

Thursday
15 October 2015

Volume 600
No. 50



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 15 October 2015

House of Commons

Thursday 15 October 2015

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

TRANSPORT FOR LONDON BILL [LORDS]

Motion made,

That the promoters of the Transport for London Bill [Lords], which was originally introduced in the House of Lords in Session 2010–12 on 24 January 2011, may have leave to proceed with the Bill in the current Session according to the provisions of Standing Order 188B (Revival of Bills).—(*The Chairman of Ways and Means.*)

Hon. Members: Object.

To be considered on Thursday 22 October.

Oral Answers to Questions

ATTORNEY GENERAL

The Attorney General was asked—

Human Rights Act 1998

1. **Graham Jones** (Hyndburn) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Justice on proposals for reform of the Human Rights Act 1998. [901576]

2. **Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): What steps he plans to take to ensure that proposals for reform of the Human Rights Act 1998 meet the UK's domestic and international human rights obligations. [901577]

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): The Justice Secretary and I meet regularly to discuss important issues of common interest, including on domestic and international human rights law. I am not, as the House knows, able to talk about any legal content of those discussions, because, by convention, whether the Law Officers have given advice or not is not disclosed outside government.

Graham Jones: The public need to be aware that withdrawing from the Human Rights Act does not mean that we will withdraw from human rights, because people will still be able to have those rights. It is just that rather than get them in British courts they will have to traipse off to Strasbourg to get them. The British public need to be made aware of the situation. The issue, of course, is about the convention. Are the

Government proposing to withdraw from the European convention on human rights, a move that would remove human rights in this country, rather than just from the Human Rights Act?

The Attorney General: The hon. Gentleman is right to a certain extent, but of course he will have to wait for the proposals that the Justice Secretary will make on human rights reform. The other point for the hon. Gentleman to bear in mind is that it is not just the Court in Strasbourg that protects the human rights of British citizens. The British courts do, too, and I believe we can rely on the robustness and good sense of British judges to protect those rights.

Paul Blomfield: Because so many people in my constituency had written to me expressing their concerns about the Government's plans on this issue, I organised a meeting during the recess. The dozens of people who came along had one simple question, which I hope the Attorney General will be able to answer: which of the rights currently contained within the Human Rights Act would he and the Government wish to see excluded from a British Bill of Rights?

The Attorney General: Again, as the hon. Gentleman has heard me say, he will have to wait for the precise proposals we are going to make. It is worth pointing out that the rights he is talking about are found not in the Human Rights Act, but in the European convention on human rights. The Government have made it clear, as I have on previous occasions, that we do not object to the content of the convention—we object to the way it is interpreted.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): One important issue in terms of the credibility of the European Court of Human Rights is the quality of the judges. We are shortly to appoint a new British judge, so can the Attorney General assure us that we will ensure that we have a judge of the very highest quality appointed? Unfortunately, some of the appointments from other jurisdictions, not ours, have in the past caused concerns to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in terms of their quality.

The Attorney General: My hon. Friend is entirely right that the quality of the judiciary matters hugely, in Strasbourg and elsewhere. As he has heard me say, we share confidence in the quality of the British judiciary, and I hope very much that one of those excellent judges will be prepared to serve in Strasbourg so that our point of view can be clearly represented.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Does the Attorney General agree that the most convincing argument as to why this Government must press ahead with this move as quickly as possible is set out on page 60 of the Conservative party manifesto? It states:

“The next Conservative Government will scrap the Human Rights Act, and introduce a British Bill of Rights.”

Some 11.3 million people voted for that and they will expect it to be carried out quickly.

The Attorney General: My hon. Friend will know that I share his enthusiasm for this reform, and I stood on that manifesto, too, and believe in it. But it is

important also to make sure that we get this reform right and that we have the details worked out before we announce what we wish to do. There will of course also be an opportunity for all Members of this House to comment on what is proposed, because I know that the Justice Secretary intends to consult on the matter.

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): The proposed repeal of the Human Rights Act and the potential withdrawal from the ECHR has serious constitutional implications for Scotland. Has the Attorney General seen the proposals and will he be delivering legal advice before they are published in the public domain?

The Attorney General: As the hon. Gentleman has heard me say to the Select Committee, I would certainly expect to see the proposals before they are published. He is right, of course, that the devolution consequences of any changes that might be made are significant or potentially significant, depending on what is done. I am afraid that, until we see what is proposed, it is difficult to assess exactly what those consequences might be.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): When my constituents say, "Philip, we voted Conservative because we wanted to get rid of the Human Rights Act, when is it going to happen?" what should I tell them?

The Attorney General: My hon. Friend can tell his constituents, as we should all tell our constituents, that manifesto promises matter, and this Government intend to honour their manifesto. Of course, a manifesto does not all have to be delivered in the first six months of government. We will seek to do so as soon as possible. I know that the Justice Secretary and his colleagues are working very hard on bringing forward proposals.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Does the Attorney General accept that the continuing uncertainty as to whether the UK will remain a signatory to the ECHR is itself damaging? Given that the proposal for a British Bill of Rights has been around in the Conservative party for a considerable time, why cannot the Attorney General be certain and tell us whether the UK will remain a signatory to the ECHR or not?

The Attorney General: I do not accept that that uncertainty is damaging. What is happening is that we are seeking a better settlement on the arrangements at Strasbourg. We believe that, on issues such as prisoner voting, it is important that this House, not the Court in Strasbourg, should make the decision. That requires a discussion with the Council of Europe. That discussion will take place. It is important that we on the Conservative Benches at least say that the status quo is unacceptable and that we need to do something about it. If the Opposition believe that the status quo is acceptable, they should make that clear.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): What's wrong with the Act, Jeremy?

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) is something of a veteran at chuntering from a sedentary position in evident

disapproval of the thrust of the Government Front-Bench team's position, but he will have his opportunity, on his feet, in due course.

Crown Prosecution Service: Rape and Domestic Violence

4. **Karen Lumley** (Redditch) (Con): What steps the Crown Prosecution Service has taken to improve the conviction rate for rape and domestic violence in the last two years. [901579]

8. **Karl McCartney** (Lincoln) (Con): What steps the Crown Prosecution Service has taken to improve the conviction rate for rape and domestic violence in the last two years. [901584]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): This year, more cases of violence against women and girls have been referred from the police, charged, prosecuted and convicted than ever before. The work undertaken by the Crown Prosecution Service and the police on rape and domestic abuse has culminated in the highest volumes ever of prosecutions and convictions in 2014-15.

Karen Lumley: In the West Mercia region, in which my constituency is located, we have seen the rape crisis go up this year to 700 from 400 cases. Can my hon. and learned Friend assure me that we are doing everything we can to make sure that these people are prosecuted?

The Solicitor General: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question. CPS West Midlands has a specialist rape and serious sexual offences unit in recognition of the increasing volume of rape and serious sexual offences reported. CPS West Midlands has increased the size of the unit and the team continues to work very closely with the police, victims groups and the independent Bar to ensure that strong cases are built and witnesses looked after.

Karl McCartney: I thank my hon. and learned Friend for his original answer. Has he brought forward any specific steps to support an increase in convictions where men are the victims of rape or domestic abuse?

The Solicitor General: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question, and let me assure him that when it comes to the prosecution of rape and serious sexual offences, it applies equally to men as to women. Boys, of course, can also sadly be the victims of sexual abuse. Sentencing guidelines, of course, draw no distinction of gender, and neither should the investigation or prosecution of offences.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Despite claims of the highest number of convictions ever, the fact is that in the last year the number of convictions for rape, domestic abuse and other serious sexual offences has fallen. What is the Solicitor General going to do to turn those worrying figures around?

The Solicitor General: I think the hon. Gentleman means that the rate has fallen slightly. I think it important to continue to prosecute more and more of these cases. For too long, many victims have found that their cases have not even been brought to court. Looking at the

analysis of rape convictions, I am encouraged to see that the number of convictions that have not been brought because of a prosecution failure is reducing, so I think that drilling down and looking at the reasons for the non-convictions is very important. We have to continue progress in that direction.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): Successfully prosecuting rape and domestic violence cases clearly requires a properly resourced CPS, yet the budget has been slashed by 25% since 2010 and the rate of ineffective and cracked trials due to prosecution issues is at a five-year high. With senior respected personnel leaving and expressing grave concerns, do the Solicitor General and the Attorney General really believe that the CPS can sustain more cuts on the same scale and still deliver justice?

The Solicitor General: I am afraid that the hon. Lady is in error when she suggests that the number of ineffective trials is at an all-time high. As I have said, the number of cases being prosecuted continues to increase, and there is no question of prosecutions not being brought because of a lack of resources. Rape and serious sexual offences units are well resourced, and they will continue to be resourced by the CPS.

Vulnerable Witnesses

5. **David Mowat** (Warrington South) (Con): What steps he plans to take to protect child witnesses in sex abuse and other cases from intimidation during cross-examination. [901580]

11. **Mark Menzies** (Fylde) (Con): What recent steps the Crown Prosecution Service has taken to improve its engagement with and support for vulnerable witnesses. [901587]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): The defence case has to be put to all prosecution witnesses, but in order to ensure effective cross-examination, a mandatory advocacy course for all defence advocates is being developed and will include the cross-examination of vulnerable witnesses. Pre-recorded cross-examination has already been piloted successfully, and we are committed to a national roll-out.

David Mowat: In 2011, at Stafford Crown court, a victim of child abuse was cross-examined in a vicious and intimidatory way for 12 days by a team of seven barristers, during a session in which the judge was generally thought to have lost control of the courtroom. Such cross-examination is a massive disincentive for others to come forward. Four years later, may I ask what steps have been taken to prevent it from happening again?

The Solicitor General: I well remember that case. The good news is that in the retrial matters were handled very differently, and the outcome was successful. However, intimidatory cross-examination should not happen. Judges have a duty to ensure that young witnesses are not cross-examined inappropriately. As I have said, a new advocacy course is being developed to ensure that that sort of abuse does not happen again.

Mark Menzies: Will the Solicitor General tell us what the CPS is doing to help vulnerable witnesses, such as victims of human trafficking, to give evidence in courts?

The Solicitor General: Recently, the CPS drew up new guidelines for the care of witnesses in court. Those guidelines are currently being piloted and will be rolled out nationally in the new year. They will go a long way towards supporting witnesses, while avoiding the dangers of coaching witnesses in the giving of evidence, which, of course, would not be desirable.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In the last few years, it has become clear that a great many young people have been sexually abused over a number of years and are traumatised by that abuse. Can the Solicitor General assure the House that the necessary resources are available so that the young people in all those cases can be looked after?

The Solicitor General: I can reassure the hon. Gentleman. As I have said many times before, when it comes to the protection of vulnerable witnesses and complainants in criminal cases, the CPS is always working to improve its processes so that the experience can be as smooth as possible. What we do not want is a repeat, in effect, of the abuse that those people originally suffered when they come to court and give evidence.

14. [901590] **John Howell** (Henley) (Con): Operation Bullfinch, in Oxford, introduced a number of radically different procedures for coping with vulnerable witnesses. What lessons have been learnt from that?

The Solicitor General: I know that my hon. Friend has a long-standing interest in improving the processes as a result of that case, which helped to revolutionise the way in which the investigatory authorities all work together. There have been a number of other successful investigations in his own police area, which are helping to improve national practice, and there is a much greater understanding across the country of the way in which in which such cases can be effectively prosecuted.

Drones

6. **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Whether future military action using drones overseas will require his approval. [901581]

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): The role of the Law Officers in relation to military action overseas is to advise as necessary on legal questions, not to authorise the action. The use of drones in military action overseas does not of itself necessarily give rise to legal questions. The deployment of one form of equipment or another rarely does, in and of itself. Whether legal questions arise will depend on the operational context in which any form of military deployment was undertaken, and the reason for it.

Chi Onwurah: Technological development can undermine legislation under all Governments, but particularly under this Government, who seem to have no strategy for it. We need to know that, while the strikes may be made by drones, the decision makers are still accountable to the

House. When will the Attorney General establish a clear legislative and ethical framework in relation to future drone strikes?

The Attorney General: Again, that is not my role within government, but the hon. Lady knows that the Prime Minister was extremely eager to come to Parliament and explain the basis of the decision to take the drone strike of 21 August, and he did so on the first available opportunity.

In terms of setting frameworks, it is important of course to treat every case on its merits. In relation to the legal position, as in relation to a political decision making process, each instance will be different and each must be considered on its own facts.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): The recent drone strike in Syria was described by the Prime Minister as a “new departure” and a first in modern times. The Prime Minister said he is

“happy to look at what other ways there may be of making sure these sorts of acts are scrutinised”.—[*Official Report*, 7 September 2015; Vol. 599, c. 31.]

Given that any action must be necessary and proportionate to meet the key legal tests, can the Attorney General update us on the discussions between the Government and the Intelligence and Security Committee on reviewing the action and any framework that will be put in place to ensure proper scrutiny in future?

The Attorney General: I welcome the hon. Lady to her new responsibilities and wish her well in them. I have no doubt that the new Chairman of the ISC will be discussing with the Government what inquiries they wish to take forward. On my engagement in the process, as the hon. Lady understands the Law Officers convention makes it clear that legal advice is not disclosed outside government, nor in the generality of cases is even the fact of legal advice disclosed, but she knows, too, that in relation to this incident I thought it was right and proper that the fact of legal advice having been given should be disclosed, and it was. I hope she will understand how difficult it is to go any further than that without undermining the good reasons that I believe lie behind the LOC.

Court Time

7. **Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): What steps the Crown Prosecution Service is taking to ensure that court time is not wasted. [901582]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): The listing of court cases is a judicial function and a responsibility of Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service, but when cases are listed the CPS takes steps to make sure the prosecution case is properly prepared and ready for an effective court hearing so the time set aside is fully utilised.

Tom Pursglove: I thank the Minister for that answer, but during a visit to Corby magistrates court I was shocked to hear about how much court time is wasted owing to the CPS not having its case together in time for when it is scheduled. Does the Minister agree that it is unacceptable for cases that are not complete to be

brought to court? We really do need to get away from this; it is unacceptable and it wastes not only time but money.

The Solicitor General: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. I know he works very hard with his local courts service. A lot of innovation with regard to transforming summary justice and the increasing use of digital processes is leading to quicker timescales, much more effective first hearings and a more efficient use of court time, so I think he has reasons to be optimistic.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I have missed the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman). It is good to have him back.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

A constituent of mine who is a very competent manager recently did jury service. He said the court system was medieval and it was about time someone came in and organised it better, managed it better and gave a real return to the taxpayer, with better justice delivered quickly.

The Solicitor General: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. After many years in the courts system myself, I understand his constituent’s concerns. The good news is that a lot of work is being done to digitise the paperwork so that time can be saved. Already there is a new proposed roll-out next year, which will co-ordinate the way in which the courts work with the CPS and other agencies so the sort of delays that irritated his constituent can be reduced and removed.

Human Trafficking Offences: Forced Labour

9. **Graham Evans** (Weaver Vale) (Con): What steps the Crown Prosecution Service is taking to increase the number of successful prosecutions for human trafficking offences involving forced labour. [901585]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): In advance of the introduction of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 the CPS delivered joint training with the police and issued guidance to strengthen prosecutions. In forced labour cases the CPS also encourages prosecution for other offences such as trafficking for forced labour, money laundering, benefit and mortgage fraud, tax evasion and Gangmasters (Licensing) Act offences.

Graham Evans: Given the sheer number of refugees fleeing the conflict in Syria, taking action against human traffickers is of the utmost importance in protecting some of the world’s most vulnerable people. What steps is my hon. and learned Friend taking to improve the confiscation of the proceeds of exploiting migrant workers into modern-day slavery?

The Solicitor General: I know that my hon. Friend has a long-standing interest in this issue. The Crown Prosecution Service is helping to improve the situation

by building capacity and capability in other countries, because this is an international problem. This is being done by better linking the work of the regional asset recovery teams with that of the human trafficking investigators, so that financial investigation can become sharper and more efficient.

13. [901589] **David T. C. Davies** (Monmouth) (Con): My hon. and learned Friend has outlined what is being done on an international basis. Will he go further and confirm that the Immigration Bill, which had its Second Reading this week, will help to tackle this disgraceful problem on a domestic level?

The Solicitor General: The Minister for Immigration and I have the duty of taking that Bill through its stages in this House, and I can assure my hon. Friend that its provisions will dovetail well to improve the range of tools that the authorities have to protect victims of trafficking and prosecute perpetrators.

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked— **Women and Girls in Sport**

1. **Andrew Stephenson** (Pendle) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to increase the participation of women and girls in sport. [901556]

7. **Glyn Davies** (Montgomeryshire) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to increase the participation of women and girls in sport. [901562]

9. **Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to increase the participation of women and girls in sport. [901564]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities and Family Justice (Caroline Dinenage): First, I would like to welcome the hon. Members for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) and for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) to their new positions. I should also like to thank the hon. Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero) for her commitment to promoting equality.

The Government are determined to tackle this important issue. The award-winning This Girl Can campaign is a fantastic example of the work we have been doing to encourage women into sport. It features real women of all different shapes, sizes and abilities taking part in sport and, most importantly, having fun. We know that 75% of women want to be more active, and this campaign, which has been viewed by more than 13 million people, offers them the inspiration to do just that.

Andrew Stephenson: The Pendle sports awards, which took place just two weeks ago, recognised the achievements of sportswomen across Pendle, including Bethany Widdup, who is now a member of the British ski team, and many others who have excelled thanks to grass-roots sports clubs across Pendle. What more can my hon. Friend do to give our local sports clubs the help they need to get even more women and girls involved?

Caroline Dinenage: First, I should like to add my own congratulations to Bethany. Awards such as those in Pendle provide a fantastic way of recognising the enormous effort that goes into grass-roots sport across the country, almost always involving incredible volunteers. Schemes such as satellite clubs, supported by Sport England, are helping to link schools and colleges to grass-roots sports clubs across the country, giving a better sporting experience to children and young people.

Glyn Davies: This week I watched the excellent film “Suffragette”, which illustrated just how far we have progressed in creating a fair and equal society over the past 100 years. Does the Minister agree that sport is a very effective way of continuing to make such progress? Will she join me in congratulating the media on the much greater coverage that is now being given to the participation of women in sport?

Caroline Dinenage: I absolutely agree. We have further to go, but—without wishing to rub salt into the wounds of our English gentlemen—I must mention the fact that the brilliant performance of our women’s teams in the recent football, rugby and netball world cups has showcased some fantastic role models and demonstrated character and success. That is exactly why they deserve all the media coverage they are getting—and, indeed, much more.

