon. Lady asked if it is possible to balance books and deliver safe patient care. I point her in the direction of the trusts that are, and have been, successfully balancing their books and providing exceptional patient care. Indeed, it has been observed not only by me and other Ministers, but by those outside the Department of Health, that the trusts that best manage their finances and the efficiency of their hospitals also tend to provide the best patient care.

The hon. Lady made an interesting statement about there clearly not being enough money, but she will be aware that the NHS itself asked for £1.7 billion in this financial year and that we responded not with £1.7 billion, but with £2 billion. We have met the NHS's own funding requests with more than it has anticipated. For the remainder of this Parliament the NHS itself has requested £8 billion of funding, and we have pledged to give it every single billion—a pledge that was not matched by the Opposition and that they tried to undermine at the last election. They pledged to give only £2.5 billion, as opposed to the £8 billion we promised the electorate. The hon. Lady says that promises have yet to materialise, but the money that we promised, not at the last election but in the previous autumn statement, is already flowing through the system.

The hon. Lady asked specifically about the relationship and the nature of the release of the figures. I completely refute her suggestion and I am certainly looking at investigating why such comments were made. I speak for the ministerial team when I say that we did not put on pressure as she might have suggested.

Finally, the hon. Lady says that the public have a right to know what is going on. We have been completely straight, and I have been direct, about the financial challenges facing the service. The reason for those financial challenges is the extraordinarily challenging situation resulting from the demographic changes in our country. On the Government's part, that requires making very big decisions about the transformation of the service. We best do that not by making the NHS a political plaything, but by working together to deliver precisely the plan that the NHS has delivered for this Government and that we intend to deliver for the patients and people of this country.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I welcome the Minister's statement, particularly the confirmation that the £8 billion will be forthcoming. He says that the money is already in the system, but what the NHS really needs is to be reassured about how much of that £8 billion will be front-loaded in the spending review. Will he reassure the House that he will set out in the clearest possible terms that it needs to be delivered as early as possible?

Ben Gummer: When my right hon. Friend the Chancellor made his commitment in the autumn statement on this year's spending, he said it was a down payment on the five-year forward view and expressed his determination to ensure that the NHS is protected and promoted in all areas of Government.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The Minister mentioned successful trusts, but fewer than one in five predict reaching the end of this financial year in balance. That does not leave an awful lot of

successful trusts. I echo the call for the funding to be front-loaded. Where are trusts meant to find staff if they are not allowed to use agency staff or nurses from overseas? Given that the deficit started to appear only in 2013—after the Health and Social Care Act 2012—does the Minister not feel that the Conservative party should review the direction of travel? The NHS was in balance from 2009 to 2013 and it has been on a downward slope ever since.

Ben Gummer: I will address the hon. Lady's final point first, if I may. The previous coalition Government's 2012 Act has saved considerable numbers—billions of pounds—which we would now have to make up if we had not made difficult decisions.

That allows me to address the hon. Lady's first point. We have a choice: we can take the traditional view of politicians, which is to try to paper over the cracks and pour money into an unreformed system, or we can take the difficult decisions that will mean that we deliver patient care in the long term. That is what the Conservative party is willing to do: we are not only providing the commitment to funding, but taking the necessary, difficult decisions.

On the specific issue of agency nurses—one such example of difficult decisions—it is not so much the number of nurses available as the scandalous rates at which they were hired out to NHS trusts. We have taken action on that to ensure that NHS providers can procure agency staff when and how they need them at a reasonable rate.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): Will my hon. Friend confirm that there have been no cuts in expenditure on the health service and that there have been no cuts in the total level of service? The problems at the moment are caused by the extraordinary pressures of an ageing population, clinical advances and rising public expectations? Will he continue to get the right balance between the needs of greater efficiency and responsible public financing, putting patient interests first and resisting short-term lobbying from trouble spots, which is a permanent feature of the politics of the NHS? In particular, will he resist any attempts by organisations such as the British Medical Association to turn controversy into yet another pay claim?

Ben Gummer: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for his assurances on what needs to be done: he, more than anyone in the House, knows how to do it. Had the Government taken the Opposition's advice and cut the money going into the NHS, we would not have achieved record numbers of doctors and nurses; we would not have halved MRSA and clostridium difficile rates; we would not have eliminated mixed-sex wards; and we would not have achieved record high cancer survival rates. All that has been made possible because of the funding commitments that the Government have made, and to which we have committed ourselves, and to which the Opposition failed to commit at the election.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): The Minister will be aware that failure to finance social care adequately has a significant knock-on effect on NHS finances. He will also be aware that the finances of NHS organisations are deteriorating rapidly, and that senior people across

the system do not believe that the system can achieve the £20 billion of efficiency savings that are required. Before the election, I proposed a non-partisan commission engaging with the public, burying our political differences and working together to safeguard the NHS. I welcome the fact that he has indicated the need for that sort of approach, but will he now commit to it? The Secretary of State agreed to it in the election campaign, so will the Minister commit to work with all parties to come up with a new settlement making the necessary changes but also coming up with the necessary finances?

Ben Gummer: I thank the right hon. Gentleman, who was an exceptional care Minister in the coalition Government, but I am a little confused by his question. He was in post when the five-year forward view was delivered by the chief executive. Within that five-year forward view is a commitment to £22 billion of efficiency savings, and he did not raise his concerns at that stage. It is precisely those efficiency savings, presented by the NHS itself and on which we have embarked, that will allow the transformation to better care that we know is possible within the service.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): We all have huge admiration for all the staff who work in the national health service. Visiting two community hospitals in my constituency in the past week, I saw that work at first hand. However, we are baffled by the bureaucracy that still exists in the NHS. Does my hon. Friend agree that we can go much further and be far more radical in cutting bureaucracy, not least, for example, by cutting the number of trusts? Is that going to be looked at as a whole to see if we can provide more money for front-line services?

Ben Gummer: My hon. Friend is entirely right. Every penny that we can save in bureaucracy and administration is a penny that we can spend on patient care, which is why the Secretary of State commissioned Lord Carter to look at the administration and bureaucracy that surrounds hospitals especially. Lord Carter has identified many billions of savings that can be made, and I anticipate that there will be more to come.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): The university hospitals trust in Birmingham, Edgbaston is balancing its books, but the neighbouring hospital, Heartlands, ran up a deficit of £5.6 million last year. In the first five months of this year, the deficit has reached £29.4 million. GPs in Worcestershire recommend that their patients are not referred to Worcestershire hospitals but to University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust. What action has the Minister taken to prevent those few hospitals that are balancing their books from being pushed over the edge?

Ben Gummer: The right hon. Lady makes the important point that exceptional hospitals such as her own not only balance their books, but have a management culture that allows them to deliver some of the best care in the country. She is right that there is a continuing challenge for all trusts, whether they are well managed or poorly managed. The measures that we have brought in, especially those on agency nurses, are designed to enable the chief executive of her trust to continue with that exceptional management in the years to come.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I note with interest that the new Leader of the Opposition has said that the Welsh model for the NHS should be expanded to encompass the whole of Great Britain. I am interested to hear my hon. Friend's views on that, seeing as Labour has significantly cut funding to the NHS in Wales.

Ben Gummer: My hon. Friend is entirely right that the new Leader of Her Majesty's Opposition made that point. It is surprising because, as a representative, I would not like our A&E targets to be missed for seven years in a row, as has happened in Wales. If we replicate what has happened in Wales here in England, we will see worse care for patients. I am sure that Members from all parts of the House would not wish to see that happen.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): Comparable developed countries spend a substantially higher proportion of GDP on health than we do. In my view, that means that our health service is substantially underfunded. Will the Minister report back to the House on those comparisons and explain why we spend so much less than those countries on health?

Ben Gummer: The hon. Gentleman is right that, in the past, the NHS has not had the funding that it requires. That is exactly why the Government have committed £10 billion to the NHS at a time when efficiency savings are being made across all other Departments. That is the mark of a party that believes in the NHS and the reason why only this party can fairly claim to be the party of the NHS.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): I suggest to my hon. Friend that one way to reduce the pressures on the service would be to make greater use of health professionals who are regulated by the Professional Standards Authority, which covers 13 mental health and wellbeing professions. What is the point of people getting statutory oversight, regulation and registration if the health service does not employ them to reduce the demand for its services?

Ben Gummer: My hon. Friend is right to point to this area of health policy as one that is of interest. That is why the Law Commission reported on professional regulation before the last election. It is being kept under close review within the Department.

Mr Speaker: We are straying a tad from the relatively narrow terms of the urgent question, to which I know colleagues will be eager to return, and none more so than the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his statement. This is a question for Members across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, where there are pressures on the NHS, because while we all have passion and love for the NHS, we must ensure that there is enough money for it. Will the Minister confirm the amount of money that will be there for accident and emergency departments and say what will be done on waiting lists?

Ben Gummer: The hon. Gentleman will know that funding for the NHS in Northern Ireland is not within my bailiwick. I therefore point him in the direction of the Northern Ireland Office and his Assembly. As far as

[Ben Gummer]

England is concerned, I confirm that we will deliver not the £8 billion that the NHS has asked for, but £10 billion over the course of this Parliament.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): The policy of advancing a new urgent care hub at Kettering general hospital has united politicians of all parties in north Northamptonshire, as well as the public. Does the Minister agree that we need more of that in our country—rather than petty bickering, people getting together to find solutions to these problems?

Ben Gummer: Conservative Members disagreed with my hon. Friend's predecessor on many points, but he did great cross-party work with Members who were not of his political persuasion to find a good solution for urgent care in his area. I hope that we will follow that model on a larger scale across the country. If we can do that, there will be a much better resolution to the challenges facing the NHS. Patients and people want us to address those challenges without turning the whole thing into a political circus.

Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): I agree that the use of agency staff places a great cost on the national health service, and I am sure the Minister will accept that cutting the number of training places for nurses and doctors at the beginning of the previous Government will have had an impact on that. St Helens and Knowsley teaching hospital is currently recruiting in Spain because it cannot recruit here. Recruitment and retention are crucial, and more than 50% of doctors now apply to practise abroad. Does the Minister think it sensible to further punish trusts that are in financial deficit—there are many across the country—by reducing their quality pay if they do not balance the books this year?

Ben Gummer: The hon. Lady asks about nurse training places, and this year the number of places is consistent with the number in 2010. The key point is not just the number of nurses in training, which is determined by NHS providers, but the number of nurses in hospitals serving patients and the public. The number of nurses is currently at a record high thanks to this Government's actions.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): My hon. Friend may have missed the speech to the Labour party conference by the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander). He may therefore be interested to know that she said that the Labour party would not be enforcing any efficiency savings in the NHS, including the £22 billion that the NHS itself has identified. Will he confirm that efficiency savings must be a concomitant part of NHS funding?

Ben Gummer: I saw the comments by the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander), and the thing that confused me most is that she imagines that efficiency savings are a creation of this Government. They are not; they are the product of the "Five Year Forward View" that identifies the need to create £22 billion of efficiency savings over the next five years. Had she read the "Five Year Forward View" she would be aware that those efficiency savings are essential if we are to get the patient care and quality that Simon Stevens identified as a necessity for the service.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): The House of Commons Library estimates the cost to the NHS from falls this year at around £2.45 billion. At a round table that I chaired last week with our local NHS trust it was clear that although the will is there to tackle the cost of falls, the resources are not. Is that a good example of how the under-resourcing of the NHS is harming patient outcomes and undermining the efficiencies that the Minister hopes to achieve? How will he address that and wider inefficiency in the NHS?

Ben Gummer: I point the hon. Gentleman to parts of the country such as Torbay, Greenwich and the soon-to-be-devolved Greater Manchester authority where the relationship and integration between social care and hospitals is producing exactly the kind of linked up action that he identifies for falls. If we can achieve that at local level we will have a truly integrated health and social care system that is not imposed from above but created by those who deliver care on the front line.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I welcome the Minister's statement. A comprehensive economic evaluation conducted last year by the London School of Economics and the Centre for Mental Health calculated that the annual cost of perinatal mental illness to the NHS is £1.2 billion, and the total cost to society is £8.1 billion. The Minister will know that on Wednesday I will introduce a private Member's Bill that is supported by the Royal College of Psychiatrists and will save lives and costs. Will the Minister ensure that that is fully considered?

Ben Gummer: My hon. Friend raises an important matter that has also been raised by my hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom). Given my responsibility for maternity services, I am particularly focused on the need to do better in perinatal mental health and maternity care, and I hope to say something about that in the not-too-distant future.

Teresa Pearce (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): As far as I am aware, the Minister has not answered the question about the delay in issuing the report. If he cannot answer now, will he put a note in the Library and explain the reason for that delay?

Ben Gummer: I answered that point entirely accurately and categorically, and on behalf of the ministerial team I refute the allegation.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): My local trust in Nottinghamshire, Sherwood Forest, is in a very bad financial position—one of the worst in the country. The primary reason is the appalling private finance initiative deal we inherited from the previous Labour Government, which consumes 17% of the trust's annual budget. Would a new Parliament be an opportunity for the Government to look again at those appalling PFI contracts, particularly those that affect trusts such as mine that are in special measures?

Ben Gummer: Across the country, trusts are struggling under the load of poorly negotiated PFI contracts. It is worth remembering that when the Labour party speaks about all the money it put into the NHS, a large part of it was borrowed via PFI—that part which was not

borrowed as part of Government debt. The important point about PFI is to try to address each contract in turn. The Department is looking at this on an ongoing basis, not only as it concerns old contracts but in the letting of new ones.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): Salisbury hospital enjoys an excellent reputation across the constituency. On a recent visit, having completed a number of easily found cost reduction programmes, the management expressed their determination to continue with patient-level costing service by service and to pursue electronic patient records reform. They asked me to raise their concern about obtaining visas for specialist scientists at the hospital and the need to have a better joined-up service between primary, secondary and tertiary elements of the NHS.

Ben Gummer: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing the attention of the House to innovation at a local level. This kind of innovation, which will allow us to transform the service into an even better NHS in the years to come, is being repeated in many trusts across the country. If I may, I will reply to him by letter on the specific issue of scientists after I have investigated the points he has made.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): In addition to needing extra funding, which the Government have rightly committed to provide, the NHS could and should make better use of its resources through better procurement, the use of technology and the employment of permanent rather than temporary staff. The challenge is how to do this at the necessary pace and scale. Will my hon. Friend advise what steps the Government are taking to drive the pace and scale of the changes that are important not only to improve productivity but for better outcomes and patient experience?

Ben Gummer: My hon. Friend identifies precisely the action we in the Department need to take. It would be a dereliction of duty to pour money into an unreformed system, as it would mean money being spent on administration, bureaucracy and waste, and not on the changes we need to improve patient care. We need to

move at pace to bring in the changes necessary to transform the system if we are to get the NHS we all want to see.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I congratulate the shadow Secretary of State on an excellent urgent question and the Minister on how he has responded. It is interesting that there are more Government Members who want to ask questions. With regard to deficits, we have very expensive and highly paid management and accountants. They set their budgets and then a deficit develops. What action can be taken against these highly paid individuals for not keeping to their budgets?

Ben Gummer: My hon. Friend raises an important point. There are trusts that are being managed exceptionally well which hit the budgets they set at the beginning of the year. That is the normal course of business for other organisations. This is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State introduced the clawback on new chief executive contracts, which mean that if they do not perform according to plan then a proportion of their salary will be docked at the end of the year. That is an important reform, one not introduced by the previous Administration but by us, the party of the NHS.

Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): May I echo the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick)? Parts of the Royal Blackburn hospital and Burnley general hospital were rebuilt by private companies in 2006, under the previous Labour Government, at a combined cost of about £140 million. East Lancashire Hospitals NHS Trust will have to pay back almost £1 billion by 2041 because of the PFI contracts signed at that time. Does the Minister agree that the toxic PFI legacy is one of the biggest challenges facing most of our NHS trusts?

Ben Gummer: A considerable number of PFI contracts were poorly negotiated under the previous Labour Administration. They need to be looked at one by one, and the Department is committed to doing that again to see whether we can reduce the burden on trusts. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will have more to say about that in the course of the transformational changes that we are helping the NHS to make.

Right to Buy

4.9 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): Will the Minister explain to the House the details of the voluntary agreement on the right to buy negotiated with the National Housing Federation and how it differs from his original statutory approach?

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Brandon Lewis): As stated in our manifesto, the Government want to give housing association tenants the same home ownership opportunities as council tenants. Since the introduction of right to buy, nearly 2 million households have been helped to realise their aspiration of owning their own home. There have been 46,000 sales since April 2010, including more than 40,000 under the reinvigorated scheme introduced in 2012 by the last Government.

The Government want to help families achieve their dream of home ownership, but at the moment about 1.3 million housing association tenants cannot benefit from the discounts that the last Government introduced. We want to give housing association tenants the same home ownership opportunities as council tenants. At present, some housing association tenants have the preserved right to buy at full discount levels or the right to acquire at a much lower discount level, while others have simply no rights at all. This cannot be right. The Government want to end this inequity for tenants and extend the higher discounts to housing associations.

On 7 October, the Prime Minister announced that a deal had been agreed with the National Housing Federation and its members giving housing association tenants the opportunity to buy their home at an equivalent discount to the right to buy. This delivers our manifesto commitment to extend the benefits of right to buy to 1.3 million tenants. In summary, the deal will enable 1.3 million families to purchase a home at right to buy-level discounts, subject to the overall availability of funding for the scheme and the eligibility requirements.

The presumption is that the housing association will sell the tenant the property in which they live, the Government will compensate it for the discount offered to the tenant and the association will retain the sales receipts to enable it to reinvest in the delivery of new extra homes. Housing associations will use the sales proceeds to deliver new supply and have the flexibility, but not the obligation, to replace rented homes with other tenures, such as shared ownership. The Government will continue to work with the National Housing Federation and its members to develop new and innovative products so that every tenant can have the opportunity to buy or have a stake in their own home.

As part of the agreement, the Government will also implement deregulatory measures to support housing associations in their objectives to help support tenants into home ownership and deliver an additional supply of new homes. Boosting the number of sales to tenants will generate an increase in receipts for housing associations, enabling them to reinvest in the delivery of new homes. Housing associations will be able to use sales proceeds to deliver that new extra supply and will have the flexibility to replace homes with tenures such as shared ownership. Housing associations have a strong record in delivering new homes, as evidenced by the way we

have exceeded our affordable homes target, delivering nearly 186,000 of them—16,000 more than originally planned for the period to 2015.

We want more people to be able to buy a home of their own, and extending the right to buy is a key part of that. It will give tenants who have that aspiration something to strive for that is achievable and give housing association tenants the opportunity for the first time to purchase their home at the same discount levels currently enjoyed by council tenants. We will now work closely with the sector on the implementation of the deal, and of course I will update hon. Members as we move through the stages of implementation.

John Healey: I am sorry that I have had to drag the Minister before the House this afternoon. I am disappointed that the Secretary of State made a written statement this morning, but is not prepared to account for himself to the public this afternoon on one of the Prime Minister's central election pledges. The extension of the so-called right to buy to housing associations, funded by the forced sale of council homes, will mean fewer genuinely affordable homes when the need has never been greater. We will oppose it. This is a back-room deal to sidestep legislation and proper public scrutiny in Parliament.

We have said from the start that this is unworkable and wrong—and so it is proving. The Minister's and the Secretary of State's statements today are riddled with holes. They are promising 1.3 million housing association tenants the right to buy their own home. How many tenants will not, in fact, have this right next year? What about those in at least 37 housing associations that have said no to the deal, and those many more who have not been consulted and have not replied? What about those in the nine separate categories of the deal

“where housing associations may exercise discretion over sales”?

What about those caught by the Secretary of State's weasel words this morning in the written statement, whereby all this will be subject to

“the overall availability of the funding of the scheme”?

What do tenants do when the landlord says no? How can this be a “right” to buy, with no legislation behind it? In truth, this is not a right-to-buy, but a beg-to-buy policy, and many housing association tenants will find next year that they have been badly let down by the Prime Minister's promises.

I strongly back the desire of most of us to own our own home. That is why I commissioned the chief executive of Taylor Wimpey to do a report for me on the decline of home ownership, which has gone down each and every year in the last five years. This right-to-buy policy, however, is bad housing policy. Shelter warned that 113,000 council homes could be sold off to pay for it, with no-go areas for many lower income families to live in in many of our major cities and towns. What assessment has the Minister made of the number of council homes that will be lost, and when will he publish the full impact assessment of these plans, as he promised the House he would on 29 June, and when will Members be able to vote on these plans, as the Prime Minister promised on 27 May when he opened the Queen's Speech debate?

The Minister has talked about one-for-one replacement of all homes sold—well, we have heard that before. In 2010, the same promises were made for council homes,

and it has been five years of failure—not with “one for one”, but with one home built for every nine sold. So what is the Minister’s guarantee for a one-to-one, like-for-like replacement for both council and housing association homes sold under this scheme, and how many of these genuinely affordable homes sold by housing associations will be replaced by homes that are not?

Finally, this is a challenge for the Chancellor as well as the Minister. This policy fails the test of good social policy and the test of sound economics. It squanders a long-term asset by selling it on the cheap. Will the Minister commit to publishing a full value for public money assessment because taxpayers will bear the cost three times over—first, for the public investment to build the homes; secondly, for the discount to sell them; and thirdly, for the higher housing benefit bill that will come when these homes are bought to let again to tenants at full market rents. If the Minister and his party really want to occupy the centre ground, they should drop this extreme policy. It is a bad deal for tenants and a bad deal for the taxpayer.

Brandon Lewis: I have to say that the right hon. Gentleman’s opening remarks, when linked to his closing remarks, sum up where we are. I am disappointed that he seems to want to stop people having the right to own their own home. We will absolutely support people in that right. He talks about the written ministerial statement, but this happened because we have been very busy getting on with the business of delivering homes for people and the right to buy, rather than spending time talking about reports and process.

A few weeks ago, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I spent a couple of days at the National Housing Federation conference talking to housing association members and their representatives. I am not sure whether the right hon. Gentleman was there—we did not see him—but we spent our time talking to the sector, and this is a deal from the sector. The housing associations now want to help their tenants into home ownership, and I applaud them for that. I think that they have done an excellent job in working to deliver a new model that presents a new opportunity to people throughout our country. Opposition Members seem determined to end that opportunity, and, indeed, the Labour party in Wales has stopped people having that aspiration.

This is a deal for the entire sector, as the sector itself has made clear. I am disappointed that the right hon. Gentleman has presupposed its stance by saying that it will oppose the deal. That puts him in an almost unique position. The tenants want the chance to buy, and the housing associations proposed the deal. It is disappointing that the right hon. Gentleman has set himself against them by opposing their deal, which we have accepted after the work that they have put in.

I am sure that, if the right hon. Gentleman looks at the way in which we are providing homes and the way in which the deal will work for people throughout the country, he will recognise that the new portability arrangements will, for the first time ever, give those living in sheltered or extremely rural accommodation who—even under the current scheme—have no right to buy their own homes a chance to do so. I am proud that we are able to deliver on the aspiration and that manifesto promise.

I noted the right hon. Gentleman’s points about the number of homes being built, which Labour Members have raised many times. Eventually, they will come to acknowledge that, in 13 years of Labour government, 170 homes were sold for every one that was built. We have announced that, under the reinvigorated scheme, it will be “one for one”: for every home that is sold, an extra home will be built.

Let me make the facts clear. In year one of the scheme, 3,054 homes were built. In the equivalent year, three years on—councils have three years in which to build—3,644 homes have been built. That is more than one extra home for every one that is sold. If councils do not build a home in time, we in the Government will take the money from them, and we will make sure that those homes are built as outlined in the scheme. The building of that one extra home will drive up housing supply.

I am disappointed that the right hon. Gentleman has not been joined by the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett), but I am delighted that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is able to join me to state very clearly to the House that we will support people’s desire and aspiration to own their homes. We will deliver the right to buy to those 1.3 million tenants. I thank the housing associations for the work that they have done, and for their willingness to stand up and deliver for their tenants and the tenants of the future. This is the most powerful form of social mobility that we can deliver, and I am proud to be able to be a small part of that.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): Perhaps I should declare a family interest, as my late father was one of the authors of the original right to buy policy.

Mr Speaker: That is why I called the hon. Gentleman first.

Mr Walker: You are very kind, Mr Speaker.

I congratulate the Minister on his statement. Having raised the concerns of my constituents in housing association properties, I am delighted that this voluntary deal has been reached.

The Minister may be interested to know that Sanctuary Housing, which is the largest registered social landlord in the country and whose headquarters are in my constituency, has said not only that it thinks that the deal can be delivered with one-for-one replacement, but that it believes it can increase the supply of affordable housing over the next five years at almost twice the rate that it has been able to deliver over the last five years.

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend has made some very good points, particularly the point about his father. That scheme enabled so many millions of families to own their own homes, and I think everyone who has been involved in it should be very proud of that.

Over the last few months and especially over the last few weeks, at the Housing Federation conference and since, we have been talking to housing associations which clearly want to use this deal to make their assets work and to build more homes. We must remember that it will drive up housing supply.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Scottish Government have taken action to abolish the right to buy for housing association and local authority tenants. We arrived at that position after observing the frustration of local tenants who could not gain access to stock because it was being sold up year after year. The pool of stock available to housing associations—particularly in cities, where land was not in great supply—was shrinking year after year.

I consider public housing—social rented housing—to be a public asset, and an important part of the infrastructure of our country. Why would a housing association providing housing for people with particular needs, such as disabled people, choose to invest in more expensive housing if that asset would be lost further down the line? Why would anyone invest in houses if they were not going to see that return and why would we continue to have that policy in particular areas where there is not enough land to replace them? We would just lose the investment that is there.

Has the Minister given any consideration to how this policy in England will affect housing associations that operate on a cross-boundary basis? Sanctuary Housing was mentioned earlier; it is a housing provider that operates both in England and Scotland. Scotland has protected the right to buy; England has not. Has any assessment been made of how this will impact on Scotland?

Brandon Lewis: On the properties the hon. Lady outlined, in the deal itself and the right to buy there are exemptions, but I do sympathise with her point. I understand how the Scottish Government came to the point that they did in terms of the frustration with housing supply because, as I have just outlined, Labour simply did not build the houses over their 13 years in government. The answer is that we need to make sure we are building the houses. I would encourage the Scottish Government that the solution is not to stop people having the right to buy their own home. I would encourage that and use the money from that to build the extra houses we need; if Labour had done that for 13 years, we would not have lost the 420,000 affordable homes that were lost in those years. We have increased those numbers in the last Parliament. We will do so again in this Parliament and, through the money coming in from right to buy, there will be that full replacement income for housing associations to build an extra home; that is the key to this.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State and Minister on this most civilised of solutions. However, may I raise a point I have had discussions with them on on a number of occasions: exemptions for small rural communities where housing association properties are extremely valuable but also extremely hard to replace? Have we had discussions with housing associations about the same exemptions for those small communities as are currently embodied in council house right to buy?

Brandon Lewis: I thank my hon. Friend. He makes a good point. The housing associations have played a hugely important part through the way they have come forward with this deal and have recognised the mandate the Government got in the general election to deliver this. They have done an excellent job in this regard. This

is about extending the right to buy and therefore the rural exemptions extend as well. Indeed my hon. Friend can see the deal on the National Housing Federation website and there are some examples there of the very point he has outlined.

Sadiq Khan (Tooting) (Lab): As the Minister will be aware, there is a housing crisis in London. The cost of rent goes up each year and there are fewer and fewer homeowners in London. London does badly out of this scheme, which will be funded, as he is aware, by selling off family-sized social homes in London. In those circumstances, can he guarantee that the money raised from the right to buy sell-off in London will be ring-fenced to build genuinely affordable homes in London?

Brandon Lewis: The “extra home built for every home sold” applies to London. London will see more homes built as a result of this and, even under the reinvigorated scheme from 2012 onwards, in the first year some 536 homes were sold in London and 1,139 were built in the period, much more than one extra built for every one sold.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): From listening to those on the Opposition Benches, we might get the impression that this is a stand-alone measure, but is it not a part of our broader programme to encourage home ownership among the widest collection of people in the country, and is this not a good illustration of how we are committed to doing that?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Yes, it absolutely is part of a wider package of work we have been doing and will continue to do to drive up home building as well as homeownership throughout different parts of the sector and with different types of tenure, while always remembering that 86% of our population want to own their own home and doing everything we can to support them in that aim.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): May I pick up the point that has just been raised? I was very concerned that money raised from the right to buy in areas such as mine will leave the borough and possibly leave London altogether. The Minister has not really answered this point. It is vital that any money raised through right to buy is reinvested in the nearby area. We should therefore look at all schemes to include as much genuinely affordable housing as possible. For example, 900 homes are being built at 250 City Road in my constituency. The cheapest one-bed flat there is £865,000 so starter homes are simply not affordable there. Does the Minister agree that the only genuinely affordable homes at the 250 City Road scheme are likely to be those for social rent?

Brandon Lewis: This is a pretty simple question of supply and demand. To get more affordable prices, we need to build more homes, and I hope that the hon. Lady will support this process, which is about getting more homes built in London and in the rest of the country.

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): I am pleased to hear from the Minister’s answer that the principle of reinvesting the proceeds of sales is at the heart of the

proposals. Does not this underline the fact that our party is here not just for homeowners but for home building as well?

Brandon Lewis: Absolutely; my hon. Friend makes an important point. We are hugely determined to drive up house building, having inherited from Labour in 2010—when the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) was the Minister—the lowest level of house building that the country had seen since 1923. We have seen the figures rise, and they need to continue to do so. All the work going on at the moment is about getting more homes built in this country.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): New Charter Homes, a registered social landlord in the Tameside part of my constituency, has just announced 150 job losses. It says that this is a direct consequence of this Government's right to buy and rent policies. What assessment have the Government made of the impact of those two announcements on registered social landlords' business plans, and what support will the Minister give to housing associations such as New Charter to ensure that their financial stability is put on a firm footing for the future?

Brandon Lewis: I am almost at a loss for words. The right to buy for housing associations has not yet come into force, so how a housing association can be taking that view now is beyond me, particularly when we bear in mind that our policy will create more work for them. We want them to use the income from right to buy to build more homes, which will mean more work for the housing associations.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I welcome the Minister's confirmation that housing associations in rural areas will continue to have an exemption. However, can he reassure those small communities in rural areas with very high housing costs, such as those in my constituency, that if the housing associations choose not to avail themselves of the exemption, any like-for-like replacement will be provided in the same area? If such replacement were provided in a distant town, our rural communities would be depleted.

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and I thank her and her colleagues for the time that they put in over the summer to talk to their local housing associations about the deal that the associations were working towards putting to us. It is important that people recognise that the rural exemptions will continue. We are extending right to buy and the rural exemptions are in right to buy. She will also be able to look at the portable option that the housing associations are putting forward.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): The Conservatives cannot seriously believe that the way to deal with the housing crisis is to give developers carte blanche to build unaffordable housing, including on green-belt sites, while attacking social housing. This is not a policy of aspiration for the millions on social housing waiting lists, for those living in overcrowded accommodation or for those with no home at all. Will the Minister tell us why there is this discrimination between those who are in social housing and those in the private rented sector? Many in the latter category

are desperate to get into affordable social housing. What will he do to prevent the homes that are sold from being put into the private rented sector, as has happened to 40% of previous right-to-buy homes?

Brandon Lewis: First, 86% of the people in our country want the chance to own their home, and we make no apology for supporting them. On right to buy, we are talking about the housing associations building more homes. As we have already heard, a number of them—including some of the largest, such as Sanctuary, Orbit and L&Q—see this as a way of ensuring that their asset base can be used to deliver the extra homes that we need, to ensure that housing supply goes up. For those people in the private rented sector, I absolutely want to continue to do everything possible to support their aspiration to own. That is what Help to Buy is about, and it is what the 200,000 starter homes announced by the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer last week are about. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will support us in our programme of work.

Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): I am pleased that my constituency's largest housing association, Housing Pendle, is delivering 122 new affordable homes this year. Will the Minister confirm that extending the right to buy to housing association properties will mean more money overall, with money being released to build new affordable homes, thus helping more families to access the good quality, affordable homes they so desperately need?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. He has a good example in his local authority area of a housing association that is keen to build, and this scheme will allow it to access its assets to build more and to use that income to make sure it is building more homes to increase supply across our country.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Listening to the Minister, one would almost think he had not presided over a collapse in home ownership in this country during the past few years. In inner-London areas we face the prospect of losing up to three quarters of our social homes, which has led even the leader of Conservative Westminster Council to say that this is going to lead to the loss of a swathe of social housing. It is all very well for the Minister to say that he is going to replace in London, but people do not just live in a city—they live in communities, they live near their work and they live near their children's schools. Will all replacement homes be built within the same local authority, where council housing and housing association properties have been sold off?

Brandon Lewis: First, I say to the hon. Lady that the drop in housebuilding that led to the drop in home ownership started under the Labour Government. In fact, the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), who is on the Labour Front Bench, said that he had no problem with a fall in home ownership, but I have a different view. This Government want to make sure that we drive up not only home building but home ownership. We will do anything we can to support that, and this deal that the housing associations have put forward will help to increase the supply of affordable homes right across our country, including in London.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): This is one of the best policies the Government have introduced. We are hearing the 1980s arguments all over again from Opposition Members. The truth of the matter is that when a property is sold, that person still lives in that property; I spoke to my local housing association over the weekend and it is really keen on this idea, because it will be able to invest in one and a half homes with this money—that is one and a half extra families with a house to live in. How can anyone possibly be against that?

Brandon Lewis: As ever, my hon. Friend makes a hugely important point. I, too, am baffled as to why any Opposition Member would want to disagree with the housing associations, with their tenants, with the people of this country, who gave us a mandate to deliver this policy, and with the 86% of people who want the opportunity to own their own home. This approach will send housing supply up—he is absolutely right about that. A key point is that for every home sold this will mean at least one extra home being built. That increases housing supply. It is simple mathematics.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) said that the people who will buy their home will live in their home, but the evidence from the council housing right to buy shows that not to be the case, certainly not in London. What assessment has he made of how many of the homes to be sold under this policy are likely to become private rental properties—often at high rent and let to people in housing need who have no hope of owning their own home?

Brandon Lewis: When a home is sold under the current right-to-buy scheme, there are restrictions on what people can do for a period of time, and that will continue in the extended scheme. Ultimately, many years down the line, I absolutely defend the right of any homeowner to do with their home what any other homeowner can do, be it selling it or living in it, but there are protections for the first few years after purchase.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I strongly support the right-to-buy approach and welcome what the Minister has had to say today. There are, however, concerns in Barnwell in my constituency relating to the replenishment of homes sold in rural areas, particularly given that a highly desirable new housing association development has just come on stream. What assurance can he give my constituents in Barnwell?

Brandon Lewis: I have two points to make to my hon. Friend. First, for every home sold an extra home will be built in that area. Secondly, depending on the particular details of the area, the rural exemptions may apply, too. At the very least there will be an extra home built for every home sold.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): Other than the right-to-buy scheme, what funding options has the Minister explored to provide social housing? Where I come from, the right-to-buy scheme—within the Housing Executive but not within a housing association—simply removes social houses from those who cannot afford to provide a home for themselves.

Brandon Lewis: As I said earlier, I cannot speak for the Scottish Government, although I do encourage them to build more houses. [HON. MEMBERS: “Northern Ireland!”] The whole point of this scheme is that, for every house that is sold, an extra home will be built. I say to the hon. Lady that the affordable house building scheme has delivered ahead of its targets, and we are now delivering at the fastest rate for more than two decades. I say to all Opposition Members that the Conservative-led coalition Government delivered more social council housing in five years than Labour did in 13 years.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I share the worries of many of my colleagues about replacement local provision. I assume that these sales will be under leasehold provision. The Minister knows that a number of us in the House have concerns about the weakness of the regulations covering people who own leasehold properties. Will he assure us that he will continue to look at leasehold reform as part of these proposals as well as separately?

Brandon Lewis: Yes, I am happy to reassure the hon. Gentleman that we will continue to look at leasehold reform and to ensure that protections are there for leaseholders in the future.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): In my constituency, Cestria Community Housing and Derwentside Homes have been building new homes both for rent and for sale. The things that have skewed their business plans have been the cap on rents and this right-to-buy proposal. Would it not be easier if the Government were to underwrite some of the borrowings of those housing associations that want to build, such as the two that I have just mentioned?

Brandon Lewis: Obviously, rent changes are going through the House at the moment, but this right-to-buy scheme helps housing associations build more homes. It gives them access to more finance and a greater realisation of their assets, and I support that. With regard to the rent changes, bearing in mind the savings that are going on right across the public sector, looking for efficiencies of 1% a year from housing associations is not unreasonable. Many housing associations are embracing that idea.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): The New Charter Group is a major social housing provider in my constituency. How can its housing associations support right to buy with no staff? As my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) said, a loss of 150 jobs has been announced today. Inevitably, that will mean poorer services for tenants and fewer homes built for local people. Will the Minister meet New Charter’s management and the union Unison, which represents the workers? What action will he take to protect our social housing for the sake of current and future tenants?

Brandon Lewis: What I say to housing associations and generally is that we do need to ensure that we are efficient in our use of public funds and of tenants’ income. Housing associations should be looking at that and at whether they have the right mechanisms and structures in place. I cannot comment on particular

housing associations, but right to buy will mean that there is more work for them to do in terms of building those extra homes that we want to see right across the country.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In Northern Ireland, there has been a significant rise in the number of people who want to buy their properties. After five years, they can get a discount of up to £24,000. Quite clearly, it is a popular scheme and one that I support. Will the Minister confirm whether the investigation that was carried out by the Office for National Statistics will also be carried out in Northern Ireland? If so, will the Minister responsible for that area in the Northern Ireland Assembly be contacted first?

Brandon Lewis: I am happy to have a conversation with the hon. Gentleman outside the Chamber to make sure that we get this matter into the right place.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Like the Minister's rent and planning policies, this is all about the destruction of social rented housing, especially in high-cost housing areas. It is a piece of tawdry social engineering that exacerbates the housing crisis. Will he answer this question, which he has been asked several times and which he has refused to answer? Where council properties are being sold—we are talking about 50%, with more than 6,000 being sold in Hammersmith—will they be replaced like for like in the same borough so that people can move into those homes before the housing waiting lists get worse than they are at the moment?

Brandon Lewis: The hon. Gentleman keeps talking about replacements as if homes are disappearing, but they are not. When people buy their home through right to buy, they will be living in that home. The income from that in the area will be used to build extra homes. The simple answer is that we want extra homes to be built, and I should have thought the hon. Gentleman

would want to support us and his local authority in seeing more homes built to support the home ownership aspiration of people in London.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I am afraid that there could not be a wider gulf between the Minister's responses this afternoon and the reality facing ordinary Londoners, who are finding it increasingly hard not just to own but to rent their own home. Since he has so far shown himself incapable of answering very simple and straightforward questions from my right hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Sadiq Khan) and pretty much every other Member from London, let us give him another go. Will the Minister answer this question without obfuscation: will he guarantee that any home sold under the scheme will be replaced like for like in the locality from which it has been sold, such as a London borough? That is a straightforward question, so may we have a simple answer?

Brandon Lewis: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the tone of his question, but he should bear in mind the fact that to have more homes available in London across the tenures, we need more homes to be built. Right to buy accesses finance to allow local authorities to build extra homes. More homes will be built—not just replacements—in London for Londoners.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I declare an interest as the vice-president of the Local Government Association. Is the Minister aware of the cross-party disquiet among local government leaders, adding to their headaches about the announcement he is about to make of the cuts for this Christmas? Has an assessment been carried out by the DCLG of the impact on London's economy of this backward move?

Brandon Lewis: I am not sure that I follow the hon. Lady's exact point. For example, the chairman of the LGA is absolutely in favour of right to buy and supports the aspiration of people who wish to own their own home. The Government will continue to do that.

Points of Order

4.46 pm

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I rise on a very serious matter indeed: to ask you whether you have had any request from the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Mr Watson) to seek your permission to make a personal statement apologising for the way in which he has so vilely traduced the late Lord Brittan, and further for him to have a chance to apologise to Lord Brittan's dignified and courageous widow?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order. The short answer is that I have had no such request. It is incumbent on each Member to take responsibility for his or her statements within this House, and there is a wider obligation, of course, to comply with the expectations and requirements of the code of conduct that applies to all Members. However, the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Mr Watson) is signalling to me that he would like to respond to what has been said and it is right that he should have the opportunity to do so.

Mr Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I understand that right hon. and hon. Members feel aggrieved that Leon Brittan was interviewed by the police and that they are angry with my use of language, but I am sure that they would also agree that when anyone is accused of multiple sexual crimes by numerous completely unrelated sources, the police have a duty to investigate, no matter who it is. My letter was prompted by Jane's concern that procedures were not followed. It is not for me to judge the validity of these claims, but I believe I was right to demand that the guidelines were adhered to. I also believe that very many victims in this country have been too terrified to speak out for too long. It is not all over just because a few famous people have gone to prison, and it has not all got out of hand just because people in high places are scared. The survivors of child abuse have been belittled and ridiculed for too long. That is the real scandal here.

Earlier, the Prime Minister said that I should examine my conscience. I think we all need to examine our consciences in this House. We have presided over a state of affairs in which children have been abused and then ignored, dismissed and then disdained. If anyone deserves an apology, it is them. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. This is not an occasion for a debate on this matter, and to be fair I do not think any Member would expect such. The right hon. Member for

Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) has perfectly properly raised his point of order—I thank him for the terms in which he has done so—and the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Mr Watson) has responded, and we must now leave it there and proceed with our next item of parliamentary business.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I trust that it is on a wholly unrelated point.

Robert Neill: It is on a point of general principle, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must resume his seat. If he seeks to raise a totally unrelated point of order—that is to say, not related to anything that we have just covered and on which I have given a definitive ruling—I will hear him, but I rather suspect from the prevarication that it is not totally unrelated.

Robert Neill *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman will speak when I give him the opportunity and not before. If he has his opportunity, he had better not be a chancer and he had better not fluff it.

Robert Neill: I hope, Mr Speaker, that you will give guidance to Members as to the proper means of raising legitimate concerns about public authorities, to ensure that matters that should properly be raised, which concern all Members of this House, are not handled in such a way as might appear to impinge on the independence of judicial and investigative processes.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is kind—I have known him for years and he has always been kind—but he somewhat over-interprets my brief and my wisdom. It is not for the Chair in this House to counsel Members as to how to proceed in such matters. We have, as citizens, the same rights as everybody else. In respect of our membership of this House we have certain additional freedoms and privileges, which must be exercised with great care; we also have responsibilities, and I referenced those, as the hon. Gentleman will acknowledge, with particular regard to the code of conduct. I know that the hon. Gentleman only ever seeks to be helpful, and I hope that he is either content or will at any rate today satisfy himself with my response. We will leave it there.

Backbench Business

[2ND ALLOTTED DAY]

Superfast Broadband

4.52 pm

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House notes variations in the effectiveness of roll-out of fixed and mobile superfast broadband in different parts of the UK; and calls on the Government to host a not-spot summit to consider ways to tackle this issue.

Hon. Members reading the Order Paper could be forgiven for thinking that this debate is about the roll-out of superfast broadband across the UK, but it is about much more than that. It is about making sure that the farmer in my constituency who needs to communicate with DEFRA can do so without driving miles to a nearby town. It is about making sure that he can grow his business and employ more people. It is about the disabled woman in a hamlet in my constituency who must currently choose between paying £20 a month for a dire mobile connection or face the isolation of living effectively without access to much of the modern world. It is also about the school in the heart of urban Boston teaching some of the most vulnerable young people, and doing so sharing a single 4G connection because their existing broadband connection is not good enough.

Broadband makes a profound difference today to businesses, to shopping, to entertainment, to education, to healthcare and to everything that goes with life in the 21st century. The £1.2 billion of public money invested so far could not have gone on a better cause, and we should remember that the coverage obligations imposed on a single 4G licence amount to a further £2 billion of public subsidy. But at its heart today's debate is about making sure that we do not allow the digital divide to widen and deepen. A one-nation Government must deliver the same digital opportunities for all of us.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman talks about a one-nation Government. Does he think that it was a mistake in 2010 for the incoming coalition Government to jettison the Labour Government's commitment to universal broadband, which would have delivered what he has described?

Matt Warman: I will come on to the universal service later.

The possibilities that the web offers to level the playing field between rural and even deprived urban areas and the best connected will alleviate the pressure on roads and on almost every public service that we offer. Although we are in the middle of a roll-out programme that has been among the fastest in the world, there remains a widening and deepening digital divide in Britain.

Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I warmly welcome not just this debate, but my hon. Friend's words about the importance of this issue. He stressed, and I want to put on the record, the concerns that many of us have, even in the centre of this capital city, here in central London, where there are major problems with superfast broadband, and the importance

of ensuring that we have as much competition as possible to put BT and Virgin Media on their mettle to make sure that we get the improvements for which my hon. Friend is so passionately making the case.

Matt Warman: I stress to my right hon. Friend that this is a debate not about rural broadband, but about national broadband roll-out. It is likely that by the end of 2017, 95% or 96% of British premises will be connected, but the one in 25 or one in 24 premises that will not be connected are not evenly spread across the country. Without serious investment in helping to connect the final 5%, we risk isolating not only individuals but entire communities, and splitting the super-connected and those for whom the 21st-century economy is another country.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on introducing this debate. Does he, like the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mark Field), recognise that central London and Westminster, with its enormous economy, is seriously compromised by slow broadband speeds? If anyone from BT is watching this debate, is it not extraordinary that a local authority has to ask the population if they want superfast broadband in order to be able to make representations for such investment? Is it not obvious that, as the hon. Gentleman says, individuals, businesses and the economy deserve superfast broadband speeds?