Rebecca Pow: If we are to build a healthier society, our children will need to engage in sport from a very young age. This applies especially to girls, who, sadly, opt out all too frequently. Some excellent youth programmes for boys and girls are running in Taunton Deane, including the centre for cricketing excellence, Taunton Vale hockey club, Taunton rugby club and Taunton football club. Will the Minister expand a little further on what the Government are doing, especially for young schoolchildren’s participation in sport?

Caroline Dinenage: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The good news is that, in Taunton, 4,700 more women are regularly playing sport today than in 2005. Research published by the Government Equalities Office shows that year 3 is the critical stage at which to keep girls motivated to play sport. That is the last academic year before the difference between girls and boys—in terms of confidence, body image and sporting participation—starts to grow. That is why investment in schools sports, such as the £150 million a year for primary PE, is so vital for helping girls to develop this very healthy habit for life.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I commend Manchester City football club for its women and girls programme, which provides 12 weekly sessions free of charge to girls and women between the ages of 14 and 25 to increase their participation in football. Do we not need to see other such examples spread right across football in the country?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Gentleman makes a fantastic point. It is an incredibly successful girls’ football team, and I know that the sports Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), is a huge champion of women’s football and not a bad football player herself.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): There are great opportunities for girls to participate in sport, especially in rugby and football, at schools and universities. What has been done to provide that same provision at clubs after university?

Caroline Dinéage: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. We want to encourage that participation through school, university and out into life afterwards. That is why the This Girl Can campaign, which shows real women taking part in sport that is fun and not just competitive, has been such a fantastic way of encouraging them to get out there and lead a healthy lifestyle.

15. [901570] **Graham Evans** (Weaver Vale) (Con): As the chairman of the all-party group for running and the father of a young daughter, I am very keen to encourage more girls to take up running, particularly through the excellent parkrun scheme. Mr Speaker, those runs are a great way to start a Saturday morning for those who, like yourself, have a young family. I recommend three miles around your local park. What is the impact of the Government's investment in the school sports premium particularly on the take-up of sport by girls?

Mr Speaker: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his helpful public advice.

Caroline Dinéage: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I know that he is no mean marathon runner himself. Running is a fantastic form of exercise and parkrun has been particularly effective at encouraging inactive people and those from all age groups to get involved in sport. In recognition of that, Sport England is investing £400,000 in parkrun to support its work. The primary PE and sports premium has been really effective in allowing schools to tailor this offer to pupils, giving them suitable opportunities to target particular groups, especially girls.

Gender Pay Gap

2. **Mims Davies** (Eastleigh) (Con): What steps she is taking to tackle the causes of the gender pay gap (a) in general and (b) in STEM careers. [901557]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Nicky Morgan): I echo my hon. Friend's welcome to the new shadow Ministers and I look forward to debates on these important issues.

The gender pay gap has fallen to its lowest ever level, but any gap at all is unacceptable, which is why the Prime Minister has pledged to eliminate the gap in a generation. Transparency is an important step in tackling the matter, which is why, within 100 days of the election, the Government have taken steps to fulfil their manifesto commitment by launching a consultation on legislation that will require companies to publish details of their gender pay gap. We must also tackle the causes themselves, by encouraging girls to consider a wide range of careers, including those in the science, technology, engineering and maths fields, and by transforming our workplaces.

Mims Davies: I thank the Minister for her answer. The overall pay gap of 2014 stands at 19.1%. Does she agree that more needs to be done to help full-time carers and full-time parents who decide to re-enter the workplace so that we can reduce the pay gap?

Nicky Morgan: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. Interestingly, the gender pay gap in her own constituency is 14.3%, which is below the national average. Of course we must help more parents to get back into the workplace. I am very clear that childcare is not just a women's issue, but a parents' issue, which is why we are introducing flexible working, shared parental leave and more free childcare. We are also tackling the barriers that affect carers, which is why we launched nine pilots across England to test different approaches to supporting female carers to remain in work.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister knows well that girls who give up STEM subjects early on do not get into good management jobs later on. Is it not important to measure how many women are getting into senior positions, particularly in the private sector?

Nicky Morgan: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman. That is why transparency is so important and why the regulations that we propose will cover the private sector. He is right in what he says. Women form 47% of the workforce, but make up only 34% of managers, directors and senior officials. This must be the time to make the change.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I applaud the Minister and the Government for their commitment to eliminate the gender pay gap. This generation of women over 50 working full time earn just two thirds of what men of the same age earn. What specific policies do this Government have to address that particular enduring pay gap?

Nicky Morgan: I thank the Chairman of the Women and Equalities Committee for her question. She will know from her time in government that one of the Women's Business Council's key strands of work involves helping older workers to stay in work. This is, of course, also about helping women to stay in work for a longer period and to get as high up in their careers as possible before they take time out for caring responsibilities. I have also mentioned the carers pilots because, sadly, even in the 21st century, the burden of caring for older relatives still often falls on women. We have to change that.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): A recent report by the Campaign for Science and Engineering found that when parents were asked what type of job they want their child to pursue when they finish education there was a clear gender bias, with parents wanting for their son a career in engineering and for their daughter a career in nursing. Does the Minister agree that it is crucial that we break down those barriers?

Nicky Morgan: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. It is good to see, for example, that maths is now the most popular A-level, and we have more girls studying STEM subjects at both GCSE and A-level. Women are concentrated in the less well-paid occupations, making up 92% of secretaries and 94% of childcare assistants but only 7% of engineers and 20% of architects. Again, that has to change.

Caste Discrimination

3. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): If she will bring forward legislative proposals to repeal the provisions relating to caste discrimination in the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Act 2013. [901558]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Nicky Morgan): The Government completely oppose caste discrimination and the judgments in the *Tirkey v. Chandhok* case suggest that legal protection against such discrimination already exists under the Equality Act 2010. We are considering the legislative position in the light of those judgments.

Bob Blackman: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. She will be aware that the case was brought under the Equality Act 2010, not the ill-thought-out and unnecessary amendment made in the other place to the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Act. This unnecessary and divisive legislation has caused consternation in the Hindu community. Will she undertake not only not to trigger that legislation but to repeal it so that the Hindu community will know where it stands legally?

Nicky Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend for that question and I know that he feels passionately about this matter. There are, of course, strong opinions on both sides of the debate. It is important, given the case that I have just mentioned, to remember that the law as it stands has changed because of that judgment. A litigant could now seek to bring a case of caste discrimination in an employment tribunal using the ethnic origin provisions in the Equality Act, which is why we should take time to look at the judgment before making further decisions.

New Businesses (Government Support)

4. **Mark Spencer** (Sherwood) (Con): What steps the Government is taking to support more women in setting up their own businesses. [901559]

5. **Mr Alan Mak** (Havant) (Con): What steps the Government is taking to support more women in setting up their own businesses. [901560]

14. **Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): What steps the Government is taking to support more women in setting up their own businesses. [901569]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities and Family Justice (Caroline Dinenage): I am delighted that the UK is considered the best place in Europe for women to start a business, but we are not resting on our laurels. That is why we have launched the women in broadband fund and are running meet a mentor roadshows across the country, giving women the support, advice and skills they need.

Mark Spencer: If the Minister has the opportunity to speak to the Secretary of State for Education, will she encourage her to ensure that girls consider topics such as economics and business studies so that we can get more young women to start their own business?

Caroline Dinenage: Well, Mr Speaker, she is nodding furiously at me so I will take that as a yes. We have been celebrating and showcasing women in business as a great way of inspiring the next generation and, of course, we have set up the new business and enterprise company as a great way of showing girls the fantastic careers available to them in both business and enterprise.

Mr Mak: I thank the Minister for her original answer. Women entrepreneurs such as Jodie Sheppard from my Havant constituency, who has launched a business helping to improve children's fitness, are excellent local role models. Does the Minister agree that organisations such as the Women's Business Council offer excellent support for our women business leaders, and will the Government continue to work hard to help women who want to start their own business?

Caroline Dinenage: Jodie Sheppard, who founded Active8 Minds in Havant, is an excellent example of a capable woman running her own business and will, I am sure, be delighted with the fantastic plug her MP has given her business today. I certainly agree that the Women's Business Council has a vital role in supporting women to reach their potential. We know that if women started their own businesses at the same rate as men do, we would have an extra 1 million women involved and an extra 1 million businesses in the UK.

Alex Chalk: Cheltenham is home to thousands of talented female entrepreneurs, but broadband and superfast broadband are key to unlocking that potential. How are the Government helping more women in Cheltenham to grow their businesses online?

Caroline Dinenage: The fund has been extended for a second year, with an additional £1.1 million to support more women to take their businesses online, enabling them to develop the skills they need to become competitive in a growing digital economy. One example of which my hon. Friend might be aware is the Faster Women project, which is supporting women in Herefordshire and Gloucestershire to develop digital skills. Today, a workshop is taking place in his very own Cheltenham to help women take the first steps in putting their businesses online.

Pregnancy and Maternity Discrimination

6. **Rebecca Long Bailey** (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): What steps she is taking to tackle pregnancy and maternity discrimination in the workplace. [901561]

12. **Angela Rayner** (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): What steps she is taking to tackle pregnancy and maternity discrimination in the workplace. [901567]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Nicky Morgan): Pregnancy and maternity discrimination is unlawful and completely unacceptable. The Government and the Equality and Human Rights Commission are working together on the largest independent research project of its kind in Great Britain to better understand the problem. The detail of the final report is due to be published later this year and will inform the Government's response.

Rebecca Long Bailey: Many women across Salford and Eccles have returned to work after maternity leave with a very uneasy feeling about whether they have a job. The report to which the right hon. Lady refers has found that women returning from maternity leave are even more likely to face discrimination in the workplace than they were a decade ago. What assurances can she offer people in Salford and Eccles that this will not be the case in generations to come?

Nicky Morgan: It is true that when the interim report was published in July this year, we were all disappointed to see that around one in eight women reported that they felt they had to leave work as a result of their pregnancy or maternity leave, but it also shows that the vast majority of employers believe it is important to support pregnant women and women on maternity leave, so we have to build on that. That is why the report will be so helpful in working out exactly what our response should be to make sure that we change this, as the hon. Lady says, not in decades but in a few years ahead.

Angela Rayner: Will the Minister join me in welcoming the work done by Joeli Brearley of Pregnant then Screwed, a Greater Manchester-based organisation campaigning to raise awareness of the appalling examples of discrimination in the workplace? More importantly, can the Minister pledge to work with organisations such as Pregnant then Screwed to help tackle this inequality in the workplace?

Nicky Morgan: I look forward to hearing more about the work that Joeli Brearley has been doing. As I mentioned earlier, we expect the report this year to tell us the types of issues that women face, the perceived discrimination where it is occurring, who is most at risk and which employers in terms of size and sectors are most likely to get complaints. I will then be open to working with all organisations to tackle that discrimination. If the hon. Lady would like to write to me with further details about her constituency organisation, I would be delighted to see them.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): Unlawful maternity and pregnancy discrimination is now more common in Britain's workplaces than ever before. One in nine women are forced out of their jobs as a result of discrimination in the workplace. In July 2013 the UK Government introduced employment tribunal fees of up to £1,200, amounting to a barrier for women and a charter for rogue employers. What action is the Minister taking to tackle this issue?

Nicky Morgan: Before answering the hon. Lady's question, may I congratulate her? I understand that she was the winner of the Icon politician of the year award last week for her work. In relation to the fees for employment tribunals, on 11 June this year we announced a post-implementation review of the introduction of fees for employment tribunals. The review is being led by the Ministry of Justice. It is well under way and is due to report later this year. I think we should await the outcome of that review to determine whether current fees or the remission scheme need to be adjusted.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): According to research from the Equality and Human Rights Commission, one in nine mothers have lost their jobs due to pregnancy discrimination, yet since the introduction of employment tribunal fees nearly seven in 10 cases that could have gone before tribunals are not going ahead, according to Citizens Advice. Why are the Government giving the green light to employers to discriminate against women?

Nicky Morgan: As I said, I welcome the hon. Lady to her position on the shadow Front Bench, but I disagree with her, which will not surprise her. We are not giving any form of encouragement to employers to discriminate. I mentioned the post-implementation review of the introduction of fees, and I should point out that in order to protect the most vulnerable in society, there is already a system of fee remissions under which fees can be waived in part or in full for those who qualify. It is right to try to divert people away from potentially acrimonious proceedings through a conciliation scheme operated by ACAS, but we should also see where the review leads and what it tells us about fees and their impact.

Working Families Tax Credit

8. **Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab):** What comparative assessment she has made of the potential effect on women and men of proposed changes to working families tax credit; and if she will make a statement. [901563]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Damian Hinds): The Government want to move from a low-wage, high-tax, low-welfare—I mean, high-welfare—society to a high-tax—[*Laughter.*] This was always going to happen one day; I apologise profusely. We want to move to a high-wage, lower tax, lower welfare society, and this includes some changes to tax credits to help put benefit spending on a more sustainable path. The impact of those changes on different groups with protected characteristics, including gender, has been considered by Treasury Ministers as part of the overall summer Budget package.

Fiona Mactaggart: The Minister says that it has been considered, but it has not been acted upon. We know that benefits such as child tax credit are twice as big a proportion of women's income as they are of men's. He will recall that in August 2014 the Prime Minister said that

“every single domestic policy that government comes up with will be examined for its impact on the family.”

What was the examination in relation to child tax credit, and what has he done about it?

Damian Hinds: We are in the process of delivering on our deficit reduction imperative, which the House had an opportunity to debate last night. The reductions in tax credits are an important part of that, but they form part of a package, along with measures such as the national living wage, childcare and changes in the personal allowances for income tax. As a result of the income tax change, 660,000 individuals will be lifted out of income

tax, 60% of whom will be women. We believe that about two thirds of the beneficiaries of the national living wage will also be women.

Gender Pay Gap

10. **Jo Churchill** (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): What assessment she has made of the implications for her policies of the responses received to the Government Equalities Office's recent consultation on closing the gender pay gap. [901565]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Nicky Morgan): As I have said, the Government are absolutely committed to eliminating the gender pay gap for good. Our consultation closed on 6 September. We received nearly 700 responses, including from 200 employers and business organisation, including the CBI. The responses from employers have been extremely positive, recognising that we all have a stake in the issue. We will consider the responses and bring forward new regulations shortly.

Jo Churchill: As my right hon. Friend knows, this subject is of great importance to me, but it leads to a broader question: what are the Government doing to ensure that the pipeline to senior management and director level for women is encouraged, because we still have a 32% earnings differential between women and men in large organisations, which is considerably larger than the 19% alluded to earlier?

Nicky Morgan: My hon. Friend might be interested to know that the gender pay gap in her constituency is 18.2%, which is just below the national average. I agree that this is an important issue. We have more women on FTSE 100 boards than ever before. In fact, we now have no all-male boards in the FTSE 100. Women now make up more than 25% of those boards. However, there is much more to do. She is absolutely right to talk about the executive pipeline. We have to get more women into management and executive positions, and we are currently looking at that issue.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's commitment to introducing regulations on compulsory reporting. There is clearly a way to go when the UK's gender pay gap is 19.1%, which significantly exceeds the European Union average of 16.4%. But does she agree that publishing alone will not be enough? If the information is to be useful, it needs to be consistent, standardised and readily available to workers and their representatives.

Nicky Morgan: I welcome the hon. Lady to her position on the Front Bench. I entirely agree that transparency is important, but the next thing will be what employers, organisations and others do with that information, and how it drives change so that the gender pay gap is eliminated. Also, as we heard from one of her colleagues earlier, it is about how we ensure that women are represented in greater numbers throughout all our workforces.

Kate Green: I am glad that the Minister agrees that the information should be accessible and meaningful, and companies must know that the Government treat this matter with the utmost seriousness. Will she therefore

explain why, in the very week that the Prime Minister was proclaiming his support for action at the Conservative party conference, Conservative MEPs were voting against a recommendation that companies should disclose their gender pay gap? Is she not worried about the message that that sends out?

Nicky Morgan: I cannot remember another occasion when a Prime Minister has turned up to something like a CBI conference and chosen the issue of the gender pay gap to highlight. I think that sends the greatest signal. With regard to our MEPs, the view that was taken was that this is a matter for member states, and we could not have a stronger signal from the top of this Government downward that, in this member state, this Government and this Prime Minister intend to tackle the gender pay gap and eliminate it.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will the Minister organise a meeting in her office to which she can invite the chief executives of the largest employers with the largest gender pay gap and the chief executives of the largest employers with the smallest gender pay gap so that one group can learn from the other?

Nicky Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend for that very practical suggestion. I am sure that my officials have taken a careful note of it, so we will go away and see how and when we can make it happen.

Science, Engineering and Maths

11. **Suella Fernandes** (Fareham) (Con): What steps she is taking to increase the number of girls studying science, engineering and maths at school and university. [901566]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Nicky Morgan): In the week in which we celebrate Ada Lovelace day, let us be clear that we cannot allow any girl to grow up thinking that some careers are off limits because of their gender or background. It is almost exactly one year since we launched the fantastic Your Life campaign, which is encouraging more and more girls to consider careers in STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths—related fields. As I have said previously in this House, the UK needs 83,000 engineers a year over the next 10 years, and, to be frank, they cannot all be men.

Suella Fernandes: I am pleased that record numbers of girls are studying STEM subjects at school and university. I recently crossed the border into my neighbouring constituency of Gosport—that of the Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities and Family Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinenage)—to visit the defence technology company QinetiQ, of which she is an enthusiastic supporter, to support its powerboat challenge, in which it engaged directly with local schools to encourage their pupils to study STEM subjects. What more can local businesses like QinetiQ do to engage directly with business so that young people, particularly girls, take up these subjects?

Nicky Morgan: The excellent work that QinetiQ is doing demonstrates how girls' aspirations can be broadened by engaging with local businesses. Its managing director

and its apprentice of the year are both female, which is a good start. We are working with British Chambers of Commerce to explore different approaches to school and business partnerships. Last year I announced that we would fund a careers and enterprise company to strengthen links between employers and young people so that they can act in a broad range of careers and so that, at a young enough age, they are inspired by the careers opportunities that are open to them and nobody says that any doors are shut to them.

Diversity Reporting

13. **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What steps she is taking to encourage diversity reporting in technology sectors. [901568]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities and Family Justice (Caroline Dinenage): Of course, companies work better when their workforce reflect Britain's diversity. It is more important than ever that we make the most of everyone's skills and talents to maximise our economic growth. That is why we are requiring larger companies, including those in the technology sector, to publish their gender pay gap so that they have the incentive and the information they need to improve fairness for women.