Matt Warman: Indeed, and I suspect that people from BT will be watching this debate closely. It is right that connecting the whole UK on an even footing offers opportunities greater than those from the roll-out of the railways or the motorway network.

Mark Spencer (Sherwood) (Con): I recognise that my hon. Friend represents a very rural constituency, like Sherwood. Does he recognise the frustration of my constituents and his when they hear discussion about the difference between superfast broadband and broadband, when my constituents are on dial-up and can get only a very small document downloaded in an hour?

Matt Warman: Absolutely, and I am keen to emphasise throughout this debate the huge range of connections, where we have people on a gigabit for the same price, effectively, as people on dial-up. Today's debate calls on the Government to hold a "not spot" summit, although at times Members could be forgiven for thinking that Prime Minister's questions, Business questions, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions and Treasury questions are all "not spot" summits.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for holding this debate. In Devon and Somerset we find that BT is getting to those easier to reach areas and leaving the "not spots" and harder to reach areas behind. May we urge the Minister, through the debate, to put more pressure on BT to get out to those hard to reach areas, instead of taking the lowest hanging fruit, as it is doing at present?

Matt Warman: Indeed. At its heart, the debate is about getting the best possible value for money for taxpayer subsidy and making sure that the commercial roll-out goes as far as it can.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Given the importance of value for money, does my hon. Friend accept that in London, where four of the 12 constituencies with the worst roll-out are located, it is particularly important that the summit has proper data on unused fibre capacity and on upload speeds, both of which are critical to maximising the value obtained from the network?

Matt Warman: Transparency is critical. On that point, 17% of the UK still does not even have the option of a superfast broadband connection, and 8% of the country cannot receive the 10 megabits connections that Ofcom says are required for mainstream services, and 500,000 still lack even basic broadband.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a brilliant speech. I would like to mention one of the many communities in my constituency that are divided by this. In Ightham, half the village can access some rural broadband from BT, but to the other half BT is promising things that it will simply never deliver, because it has realised that the economics do not add up. In the meantime, companies such as Gigaclear seem to be rolling out broadband perfectly happily to villages such as Plaxtol and Golden Green. Will he please urge the Minister to encourage more competition, and therefore greater roll-out?

Matt Warman: I would be delighted to do that, and I welcome the mention of what I think will be the first of several small villages to be mentioned in this debate—

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Matt Warman: Perhaps I could just finish my sentence before giving way.

There is a universal service obligation coming at 2 megabits a second, and there are moves to raise it to 5 megabits in the autumn, and that still falls below what Ofcom says is the typical need. As BT's roll-out continues, many of the villages that I am sure will be mentioned later will find that their connections are improved. However, the communities that stand to benefit most are those that economically are the hardest to roll out to, so it is vital that whatever Government subsidy is available is pushed as far and as fast as possible.

Victoria Borwick (Kensington) (Con): I concur with those colleagues who have mentioned the issues in central London. Obviously, all Members across the House welcome the push to ensure that more of the country has broadband and superfast broadband, but I am concerned that there are still a significant number of “not spots” in our capital city. Will my hon. Friend please ensure that his “not spots” include those in central London. I am speaking in particular about constituents in Kensington. I urge him to look again at the relationship in London with BT—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Matt Warman.

Matt Warman: In the time remaining I want to look at three crucial issues, all of which are aimed at providing maximum value for taxpayers' money and, crucially, promoting maximum competition so that the free market

drives the roll-out as far as possible. The first issue is transparency. It is a source of huge concern to all our constituents who do not have superfast broadband that it is often impossible to find out when, if ever, they might get it. Councils are often unwilling to reveal that, for reasons of commercial confidentiality, despite assurances from Ministers and BT that they can do so.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I am incredibly grateful to my hon. Friend, who has surely come to recognise that he will not get to the end of his speech until every single Member in the Chamber has mentioned one village in their constituency. Does he accept that even when BT does reach out, as in the case of Beaulieu in New Forest East, in the next-door village of Boldre the “not spot” remains? I have mentioned two villages, and each has been treated very differently.

Matt Warman *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Before the hon. Gentleman proceeds with his speech, I must inform the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), and the rest of the House, that regrettably he is wrong. The hon. Gentleman will get to the end of his speech without taking interventions from every Member in the Chamber. That would simply be unfair, because 41 hon. Members have indicated to me that they wish to make a speech. I will impose an initial time limit of four minutes, but it is likely to be reduced to three minutes later in the debate, because there is another important debate to follow. If hon. Members think that the Chair will not notice if they make long interventions on the opening speaker, they are also wrong. I am watching very carefully, and if anyone thinks that they can make a long intervention now and then be called to make a speech later, I am afraid that they will have to think again.

Matt Warman: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I think I need all the help I can get with these interventions.

Hon. Members should accept that it is not possible to produce a 100% accurate map of everywhere that superfast broadband will go. There are areas where commercial roll-out, Government-subsidised roll-out and decent mobile network speeds will not make it. I call on the Government to ensure that there is much greater transparency on where those areas are and that that is a central outcome of the summit which I hope will result from this debate. It is not enough for mobile networks to provide maps relied on by businesses that imply comprehensive coverage when in fact people have to stand in the middle of the road or hang out of the window. It is not enough for my constituents to struggle to determine when BT's roll-out will get to them. I would rather give them bad news than no news so that communities can start to work out what they can do for themselves.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): Twenty-five per cent. of all businesses in England are based in rural areas—a greater proportion than that of the population—and yet companies such as Agenda Security Services in my constituency have had to invest tens of thousands of pounds to get any kind of usable service while their counterparts in cities have no such disadvantage.

Matt Warman: Absolutely; the contrast is the most painful thing.

I would hope that greater transparency might come from BT, but it may come across all networks only with much tougher regulation. That transparency would also allow companies and councils to make a better case for putting state aid into areas where it is not currently permitted.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Matt Warman: If I can just get on to my second point, I am sure my hon. Friend will be able to have another go.

The second issue is the role of BT within the current roll-out. I am sure many Members will say that BT is, in effect, a monopoly and that its Openreach division should be split off, and accuse the company of creaming off Government subsidies and spending them on sports rights while failing to provide a consistent service across the country. In my constituency and across Lincolnshire, BT's roll-out is ahead of schedule and under budget. Moreover, with take-up ahead of expectations, unexpectedly large revenues are being ploughed back into extending the network further than we had expected. None the less, rival networks will say that Openreach could raise more money and invest more widely as a separate company.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Is there not an important issue about priorities? In my constituency there are places on dial-up speeds. They do not have broadband at all, let alone superfast broadband, and the concern is that they are not being prioritised in the state money used by BT.

Matt Warman: I absolutely sympathise with those problems.

It is unfashionable for Members of Parliament to admit that there are things they do not know, but as someone who covered broadband's roll-out as a journalist for 10 years or so, I admit that I do not know whether the roll-out would be better if BT were to be split up as a company. I am certain, though, that regulation needs to be simpler and more rigorous however the company ends up, because we must promote more competition. I am also certain that Ofcom's assessment of what is best must be absolutely robust so that whatever decision is reached is not a matter of perpetual debate. I urge the regulator to consider all possible options now.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the importance of greater competition. Whatever the future for BT, does he not agree that it is extraordinary that so far all the public subsidies for superfast broadband roll-out have been handed to a single company? How can that promote competition?

Matt Warman: The money that has been handed to BT occurred after a tendering process. We should not forget that.

Some argue that splitting up BT would delay this vital roll-out unnecessarily. I would say that we should not put our principles before a vital national infrastructure

project, and that if any delay would harm businesses and families, Ofcom should assess what the impact of breaking up BT might be in the short term.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): It is all very well to talk about competition, but we are discussing a form of social exclusion. I speak as somebody who has the dubious distinction of having a constituency that is ranked 592nd out of 650 on broadband access. In North Ayrshire and Arran, 32% of data zones have no access to superfast broadband—including Arran, parts of Dalry, Largs and Cumbrae, West Kilbride and Seamill—and there is a higher than average number of “not spots”. It is all very well to talk about competition, but does the hon. Gentleman agree that we must remember that we are discussing the social exclusion of those who have no access?

Matt Warman: I agree that access to broadband is an issue of social inclusion. However, I remember as a journalist visiting the highlands and islands of Scotland to see BT's publicly subsidised roll-out, so those areas have benefited.

Simon Hoare: In the spirit of promotion, I am grateful to my right hon. and gallant and learned Friend for giving way. Setting aside philosophical ideas about competition and splitting up BT, does he agree that most of our constituents—this is certainly true of mine in North Dorset—are just keen to get the damned thing delivered as quickly and as cost effectively as possible, to allow them to grow their businesses? Would it not be sensible to park the governance discussion until a later date and to focus today on the delivery?

Matt Warman: I humbly disagree with my hon. Friend. Although it is right to focus on the roll-out of our current plan, we are in the process of making a plan for the final 5%. That is why this is the right time to have this debate and for the Government to focus on “not spots”.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way; he is being very generous. Does he accept that, even though this is a publicly subsidised roll-out to try to counteract market failure, far too often BT approaches it from a purely commercial point of view and that it is simply used as another way to extend the profitable parts of the market?

Matt Warman: I am conscious of that accusation.

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

Matt Warman: I give way to the Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee.

Jesse Norman: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the diligence and energy with which he has pursued this topic into this debate and I apologise for missing the start of it. As he may be aware, my Committee is still interested in taking evidence on the universal service obligation and in receiving submissions from constituents and from colleagues across the House. The work will begin fully next month.

[*Jesse Norman*]

May I share with my hon. Friend a thought on BT? It is not just a question of whether the relationship of BT to Openreach is supporting competition. It is also a question of whether Openreach is itself being starved of capital because it is located within BT with its new, emerging consumer and retail orientation. If it at least had its own balance sheet it might be able to borrow at very low rates and therefore support capital roll-out with it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Even the hon. Gentleman, who makes extremely good arguments, must make them quicker and briefer than that. We will never get through this debate if people keep making long interventions. It simply is not fair.

Matt Warman: I agree with my hon. Friend that that is the counter-argument to keeping BT together.

Finally, the issue of a universal service obligation, which I mentioned briefly earlier, must be addressed in a more meaningful way. The current 2 megabits per second must be raised, but to raise that dribble to a mere trickle of 5 megabits per second is not enough when 10 megabits should be regarded as the minimum. We must accept that some parts of the country will exceed the minimum by much more than others and therefore set the minimum as high as is practically possible. I for one would like Ofcom to consider whether the current definition of superfast broadband could be that minimum, in line with the aspirations of various Governments around the world, especially when taking into consideration fixed broadband and mobile signal. That will be especially important, as a host of niche schemes come forward across the country, to connect the final 5%.

Additional mobile spectrum may be the answer, but according to Ofcom it will not be available for use until 2022, which will not provide much hope for many of our constituents. 4G will not reach 98% of the UK population until 2017, leaving millions currently with no manageable broadband connection, wireless or fixed.

The solutions to the final 5% will be many and varied, and I am sure that more companies will join those that have already used church towers, tractors and their own trenches to build a new network where it was previously thought impossible. Satellite must play a part, as will many of the exciting new projects in the Government innovation fund.

Mr Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate. Many hon. Members have talked about the problems experienced in urban and suburban areas. Villages such as Northney in my constituency are both rural and coastal. Can he assure me that in his work and engagement with Ministers those communities will not be forgotten?

Matt Warman: As a Member of Parliament for a rural and coastal constituency, I can assure my hon. Friend that they will absolutely not be forgotten.

To conclude, if the Government are to achieve their manifesto commitment to near-universal superfast broadband by the end of the next Parliament, as well as ultrafast broadband at nearly all UK premises as soon as is practicable, a brave regulator, much greater

transparency and serious Government investment must be forthcoming. Some 12% of our GDP is generated through the internet, which puts the UK significantly ahead of other countries. That status will only be maintained if we do everything we can to further narrow the digital divide, and I hope the Government will agree that the “not spot” summit for which the motion calls will be a positive and constructive part of that vital process.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Before I call the next speaker, I shall announce formally what I indicated earlier: I have to impose a time limit of four minutes on Back-Bench speeches.

5.16 pm

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman). This is not the first occasion on which he has initiated a debate on this subject. It is good to see the Minister. He is a great survivor, and has been in the same role since 2010. Not only is he knowledgeable but he is responsible for many things. He cannot blame the previous Government, but he can blame himself for some of the issues that I am about to raise.

I represent a rural and periphery constituency—an island community. Although the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness said that this is not just about rural areas, they do suffer the most. There is a double whammy for periphery communities. If people live far from large towns and cities they have to pay more for their utilities—they are not on the gas mains, for example, and mobile phone coverage is poor by comparison. Too often, rural and periphery areas are in the slow lane, so we need Government subsidies to help address that. A lot of money has been allocated, but in many areas the 95% threshold in the Government agreement with BT is simply not good enough. I have long supported universal coverage. We should start from 100%, and if there are issues, we should tackle them, rather than set a low bar of 95%, as that 5% is predominantly in rural and periphery areas.

In the recess, I went out with BT engineers to see for myself what the issues were in my predominantly rural area. I saw some of the problems that they had to consider when they rolled out broadband and moved from copper to fibre. Yes, it is a big task for them, but they have received a lot of money to do it. I suggest that the Minister should consider going for universal coverage.

There are a number of players in the field—it is not just about whether it is private or public—including the regulator, the UK Government, BT and service providers. They keep blaming one another, and the Minister and the Department should get a grip on that and place responsibility where it lies. The Welsh Government have taken a lead in Wales with a roll-out programme that brings together UK Government money—the European Union has helped with state aid—the Welsh Government and BT. I can confirm that the result in Wales is slightly better than in most parts of England. The Minister should look at best practice in devolved Administrations. In my constituency, 80% of cabinets are live, so 80% of households can access broadband, but other areas—the 5% I have mentioned—are hard to reach.

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con) *rose*—

Albert Owen: Do I get an extra minute if I give way, Madam Deputy Speaker? If so, I will give way.

Jake Berry: I draw hon. Members' attention to my declaration of interest as a property owner on the island of Ynys Môn. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that an island such as Anglesey would be a perfect place to roll out mobile broadband, given that Holy Island, which is just off the coast, is relatively flat with some high points? Have the Welsh Government considered using the European money to roll out mobile broadband to get to those hard-to-reach properties?

Albert Owen: It is good that I get the extra minute, and the hon. Gentleman has also covered a couple of pages of my speech. I am happy to defend and fight for his interests and those of his parents on the island.

The serious point is that we want the £129 million clawback to be used properly. The Welsh Government have offered grants of £1,000 to the 5% of difficult areas, £900 of which the Welsh Government provide from that pot of money and £100 of which comes from the customers and community groups that want the wireless connection. I urge the Minister, who is a very reasonable person, to look at such things rather than have a summit because, with the greatest of respect, summits are about talking and what my constituents want is action.

My constituents do not want to be in the slow lane. They do not want to be on the periphery when it comes to 21st-century technologies. I would have liked to see pilots in rural areas. Smart metering for gas and electricity is the next big issue for the country, but the providers are already saying that they cannot reach 100% of households. I want my constituents and constituents in other rural and peripheral areas to be first-class citizens in this country. They must have not only the same rights and responsibilities, but the same services. Rural areas need to compete with large towns, so we need 21st-century infrastructure. Those who say that the market can deliver should look at the mobile phone coverage in my area. It is very poor and patchy, and the market is not delivering. We want all the main players to work together to ensure that rural and peripheral areas get 100% attention and 100% broadband and mobile coverage.

5.21 pm

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I thank the Minister for everything he has done and is doing to promote the need for broadband in our constituencies. There is general agreement across the House that superfast broadband can no longer be regarded as a luxury, but is becoming increasingly essential for public services, individuals and businesses. There is a danger that a digital divide is opening up for the households that will not be able to access superfast broadband under the proposals.

It is an achievement that such a large number of additional premises have been connected to superfast broadband and that so many will be by 2017. I recognise the Government's subsidy and support for that, as well as the work of the Minister. He tells me that some 19,000 premises in my constituency will receive superfast broadband by 2017 owing to the public funding. However, that means that some 6,500 premises in my constituency

will not be able to access superfast broadband. That is not 5% or even 10% of premises in my constituency, but 15% or one in seven.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that this is not just an issue for rural communities? Even in the London Borough of Haringey, there is a massive gap in provision in the Alexandra Palace area, which is increasingly seeking to be a destination for leisure and so on.

Nick Herbert: The hon. Lady makes her point well, but she will forgive me for being concerned about rural areas, since I have a rural constituency of some 250 square miles.

I wish to raise two issues. First, the time has come for us to address seriously how the digital divide will be closed. There is an existing programme and I recognise that it is steadily increasing the number of premises that can access superfast broadband, but it is clear from the Government's figures that there will be a gap. As hon. Members have said, what our constituents want to know is how that gap will be closed.

Here is a clear case of market failure. The market says that it does not have the resources to supply the remaining percentage of difficult-to-reach households. There is a case for ensuring that public subsidy is directed at securing access for those areas that are hardest to reach, and that will undoubtedly involve a mix of technologies. I doubt that satellite technology will provide sufficient access speeds for the future, but we need to hear how the Government will ensure that rural areas are not permanently disadvantaged. Some households in my constituency can barely access broadband at all—they have the lowest possible speeds—let alone access superfast broadband. They need to hear now about future plans, recognising that their neighbours have successfully achieved that superfast access.

I believe there is a lack of competition in this area and that a shake-up of the market is needed. It is not satisfactory that 75% of new superfast broadband customers on the Openreach network are BT or BT subsidiary customers. Openreach has seen a decline in investment in that area, particularly with the copper wires that are still necessary because we do not have fibre-to-the-premises connection. The customer service provided by Openreach is simply unacceptable. One of my constituents had a delay of up to 20 months when receiving a phone line from BT, and 2,500 Sky broadband customers in my constituency who rely on Openreach have reported a fault. We know that Sky provides about one third of that service in my constituency, which means that 7,500 constituents have been affected by poor customer service. That is a constant report from my constituency.

Some 82% of my constituents wait for more than 12 days if they want to switch from BT to Sky, and there is evidence that investment by BT has been going not to the essential infrastructure necessary for Openreach but towards the acquisition of sporting rights for BT Sport on which more money has been spent. We should not be willing to accept that situation, and the merger between BT and EE is likely to make things worse because Openreach will be a smaller entity within the overall size of the group and will not be focused on such issues.

The time has come to persuade Ofcom to take a serious look at the lack of competition in this area and make a referral to the Competition and Markets Authority.

[Nick Herbert]

We would not accept such a lack of competition in the energy sector, yet there are fewer providers in the telecom sector for broadband than in the energy sector. The electricity market was referred to the CMA; it is now time for a similar referral for broadband to ensure that we increase investment in the area, that we have a disruption to encourage new entrants to the market, and that we future-proof new technology so that we close the digital divide.

5.28 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) on securing this debate. I am aware of his continued interest in this area, and it is an interest that I share as I have more than 35 years of experience in the IT industry.

The technology required to facilitate the universal roll-out of high-speed broadband across the UK already exists. If a village in rural Sweden can have superfast broadband, so can any village in the United Kingdom if money is invested to provide it. If superfast broadband coverage on the Isle of Wight can reach 90%, so it can on any other island in the United Kingdom. Existing technology will no doubt continue to develop and improve, and it can provide homes or businesses in the UK with superfast broadband if there is the will and funding to provide it.

That is easy for me to say, but we have a precedent. Throughout the 20th century the UK Government have had to meet the rapidly changing technological challenges of the time, whether the establishment of a reliable telegram service, or the affordable installation of telephones in family homes. Our youngest constituents would be perplexed by the idea that providing multiple premises with a shared telephone landline was once the pinnacle of our technological achievements.

The economic, business and social advantages of superfast broadband are self-evident. Indeed, lack of connectivity stifles business growth and can accelerate emigration, particularly in fragile rural communities. I am aware, for example, that the rural communities of Durness and Tongue in Sutherland are to get fibre-optic broadband.

It is welcome that these small centres of population will have access to quality broadband services, but the same cannot be said for the small crofting communities in between the two villages—a distance of about 20 miles. One of those missing the opportunity of high-speed broadband is the internationally renowned ceramics artist, Lotte Glob. Her business, which is based in Laid on the shores of Loch Eriboll, is severely restricted by her lack of access to superfast broadband. I have no doubt that each and every Member, if they were inclined to, could identify such businesses in their constituencies. Lotte's is just one of many.

It is not only rural communities that are affected, however. Many urban areas are plagued by difficult economic conditions and the associated problem of emigration. Increased connectivity can be an important tool in reversing this trend. Inverclyde has a relatively low availability of superfast broadband of at least 24 megabits compared with other constituencies. It is important to appreciate the gap in service provision

between urban and rural areas, but we must also recognise that it is too simplistic to characterise the issue as primarily affecting only rural communities.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that, despite the fact that his constituency and mine are neighbours in the central belt, there are areas such as Bridge of Weir and Houston that might as well be on the dark side of the moon when it comes to broadband speeds, and that the superfast broadband roll-out provides an ideal opportunity to end the postcode lottery on broadband speeds?

Ronnie Cowan: I would, and I could add to that list Kilmacolm and Inverkip since we are playing that game.

Businesses in Inverclyde and across the UK will attest to the competitive advantage that super high-speed broadband gives them. Their ability to research, advertise, communicate and sell is enhanced by having access to the fastest possible connection, as well as a customer base that has good broadband speeds. To underline the importance of broadband services, we need only to listen to the Federation of Small Businesses, which believes that access to fast, reliable broadband is now essential for a modern business and should be considered alongside other utilities such as gas, water and electricity. FSB research also found that 99% of small firms rate the internet as “highly important” to their business, with 51% of FSB members already offering services online and a further 15% planning to do so in the future.

I look forward to seeing more detail about the UK Government's commitment to a universal service obligation for broadband, in addition to more information about what is considered an appropriate speed requirement for a legally binding obligation. It is surprising that the current USO commits only to internet speeds appropriate to dial-up modems. The FSB indicated that in 2014 there were still about 45,000 businesses operating on dial-up internet speeds, which is simply unacceptable with the current technology we have at our disposal.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) mentioned the investment of public funds in the highlands and islands. What he perhaps did not mention was that funding actually coming from the Scottish Government, the Highlands and Islands Enterprise and councils to help to develop broadband. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is making the difference for the highlands and islands?

Ronnie Cowan: It is certainly a great enhancement to the process we are trying to force through.

The Scottish Government are helping to meet this demand through the Digital Scotland Superfast Broadband programme, which is divided into the highlands and islands project and the rest of Scotland project. Significant progress has already been made towards the goal of 95% coverage of superfast broadband in Scotland by 2017. The Scottish Government are undoubtedly making great strides in rolling out superfast broadband across the country, particularly when our challenging geography and spread of population is considered, yet even if we meet our target of 95% of premises with superfast broadband by the end of 2017, there will still be a small but significant number of people without access until 2020.

I therefore commend Scottish Government's measures being implemented to ensure that we eradicate all "not spots" from our network. The rural broadband scheme is just one example. Its £9 million of additional funding will reach out to harder-to-reach areas that might not otherwise benefit from the wider programme.

Whether it is grandparents Skyping with their grandchildren, students researching for exams, gamers burning the midnight oil or businesses trading with customers and clients, the experience is more positive and beneficial on a faster secure connection. Therefore, as we make the final push towards universal coverage, it is vital that we accelerate the rate of implementation and ensure that none of our constituents is left behind.

5.34 pm

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) for helping to set up the all-party group on broadband and digital communication, which we chair together. He rightly said that neither of us was an expert in the field of technology, but along with colleagues in this House and the other place we are passionate about getting broadband rolled out across the country. It is important to remember that the group was set up in response to the incredible feedback we received during the election from people absolutely sick to death of not being able to get broadband. Somebody said to me in Somerset: "We have broadband apartheid". It was possibly over the top, but I understood what they meant.

I wish to speak about the problems in my constituency and in Somerset more widely. In fact, three of us from Somerset are here, as my hon. Friends the Members for Wells (James Heapey) and for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) are also in their places. *[Interruption.]* Of course, I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Wells.

James Heapey (Wells) (Con): Forgive me, I was not trying to intervene; I was merely indicating that our hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton) was also present.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: I apologise. It was mentioned before that my hon. Friend here, but I thought he had gone. So four out of five Somerset Members are here.

One of the big problems in Somerset is that we have tied ourselves up with Devon in Connecting Devon and Somerset. The Minister has been extremely helpful, but we are one of the few parts of Britain that does not have a phase 2 plan. The county councils—not the MPs—not only did not sign the agreement but leaked to the BBC the fact that they were not going to sign it before they told us, which left us in a difficult position. One problem now is that the Minister and his team are trying to arrange procurement through Europe so that we are not left behind. I believe the only other area of Britain that has not got 95% roll-out tied up is Scotland—I am sure one of its Members will correct me if I am wrong.

Places such as Exmoor will have to rely on wireless technology, as might places such as the Mendips and the Blackdowns, but that will not help when surrounding areas, in Somerton and Frome—get that in—and elsewhere, are missing out because we cannot guarantee the same roll-out across the whole area. In Exmoor, they will have to put up 50 masts, which is an enormous number for a national park to give permission for. Is it not better to

work with BT—exasperated as some of us are with it—to get superfast cable out? It is not satisfactory just to go for satellite, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) said, or wireless. It is not the same. As my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness said, the technology is not up to it.

We are in a difficult position, because unless we roll out broadband across the United Kingdom, including in places in Scotland such as Inverclyde and elsewhere, people are going to get more and more disillusioned. In areas such as ours, where people depend on broadband if they want to work from home, we cannot get it. It is still quicker in parts of Somerset to send a letter than an email. In parts of Exmoor, people cannot get television without a Sky box. Does anyone want to put all their eggs into Mr Murdoch's basket? The answer is no. So the situation is difficult right across the area.

The Minister has an extremely good team in the Department—I know because I have met them—helping with procurement in Somerset. Chris Thompson, who heads that team, is first rate. We need to take this further. The time allocated for this debate is not adequate—three or four minutes per speech is not enough to get the message across. Could we continue the debate at another time, either through the Backbench Business Committee or in Government time?

Will the Minister announce that his team will help the areas in difficulty? He now helpfully sends out his monthly bulletin, which is extremely good and gratefully received, but places such as Devon and Somerset are stuck, partly owing to the incompetence of councillors—I will not mention names, unfortunately, but he knows who I am talking about—and partly because people are not prepared to take this seriously. I therefore urge him to announce today that his team will help these places. We have heard from places such as Inverclyde. There is no difference between Inverclyde and Somerset and Devon. We are all in the same boat, and it is going down, and we have certainly lost the paddle.

5.39 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I, too, would like to congratulate the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) on securing and opening the debate. The question I want to address is why, as we are hearing from the debate across the Chamber, this roll-out is proving so disappointing. *[Interruption.]* The Minister says it is not, but one simply has to listen to the contributions made from Members from rural and urban areas to realise that there is deep disappointment about what is happening.

I think that the essential problem—the Minister knows my view—is that Ministers have lost sight of the lesson that competition needs to be at the heart of telecommunications policy. We have heard lip service paid to competition since 2010, but have seen no serious attempt to drive forward competition in telecommunications—and now we are paying the price, as seen in the complaints aired in this debate.

Earlier this month, there was a very interesting leading article in *The Financial Times*, pointing to the willingness of the Conservative party

"to cosy up to corporate champions and established business interests."

[Stephen Timms]

It continued by saying—Conservative Members should listen—that the Conservatives’

“penchant for protecting corporate interests is not healthy. With productivity still the UK’s biggest economic challenge, their instinct should be to promote competition. Politicians of the Thatcher generation must be astonished that the lesson still needs to be learnt.”

I think *The Financial Times* is absolutely right.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I am delighted to hear an Opposition Member talking about competition. If the right hon. Gentleman’s new leader has anything to do with it, there will be no competition—there will just be the state.

Stephen Timms: I simply refer the hon. Gentleman to the many examples of the effectiveness of competition in telecommunications policy—perhaps most strikingly in the design of the 3G spectrum auction in 2000. That auction was structured to make absolutely sure that there was a new entrant, and one of the licences was taken up by a company that had not previously been in the market. I think we would all agree that over the last 12 years that new entrant has had a dramatic impact on reducing prices, improving quality, extending coverage and promoting innovation. There is no shortage of examples of the beneficial impacts of competition.

As I said in my intervention, it remains astonishing to me—I raised the issue with Ministers at the time—that no effort was made to ensure that there was at least some diversity of provision in the publicly funded roll-out of superfast broadband. Instead, all the money has gone to BT. The consequence today is that BT has Ministers over a barrel. Ministers have no levers whatever to address the problems we are hearing about from Members of all parties—and they are getting progressively worse—relating to our disappointing position on superfast broadband roll-out.

I make no criticism of BT, which has simply done what any effective company would do when presented with a gift horse—it has accepted it. It is now recognised that BT was overpaid for the infrastructure it provided, so it has to start paying back some of the handout it received. Usage of the infrastructure has been a good deal higher than predicted, so BT is paying back some of the windfall it has enjoyed, but I believe only half of it. As with the 3G spectrum auction, this exercise should have been structured to make sure that there was at least some diversity of provision. Other companies bid; BT beats all of them every time. We therefore have nobody else with which to compare BT’s performance, no alternative approaches to consider and no levers at all through which the Minister could try to promote better services in the future.

In a few minutes, the Minister will do his duty and assure us that everything is fine with the roll-out of superfast broadband, but the reality, as this debate is making clear, is otherwise. What Ministers need to do even at this very late stage is to relearn the lessons embraced by their Conservative predecessors and to find ways to inject some competition into this market—a market that, as we are rightly being reminded, is very important for the productivity and prosperity of Britain.

5.44 pm

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman).

I shall try to keep my comments brief, because many Members are present. I am sure that that is because we all share the same frustration at the slow roll-out and the lack of availability of fast broadband, especially in rural areas. I use the word “fast” rather than the word “superfast” because in chunks of rural Hampshire we aspire not to superfast broadband, but just to something that is usable. Town and country appear to have split, and not even neatly, into the haves and the have-nots, with the digital divide most keenly felt in villages where downloading from Netflix is merely a romantic dream and the mundane tasks of tax returns and communicating with the Rural Payments Agency, or even just shopping online, are at best painfully slow and at worst impossible.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): My hon. Friend is highlighting all the important aspects of being connected to the internet, and of broadband, to individuals. Will she also acknowledge that the rural economy is worth £400 billion, and that it is therefore especially important for rural areas to be connected to broadband?

Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend has made an excellent point, which I shall deal with later in my speech.

At this point, I could lapse into a great long list of villages in my constituency where broadband is slow and unreliable, but let me first point out that this is Hampshire. It is not Inverclyde, or rural Somerset, but a county that is the largest in the south-east and has a population of nearly 2 million. At its closest point, my constituency is just 65 miles from Westminster—not, of course, that that appears to be a guarantee of good service: as we heard from the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), London suffers as well. Earlier this year, the villagers of Barton Stacey were celebrating the upgrade of the nearby exchange at Sutton Scotney because they finally had access to a speed of 0.5 megabits. That is the harsh reality for people in such villages. Anything is better than nothing, but it still is not good enough to enable someone to do their homework.

Let me briefly turn to the positives. The National Audit Office has reported that phase 1 of the roll-out is progressing well, but the Minister’s own figures indicate that, by the end of 2017, 13% of my constituency will still be waiting. The superconnected cities vouchers were a great initiative, but rural businesses tell me of their frustration that they were not eligible although they had started from a worse position.

Across the Test valley, planning policy has for years been to convert redundant farm buildings into commercial premises. We have countless attractive barn conversions where entrepreneurs are employing people and contributing to the national and rural economies, but are being hampered from competing in a digital world. Their perfectly reasonable question is, “If this is crucial for urban businesses, why is it less important for the rural ones?”

Of course, the problem is not limited to businesses. Home owners moving into new developments often find that fast broadband is not only not available, but not

even scheduled to be available. New developments appear to have been simply forgotten as part of the process. One constituent in Stanbridge Lakes was recently quoted a figure of £27,000 to be connected, an amount way beyond the means of any ordinary person.

I urge the Minister to make superfast broadband a requirement for developers as part of the planning process, and potentially as part of the section 106 process. In 2015, no one would dream of building a development with no access to electricity, water or adequate drainage, but it seems to be perfectly possible to build large housing developments with no access to the fibre network. According to information from Hampshire county council, Hampshire will not, in fact, have 95% coverage by the end of 2017. It will be September 2018 before wave 2 of this complex engineering project reaches that target—across the county, that is; rural constituencies such as mine aspire to a target of 87%. I know that there are satellite solutions—of course there are—but, according to my constituent from David Hepworth, from Up Somborne,

“good reviews of satellite broadband seem rather hard to find”.

Householders, local authorities and businesses all feel that they are over the proverbial barrel. The only game in town is BT, whose reputation in villages such as Sherfield English, Lockerley, West Tytherley and East Dean is poor. The service is slow and patchy, phone lines are notoriously unreliable, and there is a lack of capacity. Contractors even routinely disconnect one household in order to add a line to another: that has happened four times to one of my constituents, Ian Forfar. A resident of Lockerley has had her phone number unilaterally changed by BT with no warning, and Mrs Sara Gruzelier of West Dean has told me that BT seemed perfectly happy to send her husband and Brigadier Hargreaves (retired)—with a combined age of 150—up a ladder to do its job for it.

What my constituents want is some reassurance from the Minister that he will look at the timescales for roll-out, make sure promised deadlines are met and that alternative technologies are in place for the 13% who suffer from that digital divide, and work with DCLG and local authorities on new developments. None of this is unreasonable, but for rural areas of Romsey and Southampton North it seems a long way from Openreach and more like “out of reach”.

5.50 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Like other Members, I welcome this debate. Setting percentage targets for the UK as a whole can mask huge variations within regions, as we have heard from many hon. Members. That is why a debate and ongoing scrutiny by Members are required.

This was further demonstrated by the fact that, just as the UK Government have set a 95% UK target for connectivity to superfast broadband, the Scottish Government have done likewise for Scotland. However, the reality is that for this to happen in Scotland the Scottish Government and local authorities have had to invest more money than has been provided from Broadband Delivery UK. That is not how I would foresee the funding proportions working. Going forward, I hope there will be further UK moneys for the 5% gap. This also shows that future strategies on broadband and

mobile coverage need to focus on difficult-to-reach areas from the outset so they can set true budget requirements. That needs to be considered for 4G.

My constituency has a large rural element, and there is undoubtedly a lack of broadband access in some of the rural areas. I also represent Kilmarnock, which is one of the bigger towns in Scotland, and worryingly there is an area in Kilmarnock that still has broadband connectivity that is, to quote a resident, “worse than dial-up”.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): My constituency has superfast broadband connectivity of 61%, far below that of many other urban constituencies in the UK, and certainly falling short of the UK average of 79%. Does my hon. Friend agree that roll-out seems to be inconsistent, with some constituencies appearing to receive a higher priority than others?

Alan Brown: I agree, and we have heard that from other Members today, too. My constituency has a similar connectivity rate.

There is an area of Kilmarnock that is not going to have superfast connectivity. That is because BT has decided it is not economic. This follows on from inadequate investment in infrastructure previously by BT. I call on BT to reconsider that.

Returning to rural considerations, an early engagement I had as an MP was attending a BT Openreach consultation event in a local village. What struck me was that the majority of the people who attended went away disappointed because they lived in the rural locality and so would not be included. This is typical of the difference between expectation and reality in terms of broadband.

It is a fact that HMRC and agricultural claims have to be done online, and welfare requirements and job applications will have to be done online in the future, too. We also know that more people want to work from home. This again illustrates the fact that we need better rural connectivity.

I would contrast this slightly with the UK Government’s £150 million investment to have connected cities. That is welcome, but it exacerbates fears for those areas still missing out and left in the final 5% sweep-up. There are concerns about how long that is going to take.

The Industrial Communities Alliance publications “Whose Recovery” and, more recently, “Growth Beyond the Big Cities” illustrate perfectly that only certain regions of the UK have had any form of sustained recovery and, importantly, city growth often does nothing for the wider rural hinterland, both in terms of wider job growth and access to city jobs because there are issues to do with connectivity to the cities. We must ensure that in future rural areas do not have the same connectivity issues online.

I stay approximately 25 miles from Glasgow city centre, yet my constituency is one of the 10% most affected in terms of households with broadband access of less than 2 megabits per second; and currently only 69% of households have access to superfast broadband. These statistics illustrate the contrast within my constituency and neighbouring constituencies. A more detailed analysis is required of below the UK general target of 95% coverage for superfast, and we need to understand that some

[Alan Brown]

households are missing out. My constituency is also in the bottom 10% with regards to unemployment statistics. The wider rural area has open-cast coal legacy issues, and unfortunately the UK Government are washing hands of that.

I call for additional UK broadband funding to allow digital access for all. That would be a good way forward. It is counter-intuitive to have connectivity issues where there is higher unemployment and in some cases general remoteness. That point will be echoed in other constituencies. A “not spot” summit should look at how that marries with unemployment and at where there is the greatest need for future investment.

The Scottish Government have made their commitment clear and are doing all they can, and in my constituency have been supported by the local authority. I call on the UK Government to develop a strategy, to provide the necessary funding for those who will currently miss out on superfast broadband, and to provide timescales for that.

5.56 pm

James Heapey (Wells) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) on securing this debate and on all his hard and well-informed work on this subject. I also congratulate the Minister on indulging my fairly regular correspondence on these matters and replying promptly and thoroughly every time.

I also welcome the work of the Connecting Devon and Somerset programme, which for all its faults has accelerated its work over the summer, and ever more homes are now coming online not only in my constituency but across those counties. I am encouraged by the Minister’s comment in his letter to me last week suggesting that phase one will reach 82% coverage in my constituency, but that clearly means there is a great deal left to do in phases two and three, and I wish to make some points on those phases.

First, there is a belief that there is an inherent flaw in the fibre-to-the-cabinet model that is being rolled out. Across the Wells constituency, and I suspect in similar constituencies across the country, as cabinets go live there are large numbers of properties—indeed, whole villages—that do not benefit from the upgrade of the cabinet because the run of copper from the cabinet to the villages or houses is too long. I encourage BT and the programmes across the country, particularly Connecting Devon and Somerset, urgently to embrace the fibre-to-the-remote-node solution so that fibre can be taken much further into those villages and premises can benefit.

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): My hon. Friend is making some very good points, and the key one is about BT and the question of competition, which was amply made from the Opposition Benches today. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to see more competition, certainly in respect of BT?

James Heapey: I very much agree. It has been suggested to me by people whose analysis I have come to trust that the fibre-to-the-cabinet model suits BT and it is therefore rather convenient that Openreach should be pursuing

that model. It seems to me that if Openreach were not a part of the BT group and was completely independent it may be free to pursue other models and technologies that might work just as well for other service providers and therefore, crucially, deliver more competition in those communities.

There is an urgent need for transparency. According to statistics provided by Ofcom, the Wells constituency is ranked 593rd out of the 650 constituencies represented in this House for broadband coverage of 24 megabits per second or better. The statistics show that coverage in my constituency is 43%, but in the course of my correspondence with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport the Department has suggested that the constituency has 62% coverage. That lack of clarity and certainty over the state of the roll-out is very worrying as we go cabinet by cabinet, village by village and indeed house by house to ensure that every single premises, be it domestic or commercial, is connected. I cannot believe that the only way to get a snapshot of the coverage in our constituencies is to provide the electoral roll to the programme so that it can examine every single house. There must be a better way of giving us the data we require.

We are talking today about “not spots”, and my concern is that they relate not simply to broadband but to mobile coverage, too. As the industry moves towards bundling, whereby the providers of television, mobile, broadband and landline services will provide bundled packages, the difference between the haves and the have-nots will become ever more stark. We therefore need to future-proof the solution that we are delivering, and to ensure that, across the country, superfast broadband and genuinely decent mobile coverage—ideally with 3G as its benchmark—are achieved sooner rather than later. I very much welcome the fact that the aim of this debate is to call for a “not spot” summit. I simply ask that we do not hold that summit until all of us are equipped with the data we need to contribute to it properly on behalf of our constituents.

6.1 pm

Stuart Blair Donaldson (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (SNP): The main problems that fill my inbox on a daily basis are complaints about BT, so it is fitting that my office manager has texted me today to inform me that our internet connection has gone down. So, BT, if you are listening—that needs to be fixed. Given that BT is a telecommunications company, communications with its customers seem to be a particular problem. For superfast broadband roll-out in Scotland, it has been given £286 million collectively from the Scottish Government, Scottish local authorities, the EU and the UK Government. It is therefore unacceptable for BT to push back installation dates for business by three months from the original date. It is also unacceptable for someone to have to take two days off work to wait for an engineer who fails to turn up. A survey of my constituents has shown that only 33% were contacted to tell them of delays or cancellations relating to their appointments. That is unacceptable.

Furthermore, given the levels of public investment in the programme, it is also unacceptable for BT-employed contractors to be sent from Glasgow to north-east Scotland to do a 10-minute job. For those unfamiliar with the geography of Scotland, that is roughly a six-hour

round trip. My constituents have found it extremely difficult to complain to BT about their issues. They contact the company, only to find that they have to contact Openreach, which then bounces them back to BT. For many customers, BT Openreach is one and the same company, and this grey area makes it even more difficult for BT to be held to account.

Rural areas will achieve their full potential only with the arrival of superfast broadband. BT continues to roll it out to rural areas, but significant issues remain, as the hon. Member for Wells (James Heappey) mentioned. There might be fibre to the cabinet, but the use of copper wires means that anyone living more than 2 miles from the cabinet is unlikely to receive superfast broadband. The situation is made even more frustrating by BT's odd choice of locations for the fibre cabinets. For example, in the village of Marykirk in my constituency, the cabinet is three quarters of a mile from the village centre, at the bottom of a flooded field.

Rural areas such as those in my constituency need BT to provide a consistent and reliable service. We also need to be able to hold BT to account for the service it delivers. That is why we must give serious consideration to Ofcom's review and the proposal to split BT and Openreach. For rural areas to survive and thrive, we need a reliable, fast internet infrastructure capable of sustaining 21st century jobs and lifestyles.

6.4 pm

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I add my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) for securing the debate, and to the Minister for listening to our tales of woe today.

I can start on a slightly happier note than some did. It was not in the first week of May this year that my family's lives were changed significantly, but in the first week of March. Previously, the internet in our small village had not been at all reliable at peak times, or when it rained, as it occasionally does in north Oxfordshire. Then, overnight, my husband stopped commuting and joined the army of those who work at home, I found that I could answer emails in seconds, and the children found to their amazement that they could watch reruns of "Top Gear", on a variety of devices, in every room of the house. For me, the advent of superfast broadband will for ever be associated with Jeremy Clarkson. Quite simply, reliable fast internet changed all our lives.

I am sure that the Minister is as proud as I am of our local branch of Broadband Delivery UK. I was able to meet representatives of the branch during the recent recess. Better Broadband for Oxfordshire is committed to doing just what its name implies. To date, it has delivered on target, on time and under budget for the two years it has been in existence, and it is ranked fourth in the country for delivery. It can surely be no coincidence that the Minister represents the neighbouring constituency to my own. Better Broadband for Oxfordshire is funded from a variety of interested groups, including our local enterprise partnership, BDUK and our district councils. Despite all this excellent work, however, much of my casework still concerns the lack of broadband.

One issue is that commercial providers of broadband declare an interest in providing services for a particular area. If they are successful, those declarations remain valid for three years, and the service might not be

provided until the end of that period. That is a long time for a village or an industrial estate to wait. Better Broadband for Oxfordshire has in some cases needed to challenge those delays, and has on occasion needed to take over the delivery of the service. However, a better solution could be to shorten the period allowed for delivery, and to insist that the service is provided in a timely fashion.

Another big issue in Oxfordshire is attenuation. Much of our network is still reliant on old copper lines, and copper replacement will need to take place if we are truly to realise the potential of broadband, but that will require enormous investment. The older lines are a particular problem in rural areas, especially for farmers. As much farming is conducted online as it is in the cowshed these days. Those of us who have tried to download Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs manuals, or even to fill in a tax return, over a less-than-perfect connection know how frustrating that can be. If a provider can be found to install fibre-optic cables to remote farms, that has to be paid for. There is some confusion over whether an EU subsidy of, I believe, about £3,000 is available to assist farmers in paying for that installation. The National Farmers Union and the Country Land and Business Association take slightly different views on whether the subsidy can be claimed by those who also claim the single farm payment. I would be grateful for clarification on that point. It is important that the Government do not assume that all Government business can be conducted online before we have achieved more universality of service. I hope that, following the "not spot" summit, I shall be able to go back to my constituents in north Oxfordshire with concrete ideas and timetables for the future.

6.8 pm

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): I should like to thank the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) for securing this debate on what is perhaps the most important economic issue for rural constituencies. My inbox, like that of my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Stuart Blair Donaldson), seems to be bursting almost daily with messages from vast swathes of people in rural areas who cannot connect to the internet at anything better than dial-up speeds.

All broadband policy, under successive UK Governments, has focused on covering a certain percentage of population rather than a percentage of the geographical land mass. That is fine if you live in London, Glasgow or Manchester, because that is where the numbers are, but it is completely useless if you live in my constituency. My main message over the medium to long term is that this House needs to change that focus. We need to change tack. We need to focus on geographical roll-out instead of having this fixation with speed in populated areas.