Chi Onwurah: I welcome the Minister's warm words on women in technology, but she will know that the British Computer Society's recent IT scorecard showed a lamentable lack of progress in increasing the proportion of women in tech jobs. She will also know that I have long campaigned on this subject. Companies that hide on this key issue for our economic future are betraying the next generation of engineers and technologists. What will she do to ensure that companies and her Government publish information on tech diversity?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Lady is an incredible champion for the whole of the STEM world, but particularly for women in engineering. Diversity is wider than just gender, of course; it extends to race and social background. Evidence shows that educational attainment is the single biggest predictor of the future life chances of children. We are requiring businesses to publish their gender information. Driving change through transparency works, as we know from the results of the work that Lord Davies has done. There are now no all-male boards in the FTSE 100. We want to continue this work, particularly in Ada Lovelace week. In an international week celebrating women in STEM industries, there is no better time to be publishing this information, holding businesses to account, and encouraging women to do the very best they can in the fields of engineering.

Setting Up Businesses

16. **Maria Caulfield** (Lewes) (Con): What steps the Government is taking to support more women in setting up their own businesses. [901571]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities and Family Justice (Caroline Dinenage): The Government are committed to supporting women to start and grow their own business. Last year 5.7% of women in the UK were involved in starting or running a

new business, and we would of course like that number to grow. The start-up loan scheme provides mentoring and financial support to entrepreneurs. It has now made over 28,000 loans worth over £150 million, with 38% of those going to women-led businesses.

Maria Caulfield: Does the Minister agree that by extending the provision of free childcare we are helping more women into work and enabling more women to start their own business? Women in my constituency certainly agree that that would be a big help in doing so.

Caroline Dinenage: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, and I wholeheartedly agree. I am delighted that tax-free childcare could provide about 1.8 million families across the UK with up to £2,000 of childcare support per child per year. This will be rolled out from early 2017. I welcome the fact that for the first time self-employed women will be able to benefit from this vital childcare support.

Harassment Online

17. **Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): What support the Government provides for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people who receive abuse or harassment online. [901572]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Nicky Morgan): The Government are absolutely clear that abusive and threatening behaviour online, whoever the target, is unacceptable. What is illegal offline is also illegal online. My Department has funded the development of a new website—Stop Online Abuse—which launched on 17 June. It provides advice on action that individuals, particularly LGBT people, can take against offensive, damaging or threatening content online and in other media.

Andrew Bridgen: As part of my casework I have been contacted by a teenager who is fearful of telling friends and relatives that he is gay. Such young people may be at particular risk of bullying. What particular help is the Minister offering schools to support such cases?

Nicky Morgan: No young person should ever feel that they are not able to be honest about themselves and their sexuality for fear of bullying. Tackling all forms of bullying is a priority. We have awarded £2 million to charities and community sector organisations, to help schools tackle homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying. I have also had the privilege of visiting some schools that are tackling the issue head on, such as Eastbourne academy and Caludon Castle school in Coventry, which are both Stonewall champion schools.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): One quarter of LGBT students at school say that they suffer online abuse. Is the Minister working with the Department for Education to provide proper advice to schools, and is she working with the National LGBT Hate Crime Partnership's excellent Speak Up campaign to tackle this particular form of bullying and hate crime?

Nicky Morgan: I am open to working with all organisations in order to stamp out this hate crime. I am lucky enough to hold two Government jobs and am able to bring them together on this particular issue and

provide £2 million of funding to pilot projects across the country to work with schools in order to stamp out unacceptable homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying. The secret seems to be to take a whole-school approach, with everybody from the head to the teachers and pupils knowing exactly that that sort of behaviour is unacceptable.

Women's Refuges

18. **Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): What steps she is taking to increase the number and accessibility of women's refuges. [901573]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): We are committed to making sure that no victim of domestic abuse is turned away from the support they need. In July the Chancellor announced an additional £3.2 million to increase specialist accommodation support for victims, including refuges, and to provide more help for victims to access that support.

Paul Blomfield: During my annual community consultation over the recent recess, lots of women constituents raised concerns about the future of refuges, recognising that local authority funding was being stretched to breaking point, particularly in big cities such as Sheffield. The Government's recent £10 million cash injection is a sticking plaster that will only delay closures. Will the Minister use the forthcoming spending review to put in place a long-term funding solution for the national network of refuges?

Mr Jones: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that our goal is to ensure that no victim of domestic abuse is turned away from the support they need. We have recently carried out, along with the Home Office, a review of domestic abuse services, and its emerging conclusions will feed into the spending review and the updated Home Office strategy on tackling violence against women and girls. As I am sure the hon. Gentleman is aware, all future funding will be dealt with in the forthcoming spending review.

20. [901575]. **Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods** (City of Durham) (Lab): As my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) has just pointed out, funding for refuges is under great pressure. A recent report by Women's Aid said:

"The current model for funding specialist domestic and sexual violence services is not fit for purpose. Many services are under huge financial pressure"

and are being "forced to close" or to use reserves just to survive. What is the Minister going to do about that?

Mr Jones: As I have said, this is subject to the spending review, but Women's Aid has warmly welcomed the funding recently announced by the Chancellor. It is

important for local authorities to provide such services, and it is also important to note that these services are still being provided up and down the country. We should not talk them down, as Labour Members are doing, because the fact is that if we talk down services and people think they are not available, many women may not come forward and access the important services they need.

Child Poverty

19. **Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): What recent assessment she has made of the effect on equality of the Government's policies on child poverty. [901574]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Nicky Morgan): The Government are committed to governing as a one nation Government and achieving true social justice, which is why we want to tackle the root causes of poverty and improve the life chances of all children. Our proposals in the Welfare Reform and Work Bill introduce new measures of worklessness and of educational attainment, which will make the biggest difference to disadvantaged children now and in the future.

Kirsten Oswald: Does the Minister agree that the Government's rebranding of the child poverty commission as a social mobility commission represents a damaging shift in emphasis? The most vulnerable children will be disadvantaged by this change in tack and by a lack of focus on the equality of outcomes for children living in poverty.

Nicky Morgan: No, I do not agree with the hon. Lady because this Government's approach is working. The number of children on relative low incomes has fallen by 300,000 since 2010, and the number of children who grow up in workless households is also at a record low. If she wants to focus on outcomes, I encourage her to focus—as we do, particularly in education—on the outcomes of all children. The gap between the advantaged and the disadvantaged has narrowed since 2010.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Does the Minister agree that one of the best ways to reduce child poverty is to get into work families that do not have a breadwinner? Is that not exactly what this Government have been doing so successfully?

Nicky Morgan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that work is absolutely the best way out of poverty. Of course, yesterday's employment numbers showed strong employment growth, including the fact that there are now over 920,000 more women in work in this country than in 2010.

Redcar Steelworks

Mr Speaker: Before I take the urgent question, may I underline to the House that its narrow terms should be adhered to? This must not simply be a re-run of exchanges that took place the other day. That is the first point.

The second point that it might be helpful for the House to know is that I am keen to move on to business questions at approximately—but very close to—10.50 am, so this will be a pithy exchange.

10.31 am

Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills if he will make a statement on the Government's £80 million released to help former employees of the SSI steelworks in Redcar.

The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise (Anna Soubry): I may break your rule, Mr Speaker, because I actually have quite a lot to say over and above what was said on Tuesday.

We know and accept, and everybody understands, that this is a deeply dreadful time for all concerned in Redcar. That is why, on 2 October, the Secretary of State and I went to Redcar—I had been there since the previous Wednesday—and announced a package worth up to £80 million to help both the workers directly affected and the supply chain and the local economy more broadly. We briefed the local taskforce, including the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop), that day on the contents of the package.

As Members will know, some elements of that package have already been rolled out and are delivering support. In terms of helping individuals, only yesterday the Jobcentre Plus service co-ordinated a very large and very successful jobs fair to help people affected to move into jobs as quickly as possible. Initial reports are that about 1,500 people attended the event, along with 50 employers offering 1,000 vacancies. That is on top of the individual support sessions that Jobcentre Plus has already been offering locally.

The redundancy payments service has established a dedicated team to process the redundancy pay, holiday pay, arrears of wages and other elements that are due to SSI employees. That is of course subject to statutory limits, but will be done as quickly as possible. I also note that the Government's business support helpline is prioritising calls from businesses directly affected by the SSI closure, businesses in the local area with the potential to grow and take on former SSI employees, and former SSI employees who are looking for advice on starting a business. That is up and running, and it is working well. Callers will be fast-tracked to an expert adviser, who will provide advice on the issues they are facing, provide information on the local support package and refer them on to any other forms of support they need. That is a good start, but we know we need to do more.

As Members will be aware, we established a local taskforce to help to shape the support to be provided. Right from the start, our intention was not to impose solutions from Whitehall, but to ask the local taskforce for solutions on how best to target money and support.

It is meeting right now, but I can understand why both Members who are part of the taskforce—the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley)—are in the Chamber and not at that meeting. We have now received some initial proposals from the taskforce about supporting workers impacted by the closure of SSI, mitigating the impact on other companies directly affected by the proposal and supporting the growth of the wider economy. As hon. Members might imagine, we are assessing those projects urgently.

I know that the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland has asked about further education colleges. The full cost of retraining former SSI workers and others made redundant in the supply chain will be met. Local colleges will therefore be able to claim full funding for education and training provided to any learner who was employed at the SSI Redcar plant at any time during 2015, or to a learner made redundant in the supply chain as a result of the plant closure, to support them to gain employment or start their own business. Eligibility will be confirmed by a referral from a Department for Work and Pensions work coach or a National Careers Service adviser who is working with affected individuals. That will enable local colleges to provide wide-ranging support to learners for short programmes of training that enable immediate entry into the labour market or for study that leads to full qualifications such as A-levels or their equivalents. Colleges that meet the quality criteria will receive additional funding to cover the costs incurred because of the additional flexibilities.

I will continue to work closely with the local taskforce, as I hope will the hon. Members for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland and for Redcar, on how we can best support the workers of SSI, the affected supply chain and the local economy. I pledge that no worker will be left behind.

Tom Blenkinsop: The official receiver has indicated that the Government have released no further funds to buy coke. The last shift at Redcar coke ovens pushed the final bed this morning. One hundred and seventy years of steelmaking have come to a terrible, shuddering halt in only four weeks.

Since the liquidation announcement, we have learned that the original figure of £80 million was a public relations gimmick. There is no new money. Why has the Secretary of State continued to ignore calls to provide at least £30 million of new money, when it has been demonstrated that that money is guaranteed under statute for any worker who undergoes redundancy? Why have no colleges or training providers dealing with SSI workers, contractors and downstream workers received any additional funding on top of their existing budgets? What are the estimated clean-up costs of the Teesside Cast Products site in Redcar? How will security and funding be guaranteed for the Redcar bulk terminal and beam mill, which are still in operation? Why are arguably the best coke ovens and the largest blast furnace in Britain, which are on one of the handful of sites in the EU where production costs are lower than 90% of other EU sites, being allowed to close, while less efficient sites continue during this global steel price downturn?

Anna Soubry: That was a large number of questions and time precludes me from answering them all. I undertake to ensure that any questions that are not answered in what I say receive a written response.

It is not true that there is no new money. There is an £80-million package, £30 million of which is an estimated figure. We discussed all that during the urgent question on Tuesday. Indeed, the hon. Member for Redcar said that the estimate was between £20 million and £30 million. In any event, there is at least £50 million of new money. I have answered the question on FE colleges. That £50 million of new money is there to support the workers and the supply chain, so that there is reskilling, retraining and—[*Interruption.*] I am sorry, but I cannot hear what the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) is saying. If he wants to ask a question, he is more than capable of doing so, and I will answer it.

The reason why we are in this situation in Redcar is that, unfortunately, month on month, year after year, SSI lost money. It never made money at the Redcar steelworks. The coke ovens, as I said on Tuesday, were losing £2 million month on month. That is the harsh reality. The hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland knows the situation. Of course he feels huge passion about it because he has put a long-seated investment of his own life and skills into the plant. He knows the devastating effect that its closure will have on the local community, but the Government have done all they can and now we have to look to the future.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): They haven't.

Anna Soubry: They absolutely have. The hon. Gentleman who shouts at me from a sedentary position knows what Government officials and I have done on numerous occasions in the face of the most peculiar and appalling practices from the Thai owners. He knows that on one occasion, for example, the employers liability insurance had not been paid. We found out at 4.20 in the afternoon. I was making calls at 9 o'clock at night to make sure that the workers still had their insurance cover at least up to Monday. We literally scabbled around looking for money. We made sure that the workers were paid their wages. He knows that that was done on the specific direction of myself and the Secretary of State, who said, "Get the money together to make sure the workers are paid." Those are the sorts of things that the Secretary of State and I have done.

Now we have to look to the future to ensure that there is a future for the workers, their children and their grandchildren. That is what this package delivers.

Mr Speaker: I call Philip Davies

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con) *indicated dissent.*

Mr Speaker: I thought the hon. Gentleman was standing—I had been so advised. Never mind; it is a rarity that he does not wish to contribute. I call Mr Alan Mak.

Mr Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that although strict EU state aid rules have prevented the Government from directly intervening in the steel industry, the £80 million package that they have announced represents strong and practical intervention in a difficult situation?

Anna Soubry: That is the case. It is not good enough for Labour Members, who know the confines of the state aid rules, to shout "rubbish". Let me put SSI's losses on the record: 2012, £275 million; 2013, £193.5 million;

2014, £81 million. Until the end of June 2015, there were losses at Redcar of £92.5 million. That represents more than £0.5 billion of losses in little more than three years. That is indeed heartbreaking, but it is the harsh financial reality of the situation at Redcar.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): One has to ask what moral universe Ministers inhabit if they think that it is acceptable to spin about the financial package for workers at Redcar. We have just heard an admission from the Minister that the figure is not £80 million, which is the figure that the Government have used and widely publicised. She now claims that there is £50 million of new money, but we need to look more closely at that. How much of that money is from the Work programme? How much is money that Ministers have put aside from the Government's resources as new money to help the workers at Redcar, and how much is just recycled spin? That is what we have been getting from the Minister.

There are still questions to answer—I will not go on for too long because of what you said earlier, Mr Speaker—[*Interruption.*] The Minister said "Oh good". I bet she did. She has not said anything to answer questions about the clean-up of the site, which she was asked earlier this week and today. This country needs an industrial strategy. We are losing an irreplaceable strategic national asset without a fight from our country's Government, and that is an unforgiveable betrayal.

Anna Soubry: I will accept some criticisms, but to say that I have not fought for Redcar is outrageous because it is not true. I assure the hon. Gentleman that my officials and I worked—I have an email trail that proves it—until midnight last night—[*Interruption.*] There is no point shouting as it does not achieve anything. I was on the phone on that Friday night until 9 o'clock in the evening, and along with the Secretary of State and my officials, I was literally going around looking for sums and pots of money to help. The harsh reality is £0.5 billion of losses over five years.

On the clean-up operation, if the hon. Gentleman had taken time to find out from the taskforce and the meeting that I attended on 2 October—[*Interruption.*] I was there; he was not. I am trying to tell him, but he is sitting there pointing his finger and heckling. It does not get us anywhere.

Kevin Brennan: You're the one who is pointing.

Anna Soubry: Yes, well I'm entitled to under the circumstances. I answered this question on Tuesday, but I am happy to answer it again. In truth, the Health and Safety Executive and the Environment Agency had been engaged with my officials for some considerable time leading up to 2 October because we feared that that day would come. The hon. Gentleman should know—this is my experience having gone to Redcar—that some of the people with the most responsible realistic assessments of the situation were the leaders of the unions, and particularly the Community trade union leadership. Because they were working there, they knew the awful, harsh financial reality of a plant that was losing £0.5 billion over five years.

Mark Spencer (Sherwood) (Con): The Minister will be aware that we had a similar experience in Sherwood with the collapse of UK Coal. Will she assure the House that Government support and taxpayers' money

[Mark Spencer]

will go into the pockets of workers to help them to get new careers, and not into the pockets of receivers, accountants, consultants and a failing company?

Anna Soubry: Yes, I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. I pay tribute to him for the work he has done for the workers at Thoresby. May I put on record that this sum of money, which is new money, represents £44,000 and more of investment per worker—it is investment in them as individuals—so that they can get the skills and training they need to get new jobs?

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister is overseeing the death of 170 years of steelmaking on Teesside. It does not have to be the end—the site is still viable. You’ve thrown the towel in. I have literally just got off the phone to people on the site. German companies are willing to buy foundry coke that we can produce in the coke ovens. That sells at £520 a tonne, compared to £190 for ordinary coke. The site is viable. We have companies willing to invest. We have companies willing to come in and supply the coke ovens to keep the plant running and to do the mothballing. You are not giving us time. You are just throwing the towel in. The official receiver has not done proper diligence. We can find buyers, we just need three months. Please, keep the plant alive. You hide behind the excuse that it is the Thai banks, the Swiss banks, the American banks, the British banks—this is British industry.

Mr Speaker: Order. We have the point. Can people please remember that I haven’t done anything in this matter?

Anna Soubry: And neither have I, apparently, Mr Speaker. But I have and I think the hon. Lady knows that. The hon. Lady is fighting for her constituents. She does so with passion and she is right so to do. She is putting on record that this is the end of steel production. It is a tragedy. But what I would say to the hon. Lady is this: I have an email trail that she knows I am more than happy to share with her and the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland. I do not know all the detail, because some of it is apparently commercially sensitive, but she needs to know this. The official receiver specifically said to those people who were interested, “Put the money in to buy the coal to keep the coke ovens going” and they refused. That is the harsh reality.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that in these circumstances it is right and proper that the Government do all they can—which they are doing—to support the workers in Redcar and in the communities around Redcar?

Anna Soubry: My hon. Friend is right. What happened on 1 October, when we were looking at ways of support, is that we suddenly discovered—literally on a website, on a tweet—that the parent company in Thailand had effectively gone into administration and had registered so in Thailand. That changed things completely. The Secretary of State and I sat in Redcar at 9 o’clock that morning and we knew and understood that any money we put in would go straight into Thailand and into the

pockets of three Thai banks. There are no procedures and no devices in those circumstances to ensure that the money would, in any event, have gone to Redcar—never mind the state aid rules.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Why is the Minister not listening to the two consortia that have come forward with bids at the last minute? They should be given the opportunity to formulate those bids and the Government should be keeping it going. It is no good doing the Pontius Pilate act and just washing your hands of the responsibility. Why are Ministers privately supporting mothballing, yet not getting that support from the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister? If you can’t answer this, what are you there for? What’s your purpose if you don’t step up?

Anna Soubry: The hon. Gentleman is right, but I am afraid he is, in this instance, absolutely wrong. The situation is that, yes, there have been expressions—[*Interruption.*] No, let me answer. He is right that there have been expressions of interest very late in the day, after the official receiver said on Monday that no deals had been forthcoming that were workable. The official receiver then went back to those consortia and said, in effect, “Put your money where your mouth is,” and they refused—[*Interruption.*]

Andy McDonald: You put your money where your mouth is.

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr McDonald, I absolutely understand and empathise with your incredibly strong feeling on this subject—and I mean that—but we cannot have a situation in which people yell at a Minister who is giving an answer. You might not like the answer, but, forgive me, the answer must be heard. The Minister is capable of looking after herself, but the answer must be heard. Please. I will always give people a chance, but the Minister must be heard.

Anna Soubry: I know the hon. Gentleman and I disagree, but we cannot—

Andy McDonald: You can.

Anna Soubry: The hon. Gentleman can sit there and say, “You can”, until he is blue and red in the face, but the state aid rules are incredibly clear.

Andy McDonald *indicated dissent.*

Anna Soubry: The hon. Gentleman forgets that the last time Redcar was mothballed, it was mothballed by Tata, and it did so because those were the state aid rules. If there was a viable offer and anyone looked, as they have, at the situation at Redcar, they would say, “Those ovens are losing £2 million month on month”. The steel was losing half a billion pounds. In reality—and the official receiver has said the same—who will want to invest in something that was losing money hand over fist?

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I wish to convey my sympathies to the community in Redcar following this devastating news, but I would mention that the steel price has almost halved in the last year,

China now produces 50% of steel, whereas in 2000 that figure was 15%, and the number of jobs has reduced under successive Governments. Is not the key thing now, on a cross-party basis, to deliver this retraining and bring more jobs to the north-east?

Anna Soubry: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. The harsh reality is that all the steel industries in this country are losing huge amounts of money. Some companies are regularly losing £700 million per year. That is the reality, but we are determined not to lose the steel industry in this country, so we now have to find the solutions to save it.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I do not question the Minister's efforts, but she has clearly been hung out to dry by the Prime Minister and the Business Secretary. Many small companies in the north-east are affected by this closure. Has the Department drawn up a register of where they are, and what measures will she put in place to help those small companies that are creditors?

Anna Soubry: I always give a straight answer to a question. I honestly do not know the answer, but I will make inquiries and write to the hon. Gentleman and everybody else who is concerned. I must make it clear, however, that I, the Business Secretary and the Prime Minister are as one on this.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): Clearly, we are all concerned about the loss of jobs at Redcar and the impact on individuals and families, but would the Minister agree that the only way to create new jobs and businesses is to invest properly in infrastructure and skills, and will she make this a priority for Redcar?

Anna Soubry: Yes, absolutely, and that is why we have put this package together, which, as I say, is worth about £44,000 to each worker.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): It is important and proper that resources and support be given to mitigate the impact of the closure of SSI Redcar, particularly for those staff who will lose their jobs, but it is reactionary, and it seems that little has been learned with the benefit of hindsight. In how many other constituencies will the Government need to repeat this process? What will they do to support the steel industry in my constituency at Clydebridge and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows)—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but we must focus narrowly on this particular situation, rather than on wider issues. I think we can leave it there.

Anna Soubry *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Okay, in a sentence.

Anna Soubry: Just to say, we are holding a steel summit tomorrow. All these matters will be raised, and I am sure we will share all the outcomes with the hon. Lady.

Mr Speaker: I hope the hon. Lady is satisfied with that holding response. Thank you, Minister.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): I recognise the difficulty of the situation in Redcar, especially as I represent a seat in the west midlands with a long and proud history of steelmaking, but will the Minister agree that her and the Government's focus should be on taking all the practical action necessary to provide alternative job opportunities and reskilling for the people affected in Redcar?

Anna Soubry: I absolutely agree and embrace everything that has been said, and would add that the task now is to ensure we do everything we can to support this vital industry, as the Prime Minister said.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): This is not the first time the north-east has suffered the closure of steelworks under a Conservative Government. As well as being devastating for those communities, it can take a long time for people to move into alternative employment. The Minister mentioned short-term training, but will she stay with those workers for the longer term to ensure they find new employment?

Anna Soubry: There is a side of me that cannot be bothered to play party politics because this issue transcends it, but it needs to be said that the last time the Redcar plant closed was under a Labour Government. In other words, it is all completely meaningless. What the hon. Lady suggests is vital and she makes a good point. One thing we do know is that a large number of the people who were laid off last time did not return when the plant reopened, and it is newer and younger workers who are now, unfortunately, being made redundant at SSI.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): As the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) has said, the livelihoods of thousands of self-employed people and workers in small enterprises will now be at stake as a result of the collapse of SSI. Can the Minister confirm that Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs will deal sympathetically with those small businesses, which may now be unable to meet their liabilities as a result of the collapse of this company?

Anna Soubry: That is a very good point, and the simple answer is yes.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): The coke ovens and the blast furnace are national assets, and this Government should do everything, even at this 11th hour, to secure them so that they are not lost and are instead retained in order to allow the future to be bright again.

Anna Soubry: That is exactly what we will do: we will do everything we can, within the law, and bearing in mind the harsh economic realities that face Britain's steel industry.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): Teesside without steel is almost unthinkable, and I hear nothing from the Government on how they are going to replace these 2,200 jobs. The Minister has talked about small business, but it is simply not realistic to expect people to do what she has suggested without help with living costs. Will she therefore confirm that there will be help with living costs within start-up allowances?

Anna Soubry: What I can confirm is a £50 million package that will mean that, in effect, there is an investment of £44,000 in each and every worker to help them find alternative work.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): It was the Tory Lord Heseltine, as he now is, who said that to help British business he would

“intervene before breakfast, before lunch, before tea and before dinner. And...get up next morning to start again.”

Might the Minister not regret the fact that she did not save steelmaking on Teesside, which would have been far better for our national economy than the package that she has announced today?

Anna Soubry: Obviously, the hon. Gentleman will not have access to all the television interviews that I did at the time. If I had a magic wand, the simple answer would be, “Absolutely, yes”, but the harsh reality is that we have slab falling by half its price, overproduction, under-consumption and a steel plant losing half a billion in five years. That is the harsh reality, and it would not be fair on his constituents if we were to try to bail out Britain’s steel industry, which would probably cost £1 billion a year.

Business of the House

10.57 am

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the business for next week?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Chris Grayling): The business for the week commencing 19 October will be as follows:

MONDAY 19 OCTOBER—Second Reading of the Psychoactive Substances Bill [*Lords*]. I also expect my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to make a statement following the European Council.

TUESDAY 20 OCTOBER—Opposition day (7th allotted day). There will be a debate on tax credits on an Opposition motion.

WEDNESDAY 21 OCTOBER—Consideration in Committee of the Cities and Local Government Devolution Bill [*Lords*] (day 1).

THURSDAY 22 OCTOBER—A motion to approve standing orders relating to English votes for English laws.

FRIDAY 23 OCTOBER—Private Members’ Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 26 October will include:

MONDAY 26 OCTOBER—Remaining stages of the Finance Bill.

I should also like to inform the House about some debates to be held in Westminster Hall.

MONDAY 19 OCTOBER—Debate on an e-petition relating to immigration.

TUESDAY 20 OCTOBER—Debate on the availability of cancer drugs.

THURSDAY 22 OCTOBER—General debate on the conflict in Yemen, followed by a debate on fire safety measures in school buildings.

MONDAY 26 OCTOBER—Debate on an e-petition relating to term-time leave from school for holidays.

As you heard, Mr Speaker, I announced that next Thursday we will be debating and voting on the Government’s proposals to allow for English votes for English laws. I should just inform right hon. and hon. Members that I have this morning published updated proposals for changes to the Standing Orders, reflecting the discussions and feedback I have had since July, as well as the letter I received from the Procedure Committee in September, which is published on its website. The revisions are clearly indicated in the new document. I have published these proposals today to give the House further time to consider them before the debate. I am also conscious that the Procedure Committee is due to report on Monday, and I will not be tabling the final proposed Standing Order changes until I have read that report and been able to make any final changes before we table them, probably on Monday night.

Chris Bryant: We should first pay tribute to two great men who have died since the last business questions: Denis Healey, the greatest Prime Minister this country never had, a man who showed that politicians need never be automata; and Geoffrey Howe, a man I had the great honour to know closely because of all the campaigning work we did together to keep Britain at the heart of Europe. As Robin Cook once quipped,

because Geoffrey had been knighted and made a peer, and his lovely wife Elspeth had been made a Baroness, she was “once, twice, three times a lady”. That is a tribute to Robin Cook, too.

Deep in the bowels of the parliamentary estate lies a small, sweaty airless room where people go to spin. It is in the gym, and it is called the John Bercow spin studio! I have never seen the Leader of the House in the gym—I do not suppose anybody has—but it seems clear that his colleagues have been spending a great deal of time in the spin studio.

When the Prime Minister was asked yesterday when exactly he knew about Lord Ashcroft’s tax status, he started spinning away like a top, stuck his fingers in his ears and simply refused to answer. It got even worse later in the day when his official spokesman was asked precisely the same question 11 times—yes, 11 times—but answer came there none. Silence; tumbleweed. Can the Leader of the House therefore tell us when precisely the Prime Minister learned about Lord Ashcroft’s tax status? Was it as the Prime Minister declared in this House, or was it as Lord Ashcroft declared in his book? I know that the Leader of the House does not like books—for prisoners or anybody else—but there we are.

One might have thought that it was perfectly reasonable to ask the British Minister with responsibility for Syrian refugees how many Syrian refugees had come to Britain. One might have thought that it was the one thing that that Minister would know, but when he was asked this simple question seven times—yes, seven times—by the Home Affairs Select Committee, he refused to answer point blank. He even maintained that he knew the answer, but just did not want to tell anyone—like an eight-year-old hiding his homework from his older sister. So can the Leader of the House now tell us how many Syrian refugees have come to Britain?

Can the right hon. Gentleman tell us when we will have a proper debate on Syria? The country, to be honest, is crying out for leadership on this issue. The Prime Minister seems to think that a consensus will miraculously develop on what the UK’s response should be. We have heard press briefing after press briefing, but millions of people have been displaced, thousands have lost their lives—thanks to Putin, Assad and ISIL—and all the while, the UK’s diplomatic, humanitarian and military policy on Syria remains a blank page. So when will the Government come to the House with a proper plan of action on Syria?

Mr Speaker, it is clear that the Government’s

“changes to tax credits have been somewhat under-scrutinised. The changes are both eye-wateringly painful to those affected, but also reverse a key policy platform of the last five years—namely, making work pay.”

Those are not my words, but those of the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Guto Bebb), a Conservative Member, and he is absolutely right. Millions of working people are terrified of what will happen to their family finances next year. About 3.2 million families will be hit. A two-parent family with one adult working full time and the other doing 20 hours a week on the minimum wage will get a £1,100 annual pay rise, but even after that, will be £1,800 worse off and out of pocket. We all know that the Government are going to back down in the end on this issue, so will they just get a move on? Will the Leader of the House be the champion of this House and fight for a change on the tax credits cuts.

Yesterday, the Government were quite exceptionally defeated in the Lords on a motion condemning the mandatory court charges that were introduced by the right hon. Gentleman when he was the Injustice—sorry, Justice Secretary. One magistrate has written to me to say that because of these mandatory charges, many innocent people are pleading guilty. He says that he recently had to impose—he had to, because it is mandatory on the magistrates—the court charge of £150 on a homeless man who had stolen a £1.90 sandwich from Sainsbury’s. That is not the rule of law; it is cruel injustice.

The new Justice Secretary has already overturned the Leader of the House’s ban on books for prisoners. He has put a halt on the right hon. Gentleman’s plan to build Saudi Arabia’s jails and execution centres, and we read in the press today that the new Justice Secretary is now going to beat a retreat on these cruel mandatory court charges. Just in case the Leader of the House is to be completely airbrushed from history, can we have a debate on his legacy as former Justice Secretary? It need not be a very long debate.

The Leader of the House has announced that we will debate his EVEL—English votes for English laws—proposals next Thursday. I still believe that they are a dog’s breakfast. However, during the last session of business questions I asked the Leader of the House whether he had any intention of replying to the Lords message asking for a Joint Committee to be set up before the measures were voted on. It is exceptional for the House of Commons not to reply to such a message from their lordships. The Leader of the House chose not to reply, either to me in the House or to their lordships subsequently.

I know the right hon. Gentleman’s old school, the Royal Grammar School in High Wycombe, extremely well. When I was curate of the parish church I used to prepare the boys for confirmation at that school, so I know that they are taught good manners. Is it not time that the Leader of the House remembered his old RGS High Wycombe school lessons, and gave the Members of the House of Lords a proper response? Should he not reply, “Yes, we will not implement these changes until a Joint Committee of both Houses has been set up”?

Let me say finally that I am sure the whole House—every single Member—will want to wish Wales, Scotland and Ireland well in the rugby world cup this weekend, but especially Wales.

Chris Grayling: Let me begin by echoing the hon. Gentleman’s words about Denis Healey and Geoffrey Howe. They were two towering figures in the House, and they made a massive contribution to the national life of the country. They will be sorely missed by their families, their former colleagues, and all parliamentarians.

Let me also pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman. Last week, he was responsible for ensuring that three new plaques were placed on the wall of the Chamber for three Members who died in the first world war. It is absolutely appropriate that we remember parliamentarians who have given their lives in the interests of this country, and I commend the hon. Gentleman for doing that.

I hope the House will also remember that a service is being held in the chapel today, and I hope that, straight after business questions, you and I will go down there

[Chris Grayling]

together, Mr Speaker. The service is being held to celebrate the life of Ian Gow, who, rightly, has a shield at the end of the Chamber—another man who gave his life in the service of this country. We remember him today as well.

The hon. Gentleman could perhaps be described as a beacon of stability in his party this week, and I commend him for that. He is a ship that is sailing steadily forward in a party that otherwise seems to be slightly on the chaotic side. Yesterday the shadow Chancellor announced five times his embarrassment at the U-turn that we had experienced. Moreover, during an interview on Channel 4 News—I do not know whether you saw it, Mr Speaker—the shadow City Minister first admitted that he had no idea what the deficit was, and then, after prolonged questioning, said that he had no idea when, or indeed whether, he had been able to go to the City. In fact, he had not been there at all.

The hon. Gentleman talked about spin, and about the John Bercow spin studio. I am afraid that, actually, the spin lessons in the House of Commons came from the Labour party when it was in government. The present Government have set out a clear plan, and this week we are implementing it. The hon. Gentleman talked about English votes for English laws. English votes for English laws was a manifesto commitment which we are implementing. Yesterday we debated devolution measures for England and Wales, a manifesto commitment which we are implementing. On Tuesday we debated the Immigration Bill, a manifesto commitment which we are implementing. So I will take no lessons from the Labour party about spin. This is a Government who are delivering what they promised.

The hon. Gentleman asked about Syria. We all take the situation in Syria enormously seriously. It is tragic and distressing beyond belief to see a country in such a state of chaos and ruins, and to see the human cost. I remind the hon. Gentleman, however, that we debated the subject for several days in September, and we will undoubtedly return to it when we need to. It is a matter that will be constantly in the minds of Ministers and the House, and we will continue to debate and discuss it at the appropriate moments.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the availability of time for a debate on tax credits. Again, I remind him that we had five days of debate on the subject following the summer Budget in July. He asked about English votes and the Lords message. He will have to wait for the debate next week, when I shall set out exactly how we plan to respond to all the issues that have been raised during the last few weeks and months.

The hon. Gentleman also asked about my legacy as Justice Secretary. I remind him that when the Labour party was in power—for 13 long years—if you had been in prison for less than 12 months, when you left you walked out of the door of that prison with £46 in your pocket and nothing else: no support, no guidance, nothing. It was shocking, it was a disgrace, and in all the years when the Labour Government had the money to do something about it, they did not. Well, as of last February, following the “Transforming rehabilitation” reforms, every single prisoner who leaves our jails will receive, for a minimum of a year, support, supervision and guidance. That is a massive change. It is a change I

am proud of. It is a change that did not happen under the previous Government. It is a legacy that will be part of the social change that I think will mark the future view of this Government and what they achieved.

Finally, I echo the hon. Gentleman’s comments about the rugby world cup. In particular I offer my good wishes to Wales. May they do to Australia what unfortunately England were unable to do.

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): May I first thank the Leader of the House for his open and straightforward dealings with me as Chairman of the Procedure Committee? May I urge him, at this late stage, when he receives an embargoed copy of the Procedure Committee report tomorrow to seriously consider all our recommendations? They are not made lightly and I believe they will significantly improve the proposals in relation to English votes for English laws.

Chris Grayling: First, I thank my hon. Friend and all the members of the Procedure Committee. What I sought to do after the debates in the summer was respond to the requests of the House. We provided additional debating time and time for the Committee to look at these issues. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the collaborative way in which he has worked with me. He is bringing forward new ideas challenging the proposals, but it has been a productive discussion. I can tell the House today that I have already taken on board some of the recommendations to me in the letter that came from the Committee in September, and I shall be reading the report very carefully when it arrives on my desk tomorrow.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week. May I too pay tribute to Geoffrey Howe and Denis Healey? I grew up in the 1970s when they were the absolute giants of this House, and many of us of that generation will remember them very fondly. I also thank the shadow Leader of the House for the three magnificent plaques we now have in the House. They are a fantastic addition.

We are back here after what is called the “conference recess”, but the third party of the United Kingdom is starting its conference today, which makes a mockery of the concept of the conference recess. Mr Speaker, I think that you, the Leader of the House and other interested parties should look long and hard at how we are organising the recesses over the summer period. That would find great support throughout the House.

Of course, we found out several things of course during the conference recess, some of them almost bizarre and utterly unmentionable, including the fact that the Leader of the House, probably in what is not a bizarre intervention, may possibly be seeking the leadership of the Conservative party. Apparently he will be the unity candidate for the Eurosceptics. I wish him good luck in that endeavour.

Next week we conclude the sorry saga of English votes for English laws. Over the past few months the Leader of the House has managed to convince absolutely no one, outwith the ranks of the Conservative party. The idea is opposed by every party in this House. It is opposed by every single legislative Assembly and Parliament in the whole of the UK. It is even opposed by the unelected cronies and donors from down the corridor,

and the Leader of the House knows very well the views of Scottish MPs on this. I just wish he would have a quiet word with the leader of the Scottish Conservatives, Ruth Davidson. Support for the Scottish Conservatives stands at about 12% in the opinion polls at present, and once they make Scottish MPs second class MPs we can expect it to fall still further.