My constituency is rural, running 100 miles from east to west and with 200 miles of coastline. Our biggest town is 80 miles from our second largest town. In between, thousands, if not tens of thousands, of my constituents live more than 2 miles from a superfast broadband exchange cabinet. That is the key to rural digital connectivity, as was alluded to by the hon. Member for Wells (James Heappey). People in my constituency are in line to receive superfast broadband only if they live within

[Richard Arkless]

2 miles of a fibre-optic exchange, and people often need to be within 1 mile of that exchange to get workable speeds. This will leave thousands of my constituents with no prospect of any kind of workable speeds. It is rural communities, with low-wage economies, dispersed public services and many infrastructure challenges, that need the help the most.

My constituency has more small businesses per head of population than anywhere else in Scotland, which is an incredible statistic given the digital disadvantages we suffer. Rural businesses are the driving force in my constituency. They are our biggest employers and it is essential that they are given the tools they need to grow. Let us consider our farmers, for example. Ours is a farming region, and our farmers, already squeezed by milk prices and other pressures, are being asked increasingly to rely on an almost non-existent connection. They have to deal with common agricultural policy applications, VAT and pay-as-you-earn returns, and applications for livestock passports and for animal registrations. All those jobs should take minutes with superfast broadband, but in reality they take hours and days with little better than dial-up speeds. That drains not only valuable commercial time, but huge amounts of what I would describe as rural gold-dust enthusiasm. They face all that before they attempt to diversify, which, amazingly, they are doing fantastically well despite being lumbered with a digital ball and chain.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you can never fully appreciate how encroaching on modern life digital exclusion can be unless you experience it for yourself. For that reason, I suggest that the “not-spot summit” be held in my constituency. People could come to Dumfries and Galloway to meet the young people who cannot get connected to the internet and to talk to our older people. They will be happy to explain how isolating it can be not to be able to see the photographs of the new baby or the grandchild’s first day back at school. People could come to meet our business leaders and ask them how they can expand their customer base or even stay still with these non-existent speeds. When it comes to booking a hotel room, people could ask our hoteliers how this affects them.

In another generation this place felt it proper to enact a universal obligation for telephone lines. This generation says it is now time to do the same for superfast broadband.

6.13 pm

David Warburton (Somerton and Frome) (Con): I know that many of my constituents will have been very pleased to hear about the targets for broadband roll-out for phases 1 and 2, but although they are a loyal and robust bunch I do not think they will be placing any bets on seeing those targets met in Somerset. The people of Somerton and Frome are not only noble in reason, but infinite in their many faculties. Their fingers are right now poised over innumerable mice, waiting to start an avalanche of innovative businesses and new ventures, but they cannot do so because, depending on whom you believe, my constituency rejoices in being either the 10th or the 14th-worst connected constituency in the country. BT and Connecting Devon and Somerset have so far completely refused at the fence of phase 2.

The Government’s recognition of the importance of rural broadband and the possible consideration of a universal service obligation are therefore both extremely

welcome, particularly alongside the planned wider physical infrastructure investment in the south-west, but we have seen some extraordinary anomalies so far. In the planned upgrade of Wincanton, for example, much of the town will see improved connectivity but the business park—the economic heart of the town—has been overlooked. That is one example of many, and I have spoken to a number of business that feel they may even need to move their operations outside Somerset in order to remain viable—moving from Somerset is, of course, a dreadful prospect for anyone to contemplate.

This dismal digital disconnectivity does not only affect businesses, but contributes to the exodus of young people from Somerton and Frome. I have highlighted before the fact that three quarters of our young people leave Somerset after their education. How can we persuade them to stay in the west country and make it somewhere to achieve their dreams unless we provide the tools they need to render those dreams in their full digital glory? The negative effects of inadequate broadband can only grow exponentially worse. In the past few years we have seen the bursting forward of the so-called sharing economy, and there are community projects in my constituency that are totally dependent on online co-ordination and organisation. I am thinking of tremendous organisations such as Frome’s excellent and very famous Electric Car Club, which harness the natural generosity and the entrepreneurial spirit of Somerset. It is arguably sad but true that nothing has greater potential to stimulate today’s rural economy than rural broadband, and it will be dire for our local economy if our entrepreneurial zeal remains stuck in the 1990s while our neighbours disappear into the 21st-century horizon.

Properly managed, a comprehensive broadband roll-out can, with one leap, act literally as a fibrous ligament binding together businesses, charities, communities and people, not only to other parts of Britain, but to each other and the rest of the world. Therefore, I very much welcome the motion, as a “not-spot” summit would certainly be an invaluable step forward. In combination with the physical infrastructure investment that the Government are providing, those fibrous ligaments will soon grow flesh and can bit by bit become muscular tendons, perfectly placed to propel the rural economy into the future.

6.17 pm

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on this important issue. As has been said, this is not just about superfast broadband, because too many people in Britain have no access to any broadband—even slow broadband is a much sought-after luxury in the rural parts of my constituency. Believe me, I know about this. I can speak from personal experience. In 2007, I moved 3 miles up the road into a house with the most breathtaking views, right in the heart of rural Burnley. Prudently, I thought it wise to check with BT before moving about access to broadband, and I was assured that there would be no problem. However, when I moved in and tried to get a connection I was told that I was too far from the exchange after all. Eventually I managed to secure broadband via a satellite, but that was expensive and never totally satisfactory; strong winds would regularly require the dish to be realigned, incurring yet more expense, and the speeds were low and never sufficient to give wireless access,

so only one person could use the internet at any one time. Downloading the smallest of files was a time-consuming nightmare. I did not even have the option of using 4G to access emails, because it is a fact that I got a better mobile phone signal in the middle of the Serengeti than I ever had in my home.

I only live in rural Burnley, 5 miles from the town centre, not on top of a mountain in the middle of nowhere—welcome to 21st-century Britain! Now, a full eight years later, I have finally got a fully functioning broadband service from BT. It is not superfast, but it works. Alas, many of my constituents still have no broadband service at all, and as recently as last week BT confirmed that there are no plans to provide 100% coverage in my constituency in the foreseeable future. So much in our lives now requires us to be able to get online. Whether for someone struggling to run a business from home or an old person trying to order online groceries, this current state of affairs is frankly not good enough. In the current dotcom economy those without online access are second-class citizens. How can we expect Britain to compete with other countries when our broadband coverage is so poor? Not only is the coverage patchy, but a recent *Guardian* money investigation highlighted the fact that we are being overcharged for the privilege. Over the past four years, British home phone and broadband customers have seen prices rise by between 25% and 30%. Prices are as much as 50% higher than standard prices in Europe. We have seen a number of mergers and acquisitions resulting in reduced competition and higher prices. There are strong similarities with the energy sector where loyal customers are exploited. There is even greater reluctance to change internet supplier than to change electricity supplier because of the fear of losing connectivity.

I welcome and support the motion and look forward to seeing a Government action plan that will address this issue and give a 100% coverage to Britain in the 21st century.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The House will be aware that most speeches have not taken four minutes. That is perfectly fine as there have been interventions. A debate is supposed to have interventions as they are what makes it lively and worth while, but after the next speaker, I will have to reduce the time limit to three minutes. The last speaker with four minutes is Mr Richard Drax.

6.21 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I am most grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to slip in here so that I get the extra minute. May I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) for securing this timely debate? I pay tribute to the Minister, who has listened to me and to colleagues from all parts of the House for many months. I am afraid that my message now is that he will have to go on listening for many months more until we all get the broadband that we so desperately need. In general, I agree with nearly everything that has been said and the concerns that have been expressed.

I wish to focus briefly on a tiny museum in a very beautiful part of my constituency called Kimmeridge—I am sure that some Members have been there. At the moment, the staff communicate by using smoke signals, a Coca-Cola can and some string or flags. In fact, they have to use anything they have to hand, as the lack of communication is so serious. Steven Etches, who has been a plumber all his life and who is now in his mid-50s, is one of the world's most renowned collectors of fossils. He has dedicated those fossils to a special museum, which won lottery funding of some £2.5 million. In addition to that remarkable achievement, he has also won an MBE—and rightly so. He was promised that, in 2017, a wonderful state-of-the-art museum would be built. It would attract people into South Dorset, educate both grown-ups and children about what used to stomp across our cliffs—no, not the Liberal Democrats—millions of years ago and help us learn all about our history. It was to be properly provided with internet broadband. Unfortunately, he has now learned that that is not the case, and the building work currently under way has been plagued with problems. John Woodward is the project director. He says the project has no broadband and virtually no mobile signal. The contractors who are used to dealing with suppliers and architects by telephone and email have been cut off. Consequently, the entire design team has been forced, at extreme expense and time, to come down to Kimmeridge to ensure that things are going to plan. This is what is happening in 21st-century Kimmeridge in South Dorset.

Mr Woodward tells me that BT appears to be totally unable to upgrade the village landlines, and indeed, recently, the entire village was cut off. The museum has asked BT for nine telephone lines, but Mr Woodward is not hopeful. He says that BT can provide temporary lines by pairing with existing ones, but for permanent lines it would have “to do something”. In the end, the fossil museum, local farmers, businesses and private individuals will be piggybacking on the new VoIP—voice-over internet protocol technology—to be installed by French oil firm, Perenco. That will give a signal of 30 megabits and will cost £99 a month. BT was quoting somewhere around £100,000. Without private enterprise, this particular scheme would not have met its deadline. Something has to happen. Something can happen with a little imagination, competition and flair. Let us get off our backsides and jolly well connect up the country.

6.25 pm

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): Like many other hon. Members, I have been contacted by many businesses in rural areas in my constituency regarding the availability of superfast broadband—or rather the lack of it. It is a serious issue in my constituency, which is why I wanted to speak in this debate.

Telecommunications is a reserved matter. However, the UK Government have not done enough in supporting rural areas with the development of modern technologies, and that threatens to send the message that large geographical chunks of my constituency are closed for business, which is absolutely not the case. The Government will argue that increases in spending on broadband development projects have seen Scotland receive a rise in funding, and that is true. However, the rise is not significant enough and the Scottish Government have stepped in to match that funding. They have doubled its value to try to deliver the upgrades that are required.

The Minister for Culture and the Digital Economy (Mr Edward Vaizey): I do not want the hon. Gentleman to give the wrong impression to the House. When he says that telecoms is a reserved matter, it is the case that the Scottish Government are in charge of the roll-out of superfast broadband in Scotland. He said that the Scottish Government stepped in to top up the money. Every project area in England, Scotland and Wales has provided match funding. It is not as if the Scottish Government came to the rescue; that was always the deal.

Steven Paterson: The Scottish Government are looking after the roll-out of broadband coverage in Scotland. However, telecommunications is reserved in this place, and the Government, of which the Minister is a member, must take responsibility, and I hope that they do.

Mr Vaizey: So, I am responsible for the roll-out in Scotland?

Steven Paterson: The Minister is responsible for the funding for it.

Despite these efforts, much of Scotland's rural zones are left in digital darkness, and that frustrates those in my constituency and in many others. The fact that the Scottish Government, a devolved Administration with no responsibility for telecommunications, have had to play such a role in this situation is not acceptable. The roll-out is inadequate for the businesses that I represent. According to Ofcom's 2014 figures, superfast broadband services were accessible by 75% of the people in the UK. Broken down, that figure was as high as 77% for England, and as low as 61% for Scotland. At the bottom of the scale was Wales with just 55%. There is a clear disparity across the United Kingdom that must be addressed.

In Stirling, a diverse constituency of urban and rural areas, only 57% of people have access to superfast broadband. A constituency that can benefit from a wealth of business opportunities, has a rich cultural and historical heritage and has the potential to expand its tourism industry needs broadband. As technology moves on, we must invest. Stirling, which is a constituency with so much potential, is currently 543rd out of the 650 UK parliamentary constituencies for superfast broadband access, so Members can see why this is such a big issue in my part of the world. Indeed, 2014 figures show that 8% of the Stirling constituency only has access to slow connections—defined by access speeds lower than 2 megabits per second. I hope the Minister will agree that we must make progress on this matter.

It is also important to recognise the efforts of Stirling Council, which joined other local authorities across Scotland in investing in the digital broadband Scotland project. Last year, with all-party support, the council invested £600,000, and it should be congratulated for so doing.

Ofcom currently safeguards the existing universal service obligations for postal and telecommunications services. A similar obligation for broadband providers was announced by the Chancellor, and I welcome that. However, it is important to note that businesses—the majority of which will rely on high bandwidth in order to expand their online presence—will benefit only to a limited degree unless the megabit limit is as high as we can achieve. I do not think that 5 megabits will be high enough and it should be revised upwards.

In conclusion, the UK Government have much to consider in their approach to the investment in broadband. I look forward to following the ongoing debate.

6.29 pm

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) for securing the debate and I also thank the Minister, who has listened to the voices from constituencies up and down the country.

I represent a new town and want to make one simple point, which I will definitely make within my three minutes. We have significant areas of new build property in Telford, so this is not just a rural issue. People come to Telford to buy the dream, but they get their value-for-money new build housing and suddenly discover when they arrive that they have been sold a pup. When I moved to Telford in 2013, I just assumed that broadband and mobile coverage would be a given—a normal expectation of everyday life—yet in parts of Telford, in modern fast-growing areas such as Lightmoor, Lawley and Trench Lock, that investment in basic infrastructure was not there. Similarly, in the Ironbridge gorge, a world heritage centre that is a mecca for tourism and leisure, there is no mobile coverage at all. Businesses and residents alike struggle with the daily frustrations that that creates.

In 2012, the Labour-controlled local council turned down Government funding to tackle the problem, saying that

“in an ideal world we would like to invest in broadband but we do not live in an ideal world”.

So the council said, “No thank you, Government. We do not want the money and do not want to invest in broadband.” Online community champions such as Telford Live and Lightmoor Life, along with the *Shropshire Star*, campaigned for change and, fortunately, three years on, Telford and Wrekin Council has changed its mind—we are now in an ideal world—and a deal with BT and Broadband Delivery UK has been signed. I am looking forward to 2017, when it will all be absolutely fine, but it could have happened a lot earlier if we had had a co-operative council—and I do not mean that in the sense that Labour would mean it.

Let us remember that new homes need infrastructure. They cannot be built in a void, as though they have just landed from Mars. Basic infrastructure in the 21st century means fast broadband and mobile coverage. Connecting Telford, as well as many other constituencies across the country, is vital for business, jobs and growth. I thank the Minister for his patience. I know that it has been very frustrating for him to have to listen to all these gripes, but I am so glad that he is in the Chamber to do so.

6.31 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I, too, thank the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) for securing this debate. Access to high-speed internet has become something that most people who live in cities take for granted. It is so intrinsic to everyday life that it has almost become an assumed utility, but that is not the case for everyone. For those without access to it, it is a luxury enjoyed by others while they are progressively denied effective internet services and media.

The people of Wales have been promised that 96% of households will have access to superfast broadband by 2016, although the term superfast is interpreted differently by the Welsh Government and means speeds of 24 megabits a second rather than the European definition of 30 megabits a second. All but 1% of that target will be delivered through the Superfast Cymru scheme, which is jointly funded by the Welsh Government, the UK Government and the European Union. The issue of whether the target will be met by 2016 is one matter, but equally important, if not more so, is what will happen to the remaining 4%. Neither the Welsh Government nor the company contracted to deliver the programme—BT, of which we have heard a lot—is prepared to disclose which areas will fall within or outside the 96%, but clearly installing superfast broadband in a cabinet in the middle of Cardiff will reach far more people than doing so in a cabinet in rural Meirionnydd. Until we are informed otherwise, we must expect that the 4% who fall outside the Welsh Government's targets will be in rural communities.

Access to high-speed internet, as we have heard, is crucial for the rural economy. Businesses in rural areas do not have the high-density footfall of big cities, nor can they rely on passing trade.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Does my hon. Friend agree that the compressed work and leisure time people face in the modern economy means that there is an opportunity for rural areas to offer wide leisure portfolios and pastimes, such as those that are available in the areas we represent? However, for people to set up businesses in those areas they need infrastructure, and we should be pushing ahead with getting broadband into rural areas so that we can use our natural capital as an economic advantage.

Liz Saville Roberts: We have heard already that tourism and agriculture, our principal rural industries, are highly dependent on effective internet services for marketing and their statutory data returns. There is a real issue with isolation and loneliness, and poor internet speed is doubly damaging in rural areas given the equally poor, if not non-existent, mobile data signal. Just 17% of Gwynedd is covered by the 3G data signal compared with a UK average of 84%, and most of that area is in the university town rather than my constituency. We have no 4G whatsoever—it is easy to remember that statistic. Our businesses are crying out for high-speed internet access and the Welsh Government are failing them. Given the importance of growing the private sector to meet the task of growing the Welsh economy, given the rural nature of the Welsh economy compared with that of the rest of the UK and given in particular the importance of high-speed internet to the rural economy, what will the UK Government do to ensure that the remaining 4% are not left without superfast broadband?

Poor broadband provision is putting rural businesses at a disadvantage and might stop businesses investing in rural Wales, as we heard previously about Somerset. That is why Plaid Cymru considers digital infrastructure equally important to the Welsh economy as transport infrastructure. If we want all corners of these islands to be prosperous and to break the long-standing dependence on the south-east of England, we must create the conditions for economic growth in all parts of the UK. For years now, Plaid Cymru MPs have been campaigning for a rebalancing of power and wealth across the UK and

although that has been traditionally associated with transport infrastructure investment and empowering national Governments with fiscal responsibility, it also means investment in digital infrastructure. For example, a Plaid Cymru Welsh Government in 2016 would deliver full superfast broadband at the EU definition of 30 megabits a second to 100% of Wales. If we are serious about growing the economy throughout the UK, we must do that.

6.36 pm

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): It is a great pleasure to make a short contribution to the debate and I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) for his tireless work on this issue during his five months in Parliament.

From Wiltshire, I can report good progress in the roll-out of superfast broadband but, as we have heard from Members across the House this afternoon, good progress is not good enough for the minority who have not secured a date or any sense of when they will be likely to receive superfast broadband. In Wiltshire, we have moved forward significantly with a postcode checker, an improved website, better communications and clawback from the programme to deliver for the remaining 5% to 8%.

People in the remaining 5% to 8% want to know what they can hope to secure, when they can hope to secure it and how it will be delivered. We need clarity on the options, because although the Government have done considerable work to pilot different modes of delivery for the remaining 5%, there is uneasiness about how it will work out practically, how it can be accessed and how it might relate to a potential phase 3, if the local authority puts together the money for that extra push after 2017. Clarity is required if people are going to be satisfied.

BT Openreach's relationship with other internet service providers, other than the rest of BT, needs serious scrutiny. Its role in the superior access given to other components of BT rather than to other ISPs is not clear. It is very difficult to get a clear answer about where such protocols exist, how they exist and whether ISPs other than BT can get BT Openreach to act with the same sense of urgency.

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that an additional challenge is to ask the Government to review those parts of the country included in the commercial roll-out and to include some of them back in the BDUK project for phases 2 and 3?

John Glen: That is a sensible point, and I know the Minister will respond to it in a few moments.

I want to finish by addressing the progress in Wiltshire and south Wiltshire on the infrastructure project for mobile telephony. I thank the Minister for what he has done to catalyse the development of that across four sites in my constituency. There has been good dialogue with local parishes and positive outcomes to deal with "not spots" and make sure that there is mobile coverage in parts where people never thought they would receive it.

I urge the Minister to examine how the process for the remaining 5% will work, and how more clarity about that process can be achieved—whether parishes

[John Glen]

or local authorities will be involved, or whether individuals can access grants for the range of options that exist. One of the biggest frustrations has been that other commercial providers have been circling, desperate to provide where BT or the local authority in partnership with BDUK will be unable to do so, but they do not have that information early enough. As many have said, it is essential that we get this right if the rural economy is to be strong and is to be able to develop. If there can be clarity over that last 5%, this will go down as an effective project by this Government.

6.40 pm

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): I want to be somewhat novel for an Opposition Member and thank the Minister, not only for attending but for seeming to listen. In my short experience in the House, that is not always the case, so my thanks are genuine.

I suspect that the Minister has heard it all before and that he feels a little complacent because he has, he thinks, almost delivered. It was always going to be hard to deliver broadband right across the country; there were always going to be some problems at the edges. However, from the start of the deployment project in 2010 to the end of this Parliament, when we may get the full roll-out of superfast broadband, it will have taken 10 years. World war two took six years, during which we organised the Normandy invasion and invented nuclear weapons. Ten years is too long. I respect the Minister's hard work, but I think that that is a reasonable criticism.

Ten years is too long because the demand for bandwidth never diminishes. Once we have superfast, we will need ultrafast. The demands of the economy are constantly changing, partly because of where people are. My constituency, sadly, is 572nd in the list of constituencies regarding broadband roll-out, but I know that in the next 10 to 15 years its population will rise by 25,000, so the problem will reset itself. We have a mix of areas—rural, coastal, urban, hills—but above all we have fast-growing local businesses, and they are being held back. If the population increases and broadband has moved on to the next stage, ultrafast, there will be an issue about how we get it.

Which spider lies at the centre of the web of problems that have led to the process taking 10 years? The answer is BT Openreach. We can argue about the issues and about what BT has done right and what it has done wrong, but it always comes back to the fact that we had a monopoly supplier. We have to address that. I am not being specific about what the issue is or how we deal with it, but if we do not address the fact of Openreach, we will never move on and be able to solve the ultrafast broadband problem when it arises, as it will.

6.43 pm

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) on securing this debate, which is hugely important for all Members of the House. It has been a very interesting debate, with Members demonstrating time after time how important the broadband connection is to them and their constituents. As we move towards the “not spot” summit, which I

sincerely hope will happen because it will tackle an issue pertinent to all our constituents, I hope that the Minister will have in his mind two issues that I want to raise.

The first concerns the inability of rural businesses to get broadband even when they are relatively near to—within one or two miles of—a fibre-enabled cabinet. I was visited by someone from a new business on Broadhead Road in Edgworth in my constituency which had just secured United Utilities as a client. United Utilities is the only FTSE 100 business in the north-west, and a relatively small start-up contracting with a FTSE 100 company is a fantastic success story. Part of the business is laying ground infrastructure, such as drains, pipes and water mains, and United Utilities asked my constituent to do a 15-minute turnaround on some plans. Despite the fact that he is relatively near a fibre cabinet, it took him over an hour even to download the plans when they were sent to him, let alone comment on them, amend them and send them back, and that is putting his business at serious risk.

Another constituent works for a crowdfunding business, which is entirely online. Crowdfunding is becoming such an important way of financing businesses in our country that we have to find a way to make sure that they can grow and succeed throughout the north of England. On Dean Lane in Water, my constituent is unable to work from home despite being within a mile of a fibre-enabled box.

There has been a lot of criticism of Openreach today, but at this point I would like to praise Openreach and Superfast Lancashire because they are coming to do a roadshow in each of those locations in my constituency. They are looking at a nodal approach—I do not claim to know what that means—to see what can be done about connecting those two individuals. I hope that the “not spot” summit will ensure that the same approach is taken all over the country.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Does my constituency neighbour agree that one problem is that different authorities are carrying out different plans, and that they ought to work more closely for the benefit of those on the edges of constituencies?

Jake Berry: I could not agree more. My hon. Friend and I have worked very well on cross-border issues in Edenfield in my constituency which borders Ramsbottom in his constituency.

My final point is about the universal service. An Opposition Member made the point that in the 1990s we thought it was so important that people had universal access to a landline that we put it in legislation when we privatised British Telecom. We did more than that; we provided a social tariff, saying that those people on low incomes or receiving benefits could secure a landline at a lower rate because we believed that it was so important. Now, when we are considering universal service for broadband, is the time to ensure that there is a social tariff for those on low incomes to access broadband. That is not so that people can sit at home surfing the internet, booking holidays or watching catch-up TV; it is for their children. Most schools in my constituency now both set homework and ask for it to be submitted online, and £15 a month for line rental plus possibly another £10 to £15 a month for a broadband connection is too expensive for many households. We will entrench

intergenerational deprivation, both digital and actual, if we do not find a way to enable those on low incomes to get connected.

6.47 pm

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) on securing the debate. I agree with the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Richard Arkless) that this issue is critical to the development of our local economy throughout the UK, whether we live and work in urban communities or rural communities. Like many of the Members who have spoken today, I represent a rural constituency that has been left behind in the broadband roll-out. A number of my constituents are experiencing digital exclusion and the social and financial implications that that entails.

Sammy Wilson: Does the hon. Lady accept that her constituency and mine are the worst two in Northern Ireland for broadband coverage, in terms of availability or speed? Does she accept also that part of the problem is the monopoly that BT has and its emphasis on getting line rental rather than looking at innovative ways of ensuring that broadband is more widely available?

Ms Ritchie: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He, like me, has heard stories from constituents in both the residential and the business sector who are unable to access broadband. For example, in a major town in my constituency is a business centre. It has a box in its business complex which accommodates 60 businesses, but the box is not enabled. That has a significant impact on the location of local investment and urgently needs to be addressed. In other cases, owing to the topography of the Mourne mountains, many young people cannot do their homework as they do not have access to broadband. They are forced to travel some 8 or 9 miles to a local library to do that simple task. That is totally unfair.

Let us look at the statistics. Of the £1.7 billion to provide superfast broadband throughout the UK, £11.6 million for phase 1 and phase 2 was allocated to Northern Ireland. Phase 1 aims to provide superfast broadband to 90% of premises. Phase 2 will seek to further extend coverage to 95%. At present my constituency has about 63%, and by June 2017 it will have 64%. Yet again, it is ordinary businesses in the agricultural sector, which is now expected to do everything by digital means, and the business community and ordinary residences that will be affected. It is believed that the format for broadband supports the majority in the wider community, rather than the minority—those isolated, inaccessible businesses in rural communities that make up our local employment base.

I urge the Minister to announce tonight that he, with BT, is going to deal with the issue, as the hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) said, and not only hold the “not spot” summit but take immediate action to ensure better access to broadband. Our local economy, our local financial and business sectors and the wider retail economy, as well as ordinary citizens in their homes, depend on that for their future economic survival.

6.52 pm

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): I join others in the Chamber in thanking my hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for Boston and Skegness

(Matt Warman) for bringing this debate to the Floor of the House. I welcome the Government’s laudable aim to transform broadband access across the country, and much has been done. The Minister was kind enough to write to me to provide me with figures that show that by June 2017, 40,135 premises in my constituency will have access to superfast broadband, but 8,712 premises will not have access. I fear that villages such as Harrington and Langton will continue to have to sellotape their dongles to their living room windows in a vain attempt to connect with the outside world.

We have heard a lot today about the impact that that can have on businesses and I will not repeat that. Instead, I will offer an example of a solution. A local company, Millhouse Manufacturers, in the village of Kirkby on Bain has 25 employees and is a real success, but it needed to upgrade its broadband access from 2 megabits per second in order to continue to grow and flourish. BT quoted the company a total of £120,000 to dig a trench two miles from the nearest exchange. For a small business, that is unaffordable, but I am proud to say that this little business in a village in rural Lincolnshire found a solution. For the sake of brevity, I will not explain the technicalities, but basically it put a pole in a field, courtesy of a local farmer. That means that it will get 100 megabits per second, rather than the 2 mbps that it was receiving before.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): My hon. Friend raises an important point. It is all well and good for BT to provide fibre to the box, but it is the last mile or two which require a much more imaginative approach to the distribution technologies. Will she join me in persuading the Government to be much more technology-agnostic in that final mile or two to the home or business?

Victoria Atkins: It is as though my hon. Friend has been reading my speech over my shoulder.

That was a very innovative solution, but it cost £3,000. Even though it was not as bad as the BT quote, it still cost £3,000, which is not affordable for many people. I hope the Minister can offer some assistance and tell us whether money can be found in the overall scheme to help fund such innovative solutions, particularly as suggested by the Chancellor in the spring Budget.

I am conscious of the time, but one other point that has not been raised is the impact on villages that are close to others that have already had superfast broadband fibre fitted. In the past two weeks two parish councils, Scamblesby and Maltby le Marsh, have contacted me. They are some 17 miles apart but they both report that when villages near them have had the fibre fitted, their broadband coverage has fallen. Mr Baildon tells me that until four weeks ago, his village had 1.5 megabits, but since a village nearby has had fibre fitted, reception has dropped to 0.34 megabits. Will the Minister please look into this, as it seems rather a coincidence?

Finally, may I end with news of my own summit, not just on “not spots” but on everything else? In a few weeks’ time I am launching in my constituency the constituency commission for Louth and Horncastle, in which I am asking everyone who lives and works in my constituency for their views on what is working, what is not working, and ideas for the future. It does not take a magician to guess that I shall be knocking on the

[Victoria Atkins]

Minister's door in a couple of months with the evidence and asking him how we can help the 8,712 premises that will not have access to superfast broadband.

6.57 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): There has been a consensus across the House that the economic and social benefits of reliable broadband are undeniable. I spent the summer touring village halls around my constituency for "chats with Cat", and that subject certainly came up in the rural parts of my constituency. I have spoken in this place before about Broadband for the Rural North—a group of people in my constituency who decided that they were not prepared to wait for BT to deliver superfast broadband, so they dug the trenches and laid the cables themselves, and now they have eye-watering speeds of up to 1,000 megabits per second—yes, 1,000. Calling that superfast broadband would be an understatement.

It is clear from my rural communities and my recent meetings with the local branch of the National Farmers Union that our communities need reliable internet access in order to access Government services, including applications for the basic payments scheme. However, it is not just our rural communities that are missing out on access to good broadband. I have received a great number of complaints from residents of the Highgrove estate in Lancaster. They certainly do not consider that they rurally—indeed, it is about a half-hour's walk from where they are to the centre of Lancaster. They have been complaining to BT that they were not receiving the superfast broadband, whereas neighbouring housing estates were. Their frustrations continued when they felt that BT was ignoring them.

The issues relate specifically to cabinet 76 at the corner of Caspian Way and Lindbergh Avenue. The cabinet is within the commercial roll-out of broadband and in an area where there is the possibility of competition, known as a "grey area", according to my recent letter from the Minister. Because of this potential commercial competition, it is outside the scope of the publicly funded project. However, my constituents, many of whom work in our local NHS hospital down the road and at Lancaster University, need decent reliable fast internet to download X-rays, for example, or to stream academic conferences. They find that the lack of internet is frustrating their work and they are unable to take opportunities such as working from home. In the words of one resident who is an orthopaedic consultant, "My parents live in a village in India and they have high speed broadband, yet I have to campaign for it here."

If the UK is to continue its role in the world, we must make sure that our broadband can compete internationally. A petition signed by 71 households from the Highgrove estate should be landing on the Minister's desk any day now. They are calling on the Government to act in their bid for superfast broadband. I hope that he will consider their petition.

6.59 pm

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): I, too, would like to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) for securing this debate.

I will keep my comments fairly short, because I think my voice might expire before my three minutes is up. I reiterate the comments made by my hon. Friends the Members for Salisbury (John Glen), for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton), for Wells (James Heapey) and for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) and by the hon. Members for Dumfries and Galloway (Richard Arkless) and for East Lothian (George Kerevan): whether we are talking about broadband width, rural farmers, the nodule—whatever it happens to be—it affects us all, and it affects us all in the same way.

The word "superfast" is lovely, but parts of my constituency would be glad just to have broadband. We have been told that 90% of the UK will have superfast broadband by 2016. Indeed, Better Broadband for Suffolk hit 80% in August this year and received an extra £3.9 million as a result of the uptake, for which I thank the Minister, because that kind of incentive is most welcome. However, we have suffered a little slippage, as the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee highlighted in its report of February 2015, and are currently ranked 513 out of 650 in the country.

We live in a digital age, unless we live in Bacton, Buxhall, Pakenham, Old Newton, Botesdale, Stowmarket or Bury. Suffolk is now a net contributor to the Treasury, but businesses are looking to move out of my constituency because they cannot grow. If we are serious about using technology optimally, we must not accept 90%, or even 95%. I am afraid that we must hold the Minister's feet to the fire—and BT's and anyone else's—in order to get to 100%. Broadband is going to be the fourth utility, and the Minister is going to deliver it.

Simon Hoare: My hon. Friend is obviously right to hold the Minister's toes to the fire, but does she agree that there is now a golden opportunity for local government also to play a part, given the announcement about business rates? It will be able to plough some of that into investing still further in broadband provision for the commercial community in her constituency and elsewhere. That will help while also taking some of the pressure off the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

Jo Churchill: My hon. Friend makes a valid point about using what resources we have in a much more intelligent way.

We need to ensure that at the planning stage there is communication between deliverers and providers and that we lay service ducts for broadband as housing and commercial developments are built, a point that several Members have alluded to. The Government are demanding digital platforms for most services, including tourism and education, so we need these things to be happening.

The word "rural" has been repeated in this Chamber time and again today. We should not be disfranchised simply because we have the pleasure of living in England's beautiful counties. It is right and proper that our cities should have high-speed broadband, but it is not right that we should not.

Mr Vaizey: I agree with my hon. Friend, which is why we are delivering superfast broadband to 16,000 homes and businesses in her constituency. I am sure that she will want to pause and acknowledge that important contribution that we have made.

Jo Churchill: I will indeed. I thank the Minister most kindly for it. However, I also point out that there are still many houses and businesses in my constituency that would be grateful if that largesse reached them too.

Broadband is also needed to deliver medical facilities in a 21st century fashion. A leading medical practice in the constituency has just started trialling the delivery of healthcare online. If we are to save money across the board, we need to take these technologies forward.

Furthermore, the mobile technology in my constituency is also not good. I am lucky enough to have some of the best “not spots” in the country, so we are championing greater coverage down in Suffolk. The A143 has some of the worst connectivity in the country. I recently surveyed my constituents, much as my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins) is doing with hers, and found that 30% feel their connectivity is either poor or very poor. When someone is without broadband or mobile coverage and then BT fails, it really is grim.

Mr Vaizey: As we look at planning reforms, particularly to extend mobile coverage, I hope that my hon. Friend will support me if we make it easier for mobile phone companies to put up masts in rural areas.

Jo Churchill: Indeed I will. I see that I have run out of time. I will follow the Minister wherever he drives us to ensure that we have 100% mobile connectivity, as France will have by 2020.

7.5 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) on securing what has turned out to be a truly superfast debate. I rise to speak about many of the issues that have been covered by other Members. There is a lot of common purpose in the Chamber about the need to connect those people in the 5%—in the highlands and islands it is even more than 5%—who are struggling to get by without the kind of connectivity that is taken for granted in other urban areas.

We have heard from my party colleagues about what the Scottish Government and councils in Scotland have been doing to take forward additional work to ensure that we reach those places that have not been covered by the commercial proposition. In fact, only a few weeks ago I was delighted to be on the shores of Loch Ness for the launch of superfast broadband there. That would never have taken place under the commercial schemes, so the Scottish Government and the other agencies involved, including the UK Government, should be congratulated on that.

I must also point out that the UK Government need to do more strategically to ensure that that is taken forward. There are opportunities in digital learning, telehealth, business and leisure in rural communities that can only be taken up with what is important infrastructure. I know that the Minister is keen to listen and work with good ideas. I also urge him to look at some of the Community Broadband Scotland projects, such as the one in Badenoch, where Badenoch Broadband is looking to deliver more than 30 megabits per second. There are models to follow in Scotland.

I echo what the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) said about technology and the advances that can be made. Let us not make the mistake of thinking that the technology we are deploying today will be sufficient in the coming decades, or even in a couple of years' time. We should be looking at a robust universal service obligation, and we should also be looking not only at 3G and 4G, but at 5G and the opportunities for new technology to roll out further connectivity for rural areas. The Minister could take this opportunity to make a commitment that when it comes to licensing for the 5G spectrum, he can include a universal service obligation that covers rural areas, such as those that have been represented today by other hon. Members and Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey.

7.8 pm

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): I join other Members in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) on securing this debate. In the digital donkey derby we have heard from the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), whose constituency is ranked 563rd for connectivity, and from my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey), whose constituency is ranked 562nd. Well, my constituency is ranked 561st, which means we are very grateful for the 43% of premises that are connected to superfast broadband. However, the remaining premises—BDUK says that it is 70% and Ofcom's digital survey says that it is 43%—still need to be connected. I support calls for transparency, so that we can get the real figures and understand why there are those different percentages.

I echo the calls for a universal service obligation, because that will deliver real change to my constituents in rural areas. It, along with the nodes that have been mentioned, may allow people to connect who have hitherto been unable to do so, even though fibre has gone to the cabinet, because they are more than 2 miles from the cabinet. A lady in Wrenbury, 2 miles from the cabinet, emailed to say that her business was suffering as a result of a poor connection, with speeds regularly falling below 1 megabit per second.

I have already started the process that my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins) mentioned by surveying my constituents. Eighty-five per cent. of those who responded to the survey have not been connected to superfast broadband, which may reflect the 43% figure in the Ofcom infrastructure report. Nearly 70% of constituents have not heard from Connecting Cheshire or BT about when work will take place to connect them to superfast broadband. Regrettably, Connecting Cheshire is not updating its website, so someone who goes to check the figures is informed that they will be connected by March 2015. That has not been helpful to businesses or residential customers in my constituency. Eighty per cent. of respondents are having connection problems, and nearly 65% of them have not had their connection problems resolved. More than 90% of respondents have highlighted low connection speeds as their biggest issue.

I urge the Minister to consider the universal service obligation to impose 10 megabits per second, for which many organisation are campaigning, including the Countryside Alliance and the Country Land and Business Association—and, indeed, several Members of Parliament who are desperate to see such a figure in their constituencies.

7.11 pm

Rishi Sunak (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con): I echo the thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) for his relentless work on this topic.

When one thinks about cutting-edge digital technology, the rolling hills and dry stone walls of the Yorkshire Dales might not be the first image that comes to mind, but I assure the House that this is an issue of vital importance to my constituents. We have heard a lot about farmers today. We know them as the proud stewards of our landscape who are working out in the fields with their hands to provide the food we require, but they are also cutting-edge innovators reliant on the latest in farming techniques and seed technology, and increasingly compelled by the Government to interact online with agencies such as the Rural Payments Agency. If they cannot access the internet, they are forced to use the services of a farm agent, who adds incremental costs to their business. They desperately need good broadband.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): Talking of rural areas, the situation is the same in my constituency. My hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry) referred to education. With regard to educating our next generation of farmers, without access to broadband people find homework and sourcing things on the internet very hard to achieve. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is a problem?

Rishi Sunak: I completely echo those sentiments. I had a similar conversation with villagers in Moulton in my constituency who were worried about young families leaving the village because they were unable to get access to the internet for their children to do their homework. They took it on themselves to install a community broadband scheme, at a great cost of over £1,000 for the village as a whole and a few hundred pounds for households, so desperate were they to correct the problem and ensure that young families stayed there.

There are many rural businesses in the Yorkshire Dales, including bed and breakfasts, pubs, and small hotels. When we go on holiday, perhaps the first thing we look at on Expedia or elsewhere is whether the place will have internet and wi-fi access. When I speak to pub landlords in my area, their desperate cry to me is that they need such access to attract customers.

I very much support the motion and hope that the “not spots” summit can be organised quickly. I urge those in charge to consider two areas for discussion that I hope can provide some relief. The first is the use of satellite broadband vouchers. Satellite is not a perfect technology—it has latency issues—but in rural areas such as mine it can provide a panacea to those requiring a basic level of broadband. Those who want it complain to me that the up-front cost can be prohibitively high, often hundreds of pounds. Although meaningful, that cost needs to be put into perspective with the current costs of some of the BDUK schemes, which can run into thousands. In some areas, satellite can be a cost-effective solution for those in need.

Simon Hoare: I apologise to the House if I am banging on about local government today. Does my hon. Friend agree that if satellite is to be successful in a

lot of our very pretty villages with listed buildings, conservation areas and so on, we will be looking to our planning authorities to show a degree of leniency instead of stopping the charge towards satellite by saying, “This is a very important building and you can’t have a satellite dish there”? We cannot have this held up for those reasons.

Rishi Sunak: I fully support those comments and those made by the Minister earlier. We must adapt the planning laws to ensure that mobile masts and satellite can deliver this vital service across rural areas, and I think that many of the rural communities in my constituency are aware of that.

The second topic for the summit could be transparency of BT’s roll-out. Satellite is one solution, but there are many areas where fibre will not work—the last 5% where it will be technically impossible or prohibitively expensive. In those areas, the Government are admirably backing the innovation fund to come up with new technologies. In my constituency, many of the alternative technology providers complain to me that they are unsure about BT’s future roll-out plan, and that uncertainty prohibits them from making the investments required to bring some kind of broadband to rural communities. This has been noticed by Select Committees as well. It would be wonderful if the summit considered what could be done to alleviate this blockage.

I commend the Government for their efforts thus far. Five years ago, only 50% of homes in my constituency had access to superfast broadband; today the figure is over 80%. That is terrific progress, but we must do more. This Government are committed to being a one-nation Government bringing opportunity to every part of this country, but if we are truly to build an inclusive society and economy that spreads opportunity to our great rural areas as well as our cities, we must ensure that broadband is there to turn those aspirations into reality. I join colleagues in urging that the summit happen as soon as possible with continued efforts to bring broadband to every part of the country.

7.17 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I too congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) on bringing forward this incredibly important debate.

I have asked only one question of the Prime Minister so far, and it was about “not spots” in my constituency. The Minister will be interested to hear that I received a very exciting reply saying that there would be three new mobile masts in my constituency to tackle “not spots”. In reality, unfortunately, the installation of those masts through the mobile infrastructure project—MIP—has been mixed, to say the least.

I am going to join in the chorus of the village people and mention three villages. In Assington Green, near Cavendish, people were very excited about the new mast, but it has died, it is finished, and it is not going to happen. It did not reach the deadline date, and we do not even know why; communication has been extremely poor. The Minister’s staff have been very helpful when I have emailed them questions about the masts, but there is no updating process and nothing to let us know what is happening. The second mast in Hitcham is a much

better story, and I thank the Minister for that. The scheme was approved today, and Hitcham is likely to have a new mast by March.

The third mast was to be in Boxford, a village in which I have an interest because my children go to the local school. It is another beautiful village but a genuine “not spot”. The loss of this mast is very disappointing, because there was huge public support for it. At the very last minute, the owner of the land—a farmer—where the mast was going to be based withdrew because of very strong opposition from a small number of his neighbours. People in Boxford found that for commercial reasons there was not going to be a mast. They needed that intervention from us and were very grateful for it, so what prospect is there of it happening? Given the possibility of such last-minute interventions, is there any kind of flexibility in the timing of the MIP? Unlike the copper wires in our villages, the Minister does not have the problem of distance from the Cabinet. Will he use that influence to try to persuade the Chancellor to keep money going for next year, because if we have the time we can build the public support to get these masts built?

Finally, I hope the Minister will confirm that he will hold the summit. As well as inviting BT, will he invite small providers, such as County Broadband, which serves Suffolk and Essex and of which I am a customer—it provides a fantastic service—so that they can be on the same level? What role does the Minister see small providers playing in delivering innovative solutions to the problem of spreading broadband in our villages?

7.20 pm

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I, too, commend my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) for securing this debate, which I am pleased to support as a vice-chair of the all-party group on broadband and digital communication.

I will, of course, focus on my own patch of Taunton Deane. We have the Connecting Devon and Somerset superfast broadband programme, which has been mentioned so eloquently by other fine Somerset speakers. I give credit to the Minister and the Government: this £90 million project is the largest broadband roll-out in the country. Things are going pretty well to get to the 90%, but—there is always a “but”—Devon and Somerset are the only two counties in the UK without a 95% minimum phase 2 broadband contract in place.

I held my own mini-summit on Friday night up in the Blackdown hills, an area of outstanding natural beauty. I am afraid the event drew together a whole room of disgruntled people from Bishopswood, Otterford, Churchinford, Churchstanton and Pitminster—I sound like Clement Freud on “Just a Minute”—who were all concerned about when the second phase of the contract will be signed to get them from 90% to 95%. They fear they are going to be left out.

Representatives from Connecting Devon and Somerset appeared at the meeting, put on a good show and said they were in negotiation with 15 people who might bid for the contracts, but they will not do so until the new year, which means, realistically, that the work will not even begin until June. That will be a year after the contract negotiations with BT collapsed, and there is still no indication as to whether many of the people

affected will be included. I would be really grateful if the Minister would comment on that and on how he sees the situation progressing.

I know that time is short, but I would like to pass on a few more comments that were made at my summit in the Blackdowns. I ask the Minister whether value for money could be considered on a slightly different basis. Perhaps investing in broadband could be looked at in terms of how much rural businesses give, meaning that it would become not a numbers game in terms of people, but a business game. The more businesses that are connected, the more the economy will get going, which is something this Government support.

Jo Churchill: May I suggest that my hon. Friend ask her summit attendees to provide the Minister with feedback and helpful information on the potential impact of the lack of broadband on their local economy?

Rebecca Pow: I thank my hon. Friend for that useful comment. I was going to continue feeding in a few more comments from my mini-summit. Many have already mentioned this, but can we be clearer about which communities are outside the scope of the current roll-out? That would at least allow residents and businesses to take decisions on whether they wish to pursue other options such as satellite broadband connection.