Yesterday, in points of order following Prime Minister's questions, some very disturbing points were made on the ruling of the Investigatory Powers Tribunal on the Wilson doctrine. Several of us were incredulous at what was said: that it has no legal force and is nothing other than an ambiguous political statement, directly contradicting what the Prime Minister said on this issue only a few weeks ago. We absolutely require an urgent debate on this issue. I hope the Leader of the House will support any such initiative so that this is brought to the Floor of the House and we can hear from the Prime Minister exactly what he meant when he made that statement a few short weeks ago. We must approach this in a spirit of honesty, openness and transparency. I hope the whole House will support any initiative to ensure we get a debate on the Wilson doctrine and the worrying allegations that MPs are being spied on.

Lastly, the Government got their fiscal charter through last night. Congratulations to the Conservatives for once again, through their measures, picking on the poorest and most marginal and vulnerable in our community. Last night we saw three positions: the Conservatives' position, backing the fiscal charter; the SNP position, opposing it with most of the Labour party supporting us; and there was a rebellious abstention, which I have never heard of in this House. I say to the Leader of the House and the Labour party that they will find those on the SNP Benches resolute in the objective of opposing the Tories. We hope the Labour party will unite and join us in that mission.

Chris Grayling: May I start by thanking the hon. Gentleman for his comments about Denis Healey and Geoffrey Howe and telling him how much we all regret keeping him away from his conference today? I am sure that he will be jumping on a train as soon as business questions are over and heading off to have a great time with his delegate colleagues.

The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of English votes for English laws. I must gently chide him on the way in which he and his party are approaching this matter. They keep coming up with the line that they will be excluded from certain votes as a result of the proposal. He knows, and I know, that that is not the case. What is more, he knows that I would not do that to him anyway. Although we spar across the Chamber, I have a great regard for him and we get on very well. Perhaps one day we will get to walk through the Division Lobby together—I know this is theoretical; it has not happened yet—and I would not dream of taking that opportunity away from either of us. Let me assure him again that on no occasion will he be excluded from a vote that he is currently able to take part in in this Chamber. That is really important for both of us and for our relationship.

The hon. Gentleman made a more serious point about the ruling in the court case yesterday. I remind him that two clear messages emerged from that case. First, the case was not successful; the court upheld the current situation. Secondly, it was made clear that all

the activity was within the law. As Leader of the House, I take these issues very seriously and I would not be happy with the House being treated inappropriately. My ministerial colleagues and I will be keeping a careful watch over the matter.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the fiscal charter. Again I pay tribute to him: he is right to say that over the past few weeks the Scottish National party has formed a united front, voted consistently and behaved as one. He is also right to point out that the same cannot exactly be said of the Labour party. After last night, it is difficult to see where Labour is going. I am not sure what its policies are now, or whether a leadership coup is being planned for the near future. Of course, the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), has a track record in that regard. He was the person who pulled the trigger when Tony Blair went, and he was instrumental in pushing Gordon Brown out. Maybe it will be third time lucky—or unlucky, depending on where in the House you are sitting.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am looking to conclude business questions by 11.45, so if we are to accommodate everyone, we must have very short questions and answers.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): At 4.25 pm yesterday in Westminster Hall, a unique event took place. For the first time, a question in Westminster Hall was not agreed to. Under subsection (13) of Standing Order No. 10, a motion should be brought to the House in those circumstances so that the House can then vote on it without further debate. I listened carefully when the Leader of the House announced the business for next week, but I did not hear him mention any such motion. Was that an omission that he would like to correct now?

Chris Grayling: I am aware of what took place yesterday, and I will be happy to discuss the matter with the Clerks and to write to my hon. Friend.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement. Members will be aware that we resumed on Monday following the conference recess with heavily subscribed debates on superfast broadband and the political situation at Stormont. The time available for those debates was curtailed, however, as a result of statements being made before the Back-Bench business commenced. I note that there was no mention in today's business statement of any dates being allocated for Back-Bench business. I understand there is a possibility that 29 October will be allocated for that purpose, but that has not been confirmed. Will the Leader of the House confirm the next dates for Back-Bench business debates in the Chamber as soon as possible?

Chris Grayling: I will always seek to be as helpful as possible to the House and to the hon. Gentleman, and I can assure him that we will let him know the next dates as soon as possible and as far in advance as possible.

Chloe Smith (Norwich North) (Con): In two Bills before the House—the European Union Referendum Bill and the Cities and Local Government Devolution

[Chloe Smith]

Bill—amendments have been proposed both by this place and the other place to refer to a change in the age of the franchise. Does the Leader of the House agree with me that we should approach this debate properly and pay it proper attention rather than dealing with it piecemeal under other Bills?

Chris Grayling: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work that she is doing in and around youth engagement, which is very important to all of us from all parts of the House. Undoubtedly, this will be debated seriously, as indeed it should be because it is a very real issue, given the fact that 16 and 17-year-olds have the vote in Scotland. There are different views in this House, so of course the matter should be given the proper attention that it deserves.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): Last week, the Tunisian national dialogue quartet received the Nobel prize for peace, but that country faces huge economic difficulties, especially in the tourism industry, in part owing to the travel advice of our Foreign Office. May we have an urgent debate or a statement on what we can do to help Tunisia, especially with regard to tourism?

Chris Grayling: We all have the greatest admiration for the prize winners in Tunisia and for all those who have worked so hard to make Tunisia a stable and peaceful country. The decision of the Foreign Office was taken with a heavy heart, because we understand the implications of it, but we also have a duty to look after the safety of British holidaymakers. The Foreign Secretary will be here on Tuesday, and I will ensure that he is aware of the right hon. Gentleman's concern. This is a matter that will be under continuous review, as we all want to do the right thing by Tunisia.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): The Prime Minister said that the whole focus of the Government will be on implementing the Conservative manifesto of the last election. That manifesto said that we would toughen sentencing and create a victims' law. From what I have seen so far, perhaps it would be helpful if the Leader of the House introduced the new Secretary of State for Justice to the manifesto. Will the Leader of the House tell us when the Government will bring forward their proposals from the manifesto to toughen sentencing and create a victims' law?

Chris Grayling: The victims' law is an important part of what we brought forward at the election. I can assure my hon. Friend that the intention of the Government is to fulfil their manifesto in full. We have a lot of business to get through, but I have no doubt that we will move on to that soon, and that it will make a difference.

Mr Graham Allen (Nottingham North) (Lab): Among the remaining orders on the Order Paper, the Leader of the House will see that there is a motion signed by Members of all parties saying that this House concurs with the Lords Message that a joint committee be set up to look at the constitutional implications of English votes for English laws. It is 104 years since this House has refused to acknowledge or answer a message from the House of Lords. Will the Leader of the House

ensure that when the English votes for English laws proposals come forward next week an answer to that message is made very clear to their lordships?

Chris Grayling: When we come to this issue next week, I will have acted on that message. I remind the hon. Gentleman that this is a debate about the Standing Orders of the House of Commons and it would be quite a big step for us to take a move towards inviting the House of Lords to rule, consider and act on our own Standing Orders.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): Given the 20% increase in the number of reported hate crimes in the past year, will a Minister come to the Dispatch Box to explain why the Metropolitan police have written to me to say that they do not consider it necessary to take legal action against identified individuals who were protesting outside Downing Street on 9 September when a mob was waving Hezbollah flags, shouting anti-Semitic remarks and making anti-Semitic gestures?

Chris Grayling: Let us be clear: hate crime is unacceptable in our society. Anti-Semitic behaviour is unacceptable in our society, as is the reverse, which is when we sometimes see hostile actions taken against mosques in this country. This is an issue that my hon. Friend should raise on the occasions that are available to him with both the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister. All of us agree that this is something that should be acted on; it is not acceptable and we would always wish to see the police take strong action when such behaviour occurs.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I wish to be associated with the comments made by the Leader of the House about the memorial to Ian Gow. We have a service of thanksgiving today to commemorate his murder by Irish terrorists 25 years ago. I hope as many Members as possible will join us in St Mary Undercroft for that service.

On an equally important matter, police recruitment in Northern Ireland has been disrupted in the past two weeks by bomb attacks on the recruitment centre. It is quite unbelievable. No other police recruitment centre in these islands faces bomb attacks when young people try to sign up for public service. Will the Leader of the House bring forward a statement on additional resources that police in Northern Ireland will have available to them to combat those attacks?

Chris Grayling: Of course, we have just had Northern Ireland questions, but I will ensure that that concern is passed to my colleague the Secretary of State. What the hon. Gentleman has just described is absolutely unacceptable in our country and should never be tolerated in any way, shape or form. Those who express support for terrorist actions are not only utterly misguided but out of place in a democratic society and should be ashamed of their views. In my view, what he has just described underlines the need for the parties in Northern Ireland to continue the dialogue they are engaged in. We need to work our way through the current difficulties to secure a stable future for Northern Ireland in all respects and to ensure that what we have seen in the past can never return.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Sue Wathen, one of my constituents, is experiencing terrible difficulties in trying to access treatment for a condition caused by contaminated blood. I know that Members on both sides of the House have constituents who are facing similar difficulties, so may we have a debate in Government time on this tragedy? We need action.

Chris Grayling: I know that this issue concerns Members on both sides of the House and is a matter of concern to the Secretary of State, so I am worried to hear that my hon. Friend's constituent is having those difficulties. If my hon. Friend wants to contact me after questions, I will ensure that his concerns are passed on to the Secretary of State. These things are probably subject to local decision making, but we should all be concerned if people who have been through a terrible experience are not getting the support they need.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Given the Care Quality Commission's report on hospital safety and the £3.3 billion bill for NHS temporary staff, may we have an urgent debate on the skills shortage in the NHS? The University of Wolverhampton, some of which is in my constituency, has said that it has had 5,000 applications for 500 nursing places. Supply could easily meet demand locally without having to go abroad.

Chris Grayling: I am well aware of the pressures in different parts of the health service and I pay tribute to our healthcare professionals. We are announcing measures today to try to ease pressures on nursing. In my view, today's CQC report is a positive in that it is part of a drive by this Government to push up standards. If we do not look at where challenges remain to be addressed, we will never be able to address them. Fantastic care is provided across many parts of the national health service, but where it is not fulfilling its full potential we obviously have to know about it and work to improve it.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): There has been a dramatic escalation in violence across Israel and the west bank over recent weeks, so may we please have a debate on this serious issue?

Chris Grayling: I think we are all concerned about what is happening in Israel and the west bank. Utterly unacceptable incidents have taken place, including stabbings out of the blue and other incidents that have led to death and serious injury. We need to be constantly aware of that in this country and use every opportunity to try to facilitate talks and peace between the two sides. Obviously, I will ensure that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary addresses the issue in this House before too long.

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): Yesterday I attended a reception organised by Citizens Advice Scotland about the barriers facing Scotland's rural customers. It has produced an excellent report that is well worth a read, and one part that caught my eye was the section on rural banking provision, which lists the difficulties facing rural areas and villages. I am sure that the situation is the same in constituencies across the country. May we have a debate on the issues facing rural communities with banking and other services, such as post offices?

Chris Grayling: We have to work to protect services in rural areas. It is vital that we do, and I hope and believe that the additional powers being provided to the Scottish Parliament through the Scotland Bill will give the Scottish Government greater ability to deal with the challenges the hon. Gentleman has described in his constituency.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence recommends three rounds of in vitro fertilisation on the NHS, but my clinical commissioning group and many others can afford only one or two. May we have a debate on whether the commissioning of IVF should be transferred to NHS England so that we can have a standard, fair number of IVF rounds across the country?

Chris Grayling: I understand my hon. Friend's concerns, but of course there will always be differences in provision in different parts of the country under a system in which we offer power and decision-making responsibilities to local doctors. I suggest that he look to secure an Adjournment debate on the subject, as I know that it will be a matter of concern to my friends in the Department of Health.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): The Royal Borough of Greenwich and the Mayor of London have approved a planning application for a cruise terminal at Enderby Wharf on the Thames, despite the absence of the provision of a shore to ship energy supply, which would prevent ships from having to use their diesel engines for power while they are berthed there. Has the Leader of the House had any indication from the Department for Communities and Local Government that it will be making a statement calling in this application for a proper examination of the impact on air quality in London?

Chris Grayling: I am sure the hon. Gentleman's concerns have been heard. He has made his case eloquently. This is a detailed planning matter that would have to be handled in the usual way by Ministers, but I am sure his comments have been noted.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Parents in Rugby were delighted when our new free school opened in September, providing additional choice and extra places, but they have been very concerned this week when, for the second time in a short period, a Traveller encampment has been set up at the entrance on the public highway to the school. May we have a debate about additional powers for local authorities to deal with encampments where they occur in sensitive areas, such as around schools? Perhaps some consideration can be given to how we fund defensive measures such as bollards to prevent such encampments.

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend makes an important point. In my experience in Surrey, police and local authorities have more powers than they sometimes realise. If they use those powers effectively, they should be able to move those encampments on quickly. They need to do that, and I encourage my hon. Friend to put pressure on both those organisations locally to make sure that they get on with it.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I bobbed furiously yesterday in Prime Minister's questions, such is the importance of this matter. The national media

[Angela Rayner]

recently reported the findings of a coroner's report on a young man from my constituency named Kane. He was the same age as my son, who is 18, and he killed himself because Wonga cleared all the money from his account. May we have an urgent debate so that this cannot happen again? These companies should not be allowed to leave someone—our children—so destitute.

Chris Grayling: It is tragic when anybody takes their life, but particularly when someone so young does so. The point that the hon. Lady makes is a valid one. I encourage her to apply for an Adjournment debate so that she can put this point directly to my colleagues at the Business Department.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): We are fortunate in Colchester to have two of the best grammar schools in the country, and I was delighted to hear the announcement that the Government will imminently approve a new grammar school in Sevenoaks. May we have a debate on the Government's policy on grammar schools and whether we can open any more during this Parliament?

Chris Grayling: It is important to say that the decision taken by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education involves the expansion of a successful school. If that expansion goes ahead, it will mean that a successful school will be able to offer more places to more students, but it is the expansion of a successful school. Our policy is always to ensure that every successful school—grammar school, academy or otherwise—is able to expand to offer places to young people who need that support.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): In Chesterfield over the past few years we have been conscious of the huge difficulties in accessing GP appointments. The Government's policy, which seems to suggest that GP contracts are over-generous at a time when the country is desperately struggling to attract GPs, and the moves that they are taking in relation to junior doctors, which are discouraging people from pursuing a career in that field, make the problems worse. May we have a debate in Government time to ascertain what the Government's strategy is to improve access to GP appointments?

Chris Grayling: My right hon. Friend the Health Secretary was in the House on Tuesday answering questions. It is his policy to encourage the development of a seven-day NHS to improve access to GP services. He is working with the relevant representative groups on plans for employment structures for junior hospital doctors to ensure that we provide the right framework for that to happen, and also to provide the right support for our junior doctors.

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): Tomorrow afternoon I will be attending the unveiling of a plaque to commemorate Napoleon Bonaparte's sojourn on HMS Bellerophon in Plymouth Sound, following his defeat at Waterloo 200 years ago. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating and thanking Alain Sibiril, who is the French honorary consul in Plymouth, who has organised this event? May we have a debate on the entente cordiale?

Chris Grayling: In this country we always try to welcome our French friends with open arms. It is quite unusual for them to be detained in a ship offshore. They are otherwise welcome to come here as part of an entente cordiale that, happily, has lasted 100 years. It is quite a long time since we had a conflict with the French, and long may that continue. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, as I know that this is not the only historic event that he is involved in. He is also involved in the celebrations of the sailing of the Mayflower, another important occasion to mark in the history of this country, and I commend him for it.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): May we have a statement on the plight of six merchant seamen, including my constituent William Irving, who have been detained in Chennai for over two years on charges of piracy and are now undergoing their second trial? If they are again released following the trial, will the Government commit to securing their return home as soon as possible?

Chris Grayling: We always try to provide proper consular support to people who are charged abroad and ensure that they are treated fairly and justly by overseas justice systems. I encourage the hon. Lady to raise the case with Foreign Office Ministers when they are here next Tuesday, because I know that they will try to do the right thing.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Just 6% of mobile phone users change contracts each year, and more than half the population have never changed carriers. According to the consumer group Which?, that means consumers are paying more than £5 billion a year more than necessary because 70% of people are on the wrong contract. Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on ways in which mobile network operators could better communicate the best available deals to their customers?

Chris Grayling: That issue was addressed in our manifesto, and I know that the Department for Culture, Media and Sport is currently looking at it and hopefully will take steps to enhance what we do shortly. I encourage my hon. Friend to seek to bring the matter before the House, either through the Backbench Business Committee or in an Adjournment debate, because I think it is very important.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): In the Finance Bill Committee we recently discussed the issue of VAT on female sanitary hygiene products. The Financial Secretary told us that it was a matter of European legislation. Therefore, may we have a debate on the Government's strategy for negotiating a zero rate as part of the Prime Minister's talks on our EU membership before the referendum?

Chris Grayling: I think there will be many occasions to discuss our relationship with the EU over the next few months—indeed, we have done so with the European Union Referendum Bill. The hon. Lady makes an interesting point that I know she will want to make in those debates, or during Foreign Office questions next week.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): Anni Nasheed is the first ever democratically elected President of the Maldives, yet he has been sentenced to 13 years in prison for terrorism. The UN working group on arbitrary detention has found that unlawful on three counts and urged for his immediate release. Will the Leader of the House find time for a statement from a Foreign Office Minister to explain what the British Government are going to do, including the possibility of sanctions, to ensure that he is released as soon as possible?

Chris Grayling: I know that the United Nations has looked at that matter closely. The Government are extremely concerned about what has happened in the Maldives and want to see the issue addressed. The Foreign Secretary will be here next Tuesday for Foreign Office questions, so I encourage my hon. Friend to take advantage of that opportunity. We should always stand up when political leaders are imprisoned inappropriately. We should be, as we always have been, a beacon of liberty for political protesters suffering in that way.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Like my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), I would like to request an urgent debate on today's report from the Care Quality Commission, which states that two thirds of our hospitals are offering substandard care, that one in eight are rated as inadequate for safety and that three quarters overall are rated as requiring improvement.

Chris Grayling: As I said earlier, the reason we have the new regime, and why we go through these performance assessments, is precisely so that we can drive up quality and performance. Where hospitals have been put in special measures as a result of the CQC's work, we have seen measurable improvements in the quality of care, which is something we should all welcome.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Harrow Council has announced its intention to impose a £75 charge for the collection of garden waste. This back-door council tax increase for a monopoly service is likely to be the most expensive in London, and possibly in the whole country. May we therefore have an urgent debate in Government time on councils imposing additional charges for monopoly services that the public have no choice but to accept?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend highlights the risk of monopoly services generally. We should always seek to deliver choice in the public sector where we possibly can. Seeking to offer consumers choice has been part of what this Government, and indeed our party, have done for a very long time. I understand that the situation he describes must be hugely frustrating locally. I know that he, as a powerful advocate for his area, will be biting at the council's ankles for what it is doing.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): I am sure that the Leader of the House will want to join me in praising Leeds business week—the UK's biggest week-long business event, bringing businesses, entrepreneurs, the private sector and the third sector together to discuss business issues. May we have a debate on how the Government's devolution proposals, currently somewhat

confused with the different options in Yorkshire, will affect businesses so that they have a clear idea of what to support?

Chris Grayling: We very much hope that our devolution proposals, with the plans that are coming through—we had a Second Reading earlier this week and we have a debate in Committee on the Floor of the House next week—will provide a real opportunity for partnership between local authorities and businesses to drive up the economic performance of our cities and our regions. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to take part in the debate next week. He makes an important point and I am sure that Ministers will listen to it.

Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): On Saturday it was great to see the last flying Vulcan bomber fly over Rolls-Royce in Barnoldswick as part of its farewell tour of our country. My family have very close ties with this iconic aircraft; four members of my family, including my father, worked for A.V. Roe and Company, which designed and built the aircraft. Will the Leader of the House grant us a debate where we could pay tribute to Vulcan to the Sky, the charity that has kept the plane flying, and the remarkable farewell tour across the UK that has delighted thousands of spectators?

Chris Grayling: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend and his family for their involvement in an iconic aircraft in the history of this country. He must be very proud that they have played a part in its construction. For so much of our heritage, we rely on groups of volunteers who give up their time to protect for future generations what has been. He describes a very important group of those volunteers who are doing a great job; I commend them for it.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Changes to the state pension as part of the Pensions Act 1995 and the Pensions Act 2011 have adversely impacted, not just once but twice, on a number of women born in the 1950s. May we have an urgent debate in Government time to discuss the impact of those pension changes on women born in the 1950s and potentially look at solutions to put right the injustices?

Chris Grayling: These issues have been debated in this House extensively over the years. Yes, there are difficult decisions to take when deciding to raise the state pension and having to set a framework within which to do that. These decisions were taken under Governments of both parties. We have all recognised the need to increase the state pension age and the logic of equalising the pension age between men and women, and we have tried to do that in as sensitive a way as possible. It has been extensively debated in this House, but I do not think we could move to further changes now.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): The continued retention of weapons of mass destruction for the UK is of grave concern to millions of people, not least in Scotland, where people live in their shadow. This issue is much too important to be about gaining advantage at an election, as has been suggested. Will the Leader of the House ask for a statement from the Secretary of State for Defence on the timing of the vote on the Trident replacement?

Chris Grayling: We will bring this issue before the House in due course. I appreciate that Scottish National party Members feel strongly about it. What I have never been quite able to understand is why, since the nuclear deterrent is such an important part of the Scottish economy, they want to see it go.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I have been preserving the hon. Gentleman, who is a specialist delicacy in the House, to be savoured at the end.

Jim Shannon: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

One recent health issue has been the increase in type 1 diabetes. Many schemes have been put forward to address that, including dose adjustment for normal eating, which controls carbohydrates in tandem with physical exercise. Will the Leader of the House agree to a statement or a debate in the House on type 1 diabetes and how to address it?

Chris Grayling: That condition affects very large numbers of people, and we would wish health research to continue to try to alleviate the burden that people face. The subject is absolutely right for requesting an Adjournment debate or asking the Backbench Business Committee to bring forward a debate, and I encourage the hon. Gentleman to do so.

Point of Order

11.44 am

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In business questions, the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) mentioned the conference season. Surely it is unacceptable in this day and age that Parliament goes for three weeks without any scrutiny of the Government. Surely the political parties can organise their conferences at weekends so that Parliament can continue to sit. Is there anything that you can do to help to facilitate this and to make the political parties have their conferences at weekends so that the House can continue to scrutinise the Government during that period?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, of which I had no advance notice, but about which fact I make no complaint whatever. I simply say to him the following: first, at the moment it is a matter for the parties, though potentially it could be the subject of a resolution by the House.

Secondly, I think that there is a psychic quality about the hon. Gentleman, because I have, in very recent days, penned words on this very matter that might appear in an organ of note within the House soon. As so often, I find myself very much in agreement with the hon. Gentleman. This is our main place of work. This is where people expect us to be. The idea that, because voluntary organisations choose to hold a voluntary gathering, we should absent ourselves from our main place of work for three weeks has long struck me as incongruous. It appears that it also strikes the Scottish National party as incongruous, as it seems perfectly capable of organising a substantial conference on a Thursday, Friday and Saturday, thereby not necessitating a further week of absenting from parliamentary business. I think I had better leave it there for now.

Philip Davies: For now?

Mr Speaker: Only for now. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman.

Wilson Doctrine

Application for emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

11.46 am

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I seek leave to propose that the House should debate a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration, namely the operation of the Wilson doctrine.

The right of Members of this House to be able to represent their constituents without fear or favour is intrinsic to our democracy. It is the cornerstone of the Bill of Rights and one of the most ancient freedoms of this country. In another era, before the existence of telephones and emails, it meant that MPs and peers, even in times of war, had the right for their written correspondence not to be intercepted or interfered with.

Since 17 November 1966, Members have relied on the words of Harold Wilson, the then Prime Minister, who said that he had instructed

“that there was to be no tapping of the telephones of the Members of Parliament. That was our decision and that was our policy.”

He added:

“But if there was any development of a kind which required a change in the general policy, I would, at such moment as seemed compatible with the security of the country, on my own initiative make a statement in the House about it.”—[*Official Report*, 17 November 1966; Vol. 736, c. 639.]

Despite the slightly opaque wording Wilson then used, that rapidly became known as the Wilson doctrine and it was extended five days later by Lord Longford to Members of the House of Lords. It was subsequently—and erroneously, it turns out—thought that it equally applied to Members of the European Parliament, to Members of the other three legislatures in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and to all other forms of digital communication.

Yesterday, the Investigatory Powers Tribunal gave its ruling on a case brought by the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), who is in her place, and others. The judgment states that

“The Wilson Doctrine has no legal effect” and calls it

“a political statement in a political context, encompassing the ambiguity that is sometimes to be found in political statements”.

That runs contrary to assurances given to Members of both the Commons and the Lords by successive Governments, including the current one, and casts doubt on the protection supposedly afforded by the Wilson doctrine. To all intents and purposes, it means that the Wilson doctrine is dead.

From your own intervention to the tribunal, Mr Speaker, and from the points of order raised by several Members yesterday, it is clear that Members on both sides of the House believe that this ambiguity needs clearing up as a matter of urgency. I note that the Home Secretary stonewalled on the issue when asked about it by the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) on Monday, and this very morning the Leader of the House gave the most opaque comment I have heard yet on the matter.

Serious questions remain. First, is the Wilson doctrine still in operation in any meaningful sense whatsoever? Secondly, have parliamentarians’ communications been deliberately targeted? Thirdly, if so, has that been on the authority of a Minister, a Secretary of State or anyone else? This is an urgent matter and it needs consideration.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the shadow Leader of the House. The hon. Gentleman asks leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration under the terms of Standing Order No. 24, namely the Wilson doctrine. I have listened carefully to his application, and I am satisfied that the matter raised by him is proper to be discussed under Standing Order No. 24. Has the hon. Gentleman the leave of the House?

Application agreed to.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has indeed obtained the leave of the House. The debate will be held on Monday 19 October as the first item of public business. The debate will last for up to three hours, and will arise on a motion that the House has considered the specified matter set out in the hon. Gentleman’s application.

Chris Bryant: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am very grateful to you for what you have just announced. Given the Leader of the House’s announcement earlier that we will have a statement from the Prime Minister on Monday—such statements sometimes run for an hour or even two hours—and that we will then have this three-hour debate, there will not be much time for the Psychoactive Substances Bill.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Chris Grayling): That’s your fault.

Chris Bryant: No. The Leader of the House says that that is our fault. It is for the Government to make provision for matters of interest to the whole House and to make proper provision for scrutiny of their own legislation.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. The short answer is of course that the timetabling of business is a matter for the usual channels, not for the Chair. It is important to explain that, not least for those beyond the House who are interested in and listening to our proceedings. What is a matter for the Chair—in general terms, but importantly—is the principle that the opportunity for scrutiny should be protected. It is extremely important, if there is a Second Reading of a Bill, that there is adequate time for it to be debated and, in the context of such a Second Reading debate, for its general principles to be the subject of scrutiny, so I hope that adequate time will be provided for that purpose. It is Thursday and the matters concerned will not be treated of until Monday, so there is certainly plenty of time for consideration of how the different priorities of the House can each and every one of them be met. I think we can leave that there for now. If there are no further points of order, the Clerk will now proceed to read the Orders of the Day.

Armed Forces Bill

Second Reading

11.52 am

The Secretary of State for Defence (Michael Fallon): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The introduction of an Armed Forces Bill is always a significant occasion for defence. It matters in particular for three reasons. The first reason is its constitutional significance. We are renewing the legislation necessary for the armed forces to exist as disciplined forces. That legislation is currently the Armed Forces Act 2006, which provides the system of command, discipline and justice for the armed forces. It covers matters such as the powers of commanding officers to punish disciplinary or criminal misconduct, the powers of courts martial and the powers of the service police. The 2006 Act confers powers and sets out procedures to enforce the duty of members of the armed forces to obey lawful commands.

Since the Bill of Rights in 1688, the legislation making the provision necessary for the Army to exist as a disciplined force—and, more recently, the legislation for the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force—has required regular renewal by Act of Parliament. Without this Bill, the Armed Forces Act 2006 could not continue in force beyond the end of 2016. That reminds us that ultimate control over the system under which the armed forces are maintained resides not with the Executive, but with Parliament.

Secondly, this occasion is sufficiently rare in the lifetime of a Parliament to prompt us to reflect on the progress made since the last such Act, the Armed Forces Act 2011. The centrepiece of the last Act, the requirement to report on the armed forces covenant, remains more relevant than ever. The covenant has already made a huge difference to the lives of serving and ex-service personnel. In the past few years, we have seen not only the Government, but all 407 local authorities and more than 700 businesses, large and small, come together to make sure that our personnel get a fairer deal as a result of their service to our country.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): We have perhaps been somewhat neglectful of armed forces personnel when they cease to be serving and become veterans. Does the Secretary of State agree that we must place a greater priority on ensuring that veterans have ongoing help and support because of the difficulties that many of them may still face as a result of their service in Iraq and Afghanistan?

Michael Fallon: I certainly do agree with that. This work is ongoing and is not yet done. We will continue to try to make progress. As the hon. Lady knows, we have implemented a number of reviews, not least Lord Ashcroft's review of the mental health services that are available to veterans.

I assure the House that our commitment to the covenant remains unshakeable. Today, we are launching a credit union for armed forces personnel. By paying a regular amount of their salary directly into the credit union, they will be able to avoid the struggle for credit approval and the siren call of the payday lenders.

Thirdly and finally, the Bill gives us the opportunity to ensure that the 2006 Act remains fit for purpose for the next five years. The first clause keeps the 2006 Act in force beyond the end of 2016; provides for the continuation of the 2006 Act for a year from the date on which this Bill receives Royal Assent; and provides for renewal thereafter by Order in Council, for up to a year at a time, until the end of 2021. That will give Parliament a regular opportunity to debate the systems of the armed forces for command, discipline and justice.

Clauses 2 to 6 modernise and strengthen the service justice system by making sensible and proportionate changes to the existing provisions. I will take each of those clauses, very briefly, in turn.

Clause 2, on post-accident testing for alcohol and drugs, deals with the situation whereby a commanding officer may require a member of the armed forces or a civilian who is subject to service discipline to co-operate in a preliminary test for alcohol or drugs only when he or she suspects that an offence has been committed. The clause extends those circumstances by providing for post-accident preliminary testing without the need for suspicion that the person being tested has committed an offence. The new powers to require co-operation with tests will apply only after accidents involving aircraft or ships or other serious accidents. They are derived from, although not identical to, those in the railway and transport safety legislation under which civilians are required to co-operate with tests for alcohol and drugs.

Clauses 3 to 5 simplify the process of investigation and charging of criminal and disciplinary offences under the 2006 Act. The commanding officer rightly deals with 90% of cases in the service justice system, and that will not change. The remaining 10% of cases are those that the commanding officer does not have the power to hear, which involve offences such as perverting the course of justice and sexual assault. Some cases that cannot be dealt with by the commanding officer have to be referred by the investigating service police to the commanding officer and then by the commanding officer to the director of service prosecutions for a decision. That is an unnecessarily complex process.

Clause 3 provides for the service police to refer straight to the director of service prosecutions in any case where there is sufficient evidence to charge for an offence that the commanding officer cannot deal with on his own. That brings the service justice system into line with the civilian system.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Does that mean that the commanding officer is taken out of the loop entirely in cases concerning soldiers, sailors or airmen who are his or her responsibility?

Michael Fallon: No, because the commanding officer will be kept informed about the investigation and the stage it has got to. They are not being removed from the process; we are merely simplifying the procedure and shortening it so that the matter does not have to be referred automatically to the commanding officer and then back to the director of service prosecutions.

Clause 3 also deals with linked cases such as separate offences that occur during the same incident. Some cases may need to be sent to a commanding officer, even though they are connected to a case that has been sent to the director of service prosecutions, and that can

result in separate decisions on whether to prosecute, and separate trials. Clause 3 allows the service police to refer a case to the director of service prosecutions if, after consultation, they consider it appropriate to do so because of a connection with another case that has also been referred to that director.

Clause 4 clarifies the procedure for the referral of those linked cases from the commanding officer to the director of service prosecutions, and clause 5 allows the director to bring charges. Currently, when the director of service prosecutions decides that a charge must be brought, they must direct the suspect's commanding officer to bring that charge. Clause 5 allows the director to bring that charge, just as the Crown Prosecution Service brings charges in the civilian criminal justice system.

Clause 6 increases the range of sentencing options available to the court martial. Civilian courts are currently able to suspend sentences of imprisonment for up to 24 months, but service courts can suspend them for only 12 months. We would like court martials to be given greater flexibility to vary the deterrent effect of service detention. In some cases it is right for suspended sentences to allow continued service alongside rehabilitation activities. The clause simply corrects the anomaly by giving court martials the ability to suspend sentences of service detention for up to 24 months.

Clauses 7 and 8 give the director of service prosecutions power to give offenders immunity from prosecution, or an undertaking that the information they provide will not be used against them, in return for assistance that the offender may give to an investigator or prosecutor.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend say what service offences he has in mind for immunity from prosecution? Will he reassure the House that that does not involve any form of plea bargaining, and say whether there are civilian equivalents of the kind of offences that he has in mind?

Michael Fallon: Only the most serious cases would involve that kind of immunity—perhaps the Minister will provide my hon. Friend with more examples of what such cases might be when he winds up the debate. These are cases where the evidence from a witness or defendant could be crucial, but where fears about self-incrimination stop someone coming forward and providing essential information.

In the civilian criminal justice system prosecutors such as the Director of Public Prosecutions have statutory powers to offer immunity and restrictions on the use of evidence, but the director of service prosecutions in the service justice system does not. That damages their ability to prosecute the most serious cases, because it may be necessary to rely on evidence from individuals who may not be willing to come forward and give evidence without conditional immunity, or an undertaking that that information will not be used against them. These clauses closely follow those in the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act 2005 that apply to the civilian criminal justice system.

I assure my hon. Friend that as in the civilian criminal justice system, the intention is for immunity and undertakings not to use information to be offered only in the most serious circumstances for those who are found, after proper investigation, to have fallen short of the high standards that we set.

Clause 13 brings the Armed Forces Act 2006 back into force in the Isle of Man and British overseas territories except for Gibraltar. Under United Kingdom law, the 2006 Act has always applied to members of the armed forces, wherever in the world they are operating, and that will remain the case. That means that a member of the armed forces commits an offence under UK law if they do something in another jurisdiction which, had they done it in England or Wales, would have been a criminal offence.

In addition, the 2006 Act originally formed part of the law of the Isle of Man and the British overseas territories. However, the Act expired in those jurisdictions in 2011. Clause 13 and the schedule to the Bill revive the Act in those jurisdictions so that, as it currently has effect in the UK, it will also be in force there. That ensures that things that members of the armed forces might do under the 2006 Act in those jurisdictions, such as the exercise of service police powers of arrest or search, would be lawful there not only as a matter of UK law but as a matter of the local law. It also ensures that the civilian authorities within those jurisdictions can do things under the 2006 Act which they might not otherwise have powers to do under the local law, such as the arrest of a person suspected of a service offence under a warrant issued by a judge advocate.

An exception is being made for Gibraltar. This is because we are currently consulting the Government of Gibraltar on how best to extend the provisions of the 2006 Act—and, therefore, of the Bill—to that territory.

Clauses 14 and 15 relate to Ministry of Defence firefighters. The Defence Fire Risk Management Organisation has more than 2,000 personnel operating over 70 fire stations. Yet those firefighters currently have no specific emergency powers to act to prevent or deal with fires to protect life or preserve property. That could lead to a situation where firefighters entering a property to put out the flames might have to defend themselves against charges of breaking and entering, or where restraining family members from returning to a burning building might leave them open to a charge of assault.

Fire and rescue services at some MOD sites are currently provided by a contractor. They, too, should be able to deal with an emergency in the same way as MOD firefighters. Clauses 14 and 15 address this issue by giving Defence firefighters the same powers to act in emergencies as employees of a civilian fire and rescue authority.

In conclusion, the Bill is an important act in continuing the authority of the armed forces. It makes modest but relevant upgrades to the existing system for the armed forces of command, discipline and justice. The world-class reputation that our armed forces enjoy is underpinned by many factors, one of which is that system of command, discipline and justice. We need to make sure that that system continues to be fit for the modern age. I commend the Bill to the House.

12.7 pm

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to speak in today's Second Reading debate on the Armed Forces Bill. This is my first opportunity to fulfil my new role in the House as shadow Secretary of State for Defence and I would like

[*Maria Eagle*]

to begin by thanking the Secretary of State for the courtesy he has shown me so far in arranging appropriate briefing for me from his Department. I am grateful.

Let me start by offering my sincere condolences to the family and friends of Flight Lieutenant Alan Scott of 33 Squadron RAF and Flight Lieutenant Geraint Roberts of 230 Squadron RAF, who died in Afghanistan on Sunday. From the tributes I have read, both men were highly experienced, respected and valued members of the RAF family. Their deaths serve as a reminder of the commitment and dedication of our armed forces personnel, and of the sacrifices they make. The continuing work of our service personnel in Afghanistan makes a positive contribution to the safety and stability of that nation and beyond. I would also like to express my deepest sympathy and extend my condolences to the family of Megan Park, a young Army recruit who died last month while undertaking training in Pirbright. By undertaking her training, she showed her willingness to put herself in harm's way for her country. My thoughts are with her family and friends.