Above all, attendees wanted assurances that rural properties will continue to be connected by whatever means—poles, wireless, satellite, fibre, fibre to the remote node or anything else the Minister might come up with. Community fibre partnerships might be relevant, although that would mean that people would themselves have to pay. There are rumours that the Minister might send vouchers wafting their way, but they are not terribly keen on them, for various reasons. Similarly, when the clouds come down and the rain rushes on to the Blackdowns, satellite does not work terribly well, but perhaps we should consider it as a temporary measure.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Kent has been very keen on vouchers and was only recently allowed into the broadband voucher scheme, but we fear that funds are running out. Does my hon. Friend agree that extending funding for broadband vouchers should be a priority for the forthcoming spending review?

Rebecca Pow: That is an interesting point. People in the Blackdowns were quite negative about vouchers, but perhaps they should consider them more closely. I believe that people can receive £3,000 as an up-front contribution towards a satellite dish and to help with installation, but they have to pay for it monthly. Perhaps we should be a little more magnanimous in the Blackdowns and look more closely at that. The overall consensus was that fibre optic is still the best option for whoever wins the contract for the remoter parts of Taunton Deane.

In conclusion, let us have fibre to all premises and new houses in future; let us look very carefully at the Ofcom review of connectivity; let us fight for rural connection and our urban “not spots”; and let us do it all through this summit.

7.25 pm

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Having spoken in February's debate held by my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), which itself built on several other debates in the last Parliament, I am sure my hon. Friend the Minister must feel that this debate is somewhat like the film "Groundhog Day", albeit with some new and very welcome characters. Rather like the protagonist in that film, he is doomed to repeat the same debate over and over again until we get it right.

I welcome the Government's support and commitment. Almost 30% of the properties in my rural Newark constituency have gained access or the ability to access broadband as a result of public subsidy. That is not what failure looks like. None the less, 20% of properties remain unconnected, which will be the subject of the summit proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman), if the Minister takes him up on it.

Nottinghamshire is on the cusp of another significant stride forward, for which I need the Minister's help. I apologise to the rest of the House that this is specific to my own county. Further to the initial superfast extension programme funding, Nottinghamshire County Council and Broadband Delivery UK agreed to allocate an additional £1.3 million to Bassetlaw and Newark in my constituency. However, it remains to be contracted as we do not yet have the BDUK state aid assurance for the change request. Once we have that assurance—I look to the Minister for help with that—I understand that the contract can be exchanged very quickly, and once he makes that crucial intervention, the Minister will be feted in the villages of Nottinghamshire like a latter-day Robin Hood, or perhaps, in the Minister's bearded days, Friar Tuck.

The word "summit" seems to be overused, but I, too, have held one and have two brief observations to make. The first relates to something that has not been discussed yet, namely demand. The present value-for-money test as to whether a community can get broadband depends on an opaque view of how many residents will take it up. It does not actually look at the reality. We have polled residents in some of my constituency villages, some of which have said that up to 75% of constituents will take it up. I believe them, because they are an engaged and thoughtful lot. That would have tipped the formula in favour of investment, but it was not taken into account.

Conversely, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry) has rightly said, we need to address low take-up. On average, the figure is 18% to 20%. It is absurd for us to debate this level of public subsidy and investment if take-up is 10% or 15% in some parts of our country, particularly in deprived areas such as the city of Nottingham a few miles from my constituency. We should campaign as hard for higher take-up in deprived areas in particular as we are for subsidy and investment in more prosperous ones.

7.28 pm

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): I add my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) on securing this debate.

The variations stated in the motion exist in my constituency. Earlier this year, I was thrilled to learn from a survey conducted by uSwitch that Sandy Lane in Cannock was the street with the fastest broadband in the whole country. If people are looking for fast broadband, they know where to come—move to Cannock! I add a word of caution, however: although that is excellent news, it is unfortunately not the case that our broadband and mobile coverage is good for all residents and businesses across my constituency.

I was recently contacted by a resident of Fair Oaks in Birches Valley. Their property is served by the Rugeley exchange and a street cabinet, both of which have been upgraded to deliver fibre broadband. However, given the way in which the technology has been deployed, the property is too far from the enabled street cabinet for a cable to be connected—an issue raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heapey). That leaves a number of rural properties in the valley with no immediate hope of superfast broadband. They only have a hope if and when the next phase of upgrades takes place, and if their location is factored into plans.

The House can imagine my surprise when I went on to the Superfast Staffordshire website. It stated that the valley was enabled for superfast broadband, which was "available to order". Well, it is not, nor is that included in future plans. We must ensure that such properties do not miss out. I noted from the website that Keys business park is not connected and that the time frames for connection have not been confirmed. Bluechipworld Sales and Marketing Ltd is a fascinating business in that business park, and I visited it only a couple of weeks ago. It designs and manufactures high-tech devices from its sites in Cannock and China. Its designers are employed and based in the UK—in Cannock—and, importantly, that gives young people career opportunities.

Jake Berry: My hon. Friend's point about a high-tech company in her constituency creating employment is similar to the one that I made in relation to my constituency. Perhaps the Minister will say what vouchers could be made available for business customers, not just individuals, who want to bring high-tech engineering companies to our constituencies.

Amanda Milling: My hon. Friend makes a good point.

Broadband speeds are important for that technology business, because it can take four to six hours to transmit its designs to China. We rightly talk about productivity, and I am sure that hon. Members will agree that this is an example of why we desperately need to roll out superfast broadband quickly, efficiently and universally.

I welcome the motion, and I hope that residents and businesses across Cannock Chase, including in Birches Valley and Keys business park, will enjoy the broadband speeds that those on Sandy Lane in Cannock experience.

7.32 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I, too, congratulate the Backbench Business Committee on holding this debate and the hon. Members who have pushed for it. I applaud the many informed and moving contributions that we have heard, particularly from my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen),

my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), and my hon. Friends the Members for Burnley (Julie Cooper) and for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith).

I am pleased to stand at the Dispatch Box for the first time as shadow Minister for the digital economy.

Mr Vaizey: What took you so long?

Chi Onwurah: Well, it has been a long time. Before entering Parliament in 2010 I spent 20 years as an electrical engineer building telecoms networks around the world. I confess to having had a geeky worry that my technical knowledge would suffer as part of the privilege of being elected to the House. The Government have been so ineffectual, however, that my technical understanding remains as relevant as ever. Ministers should be ashamed of that, because it is their failure.

The UK has the sixth largest economy in the world, and is a developed nation with aspirations to lead the digital world. It is a country where Government services are “digital by default”, yet we have heard from many speakers in all parts of the House about the dire state of our digital infrastructure. I am not going to repeat all the terrible tales that we have heard: 1.8 million homes that cannot get broadband; dial-up speeds; businesses unable to do business. The economic benefits of better digital infrastructure—or, in some cases, of any kind of digital infrastructure—have been emphasised. The UK’s productivity problem was mentioned, and it is one of the biggest challenges that our economy faces. We have the second worst productivity in the G7. Ministers contribute to the problem, with a lack of productivity when it comes to providing the digital infrastructure that this country needs. The Government’s own broadband impact study states:

“It is now widely accepted that the availability and adoption of affordable broadband plays an important role in increasing productivity”.

The Minister laughs, but this is serious for many of his MPs. Better infrastructure increases productivity by

“supporting the development of new, more efficient, business models, enabling business process re-engineering to improve the efficiency and management of labour intensive jobs, and enabling increased international trade and collaborative innovation”.

Many Members on both sides of the House have given examples of that. As the new Leader of the Opposition and the new shadow Chancellor told conference this year, at the

heart of our forward-looking narrative will be plans for investing in the future, including “investment in fast broadband to support new high technology jobs”.

Jake Berry: Does the hon. Lady accept, with the thought of the new Leader of the Opposition in her mind, that the natural step after the renationalisation of the railways is the renationalisation of BT?

Chi Onwurah: It is possible, as the last Labour Government demonstrated, to have a telecoms network that includes competition if there is a strong regulator and a Government who are committed to ensuring that competition delivers services for consumers. Unfortunately, that is no longer the case.

The internet provides social benefits, as we have heard. Online shopping is often cheaper, and the internet opens up access to public and private services. It is not right that some people cannot access Government services for which they pay or, even worse, that they are penalised for not being able to access them online, whether they are farmers or people on benefits trying to sign on and do their job hunting online. The internet opens up a world of free education and is a window on the globe. It is absolutely ludicrous that the Government have not been able to provide what has become the fourth utility.

The Government attack the right to strike for working people, but they have effectively withdrawn their labour when it comes to superfast broadband. Underneath the polite tone of the motion, Members in all parts of the House know that anger is growing among their constituents, especially in rural areas. The truth is that it will take more than a summit to reverse a failure by the Government to deliver on their promises, which lacked ambition to begin with. When the Labour Government left office they left fully funded plans for basic broadband—*[Interruption]*; I am sorry, it is the truth—to be delivered in two years and superfast broadband to be delivered to 90% by 2017. The remaining 10% would be covered by mobile broadband.

Now we are falling further and further behind our competitors. Australia is aiming for 100 megabits for 93% of premises by 2021, and South Korea will have 1 gigabit by 2017, yet we do not have a target this decade for getting everyone online.

Instead, we have had five years of ad hoc funding announcements and vanity projects whenever the Chancellor has wanted to sweeten the latest round of punishing austerity—a series of disconnected policy initiatives that were never very ambitious, but that have suffered from delays nevertheless.

The crown jewel in all those projects—the £790-million rural superfast broadband programme—was handed entirely to one company because of a badly designed, monopoly-favouring procurement programme that has been panned by every Committee to have considered it in this House and the other place and criticised by anyone who has taken a passing interest in it. That is the fault not of BT, but of Ministers.

What we need from the Government is a vision for a market-led, future-proof, universal digital infrastructure. Ultimately, that means fibre going to premises and real investment. It will not come along on its own. Ministers need to set out a vision for our digital infrastructure. They need to tell us how we will get there and ensure that it happens. Instead, all we have is complacency and chutzpah. Demand in this debate has outstripped supply, as is the case with broadband in the UK. I urge hon. Members to remember the importance of digital skills and digital inclusion, as well as digital infrastructure. There are still 5 million households that have no access to the internet and 1 million more who do not feel confident using it.

The Government have no coherent strategy. There is a lack of vision and a staggering level of incompetence in implementation. There has been a super-slow crawl-out, rather than a roll-out, to just 2 million premises so far, with constant delays.

James Heappey: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Chi Onwurah: I am afraid that there is no time.

The Minister says that we are the best in Europe, but he chooses which countries to compare us with. We are 10th out of all the countries in Europe. As we have heard, there is better coverage in the Serengeti than in some parts of the UK.

We will not oppose the motion, but the Labour party does not believe that a summit can overcome the five years of complacency and incompetence from this Government or can fulfil Britain's broadband potential.

7.42 pm

The Minister for Culture and the Digital Economy (Mr Edward Vaizey): It gives me great pleasure to respond to this important Back-Bench debate and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) on securing it.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) on becoming the Opposition spokesman. I have always regarded her as, in effect, the shadow spokesman on this matter. Rather like the new leader of the Labour party and shadow Chancellor, I have left some very unhelpful quotations over the past five years in which I have praised her knowledge and expertise. I obviously resile from them all now that she is the official Opposition spokesman.

I was asked earlier whether this debate felt like groundhog day. I have to say that I have welcomed every single speech from those on the Government Benches—they have been brilliant, original and effective, and have displayed yet again the huge range of talent that exists on our Benches in representing our constituents and putting their issues on the agenda. The point when I thought it was groundhog day was when the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central gave her speech. It is 2015 and the Labour party is still talking about a policy that it came up with in 2009. That policy was uncoded, required a tax that did not exist and contained no plans, yet it would have brought only 2 megabits to the country. Quite rightly, when the first Conservative Secretary of State came in, those plans were torn up because we knew that the country wanted 24 megabits. It wanted superfast broadband, which is what we have delivered.

While we have heard a lot of fine speeches from Government Members, I have to mark out the speech by the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) for sheer brass neck. It is astonishing that he talks about BT's failure, when it was his Government that presided over the digital region project in south Yorkshire, which went bust, resulting in £50 million of taxpayers' money being written off. The only superfast broadband project that started under his Government was the one in Cornwall, which relied on European money and involved BT. Cornwall is now one of the best connected regions in Europe.

The right hon. Gentleman accused me, because I happened to say that I might be mildly sceptical about the break-up of BT, of cosying up to corporate interests. Of course, those who are calling for the break-up of BT include such small businesses run out of a back bedroom as Sky, Vodafone and TalkTalk. It is absolutely astonishing.

Stephen Timms *rose*—

Mr Vaizey: He's coming back for more. I welcome that.

Stephen Timms: The accusation about cosying up to corporate interests came from the *Financial Times*, not me. Does the Minister not accept, with the benefit of hindsight, that he should have ensured that some of the public subsidy went to a provider other than BT?

Mr Vaizey: The right hon. Gentleman cannot say that BT has me over a barrel when it has just paid back £129 million seven years early, thanks to the contracts we negotiated.

Let us look at those contracts. We said that we would deliver superfast broadband to 90% of homes and businesses in the country by the end of 2015. That is exactly what we will do. Three contracts have finished and 38 are ahead of schedule. I remind hon. Members that the reason BT bid for the contracts and that Virgin, for example, did not was that the state aid conditions required open access. Therefore, only companies that were prepared to see their networks used by their competitors were going to bid for the contracts. That is why BT was the only bidder in town.

Many of my hon. Friends have talked about Connecting Devon and Somerset, which did not sign a phase 2 contract with BT. I have sat in a room with hon. Friends and listened to officials from Devon and Somerset telling me that BT was not delivering. I now hear from my hon. Friends that BT is delivering.

As I have said, we have got £129 million back, thanks to the contracts. We are now going further. We have said that we will get to 95% of homes and businesses by the end of 2017. I am confident that we will deliver that as well. New technology and competition will help. Virgin has announced £3 billion of investment to compete with BT's roll-out. It will get to 3 million to 4 million homes. Sky and TalkTalk are building a network in York to see how it can roll out fibre to premises.

That is a good example of how councils have to partner with telecoms providers, because they have to help with the planning. It is important that we keep the costs down. I hear people complain about the lack of broadband in central London, but Kensington and Chelsea refused to give planning permission to a single green box of BT's for two years because it did not like the design. Councils have to get with it. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) said, when we want to put up a mobile mast, we can suddenly find that the landowner has withdrawn their permission because of local objections. If we are going to build this infrastructure, there has to be a bit of give and take. Councils and local communities have to accept that the infrastructure has to be built. We might need to have taller masts and some structures in rural settings.

Now that BT has announced the roll-out of its G.fast technology, I am confident that 10 million homes will get speeds of 300 megabits or more over the next five years. We have the fastest roll-out and take-up of 4G in the world. We inherited a stalled auction programme from the last Labour Government that we had to resurrect and we are now back on track.

It was appalling to hear the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central say that we should have a policy like Australia's, which is massively over budget and involved

a huge legal battle over many years effectively to nationalise the main telecoms operator. That pretty much cost the last Labour Government in Australia the election. We will not go down that road—that is for sure.

My hon. Friends are, of course, interested in the remaining 5%. I have written to all hon. Members setting out where broadband has got to in their constituencies in the last quarter, how many homes are being connected and, importantly, how many homes are not being connected. I am prepared to sit down with all my hon. Friends and visit their constituencies over the next six months to discuss areas that are not getting broadband, so that we can work together to deliver it.

Albert Owen *rose—*

Chi Onwurah *rose—*

Mr Vaizey: I give way to the hon. Member in whose constituency 0% of homes were being connected commercially and now, thanks to this Government, about 80% are connected.

Chi Onwurah: Me?

Mr Vaizey: No, I am giving way to the hon. Gentleman on the Back Benches.

Albert Owen: The Minister echoes the success of the Welsh Government in delivering to my constituency because it was a partnership. Will he sit down with Welsh Government Ministers, and others, to see what best practice could be used so that England can follow in the tracks of Wales?

Mr Vaizey: As my hon. Friends will be aware, I should have singled out the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) because a Labour Government in Wales are responsible for rolling out superfast broadband and—guess what?—according to the Labour party, superfast broadband is brilliant in Wales but terrible in England. I was interested to hear that the hon. Member for Stirling (Steven Paterson) could not make up his mind whether he wanted to condemn or support the roll-out of superfast broadband in Scotland by the Scottish Government and the SNP. I take all such critiques with a great pinch of salt.

Chi Onwurah: The Minister said that I wished for a policy that is the same as that in Australia, but that is not what I said. I said that we needed a target as ambitious as Australia's and the one in place by the new conservative Prime Minister there.

Mr Vaizey: I am all for targets but let us have some delivery. Australia has an ambitious target and zero delivery. We have a realistic target that we have hit time and again, and we will continue to do so. We have passed superfast broadband to more than 3 million homes and businesses, and when the next figures come out it will be close to 4 million. We must also deal with the last 5%, and by the end of this year we will set out our plans.

It is no secret that we are looking at a universal service obligation, and we will not be tied to some piddling European target of 5 megabits. No, when we look at a universal service obligation we will look at a British universal service obligation to deliver the kind of British broadband speeds that British citizens and businesses require. Over the last four years we have delivered that to more than 3 million homes and businesses, and we are fast approaching 4 million. We are hitting our targets time and again. We may not be able to beat the Australians at Twickenham, but when it comes to broadband we beat them hands down!

7.52 pm

Matt Warman: I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate. I do not think that many debates secured by that Committee will have included contributions by Members from Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales and England, and this debate has shown that superfast broadband is genuinely a national problem that needs a national solution.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry) suggested a social tariff to emphasise how much this problem affects those who have the least money to spend on subscriptions, and my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) said that small providers will play a crucial role in the future. My hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak) spoke about people leaving villages because of the digital divide, and that emphasises the scope and scale of the problem that we face. This is not just an English problem and it is appropriate to end by citing the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts), who said that if we want all four corners of these islands to be prosperous, we must create the conditions for economic growth. That is what this debate has been about, and the “not spot” summit that I hope the Government will organise shortly will be a crucial part of the solution to the national problem of superfast broadband roll out. I commend this motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes variations in the effectiveness of roll-out of fixed and mobile superfast broadband in different parts of the UK; and calls on the Government to host a not-spot summit to consider ways to tackle this issue.

Stormont

7.54 pm

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the political situation in Stormont.

I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) who has co-sponsored this debate, to all those who supported my efforts to secure this debate, and to the Backbench Business Committee that gave me this opportunity.

I know that the eyes of some hon. Members—especially those who are not here—may glaze over when they see that the debate is about Northern Ireland yet again, but I do not apologise for that. This is about my home, our home, my constituency and my family, and it is as important to me as I expect each hon. Member's constituency is to them. Yes, I am afraid it is Northern Ireland to be debated.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): Don't apologise.

Danny Kinahan: Thank you. In my maiden speech three months ago, and in numerous interventions, I continue to make the point that the devolved Government of Stormont does not work. Indeed, the First Minister has publicly described it as “dysfunctional”, and it could not be more so. I raise this matter today because I am fiercely proud of my home country, of being Northern Irish, both British and Irish, and in fact a large part Scottish too. I long to see my country at peace with itself.

In my maiden speech I chose as one of my key points to call for a real push for the Union and for all parts of the United Kingdom to work together, not just for Northern Ireland but for all members of the Union. I firmly believe that the majority in Northern Ireland want a Union for everybody that lives up to the core values of fairness, tolerance and freedom of speech, and embraces the spirits of enterprise and hard work that make these islands great. I enjoyed hearing the Prime Minister make the very same points in his speech in Manchester last week.

Why do I raise this issue? It is because I want all hon. Members—Labour, Liberal, Conservative, SNP and each party present in the House—to take an interest and help to move Northern Ireland to the next level of normality. We want a peaceful society where diversity is respected and cherished, and a society that has a functioning Government and Opposition, protection for minorities, and dynamic and decisive politics without a criminal element linked to it in any way. I am extremely happy and proud that my party recently made the brave decision to move into opposition in an attempt to move Stormont forward.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for allowing me to intervene so early in his contribution, and I congratulate him and the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee on securing this debate. The hon. Gentleman touched on the fact that the Ulster Unionist party's withdrawal of its one Minister from the Executive in many ways precipitated the current crisis. For the benefit of my constituents and the people of Northern Ireland, will he outline when and under what circumstances the Ulster Unionists will take their place in the Executive again?

Danny Kinahan: I thank the hon. Lady for that interjection, and we will wait to see what happens in the next elections before we decide whether we, and others, go back in. Yes, it was our party that precipitated things, but we only moved into opposition. The actions of others may have precipitated things further.

I know that all hon. Members will support the aims I have mentioned, and all will have done so in their constituencies throughout the United Kingdom. I wish to emphasise that we cannot simply devolve and forget, and all four countries will always benefit from working together in the Union. At Home Office questions today we saw a perfect example of that when I mentioned the lack of visible policing on the ground which allows paramilitaries to fill the void. The Minister just said, “Talk to Minister Ford.” That is not satisfactory.

We owe so many people so much for all they have done for Northern Ireland—the politicians, the armed services and people from many other walks of life—and we in Northern Ireland are for ever grateful. We all want to see better, and we all believe in better. In 1998, almost three quarters of a million citizens—more than 71% of those in Northern Ireland—supported the Belfast agreement. That was a ringing endorsement for putting the past behind us and looking with hope to a brighter future. They supported the vision that Northern Ireland could be a country of equals where religion, culture and heritage would not define opportunity or aspiration. I remember the excitement and genuine belief that this was a change that would offer future generations not only a better life but the chance to be themselves with no fear of intimidation or violence.

I came home in 1984, after serving my time in the Army. I remember the dark days when Belfast was somewhere many avoided, where armed soldiers and police patrolled the streets, where shopping bags were searched at checkpoints, and where the temptation to eat out or go to the cinema really did not exist. In 1998, the Belfast agreement lifted the lid. Enjoyment, excitement and the genie of a thriving economic future were released. The sheer buzz that I think the majority felt in Northern Ireland was quite wonderful: we had a hope of a better future and it was in our hands. It was not a perfect solution, but nevertheless a hope we have so nearly squandered. It was meant to create a system that would adapt and change over time, and become a form of government that lived up to the principles of that 1998 agreement. Instead, the very system put in place and supported by individuals during the referendum on both sides of the border has been changed, without the opportunity for those same individuals to voice concern or disagreement, into this dysfunctional quagmire.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman alludes to the dysfunctionality of the system of government we have, and he quoted others who have said likewise. Does he accept and agree that his party and other parties were the architects of the structures that he now describes as dysfunctional?

Danny Kinahan: I thought that might be the question. We certainly were the architects, with others, who took great risks. I have already said it was an imperfect system. What came later was much more imperfect, but I do not want to change this into a petty debate.

Changes, such as the election of the First and Deputy First Ministers, have removed ownership of the process from the Assembly and forced every future election to be a purely sectarian headcount. Northern Ireland is now locked into mechanisms that actively stop any improvement happening. Today, we need the support and leadership of this House to help us to move forward. We have an election process for the First Minister that means we have, in reality, a co-equal First Minister and Deputy First Minister, neither of whom can do anything unless the other agrees it. It is an admirable idea, but one doomed to failure as so often neither First Minister—that is what they both are—can agree with each other. It is almost an endless game of brinkmanship, a game of chicken that sees Northern Ireland's people suffer each time there is a disastrous crash because neither First Minister will give an inch. We have an Executive of all parties, with the intention that those parties will work together and decide together. Again, that is an admirable idea, but not when the two main parties squeeze and ignore the other parties at every turn, forcing matters through and then claiming that they were agreed under the excuse of collective responsibility. All this must change.

Part of the structure of the Good Friday agreement was the creation of a petition of concern. This was a legislative tool to safeguard the rights of minority groups by offering either the nationalist or Unionist community the ability to veto legislation that would infringe their rights. This tool, designed with the right intentions, has been misused in the most underhand of ways. Since the last Assembly election in 2011, it has been used no fewer than 34 times to block issues including: better recycling, allowing the National Crime Agency to work in Northern Ireland, the provision of services and support for military veterans, to prevent Ministers even being held to account, and, of course, to stop same-sex marriage. It is obvious that the petition of concern no longer protects minority groups, but in many instances has actively been used to undermine them. The intention was never to use this as a vehicle to reinforce such politics, but that is exactly what it does.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman talks about the dysfunctionality of the existing Assembly. Does he not accept that for the past eight years, while the Democratic Unionist party has been the largest party, the Assembly has not had to be suspended once? It has not collapsed on numerous occasions, which it did when his leader and the leader of the Social Democratic and Labour party were in charge and First and Deputy First Ministers in the Assembly.

Danny Kinahan: Thank you very much. I take those points very much on board. Rather than get buried in petty Northern Ireland politics, I will just point out that most of those collapses were actually caused by the hon. Gentleman's party.

Those who were involved in the construction of the Good Friday agreement recognised that a simple or quick fix could never be an option. Indeed, those who were key in bringing this agreement to the people saw this as a first step towards a fair and equal society. They recognised that paramilitarism, segregated education, identity, culture and how to deal with victims and survivors were all complex issues that would need to be

addressed many years beyond implementation of the 1998 framework. Sadly, in the 17 years since the signing of the agreement these issues have simply not been addressed.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Going back to the question of the suspension of the Assembly on four different occasions up to 2002, does he recall that on none of those occasions was a suspension brought about by a disagreement between the parties that held the First and Deputy First Ministerships? The suspensions were all caused by crises relating to the decommissioning issue, usually because of decisions and antics involving the British Government and certainly not involving the SDLP.

Danny Kinahan: Thank you very much. I am in a very good sandwich here, or between two thorns on a rose. I very much take those points on board.

The squabbling that has ensued, due to the mistrust of politicians, has not only made these matters even more divisive but has allowed them to taint issues such as healthcare, social justice and the economy.

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

Danny Kinahan: No, I am going to carry on for a moment.

Indeed, every avenue of life in Northern Ireland in which politics has a role to play fights against the stagnation that those politics have created. The current impasse, which is nothing more than the outworkings of this mismanagement and the mistrust of the major parties leading the Assembly, has placed Northern Ireland in a precarious position, not only economically, as political parties have failed to agree the implementation of welfare reform, but socially as the continued bickering and public statements of dislike and intolerance further drive a wedge between the sections of nationalist and Unionist communities.

Ian Paisley: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Danny Kinahan: I will later.

Our youngest generation, those who grew up in a post-1998 world, are among those who despair most at our inability to govern and our seeming fixation on creating obstacles instead of solutions. This was the message given to me loudly and clearly on the doorstep in the May elections. I am aware that, like those young people, many Members of this House are frustrated by the seeming inability of politicians at Stormont to see beyond narrow orange or green-tinted positions and genuinely attempt to make the brave and bold steps required to move our country forward. Nowhere is this more apparent than when we look at Stormont's inability to implement policy or offer the leadership Northern Ireland deserves to rekindle that sense of hope, opportunity and aspiration I alluded to at the beginning.

Ian Paisley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. We are now 15 minutes into his speech and there is not a lot of what he has put to the House this evening

[*Ian Paisley*]

that I disagree with, but the current impasse in Northern Ireland is nothing to do with bickering. It is nothing to do with people falling out. It is to do with blood shed on our streets and the murder of an individual. The hon. Gentleman needs to address that point. We will agree or disagree and fight in the Assembly about all the other minor points, but this House needs to hear about the growth of criminality in Northern Ireland, and what this House is going to do about challenging that criminality, that murder and that mayhem.

Danny Kinahan: I will get to that point towards the end of my speech, because I think it is absolutely key.

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): I entered the House with hope that the four corners of Britain could come together to form a solid table to hold the hopes and aspirations of everybody. My friends in Northern Ireland now enjoy 40,000 more people in employment than in 2010; unemployment has fallen for 27 months in succession; and employment is up to 67.8%. Surely these are things to hang on to—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Interventions are meant to be short. We are struggling with time, and I want to get everybody in.

Danny Kinahan: I could not agree with the hon. Lady more. I entered the Chamber with hope, and I intend to keep fighting for exactly the same things as she—

Sammy Wilson: You've been very negative so far.

Danny Kinahan: It is better to start off negative and end up with hope. The hon. Lady gave some good examples, but they have happened despite, not because of, the Government in Northern Ireland.

I want to offer some examples of the failures. The social investment fund was created in 2011 with the intention of providing £80 million for key programmes and infrastructure projects that would directly benefit the most economically and socially challenged communities in Northern Ireland. By 30 March this year, £2 million was all that had been allocated; £78 million might now never be spent, with community groups and the most vulnerable being the ones who suffer. As of this June, only £3.5 million of £12 million available for childcare provision had been spent, which meant another £6.5 million had been lost. This is appalling, considering the number of working families struggling owing to the lack of accessible and affordable childcare in their area, especially given the present welfare debacle. Some 20% of the population are currently on health waiting lists, some of which reach beyond 18 months. It is a situation recognised as unacceptable by national experts.

On shared education, which most recognise as the holy grail in addressing so many of the issues, recent research found that almost half of Northern Ireland's school children were being taught in schools where 95% or more of the pupils were of one religion. In the 2011-12 academic year, 180 schools had no Protestant pupils on their rolls, and another 111 taught no Catholic children. In October 2010, the First Minister said:

“I believe that future generations will scarcely believe that such division and separation was common for so long.”

He said that consideration should be given to tasking a body or commission to bring forward recommendations for a staged process of integration. Five years later, little if anything has changed. Under the Stormont House agreement, if it can be agreed, we are about to tie ourselves to spending £150 million on investigating the past, yet our own Justice Minister has said it will only really clear up one or two cases. Just think how much better that money could be spent elsewhere. Our victims and survivors need justice and support, but there has to be a better way.

There are many more examples, especially from the last four years of the dysfunctional Northern Ireland Assembly, but time prohibits me from listing every one.

Sammy Wilson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Danny Kinahan: I will keep going, otherwise the hon. Gentleman will not have time to speak later.

Commentators inside and outside politics recognise that the primary reason for this continued dysfunction is the creation of what we in Northern Ireland call the silo mentality of Ministers. When the coalition Government was agreed in 2010, neither coalition partner got exactly what it wanted out of government, but both parties were able to set personal and ideological positions aside to do what they deemed was right for the nation. Sadly, the opposite is now true at Stormont. Ministers are challenged by Executive colleagues not because of their policy approach, but because of party political or ideological differences. It is said that a house divided against itself cannot stand. The Stormont Executive have proven that nowhere is that more true than in that political Cabinet.

If the UK Government were to design an education policy that ran contrary to their health policy or an inclusion policy that ran contrary to their housing policy, the electorate would quickly become fed up and ask for a new Government. That is unavailable to the people of Northern Ireland. Without a formal Opposition, there is no chance for change. Again, I congratulate my party as the one that made that brave step in creating the '98 agreement and now, 17 years later, is doing the same for a strong Opposition. If those elected cannot be held to account, removed from Government or placed in a position where party comes second to the needs of those they represent, is it likely they will ever produce an effective Government?

Finally, I come to the elephant in the room of political debate in and about Northern Ireland: the continued undermining of political and social progress by criminals under the guise of terrorism—those who wish to rely on the violent struggles of our past at the expense of a political future. The House must recognise that the vast majority of acts carried out by these groups are not ideological but criminal and range from drug dealing to tobacco and fuel smuggling, punishment beatings, prostitution and racketeering. These ugly groups use Northern Ireland's dark past and the Assembly's inability to deal with these issues as cover to get away with the most heinous of crimes, including cold-blooded murder, with absolute impunity.

If any Member sitting on these Benches were considered to have a direct link with an active criminal or terrorist gang, I am sure that every other Member would not let that person remain here, occupying a seat in the greatest of all Parliaments. We all know that one party will not

take its place in the House, meaning that we cannot include its Members in the debate or hope they will have the courage to speak and defend themselves in front of Members. I do not stand here to call out individuals, political parties or groups, although to make certain points I have had to do so; I stand here to highlight that without confidence in those we expect to govern with a fair hand, no citizen can truly support any elected body.

I have perhaps painted what some might see as a negative and rather depressing landscape for Northern Ireland, but I wish to emphasise that nothing could be further from the truth. The resilience of the people of Northern Ireland ensures that no matter how tough the challenge or how demanding the task, they rise above it and do what they have always done best: show hospitality to those who visit, continue to see the funny side of the challenges facing them and do what is best for them, their families and their neighbours. Many years ago while travelling, I met an Alaskan pipeline worker who had travelled around the world three times. When I asked him where the best place was, he replied, without knowing where I was from—surprising that!—“Northern Ireland”. He said that its inhabitants were the friendliest and loveliest of people. Above all, I wish to ensure that that remains the case.

I know you want me to finish, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I am very nearly there.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman was advised to take about 20 minutes, but he is now on 23 minutes. A lot of Members want to speak. If we do not get other Members in, we are going to kill the debate.

Danny Kinahan: I was going to give the House some examples of some great Northern Irishmen and women, such as Mary Peters and Rory McIlroy, to show that we are a great country. To end, I wish to note that the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Tom Elliott) is the happiest place in the UK. I thank Members for listening to me.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I advise Members that I am now introducing a five-minute limit that might have to go down to four, so please let us try and get through the debate as quickly as possible.

8.18 pm

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): As a co-sponsor of this debate, I acknowledge the hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan) as the force behind persuading the Backbench Business Committee to allow us to have it, and he made a thoughtful speech tonight. He is a new but valuable member of the Northern Ireland Select Committee, and I know that he will contribute to its work for some years.

When beginning a speech in this place, it is normal to say what a pleasure it is to take part in the debate, and while it is always a privilege to speak in this Chamber, it is rather regrettable that yet again we have to hold a debate on Northern Ireland because of problems in the Province, especially when, as the hon. Gentleman said, so much is right and working there.

Looking across at the Opposition Benches, I see representatives of three parties and an independent. Although I see some disagreement, I also see a

determination in all of them to make things in Northern Ireland work. Sadly, however, problems seem to get in the way of the institutions functioning as well as they might.

As I see it—I have only five minutes—there are two problems to address tonight and in the next few weeks. The first is the crisis—it is a crisis—of government in Northern Ireland, where there are no longer properly functioning institutions. We could say that that resulted from the very bad murders that took place—indeed, as the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) pointed out, we cannot skate over them—followed by the Chief Constable’s assertion that one of the murders was carried out by the IRA, which was supposed to have disbanded a long time ago. We cannot ignore the fact that that is what brought about the immediate crisis.

It is also right to recognise—the hon. Member for South Antrim devoted much of his speech to this point—that the institutions were not functioning before that. The real and deeper reason for this problem, as far as I can see, is the design of those institutions. We know why they were put together all those years ago—to bring people together and to get them talking to each other instead of firing at each other—and there could be no better reason than that for designing those institutions. No one’s heart could have failed to leap at the sight of Dr Ian Paisley sitting with Martin McGuinness. That really gave us hope. Thinking back, we have to accept that the way in which the institutions were designed—with those who wanted to be elected to the Assembly having to designate themselves Unionists or nationalists or neither—could be said to have institutionalised the very sectarianism we were trying to get away from.

It is important to address the longer-term problems. I do not think we shall get solutions this side of next year’s elections in Northern Ireland, but from that point on we have to look at ways of ensuring an effective decision-making body. The institutions have brought people together, and we should not underestimate that magnificent achievement, which is a tribute to all those who worked so hard to bring it about and to the people of Northern Ireland and the great resilience they have shown.

It would be unfortunate, however, for anyone to suggest that revisiting the Belfast agreement in order to improve it is somehow an attempt to unravel it. That cannot be the case. An attempt to make sure that the institutions work better in the future would enhance the principles of the Belfast agreement, and we have to show courage in doing that. I would rather see proposals for improvement come from Northern Ireland—from the Assembly, but also from ordinary men and women in Northern Ireland rather than from this place. It is up to the people in Northern Ireland in those institutions to agree them and make them work.

We must address the immediate crisis. I would say to anyone on the Assembly in Northern Ireland who is listening to the debate that I led for the Conservative party many times when we were in opposition. Direct rule from a Committee Upstairs gave no one in Northern Ireland an opportunity to have their say on major parts of legislation. It is surely better to make the institutions work.

8.23 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I am grateful for the two contributions so far, which I found thoughtful and interesting. I thank the hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan) for bringing this debate before us today, but all of us here and those who sit in Stormont are in danger of losing the confidence of the population of these islands through a seeming inability to find a resolution and get government back on its feet. If we take it that all parties are acting in good faith, we are left wondering why no one can find the common ground where all sides need to stand.

Very few politicians furth of Scotland have a good understanding of Scottish politics, so I am going to imagine that most politicians this side of the Irish sea will have a similar difficulty in fully understanding the politics of Northern Ireland. I hope that any shortcomings I have will be forgiven.

The continued impasse surpasses understanding. It surely should not be beyond the wit of politicians to find a way to work together even when they do not agree.

It is easy to understand that there is a different dynamic in Belfast, thanks to the unique governance arrangements and the need to ensure power sharing. It is easy, too, to understand that there are issues in politics in Northern Ireland that we do not have in our constituencies—or at least not to anything like the same extent—and that we do not have the same political history to contend with.

That said, I cannot bring myself to believe that any voter would cross a ballot paper in the hope that their elected representative would enter into a disagreement and find ways to continue it. I do not believe that either side of the great divide was carried to power on a wave of hope that they would create a situation that prevented anything from happening. If nothing else, the history of devolution in Northern Ireland has shown that the strongest wills on both sides of the fence can sit together and plan a common future, can work together and find accommodations to suit, and can make changes that do not require anyone's capitulation, humiliating climbdown or pyrrhic victory.

I can well understand the position of wanting nothing to do with implementing the welfare cuts that are being forced on the poorest in our society, but I cannot understand the thinking that says that shutting down government is the better option. Equally, is not the continued existence or otherwise of the IRA or any other organisation that might appallingly choose violence as a route to social change a matter for the police and the security services rather than a point of argument for politicians? The people who elect us are entitled to expect better.

The Stormont House agreement, which appeared at first to be an excellent piece of collective decision-making has become something of a millstone and a point of contention, which is very unfortunate. The agreement could be the basis for forward movement if all sides were prepared to act in good faith and allow others the opportunity to do the same.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the work done by the Secretary of State in getting the agreement made. I acknowledge the work that she continues to do to try to get a resolution. It is not often that someone

from my party will praise a Tory Minister and I will admit it sticks a bit in my craw, but the praise is very much deserved on this occasion and I hope her representative will pass it on to her. I hope he will also pass on my plea to her to keep the shadow of direct legislation, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson), from this debate and to keep trying to get a resolution. Her deadline is, I think, at the end of this month—fewer than three weeks away. I hope she will be prepared to extend that deadline if it looks like there is a chance of striking a deal.

Getting Stormont back on its feet is the priority, but making sure that the parties working there come to an agreement on the basis of trust and respect might be the harder job. The political parties of Northern Ireland must, I believe, be prepared to accept that the other side of the argument might actually be acting in good faith and that although the Stormont House agreement might not be the best they could get, it is what is on the table just now. Posturing instead of acting could be damaging.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr Ben Wallace): In the spirit of what the hon. Lady has said, if for whatever reason the financial settlement made it impossible for Stormont to continue functioning, would she support the Government legislating on welfare if it were the only option?

Deidre Brock: I do not feel that I am qualified to answer that, if the Minister will forgive me. I certainly feel that we must take every opportunity not to interfere in the discussions, and that any form of direct rule should not at present be looked at. I still feel that there is scope within the discussions to take that idea forward and ultimately to reach some agreement.

Posturing instead of acting could do damage that might take too many years to repair—and refusing to compromise could do the same. I believe that the people deserve no less than a compromise.

8.29 pm

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to contribute to the debate, and to follow the excellent speeches that have been made so far. I will not detain the House by repeating all the good words that have been spoken about how important it is for an enduring settlement to be achieved, although it is clearly very important for Northern Ireland to find a stable political process that can deliver for its people. I think we would quite like to avoid the annual round of crisis talks, and to get this matter sorted out for the long term.

On a more flippant note, I must say that I am surprised that we have got this far in the debate without anyone mentioning rugby or football, given the weekend's events. May I be the first to congratulate the Northern Ireland football team on qualifying for the European championships? *[Interruption.]* I know that I should not have mentioned rugby—it is all going to go wrong—but that is an example of Ireland's working together, and it could be a template for how we can move forward.

Let me now turn to a rather more parochial English activity. The Secretary of State has repeatedly said that the solution to the crisis cannot be yet more money from Westminster and the taxpayers, that the parties in Northern Ireland must find a solution within their

existing budgets, and that there is no way of buying them out of the problem. I welcome that, because I think it must be the right solution. Every time we back down over here and offer more money, we create a problem, because in a few years' time there will be another dispute that the parties cannot resolve between them, and they will think that there is some way in which we can fix it for them.

I urge the Government to be very cautious about taking the power to carry out welfare reform, because I think that that will mean a cop-out by politicians in Northern Ireland. They will not have had to find the money; they will not have had to fix their own budgets; they will not have had to choose their own welfare system. If we do this for them, they will be able to run around saying, "We never agreed to it. All those evil people in Westminster forced this terrible scheme on us. We would never have done anything like this." They need to make a choice between welfare spending and other budget priorities, and that is what we should be saying to them.

We need the Minister to explain the Government's time frame. How far can we go with no effective government of Northern Ireland without forcing an Assembly election? Can we really limp on until the end of March and the start of the election period? Is there any real prospect of a deal before the Irish and Northern Irish elections, or will there be another six months of to-ing and fro-ing and hokey-cokey, with Ministers being appointed and then resigning on the following day? Is there, realistically, a solution without the holding of elections in Northern Ireland a great deal sooner than next May?

I said that we should be very cautious about taking over the welfare reforms, but I think that there must come a point at which, if there can never be a deal in Northern Ireland, we cannot just sit back here and watch government fall apart and public spending descend into chaos. At some point we must say, reluctantly, that there really is no other way, although I think that that would be a rather poor outcome. I ask again, however, "What is the timetable?" Is the end of October, which we just heard mentioned, the hard deadline for a deal, or can we allow this to drift on until Christmas and try to deal with it in the new year?

At some stage we must be clear and say, "Here is the time frame: sort this out, or we shall have to do it for you, no matter how bad that is", but we must also be clear about the fact that it is a last resort, and not the outcome that we want to see.

8.32 pm

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I think it worth highlighting, at the outset, the reasons for tonight's debate, and why the political situation in Stormont is so fraught.

First—and I was glad to hear the Secretary of State say this explicitly in Manchester last week—there is the failure of the two nationalist parties to proceed with the agreement on welfare reform into which they entered at Stormont House in December last year. Secondly, there is the murder of Kevin McGuigan by people who, according to the Chief Constable, are current members of the IRA, an organisation which—again, according to the Chief Constable; not according to Unionists, not according to politicians, and not according to speculation—is still in existence.

Let me say something about the immediate aftermath of the Belfast agreement. We have heard a litany of faults in relation to Stormont, and I agree with much of it, but the hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan) ought to remind the House that all the issues that he spoke about in connection with the First Minister, the Deputy First Minister, Ministers in the Executive, all-party government and petitions of concern were issues that we opposed at the time, and that he and his party supported and implemented them. Let me say, with the greatest respect, that he should not come here and try to revise history. It should also be remembered that when, after the Belfast agreement, the previous Assembly kept being suspended and there was dysfunctionality, people such as David Trimble were prepared to proceed regardless of what the IRA did. Even when there was no decommissioning, even when people were being murdered on our streets by the IRA, and even when police assessments were made and far more was going on, no action was taken.

As we have demonstrated, the DUP is not prepared to carry on with business as usual, or sweep such matters under the carpet. They cannot be swept under the carpet. Imagine if a political party in government here had some kind of militia or paramilitary organisation doing such things on the streets! It would not be tolerated for a minute, and no one else should tolerate it either. If we truly value democracy, we must make clear that only those who are committed to exclusively peaceful and democratic methods should be eligible for places in Government, and that if they are found to be not so committed, action must be taken.

Later this week, some of us will gather in the Undercroft to commemorate the loss of Ian Gow. The despicable contempt for democracy that robbed the House of Commons of that gallant Member lives on in the men who ordered his murder and the murder of so many others. Let me say directly to the Secretary of State and to Ministers that if they will not act to protect peace and the political institutions in Northern Ireland, we not only will but must act. However uncomfortable and however awkward that may be, we will not sit idly by and let terrorists return us to the dark days of the troubles. Others may want to run away, but we will not. We will stick to the task of making Stormont better, and making it work.

The current crisis is precisely what is expected when, time after time, one participant in government thinks that it can play by a different set of democratic rules from those applying to the rest of us. In so doing, it is causing severe damage to Stormont, and to the type of peaceful, stable future that the people of Northern Ireland want and deserve.

What must be done now to salvage Stormont from the place in which republican killers have left it? Twenty years into the process, the paramilitaries must go away. In the words of the Secretary of State, they must disband. Whatever emerges from the talks process this time must do the job that the Independent Monitoring Commission plainly did not do last time. The Government must be honest with us, and tell the public what is being achieved—or, just as important, what is not being achieved. A new mechanism for ridding us at last of the scourge of republican and so-called loyalist criminal gangs must be credible, independent, robust and transparent. There must be an end to the smuggling, the racketeering,

[Mr Nigel Dodds]

the drug dealing and the fuel laundering. Criminality must be tackled. For some time we have suffered because republican “untouchables” have grown fat and still more corrupt. Let us now have some British Eliot Nesses. The Prevent strategy that the Home Secretary employs against home-grown Islamist terrorism is full of useful lessons for the Northern Ireland Office. It is time that we got results in dealing with paramilitaries and criminals.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): I am following closely what the right hon. Gentleman is saying. Does he agree that the full implementation of the Stormont House agreement remains the best hope for the people of Northern Ireland and its institutions?

Mr Dodds: I entirely agree. Even before the resolution of the crisis became unavoidable because of the killing of Kevin McGuigan and what flowed from it, we had the deadlock and chaos that resulted from the failure to implement the Stormont House agreement, and the failure to get on with welfare reform that had been agreed by the SDLP and Sinn Féin, resulting in the fact that we could not have a proper, sustainable budget on which to base future plans for the Assembly of the people of Northern Ireland..

Sammy Wilson: My right hon. Friend has referred to criminality. In the wake of the killing of a member of the Garda on the border this week, the Garda have said that there is a corridor of criminality along the border. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that needs to be addressed?

Mr Dodds: I totally agree, and I want to take this opportunity to express the sincerest condolences to the family of the Garda officer who was so despicably murdered as he went about doing his duty on behalf of people in the Irish Republic.

We must create some kind of high-profile taskforce to take on the terrorist godfathers and their criminal activity. We should give Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, MI5, the National Crime Agency, the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Army and our friends in the Irish Republic security forces the tools they need to do the job. We need targets and we need results. The public have suffered at the hands of these crime lords for long enough.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Dodds: I cannot, as I do not have any more time left to give way and other Members want to speak.

We must get on and implement the Stormont House agreement. We cannot go on wasting £10 million each and every month, as we have to do in Northern Ireland with, effectively, the Executive handing that over to the Treasury. It could pay for more than 2,100 people to get knee operations or more than 1,800 people to receive hip operations. Instead, we are handing that money back to the Treasury as a result of this nonsense that is going on in Northern Ireland at the moment.

The past is part of the talks process. Let me be very clear that, as far as the DUP is concerned, we do not want to visit the fantasy land the current Leader of the Opposition seems to dwell in. We are very clear that we

will not let the past be rewritten. We know who the terrorists were and there will be neither amnesties nor excuses granted. Nothing that emerges from the talks process will lead to anything other than an honest accounting of the past, as far as we are concerned.

We want a settlement that endures in Northern Ireland: one that works, one that delivers for our people, one that sees us co-operate for the good of all. Sinn Féin faces the same choice it has always faced: either choose to become truly democratic politicians like the rest of us, or stay in a crime-tainted world. Sinn Féin cannot be allowed any longer to stand in the way of peace and progress.

8.40 pm

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend—I want to call him that as I have known him for 30 years—the hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan) and the Chairman of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson), who have been successful in securing this debate.

I am not going to pretend that I have a great family lineage in the Province; I do not, but I was brought up on the atrocities that took place during the troubles and dominated the news headlines during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. I was present at the Harrods bombing in 1983 and the Brighton bombing in 1984. Over the last five years, as a member of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, I have gained a better understanding of the issues and challenges facing this great Province.

These challenges break into three separate parts: the need to rebalance the Northern Ireland economy, especially welfare reform; the threat from organised crime and terrorism; and confidence in the justice system and the legacy from the Troubles.

The Northern Ireland economy is very similar to that of my constituency in Plymouth in that they are both dependent on the public sector. In my patch, over 32% of people work in the public sector. The proportion in Northern Ireland is similar, at over 30%. That issue must be dealt with.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Assembly having the opportunity to change the rates of corporation tax could encourage the private sector to help to rebalance the Northern Ireland economy?

Oliver Colvile: I thoroughly agree, and that is why I hope that there will be some movement on that come 2017. I ask this question: why has Northern Ireland not got a city deal? We in Plymouth have not only ended up getting a city deal, but land has been released which the Navy no longer needs and we also have an enterprise zone. My hon. Friend is right that movement on corporation tax is the right thing to do.

I welcome the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) on his return to the post of shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. I hope he will continue the bipartisan approach he took the last time he held the post. I also hope he can help convince his leader and the shadow Chancellor to give up their support for IRA terrorists. Perhaps he might like to take them to meet

the victims of the atrocities to hear at first hand of their real anguish at losing close relations, and maybe they can get an education.

I also pay tribute to Anthony Golden, who was killed earlier this week. It appears that his murderer was facing charges of membership of dissident republican groups and was out on bail. That proves that terrorism is not only an issue for Northern Ireland, as it also happens in the south and to us all here on the mainland, too. What discussions is my hon. Friend the Minister having with his opposite number in the Republic to tackle organised crime and terrorism?

I also want to speak a little about confidence in the justice system and the legacy issues. We should remember that my city of Plymouth, through its military, made major sacrifices and lost lives during the troubles. During my visits to Northern Ireland, I have met a number of victims' families and they all want to see justice. So, last November, I supported the Government's proposals on the European arrest warrant. The warrant gives powers to our police forces to apply for the arrest of potential criminals and for them to be returned to the UK to face justice. Will my hon. Friend the Minister explain why the PSNI has refused to apply for a European arrest warrant to bring Rita O'Hare back to the UK?

Rita O'Hare was put on trial in the 1970s for plotting to kill someone in the Army. She was given bail and subsequently escaped to the Republic to become Sinn Féin's envoy to the United States. Tony Blair and Jonathan Powell were approached by Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness to bring her back to the UK. Despite their support, Blair was told by his Law Officers that he could do not that as she would be arrested. I have pressed the PSNI to apply for a European arrest warrant, but I have been told that there was not enough evidence to proceed. I am sorry, but if there was enough evidence to bring her to trial in the 1970s, why is there not enough now? This is ridiculous; she should be brought back to the UK to face trial.

Since the decision to give Northern Ireland what I would call home rule and to devolve responsibility, it appears that the Executive have had difficulty on occasions in taking responsibility for what goes on in Northern Ireland. Welfare reform, rebalancing the economy and dealing with legacy issues should be the responsibilities of the Executive and the Assembly. Ministers and the Northern Ireland Committee have roles to play, but the Northern Ireland Executive have to be more willing to take responsibility for devolved matters. I will continue to press for the Northern Ireland Committee to help by undertaking an audit of what has happened since the Good Friday agreement, to ensure that we can deliver on that and have better community consultation. The hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan) is quite right to call for help from Whitehall when there is no alternative, but that should be the last port of call. In short, it is time for grown-up politics and for Northern Ireland to work as part of the Union.

8.47 pm

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan) and the Chair of the Northern Ireland Committee, the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson), on securing the debate. This is my first speech as a Back Bencher for

more than 14 years, so I hope that hon. Members will forgive me if I am a little rusty. I never sought the role of shadow Secretary of State, but it turned out to be an immense privilege and left me with a deep affection for Northern Ireland. That affection is built on the straight talking and warmth encapsulated as "the craic" among so many people I met.

I feel a great sense of pride but also responsibility as a consequence of my party's legacy in helping to bring peace to Northern Ireland. Whatever the collective political failures of recent years, it is important to recognise that many of Northern Ireland's leading politicians would hold their own intellectually and administratively at the highest levels in any democracy.

I want to take this opportunity to welcome back my friend and colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker)—who is not in his place at the moment—as shadow Secretary of State. He is widely trusted and respected in Northern Ireland. I also want to take this opportunity to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) for his tremendous support during my period in the role. I strongly support both of them in maintaining Labour's support for a bipartisan approach. The principle of consent must apply to any change to Northern Ireland's status within the UK. It is also important that my party should maintain equidistance between Northern Ireland's mainstream parties.

So, what are the causes of the culture of crisis that has led to a cycle of despair and, in turn, to public disillusionment with the political system? There are a number of factors involved. Three successive years of elections have meant that politicians are reluctant to make compromises that might affect their core support. Sinn Féin's overriding political priority has been to make progress in the south and to do nothing in the north to undermine its anti-cuts, anti-austerity position. Also, post-Ian Paisley senior, the Democratic Unionist party has been wary of being seen to work in an authentic partnership with Sinn Féin. An accommodation is not a partnership. Furthermore, too many people are still trapped in worklessness and inter-generational poverty and not seeing their lives getting better via a peace dividend.

What might the solutions be? The Stormont House and Stormont Castle agreements must form the basis of a way forward. There has to be a viable budget that takes account of agreement on some measures to mitigate the impact of welfare changes, including non-implementation of the pernicious bedroom tax, but Sinn Féin has to accept that such a viable budget is a reality facing all democratic Governments. This will require tough choices including changes to the welfare system. The only case I can see for further additional UK Government finance is a new fund to support the development of a new universal mental health service to tackle the inter-generational trauma unique to Northern Ireland. There also has to be a plan, with measurable timelines, to oversee the disbanding of all paramilitary structures. Such structures should be anathema in today's Northern Ireland. The structures to deal with the past need to be agreed as soon as possible, and the Government should honour the Good Friday agreement commitment to a public inquiry into the Finucane murder. This can and should be time-limited, with a finite budget.

[Mr Ivan Lewis]

An incoming 2016 Executive, and, where appropriate, the UK Government, should commit to the implementation of the excellent Heenan-Anderson Commission recommendations to systematically tackle worklessness and inter-generational poverty. Alongside that, we need an economic plan that includes a city deal, and investment in skills and infrastructure, essential if the devolution of corporation tax is to make a real difference. It is right that there should be the establishment of an official recognised Opposition, preferably from 2016 onwards, but we also need a new movement binding together civil society, business, trades unions and the Church to apply pressure to politicians and to create the space and permission for politicians with courage and vision.

Seventeen years on from the end of the troubles Northern Ireland is a much better place, but it is still a society emerging from conflict, coping with the wounds of its past. In truth, that means it will take at least a generation, perhaps two, to move from a cold to a lukewarm peace and then to a normal society. What is needed more than ever is courageous political leadership, coupled with a shared and ambitious vision for prosperity and social justice.

Lady Hermon: I just want to pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman, who worked extremely hard as the shadow Northern Ireland spokesman for a considerable time. I am curious to know whether his experience and expertise on Northern Ireland has at any stage been asked for by the current leader of his party. I think his plea tonight was almost for his party leader to read what he was saying about Northern Ireland. Has his party leader ever sought his view?

Mr Lewis: I thank the hon. Lady for her generous comments, and I thank all Northern Ireland politicians represented in this House for the tremendous support they gave me during the time I did that job. They do not get enough credit for the many constructive and positive things they do to try to move Northern Ireland forward. In direct answer to her question, I can say that in the context of the reshuffle I did have a brief conversation with the leader of my party about the challenges facing Northern Ireland. When I meet the leader of the Labour party in the next few weeks on a one-to-one basis I will certainly be raising a number of issues with him, one of which will be my analysis and my view of the appropriate position that my party needs to take if we are to continue to adopt, along with the Government, a constructive bipartisan approach to moving Northern Ireland forward. There are many things we could do that may undermine that, and we must resist the temptation to change our long-established positions, which have, despite some disagreements, on the whole earned the respect of all of Northern Ireland's political parties. I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North, the shadow Minister of State, has insisted that we stay true to those positions. On that note, I will bring my remarks to a conclusion.

8.53 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is an honour and a privilege to follow such a forceful and well-argued contribution from the hon. Member for Bury South

(Mr Lewis), and I think we would welcome his comments—we certainly would on this side of the Chamber. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) and the hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan) on securing this debate. While we are on the subject of congratulations, let us congratulate the Irish rugby football team on having achieved qualification where England could not, the Northern Ireland football team on qualifying for Euro 2016 and even the Republic on getting to the play-offs for Euro 2016.

I wish my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State the best in conducting the negotiations, as I am sure the whole House does. They are at a delicate stage and they clearly need firm but fair guidance.

Let me discuss my personal history. I was at university in Liverpool in the 1970s, where I represented people from both sides of the sectarian divide. I visited Northern Ireland for the first time then and I was shocked by what I saw. I was there on business in the 1980s and 1990s. It was a very different sort of world to the one it is today. The opportunities that arise in Northern Ireland for business, for tourism and for the greater good of its people are legion. We should look at the positive things that have taken place. Personally, I have had to work with people whom I could not stand in various different political institutions. I take my hat off to those who have to work with people who were literally seeking to murder them only a few years ago. The positive aspect of the changes that have taken place need to be emphasised. People must understand what can happen when things move forward.

I well remember the words of the late Jim Callaghan who said that it was an easy decision to send in troops to Northern Ireland, but a very difficult one to get them out. Clearly, what we do not want to do is go back to some form of direct rule, because it will then be much more difficult to get a settlement that will lead to proper—

Bob Stewart: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. Just as a point of fact, in the spring of 1970, I remember Jim Callaghan telling my platoon that the British Army would be out of Northern Ireland by Christmas 1970.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. and gallant Friend for his contribution. He makes the point quite clearly.

Dialogue clearly needs to take place between the different political parties in Northern Ireland, but paramilitary organisations and criminal gangs have no part in that dialogue. We must give full support to the police in ensuring that the rule of law and order is instituted in Northern Ireland.

I congratulate the hon. Members for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) and for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) on their steadfast support for a proper process and a bipartisan approach. I am concerned that those paramilitaries may have been encouraged by other Members of the Opposition, and that they may be instituting some of their attitudes. I have school friends who were in the pubs in Birmingham when they were bombed. I was in the bar in the Grand Hotel in Brighton an hour before it was bombed. I have personal memories of what happened during those days. We must never go back to them, and we must ensure that we institute proper democratic solutions to the problems of Northern Ireland.

Time is running out. I ask the Minister, in his reply to this debate, to set out how we can ensure that the budget for Northern Ireland is delivered. I also ask him to set out very clearly the position on welfare. We cannot have a situation in which one part of the United Kingdom is carrying on with a huge deficit and not implementing the Budget. Equally, we need to ensure that we implement the Stormont House agreement as opposed to just allowing things to drift. Clearly, the legislation will take some time to pass through this House. We cannot have deadlines being set and then being ignored.

I accept that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is at a delicate stage in her discussions with the political parties in Northern Ireland, but we cannot allow this impasse to continue unabated. Encouraging news emanates from those talks, but no agreement seems to be taking place. It is not right that some political parties that are not present in this Chamber can hold up the talks and express platitudes but not implement the agreement to which they have put their names. Clearly, we need to impose some deadlines and some structure and ensure that the people of Northern Ireland can benefit from the economic recovery that will flow from democracy, institutional investment and the rebalancing of the economy so that the private sector can improve the jobs and the life prospects of all the people of Northern Ireland.

8.59 pm

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan) and the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson), on getting the Backbench Business Committee to agree to this debate.

It will come as no surprise to most people in the Chamber who know me that I am going to talk about the role of trade unions. The trade unions in Northern Ireland are one of the very few voices that are genuinely non-partisan and cross-community. With no disrespect to those sitting on the Northern Ireland Benches to my left, we have seen tonight that there are clear disagreements within the political parties, but the trade unions in Northern Ireland have always played a role in representing people regardless of where they come from or what their beliefs are. These are the people who have to face the reality of Government policy on the ground, whether that is a public sector pay freeze, the cost of living squeeze or the impact of welfare benefit cuts, and I asked them for their view today. On behalf of Unison, the biggest trade union in Northern Ireland, I received the following response:

“trade union members in Northern Ireland fear a return to sectarian violence, a return of a gang law-enforcement culture and a breakdown of institutions and public safety.

The unions...are fighting to save the peace process and Good Friday Agreement, from a politically engineered dispute between the DUP and UUP in the run up to the 2016 elections.

DUP ministers are only...taking office for one hour a week then resigning, and taking full salary”

to progress their policy—*[Interruption.]* If Members want to intervene, I am happy to take an intervention.

Mr Dodds: I hope the hon. Gentleman will clarify that that is not the case. Indeed, the crisis came about not as the result of some kind of Ulster Unionist-DUP

dispute but because of the IRA murder of a person on the streets of Belfast. That is what we should all be concerned about.

Mr Anderson: I take on board what the right hon. Gentleman says, but, as I said earlier, this is not what I am saying; it is what was said to me by those who represent people on the ground in Northern Ireland. That is their view, and the view of the people who try—

Sammy Wilson: It shows how partisan they are.

Mr Anderson: Well, what I said is the case.

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions, which represents trade unions across the whole of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, took a motion to the European TUC, which represents 60 million workers across Europe. The ICTU is convinced that without the input of both Governments and the US Government there will be no movement forward in Northern Ireland. The congress supports fully the devolved Administration of Northern Ireland, wants the Government to be involved and to give a financial stimulus to ensure the continuation of the political institutions, and believes:

“The austerity measures being imposed on the citizens of Northern Ireland by the...Government are a major impediment to the resolution of the political impasse.”

Despite all the progress, Northern Ireland remains a society emerging from conflict:

“A society which has the lowest levels of any region in the UK of investment, educational attainment, and the highest levels of mental ill-health.”

The suicide rate is some 70% higher than in any other region, and poverty, the security spend and economic inactivity are all higher on any scale. The unions believe:

“The failure to achieve a political resolution in the talks...will result in the fall of the political institutions and direct rule...by the Westminster Government”,

which is the last thing that anybody over there wants. That will be unforgivable. The unions believe it will take us back to where we were and will

“result in the emergence from the shadows of the so called...paramilitary groups”.

While Members speak about the fact that one thing that led us to where we are now was what the police lead us to believe was the involvement of the IRA in the killing earlier this year, the unions believe that the failure to get the system up and running again will take us back to the full-blown impact of what we saw for far too many years.

I suggest that the people involved on behalf of the Government should sit down with the trade unions once in a while. I know that they are not very keen on talking to the trade unions on this side of the Irish Sea, but perhaps they might like to talk to the trade unions on the other side of it, which are genuinely committed to seeing the community go forward. Their track record shows that they have been there and shows their work with people on the ground, so the Government should ask for their view and work with them to try to make things go forward. At this moment, we are facing an impasse that will not be helped by having direct rule imposed in any shape or form.

9.4 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. The hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan) who introduced it was almost apologising that we should be discussing Northern Ireland again. I far prefer to have politicians sitting in the House of Commons talking about Northern Ireland than have young men out on the streets of Northern Ireland killing each other, so it is always a pleasure to be able to take part in such a debate.

Murder should have no place in politics. It is ballots, not bullets, that should decide issues in the 21st century in this United Kingdom. When a culture of violence develops, we see a Garda officer from the Republic to which the person in question claims to have loyalty shot dead while going about his duties. That is what happens when a culture of violence and criminality is allowed to fester under the excuse of a flag of political belief.

It is also important that we have budgetary and fiscal responsibility. It is safe to say that there are considerable differences between the Administrations in Westminster and Edinburgh on Scotland's future fiscal direction, yet they have managed to agree a balanced budget, and will implement it regardless of the outcome of the Scottish Parliament elections next year. That sends a message to others.

Sammy Wilson: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that in Scotland we are dealing with a one-party Government, while in Northern Ireland we are dealing with a five-party Government, some of whose members would make the leader of the Labour party look like a member of the Conservative party?

Kevin Foster: It is clear that in Northern Ireland everyone, not just some Members of the Assembly and the Government, needs to take responsibility for making balanced budget proposals and agreeing an effective Assembly Government based on sustainable finances, a point that I have made following the last two statements to the House by the Secretary of State. If people do not agree, it behoves them to state what they would agree to and then be prepared to discuss that to keep the whole system going. We could spend all night listing issues with how the Assembly works, and there are some who are not prepared to accept some of what was signed up to. It can be easy to get an agreement, but implementing it is usually slightly more difficult.

There is a golden opportunity to secure a peace process for the future. The speech that I was looking for in this debate was the one made by the hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis). We could have a fascinating debate lasting until the early hours listing all the problems, but the hon. Gentleman set out solutions. I may not agree with every point that he made, but he was certainly right to say that there needs to be a positive approach to finding a solution to the current impasse. All parties, not just some, need to take responsibility.

I hope that the Government will continue to move down the path set out in the Belfast agreement, support the implementation of the Stormont House agreement and support Northern Ireland's politicians in coming to a point where they are able to govern on behalf of the people of Northern Ireland and deliver many of the benefits that devolution should be bringing. That, for me, is the core of the matter. I want to see a time when

Northern Ireland debates in this Chamber are about the economy, jobs and the future, rather than the past and the constitutional situation. I am as fervent a Unionist as the next person; I believe that the four nations are better together than they are apart. Clearly, there are those in the Chamber who disagree with that statement, but to be fair they show that one can pursue their argument through democratic debate, not by any other means. For me, the solidity of the Union lies in being able to discuss those issues rather than constantly coming back to the constitution.

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): I think that we all want to discuss the economy and the good things about Northern Ireland and the rest of the Union. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that we cannot ignore criminality, paramilitary actions and murder on our streets?

Kevin Foster: No, we cannot have murder as part of our political debate. Paramilitary groups have no place in this country. They should disband and respect the fact that, as I said earlier, decisions nowadays will be taken by ballots, not bullets. We go about achieving that by making sure that we have an agreement that all parties can take forward. No devolved Assembly can live for very long without a sustainable financial position. Governments in Wales and Scotland agree balanced budgets despite huge political disagreements with Westminster. I hope that we can see some parties take a lesson from that in Northern Ireland to allow the Assembly and Executive to proceed with sustainable finances for the next few years.

It has been a pleasure to have the chance to contribute to the debate. I hope that we can go forward on the basis of a positive plan that allows us to put Northern Ireland's future back exactly where it should be: in the hands of Northern Ireland's people and their elected representatives, not coming back to a Committee Room in this House for direct rule.

9.10 pm

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): It is good to follow the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), a lovely part of the world, and to hear his contribution. I am glad to have this opportunity to take part in the debate and to say a few words, but I will be brief as I know there are still a few Members who want to contribute. We have had so many debates in this Chamber about Northern Ireland, and I have listened with interest to the speeches tonight.

We have had a number of history lessons going back to the 1970s and 1980s, but the general public out there in Northern Ireland want to know where we go from here. Make no mistake—the Assembly is in a crisis. As we have this debate here tonight and as we discuss other issues tomorrow and on Wednesday, the discussions will be ongoing in the Assembly to try to find a resolution to the issues and concerns that there are in the structures of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Any deal or understanding that we come to at the end of these talks, and any agreement, if there is one, needs to be comprehensive. It needs to deal with the issues that were agreed in the Stormont House agreement.

Unfortunately, a number of parties reneged on that. Although we know the reputation of Sinn Féin and we know its links to the provos, as history has shown us,

I am extremely disappointed in the stance of the SDLP. On SDLP Members' understanding of economics, the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) is a former Finance Minister so he understands finance, or he should understand finance. Every Member of this House will understand that if there is no money in a business, cash flow stops. It is all over. That is exactly the problem in Stormont.

Yes, we have had a murder on the streets of Belfast, and that is important. Blood on the streets of Belfast—we cannot ignore that; it must be dealt with. The paramilitaries must be dealt with, whether they be republicans or loyalists. They need to go away, in the words of the Secretary of State. But without money one cannot run a business. That is the problem of the Assembly. Welfare reform needs to be agreed, and quickly.

The point was made earlier that we are handing back tens of millions of pounds to the Treasury. Where is the business sense in that? Why? Because Sinn Féin and the SDLP, but more so Sinn Féin on this issue, are facing elections in the Republic of Ireland and they believe that it will have a detrimental impact on them if they agree to welfare reform. Welfare reform has to be implemented. The Government and the Prime Minister only recently said that there was no more money. Do we like that? No, but we have to go with it because there is no finance. Stormont needs to be resolved. We are a devolutionist party, and I believe that Northern Ireland is ruled better from Stormont, but there must be trust. At present the trust is not there. It needs to be re-established.

9.14 pm

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): In following the hon. Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson), I will respond to his challenge to my party, but I do not want to respond only to the issue of welfare reform and the challenges in the devolved budget resulting from the Treasury's budget bullying tactics. The Treasury is imposing a fine on the block grant that is given to the Northern Ireland Executive under the Barnett formula. It adopted that tactic because it thought that creating budget stress for the Assembly would force through welfare reform, but that budget stress became a budget crisis, and that in turn is feeding a political crisis.

The Treasury needs to take a different course. I ask hon. Members to contemplate what would happen if the British Government decided to introduce a provision in the Scotland Bill that would require any disagreement between Ministers in London and Edinburgh on welfare issues in Scotland to be resolved according to the terms they are using in Northern Ireland. How would those on the Treasury Bench react if some of us proposed a new clause that would specifically forbid the Treasury ever doing in Scotland what it is now doing in Northern Ireland: using budget interference to impose a different view of welfare reform?

Although the scheme for devolution set out in the Scotland Bill is different from the notional legislative devolution that Northern Ireland has, the fact is that there is a scheme for devolution there, and it requires and presumes, by the nature of the legislation, agreement between Ministers, but there is no provision for when there is disagreement. It certainly would not work if Scotland was to be treated in the way Northern Ireland has been treated. Therefore, if the Treasury would not

treat Scotland that way in relation to the future of devolution and welfare, it should not treat Northern Ireland that way now.

Sammy Wilson: Does the hon. Gentleman not accept that using the word “fine” misrepresents the situation? The money that is being paid back to the Treasury is the difference between what is being spent and would have been spent had the welfare changes introduced across the rest of the United Kingdom been introduced in Northern Ireland. The fact that the Northern Ireland Assembly has made a choice means that there is a difference in the amount of money spent, and that is why the money has to be paid back.

Mark Durkan: Whether we call them fines or penalties, as the hon. Gentleman and his party have done previously, or savings forgone, which is the language the Treasury uses, they are the same thing and the result is the same: serious pressure on our budget. There are other pressures on our budget as a result of some of the choices that the Executive have made. They are not choices that I would have made when I was Finance Minister—given that my period in that office has been brought up—but they are not choices that I had to make either.

Let me return to the issues that now confront all the parties in the Stormont House talks. Serious attention is rightly being paid to the question of paramilitarism in its various manifestations and manipulations. We are glad that that issue has come to the fore, although we regret how it has come to the fore. In the scoping for the original Stormont House negotiations late last year we said that we wanted paramilitarism, organised crime and criminality on the agenda. Unfortunately we did not get support from others, because they did not seem to believe that it was a relevant issue. It clearly is. Many hon. Members have touched on some of the features of criminality that clearly derive from our troubled experience. Whether people want to pretend that some of these people are simply privateers, having been privatised from some other paramilitary group, or something else, the fact is that collectively we have to confront what that means. We have done that before in previous debates on a cross-party basis—for example, when looking at organised crime in the border areas and elsewhere.

We, as parties, must also ensure that we are not divided on the issue of paramilitarism by taking a differential approach to it depending on what side of the community it appears to come from. We should avoid making different demands on and criticisms of the police according to their response or non-response to one feature of paramilitarism, as opposed to another, because that would send out a signal that we are still divided and that the paramilitaries are somehow attached to and serve particular sides. Nor should we create difficulties for the police. Parties should be robust in using the accountability mechanisms for policing to challenge and engage policing at all levels, but we should not catch the police in the middle of our party political differences.

That is why at Stormont House my party is advocating a whole-community approach to dealing with paramilitarism. If we are to create a whole community in Northern Ireland, we need to overcome historical sectarian divisions and all the convulsive ruptures that aspects of our culture and traditions have sometimes brought about, such as parades. At Stormont House—this

[Mark Durkan]

is often forgotten—we agreed new financial commitments on shared and integrated education, but we need to go further. We need to invest in shared housing to build more intentionally shared communities close to the new shared education estate so that one will reinforce and support the other in changing society.

When people voted for the Good Friday agreement—I am probably the only person in the Chamber who was there negotiating it, and I take my share of whatever people want to say in the way of blame or criticism—we were proved absolutely right in the way we had done it. It was about creating transformational politics in Northern Ireland, and not, at best, episodes of transactional politics where people appear to share power now and then, and turn their backs on each other and let the community down at other times. We need to use these Stormont House negotiations not just to make good the better promises of Stormont House but go back to the original promises of the agreement.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. To get everybody in with equal time, we are going to move to a three-minute limit.

9.21 pm

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): The hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) said that we should be more positive about some aspects. How much more positive can we get than Northern Ireland qualifying for the European football championships for the first time at the weekend, and the Ireland rugby team topping their group in the rugby world cup, although there were quite a number of Ulstermen playing for Ireland as well? Let us be fair—there are some positives. Perhaps we should just let the sportspeople of Northern Ireland run Northern Ireland. Would we have a better place? I do not know. It is difficult to replicate the euphoria in the sporting world in Northern Ireland in politics at the moment, but that is what we need to try to do. However, we cannot ignore what is happening on our streets—the murder and the criminality. All those aspects must be dealt with.

It is incumbent on us to go back to where we were in December. Not every party agreed with the Stormont House proposals. In fact, Sinn Féin was the only party that totally signed up to them. Let me quote what some of its members said at its party conference in March this year. Gerry Adams, the Sinn Féin leader, said of the deal they got at Stormont House in December:

“Welfare reform is a fresh start that we need to seize with both hands”.

Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness referred to a

“remarkable achievement which has the potential to give the executive a fresh start... Against all the odds we have forged a way forward, we have achieved a deal in the interests of the people... We are immensely proud of the achievement”.

Only a couple of days later, they reneged on that deal. Why? Is it because they want to demonstrate that Northern Ireland is unworkable? There is a real challenge for us to prove that it is workable. We need to bond together—perhaps without Sinn Féin, but we need to do it. We need

to bond together with unions, with representatives of the community, with public representatives, and, dare I say it, with sportspeople to make sure that Northern Ireland is a workable country and that Sinn Féin and those who are determined to drive that away cannot be successful.

9.24 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): First, may I say that the negativity in some of tonight’s speeches is not representative of the record of the Northern Ireland Assembly? Indeed, parties as diverse as Sinn Féin and ourselves have been forced to work together, yet have brought forward a programme for Government that, as was pointed out in an earlier intervention, has seen the economy through the recession, kept employment levels higher than ever through that kind of trough in economic activity, and introduced innovative policies, including taking unemployed teachers off the dole queue, helping young people with literacy and numeracy problems, and changes to business rates, which have now been replicated in Scotland and Wales. There have been innovative policies and good work has been done, despite the fact that many of the parties’ views have been so diverse.

We have a problem at the moment. Economics was always going to be an issue for the Northern Ireland Assembly, given the fact that there are people there who are to the left of the leader of the Labour party, and others who would be quite happy sitting on the Tory Benches. There was always going to be a problem with economics and we have now come to the issue of welfare reform.

Part of the problem is the way in which the Government have handled the issue. Instead of making it very clear from the start that no leeway would be given beyond the substantial changes made and that no handouts or further money would be thrown at the problem, that hope was always held out. There are still people in Northern Ireland who say, “If we went collectively, we could somehow or other escape the changes that have had to be made in the rest of the United Kingdom.” That is nonsense, but unfortunately it has been assisted by the unwillingness of the Government to take on Sinn Féin and tell it and the SDLP, “Look, we have allowed changes to be made on welfare in Northern Ireland and it’s going no further.”

The Government have to make it clear to Sinn Féin that criminality and the party’s association with criminals who launder money and engage in illegal activities, and its defence of them because they are former comrades, will not be accepted and that it has to be dealt with. Until that clear message goes out, I believe the present impasse will remain.

9.27 pm

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): I echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) and congratulate the hon. Members for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan) and for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) on securing this debate on the political situation in Stormont.

The SDLP is committed to the talks process for the people of Northern Ireland. Our citizens have well and truly lost patience with the political situation in Stormont, with it hurtling from one crisis to the next because of

the dysfunctional mismanagement by the two parties at the centre. The parties, and the British and Irish Governments, must commit to full and comprehensive outcomes.

Sinn Féin completely refuses to acknowledge the Chief Constable's assessment of the possibility of paramilitary involvement in the murder of Kevin McGuigan in the Markets area of Belfast earlier this summer. There is also, of course, the failure of the DUP to work the institutions. Their approach of 10-minute Ministers going in and out has resulted in the public being sick, sore and tired of long waiting lists for healthcare. Our Minister for Health is a Minister for 10 minutes one day and then not a Minister for five days. That compounds an already difficult situation in that Department.

There is also a situation with renewable obligations for energy and renewable technologies in Northern Ireland. The people were told that they would last until the end of March 2017, but what the 10-minute Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment refused to tell them was that they were actually going to end in March 2016, thereby impacting on local industry and local capability, where there are enormous opportunities.

Mr Dodds: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Ritchie: No, because other people want to speak.

Mark Durkan: Take a minute.

Ms Ritchie: Maybe I will.

Mr Dodds: Does the hon. Lady dissociate herself from and repudiate the recent words of her party leader, who referred to Roman Catholics in Northern Ireland as "taigs"?

Ms Ritchie: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments. I do not think that that is exactly what our party leader said.

Mr Dodds: He did say it.

Ms Ritchie: What I would ask is whether the DUP is fully up to power sharing, because that is the kernel or particular issue.

Mr Dodds: You do not repudiate it.

Ms Ritchie: I am not saying that.

Lady Hermon: I can assure the hon. Lady that I will not follow the comments made by the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Mr Dodds), but he is quite right to ask the question.

The issue I wish to raise is quite different. The people in my constituency certainly want to know whether, if Sinn Féin agreed to some form of welfare reform, the SDLP would follow suit. When is the SDLP going to agree to the welfare reforms that have been rolled out across the rest of the United Kingdom?

Ms Ritchie: The SDLP wants the best possible implementation of the Stormont House agreement for all the citizens of Northern Ireland. In fact, in February in the Assembly, it was the SDLP which tabled numerous

amendments to the Welfare Reform Bill. The DUP and Sinn Féin refused to support the measures. They voted down amendments that would have improved the Bill. We were able to give the Minister—[*Interruption.*] In many instances, the amendments were cost-neutral.

Mark Durkan: The Minister said that they were cost-neutral.

Ms Ritchie: Yes, that is right.

On another aspect of the issue, Northern Ireland needs to move into a shared future that fosters tolerance and respect across the entire island. We cannot do so if we do not confront our past. The north's past will not simply be dealt with through the passing of time. The SDLP is not happy with the proposed legislation on the past, because we believe that it is an impediment to dealing with those issues and the recovery of truth and accountability. In my constituency, six innocent men were murdered in Loughinisland in County Down on 18 June 1994. We are still waiting on information regarding the truth; we are still waiting on justice. Above all, we are waiting to find out who perpetrated those murders and why they were perpetrated. Was there state involvement and was there involvement by the Royal Ulster Constabulary? We need to find out, which is why it is crucial that the Bill dealing with the past addresses those issues.

I am in absolutely no doubt, nor is my party, that Northern Ireland has considerable economic potential. We need a rebalancing of the economy, and we need balanced regional development. There is an opportunity for reconciliation, which must deal with the past and the situation of our current citizenry, so to speak, so that we can deal with the future. We must have a prosperous future, and we must be able to unite the people of the island of Ireland in terms of a reconciled future.

9.33 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is 10 years since the IRA was supposed to decommission its weapons, 10 years since the IRA was to disband its military operations, and 10 years since a party now at the heart of the Northern Ireland Executive began its transition to a party that was, at least so it said, committed to exclusively peaceful means. Ten years on, we have murder on the streets of Northern Ireland and it is that supposedly decommissioned, supposedly disbanded terror group that is once again making the headlines and putting Northern Ireland in the news for the wrong reasons.

We are holding this debate because armed terrorists carried out executions on the streets of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. If this were any other part of the United Kingdom there would be a national outcry. Just how many lies have been told? How many more lies are we expected to believe? We were told the IRA had gone away and had left the stage. It was described as withering away by none other than the Independent Monitoring Commission. Do we believe Bobby Storey when he says that the IRA has disappeared into the air like a butterfly? Cassius Clay said that he floated like a butterfly and stung like a bee. When the IRA stings, people die. That is the difference. Do we believe Bobby Storey or do we believe the IMC? Do we believe the assessment of the IRA by

[Jim Shannon]

the Chief Constable of the PSNI or do we believe that political colossus, Gerry “I was never in the IRA” Adams? Who do we believe?

Is it any wonder that Stormont is in crisis when the largest nationalist party cannot tell its partners in government the truth about its supposedly former terror wing? We cannot expect simply to brush all this under the carpet. After all the hurt, pain, suffering and death that the IRA caused, it is beyond an outrage that Sinn Féin cannot understand the angst not just in the Unionist community, but throughout the Province. Up and down Northern Ireland, normal hard-working families are worried—worried for the future, worried that terror is back on the streets, worried that they cannot trust those at the heart of our Executive and worried that it will affect them.

Mr Gregory Campbell: Does my hon. Friend agree that last week we saw an opportunity for the police to recruit from all communities across Northern Ireland, but that in some cases terror was manifested and threats were made? This weekend, there is one of the delayed recruitment procedures in the north-west of Northern Ireland, which offers an opportunity to politicians, trade unionists and the wider communities to stand united in opposing terror and ensuring that everybody across the community can join up with the police to ensure that terrorism never wins.

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. He covered my next point. Over a weekend when the PSNI tried to recruit across the whole of Northern Ireland, there were threats and bomb hoaxes. That may be the future that some republicans want to see, but we do not want it.

If Sinn Féin is willing to hide from the truth on this issue—an issue so close to home for many people across our United Kingdom—one must ask what else it is hiding. If Northern Ireland is truly to enjoy a new era and a true process of reconciliation, it is time for republicans to step up to the plate and start taking their responsibilities seriously.

The hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan) referred to the elephant in the room. It very clearly is in the room.

Northern Ireland deserves better than this. After all that we have been through, I implore the House to support those who are rooting out the scourge of terrorism within our society so that Northern Ireland can enjoy the true peace and stability it so deserves.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP) *rose*—

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. If I am to call the remaining two speakers, they must each be brief because I want to hear the winding-up speeches from the Front Benches as well. If they could speak without interventions, that would help the House.

9.37 pm

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I am happy with the ruling that I should not take any interventions.

Had you been here earlier, Mr Speaker, you would have heard a number of contributions that could best be described as jaundiced, if not entirely negative. I am pleased that the debate is not entitled the political “crisis” in Stormont, but the political “situation”. I was pleased to support the hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan) in his request for this Back-Bench debate and I believe that it has been important. Aside from the jaundiced contributions, there have been a number of encouraging contributions.

I always like to believe that the glass is half full and there are reasons for optimism. It is important that we will receive an analysis this week of the situation that paramilitary organisations find themselves in and of the operations that they may or may not have been involved in, and that we will hear at first hand an independent assessment of what we should believe and what the threats are to Northern Ireland.

The hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) referred to the state of play in the Northern Ireland Executive. Members may well be aware that one member of the Executive resigned, not for any principled reason, but entirely for political opportunism. Few people in Northern Ireland recall who that individual was, never mind what was achieved.

There is a clamouring in Northern Ireland for our Executive Ministers to get back to their jobs full time. Irrespective of how disappointed people are about how things have progressed over the past few weeks, they want devolution to work. They want Stormont to succeed and they want to see delivery in Northern Ireland, as in the rest of the UK. That is hugely important. We want to be back in our places in Stormont castle and in the Assembly.

We know what needs to change, and last week I was encouraged when the Deputy First Minister seemed to herald a shift in his position. That has been described as a preparing of the ground for a U-turn by Sinn Féin on welfare reform, and if that is right it is to be welcomed. It is disappointing the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) has not taken the same view and still stands over the intransigence on welfare reform.

On criminality—the Minister will wish to respond to this—we need to get away from all those who have held us back in Northern Ireland, and from those who currently pillage and persecute their own communities and hold our community back. The Minister knows that he has our full support on that, whether on the Northern Ireland side of the border, in the Republic of Ireland, or internationally. Such positivity should not be misplaced and absent from this debate, and we look forward to a resolution to the current impasse.

9.40 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Like many others, I have been concerned about recent developments in Northern Ireland. Paramilitary activity has no place in society, and it is right that the Secretary of State has called for an independent review to assess the status of paramilitary organisations in Northern Ireland. I hope that that review will facilitate the talks that ensue.

It would be a travesty if Northern Ireland were to return to direct Westminster rule. Such a regressive step would be a hammer blow to the peace process, and could effectively mark the failure of the Good Friday agreement—a deal that was agreed by a majority of citizens in Ireland, north and south, and by the UK and Irish Governments. Peace has been a rocky road in Northern Ireland, and I acknowledge the work of a great many individuals in ensuring that it has lasted.

I am deeply concerned that the peace process does not appear to have been handled as sensitively as it ought to have been in recent years. Failure to find consensus on key areas such as dealing with the past, and external factors such as imposed austerity, are seriously hindering progress. The latter point is a key concern of mine because, as an anti-austerity politician, I find it alarming that such matters are impeding the peace process.

Northern Ireland has real and ongoing issues that are directly attributable to the legacy of the troubles. The situation is deeply complex, and the legacy of the troubles has left long-lasting socioeconomic problems. Northern Irish constituencies, although few in number, regularly sit atop the UK's unemployment charts. Last month's figures show that three of the Province's 18 constituencies are also included in the five highest out-of-work benefit claimant rates per percentage of economically active population. There are generational issues and, not coincidentally, those three constituencies top the tables for unemployment among 18 to 24-year-olds—an age group too young to remember the actual troubles. Those are serious issues, and the root causes need to be addressed as part of the peace process.

The bedroom tax has caused misery for millions across the UK, and real damage to the governance of Northern Ireland. Although the Scottish Government protected citizens from that cruel levy, it has caused chaos over the water. It has not been easy, but the Holyrood Administration have done a commendable job of protecting the most vulnerable. At Stormont, however, the power-sharing Executive have been unable to reach a consensus and have repeatedly been thrown into turmoil on that key issue.

I hope that I am not a lone voice of common sense when I state my bemusement that Tory welfare reform is even being mentioned in relation to the peace process. It is clear that the Stormont House talks did not effectively resolve those issues in the way that they were meant to. Although it is not my place to comment on or dictate the nature of talks, agreements or resulting legislation, I hope to see progress and consensus on key issues. I am eager to see a positive outcome to the current talks, and I truly hope, for the sake of all those living in Northern Ireland and the decades-long peace process, that a lasting resolution can be found.

Mr Speaker: Order. We are extremely grateful to the hon. Lady. Unfortunately there will not be time for a Back-Bench winding-up speech. The opening contribution was substantial, for which we are grateful, but we now need to wind up the debate with the Front-Bench speeches.

9.44 pm

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): I congratulate all those who have spoken this evening. Last time I spoke from the Dispatch Box on Northern Ireland

matters I was able, proudly, to congratulate Kyle Lafferty on scoring the goal that took Northern Ireland forward. Tonight, it would be wrong and remiss if I were not to mention Josh Magennis and Steven Davis, as well as Michael O'Neill and everyone at the Irish Football Association. They should be proud of their achievement. I am sure this House will be supporting the green and white army in France next year.

It is important to put on the record the position of the Opposition. There has been much welcome regarding the return of my colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), and we welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) to the team. There has been no change in the policy of the Labour party with regard to Northern Ireland. We reiterate, on the record, the bipartisan approach. It is vital that we place on record our unwavering commitment to the people of Northern Ireland and to the rule of law, and to reiterate the remarks made by my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling at the Labour party conference when he made it clear that we are fully supportive of the principle of consent as expressed in the Good Friday agreement and subsequent agreements.

We have heard some first-class speeches tonight. For anyone who has talked about negativism, I have to say that I have heard knowledge and I have heard people speaking from the perspective of experience. The hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan), who secured the debate, should be given credit. He referred at one stage to a “dysfunctional quagmire”, a dramatic expression that will no doubt enter the parliamentary lexicon. It is not one I have heard before. He may be expressing his own personal concerns and fears, but there is, of course, much more to this debate than that.

We have heard from so many Members about the difficulty of moving forward from the past. None have made the case more dramatically than the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Mr Dodds). On 30 July 1990, Ian Gow was killed. Twenty five years have passed since then. The three new commemorative shields over the door to the Aye Lobby will not have escaped the notice of the House. They represent not just Major Charles Lyell, who was the Member of Parliament for Edinburgh South, but Captain Dr John Joseph Esmonde, who was the Member for North Tipperary and the famous Lieutenant Tom Kettle, that great poet from East Tyrone.

The past is all around us. The past is everywhere. We cannot ignore the past, but we have to move forward. One statement we heard tonight shows us how we are still facing terrible problems. The right hon. Member for Belfast North referred to Garda Anthony Golden, who was killed this week. Let us not forget that Garda Golden was the father of three young children. They no longer have a father. What we are talking about here tonight is not some abstract matter. This is not some political game or constitutional discussion. This really is a matter of life and death. It was rightly said that it is much more important that we talk about these issues here and in Stormont than resort to the alternative.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis) said that he might be rusty. I think the House owes my hon. Friend thanks and gratitude for his work from the Opposition Front Bench. He was not rusty. As ever, he was incisive. He was as sharp as a razor and absolutely to the point. We have much to learn from him and from the positivity he expressed.

[Stephen Pound]

In addition to trade unions, my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson) mentioned Washington. We should refer in these debates to the role of Dublin and the Irish Government, as well as Washington. We need all the friends we can get in resolving these matters. They have proven to be good friends.

Let us not forget the comments made by the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster). He talked about the future, not the past. That is so important: let that be the key factor. Above all, the hon. Member for South Antrim brought this debate to the House not in a mood of despair, but, as far as I could see, in a mood of optimism. I hope we can resolve these issues.

I would like to put a couple of points to the Minister. The first is on the issue of welfare reform. The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) raised these points. As he will know, Northern Ireland is not like any other part of the UK. We who have not lived through them cannot understand the effect of those traumatic and horrifying acts of terrorism and bloodshed. The post-traumatic stress and other mental health illnesses that blight and curse that community are beyond the imagination and experience of many of us on this side of the water. Does the Minister share the concerns on this side of the House that further reductions to services as a result of welfare reform threaten to enhance the cycle of generational problems of worklessness? What assistance will the Government be offering to ensure that mental health support services in particular are protected?

I reiterate the Opposition's support for the Stormont House talks, but I would be grateful if the Minister could update the House on the response he has received from the various political parties regarding the proposed legislation. Why is the implementation and reconciliation group referred to not included in the legislation? Finally, what progress is being made with the talks?