The Bill renews the legal basis for retaining our armed forces in peacetime for another five years, while we are fulfilling Parliament's hard-won right to give consent to the Government for so doing. As parliamentarians, we are fulfilling a key function when we consider whether to consent to this measure. That is one reason why the Bill is important. While our armed forces comprise some of our finest and most dedicated public servants, their actions are not protected or circumscribed by contracts of employment. They owe a duty of allegiance to Her Majesty the Queen, which requires them to obey lawful orders. It is the system of service discipline and justice, therefore, that enables commanding officers to enforce that obligation when necessary. We certainly have an interest in ensuring that the system of military discipline and justice is fit for purpose, up to date and works well. That is the second reason the Bill is so important.

The Secretary of State has set out the main provisions in the Bill. It seems to me that they are largely non-contentious, technical and simplifying provisions, all of which we will seek to probe in Committee to ensure they work as intended and to satisfy ourselves that they are fit for purpose. I welcome the provisions extending the circumstances in which commanding officers can require service personnel and civilians subject to service law to be tested for drugs and alcohol after accidents. We will want to be satisfied that the rationale for extending the provisions to cover the three new situations set out in the Bill is sound and to have a fuller explanation for the differences between the powers being taken and those upon which they are based in the Railways and Transport Safety Act 2003. We will also want to be clear that the new provisions are sufficiently comprehensive to encompass all likely circumstances.

We welcome the intention of the Bill in setting out to simplify how people are charged with offences within the service justice system. No one benefits from unnecessary delay or bureaucracy in the administration of justice, in whatever system such potential problems might arise. On the face of it, it seems entirely sensible to remove the delay that might be caused by the requirement to refer a case to the commanding officer when he is not in

practice able to try it. If he must simply refer it to the Director of Service Prosecutions, it seems sensible for that to happen without the reference from the commanding officer, but he must of course know what is going on with the men under his control. It also seems entirely sensible to refer to the DSP cases that are connected. We will want to probe further in Committee how much of the existing caseload is likely to be affected—I think the Secretary of State referred to some figures in his opening remarks—and where any disadvantages are perceived in the provisions as drafted. Similarly, provisions relating to enabling the DSP to charge directly instead of directing a commanding officer to do so seem sensible, but we will wish to have full assurances in Committee.

We will also want to be satisfied on the necessity of applying equivalent provisions to those in the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act 2005 relating to immunity from prosecution, undertakings not to use information as evidence and sentence reductions for offenders who co-operate with investigations and prosecutions. We will start from the assumption, however, that if they are useful in the civilian justice system, they might well be useful in the service justice system as well.

The Bill does not cover how UK disciplinary procedures apply to foreign troops trained by British service personnel on British soil. Following the serious and regrettable incidents last year involving recruits from the Libyan general purpose force undertaking training at Bassingbourn camp, the Government published a summary of a report that looked at the Libyan training programme—the full report has now also been published. In January, following the publication of the summary, the Secretary of State said he had asked officials to consider applying UK service discipline to training foreign troops in the UK. In a recent Adjournment debate, the Minister for the Armed Forces said:

“The report asked whether we could apply UK service discipline to troops training in the UK. This would involve bringing foreign troops into the British military chain of command and require significant amendments to the Armed Forces Act 2006. My Department has assessed the challenges and downsides of making those changes and decided that they would currently outweigh any benefits, particularly as we are keen to provide training in-country. I have therefore not instructed my Department to instigate such changes now, but I will keep the matter under review.”—[*Official Report*, 10 September 2015; Vol. 599, c. 651.]

It is important that lessons are learned from that very serious incident and that foreign troops who come to the UK to train with our military adhere to the same code of conduct as British troops. It is equally important that disciplinary procedures can be put into effect swiftly in cases where criminal offences are committed. The Minister appears to be saying it is too difficult to do this at present, but I hope she will consider fully whether that is an adequate response. As the House will recall, these matters included very serious crimes of sexual assault and rape. Sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape are among the most serious of criminal offences in both civilian and military spheres, and the service justice system must take such crimes as seriously as does the ordinary criminal law.

From meetings I understand have taken place at ministerial and official level, the Minister will know about the military justice campaign being run by Liberty. It has raised serious issues about the collection of statistics on sexual assault and rape and how the service justice system deals with allegations of these serious

offences. We will want to probe in Committee what the current state of play is in respect of ensuring that such offences are treated as seriously within the service justice system as they are outside it.

Bob Stewart: On the argument about people visiting this country being subject to our military law, a big worry would be that we do not want other nations to apply their military law to our service men when they allegedly do something wrong in those countries. We want our military law to extend to our service men, wherever they are in the world.

Maria Eagle: Of course, the hon. Gentleman has a lot of knowledge of these matters, and I appreciate that such issues, as the Minister must have found, are very complex and difficult. Given the seriousness of the incidents and the fact that the Government undertook to look at the matter, it is important to have a full discussion about why they have come to the conclusion they have. I have not said that I disagree with the conclusion, but I think the House needs to probe fully why the decision, which she undertook to keep under review, was made. We will seek to probe that further during the Bill's passage. I say no more than that.

Mrs Moon: May I say how much I welcome my hon. Friend's appointment? I totally agree about the need to probe the issue of extending British law to troops based and training here. The people of Cambridgeshire need a full explanation of why that was not possible. Whether it proves possible is moot. The important thing is that they know it is being fully explored. Will she also say something about the importance of opening up the ability of members of the armed forces to come forward when they have experienced rape and sexual assault, as often they are advised by people in the chain of command that it might damage their career to do so?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. There is plenty of time to speak. If the hon. Lady wishes to make a speech, I will put her on the list with pleasure.

Maria Eagle: I thank my hon. Friend, who is a member of the Defence Select Committee, for her welcome for my appointment, and I hear what she has to say about these matters. The reason Liberty is campaigning on some of these issues is that, if things go wrong, it can destroy people's lives and cause many difficulties, not only for the individuals affected but for the services. In Committee, I want us to debate the matter further with Ministers, who I know have met and considered these matters with campaigners, and to hear a bit more detail about policy development and where they are in respect of some of these things.

We have already heard from the Secretary of State the rationale for extending the provisions in the Armed Forces Act 2006 to the Isle of Man and British overseas territories, except Gibraltar, but we will want to make sure, by way of the normal scrutiny one would expect of a Bill, that the provisions are correctly drafted, fit for purpose and will do what he said he wants them to do.

We are concerned about the rationale for the provisions in clauses 14 and 15 relating to the powers of Ministry of Defence firefighters in an emergency. There is no discernible problem, or any reason why those provisions

need to be in the Bill. The explanatory notes suggest, as the Secretary of State did, that MOD firefighters currently have no power in an emergency to act to protect life and property, but I wonder whether there have been instances of the kind of difficulty to which he referred. Have there been instances of such firefighters being prosecuted, or being sued for assault or for breaking and entering? If there have been any such instances, I can see why he might want to introduce these provisions. If there have been no such instances and this is simply a tidying-up exercise, how come he perceives a problem now?

Michael Fallon: Let me try to answer that, but first may I welcome the hon. Lady and her team to the Dispatch Box for the first time? This measure is, of course, a precautionary one to reinforce the powers of those firefighters. There may well be instances where they might have to enter service accommodation or a civilian house on or near an MOD airfield. In other circumstances, perhaps in a remote area, MOD firefighters may be the first to reach a civilian fire in a civilian area, having got there in advance of the local authority fire service, but they do not have exactly the same powers. The purpose of these clauses is to deal with these things.

Maria Eagle: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for that further explanation. In preparing for my remarks, I gave the chief fire officer of Merseyside's fire and rescue authority a ring to ask whether the Chief Fire Officers Association, of which he is a member, has been consulted about these provisions. I thought it might have asked for this kind of measure. My contact with him was the first he had heard of these provisions, although he was of the opinion that he would have expected the CFOA or the local authority fire and rescue authorities to have been consulted ahead of their introduction. They are category 1 responders and would have expected to have been consulted on these provisions. There are well-known, regular opportunities for the MOD to consult and liaise with the civilian fire authorities and chief officers, but that has not been done in this instance, which made me wonder precisely what was going on. The provisions seem to imply the deployment of MOD firefighters beyond the confines of their current role on MOD property. The definition of "firefighter" includes, as I believe the Secretary of State said, contractors and subcontractors employed by private companies, and we are at a time when the work the Defence Fire Risk Management Organisation does is being outsourced or tendered. We will want to probe this matter further in Committee.

The Secretary of State has sought to reassure me, and I am open to being reassured. I am pleased to confirm that, with those few remarks and slight concerns notwithstanding, we will be supporting the Bill and seeking in Committee to probe its provisions, improving them where we can. Of course, if they cannot be improved, we will support them. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Is anybody interested in speaking? I call Jack Lopresti.

12.24 pm

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I was extremely interested in speaking, but I was being very courteous in waiting to be called, Mr Deputy Speaker.

[Jack Lopresti]

Like the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle), I wish to send my condolences to the families of our service people who have recently died on operations and during training, and I echo the comments she made. That is a further example, as if we needed one, of the sacrifice and sense of duty of our service people, and the debt of gratitude we owe all of them.

I particularly welcome the Bill's overall objectives and its content. It is in a noble tradition, stemming, as the Secretary of State said, from the Bill of Rights, under which no standing Army—obviously, that is now extended to our armed forces—may be maintained during peacetime without the consent of Parliament. That provision under the Bill of Rights is one of this country's enviable documents that form our uncodified constitution, which balances the power of the monarch, the Government and the Houses of Parliament.

This Bill, enabling our country to maintain standing armed forces, could not come at a more relevant time, given the challenges we face around the world. We live in an increasingly dangerous age, with Putin's army on the march in Crimea and Syria, and the problems we face in the middle east with ISIS. I understand that for some, although not I would think those on the Opposition Front Bench today, there is confusion about the importance of the defence of the realm; the Leader of the Opposition has said that he questions why

“a country of 65 million people on the north-west coast of Europe”

needs “to have global reach”. I am sure that none of the Opposition Front Benchers would agree with his comments on abolishing the armed forces and leaving NATO.

We of course need armed forces, and I am extremely proud of them, as I am sure everybody else here is. Our armed forces are the best in the world. I have some modest experience in this area, having had one of the best years of my life—so far—when I served with the fantastic men and women of 3 Commando Brigade in Afghanistan on Operation Herrick. I am very proud that 4,000 brave and extremely capable men and women are deployed around the clock on 21 different joint operations in 19 countries, which is double the figure of five years ago.

Britain has the biggest defence budget in the whole of the European Union and the second largest in NATO. I was delighted when the Chancellor rightly announced in July that the UK had committed to meet the NATO pledge to spend at least 2% of GDP on defence every year of this decade, with the MOD's budget rising by 0.5% per year. Of course, an additional £1.5 billion a year by 2020-21 will be made available to the armed forces, and security and intelligence agencies in a new joint security fund. I do not think anybody here needs reminding of the significance of our armed forces; the defence of the realm is the first duty and responsibility of any Government. I have said it before, but one of my favourite quotes is from the late Lord Healey who served with the Royal Engineers during world war two and was military landing officer for the British assault brigade at Anzio. He said:

“Once we cut defence expenditure to the extent where our security is imperilled, we have no houses, we have no hospitals, we have no schools. We have a heap of cinders.”—[*Official Report*, 5 March 1969; Vol. 779, c. 551.]

But the UK is investing in British security, British prosperity and our place in the world, which transforms our ability to project power globally, whether independently or with allies.

I also had the privilege of serving on the Armed Forces Bill Committee during the last Parliament, when the Government took the historic step of enshrining the armed forces covenant in law for the first time. We now have an increasing number of veterans who have seen active service in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere, and we have a duty and responsibility as a nation to make sure they are looked after and are not in any way disadvantaged by their previous military service. I worked with my local authorities to ensure that they signed the community covenant, too.

This Bill has some interesting aspects that we ought to explore further in some detail. We have talked about provisions whereby a commanding officer may require a member of the armed forces or a civilian subject to service discipline to be tested for alcohol and drugs, and about how we are looking to change things in that area. I share the concerns of my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), who said that he was worried that under the new provisions a commanding officer could be a little out of the loop when it comes to the welfare of, and duty of care towards, his or her men. I think we will look at that in more detail. As far as I am aware, the last two major deployments were largely “dry” operations, but when our military personnel are on duty they have to not be under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

Cutting red tape and potentially simplifying the way justice is carried out is sensible. The increase of the period that a sentence of service detention may be suspended from 12 to 24 months could enable a more flexible form of justice. As the chairman of the all-party group on Gibraltar, I will be interested to see how Gibraltar is incorporated in the extension of the Armed Forces Act 2006 to the whole of the UK, the Isle of Man and British Overseas Territories. I know that conversations are taking place and work is going on, but I will be interested to see how that will work out. The House will obviously have to look in some detail at clauses 14 and 15, which propose extending the statutory powers to MOD firefighters in an emergency, providing the same powers to act as those of civilian fire and rescue authorities. I look forward to working with colleagues from all parts of the House on the progress of this very important Bill.

12.30 pm

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I, too, welcome the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) to her new role; I look forward to working constructively with her and her colleagues in the coming weeks and months. On behalf of the Scottish National party, may I also express our deep sadness at the loss of Flight Lieutenant Alan Scott and Flight Lieutenant Geraint Roberts? We, too, extend our most sincere condolences to their families and friends on the tragic loss of such highly regarded servicemen.

It goes without saying that we support the renewal of the Armed Forces Acts that enable our dedicated and professional service personnel to defend and protect the

people and the interests of all four constituent parts of this United Kingdom. We will fully engage with the Bill as it progresses through Committee.

Let me put on the record at the first opportunity to do so since coming to this place that we wish to highlight some serious concerns about the current state of the armed forces, particularly pertaining to Scotland. It is an inescapable fact that since the last Armed Forces Bill came before this place, a record number of servicemen and women have been betrayed by a Government who have overseen historic levels of cuts to the number of service personnel and the military footprint in Scotland. Year on year, we have had to endure cuts to the number of people serving in our armed forces. The Scottish Government's employment figures show a 9.5% drop in the number of people employed in the armed forces in Scotland. That is a staggering 2,800 jobs lost in just five years. It is a matter not just of military personnel but of Scotland's military footprint.

Since the strategic defence and security review of 2010, we have lost two of our three air bases—Leuchars and Kinloss—and we have had to witness an act of gross military vandalism when the Nimrods, the nation's strategically vital maritime patrol aircraft, were chopped into pieces and sent for scrap. Given the United Kingdom's geographic position in the north Atlantic, not having maritime patrol aircraft is quite remarkable, but for the United Kingdom to have had MPAs and then to have had them chopped into pieces and scrapped simply beggars belief.

Mr James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Many of us in the House would agree with what the hon. Gentleman says, and we opposed many of these sad cuts, which were necessary for the nation to break even. Will he enlighten the House? If the outcome of last year's referendum had been different and we now had an independent Scotland, would he guarantee that the pre-cuts strength that he decries that we have lost would be replaced by the Scottish National party and the Scottish Government? Also, how many jobs would be lost if Trident were to be removed from Scotland?

Brendan O'Hara *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I can understand the temptation, but I do not want to open this pretty technical debate into a general point-scoring debate on policy. As I say, I can understand the temptation, but I am sure the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) will want to stick to what we are debating.

Brendan O'Hara: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. To respond very briefly, I refer the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray) to the White Paper published before the referendum. Everything would be contained therein. The Scottish National party is quite clear about its paramount commitment to conventional defences. We would thus obviously invest in such defences.

I shall take your advice, Mr Deputy Speaker, and perhaps not engage further, other than to say that we shall support the Bill as it makes its way through Committee. Most notably, at the 2015 general election, the SNP was the only party to make a commitment to providing a statutory footing for a British Armed Forces Federation. We would like to introduce such provisions

into the Bill in Committee. There is, of course, already an established British Armed Forces Federation, which provides a professional, independent and apolitical voice for service personnel. The BAFF is, in its own words, "a specifically British solution for the British Armed Forces", which campaigns on range of issues such as armed forces housing, compensation and improved medical care for veterans.

Veterans' mental health is particularly important. I recommend anyone attending last night's Adjournment debate—and those who did not attend it—to get hold of the *Hansard* and read the fantastic contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), ably supported by the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer). This was a learned and informed debate—a shining example, I believe, of this House at its best.

If the BAFF were given statutory status, it would be a far more robust organisation in providing legal advice, aid for the writing of wills, anti-bullying advice, grievance reporting and, of course, aid to those with mental health problems. The idea of having an armed forces federation is not new and it is not radical. Indeed, there are several such federations operating extremely well within the armed forces of many of our NATO allies. Norway, Denmark, Belgium, Germany and Hungary all have armed forces federations, while there are also recognised and functioning armed forces federations in Australia and, closer to home, in Ireland. I firmly believe that a mature and responsible military such as that of the United Kingdom has nothing to fear from an armed forces federation.

As I said elsewhere, it should be seen as complementary rather than in opposition to the chain of command. A federation would not impinge in any way on the chain of command, but would rather give support to service personnel and their families—and, of course, to our veterans, to whom we all have a duty of care. If a federation works well for the police force, surely it is wholly appropriate that we extend the same right to our military personnel, who put their lives on the line every time they go on duty.

In conclusion, we support the Bill and will continue to support it, but we will go through it, as the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood said, line by line to make sure that the Bill will be the best that it can be. Our service personnel deserve no less.

12.37 pm

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): I welcome the Bill, which allows our armed forces to be recruited and maintained as disciplined bodies. I want to pay tribute to our brave armed forces personnel, particularly in the Royal Navy. The House will know of my special interest in this service because my daughter is a serving Royal Navy officer. My interest goes further than that, however. HMS Raleigh, the premier initial sea training establishment, is based in my constituency. It provides considerable employment, as does the Devonport naval base and dockyard. There is also the Thanckes oil fuel depot at Wilcove. The Royal Navy is thus at the very heart of my constituency. Young recruits experience their first six weeks of what it is like to serve in our armed forces there. That is why the Bill is important—because we must maintain recruitment.

[Mrs Sheryll Murray]

I welcome the clauses to modernise and update the Armed Forces Act 2006 to ensure that our armed forces are appropriate for modern times. It is important to pass the Bill to ensure that we recruit and maintain disciplined armed forces who will be able to operate professionally in our services. I particularly want to ensure that we man our Vanguard submarines, and I am delighted that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has confirmed that four new successor submarines will be introduced. This Bill will ensure that the manpower is available for them to remain fully operational.