I could say more—we could all say more—but I will conclude by thanking, as I think we all do, the hon. Member for South Antrim, not just for bringing this debate, but for the conciliatory, gentle, positive and hopeful way in which he did so. He referred to the greatness of the people of Northern Ireland. We all agree with that. I hope that now is the time for the people of Northern Ireland to prove that they are not just a great people with a great past, but a great people with a great present and future. That future is ours to seize. Let us do it.

9.51 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr Ben Wallace): Before I start, may I add my and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's condolences to the family of Garda Officer Anthony Golden? Whatever side of the Northern Ireland border one lives, we all support the PSNI and the Garda in the work they do every day, putting themselves at risk trying to keep people safe. The loss of Officer Golden's life is truly a tragedy brought about by people who still stick to the path of violence. May I also make a brief apology for my right hon. Friend not being here? She is, of course, in Northern Ireland involved in the talks process.

This all started last December, when, after an 11-week period, the Stormont House agreement was brought about. It was designed to make a more prosperous, stable and secure Northern Ireland and to ensure that all the problems that had arisen since the Belfast agreement were put behind us, and we underpinned it with a generous settlement of £2 billion. I assure my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) that there is no more money. We funded the deal and put together the £2 billion package last year, and there is no open chequebook. The option is clear: to implement in full the Stormont House agreement. It is regrettable, therefore, that this year Sinn Féin decided to break the agreement. Had it not, I think that Stormont House would still be operating and on the path to producing a more prosperous and better Northern Ireland.

For the sake of people in Northern Ireland, however, we cannot allow a non-functioning Stormont to continue, which is why my right hon. Friend convened the talks—to try to work through the impasse. The Government and many other parties have stuck to their part of the Stormont House agreement. We have paved the way for corporation tax legislation at Stormont to allow flexibility and reduced levels to be put in place to encourage the desperately needed businesses to grow, and we are on the cusp of introducing legislation to deal with the legacy of the past. I can assure the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) that nothing in the proposed legislation will prevent her from finding out the truth of what happened to her constituent or justice from being served on the perpetrators, if they are identified.

We have also rolled out and started the process of that £2 billion package: the voluntary exit scheme for civil servants, the £150 million to deal with the legacies of the past and the £350 million towards the economic pact, but unfortunately welfare reform seems to be the sticking point. The hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis) could not have put it better. Whatever one's position on welfare and my Government's welfare policy, it needed to be implemented. I say to the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) that it was something that the parties signed up to in December last year. It is simply part of the politics we have to face and implement. Yes, we have allowed flexibilities—flexibilities that the constituents of the hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis) in Lancashire and I do not have. We have allowed flexibilities for Northern Ireland with its generous block grant to make accommodation for the troubles and their impact. It is important to see this through.

We cannot overlook the brutal murders that took place this year, culminating in the murder of Mr McGuigan in the Short Strand. Let me make it absolutely clear that there is no place in Northern Ireland or the rest of the United Kingdom for the paramilitaries or the existence of paramilitary organisations. This Government will fully support the investigation of the PSNI no matter where it leads. We will not interfere with it; we will only support what the Chief Constable of the PSNI does with his operational freedom to pursue justice. That is no more and no less than we should expect.

I support the Justice Minister in the devolved institution, Mr Ford, on his work with the organised crime task force. He is making progress. Only a few weekends ago, we had a successful search, arrest and charging of an individual linked to republican terrorism in west Belfast. I say to the hon. Member for South Antrim

(Danny Kinahan) that we are making progress in bringing people to justice. With explosives taken off the street, they will not be available to cause harm to, and murder, people as they go about their business. The aim of all this is to bring violence and the men of violence to an end.

As for the contributions, I think that the hon. Member for South Antrim should not have apologised for bringing this debate. We should have more debates on Northern Ireland: it would give me more practice, but I am also delighted that Members of all parties have so fully engaged in the debate.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) focused on action, and I totally agree that we must take action to ensure that Stormont continues. My first time in politics was in the Scottish Parliament. I saw what a working Scottish Parliament can do for the people of Scotland. I would say that a working Stormont is the best path to peace and also the best path to prosperity. We should not let obstacles bring that institution down. If that means tough decisions being taken here, we might have to do that. I hope that the Scottish National party would not rule that out unconditionally.

To my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley, I repeat that there is no more money. The right hon. Member for Belfast North (Mr Dodds) made a valid point, however, and I welcome his support for the full implementation of the Stormont House agreement. The point is to see this agreement through—the agreement signed and sealed in December last year.

My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile) talked about his experiences of Northern Ireland and the chaos and murder that was brought to the mainland of the United Kingdom. We should not forget that the IRA blew up people going about their business shopping, including children and families in this country, in Northern Ireland and all around Europe. We should not forget that when we ask people to condemn the actions taken in the past.

I think the hon. Member for Bury South demonstrated why he deserved to be the shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. His speech spoke very much about him being a mature politician who delivered what the UK Government should be delivering for Northern Ireland—a bipartisan approach, neutral to the extent of not favouring one party or the other, but focusing on the issue of consent and trying to move forward to the future rather than dwelling on the past.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) asked how long have we got. The money is running out; there is no magic money tree. We have gone as long as people will want to tolerate withdrawal of their services, as hospitals go into crisis and education is not able to function in Northern Ireland. We have as long as it takes, but my view is that the people of Northern Ireland will not tolerate it much longer—and neither should the parties of Northern Ireland.

The prize is great; the prize is in front of us. Northern Ireland is an exciting, confident place—better than when I was there in the '90s. If we can resolve this Stormont House impasse, I think Northern Ireland will go from strength to strength—like its football team and the Irish rugby team.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the political situation in Stormont.

Business without Debate

REGULATORY REFORM

Ordered,

That Andrew Bridgen, Richard Fuller, Rebecca Harris, Simon Hoare, Dr Rupa Huq, Imran Hussain, Rob Marris, Mr Michael Meacher, Wendy Morton, Roger Mullin, Andrew Percy, Christopher Pincher, Jeremy Quin and Mr Andrew Smith be members of the Regulatory Reform Committee.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

Civilians in Syria

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

10 pm

Jo Cox (Batley and Spen) (Lab): Every decade or so, the world is tested by a crisis so grave that it breaks the mould: one so horrific and inhumane that the response of politicians to it becomes emblematic of their generation—their moral leadership or cowardice, their resolution or incompetence. It is how history judges us. We have been tested by the second world war, the genocide in Rwanda and the slaughter in Bosnia, and I believe that Syria is our generation's test. Will we step up to play our part in stopping the abject horror of the Syrian civil war and the spread of the modern-day fascism of ISIS, or will we step to one side, say that it is too complicated, and leave Iran, Russia, Assad and ISIS to turn the country into a graveyard? Whatever we decide will stay with us for ever, and I ask that each of us take that responsibility personally.

To date, neither side of the House has a record to be proud of. Let me start with my party. One of the reasons it is such an honour to be standing on this side of the House is the deep, deep pride that I have in Labour's internationalist past. It is pride in the thousands of people from our movement who volunteered to fight tyranny alongside their fellow socialists and trade unionists in the Spanish civil war; pride in the leaders of our party—and Robin Cook in particular—who demanded action to stop the slaughter of Bosnian Muslims in Srebrenica and elsewhere, in the face of outrageous intransigence from the then Conservative Government; and pride in the action we led in government to save countless lives in Kosovo and Sierra Leone. In recent years, however, that internationalism has first been distorted, and now risks being jettisoned altogether.

My heart sank as I watched in 2013 when, following President Assad's use of chemical weapons against civilians, we first voted against a military response and then supported taking military options off the table. Responsibility for the mishandling of that critical vote, which had such far-reaching international implications, falls principally on the Government, but we on these Benches carry some culpability for letting Assad ride roughshod and unchallenged across what should have been a sacrosanct red line. As a result, the international community lost all credibility in our subsequent efforts to stem the spread of, and the suffering in, this horrific civil war. Indeed, our failure to intervene to protect civilians left Assad at liberty to escalate both the scale and the ferocity of his attacks on innocent Syrians in a desperate attempt to cling to power.

I understand, of course, where our reticence comes from. It comes from perhaps the darkest chapter in Labour's history, when we led this country to war in Iraq. Many Members in all parts of the House have been scarred by that experience, and understandably so; but let us all be clear about the fact that Syria is not Iraq. I opposed the war in Iraq from the beginning because I believed that the risk to civilian lives was too high, and their protection was never the central objective. I knew, as we all knew, that President George Bush was motivated not by the need to protect civilians, but by supposed weapons of mass destruction and a misguided view of the United States' strategic interest.

I marched against that war, and have marched against many others in my time. Indeed, before I joined the House I was an aid worker for a decade with Oxfam. I have seen at first hand the horror of war and its brutal impact on civilian populations. I have met 10-year-old former child soldiers with memories that no child should have to live with. I have sat down with Afghan elders with battle-weary eyes. I have held the hands of Darfuri women, gang-raped because no one was there to protect them. From that experience, alongside a horror of conflict, I have the knowledge that there are times when the only way to protect civilians requires military force. I might wish that it were not so, but it is. That is why I firmly believe that the Labour Government were right to champion the adoption, in 2005, of a landmark global commitment to the best and most fundamental of our human ideals: the responsibility to protect civilians. I still firmly believe that a legitimate case can be made for intervention on humanitarian grounds when a Government are manifestly unwilling or unable to protect their own civilians. Sovereignty must not constitute a licence to kill with impunity.

The history of Iraq hangs over us all, and it should, but its legacy is awful enough without supplementing it with a new one of ignoring the slaughter in Syria. We must not let it cloud our judgment or allow us to lose sight of our moral compass.

The war in Iraq led to the deaths of thousands upon thousands of civilians. Its legacy must be to make us all put the protection of civilians at the centre of our foreign policy, not to make us sit on the sidelines while hundreds of thousands more are killed and millions flee for their lives.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am greatly concerned about the persecution of Christians in Syria. Some 600,000 Christians have been displaced from Syria. They have been given the ultimatum of "convert or die". Does the hon. Lady feel our Government could do more to put pressure on Assad and parts of ISIS to make sure the persecution of Christians stops?

Jo Cox: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and I will come on to that subject later in the speech.

I shall now turn to the Conservative party's record. For four years the Government have categorically failed on Syria, and it is not just the UK that should be judged so harshly. The failure to develop and then implement an effective strategy on Syria left this conflict free to create a horrendous European refugee crisis and provide a haven for the barbarism of ISIS to take root, allowed chemical weapons to be used unchallenged and even emboldened Russia. In particular, since the Prime Minister's mishandling of the 2013 Syria vote, the Government have let this crisis fester on the "too difficult to deal with" pile. There has been no credible strategy, nor courage, nor leadership; instead we have had chaos and incoherence interspersed with the occasional gesture. Indeed, it has been a masterclass in how not to do foreign policy and a stark lesson on what happens when we ignore a crisis of this magnitude. Britain—with our proud tradition in international affairs, our seat on the UN Security Council and one of the best diplomatic, humanitarian and military services in the world—has been a political pygmy in this crisis.

None of us have a proud history in this affair. If we are to put this right, we must put that behind us; we must put party politics to one side and focus on what really matters—the protection of Syrian civilians.

Let me first turn to two of the arguments that do most disservice to a serious discussion of this crisis. First, please let us stop casting the humanitarian, diplomatic and military responses as mutually exclusive alternatives. They are not. If we are serious about addressing this crisis, we need to stop pretending that any one of them offers a panacea and instead weave these strands into a coherent strategy. Secondly, let us not be duped into believing that we need to make a choice between dealing with either Assad or ISIS. On the surface, this may seem appealing, but it is not an option. There is no choice.

We can, and must, address both Assad and ISIS for two principal reasons. First, a sole focus on ISIS will not end the conflict and the threats to our interests. The Assad regime ignited, and continues to drive, the violence in Syria. This year alone, it has killed seven times more civilians than ISIS, so a strategy that only focuses on ISIS will not end the fighting or the threat to regional stability. It will not stem the tide of desperate refugees pouring into Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan, or trying to get into Europe.

Secondly, and crucially, a myopic focus on ISIS will not lead to its defeat. It will not work. Assad is ISIS's biggest recruiting sergeant, and as long as his tyranny continues, so too will ISIS's terror. Indeed, a sole focus on ISIS while ignoring the regime's ongoing bombardment of civilians risks inadvertently strengthening the jihadis' narrative, which is fuelled by the idea that the west is colluding with Shi'a forces in Tehran and Damascus in a crusade to subjugate Sunni Arabs. That is why, to make good on our past failures, to protect our interests and to live up to our proudest traditions, we need urgently to develop a comprehensive and coherent strategy.

I believe that there are three core elements to such a strategy, none of which is easy and all of which are critical. First, I shall talk about the humanitarian aspect. Four years on from the start of the conflict, there are now 240,000 dead—some credible estimates put the figure at over 330,000—and more than 12 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance. The scale of the human disaster is breathtaking. One area in which the UK Government have shown considerable and commendable leadership is in the regional humanitarian response to the refugee crisis, where we have led the way with the US and our European partners. I now urge the Government to go further.

As the Minister will be aware, the vast majority of Syrian refugees are in the region and those countries are buckling under the strain. The G20 summit in Turkey in November should be marked by the launch of an ambitious plan to meet refugees' urgent needs, to invest in their education and livelihoods and to support Syria's neighbours in reconstruction and development. Equally important is the UK's response to the refugee crisis, which has, to date, been woefully inadequate. Taking 20,000 refugees over five years is simply not good enough; it sends an awful message about how seriously we take civilian protection. Whether it is the response to the drownings in the Mediterranean or our offer to take Syrian refugees, the Prime Minister has been pushed into climbdown

after climbdown, embarrassed into action by the humanity of the British public. It is time for him to lead, not follow.

But let us be clear that, no matter what our humanitarian response is to this crisis, it will never be enough. It cannot end the conflict. That is why we also need to invest far more in diplomatic efforts to find a political solution. There are clearly no easy answers, but we can at least be clear on the principles. First, this needs to be a much higher-level conversation. We saw some improvement in that respect at the UN General Assembly last month and in the reopening of the UK's embassy in Tehran. However, the Foreign Secretary and Prime Minister need to make it clear that ending the conflict in Syria is their No.1 international priority, and to challenge other world leaders to match their commitment.

Secondly, we must not let the urgent need to find a political solution cloud our judgment about what a credible one looks like. If four years of continuous vicious conflict have taught us anything, it is that the current regime is no longer capable of bringing peace and stability to Syria. Whatever its exact complexion and character, and whatever the complex negotiations and compromises needed to get there, a credible political solution has to involve a transition to a new Government that represent all Syrians and that enjoy sufficient trust and legitimacy that all but the delusional fanatics of ISIS will be willing to lower their guns and work together to rebuild their country. Russia's recent intervention makes the route to a political settlement more complicated but it does not change the necessity for one. A political solution is the only way to end the conflict between the regime and the opposition in Syria. Only when that conflict has ended can ISIS and the handful of other extremists allied to Al-Qaeda be defeated.

The third element of the strategy has to be military. While I do not believe that there is a purely military solution to this conflict, I do believe that there will be a military component to any viable solution.

The threat from ISIS—to the region, to the west and to Syrian and Iraqi civilians—is real and growing. I do not believe it to be ethical to watch from the sidelines as Syrian villages are overrun by ISIS fighters who make sex slaves of children, terrorise minority groups and slaughter fellow Muslims. In addition, their call for individual sympathisers to attack westerners anywhere and anytime requires a robust response.

The estimated 20,000 foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, many of whom hold western passports and can therefore travel freely in Europe, present a real and serious threat to us here in the UK. In addition, ISIS's spread to new havens in Libya, the Sinai peninsula, Afghanistan, Yemen, Nigeria and elsewhere convinces me of the need for active UK involvement—but only if that is part of a comprehensive strategy to protect civilians and end the conflict.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a good and brave speech on this important point. Will she emphasise the point we set out in our joint article over the weekend, which is that the safe havens are not an intervention in the politics of Syria but are strictly a humanitarian measure to ensure safety for those who are fleeing their homes and communities, often under gunfire, and the extreme violence in Syria today? This is the sort of intervention that the

[Mr Andrew Mitchell]

United Nations was set up to co-ordinate, and we really must ask why more is not being done by the international community to promote this important initiative, which both of us supported at the weekend.

Jo Cox: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that, and we do share common cause on the need for humanitarian protection for civilians in Syria.

Let me get back to my point about a myopic focus on ISIS being counterproductive. If selective air strikes against ISIS are the only action the west takes in Syria, we will never defeat ISIS—and we could even strengthen it. At least 75% of all civilian deaths in Syria are a result of action by Syrian Government forces; aerial bombardment by the regime is by far the biggest killer, taking around 200 lives every week. It is horrifically indiscriminate; 95% of the victims are civilians. For these reasons, and in the light of the fact that an ISIS-only approach will not protect us from the threat it poses, our objective must be to stop the indiscriminate aerial bombardment in Syria. Not only would that provide much-needed relief to Syria's embattled population, who are still being bombarded by 50 to 60 barrel bombs a day, but it could help empower Syria's remaining moderate opposition, who are essential not only to finding a political solution but to holding back and ultimately defeating ISIS.

Stopping the bombs would also take away a significant radicalising factor in the conflict and could breathe new life into the political process, changing Assad's calculations and forcing him to the negotiating table. As we saw in 2013, the Syrian Government's response to the credible threat of force was to make a political deal, not to risk escalation. As such, I believe it is time for the Government urgently to consider deterring the indiscriminate aerial bombardment of civilians in Syria through the willingness to consider the prudent and limited use of force.

A no-fly zone would be an enormous military undertaking, and would entail significant risks, particularly now that Russia has joined the regime in the Syrian skies. But what I call a no-bombing zone, enforced from maritime assets in the Mediterranean so as to avoid engaging Syrian air defences, would save lives, uphold international humanitarian law and breathe life into the political process.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I totally endorse what my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) said about the hon. Lady making a brave speech. My worry is that she can do nothing without a Security Council resolution, which gives political top cover and the legal right to go into a sovereign country.

Jo Cox: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the intervention. I agree that we should try to secure a UN Security Council resolution, but I do not think we should limit ourselves to not acting without one. I believe a no-bombing zone is feasible if it is enforced from maritime assets in the Mediterranean, so as to avoid engaging Syrian air defences. This would save lives, uphold international humanitarian law and breathe life into the political process. A well-designed deterrence operation would impose a cost on the Syrian regime for any indiscriminate

bombing of civilians—for example, by targeting the military airbases where barrel bombs are stored and flown from. Any attempt by the regime to escalate would trigger additional punitive strikes, rendering aerial bombardment counterproductive. In those circumstances, it is far more likely that Assad and Russia will be forced to the negotiating table.

To conclude, this conflict has proved time and again its propensity to escalate month on month, year on year. For moral reasons—and national self-interest—we can no longer afford to ignore Syria. Indeed, inaction will only see a growth in the number of Syrians killed, the number of refugees fleeing and the potential threat to British national security from ISIS. I urge all Members to look to the best traditions in the history of their parties and to think about the personal role that they can play to protect civilians in Syria and further afield.

The voices of Syrians have been absent from this debate for far too long. They have been asking for protection for years and no one has been listening. It is now time for us to listen and to act.

10.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I congratulate the hon. Member for Batley and Spennings (Jo Cox) on securing this important debate. She brings a huge amount of expertise to the House, which is very welcome. I have just returned from the UN General Assembly, where this subject was very much on the agenda. She went into a huge amount of detail, but I am sorry that she chose to wander down a bit of a political path. I will write to her with more details on the issue of British leadership. As my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) said, unless we have a UN resolution, it is very hard to march forward. I am afraid that, on more than one occasion, either China or Russia has vetoed attempts to move this situation forward. I also disagree with her about the choice between ISIS or Assad. We have never made that statement—quite the opposite, in fact.

I am sorry that we are debating this matter for only 30 minutes. The sheer number of Members in the Chamber on a Monday evening on a one-line Whip shows that this is a very important matter. I hope that the usual channels are listening, and I urge them to consider a far longer debate on the subject. [Interruption.] Let me finish. We are meeting our 2% of GDP commitment and our 0.7% official development assistance commitment. With a long history in the middle east, we have the ability and desire to do more to assist in this terrible conflict, but we seek consensus over how we might do that. A fuller debate would explore how these matters might be pursued in more detail.

The Syrian civil war is now in its fifth year. As the hon. Lady has said, 250,000 people have been killed, almost 8 million displaced internally and more than 4 million refugees created. This is a crisis caused and fuelled by the Assad regime, which is responsible for the vast majority of deaths. Almost 90% of the civilian deaths are a result of the regime's indiscriminate bombing, its shelling of urban areas, its siege tactics and its use of chemical and toxic substances. This instability has fuelled a migration crisis that affects neighbouring countries, the wider region and Europe as well.

Assad's failure to recognise the Sunni people, who make up two thirds of the country's population, has acted as a recruiting sergeant for ISIL. Today, ISIL poses a threat not just to the region but wider afield to the UK as well. The horrific attacks in Sousse, Kuwait, France, Australia, Turkey and elsewhere demonstrate that the threat knows no borders. But alone, Assad has neither the intent nor the capability to defeat ISIL. The ultimate solution both to the migration crisis and the threats emanating from Syria is a political transition that involves a mechanism for Assad to step down. It is for the Syrian people to decide exactly how that happens. It may be part of a transition process, but the process cannot be open-ended, and Assad can have no part in Syria's future.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op) *rose—*

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab) *rose—*

Mr Ellwood: I will not give way, because of the time.

The UK supports the efforts of the UN envoy, Staffan de Mistura, who faces a complex and challenging task. The UN Security Council and the wider international community must support Mr de Mistura's efforts as he works with the Syrian parties to deliver a political process that brings about an inclusive transition.

Graham Jones *rose—*

Mr Ellwood: No, I will not give way.

The Russian Government's increased support for Assad has further complicated an already complex situation. They must take responsibility for their part in escalating the Syrian war. By predominantly hitting non-ISIL targets, they will only fuel more extremism and more radicalisation.

We call on Russia to cease its attacks on the Syrian opposition and civilians and to focus its efforts on ISIL. Observers of the middle east will know that Russia's strong links with and interests in Syria are not new. Secret agreements offering diplomatic and political support were signed even before Syria gained its independence from France. The Soviets offered military help to form the Syrian army in the first place and Hafez al-Assad sided with the Soviets during the cold war and agreed the permanent basing of naval, land and air assets. This is not just about global posturing but Russia's actions in shoring up a tyrant who was on his way out, and it will lead to Russia's losing influence in the long term.

It took six days for Russia to strike any ISIL targets at all. More than 85% of Russian strikes have been—

Graham Jones *rose—*

Mr Ellwood: I will not give way. I have made it very clear that time is short and I am answering the hon. Member for Batley and Spen. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will hang on to his seat and I will be delighted to speak to him after the debate.

It is clear that Russia's priority is not to defeat ISIL but to prop up Assad. Russia has violated Turkish airspace three times in the past week and the UK strongly condemns these provocative violations of NATO members' sovereign airspace. It is important that allies

show solidarity to ensure the inviolability of NATO airspace is respected, so we call on Russia to stop targeting civilians and opposition groups, which are part of the future of Syria. This is Russia's biggest air deployment beyond its borders since the cold war, with fast jets, helicopters, unmanned aerial vehicles, electronic warfare and air defence systems propping up an ailing Syrian regime whose military is exhausted, depleted and demoralised.

Russia's entry, with all its propaganda, will no doubt delay a resolution and the political transition about which the hon. Member for Batley and Spen spoke rather than expediting them. It will also widen the extremism footprint for Russia, as significant numbers of foreign fighters supporting ISIL will no doubt react to Putin's actions.

The hon. Lady mentioned safe zones, and I have taken a lot of time over the summer to consider the issue in detail. We will continue to look at all options along with our allies to protect civilians in Syria. There has been talk of safe or protected zones, no-fly zones and so on, but history tells us that implementing genuinely safe zones is difficult and must be accompanied by an international mandate that would provide the will, the authority and the full means to ensure that they have a chance of being effective. It would also involve significant military commitment. As we have seen, that can be hard to come by from the various Parliaments across the world.

We should also bear in mind the legal justification for intervention in another country has five means. One is a UN Security Council resolution—

Mr Mitchell *rose—*

Mr Ellwood: I will not give way. The other legitimate means for engagement include article 51 of the UN Charter, or the right collectively to defend others, or intervention to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe, as we saw in Kosovo. The final such means is an invitation by the leader, which is what we saw in Iraq.

The hon. Member for Batley and Spen mentioned the humanitarian situation. The UK has been at the forefront of the humanitarian response to the conflict in Syria. I am pleased to say that we have pledged more than £1.1 billion in aid in response to the crisis in Syria and the region. I visited the Zaatari camp in north Jordan in the summer and my hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces, who is in her place, has just come back from Azraq. I am pleased to say that we are seeing how well British money is spent. It is clear that refugees want to stay in the region where they have family and cultural ties, and the cost of housing one refugee in the UK equates to supporting more than 20 refugees locally. Let me make it clear that the standard of that support is very different, but that just illustrates the difficult decisions people are having to make in every country about how much money we spend domestically and how much we spend in the region.

The Prime Minister also announced on 7 September the expansion of the Syrian vulnerable persons relocation scheme to resettle up to 20,000 Syrians in need of protection during this Parliament. Since the crisis began in 2011, the UK has granted asylum to nearly 5,000 Syrian nationals and their dependants.

[Mr Ellwood]

In conclusion, we are well aware that Syria remains the greatest humanitarian tragedy of our time. We must support the desire of ordinary Syrians for a future free of the cruelty of Assad and the barbarity of ISIL. I end by apologising to Opposition Members for not being able to take interventions. As they can see from my notes, I have plenty more to say on the matter—

Graham Jones: Will the Minister give way now?

Mr Ellwood: I will not give way, no. The hon. Gentleman is not going to tease me at this last moment. I invite and encourage a wider debate that lasts longer than 30 minutes, which I would very much welcome—

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): Let's have one now.

Mr Ellwood: We can go on later into the night if you want, Mr Speaker, but I think that time is against us. I look forward to debating the matter in further detail. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The business managers can perfectly well facilitate such a debate, and at whatever hour of the night it took place I should be very happy to be in my place. Obviously a lot of people have things to say and would like to do so.

Question put and agreed to.

10.30 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 12 October 2015

[MR NIGEL EVANS *in the Chair*]

Cannabis

4.30 pm

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Mr Speaker has agreed that, for this debate, members of the public can use handheld electronic devices in the Public Gallery, provided that such devices are silent. I am sure, however, that people will be so gripped by the debate that they will not be distracted at all by their handheld devices. Photos must not be taken.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered an e-petition relating to making the production, sale and use of cannabis legal.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Evans, because you have played a distinguished part in debates on this issue—indeed, I might well quote some of the things you have said. One time, you complained that cannabis contained several hundred compounds, and the *New Scientist* wondered whether you knew how many compounds were in the cabbage you had had for your supper that night.

Before we start, I would like to illustrate how this Government—like all Governments—have handled this issue. It is typified by the response we had to this thunderously eloquent petition, which has been signed by 220,000 people. The response was trite: it could have been written 20 years ago. It does not reflect our current knowledge and experience, the great work that has been done, particularly in the last 20 years, or the serious case that has been made for decriminalising cannabis.

Let me start with a recent revelation about how the Government's mind works. I put down a parliamentary question that could have been answered with one word. I asked how many prisons were free of illegal drug use; the answer that came back was that, for a month last year, 81 were. That was not the answer I was expecting, so I put down another question, asking how many prisons were free of illegal drug use for a year. The answer that came back was that one prison, Blantyre House, reported no drug use for a year. My next question was how many prisoners there were in Blantyre House, and the answer was none, because it had been closed down. The Government, in their secretive, defensive way, which denies the information, discovered that the answer to the drugs problem in prisons was to get rid not of the drugs, but of the prisoners—it is simple, really.

I am afraid that, since the decisions taken in the 1970s, Governments have been denying the truth that is before them: the attempt to reduce drugs in prisons has been a continuing, abject failure. They will not face up to that; they are in denial. The case I want to put today is that that failure has been going on for about 45 years. In the 1960s, the United Nations decided it would eliminate all illegal drug use throughout the planet in a decade. Many countries introduced laws. We introduced

the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, which was supported by all parties and by two Governments—there was a change of Government. The Act was going to be the answer; it was going to eliminate all drug use.

We have introduced the harshest punishments in all Europe, with the result that, although there were fewer than 1,000 heroin and cocaine addicts in 1971, there are now 320,000, and cannabis use has increased exponentially. It is amazing that, throughout that period—this argument has been going on for a long time—Governments have said, “We have tried a tough policy, but it has not worked, so we will try a tougher policy.” When that does not work, we get a different tough policy. No Government have had the sense to introduce a policy that could be described as intelligent. We urge the Government to consider that today.

The Government response begins with the statement that “cannabis is...harmful”. We want to legalise it because it is harmful—of course it is; we do not want to legalise it because it is safe. We need to replace the current system in Britain, where we have the worst of all worlds, spending billions each year trying to restrict the use of drugs. We jail more people as a proportion of the population than anywhere else on the planet, except the United States. We end up with all the problems that emanate from the abuse of drugs, but we gain none of the medical advantages that we would have if we liberated people so that they could use their medicine of choice.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): My constituent Bernadette McCreadie suffers from Crohn's disease and psoriatic arthritis, and she is allergic to most of the pharmaceutical medicines that are prescribed—in fact, they have given her ulcers. She has found effective pain relief only through cannabis. Does the hon. Gentleman feel that the ban on the use of cannabis in non-medicinal ways has led to a failure to allow people such as Bernadette to use a drug they find essential to their wellbeing? Sadly, the current situation sees her forced into the company of illegal drug dealers.

Paul Flynn: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I have a host of stories going back to the '80s and early '90s, when we first had demonstrations in support of medicinal cannabis. It is a sad story. I have looked into the eyes of so many people who have said, “This is the only thing that gives me relief. Why on earth can't I take it?”

Cannabis is the oldest medicine in the world. It has been trialled and tested by tens of millions of people over 5,000 years. If there were any problems with natural cannabis, that would have been apparent a long time ago. However, all we have is this wall of denial by Governments who are afraid of the subject, afraid of becoming unpopular and afraid of it being said that they are going to pot.

I am not unrealistic, and I do not expect the Government to make a volte-face on recreational cannabis, but they should explain their position and realise what is going on. However, the case for medical cannabis, including in its natural form, is overwhelming. We can have it in Sativex, but there are problems with the drug, which is of limited value. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence does not like it, because the cost is very high.

[Paul Flynn]

Medical cannabis can now be used in 23 states in America. The best form is one produced in the Netherlands, which can be used in about a dozen countries in Europe. A change has to come. It is barbaric to deny people their medicine of choice. There can be no justification for doing that.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. Does he agree that the biggest scandal is that this Government, like successive Governments, have set their face against the evidence? If we look at an evidence-based approach, there is absolutely no correlation between a drug's legal status and the amount it gets used. In other words, prohibition simply does not work.

Paul Flynn: I am grateful for the hon. Lady's intervention. We look at the United States with incredulity because it does not accept the evidence on gun possession. We can all see the evidence; it has been shown over and over again that the more guns there are in society, the more deaths and murders take place. However, the United States will not accept that. We are in a similar state of denial on cannabis. Many places in the world now recognise that prohibition has been a continuing disaster—a disaster more serious than the prohibition of alcohol in the United States—yet we refuse to recognise the fact.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Does he accept that his analogy with gun control in America proves exactly the opposite point? The problem with guns in America is that there are too many of them and they are too easy to get, so I am not sure the analogy supports his argument in the way he used it.

Paul Flynn: The analogy is with the fact that we deny evidence. We do not look at evidence. As I illustrated, the evidence is that controlling drugs in prison has failed. The Government went to the idiotic palaver of requiring three questions to be asked before they admitted that there is not a prison in Britain free of illegal drug use. The point is about that defensive attitude and the denial of information.

I believe the word is spreading throughout the planet now. In the United States, which was the worst of the lot and the most in denial, four states are now selling cannabis recreationally. Has the sky fallen? Has it been a disaster? It has been a great success. In 2000, we saw politicians of great courage in Portugal introduce a depenalisation scheme. It was unpopular with other politicians, the press and the public, but they went ahead and it has turned out to be a brilliant success in every way. They cut down the number of deaths within five years. They have invested more money in health systems and support systems, and the scheme was widely praised by our own Health Committee when it went to Portugal. It also went to Colombia, and its report in 2012 asked for an investigation into drugs. It based its conclusions, after a year of investigations, on the success of Portugal, but do we talk about that? Are we going to follow suit? We do not have to take the courageous step now; Portugal has done it for us. It has done the work, which has been hugely beneficial.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): The hon. Gentleman will be aware that we have many particular problems in Northern Ireland due to paramilitary activity. Paramilitaries in Northern Ireland have made a fortune out of the misery of others by selling illegal drugs, including cannabis. Has he had a chance to calculate what the impact on the activities of paramilitaries in Northern Ireland would be if cannabis were legalised?

Paul Flynn: I have not been to Northern Ireland to discuss this, but I went to the Oireachtas a number of years ago following a report on this issue; there were terrible problems with the criminal market in Dublin, as the hon. Lady will know.

What we are against is the fact that we have a substance of great popularity, used by millions of people, but the market for it is controlled by irresponsible criminals with little regard for the results for customers. They do not pay taxes. We have an empire of criminals building up throughout the world, exploiting their customers. The sensible way forward is to replace that market with one that is run by the state, has strong controls and does as much as it can to keep drugs out of the hands of vulnerable people, including those with mental health problems, the young, pregnant women and so on. No one is asking for free-for-all drug use; we are asking for an intelligent system that can be run and controlled.

It is ludicrous that these drugs should be known as “controlled” drugs when they are totally out of control. I have had constituents come to me and say, “Well, I thought it was legalised anyway.” The police are now very reluctant to arrest for these minor offences. It is many years since a case of someone using cannabis medicinally has been taken to court, because the juries are refusing to convict and it is a waste of everyone's time, but that is still the law—the law supported by those who are against legalisation here.

If we can take the control of the drugs trade out of the hands of criminals, it will be an all-round improvement. That is what is happening elsewhere in the world. I mentioned the United States, but it is also going on throughout south America. A number of groups have come here recently from Mexico, Honduras and Bolivia to talk with the all-party groups about their revulsion at the drugs state and the terrible effect it has had on their countries. They were the producers, but the problems were in downtown Chicago; the consumers were on the other side. The most serious problems of drug trafficking and warfare involved people in south America.

One major benefit for countries—particularly Mexico—that border the United States, where they have seen the control of drugs taken into the hands of the state, is that there is less trafficking. Fewer drugs are going across the border, which will be a benefit.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): My hon. Friend describes some quite exotic places, but I want to give an example from the Recovery Interventions Service Ealing, a drug and alcohol support service in my constituency. RISE put the point to me that these things are often about working smarter, not harder. It might be about not necessarily being punitive, but looking at joined-up thinking with other agencies. RISE has a joint working initiative with the West London Mental Health Trust to reduce harm, because it reports that the strength of some varieties of this drug—particularly skunk—is higher than it was 10 or 20 years ago. It has

joint risk assessments, wrap-around treatment, and database and information sharing with other agencies. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is a good way forward?

Paul Flynn: A great deal of good work has been done by the agencies and those who work in this area. The previous MP who ran the all-party group on drug misuse in this country pointed out that there is an establishment of people who are involved and have a vested interest in drug prohibition. He went every year to a group who were helping people with drug problems, but he noticed in his 15 years in Parliament that there were more people coming every year.

Great work is being done, and it will always need to be done to rehabilitate people who are afflicted by drug addiction. One accepts that, but what has taken place in this country and throughout the world in the past 45 years of prohibition is hugely increased drug use. It is going down now, because of the matter to which the Chair referred at the beginning of the sitting: young people are obsessed with the new addiction of playing with their iPhones and iPads. They do not have time to roll a reefer. That is the new addiction, and it has a beneficial effect. That is the fashion throughout the world, and it probably does not do them much harm. The Home Office has admitted that there is no correlation between harsh punishment, harsh penalties and the use of drugs. It is entirely to do with fashion and what young people regard as acceptable and what they regard as naff.

We imagine that we can control what is going on, but we cannot. The whole process is out of control. Holland has given us a fine example over the past 40 years by de-penalising cannabis use. Now and for nearly all that period, cannabis use in Holland has been far less than here in the United Kingdom. There is a good reason for that: people in Holland can go to any coffee shop and have a cannabis cake with their grandmother. Where is the fun in that? They have taken away the allure of forbidden fruit.

In America, groups of young former hippies were sent out to the sticks to deter drug use. At that time, drug use was rampant in cities, but not in rural areas, so these attractive, long-haired hippies went there with guitars and said, "We've been subject to degradation. We've been through hell. We've been through sexual orgies. It was terrible. For goodness sake, don't do drugs." Their message was: "Drugs are dangerous. They will upset your parents and destroy your health"—rather forgetting that young people all know that they are immortal. Danger is an attraction, as is upsetting their parents and establishing their own identity, and drug use followed the drug education programme as surely as night follows day. This futile experiment, lasting 45 years, should now come to an end.

Let me give just one example of what has happened. People in America suggested that if cannabis were decriminalised for recreational purposes, there would be all kinds of consequences, but in Colorado and Washington, decriminalisation of recreational drugs took place a year ago, and the disasters have not occurred. The evidence shows no spike in cannabis use among young people and no increase in road fatalities. What there has been, of course, is a large reduction in the criminal market because the state now runs 60% of the market. In Colorado, they are nearing control. If the state government decides that problems are emerging, they

can change things, because they pull the levers. They can decide what happens, instead of allowing criminals to use their drugs freely and sell them irresponsibly to build up their criminal networks, as happens in Northern Ireland, or to sell them to people whose mental health is fragile.

Lady Hermon: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for prompting me to get to my feet again by mentioning Northern Ireland; it is so kind of him. In response to my first intervention, he referred to his first trip to Dublin, but not to Northern Ireland. As he knows, cannabis is still illegal in the Republic of Ireland. Will he give some attention to the thought that, although cannabis remains illegal in the Republic of Ireland, we have a very porous border, and it is easy to move into Northern Ireland and therefore into the rest of the UK? What does he believe the impact would be of changing the status of cannabis in the UK but not in the Republic of Ireland?

Paul Flynn: Similar concerns were expressed about the Netherlands and other countries when the laws were changed. It was said that there would be drug tourism and that people would flock across, and there have been examples of that, but one hopes that the world will gradually come to its senses, through a gradual process—it is happening now—and that laws can be synchronous and work in that way, as happens in many other areas. My trip to the Oireachtas happened because I was writing a report for the Council of Europe at the time. I was representing the United Kingdom, rather than my own opinions on the matter. What we saw in Dublin with regard to criminality was horrendous. It was very much a replay of what happened in the '20s in America, and we have yet to learn that lesson.

One of the interventions reminded me of our attitude in this place. We have been talking about this for many years, and I prize the memory of one debate in which the Opposition spokesman and the Minister in charge had to leave. They could not stay for the full period because they needed to go outside the Chamber for a fix—they were both tobacco addicts. They did not see any contradiction in denouncing the use of an addictive drug in the Chamber, for young people, while they were themselves addicted to another drug.

I will not mention any names, but I recall another Conservative MP saying to me, "I just can't understand it. I went to a prison and my constituent told me he wanted to get hold of some paracetamol for his toothache. He was told, 'You can't get that until you go and see the doctor tomorrow morning. You might be supplied with it then.'" The MP's constituent made this point: "I can go out of this cell now and within 10 minutes, I can get heroin, cocaine"—Mr Evans, you might recall this story—"and cannabis as well", because they were freely available. Can we persuade the Government to face up to the abject failure that has occurred over this long period?

I have spoken for longer than I intended, and I know that there are many other Members here with a long history in this subject who want to speak. I particularly welcome the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), for the Green party, and the Liberal Democrat Members who—I read in my copy of *The Guardian* this morning—are going to take up this issue in a more serious way. No party in this House has contributed more to this subject and the cause of reform than the

[Paul Flynn]

Liberal Democrats. It is sad to see that a number of them lost out in the last election, particularly the former Member for Cambridge and the former Member for Lewes. Those people have perhaps been punished by the press and possibly the public for having been caught in possession of an intelligent idea, but they deserve credit from this House. I look forward to hearing what Members have to say.

I shall conclude my remarks with a story about a person called Elizabeth Brice, who campaigned under the name of Clare Hodges. Sadly, she died in 2011. Elizabeth Brice led protest after protest here, and she single-handedly convinced the Belgian Government in 1998 to change their law on medicinal cannabis. She was an extremely gifted woman; she was a producer for a television company and a classicist. Among her more bizarre achievements, she was translating the Noddy books into Latin, of which I have a prized copy. I mention her story, although I am grateful to all the people who have written to me recently—there is no way that I can do justice to the number of letters and submissions I have received.

Elizabeth wrote:

“Multiple Sclerosis is a cruel disease. You develop it when you’re young and healthy, and slowly but surely you lose all your faculties, abilities and functions. Nowadays you can expect to live your full life span often until you are completely dependent. And of course this is a very depressing prospect...all the future seemed to hold was deteriorating health and no medicines that really helped.

When I did try cannabis, the physical relief was almost immediate. The tension in my spine and bladder was eased, and I slept well. I was comfortable with my body for the first time in years. But, just as important, I felt happy that there was something, after all, that could help me. It was as if a huge weight had been lifted from me.”

She stated:

“Cannabis helps my body relax. I function and move much easier. The physical effects are very clear. It is not just a vague feeling of well-being.”

On one of her visits to the House of Commons, she committed a serious crime. Out on the Terrace, she asked for a cup of hot water, to which she added a green substance—I am sure that the staff were curious about what those green specks were in the cup afterwards. She had taken herbal cannabis in the House of Commons. The law at the moment says that she could be put in prison for five years, for the crime of seeking relief from pain. Does anyone believe that that law is sensible? That law is an ass. For so long, this House has been held back from full-scale reform by the timidity of Members of Parliament, because of a reluctance to reform for fear of being attacked by the media and losing votes. Now is the time for compassion and courage.

[Interruption.]

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Order. No applause, please.

4.59 pm

Mr Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn), who for many years and with great consistency has pursued his campaign on this front and, sadly, has not yet achieved his objective.

Some years ago, members of the press asked Front Benchers from both parties whether they had ever consumed cannabis. I found that I was one of the very few who had never done so then, and I have not since. That may be why I had a clear enough head, when looking at the evidence, to conclude that we need not just to decriminalise cannabis, but to legalise its sale and use.

I duly wrote a booklet—it is still the definitive work on the subject—called “Common Sense on Cannabis”, which is available, I suspect, from the Social Market Foundation or free on my website and in which I advocate legalisation. I still believe that that is the right policy and I shall explain why. I believe that not because I am an advocate of the use of cannabis. I abhor the stuff and, as I said, have never used it. I am not an advocate of it except for medical use, and I am sure that we could all agree that cannabis and derivatives of it should be made available for medical use when it can bring the relief that the hon. Gentleman described and that many of us will have heard about from our postbags. Even Queen Victoria allegedly used cannabis to relieve menstrual pain. If it is a Victorian value, surely it can be made more widely available.

There are practical reasons for wanting to move to legalisation. First, attempts to prohibit the sale and use of cannabis have failed. It is readily available and widely used. Until recently—it may still be the case—there has been a higher level of usage in this country, where it is illegal, than in Holland, where it is legally available. Nearly 30% of citizens of this country have at some stage or other used cannabis and few of them had any difficulty in obtaining it, so those attempts have failed. The second point is that they have failed despite the fact that 80% of the effort in the so-called war on drugs goes on trying to prohibit the use of cannabis. If we provided some legal outlets for cannabis, that enforcement effort, the treatment effort and so on could be diverted to tackling hard drugs, which really do harm people, enslave people and, sometimes, kill people.

Thirdly, keeping on the statute books a law that is widely ignored and impossible to enforce undermines faith not just in that law, but in law and the legal system more generally. Finally, legalisation would deprive the criminal world of a large and lucrative market. As the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) pointed out, that is particularly important in Northern Ireland, where that market is exploited by gangs—well, by and large by the IRA and other paramilitaries, who are likely to use that resource for the most odious and nefarious reasons.

Those arguments have led many to conclude that we should decriminalise cannabis; we should no longer make it an offence to possess or to use the stuff, but supplying or selling it should remain illegal. That is de facto the situation in some parts of the country, but I believe that as a policy it would be a mistake, and let me explain why. One of the key reasons used by prohibition advocates is that cannabis is a gateway drug. They say that once people have tried a soft drug such as cannabis, it awakens a desire for stronger drugs and leads them on to cocaine and heroin, so they must stop going down the slippery slope. There is no evidence for that at all. The truth is that it is only the criminalisation of the supply of cannabis that makes it into a gateway drug. Because cannabis users can obtain it only from illegal sources, they are forced into contact with the illegal

gangs that will try to persuade them to move on to hard drugs. Prohibition of cannabis drives soft drug users into the arms of hard drug pushers. Only by providing some legal outlets for cannabis can we break the contact between cannabis users and those pushing cocaine, crack and heroin. In my view, such legal outlets should not be numerous and we should ban active marketing, sales to minors and use of cannabis in a public place.

I invariably find that most arguments against legalising cannabis are based on the supposed health risks. I entirely accept that heavy and sustained use of cannabis can be harmful, but at the time of writing my pamphlet, I quoted the *Lancet* review of all the medical evidence on the use of cannabis, which said that

“on the medical evidence available, moderate indulgence in cannabis has little ill-effect on health, and...decisions to ban or to legalise cannabis should be based on other considerations.”

I emphasise “moderate” and “little”. I am not saying that it has no effect or that heavy and sustained use is not harmful, but I specifically stated then that moderate and occasional use of cannabis has few ill effects on health. None the less, people constantly bring up the health arguments, and I notice that when they do, they always say, “Oh, there’s just been a study that counteracts all that went before.”

Dr Daniel Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): It is easy to quote studies, but the Royal College of Psychiatrists, which does not take a view on the criminality but takes a view on the medical evidence that is presented and gives people an option to make up their own mind, does point out that even moderate use in younger years can lead to increased risk of mental illness in later life.

Mr Lilley: My hon. Friend has not stated a specific study, but certainly that was not the view in the *Lancet* review of cannabis. I find that there is a searching around for evidence. It is policy-based evidence—evidence that has been looked for to justify a policy, rather than being found and leading to a policy. It is similar to the sort of thing we find in the global warming debate.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I find myself agreeing with everything that the right hon. Gentleman has said, perhaps with the exception of what he has just said. Does he agree that if a product is potentially dangerous, it is better to purchase it in a regulated market, with controls, rather than purchasing it from a criminal?

Mr Lilley: That is absolutely right. The product is most likely to be unhealthy if it is illegally obtained and probably impure—of course that is even more true of hard drugs—and likely therefore to cause side effects that are not necessarily caused directly by the cannabis itself. Obviously, it is usually used in association with tobacco, which is itself undoubtedly harmful.

Paul Flynn: Does the right hon. Gentleman recall that the former chairman of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, Dr Nutt, made this assessment? I shall repeat what he said, to try to put the issue in perspective: we would need to stop 5,000 people taking cannabis to stop one possible case of psychosis. Although

one in 5,000 is a tiny number, it is not a matter that one can ignore altogether, but it certainly should not be exaggerated, either.

Mr Lilley: Yes, I think the hon. Gentleman puts the issue in perspective with that remark. There is evidence that cannabis may precipitate psychosis in those prone to it anyway, and they should certainly be discouraged from using it, as I would discourage everyone from using it, but it is better that it be available and regulated than illegally supplied but readily available in any case, and with a high level of usage in this country.

Another argument that people invoke is, “Cannabis nowadays is different from what it was in your youth, Mr Lilley.” Since I did not take it in my youth, that does not make a great deal of difference, but people say that it is now available in much stronger and more potent forms. Of course, that is partly a symptom of illegality. In the same way, during prohibition people moved from beer to spirits, because the more concentrated alcohol was, the easier it was to transport and supply while escaping the authorities.

Mr George Howarth: The argument of the right hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) is that cannabis, whether for medical purposes or general recreational use, should be decriminalised. However, does he accept—as, I believe, my hon. Friend does—that he might make more progress if he concentrated for the time being on whether a product could be developed with the right efficacy to justify it in medical terms, rather than focusing on general decriminalisation, which I believe is more problematic?

Mr Lilley: I certainly agree that the medical arguments are overwhelming. I cannot think of any good reasons for not allowing the use of cannabis and its derivatives for medical purposes, although there clearly are arguments, which I do not find compelling, for prohibiting it generally.

The more I examine the arguments for prohibition, the clearer it is to me that although the pretence is that it is for health reasons, the actual reason is moral disapprobation of drugs. I am probably one of the few people in this room who is prepared to say that I share that moral disapprobation. Of course, the greatest sin that one can commit in this country is to take a moral view on anything; that is the supreme immorality. I do think that it is wrong, however, to get stoned out of one’s mind on anything. It is degrading. God gave us minds to see things clearly, not to befuddle and bemuse. There are greater moral arguments, the traditional one being that it undermines one’s self-control and leads to other, more serious wrongdoing. For all those reasons, I am against using it and I would discourage people from using it.

Those who are motivated by moral disapproval of the abuse of drugs make two mistakes. First, they confuse use and abuse. Occasionally to have a relaxing spliff is one thing. I have never done so, and I would not advocate it, but I occasionally go home and drink a glass of wine to relax after a hard day of looking at 38 Degrees petitions, and I do not see any great difficulty in that. I would, however, discourage people from abusing either alcohol or cannabis.

[Mr Lilley]

Secondly, those who are motivated by moral disapproval jump to the conclusion that because something is morally wrong, it should be against the law. Lots of things are morally wrong that are not against the law. Adultery is wrong; one should not betray one's spouse, but we should not put people in jail if they do. We have to get used to the idea that in a free country, people will have to make many moral decisions themselves without being told by the law what to do. We would be a healthier and better country if we gave people that moral responsibility, without saying that it is something that we approve of. It is a choice that people should make, and those of us who disapprove of certain decisions should make the moral arguments against them, rather than dressing them up as, or hiding behind, largely spurious and bogus health concerns, which are at best greatly exaggerated, and at worst non-existent.

Norman Lamb: I want to intervene briefly to say that that was the most perfect explanation of liberalism, and I applaud the right hon. Gentleman for giving it.

Mr Lilley: To make the right hon. Gentleman's contribution into a genuine intervention—I had finished—I will say that there is quite an overlap between conservatism and liberalism, and if he would abandon the wrong bits and keep the right bits, he could join a larger party.

5.14 pm

Dr Paul Monaghan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) on securing it. A debate about the regulation of cannabis to reduce harm is welcome. I will immediately declare an interest. For many years, I have had the privilege of being the director of the Inverness Multiple Sclerosis Therapy Centre. Cannabis has brought some relief to some sufferers of MS, and I am anxious to support those individuals. I am also the vice-chair of the all-party group on drug policy reform. That widely respected group has undertaken significant research into the medical and social use of cannabis, and its findings are, I believe, unassailable.

There are strong arguments to support the regulation of cannabis for social use, but I will focus today on the medical use of cannabis. I urge all right hon. and hon. Members to consider urgently the legalisation of cannabis for medical use. The many applications of cannabis as a medicine are impeded by its inclusion in schedule 1 of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. Schedule 1 drugs are controlled substances considered to have no medicinal value. A simple change to schedule 2 would recognise the drug's undoubted medicinal value and place it on a par with opiates. It would also enable research to be carried out into the vast potential for a range of medical applications and facilitate relief for thousands of people, including the many who suffer from MS and epilepsy who are not helped by other medicines.

Cannabis is already an important medicine. The utility of cannabis and its derivatives has been established through analysis of the treatment of a range of conditions including multiple sclerosis, epilepsy, numerous forms of chronic pain, glaucoma, and nausea and loss of

appetite caused by chemotherapy or radiotherapy. Estimates suggest that some 30,000 people across the UK are at risk of breaking the law by using cannabis medicinally, but they do so primarily because it provides relief from chronic medical conditions and has relatively mild side effects.

There are a number of anomalies in the UK system. Sativex, which is a synthetic form of two of the main cannabinoids in cannabis, THC and CBD, is authorised in the UK as an extra treatment for patients with spasticity caused by MS. Sativex contains the same constituents as drugs classified in schedule 1 as cannabis derivatives, and it can cost more than 10 times as much as medicinal cannabis imported from Holland.

Cannabis's schedule 1 status makes research into medical applications an expensive obstacle course. Such research involves a minimum outlay of £5,000 to cover licensing and security, and licence applications take about a year. In the UK, only four hospitals have been granted a licence to hold stocks of cannabis, although they can all hold heroin. It has been calculated that research into cannabis costs 10 times as much as, and takes significantly longer than, research into all other forms of drug.

It is worth noting that the recent Home Office report "Drugs: International Comparators" suggests that the severity of the cannabis drug control regime has had little impact on the prevalence of drug use. An adjustment to the UK control regime to give patients the right to medication that they believe works for them is unlikely to have any wider impact on the level of recreational cannabis use. Indeed, I would argue that no sensible argument can be mounted in support of the idea that medicinal regulation would impact adversely on other forms of illegal drug use.

The case for the regulation of cannabis for social use is primarily about ending criminalisation, reducing harm and creating separate drugs markets. Laudable as those arguments are, they are only tangentially related to the regulation of cannabis for medicinal use. That fact is evidenced in the drug's regulation for use in many parts of the world. More than 20 states in the USA have provision for the supply of medicinal cannabis. In Europe, medicinal cannabis is produced in the Netherlands, and it is available on application by a physician in the following European countries: Italy, Finland, Switzerland and Germany. Recently, Canada also legalised the use of medicinal cannabis.

We must be clear that cannabis does have a legitimate medical use that is not recognised by its schedule 1 classification. Cannabis is, in fact, an important medicine with a legitimate role in treating a host of conditions including, as I have said, the symptoms of multiple sclerosis, epilepsy and various forms of chronic pain. There is mounting evidence to support its use as an effective treatment for Dravet syndrome, an extreme form of childhood epilepsy—sufferers have up to 100 seizures each day. Some families have reported that CBD is the only thing that has been effective in easing their child's symptoms. Further research into this and the ability to access medicinal cannabis legally would be life changing for sufferers of the condition.

It is enormously important that we should be able to research the further potential medicinal use of cannabis. To do that, we need to change it from being a schedule 1 drug to being a schedule 2 drug and we need to do that

soon. People could then be prescribed medicinal cannabis by a physician when appropriate. Patients who find the drug helpful for their condition would no longer need to break the law to obtain it and would have access to high-quality cannabis with monitored cannabinoid content. Such a change would greatly facilitate important research into the medical uses of cannabis. I hope the Minister will consider regulating cannabis for medicinal use. Quite frankly, our constituents deserve nothing less.

5.21 pm

Dr Daniel Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I commend the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) on bringing the debate to the House and on this grown-up, sensible discussion about a topic that is often taboo and should not be because it affects the lives of many of our constituents.

A number of issues have been covered, including the criminal justice system, which I will come back to. I will pick up on a couple of points made articulately by the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Dr Monaghan) on the medicinal uses of cannabis. There are some issues with the current law that need to be looked at, which perhaps make the medicinal use and the research of medicinal use more challenging. I also want to touch on some medical evidence. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr Lilley) made some compelling points during his eloquent speech for the legalisation of cannabis. I am not, unfortunately, able to support him and I hope that my discussion of some of the medical background will help to explain why.

I have picked many of my remarks from a balanced review by the Royal College of Psychiatrists, which I hope we all consider to be well-resourced and an appropriate source of material for balancing the medical evidence on the use of cannabis as it looks at not only mental health, but physical health. Most of my remarks will be based on the evidence that it has collated. The college does not have a view on the legal position but, none the less, it wants people to look at the evidence and make up their minds. I will give my view, having reviewed some of that evidence.

Although there has been a steady reduction in the use of cannabis since 1996, about 2.3 million of those aged 16 to 59 have reported using cannabis in the past year. Frequent use of cannabis is more than twice as likely among young people. In spite of many Government and media warnings about health risks, many people see cannabis as a harmless substance that helps people to relax and chill—a drug that, unlike alcohol and cigarettes, might even be good for their physical and mental health. I will come to the point that that is clearly not the case.

It is worth quoting directly from the Royal College of Psychiatrists about how cannabis and cannabis plants have evolved over the past few years. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden said that drug use is very different from when he was at university. That may well be the case but the evolution of cannabis and the increasing frequency of high-potency cannabis—skunk, as a number of types of stronger cannabis in general are often referred to—has changed some of the health risks associated with cannabis use. As the Royal College of Psychiatrists says,

“Over the last 15 years, skunk has invaded the street market and its THC content is about 2-3 times higher than the ‘traditional’ cannabis used in earlier years.”

I will come to THC content and the different chemical components of cannabis, but the royal college continues:

“In the UK, most sold materials is home grown because of a loop hole in the law making it legal to buy seeds over the internet.”

I have some sympathy with the points raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden: there are some challenges in the law and, de facto, we effectively have decriminalisation of cannabis in many areas of the country. I would be interested to hear the Minister’s views on that. Does he see a clear distinction between legalising a drug that we know to be harmful and a more decriminalising approach with police discretion, as we have at the moment? I believe the approach we have at the moment is probably the right one, given some of the harmful effects that I will speak about.

Paul Flynn: Will not the hon. Gentleman respond to what was said by his right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr Lilley): skunk—that expression is only used in this country because there are different strengths of THC—is a product of prohibition just as distilled spirit, the main killer drug, was in America? Does he agree that if we end prohibition and have a legal market, people will get to use the cannabis of their choice—not necessarily the one that the illegal market wants them to take?

Dr Poulter: I do not necessarily accept the view that stronger or different forms of cannabis are developed as a result of prohibition. Take Holland as an example; different varieties of cannabis are available in various cannabis coffee shops in Amsterdam. People there have an opportunity to decide which potency and strength they use. I do not necessarily accept that prohibition has driven a market towards creating stronger varieties of cannabis. We know that stronger types of cannabis, such as skunk, have a stronger correlation with psychosis and some of the harmful mental health effects that are linked with the use of cannabis and the chemicals it contains.

On that subject, there are about 400 chemicals in an average cannabis plant. The four main compounds are delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol, cannabidiol, delta-8-tetrahydrocannabinol and cannabinol. Apart from CBD—cannabidiol—these compounds are psychoactive, the strongest being delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol. The stronger varieties of the plant contain little CBD, while the delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol content is a lot higher. We are talking about a number of psychoactive substances. The stronger plants and varieties tend to contain larger amounts of the more psychoactive components and compounds.

When cannabis is smoked, its compounds rapidly enter the bloodstream and are transported directly to the brain and other parts of the body. The feeling of being stoned or high—like my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden, I have not had the experience—is caused mainly by the delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol binding to a cannabinoid receptor in the brain. Most of these receptors are found in the parts of the brain that influence emotion, pleasure, memory,

[Dr Poulter]

thought, concentration, and sensory and time perception. Cannabis compounds can also affect the eyes, ears, skin and stomach.

There are a number of effects, some of which people describe as pleasurable and some of which we know are harmful. I want to touch on the mental health problems associated with cannabis use in some detail. The Royal College of Psychiatrists has published information on the subject:

“There is growing evidence that people with serious mental illness, including depression and psychosis, are more likely to use cannabis or have used it for long periods of time in the past. Regular use of the drug has appeared to double the risk of developing a psychotic episode or long-term schizophrenia. However, does cannabis cause depression and schizophrenia”—

there is a legitimate discussion about reverse causality—
“or do people with these disorders use it as a medication?”

Over the past few years, research has strongly suggested that there is a clear link between early cannabis use and later mental health problems in those with a genetic vulnerability”—

my right hon. Friend made that point—

“and that there is a particular issue with the use of cannabis by adolescents.”

On depression, the Royal College of Psychiatrists says:

“A study following 1,600 Australian school-children, aged 14 to 15 for seven years, found that while children who use cannabis regularly have a significantly higher risk of depression, the opposite was not the case—children who already suffered from depression were not more likely than anyone else to use cannabis. However, adolescents who used cannabis daily were five times more likely to develop depression and anxiety in later life.”

That covers the issue of reverse causality.

I particularly want to talk about psychosis, schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. The Royal College of Psychiatrists states:

“There is now sufficient evidence to show that those who use cannabis particularly at a younger age, such as around the age of 15, have a higher than average risk of developing a psychotic illness, such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder.

These studies also show that the risk is dose-related. In other words, the more cannabis someone used, the more likely they were to develop a psychotic illness... a study in Australia recently showed that those who used cannabis could develop the illness about 2.70 years earlier than those who did not.

Why should teenagers be particularly vulnerable to the use of cannabis? It is thought that this has something to do with brain development. The brain is still developing in the teenage years—up to the age of around 20, in fact. A massive process of ‘neural pruning’ is going on. This is rather like streamlining a tangled jumble of circuits so they can work more effectively. Any experience, or substance, that affects this process has the potential to produce long-term psychological effects.

It is also known that not everyone who uses cannabis, even at a young age, develops a psychotic illness.”

My right hon. Friend articulately raised that point. The Royal College of Psychiatrists continues:

“The available research shows that those who have a family history of a psychotic illness, or those who have certain characteristics such as schizotypal personality, or possibly have certain types of genes, may increase the risk of developing a psychotic illness following the regular use of strong cannabis.”

Research increasingly shows that there is a strong link between psychosis and the use of cannabis, with young people having a particular vulnerability and susceptibility.

On physical health problems, the Royal College of Psychiatrists says:

“Even though the main risk to physical health from cannabis is probably from the tobacco that it is often smoked with, new research has found that the cannabis plant also contains cancerogenic mutagens that can affect people’s lungs.”

We now have evidence of potential physical harm caused by smoking cannabis, and the approach taken by this House over the years has been to discourage people from smoking and using substances that harm their physical health. There is emerging evidence of the physical harm caused by smoking cannabis, so there is a strong argument that we should be consistent by discouraging people, as much as possible, from smoking cannabis. That, as my right hon. Friend has said, could be done by legalising cannabis and giving people an open choice, but when there is compelling evidence of physical harm, it would be wrong to legalise a substance that we know to damage people’s mental health and, increasingly, their physical health.

Several issues have been raised about the medical use of cannabis. Cannabis is widely used by people who attend pain clinics—such people self-administer illegally obtained cannabis for symptom relief. At the moment, it is very difficult for medical researchers to research the potential benefits of some substances contained in cannabis in alleviating pain in palliative care or in other legitimate medical settings.

The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross eloquently discussed Sativex, a drug used to treat multiple sclerosis. The drug remains a schedule 1 controlled drug, which means that under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 and in regulation there are no requirements on pharmacists to keep records or on the prescriber to write prescriptions in a form other than that required by the Medicines Act 1968—in other words, for prescription-only medications.

The Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency has also issued the manufacturer of Sativex in the UK with a wholesale dealer’s licence and an importation licence for patients with MS. The Home Office has therefore been able to issue licences for such supplies, and has done so through a general licence that covers all doctors who apply on behalf of individual MS patients. Dispensing pharmacists are also covered by that licence, which is triggered by an application by the doctor to the Home Office Inspectorate. Supplies can be made directly from the company’s domestic stocks.

There is a challenging framework for the medicinal use of cannabis in this country, and it needs to be reconsidered. It was suggested earlier that we should consider changing cannabis from a schedule 1 drug to a schedule 2 drug, which would be consistent with opioids—doctors are able to prescribe, say, methadone as an alternative for someone who is being treated for heroin dependence. That merits some consideration, and I would be grateful if the Minister responded on that point. A number of studies in the United States have shown that cannabis has potential medicinal benefits for pain relief in palliative care, so will we in this country be able to consider some of those issues? If we can help patients use pain control better to manage the symptoms of terminal or progressive diseases or illnesses, that has to be a good thing. We would not want the unintended consequences of the current legal framework to get in the way of achieving that.

This is not a simple issue. I have looked at the evidence and, on balance, I am not currently persuaded that making access to a substance that is harmful to both physical and mental health legal, as opposed to decriminalised, would be a good thing. We need to make it easier to research the potential medical benefits of cannabis in pain control in terminal and progressive illnesses. Finally, there is a lot for us to do in the criminal justice system. There were encouraging words from the Secretary of State for Justice last week on the need to stop the cycle of reoffending by better supporting prisoners with mental illnesses or substance misuse challenges, including the misuse of cannabis and other drugs. We can help such people not by criminalising their activities but by supporting their rehabilitation and helping them to cope better with their substance misuse problems.

5.38 pm

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. It was good to hear the opening contribution of the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn), who has long campaigned on such issues. He has always been consistent, for which I greatly admire him.

It was also good to hear the contribution of the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr Lilley), who is my sister's MP. I found myself agreeing with much of what he said. He thinks he is alone but, actually, I have never taken cannabis. I am instinctively hostile to the excessive use of any drug, legal or illegal, because of the impact on the individual and, sometimes, on their family and the wider community. It is precisely the potential health risks to which the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) referred that make me conclude that cannabis should be treated as a health issue, not a criminal justice issue. Surely it is absolutely inappropriate to criminalise people the way we do at the moment.

The global war on drugs has been a catastrophic failure. It dates all the way back to President Nixon. Profits from the global trade in drugs, to the tune of £200 billion, go exclusively to organised crime. It is a remarkable failure of public policy to have enriched criminals so successfully. Despite the efforts of the UK and US military forces in Afghanistan, the production of poppies has increased threefold during the period of their involvement there.

We spend about £65 billion globally a year on enforcement, and it achieves absolutely nothing. Thousands of people lose their lives. We have seen many gruesome beheadings in Mexico of people caught up in drug wars. The trade corrupts Governments in central and south America. Critically—I suspect that Conservatives ought to recognise this—it undermines the rule of law, which is the foundation stone of a civilised society.

Incredibly, the war on drugs leads to the criminalisation of tens of thousands of young people in our country. Last year, 30,000 people were criminalised for the use of cannabis. I am acutely aware of the comorbidity of mental ill health and drug use, but often people who suffer from mental ill health resort to cannabis for relief. Then we choose to criminalise them. It is a remarkable thing to do in a so-called civilised society.

Yet there is extraordinary hypocrisy on the issue. Senior politicians are frequently challenged about their use of cannabis and other drugs in their teenage and early adult years. Those who admit to such drug use laugh it off as a youthful indiscretion, apparently comfortable with the fact that tens of thousands of their fellow countrymen and women—usually people less fortunate than the politicians who reach the top of Government—end up with a criminal record for doing precisely the same thing. We should be uncomfortable about that.

Although the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden and I have never taken cannabis, probably at least 50% of the Government have, yet thousands of their fellow citizens end up with a criminal record for doing the same. Incidentally, there is one notable exception. Lord Prior, the Conservative whom I defeated in North Norfolk, bravely admitted while Member of Parliament for North Norfolk to using cannabis as a student and called for reform of our drug laws. I hope that he maintains that view. I think that he does, but he is the exception that proves the rule.

The whole policy is disastrous in public health terms. Many people lose their lives unnecessarily through dangerous drug use. Someone who buys drugs from a criminal has no idea what they are buying, and the criminal has no interest in their welfare. That is catastrophic and must be challenged. At the same time, two of the most dangerous drugs available, tobacco and alcohol, are legal in our country. We talk about the potential risks of cannabis, but tobacco kills about 100,000 people in the United Kingdom every single year. About half of regular smokers end up dying of a smoking-related illness, and it is a legal drug.

Alcohol causes untold damage in our society to families. Thousands of families in my county of Norfolk have a problem alcohol user in the household, damaging children along the way. Violence on our streets and domestic violence are linked to alcohol. It kills 20 times more people in our country than heroin, yet the Government resist introducing even minimum unit pricing on alcohol as a regulatory limit that might reduce the carnage. My own former party leader, Charles Kennedy, lost his life to alcohol, a legal drug in our country.

We need a new approach. As the hon. Member for Newport West said, we need an approach based on evidence, but where national politicians have failed to take the lead, change is happening locally. Many police officers around the country show commendable creativity and openness of mind in challenging how things are done. Tom Lloyd, a former chief constable in Cambridgeshire, was a police officer who led the way early. Now police and crime commissioners, recognising the pressures on public resources in their area, have moved away from criminalising people for taking cannabis. Ron Hogg in Durham, for example, has effectively decriminalised cannabis in his area. Alan Charles in Derbyshire has done the same. Martyn Underhill, an impressive independent police and crime commissioner from Dorset and an ex-police officer, has spoken of his support for those initiatives.

As the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden said earlier, decriminalisation is not ultimately the right legislative solution. We need to go further and introduce a regulated market. Internationally, things are changing and the momentum is growing stronger.

[Norman Lamb]

In the United States, Colorado, Washington and Alaska—yes, the state Sarah Palin comes from, Republican to its core—have voted to legalise cannabis. Oregon, another western state, and Washington D.C. have also done so. Uruguay has decided to introduce a regulated market, which has now been established. California and several other states, including the deeply conservative Ohio, are now looking towards a legalised regulated market.

Some 23 states now allow the medical use of cannabis. As others have said, what possible justification can there be for continuing to criminalise people with multiple sclerosis who choose to relieve their pain? It is unbelievable. This Government could act straight away on that if they had the will to do so, and they would have massive public backing. In Europe, the Czech Republic is now pressing for reform, and there are cannabis social clubs in Spain.

An issue with UN treaties makes it difficult, on the face of it, for states to introduce regulated legal markets, but in October last year, the US assistant Secretary of State, William Brownfield, said that the international community should

“accept flexible interpretation”

of UN conventions,

“tolerate different national drug policies...accept the fact that some countries will have very strict drug approaches; other countries will legalize entire categories of drugs...How could I, a representative of the Government of the United States of America, be intolerant of a Government that permits any experimentation with legalisation of marijuana if two of the 50 states of the United States of America have chosen to walk down that road?”

That is commendable.

Change is happening, and I desperately want the United Kingdom to consider the evidence and not base policy on fear, stigma and prejudice. As the hon. Member for Newport West said in his opening remarks, my party, the Liberal Democrats, have established an expert panel to consider how a regulated legal market for cannabis could work in our country. Professor David Nutt, the former chair of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, will sit on the panel, along with Tom Lloyd, the ex-chief constable who has been brave enough to speak out. Niamh Eastwood will also sit on the panel, which will be chaired by Steve Rolles of Transform. Let us have an approach that focuses first on health, not criminal justice. People know what they are buying in a regulated market. Let us focus policy on taking money away from criminals, taking control of the market and allowing tax revenues to be used to educate people about the dangers of drugs. Is that not a more rational approach? It is fiscally responsible—something the Government should recognise. It would be a better use of public money, protect young people and end the crazy criminalisation of many young people. That approach ought to be attractive to the Government.

The panel will focus on how to reduce harm and minimise the illicit market. It will look at Colorado and other states that have gone ahead with such work. The early evidence from Colorado is positive. There has been no obvious spike in young people's use of cannabis, no increase in crime and no increase in road fatalities. As the hon. Member for Newport West said, the majority of the market is now regulated and has been taken away from criminals, thus reducing the profits of criminal networks. The tax revenues are used for a social purpose.

Lady Hermon: I am most grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for allowing me to intervene as he is coming to the end of his contribution. He rightly emphasises looking at the evidence. May I invite him—my right hon. friend from a different party—to revise what he suggested earlier in his contribution? I am not a member of the Government, nor do I wish to be, but he cited a percentage of the Government who he said were users of cannabis, and I do not think that he would want that percentage to stay on the record without correction, without evidence.

Norman Lamb: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her intervention. Of course, my suggestion was speculation, but very many young people—about a third—choose to take cannabis at some stage. As the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden said earlier, that percentage of the population choosing to use cannabis starts to undermine the rule of law. Perhaps the percentage is a third and not a half, but one can make a reasonable judgment that a significant proportion of this Government will have used cannabis at some point. That is a reasonable assumption to make, yet the Government appear to be comfortable with other people in this country ending up with a criminal record. That is what I find distasteful and that is what has to be challenged. We need policy based on evidence, which focuses on health and not criminal justice.

Paul Flynn: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Norman Lamb: I am conscious that other people want to contribute to the debate, so I must remain disciplined or I will be told off by Mr Evans.

The case is overwhelming. I urge the Government to act and listen to the evidence.

5.53 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans, and a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb)—I think I completely agree with everything he said. I thank the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) for securing the debate and all the people who signed the petition, which raised the profile of this important issue.

I shall start with a few quotations:

“Drugs policy has been failing for decades.”

We need

“fresh thinking and a new approach.”

Not my words, but those of the Prime Minister, David Cameron, back in 2005 when he was a contender for leadership of the Conservative party. At that time, he also said that it would be “disappointing” if radical options on the law on cannabis were not looked at. Since then, he has reversed his position almost 180° and done what, sadly, all too many politicians do once they have secured power—ignored the evidence and, in the face of what can be a hostile media environment, retreated to the status quo.

My position, which I have set out repeatedly in the House, is that we should be guided by the evidence. We need an urgent review of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 to determine whether the legislation has been effective and to consider whether alternative approaches might

better reduce drug-related harms. That other countries and some US states have been more committed to following the evidence on cannabis than the UK has been creates an opportunity for us to learn from their experiences, whether they be of decriminalisation or some form of regulation.

There are clear and compelling grounds to legalise cannabis for medical use in particular and, having studied the evidence, I am fully persuaded that we need to do just that. Not because it is popular—although it is, with 53% of the UK public backing the legalisation or decriminalisation of cannabis for medical and non-medical use, according to an Ipsos MORI poll from last year. Not because many of those who already use cannabis-based medicines testify to the positive effects—although they do, with many claiming benefits for chronic pain, including that caused by neuropathy, fibromyalgia and rheumatoid arthritis, and others, such as MS sufferers, citing its benefits. Not because the UK lags behind other nations when it comes to recognising the therapeutic value of cannabis—although it does, with 20 US states, Canada, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic and Israel, among others, legalising the production and supply of cannabis for medical use. I am fully persuaded, because a strong evidence base justifies looking in much more detail at exactly how we should regulate the production and supply of cannabis for medicinal purposes.

We owe it to people like my constituent, Charlotte, a 34-year-old mother living with a palliative cancer diagnosis. She told me:

“When you are faced with such a diagnosis, you either accept it and let the rot set in or you look outside the box!”

She believes that cannabis oil is saving her life and allowing her to live well:

“I would be dead or very, very ill if not for cannabis oil.”

She goes on to say that

“the Government is shooting itself in the foot, if it supported cannabis and proper evidence based trials were properly funded it would have a huge impact on the cancer costs.”

We owe it to Charlotte, and the many people like her who use or want to use cannabis medically, to stop our ideological opposition and start gathering, and then listening, to the evidence.

Trials of the regulation of medical-based cannabis could, for example, answer questions about how we differentiate between different types of use and how to avoid the potential for leakage into non-medical supply. They could facilitate research that might otherwise be hindered and, if successful, they could provide a potential stepping stone for regulated legal production and supply of cannabis more widely.

[MRS CHERYL GILLAN *in the Chair*]

It is important to note that in those countries where medical cannabis is already regulated, implementation and practice has varied enormously. Some models have successfully demonstrated what effective, controlled production and responsible prescribing or retailing can look like. Elsewhere, regulation has been inadequate, leading to over-commercialisation and irresponsible sales practices and promotions. All that and more must be looked at within an agreed framework of what might be achieved through regulation, so that any proposals brought forward in the UK have learned from and built on existing good practice. That principle applies not just to

medical cannabis; we have an opportunity to learn from countries such as the Netherlands and Denmark and US states that have introduced various regulated models for the sale of cannabis for recreational use too.

Colorado, which in 2012 became the first jurisdiction in the world to legalise cannabis, demonstrates the benefits of ending the criminalisation of users and putting Government in control of the trade. Despite dire predictions, early evidence suggests that legalisation in Colorado has had the following positive outcomes: no spike in cannabis use among young people; thousands no longer receiving criminal records; no increase in road fatalities; and a significant reduction in the size of the criminal market, as the state now controls 60% of supply.

In these times of austerity, it is also interesting to note that in Colorado, for example, legal marijuana tax revenues have been breaking records. Through the first seven months of this year, Colorado has brought in nearly \$73.5 million, putting the state on track to collect more than \$125 million for the year, with \$40 million of that allocated for school building programmes. If that kind of benefit can be properly balanced with a regulatory regime that minimises individual and social harm, which theoretically Governments are supposed to do for the production, sale and use of alcohol, why does it not make sense to be open to alternatives to prohibition? There is growing pressure to learn from what is being tried in other countries. The Select Committee on Home Affairs concluded that Government action is needed “now, more than ever” to learn from the models adopted in, for example, Portugal.

We should also pay attention to the evidence from closer to home. When in 2004 cannabis was declassified from a class B to a class C drug in the UK, most estimates suggest that there was a decline in cannabis consumption or no change. A study from Newcastle University Business School also concluded that there is generally no evidence for an increase in the consumption of any other drugs by young people, in particular heroin, cocaine, crack, amphetamines, ecstasy, acid or glue, or for an increase in the consumption of any class A drug.

There is also no evidence for an increase in various forms of criminal behaviour, including drug production and distribution, with the possible exception of a small increase in property crime among 15 to 17-year-olds relative to those under 15. Finally, there is no evidence for an increase in antisocial behaviour, victimisation or any other types of risky or antisocial behaviour.

In other words, and this is borne out by looking at long-term trends across drugs and other different classification regimes, illegality or otherwise has very little effect on whether people use drugs.

Paul Flynn: Does the hon. Lady recall a very spiky example here of one of the scare stories about cannabis? It was said that cannabis users were on the slippery slope and that if they started with cannabis they would end in a life of degradation in the gutter. It was followed up by Ann Widdecombe, who wanted to introduce some new punitive laws, until half the shadow Cabinet declared that they had taken cannabis as young people. They ended up on the slippery slope to a form of degradation on the Tory Front Bench, but one that is not illegal yet.

Caroline Lucas: I thank the hon. Gentleman very much for his recollection. It is of a time before I was in this House, but he has made a very eloquent testament to the fact that cannabis does not act as a gateway drug; it does not drive people to crime or to act antisocially.

Successive Governments have used carefully calibrated snapshots in time in an attempt to illustrate that the laws are working to reduce drug use, but if one looks at overall trends over time the only thing that is really certain is that there is no link between illegality and use. For example, cannabis use has been in decline since 2000 and that trend was completely unaffected by the drug being downgraded in 2004 and subsequently upgraded again in 2009. In other words, the relative illegality of cannabis does not appear by itself to act as a deterrent.

That conclusion is also reached in research published in the *Journal of Substance Use*, for example, which corroborates previous studies that found that whether or not a drug is illegal has very little bearing on people's decision to use it. One study compared Norway, which has a relatively liberal regime, with Sweden, where strict controls are in place, and both countries have similar levels of drug use. Again, that undermines any correlation between levels of punishment and levels of drug taking.

However, there is powerful evidence that the so-called "war on drugs" is actually making things an awful lot worse. Far from being neutral, in many cases the current model pushes users towards more harmful products, behaviours and environments. I know that many of us are concerned about the long-term effects of newer and stronger forms of skunk, for example, and prohibition makes it incredibly difficult to monitor or test new drugs, to evaluate their impact or to provide users with health information. On the other hand, regulation would allow individuals to make more informed choices and to reduce many of the risks associated with illegal consumption.

Therefore, it is crucial to differentiate between the suffering caused by drugs and the suffering caused by drugs policy. The scandal is that it is the latter problems—those caused by drugs policy—that are the more serious, and they are the things that we could make a difference to if we could just garner sufficient political will and courage in this House. The vast majority of drug-related offending takes place not because people take drugs but because of drugs policy; users are driven to burglary and theft to buy drugs at vastly inflated prices in an unregulated market. There is enormous potential to reduce crime and its impact on our communities significantly if we were to adopt a different, regulated system.

Cannabis is a good place to start with that, so that we can introduce change gradually and safely, monitor the effects on individuals and wider society, and ensure that we have a model that minimises harms and does not encourage so-called "drug tourism" but instead educates users and—critically—removes the trade from the hands of the criminals and the gangs. This is a chance to take the best of what has been tried elsewhere and reject the worst, finding a legal, regulated model for the production, sale and use of cannabis.

This week, we will be giving the Cities and Local Government Devolution Bill its Second Reading, and I will argue that if the Government were serious about devolution they would also allow local authorities far greater scope to pursue drug policies that are shown to

work locally, even if local priorities are at odds with national policy or legislation. Such an approach would be in keeping with the advice from the Global Commission on Drug Policy, which has recommended that national Governments allow local initiatives to experiment with locally designed policies that are, as the commission puts it:

"designed to undermine the power of organised crime and safeguard the health and security of their citizens."

That is exactly what we tried to do in Brighton and Hove, the city that I represent here, because when I was first elected in Brighton, Pavilion, our constituency had the much unwanted title of the drugs death capital of the UK; at that time, more people were dying of heroin overdoses in Brighton than anywhere else in the UK. As a result, a group of us got together and set up a commission on drugs, and we looked at what we could do to try to make a difference, based on evidence. Although we made big strides forward, I have to say that the national policy framework was a real obstacle to our going as far as we would have liked to, in terms of some of the measures that we wanted to pursue.

None the less, by looking at the evidence we have managed to achieve a 17% increase in the number of people leaving treatment successfully, compared with a national average of 7%; we have actively tackled concerns about whether people were too easily left on maintenance programmes, so that almost half the people leaving treatment services now do so in a drugs-free way, compared with 35% at the end of 2010-11; we have rolled out training to administer naloxone and reverse heroin or methadone overdoses, and we have reduced benzodiazepine prescribing rates; and the number of drug-related deaths in the city has also fallen, at a time of massive Government-imposed spending cuts and massive upheavals for the NHS and police services in particular.

In conclusion, the call contained in this petition that so many of our constituents have signed—930 in my own constituency alone—is an opportunity for the Government to demonstrate their commitment to the evidence, to genuine devolution and, indeed, to fiscal responsibility, and I hope that the Minister will be able to offer us reassurances on all those fronts.

6.6 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) for securing this debate today. It is an extremely important debate, which has been brought forward in response to an overwhelming petition by the public.

Cannabis is the most widely used illegal drug in the UK. Although it appears that there has been a steady reduction in its use since 1996, between 2013 and 2014 about 2.3 million 16 to 59-year-olds reported using cannabis. Frequent use of cannabis is also about twice as likely among young people, with nearly 5.3 million 16 to 24-year-olds reporting having used it during the same time period.

Despite Government and media warnings about health risks, many people see cannabis as a harmless substance that helps them to relax, and as a drug that, unlike alcohol or cigarettes, might even be good for their physical and mental health. Proponents for decriminalisation have also highlighted the potential

medicinal properties of cannabis, and argued that legalising the production, supply and use of cannabis would also have a number of benefits for society as a whole. We have heard many of these arguments today.

Transform, a charitable think-tank that campaigns for the legal regulation of drugs both in the UK and internationally, argues that the current approach of prohibition is failing and will never be successful in protecting individuals or society from the misuse of drugs. It highlights that the unintended consequence of prohibition is that it creates an illicit market, which allows the drugs trade to be monopolised by organised crime factions.

A number of my constituents who feel extremely strongly about this issue have contacted me in the run-up to this debate. One of them, Paul, who wished to be mentioned today, supports a motion to decriminalise cannabis due to its medicinal properties, and he has told me that he feels that criminalising a substance produced from organic matter and that holds medicinal potential while allowing “over the counter” sale of many more harmful substances could be viewed as disproportionate, as could driving someone to use the “black market” to gain hope or relief from a medical condition, such as multiple sclerosis, because nothing else offers the same relief.

On the other hand, medical bodies have reported evidence indicating the significant potential harm that can be caused by cannabis. I am a clinical psychologist who specialised in addiction and forensic populations in my previous career, so the impact of cannabis on mental health is of particular interest to me. Literature published by the Royal College of Psychiatrists in 2014 has highlighted several issues of concern in this regard. While it is acknowledged that not everyone who uses cannabis will develop mental health problems, even among those in the groups in society identified as being the most vulnerable, the royal college’s publication highlights the growing evidence that people with serious mental illness, including depression and psychosis, are more likely to use cannabis or to have used it for long periods in the past. It also appears that regular use doubles the risk of developing a psychotic episode or long-term schizophrenia.

Research has found that adolescents who use cannabis regularly have a significantly higher risk of developing depression, anxiety and psychotic illnesses such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. A longitudinal study of 1,600 Australian adolescents, already described by the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter), found that while children who used cannabis regularly had a significantly higher risk of depression, the opposite was not the case, with children who already suffered from depression no more likely than anyone else to use cannabis to ameliorate their problems. The study found that adolescents who used cannabis daily were five times more likely to develop depression and anxiety in later life.

Evidence also shows that individuals who use cannabis, particularly at a younger age—around 15, which is when many people start to use it—have a higher than average risk of developing a psychotic illness. It has been found that the increased risk is related to increased use, and that those who use cannabis are also at risk of an earlier onset of illness compared to those who do not.

Available research shows that people with a family history of psychotic illness, or those who have certain characteristics or a certain vulnerability, may be at an increased risk of developing an illness following the regular use of strong cannabis. As has been eloquently described, research also indicates that the UK market has been flooded with stronger varieties of cannabis, such as skunk, which contain higher quantities of tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC, which is cannabis’s main psychoactive ingredient. It has been found that there is a higher risk of developing a psychotic illness from cannabis if it has high levels of THC, and if you are a regular user. The easy availability of the stronger varieties carries a specific risk to young people with a genetic predisposition. In addition, it has been highlighted that cannabis with high amounts of THC can cause cognitive problems, such as with short-term memory and processing speed.

While in the past it was thought that cannabis was not addictive, current evidence suggests that it can be, particularly if it is used regularly and heavily.

Mr Lilley: We obviously listen with great respect to the hon. Lady because of her expertise, as we did to my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter), who has similar expertise. I just wonder whether the studies that she and he have mentioned consider the prevalence of the illnesses in society as a whole, and whether the recent decline in cannabis use has led to a decline in the incidence of the illnesses. Similarly, when there was a rise in the use of cannabis, did that lead to a rise in their incidence? Is the incidence greater in countries with high cannabis use than in countries with low use, or has such research not yet been done?

Dr Lisa Cameron: The studies I mention do not specifically answer the right hon. Gentleman’s questions, but they indicate that people with particular vulnerabilities might be more likely to develop mental health problems, along with individuals with heavy and sustained cannabis use. It was not necessarily that a vulnerability was required for someone to go on to develop depression or anxiety.

Regarding physical health, it appears that the main risk from cannabis is that from the tobacco that it is often smoked with, although the British Lung Foundation reported in 2012 that cannabis smoking carries a greater risk of smoking-related disease than tobacco alone. It has also been reported that cannabis can affect fertility, and new research has found that the cannabis plant contains cancerogenic mutagens that can affect the lungs.

In conclusion, it is my position that further research, and perhaps the addressing of the level of schedulisation of cannabis, would be particularly helpful for medical conditions, and that at some point in the future there might be a case for prescribed use for certain conditions, where it is shown to have an ameliorative effect on an individual’s health. Overall though, there appear to be significant mental—and some physical—health concerns associated with cannabis use, which make it necessary for careful consideration to be given to the most effective methods of managing and addressing the issue and to any changes to legislation.

6.15 pm

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) on bringing the petition to the House and all those who signed it. That is probably the last time I will remember the name of a constituency; I have not yet got to grips with the constituencies, so I will probably point a lot.

It is clear from the petition that cannabis and its production, use and legislation is an important issue to the people of the United Kingdom. I received an email from a constituent yesterday informing me that more people signed the petition in Scotland than anywhere else, and that Glasgow was the city with the highest number of signatories, with my own constituency having one of the highest rates. For that reason, and because I am the Scottish National party spokesperson on civil liberties, I am pleased to contribute to the debate.

The frustration that the signatories to the petition must feel is that, although the issue evokes strong emotions in different quarters, there is no settled demand for any specific legislative change. Even today, most of the speakers, however they feel about the matter, acknowledged the other side of the debate. I do not envy those who have to make the decision, but I echo everyone else's calls for much more research, so that we can get to the bottom of the argument.

The debate also reflects some of the idiosyncrasies of the current devolutionary settlement, in that control of drugs is reserved to the UK Parliament under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 but the treatment and prevention of drug problems is devolved to the Scottish Government. That is an unhelpful division in a policy area that is too important for there to be a fragmented approach but it also illustrates that there are a number of facets to the issue: harm reduction and public health on the one hand and legality and criminalisation on the other. There is a strong argument—I have heard this a couple of times today—that public health should be the focus when considering drug and alcohol use and misuse. The right hon. Member for some constituency, which I am sure is wonderful—

Norman Lamb: North Norfolk.

Anne McLaughlin: The right hon. Gentleman made the strong argument that the Department of Health should consider the issue, not the Ministry of Justice. In Wales they do things differently—health is devolved to Wales. They have centres there where they carry out tests so that those who choose to use illegal substances can find out what is in them. I am interested in hearing more about the impact of those centres.

Taking a multifaceted approach stands in contrast to the often ill-informed populism that, as many hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Newport West, have said, often decided policy under all Governments in the past. There is a need, therefore, for much more research and more definite conclusions, to remove the debate from the realms of both an ill-informed populism—on both sides of the debate at times—or an abstract legalism.

Many hon. Members will know of the real difficulties that criminal records cause people in the poorest communities. Those communities are also often the ones

most heavily blighted by the antisocial use of drugs. At this point, I want to do a “bit of a Jeremy Corbyn” and provide a voice for my constituents because, like most hon. Members, I have had many emails on the issue. I will quote just a couple of them, because they have asked me to be their voice here today, although they have differing views on the matter. Drew from Robroyston says:

“I understand arguments on both sides but it is hypocritical that we freely sell and consume substances such as alcohol and tobacco but prosecute those who choose to ingest less harmful drugs.”

Caroline, however, says:

“My brother was managing his schizophrenia until he started cannabis.”

William asks me:

“If the Misuse of Drugs Act is there to prevent social harm and alcohol and tobacco aren't illegal, why am I made to be a criminal for smoking cannabis?”

Another constituent says:

“The fact that alcohol is legal is not an argument for also legalising cannabis. If we were considering legalising alcohol today, would we?”

The petitioners may not get all they are campaigning for today—they may; I have no idea what the Minister will say—but they need to know that their arguments are being listened to, and the best way to achieve that is to commit to researching the issues properly. Those opposed to the petition would surely be satisfied by that, because they believe that research will back up their arguments. It is a win-win for the Government, and I urge the Minister to commit to that research today.

One of the clearest things we know from the research that has already been done is how much work remains. The effects of alcohol and tobacco are well documented in our society, and the Scottish Government continue, via their minimum pricing regulation, to stand up for public health in the face of pressure from the industry and, sometimes, the public. However, the health effects of cannabis at a societal level, its relation to other drugs including tobacco and its relationship, causal or otherwise, with mental health problems require further study.

A very close associate of mine has bipolar. She was a regular user of cannabis. She asked two different psychiatrists, “Did that make it worse?”, and one said yes and the other said no. She asked them whether it caused her bipolar, and one said, “Possibly”, and the other said, “You possibly started to use it to cope with the effects of an undiagnosed condition.” That is the problem. I have heard a couple of Members say that there is conclusive evidence, but there is no conclusive evidence that cannabis does not exacerbate pre-existing mental health problems. Anyone with any experience of mental illness would never support anything that would exacerbate or cause psychotic episodes. Another argument that is put is on whether alcohol exacerbates mental health conditions. If research is done and it is found that cannabis has a serious impact on people's mental health, that would be a strong argument against its legalisation.

On the other hand, we have to look at physical conditions. We have heard much today about medicinal cannabis. I was emailed by Michelle Anne; I think she probably emailed everyone. She was demonstrating outside today, and she is possibly in the Public Gallery. She described the physical symptoms of some of her conditions.

I cannot read all the email out, but she talked about waking up and how before she moves, she has to fight spasms, cramps and electric shocks. She described it as like being

“thrown into a bed of nettles”.

She spoke movingly about how, as a result of her using what she referred to as organic, well-grown, cured cannabis, she now feels happy, sleepy and hungry—all welcome benefits.

Although we have heard arguments in favour of legalisation, it is clear that that is not a panacea. The evidence from the US states that have proceeded with decriminalisation indicates a variety of outcomes. All parties would probably benefit from a continued study of those jurisdictions and our European neighbours to inform policy in this country. It is surely a gift to us that we do not have to rely on a debate to come to a conclusion; we have evidence from around the world and other countries willing to share it with us. As the hon. Member for Newport West said, they have done the work for us, so let us use it.

There are clear arguments against legalisation, but the House would do well to heed some of the real problems associated with the policy as it stands. Those from our poorest communities and from black and minority ethnic communities are affected most severely by the criminalisation policy. The right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr Lilley) talked about morality, but I would put it another way: there is a snobbish attitude to cannabis as compared with other drugs. As other Members have said, it would appear from various media reports that those of a middle to upper-class background can partake in illicit substances in their university days without ever jeopardising their future careers. However, for many people from a working-class background, a drugs-related conviction, no matter how minor, can have a devastating impact on their life chances in terms of employment.

Let us also consider one group of primarily BME users—Rastafarians. Their use of cannabis is part of their religious and spiritual beliefs. I am probably the only speaker here today—Members can prove me wrong if they like—whose partner is a Rastafarian. I might get shot down in flames for this, but he is probably the only Rastafarian who has never used cannabis. It is not compulsory for Rastafarians to use cannabis, but it is part of their spiritual outlook. He has asked, “If I choose to use cannabis because it is part of my religious beliefs, where are my civil liberties if that criminalises me?”

I end by making one final point. The international context of our drug legislation must be considered. The UN drug conventions are all more than a quarter of a century old, and there is growing anticipation ahead of the international discussions in 2016, which will be informed by a far broader base of evidence accumulated in the interim period. It is noteworthy that some of the countries that requested that the discussions be brought forward are very much at the forefront of what was once called the war on drugs. The Government should ensure that the United Kingdom participates fully in the UN discussions on drugs policy. That will allow us to act responsibly on the international stage, using UK evidence to inform international approaches and utilising the latest international research to influence policy here on these islands.

6.25 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to be called to speak under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. I start by thanking the Petitions Committee for scheduling this debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) for his measured and well-researched contribution. The e-petitions process is an invaluable addition to our democracy, as it ensures that we can directly respond to the interests of the British public. That can only be a good thing. The petition that sparked this debate was signed by 125,000 people in just four days. It is clear that there is a degree of public interest in the legal status of cannabis, and it is right that we carefully consider the issue. The debate’s quality has allowed us to do precisely that, although this is clearly not the end of the debate.

Since the late 1990s, cannabis use in Britain has significantly reduced, particularly among the young. According to Home Office statistics, nearly 30% of 16 to 24-year-olds had used cannabis in 1998. In 2014-15, it was a little over 16%, although the percentage had slightly increased over the previous two years from 13%. We are still on a positive trend, although it would be invaluable to understand what has driven the increase in the past two years. I wonder whether that is related to the cuts we have seen to youth services. It is also important to note that there has been an increase in synthetic cannabinoids.

As has been discussed, Portugal and other countries have chosen to decriminalise cannabis and other drugs. I know some would like to see us go down the same route in Britain. When considering lessons from Portugal, we should be clear that its drug policy is far from permissive. It removes criminal penalties for simple possession of small amounts, rather than having the wholesale decriminalisation of possession, supply and production offences. Those caught with drugs are summoned before a tribunal or dissuasion commission, which includes a psychiatrist and a social worker, who often mandate rehabilitation services or issue financial penalties. There is still a concerted effort by law enforcement, working in conjunction with the health service, to reduce drug use and in particular to control production and supply.

I am aware that Björn Hibell’s study of European drug trends shows that cannabis use is reducing among the Portuguese young. However, we must recognise that cannabis use is decreasing even faster among British youths, although from a higher base, and that there has been an increase in the use of cannabis and other decriminalised drugs among older groups in Portugal.

I understand that one reason why many may have signed the petition is that too many people, young and old, feel that they have had their lives blighted by a conviction for the possession of cannabis. A conviction may well prevent someone from getting a job while it is still on their record, and some professions—in law, accountancy and medicine—even require the disclosure of spent convictions. Our police have discretion over how to enforce the law against possession. In some areas, such as Durham, that means a force-wide policy of not charging people for possession, or even for growing their own plants. In other areas, individual police officers are allowed to make their own judgment, which includes charging people with a first offence and the possibility of a custodial sentence. We have de facto

[Lyn Brown]

criminalisation in some parts of the country and enforcement in others. This is an extraordinary postcode lottery. Given that a drug conviction has such a serious impact on a person's life, this postcode lottery is simply unacceptable.

We should also recognise racial disparities. Black people, on average, use drugs less than white people, but are six times more likely to be stopped and searched for drugs. This inequity needs to stop, so I say gently to the Minister that what we lack at the moment is Government direction and leadership. If the debate does nothing more, I hope that it will flag up to the Minister that he might have some work to do to ensure the equity of law across the country and for all citizens.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newport West has consistently campaigned for the use of cannabis to be legalised for medicinal purposes, and he has made that case again today with characteristic eloquence and sincerity. I have enormous sympathy for anyone who seeks the most effective way to access pain relief. I do not doubt the reports made by those with multiple sclerosis and other illnesses that drugs can bring pain relief and improve muscle control. However, I do not believe that we need to legalise cannabis to have access to its medical benefits.

THC, the active ingredient in cannabis, is used as an ingredient in the drug Sativex, which we heard about earlier. It is already licensed in the UK—in Wales—to relieve the symptoms of MS and other medical conditions. We can and do benefit from THC without legalising forms of cannabis that are used recreationally. I understand that this is something that the Government's drug advisers, the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, support.

I am also aware that Sativex is not available on the NHS in England owing to the cost of the drug. Although that is ultimately a decision for NICE—I accept that—I ask that Ministers look at this again. Sativex is, after all, available on prescription in Wales, as I have said, and MS sufferers in England should not face greater pain and difficulty simply because they live on the wrong side of a border. Despite the medical benefits of THC, which can be accessed through Sativex, there remains real public concern about the negative impact that recreational cannabis has on health. I share many of those concerns. My main worry about the drug is its impact on mental health, as eloquently outlined by the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter). We know that regular users are more likely to develop psychotic illnesses, including schizophrenia. There is also a link between cannabis use and developing depression or anxiety, particularly among those who started smoking cannabis as adolescents.

Britain has some of the highest rates of mental illness in the world. The Mental Health Foundation and Mind tell us that one in four Britons suffers from a mental health problem over the course of each year. According to the Office for National Statistics, 15% of us will seriously contemplate suicide at some point in our lifetime. Given these mental health concerns, I think it would be irresponsible to support measures that may make the drug more readily available—something likely to occur if we legalise the drug.

As I understand it, Holland abandoned its model of completely ignoring personal possession due to the impact of the drug on mental health conditions. This is

worrisome, especially given the potency of cannabis on our streets. According to the Home Office's most recent potency study, intensively grown cannabis, which is the most common form of the drug in the UK, has on average a 15% THC concentration. Traditional cannabis, if there is such a thing, has just 9%. Strong strands of cannabis have all the more impact on minds. We also have the growing problem of synthetic cannabinoids.

In conclusion, I ask appropriate Ministers to look again at Sativex and the use of cannabis for those with particular physical conditions that can be alleviated by the drug. I believe the Minister should look at the postcode lottery of criminalisation due to cannabis possession and use, but I am not persuaded of the case for the legalisation of cannabis. In this place, we should always have mind to the impact of our actions on public health. Legalisation will not improve this. Legalisation has the potential to exacerbate the problems that we have with drug dependency and mental illness.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, it may be helpful to tell you that I intend to call Mr Flynn, the proposer, at the end. He has indicated that he would like to speak.

6.35 pm

The Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice (Mike Penning): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. I welcome the new shadow Minister, the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown), to her role. I did not get an opportunity at Home Office questions earlier. We are friends, which is a dangerous thing in this place, and we agree on many things. In fact, I agree with most of what she has said in her comments today.

May I start by saying that I am not from the university elite who smoked cannabis when they went to university? I am not cynical and I am not horrible—I hope. I worked very closely with the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) when he and I were shadow health Ministers and when he was a health Minister with responsibility for mental health and I was in a different role.

I have every sympathy for my friends and members of my family who have had MS and the terrible pain and anguish that they go through because of an incurable disease. So I start from the premise of having sympathy. Let us see what we can do in the 21st century to take people out of that environment. However, I have real concerns about legalising cannabis. I congratulate the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) on his position, which has not changed in 40 years. I also congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr Lilley). I expected him to be sitting here when I came in to the debate today.

We have had two contributions from people who are medically qualified and who know—not anecdotally—about the medical side and the patient's point of view. Their contributions have been enormously significant. I believe that the debate would have been more useful if we had talked about the medical side and the help available, rather than the generality.

Norman Lamb: Will the Minister give way?

Mike Penning: If I can make a little more progress, I promise I will give way shortly. I am always generous in that way.

Although we have had a huge petition from people who are for legalisation, I am sure that colleagues in the House have also had people writing to them saying no to legalisation, as indicated by the SNP shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin), a moment ago. There is no petition from those who do not want to change the legislation, but a large petition from those who do. I think a significant minority also need to be considered in this debate.

Norman Lamb: I do not think there is any dispute about medical risk. The question is about how one responds to it. Does the Minister really think it is appropriate to give someone who is perhaps suffering from mental ill health a criminal record?

Mike Penning: To be fair, that is different from the point I was trying to make. In the modern way in which we police—not just in the past five years, but for many years—the discretion of a police officer to make a decision is an operational matter for them, and not for politicians. Also, it is not for police and crime commissioners to make such decisions. I know what the Durham PCC said, but operational decisions are for the chief constable. PCCs were not set up to make such decisions. We now have cross-party support for PCCs. I am pleased about the Labour party's conversion since the election. That is not a snipe—yes, it is—but I am really pleased that there has been a change, because there are excellent PCCs out there and they do an excellent job.

I am also conscious that there are devolved Administrations looking at this matter differently. I will come to some of those points later. Let us see what positives can come out of this. I will not stand here and say, "We are going to legalise cannabis." I am not going to say that from a moral, personal or Government position. However, we could look carefully, as was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter), at the research. We need to look at why the research is not taking place and at the effects of certain parts of the legislation.

Believe it or not, I took a week off the week before last and went to my favourite part of Norfolk: the Norfolk broads. I spent a week fishing while my wife and mother-in-law looked at the other beautiful parts of Norfolk. I used a lot of hemp—we discussed the seeds earlier in the debate. I live in and represent Hemel Hempstead. Some of the bread that some of us buy contains hemp seeds. My hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich alluded to the problem of the seeds being legal, and the rationale behind that, although that does not mean we should not look carefully at the matter, and we will. There should be nothing in statute that prevents research into improving people's quality of life. I will go away and work with other relevant Departments to see how we can do that.

My good friend the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) alluded to what would happen with the republican response. As a former Northern Ireland Minister, and having served in Northern Ireland in uniform in a different capacity, I know that the sad thing is that these thugs and organised criminals will find something else with which to raise money and

destroy their communities, as they have done with diesel laundering and other things over the years. I do not think that legalisation would make a huge difference to what they do, but it might make a huge difference to the lives of the hon. Lady's constituents, whether mentally or physically, according to the evidence we have heard today.

Another issue, which I discuss with my constituents, is the diverse views about where we should be on this subject. We are as one in wanting to protect our constituents, but we are perhaps looking at it in different ways. Going back to the point made a moment ago by my former right hon. Friend, the right hon. Member for North Norfolk, mental health protection for vulnerable people is probably one of the most difficult and important issues we face, which is why I am so pleased that, after the work we did in the past, so many police forces now have mental health professionals with them on the streets and in the custody suites, and use sections 135 and 136 less.

As we have heard, there is conflicting evidence from studies from across the world. The majority of the world has not legalised cannabis. There is movement, but the majority of the world is in roughly the same position as us. The shadow Minister talked extensively and absolutely correctly about Portugal, but they have a completely different strategy for working with people and moving forward, and that is true not only of their health service. Only last month, the Washington State Institute for Public Policy said that it is too early to decide whether what is going in that state is going to work. The evidence I have before me says that the institute thinks it will not be clear until at least 2017.

Paul Flynn: Will the Minister give way?

Mike Penning: I would like to make some progress. The hon. Gentleman will be summing up at the end, but I will give way shortly.

There will always be one expert in one part of the world saying one thing and another in another part of the world saying another, not least because there will always be such diverse views. Nevertheless, we have to listen to what is going on and use that as our evidence base, as was asked for earlier.

The situation in Holland is really interesting. We have heard different usage statistics today, but the latest figures I have—I might be wrong; if I am, I will write to colleagues and ensure that they know—are 6.5% or 6.7%, according to the crime survey for England and Wales for 2014-15, while the latest figures for Holland are 7%, which is a larger percentage than ours. Holland legalised cannabis and a different situation is occurring there: while usage is dropping here, it has stayed higher in Holland. I am not saying that what Holland has done is wrong—it is an independent country and it is absolutely right and proper that it has its own policy—but when we compare ourselves with Holland, we must not use statistics that might be out of date. If my figures are out of date, I apologise, and I will write to colleagues to correct them. Other points were raised on which I would like to write to not only those colleagues present, but every colleague in the House—those who were not able to attend this debate—to answer such queries.

To the hon. Member for Brighton and Hove, which I think is the name of that constituency now—

Caroline Lucas: Brighton, Pavilion.

Mike Penning: I apologise. She is the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas)—my civil servants will be told off later for the notes I was given. I say to her: do not believe everything that Ipsos MORI or any other pollster says. I was supposed to have lost my seat in 2010, but I returned with a majority of 13,000. Pollsters get it wrong; it is about the questioner.

Caroline Lucas *indicated dissent.*

Mike Penning: The hon. Lady can shake her head, but it is a fact that we were not predicted to win the election, yet we did. There are different views about what pollsters say and can measure, but our job is to protect our constituents.

Caroline Lucas: I was shaking my head only because the polls are one tiny part of the overall case that I and colleagues have been making. Our case has been about looking at the evidence. I find it shocking to hear from both the Minister and, sadly, the shadow Minister no real interest in looking at the evidence. Yes, we have heard two medically qualified people speak, but there is plenty of medical evidence out there that suggests that, for example, freeing up cannabis for medicinal use is a positive thing to do. Will the Minister undertake to look at the evidence?

Mike Penning: I am not certain that the hon. Lady was listening to what I said, but I suggest she reads *Hansard* tomorrow morning. We have cross-party agreement that we will look at research and see how we can help people. I am committed to that, as is the shadow Minister. We will try to do that, but I cannot do it at the Home Office alone; it has to be done across the board. That is the most important thing that can come out of this debate. It is not about who is right and wrong; let us try to work out what can help individuals.

Paul Flynn: The Minister says that he is keen to look at evidence, so will he re-read the report of the Home Affairs Committee? With a Tory majority, it looked at the subject very seriously for a whole year, and concluded that what happened in Portugal was entirely beneficial, with no harmful effects, and is now supported by all parties in Portugal, as well as the police there. Why does he think that an anecdotal sideswipe at that is going to mean anything? Is he not relying on an evidence-free policy instead of taking up the Select Committee's recommendation to set up a royal commission on this issue?

Mike Penning: The hon. Gentleman is never going to change his view, and that is fine.

Paul Flynn: That was the Select Committee's view.

Mike Penning: From a sedentary position he chunters on. Let us listen to what the royal colleges have said, because they are the experts. The Select Committee took evidence. I have sat on Select Committees and I know exactly what goes on. I think I am due to give evidence to the Select Committee next week. It is crucial that we do not set ourselves in one position but that

instead, we ask what research could help take things forward. That is what I have committed to doing and it is very important.

Norman Lamb: I am delighted that the Minister visited the Norfolk broads. I wonder whether, when he was there, he enjoyed a pint in one of the many pubs. There is very clear, overwhelming evidence that alcohol is more dangerous than cannabis. Can the Minister give any explanation of why it makes sense for that more dangerous product to be legal while a less dangerous product is illegal?

Mike Penning: Well, I am not actually convinced, on the evidence, that cannabis is less dangerous for certain people. As was said earlier, if we were to start alcohol and tobacco policy again from today, of course we would not be where we are now. I accept that point.

In conclusion, I am committed to working with other Departments and whoever else wants to work with us to ensure that, in the 21st century, where cannabis can be helpful through pharmaceuticals, we will try to make sure that that happens. I am committed to looking at the research and at what work we should be doing. This debate has been enormously useful, but I cannot support the petition.

6.49 pm

Paul Flynn: I am afraid that, as usual, the point of the debate has been missed. It is not my debate, but the debate of the 220,000 people who tried a new procedure—this is only the second time it has been used—to ask that the House debate this subject. Our chief task in this Parliament is to restore the reputation of this place. Democracy was invented in Greece 2,500 years ago and has come to us in stages. People had expectations that, because they signed the petition and we held this debate, they would hear a positive, sensible and constructive answer from the Government. They have been disappointed.

The great myth that is perpetrated is that if we ban something people do not use it and that if we make something illegal it stops being used, but the reverse is true. The prohibition we introduced in 1971 has been a continuing disaster. We heard medical evidence from the same source, and we have to take it seriously. The small percentages do not relate to the extent of the danger. I remind the House that Professor Nutt said that we would have to stop 5,000 people using cannabis to prevent one case of psychosis. That still makes it a serious problem, but the great lesson is that prohibition has caused people to suffer greatly. People have been criminalised, and their lives have been ruined.

I have only two minutes, so I will make a final point. Tens of thousands of people have written impassioned letters to us about their suffering. They want the Government to move their drug of choice, which is a natural substance, not a chemical one like Sativex—the natural form of cannabis has been used for 5,000 years without any serious side effects—from schedule 1 to schedule 2. Simple—it could be done. It has just been done in 23 states in America without any harm. I beg the Government to look again at the evidence to rescue sufferers of MS from their bed of thistles.

Mr Lilley: Surely the hon. Gentleman agrees that the one argument that those opposing our position have leant upon is the evidence of the Royal College of

Psychiatrists studies, but the very fact that studies can be carried out on people who use and do not use cannabis shows that the present prohibition is not effective. It also suggests that, although there may be health risks, their incidence will probably not be altered by legalisation, whereas all the other issues that the hon. Gentleman and I have raised would be ameliorated. We hope the Minister will take that into account in his further consideration.

Paul Flynn: As the right hon. Gentleman said, there is a belief that persists. Recently, one of the legal highs was criminalised, and the result in my area was a 300% increase in its use. We cannot go on believing that we are the masters of the universe. We are throwing 2 million or 3 million of our young people into the hands of

irresponsible gangsters. We should ensure that these drugs are controlled so that they are kept out of the hands of people with mental ill health and others whose health might be threatened, such as pregnant women. That is the point of a controlled drug, and we will get it controlled only with legalisation. We will carry on with the chaos, waste and cruelty if we continue with our mistaken policy of prohibition.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered an e-petition relating to making the production, sale and use of cannabis legal.

6.53 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 12 October 2015

BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

Low Pay Commission: National Minimum Wage

The Minister for Skills (Nick Boles): I am pleased to announce that the Government have published policy evidence to support the Low Pay Commission's research towards recommendations due in 2016. I have written to the LPC to set out what we would like the Commission to consider on the national minimum wage and national living wage. This document contains policy information relating to the national minimum wage legislation and wider Government policy which may impact upon the Low Pay Commission's recommendations.

Economic evidence will be published before the end of the year when the latest information on earnings and economic forecasts is available.

A copy of the evidence will be placed in the Libraries of the House and will be available from the BIS website at: www.bis.gov.uk.

[HCWS213]

Sahaviriya Steel Industries UK Limited

The Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills and President of the Board of Trade (Sajid Javid): I want to update the House on matters relating to SSI in Redcar, which entered liquidation on Friday 2 October 2015.

Both the Minister of State for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise and I were in Redcar during recess. SSI's work reviving steel making in Redcar has faced increasing challenges and this announcement came as deeply disappointing news, undoubtedly making for a tough time for the workforce and Teesside more broadly.

The Government cannot intervene in the liquidation process, which is now in the hands of the Official Receiver, however we are absolutely committed to helping the workforce and local economy.

The Government have announced a package worth up to £80 million to support people who have lost their jobs as a result of SSI's liquidation, and mitigate the impacts on the local economy. The funding will include support for workers to retrain and help for local firms to grow and create jobs.

In addition, we have asked Amanda Skelton, Chief Executive of Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council, to chair a local taskforce which is examining what steps need to be taken to support the local economy and workforce.

Full details of the package are being worked through and discussed with local stakeholders, however I wanted to set out in more detail two of the elements of the support package that are already available to SSI's employees.

First, both employees and contractors made redundant as a result of SSI's liquidation will be able to access Jobcentre Plus' rapid response service, which helps people to move quickly into alternative employment. This service is delivered locally with partners, is tailored to an individual's needs, and can include some or all of the following elements:

- Help with job searches including CV writing and, interview skills;

- Help to identify transferable skills and skills gaps (linked to the local labour market);

- Training to update skills, learn new ones and gain industry recognised certification that will improve employability;

- Help to overcome barriers to attending training or securing a job or self-employment such as child care costs, tools, work clothes, travel costs etc.

This service has been mobilised and is delivering support to SSI employees following the first announcements of redundancies and Jobcentre Plus will continue to play a full part in the taskforce we have established.

Secondly, there are special arrangements in place to ensure employees who are dismissed on the insolvency of their employer receive a basic minimum of the debts they are owed from the National Insurance Fund. This includes payments for statutory redundancy, holiday and notice pay, and arrears of wages, subject to statutory limits.

The redundancy payments service (RPS) has issued SSI staff affected with a letter, explaining their rights and how to make an online claim for redundancy pay. If any SSI employees have not received this letter, they should contact the redundancy payments inquiry line on 0330 331 0020. The RPS has established a dedicated team to process these applications and make sure SSI employees receive their payments as quickly as possible.

Unpaid pension contributions are also payable, within specified legal limits, from the National Insurance Fund. If there are unpaid pension contributions, the pension fund trustee will lodge a claim with the RPS, so employees do not need to submit an application for this. If employees have concerns about their pension, they should contact their scheme administrator.

Turning to the steel industry more broadly, it is clear that the industry is facing extremely challenging economic conditions. We are working closely with the sector to help where we can, and as such, will be holding a Steel summit on 16 October to understand the challenges the sector faces and explore what more can be done to support the industry. I am pleased that not only the industry and the unions, but a number of MPs representing constituencies with close links to the steel industry have accepted the invitation.

Finally, I wish to place on record that on Friday 2 October 2015 an indemnity was provided to Ken Beasley, the Official Receiver, in his capacity as liquidator of Sahaviriya Steel Industries UK Limited.

It was urgent and necessary to provide the Official Receiver with this indemnity, so that he felt able to accept the appointment as liquidator of the company and ensure that the company's site could be secured and health and safety concerns associated with the site addressed from that point.

The indemnity is uncapped. However it is limited to liabilities arising as a consequence of the Official Receiver:

- carrying out the proper performance of his duties as liquidator of the company, and

maintaining, securing and funding the ongoing operation of the company's undertaking, and distributing the assets of the company in the ordinary course of his duties as liquidator of the company.

The Government can terminate the indemnity by giving at least 14 days' notice to the Official Receiver.

In accordance with the guidance contained in "Managing Public Money", on 8 October, I wrote to the Chairs of the Public Accounts Committee and the Business, Innovation and Skills Select Committee outlining the indemnity committed to on behalf of Government and the reasons for the urgency in this case.

As a matter of record I have placed a departmental minute in the Libraries of both Houses explaining the procedure followed and containing a description of the liabilities undertaken.

[HCWS215]

TREASURY

Charter for Budget Responsibility: Autumn 2015 Update

The First Secretary of State and Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr George Osborne): Today I have laid before Parliament an updated Charter for Budget Responsibility. It sets out a fiscal framework to entrench a commitment to reach surplus and maintain it in normal times. It also includes the updates to the Charter recommended by the HM Treasury review of the Office for Budget Responsibility, led by Sir Dave Ramsden and clarifications on the operation of the welfare cap.

The updated Charter laid today was published in draft on 14 September 2015. The Charter was first published in draft as it includes modified guidance to the Office for Budget Responsibility. Under Section 6(4) of the Budget Responsibility and National Audit Act, if the Treasury proposes to modify the guidance to the Office for Budget Responsibility included in the Charter, a draft of the modified guidance must be published at least 28 days before the modified Charter is laid before Parliament.

A debate and vote in the House of Commons on the updated Charter has been scheduled for 14 October.

[HCWS226]

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Business Rates Reform

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Greg Clark): Last week the Chancellor announced the Government's intention to make significant reforms to the way in which local government is funded while taking a major step forward in our plans to place more power in the hands of local communities.

Since 2013, local councils have retained 50% of the proceeds of business rates, to ensure that when local areas take steps to boost business growth in their area, they see the benefit. The Government now intend to go further, with plans to move to 100% retention of business rates by the end of the Parliament.

All income from local taxes will fund local services, giving local people more control over how their money is spent and providing incentives for growth. Specifically, by 2020:

Local government will retain 100% of local taxes - including all £26 billion of revenue from business rates - to spend on local government services. This means the Government will no longer take business rates income into Whitehall for redistribution as grant.

Local authorities will have the power to cut business rates to boost enterprise and economic activity in their areas. This will complement existing powers to grant reliefs to individual businesses and will allow authorities more discretion to reflect local circumstances in their local tax regimes;

Directly elected metro mayors will be able to add a premium to business rates to pay for new infrastructure. They will need to have support of local business leaders through the Local Enterprise Partnership and the power will be limited by a cap; and

As well as phasing out the Local Government grant from Whitehall, these new powers will come with new responsibilities to ensure the reforms are fiscally neutral. The Government will set out further details in the Spending Review.

Redistribution between councils will remain important, to reflect the different need of different authorities. In developing the reforms we will consider the responsiveness of the system to future changes in relative needs and resources, while maintaining a strong incentive for authorities to grow their local economies. We will also consider how risk and business rates volatility can be better managed and how to protect authorities against significant falls in income.

Over the coming months the Government will work with local government, businesses and other interested parties on the detailed design of these reforms.

[HCWS221]

Right to Buy: Agreement with Housing Associations

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Greg Clark): The Government are pleased to announce that they have reached an agreement with the National Housing Federation, which will extend Right to Buy discounts to at least 1.3 million more families across the country.

We want more people to be able to own a home of their own. The Right to Buy is a key part of this, and has already helped 2 million families to realise their dream of home ownership.

Until now, Right to Buy discounts have only been available to tenants in local authority properties and some former council properties. Extending these discounts to housing association tenants in England will end this unfairness, and will deliver our manifesto commitment to extend the Right to Buy to housing association tenants.

Under the agreement, all homes sold to tenants will be replaced on a one for one basis, delivering an overall increase in housing supply. Housing associations have a strong track record in the delivery of new homes, playing a major role in exceeding the Government's 2011-15 affordable homes target by delivering nearly 186,000 homes.

The agreement will mean that the first housing association tenants will be able to start to buy their homes from next year.

In summary, the deal will enable the following:

One point three million families will be given the opportunity to purchase a home at right to buy level discounts, subject to the overall availability of funding for the scheme and the eligibility requirements. The presumption is that housing associations will sell the tenant the property in which they live.

The Government will compensate the housing association for the discount offered to the tenant, and housing associations will retain the sales receipt to enable them to reinvest in the delivery of new homes.

Housing associations will use the sales proceeds to deliver new supply and will have the flexibility, but not the obligation, to replace rented homes with other tenures such as shared ownership.

Government will continue to work with the National Housing Federation and its members to develop new and innovative products, so that every tenant can buy a stake in their home.

As part of the agreement, the Government will also implement deregulatory measures which will support housing associations in their objectives to help support tenants into home ownership and deliver additional supply of new homes.

We will now be working closely with the sector on the implementation of the deal, and I will update hon. Members in due course on the next stage of the implementation.

[HCWS222]

DEFENCE

Members of the Reserve Forces in Support of UK Operations to Counter the Threat of ISIL

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Penny Mordaunt):

With the expiry of the call-out order made on 1 October 2014, on 21 September 2015 a new order was made under section 56(1 B) of the Reserve Forces Act 1996 to enable Reservists to be called into permanent service in support of United Kingdom operations to counter the threat of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

Under the call-out order made on 1 October 2014, 85 Reservists have been called out for operations. We anticipate a continued requirement for Reservists, with the right skills and experience, over the period the new order will be in force. This is fully in line with our policy of having more capable, usable, integrated and relevant Reserve Forces.

The order takes effect from 30 September 2015 and ceases to have effect on 29 September 2016.

[HCWS216]

Reserve Forces Call-Out Orders: Defence Objectives

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Penny Mordaunt):

Changes made by the Defence Reform Act 2014 allow for Reservists to be called out under section 56(1B) of the Reserve Forces Act 1996 if it appears to the Secretary of State that it is necessary or desirable to use members of a reserve force for any purpose for which members of the regular services may be used. Reservists called out under this power may be required to serve for a period of up to 12 months.

With the expiry of the orders made on 1 October 2014, on 21 September 2015 I made four new call-out orders under section 56(1B) of the Reserve Forces Act 1996 to

continue to allow Reservists to be called into permanent service to support defence engagement activities (for example the provision of short term training teams and military capacity building overseas); global counter-terrorism and counter-piracy; the operation of our permanent joint operating bases (PJOBS) in the South Atlantic islands, British Indian ocean territory, Cyprus and Gibraltar; and maritime security objectives.

Under the orders made on 1 October 2014, 280 Reservists have been called out (193 for defence engagement, 66 for global counter-terrorism and counter-piracy, 10 for maritime security operations and 11 for the operation of PJOBS). We anticipate a continued requirement for Reservists, with the right skills and experience, over the period the new orders will be in force.

For operations that fall outside the scope of these orders, for example military aid to the civil authorities, or warfighting, or for operations which are likely to involve a large number of Reservists, I would expect to make separate call-out orders.

These orders take effect from 30 September 2015 and cease to have effect on 29 September 2016.

[HCWS217]

Future Unmanned Air Systems Capability

The Secretary of State for Defence (Michael Fallon):

The UK's intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities and equipping our special forces are two high priority issues for the strategic defence and security review.

We have reached some early decisions in these two key areas. We will more than double the number of remotely piloted air systems in the RAF's fleet, as we start to replace the 10 current Reapers with over 20 of the very latest air vehicles. We will also provide our special forces with new specialist weapons and clothing, as part of a programme to ensure that they remain at the cutting edge of technology.

The first RAF Reapers were deployed to Afghanistan in 2007, and are now flying vital missions over Iraq and Syria. We want to expand our capability as this area of technology rapidly develops, so we will start to introduce the new Protector aircraft. With its greater range and endurance, it will significantly increase our ability to identify, track, deter, and ultimately counter potential threats. Previously known as the Scavenger programme, Protector will substantially enhance the UK's global intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance capability.

The new special forces equipment package will ensure we maintain clear operational advantage over adversaries, and enhance their ability to work with our key allies.

This investment will enable us to address sophisticated dangers both at home and abroad, and is only possible because this Government have committed to increase defence spending, meeting the NATO investment pledge and spending 2% of GDP on defence for the rest of this decade.

[HCWS220]

Jordanian Armed Forces: Gifting of Equipment

The Secretary of State for Defence (Michael Fallon): I have today laid before the House a departmental minute describing a package of equipment, with a total value of £2,407,450 which the UK intends to gift to the Jordanian armed forces.

Conventional Jordanian forces lack the agility, as well as the training, equipment and command structures, to allow them to counter emergent threats on their Syrian and Iraqi borders. The new quick reaction force (QRF), a British-led multinational initiative is designed to address this by being able to deploy approximately 500 personnel at speed, to counter the ISIL and extremist threat at Jordan's borders.

This gift will greatly enhance the QRF's capacity and comprises a range of non-lethal command and control, manoeuvre and protective equipment.

Gifting is expected to begin soon after the completion of the departmental minute process.

[HCWS224]

Deaths of Corporal James Dunsby, Lance Corporal Craig Roberts and Lance Corporal Edward Maher: Inquest

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Penny Mordaunt): On 15 July 2015 I made a statement regarding the inquest into the deaths of three Army Reservists, Corporal James Dunsby, Lance Corporal Craig Roberts and Lance Corporal Edward Maher who died as a result of training activity on the Brecon Beacons in Wales. I confirmed that following the conclusion of her inquest into the incident, HM Senior Coroner for Birmingham and Solihull highlighted a number of failings which contributed to the deaths of the three soldiers and made a number of recommendations to prevent future deaths. I responded to the Coroner on 14 September 2015 and, after allowing a short period for the Coroner and families to consider my response, I have today placed a copy of my response in the Library of the House. In addition to the improvements outlined in my letter we have a service inquiry under way to look at the wider safety aspects of such training and I will keep the House informed. My thoughts remain with the families of Corporal Dunsby, Lance Corporal Roberts and Lance Corporal Maher and we are committed to doing all we can to ensure such a tragic event cannot happen again.

[HCWS225]

Ukraine: Operation Orbital

The Secretary of State for Defence (Michael Fallon): Further to my statement to the House on 25 February, *Official Report*, column 321 and my written statement of 6 March this year, *Official Report*, column 83, I wish to update the House on our support for the Ukrainian armed forces.

The February ceasefire agreement, which came into effect at the beginning of September, has seen a reduction in violence in much of the conflict zone. We very much

hope that this will bring an end to the fighting and generate substantial progress with the other measures agreed at Minsk.

This Government are committed to supporting Ukraine's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity. As a result of their prolonged engagement in this crisis, the Ukrainian armed forces have faced a serious shortage of training and basic equipment and have requested help. The Ukrainians value highly the UK's support to training their personnel through Operation ORBITAL, welcoming our flexibility and responsiveness to their requests for assistance, and highlighting that our training has made a tangible difference on the ground to their capability.

So far this year the armed forces have deployed 19 teams to train nearly 1,600 members of the Ukrainian armed forces. Over 2,000 troops will have been trained by April 2016. Given the continued importance of our support in developing the resilience of Ukraine's armed forces I have agreed that the UK should extend our training into the next financial year, with the continued deployment of short-term training teams to deliver training to meet the Ukrainian armed forces requirements.

For the financial year 2016-17 this will see an increase from the current 75 personnel, announced last February, to around 100 deployed to Ukraine at any one time. This uplift will ensure we have sufficient flexibility to meet evolving Ukrainian requests without unnecessarily constraining activity. The UK co-ordinates our training support with allies, from November there will be a UK liaison officer in the new US-led joint multinational training group based in western Ukraine. In addition to Operation ORBITAL activity, the UK will continue with its wider support to institutional capacity building and defence reform in Ukraine.

[HCWS218]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Informal Meeting of EU Foreign Ministers (Gymnich)

The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington): I attended the informal Foreign Ministers meeting on 4-5 September in Luxembourg.

The informal format of the Gymnich allows EU Foreign Ministers to engage in a free-ranging discussion on a number of issues. In contrast to the formal Foreign Affairs Council (FAC), Ministers do not agree written conclusions. The next FAC is due to be held on 12 October. The Gymnich was chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini. Discussion centred on the Middle East Peace Process, Russia/Eastern Partnership and the migration crisis. As the discussion on migration overran significantly, Ms Mogherini decided to postpone the final discussion on Iran.

Johannes Hahn, Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations also attended. Fernando Gentilini, EU Special Representative for the Middle East Peace Process, took part in the discussion on the Middle East Peace Process. Elmar Brok MEP, Chairman of the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs attended the discussion

on Russia/Eastern Partnership. Foreign Ministers from EU Candidate Countries joined EU Ministers for a session on migration.

Gymnich discussion

Middle East Peace Process

Ms Mogherini used her opening remarks at the Gymnich to announce a meeting of the Quartet with key Arab countries in the margins of the United Nations General Assembly. Her statement can be found at http://eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/2015/150904_01_en.htm

Ms Mogherini provided a sobering analysis of the situation on the ground including the fact that the humanitarian situation in Gaza remained dire.

I agreed with Ms Mogherini's priorities for Gaza (access and port) and added power supply as a third priority. I also echoed other speakers in calling for the implementation of existing EU legislation applicable to settlement products.

Russia / Eastern Partners

There was general agreement that Ukraine needed continued EU support as the winter approached both in terms of security and continued reform. There was universal condemnation of Russia's role in eastern Ukraine. There was however recognition of the constructive role Russia can play in international security issues, as it did in the Iran nuclear talks.

Ms Mogherini recalled that the Eastern Partnership was not just about Ukraine and highlighted the differentiated engagement needed with Moldova, Georgia, Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Migration

The external aspects of the migration crisis were discussed in detail. The common view among member states was that this was the single biggest challenge facing the Union. There was recognition of the heavy burden currently being carried by some of the candidate countries, in particular Turkey. It was agreed that more work was needed on readmissions and returns. There was broad support for setting up 'hotspots', both inside and outside EU territory, to bring together EU institutions involved to deliver an integrated service in managing migrants.

A number of Ministers pointed to the need to address the factors prompting migrants to leave their homes, and increase the incentives for them to stay close to their source countries. We also needed to address the people-smuggling networks. Otherwise, there was a risk that the flow of migrants and refugees into the EU would increase to unmanageable levels. The Valletta Conference in November would provide an opportunity to develop such a strategy with African partners. There was discussion of a second possible international conference focusing on the Eastern Mediterranean/Western Balkans route.

Ms Mogherini concluded that all aspects of a comprehensive migration strategy needed to be pursued.

[HCWS219]

Ministerial Correction

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): During the Westminster Hall debate "Arms Sales (Human Rights)"

on Thursday, 17 September (HC Deb, col 407WH) I told my right hon. Friend, the Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias), that Bahrain was "an example of a country that is on the list of concern", referring to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's list of 27 countries of human rights concern, as set out in the 2014 Annual Human Rights and Democracy Report. In fact, Bahrain was not featured in the report as a country of concern, but rather as a country case study: <http://www.hrdreport.fco.gov.uk/country-case-study-bahrain-reform-implementation>.

Country case studies were introduced in 2012 as a way to report on countries which do not meet the overall threshold for a country of concern, but which we judge nonetheless to be facing human rights challenges, or to be on a trajectory of change with regard to their human rights performance.

[HCWS223]

TRANSPORT

Rail Investment

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Patrick McLoughlin): On 30 September, I was pleased to confirm that work to electrify TransPennine and Midland Mainline railways would resume under plans announced as part of Sir Peter Hendy's work to reset Network Rail's upgrade programme.

Sir Peter Hendy, the Chair of Network Rail, outlined to me how work could continue. I replied to him asking Network Rail to un-pause this work.

Network Rail will work with the Department for Transport (DFT) and Rail North to develop a new plan for electrification of the TransPennine line between Salybridge and Leeds and on to York and Selby to focus on delivering key passenger benefits as quickly as possible. This is an improvement on the previous plan which only changed the power supply of the trains.

The new plan will deliver faster journey times and significantly more capacity between Manchester, Leeds and York. The upgrade is expected to provide capacity for six fast or semi-fast trains per hour, take up to 15 minutes off today's journey time between Manchester and York and be complete by 2022. When the work is finished, the whole route from Liverpool to Newcastle—via Manchester, Leeds and York—will be fully electrified and journey times will be significantly reduced compared to today's railway.

Network Rail will also recommence work to electrify the Midland Mainline, the vital long-distance corridor which serves the UK's industrial heartland. Sir Peter Hendy proposed that line speed and capacity improvement works already in hand are added to, with electrification of the line north of Bedford to Kettering and Corby by 2019 and the line north of Kettering to Leicester, Derby/Nottingham and Sheffield by 2023.

New Northern and TransPennine rail franchise awards will be announced before the end of the year. The new franchises will deliver new train carriages and remove out-dated Pacer trains; introduce free WiFi on trains; and offer a one-third increase in capacity with 200 additional services on weekdays and Saturdays and 300 more train services on Sundays.

Connecting up the great cities of the North is at the heart of our plan to build a northern powerhouse. The total programme of rail electrification and upgrades will completely transform the railways for passengers in the North and Midlands and help ensure that every part of Britain benefits from a growing economy.

[HCWS214]

Vehicle Emissions

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Patrick McLoughlin): I wish to inform the House of the latest developments on vehicle emissions testing, following the revelations of Friday 18 September that Volkswagen Group had been fitting so-called defeat devices to some of its vehicles.

Volkswagen Group has admitted that defeat devices are present on almost 1.2 million vehicles in the UK. These are diesel-powered vehicles tested and approved under the Euro 5 standard. Other vehicle manufacturers have confirmed that defeat devices do not exist on their vehicles. We, of course, will be testing this for ourselves.

I have taken a series of actions to defend the interests of UK consumers, both in the immediate and longer terms. The actions of the Government will continue to be guided by the over-riding principle of protecting consumers.

First, I have applied considerable pressure on the company in the UK and on EU Ministers to resolve the immediate situation with speed and efficiency. This means clear information for affected drivers and acting

quickly to put right the affected vehicles. I have been clear that I expect VW to take every step necessary to protect its UK customers but it is right that the Government carry out their own thorough and independent investigation.

Therefore, secondly, I have announced a UK programme to retest vehicles. The Vehicle Certification Agency, the UK regulator, is running laboratory tests starting with those VW Group vehicles for which VCA has provided approvals. These tests will compare real world driving emissions against laboratory performance. We are taking steps to ensure independence; neither the cars nor the testing facilities will be provided by the vehicle industry themselves.

Thirdly, I have called for swift action by the European Commission to co-ordinate a pan-European approach. This is vital for ensuring that test results are available to consumers on a timely basis and to avoid duplication across different European countries.

Fourthly, a key element of regaining consumers' long-term trust in vehicle emissions testing is to have tests that mean what they say. The UK was in the minority among member states earlier in 2015 in calling for "real driving emissions" to be speedily introduced. These tests will provide useful information that consumers can trust.

I met my fellow EU transport ministers in Luxembourg on 8 October and tabled the issue of vehicle emissions testing. I pushed for both a co-ordinated approach to retesting of vehicles across Europe and for real driving emissions to be introduced as quickly as practicably possible. I will continue working with my European colleagues to achieve the UK's objectives.

[HCWS227]

Petition

Monday 12 October 2015

OBSERVATIONS

HEALTH

Lambeth and Southwark Milkspots

The Petition of residents of Dulwich and West Norwood,

Declares that the Lambeth and Southwark Milkspots cafés staffed by expert midwives from King's College Hospital provide a gold standard of postnatal breastfeeding support in the community, being free, accessible, held daily, and allowing continuity of care from skilled health professionals; and further declares that King's College Hospital has announced that it intends to recall these specialist midwives with basic training, without any obvious expert support, and this will leave women with complicated needs without adequate support, advice or referral to hospital services; and that around 4,000 people have signed a Change.org petition to protest against the proposed end of current staffing arrangements.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons require the Department of Health to urge King's College Hospital to preserve the existing staffing

arrangements of the Lambeth and Southwark Milk Spots, and to investigate other means of sharing skills among its midwives.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Helen Hayes, *Official Report*, 21 July 2015; Vol. 598, c. 1464.]

[P001540]

Observations from The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jane Ellison): The Department of Health understands that the trust is continuing to provide midwifery support for the Milk Spots cafes in Lambeth and Southwark.

The trust will ensure that the cafés are staffed by experienced midwives with other community midwives working alongside them, in order to facilitate skill sharing and mentoring.

The midwives at the Milk Spots cafés will be supported in their work by infant feeding support workers. Together, the midwives and infant feeding support workers will be able to support mothers who are breastfeeding, as well as diagnose tongue tie, and make referrals to specialists at King's. They will also provide other services in the community as necessary.

Lambeth Council has initiated a review of the Milk Spots and the service they café provide, with particular emphasis on vulnerable women. When the review is completed, King's College Hospital NHS Foundation Trust will continue to work with Lambeth Council to implement any recommendations to ensure there is ongoing provision of support for women and families.

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