Devonport dockyard in Plymouth is the sole nuclear repair and refuelling facility for the Royal Navy. Its excellent work has been long championed by my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile). I understand that my right hon. Friend may not be able to do so today, but I would be grateful if he could confirm as soon as possible that the continuing refuelling programme for the ballistic submarines will continue at Devonport as the new submarines are integrated into the fleet.

I feel that I should also mention my surprise that the Leader of the Opposition seems determined to compromise the security of our armed forces and this nation when he talks of abandoning our continuous at-sea deterrent.

I welcome the Government's commitment to the new aircraft carriers. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has already told me that they will be manned by a crew whose numbers will be similar to those on HMS *Invincible*, despite being three times its size. He has also told me that the Royal Navy is planning to ensure that it has the suitably trained and qualified people it needs, and that that will include training on HMS *Raleigh* in Devonport. It would be good to hear that he is confident that we have enough suitably qualified and experienced personnel who are ready when they are needed to develop the operational capability of both ships.

Let me finally say something about clause 14. I am pleased that the Act is being amended to recognise the brave firefighters in our armed forces, and to give them the same authority as our civilian firemen and women. I thank them for their brave work in keeping our military safe.

12.41 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. Let me begin by expressing, on behalf of my party, sincere sympathies to the families of Flight Lieutenant Alan Scott and Flight Lieutenant Geraint Roberts, who gave their lives in Afghanistan.

I thank, with sincere appreciation, all who have contributed to the Bill's progress so far, and who have introduced changes that have been in reserve until now. The issue that we are discussing is of the utmost importance to every Member. Those who are present have a specific interest in it, but many others who would like to be present are unable to attend. For the record, let me convey an apology from the Chair of the Defence Committee, and from other Committee members who cannot be here because they are dealing with other business, but who would have wished to participate if that had been possible.

A strong, effective and renowned armed forces has always been at the heart of our great nation—that united nation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, with all four of its regions together—and has always been a proud and important pillar of our national identity. Like others who are present, I am strongly committed to the armed forces covenant, which I want to see delivered in its entirety throughout all four regions in the United Kingdom. I also believe that it is important to look after veterans with mental and physical disabilities. Last night, we had the opportunity to listen to an excellent speech by the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), who presented the case for those veterans. As we heard just now from the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara), the report of that debate is well worth reading, including the positive response from the Minister for Community and Social Care.

I am sure Members agree that when our armed forces are having a positive impact, whether delivering aid to the needy or toppling a tyrant, that instils in us a great sense of pride in being British—and no one is prouder than I am of being British. That said, however, when something is broken it needs to be fixed, and when something could be better, it needs reform. Unfortunately, not all our personnel are receiving the protection that they deserve in terms of their human rights. It is time for a review and time for change, and that is what the Bill proposes. The key focus of the Bill must be on ensuring that we protect and uphold the human rights of those who serve in our armed forces.

I commend the Defence Secretary for creating a service complaints ombudsman. That positive legislative change was necessary, and it is vitally important to ensuring that our armed forces receive the fair treatment that they have earned and deserve. I was delighted with the amendment to the Armed Forces (Services Complaints and Financial Assistance) Act 2015, which granted the new ombudsman power to investigate the nature of service complaints rather than merely processing claims of maladministration. That was clearly a positive step.

However, while those developments are most welcome, more could and needs to be done. Members have mentioned alcohol and drugs: the Secretary of State did so in setting the scene, and no doubt others will do so as well. We need armed forces that are accountable and responsible, we need a system of regulating and legislating, and we need testing for alcohol and drugs.

There is overwhelming evidence that sexual assault and rape are a pressing issue for many of our service personnel, especially our servicewomen. In its 2015 sexual harassment report, the Army recorded that 39% of servicewomen questioned had received unwelcome comments about their appearance, body or sexual activities, compared with just 22% of servicemen. Furthermore, 33% of servicewomen had been subject to unwelcome attempts to talk about sexual matters, compared with only 19% of servicemen; 12% of servicewomen had received unwanted attempts to talk about sexual matters, compared with just 6% of servicemen; 10% of servicewomen had received unwanted attempts to establish a sexual relationship, despite discouragement, compared with only 2% of servicemen; 4% of servicewomen had been

told that they would be treated better in return for a sexual relationship; and 2% reported that they had been sexually assaulted.

Those statistics reveal something that is totally horrendous and totally unacceptable, and the need for significant change. The Bill gives us a chance to make that change, which is good news. Some of the figures may seem small, but that does not make them any less unacceptable. Would any other line of work tolerate such figures? The Departments concerned would certainly be asked to make legislative changes. Indeed, would such figures feature in any other line of work? The figures that I have given show that sexual assault and rape are a problem that needs to be tackled within our armed forces—not least for women, who fare far worse than men.

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman think that the existence of a representative body—a federation—would help or hinder a solution to the problem that he is rightly identifying?

Jim Shannon: We shall obviously have some idea of the Government's thoughts on that when the Minister responds to the debate, but I think that the establishment of such a body would be very helpful, although its terms of reference would have to be discussed.

The nature of the Army prevents many women from speaking out, because they do not want to be perceived as weak in such an environment. The problem is that there is such a strong bond of camaraderie that the culture makes it important for servicemen and servicewomen to get along without creating a fuss. As we know, there have been stories in the press about service personnel who have been abused and subsequently traumatised, and who, unfortunately, may have succumbed to loss of life as a result. There needs to be a change in the culture of our armed forces in relation to this serious subject, but we, as legislators, can do our part by means of the Bill.

Data and evidence of such offences are scarce, because we lack a comprehensive and reliable collection of data. That, too, must change: we need to get a serious grip on the issue, and we need records so that we can monitor our progress. As well as monitoring, however, we should set a target for administrative change, and the Bill may make that possible. To fix any problem, it is necessary first to understand the extent of it, and the lack of data does not reassure those concerned that the issue is being taken seriously enough. This is just one of a number of areas that urgently need reform.

It is incredibly worrying that the Sexual Offences Act 2003 does not ensure that a commanding officer is required to notify police of an allegation of a sexual assault. In fact, such an inherently serious offence ought to be subject to an automatic referral, and I should like that to be considered during debates on the Bill. Sexual assault is a gross violation of an individual's physical integrity, and the repercussions for the victim can be endless. As I said earlier, we are well aware of high-profile cases in which people have taken their lives. The figures and statistics that have been cited today should shock each and every Member, and I hope they have made clear the need for urgent action.

I commend the changes relating to Ministry of Defence firefighters. It seems ludicrous that when firefighters need to break into a place, they should not be able to do

so, and it also seems ludicrous that they cannot regulate traffic. Those are small changes, and it is only right that they should be made.

I hope and trust—indeed, I know—that Members will take seriously all the comments that have been made, and will continue to pay the utmost attention and respect to these incredibly important issues. I commend the Armed Forces Bill.

12.49 pm

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): I rise to support the re-establishment of the British Army, a matter about which I assume there will not be that much dissent—although give it a couple of weeks and who knows where the Opposition Front Bench will be. Pleasingly, the British Army headquarters are based in my constituency, although I do not hear a huge amount from them. I assume they have more powerful allies in this House than me, but they will not have a more committed one. I am very pleased to see this Bill come forward, because this is an extremely important time for the British Army—a time of great flux in terms of challenge and budget, with 2% of GDP now having been guaranteed by the Government. That will be a challenge for the Army, going a little in reverse from where it has been, and matching that through the SDSR to capability is going to be something of an iterative process. In that regard, I wanted to raise a few issues.

First, the Army is devoting more time and energy to research and technology. The nature of warfare is changing significantly as automation becomes more and more the norm. At the moment we are largely seeing that in airborne form, but the day will come quite soon when our cavalry or tank regiments become more automated; unmanned tanks are on the horizon, and significant research is taking place in the United States and elsewhere into battlefield robotics generally. I urge Ministers to consider the implications for the future.

We have too often played catch-up in our procurement in the armed services. I am old enough to remember the Heath Robinson saga of the Nimrod which never quite kept up with requirements, and TRIGAT, an anti-tank missile which took so long to come to fruition that by the time it was ready to fire, tanks had been developed whose armour could resist its penetration. More investment in technology and research is therefore critical.

My second point is about resilience. Pleasingly, the Government have taken £145 million of LIBOR fines and devoted it to welfare among families of service people. I hope Ministers will consider making sure that a fair proportion of that is spent on mental health welfare, about which we have had numerous debates in this House, not least last night when we had an Adjournment debate on this very subject.

I do not know whether legislation is needed to extend the welfare capability of the Army to those of other nationalities who have served alongside. The Minister will know I am particularly concerned about the plight of those who acted as interpreters for the British Army in Afghanistan, about which there has been some press coverage in recent weeks, and whether they and their families are in receipt of some of the welfare funding that is available, and whether the Army has the power to transfer money and resources to their assistance. I would like that to be considered.

[Kit Malthouse]

There is one issue in respect of the Bill that Ministers might consider on Report. There is a pleasing and sensible measure to extend testing for alcohol and drugs when an accident has occurred. That made me wonder whether Ministers might consider incorporating in the armed service disciplinary code the penalty of compulsory sobriety. The Ministry of Justice has recently extended this innovative solution to alcohol-based crime to the whole country, so that police and crime commissioners can now use it on a regular basis, following a successful trial in Croydon, in which I confess I had a hand when I was deputy mayor for policing in London. Essentially, rather than being sent to prison or be subject to other draconian measures, those convicted of an alcohol-based crime are tagged for three or six months with a tag that tests them for alcohol every 30 seconds. If they contravene there are other penalties available, but pleasingly about 98% of people comply. The great advantage of this disposal is that nobody goes to prison so people maintain their job and contact with their family. Compliance is much greater and it removes the alcohol which is the source of the offending.

It might be sensible for Ministers to investigate whether this needs incorporating in the Army code, because I have a feeling that as a disposal it will grow in popularity across the country, as it is doing in the United States. We discovered this in South Dakota, where it has taken drink-driving from three times the national average down to below the national average, and the disposal generally is now creeping its way into being used in all sorts of offences, not least domestic violence, where alcohol plays an enormous part.

I welcome the Bill and support it. We need no greater reminder of its importance than the tributes paid to the airmen who lost their lives recently. They were the best of us and their families have our deepest condolences.

12.55 pm

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): If ever there was a Bill that underlined the need for a written constitution, this would probably be it. When a constituent asks me what I do when I am down here, I do not think they would be happy to hear that we spend valuable legislative time renewing a Bill that was first put before the House in 1688. That shows that this country's relationship with its armed forces personnel is outdated. The Glorious Revolution brought us this tradition.

Mr James Gray: I am astonished by that comment. The hon. Gentleman says he resents spending his time renewing this Act, but he completely misunderstands the point. The whole point is that it is this Parliament's right and duty once every Parliament to renew our relationship with the armed forces. If, by a written constitution or some other means, that did not happen, our rights and duties in this place would be severely reduced.

Douglas Chapman: My point is that if there were a written constitution we probably would not have to go through this process each time and our business might

be better understood by the general public, who are sometimes at a loss to understand some of the intricacies of the ways of the House.

The tradition we have in Scotland of contributing more economically and in manpower to the armed forces than we receive in return is a different tradition. I thought that the rules now were that we pool our resources and fairly share the spoils of the UK. However, in terms of defence spending, Scotland continues to pool our resources, tax base and manpower, but much more of the investment is sucked elsewhere. That must change.

We look forward to the Bill being debated and scrutinised in Committee. It must be considered within the context of resources, where the service personnel are deployed and how that impacts on the families of service personnel and veterans. There is massive underinvestment in conventional defence forces in Scotland, which is both unfair and dangerous. The Ministry of Defence used to keep records of investments made in Scotland but mysteriously stopped, apparently when it became clear that questions from my right hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Angus Robertson) were decidedly inconvenient to the idea of Scotland being "better together".

Other Members have mentioned their constituencies and how investment is affecting work practices there. However, in Scotland we must also recognise that the 2010 defence review brought an end to many of our historical regiments, and that had an impact on both recruitment and morale. We have lost two of our three air bases with the third, Lossiemouth, yet to receive adequate assurances that it will outlast the Tornado. We are a maritime nation with a coastline about as long as that of India, yet we are without a maritime patrol capability. There is not one serious ocean-going surface-based ship in a country which built some of the best ships in the world at places such as Scotstoun, Govan or Rosyth in my constituency.

I do not want to spend much more time discussing the Bill as we will be scrutinising it in Committee. We welcome the progress that has been made so far, and we will continue to consider how it and other Bills will affect defence investment in Scotland.

12.59 pm

Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con): On a rather sad note, may I pass on my condolences to the families of Flight Lieutenant Scott and Flight Lieutenant Roberts? At the same time, I should like to take this opportunity to congratulate all the young men and women who passed out of the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst this summer alongside my son. I know that they will serve their country with pride, and possibly with their lives, just as Flight Lieutenant Scott and Flight Lieutenant Roberts did. Along with my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray), I know how that must feel. I am sure that the whole House, including the Leader of the Opposition, will ensure that they receive all the necessary support—be it political, moral or financial—to ensure that they have the finest equipment and leadership, including the justice system which we are discussing today, to enable them to fight the battles that we will put them through.

Parliament takes the opportunity, by passing an Armed Forces Bill during each Parliament, to reaffirm its support for the armed forces and for the brave, selfless people

who serve in them. It is an honour to represent Portsmouth, alongside the Minister for the Armed Forces, my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt). It is the home of the Royal Navy and of its people, whose families are on the front line in every struggle this country faces. It is important that our forces should be properly equipped and that their laws should be clear and comprehensive. The UK has the chance, through the strategic defence and security review process and the renewal of this legislation, to review recent history and examine any mistakes, as well as to plan for the future.

People at home and our allies abroad will welcome our commitment to maintain our defence spending at 2% of GDP. In the long term, we might need to restore the defence budget to a higher level than that. Our capabilities have to match our commitments. I welcome the equipment plan for the coming decades, but we should also give more thought to the personnel operating that equipment. In my first few months as a Member of Parliament, I have already seen a number of serving and ex-service personnel facing a variety of problems, from family law to healthcare and housing, resulting from their time spent in the forces. Some of them wonder what the armed forces covenant actually stands for, when they find themselves banging their heads against the doors of officialdom.

In many cases, however, personnel have had recourse to the excellent charitable organisations, including Combat Stress, the Royal Navy and Royal Marines charities, SSAFA, the Royal British Legion and the Royal Navy Benevolent Trust. Some of them provide a central resource for those seeking help in Portsmouth at Castaway House; some have also received LIBOR money. I hope that the military covenant can be strengthened so that nobody leaves that place feeling as though they have been cast away.

After the election, it was an early priority of mine to meet those organisations to understand the challenges that they and the people they represent face. We know, not least from the debate last night, that Combat Stress has seen a 28% increase in referrals in the last financial year. I pay tribute to the work of the Department of Health, which makes a strong contribution to supporting veterans, but it is too often felt that we take a reactive approach to the challenges of service life and health outcomes, rather than a proactive one. At present, Combat Stress's contract with the NHS in England and Scotland is due to be terminated in 2017. I hope that the Minister will assure the House that the great work that it does will be carried on in the future.

Bob Stewart: To emphasise my hon. Friend's point, post-traumatic stress disorder can occur 14, 15 or 16 years after a man or woman has finished their service. That is why Combat Stress is so important.

Mrs Drummond: And that is why the military covenant should continue throughout the whole life of a veteran.

I welcome the further reform to the armed forces justice system that the Bill introduces. The services operate very differently from civilian life, and a specific system is necessary to cover them, but that does not mean that the rights of those in the forces should be any weaker. It is important that service personnel should enjoy the same protections of due process and the rule

of law as those in civilian life. The reform of the operational period in clause 6 brings service practice closer to the operation in the civilian courts. I also welcome clauses 7 to 12, which extend the scope for granting immunity from prosecution in service cases. Sometimes that is necessary to uncover a greater evil and bring it to an end.

However, I believe that the legislation should do more to clarify and support whistleblowing in the services. It is a tragedy for the families of those involved that they are still looking for answers to what happened at Deepcut barracks almost 20 years ago. I welcome the new code of conduct for the Army on bullying. The Armed Forces (Service Complaints and Financial Assistance) Act 2015, which was passed at the end of the last Parliament, introduced an ombudsman process to allow personnel to raise issues and to allow the ombudsman to investigate the substance of those cases. I look forward to that process starting shortly.

The Government recognise the importance of bringing the same protections to service personnel that civilians enjoy. Since the passage of the Armed Forces Act 2006, the armed forces justice system has been brought a long way forward from the unsatisfactory state it had been in. But a justice system is there to protect people as well as to prosecute them, and there is still room for improvement, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned, in key areas such as bullying and the prevention of sexual harassment. I am sure that we shall continue to improve the armed forces justice system and keep it under review, either through this Bill or through the armed forces legislation that I have mentioned, which I hope will be incorporated into it. We will be reviewing that legislation in every Parliament as well.

1.5 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I am pleased to be able to follow the thoughtful speech by the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond). I should like to reflect on the events of a century ago and put on record some of those who made the ultimate sacrifice. War memorials in Scotland record many lives lost at the battle of Loos, which raged briefly in September 1915. The newly built war memorial funded by the people of Neilston, in my constituency, remembers the sacrifice of soldiers from the village and the surrounding areas who were killed in world war one, a number of whom were lost at Loos. I grew up in Carnoustie, a town that prides itself on two men who were awarded the Victoria Cross. Lance Corporal Jarvis of the Royal Engineers was the first recipient of the Victoria Cross in the first world war. He risked his life for over an hour under enemy fire to destroy a bridge to protect retreating colleagues. Petty Officer Samson of the Royal Navy Reserve gained his Victoria Cross for tending the wounded on the beach at Gallipoli.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) has said, we support the Bill. I also echo the words of the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle), in saying that we look forward to debating the detail of the Bill in Committee, to ensure that it will be the best and most effective that it can be.

It is worth recalling that the backdrop to recent legislation in this area has sometimes been the fraught relationship between the Government and the armed

[Kirsten Oswald]

forces in regard to issues such as Afghanistan and Iraq. In fact, senior officers were forced to go public in an effort, as they saw it, to protect those under their command. The current members of our armed forces are entitled to ask that we learn lessons, when they are there to be learned, and that we do not repeat any mistakes that might have been made.

We also need to look at how best to support those who have been involved in wars. As my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute said, the Scottish National party's manifesto made a commitment to the creation of a British armed forces federation. I was encouraged by the positive words from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on that subject. This would represent real progress in the way we deal with our responsibility to undertake our duty of care to our service personnel. We absolutely must use the opportunity that we will have in Committee to continue to modernise the governance of our armed forces and to consider properly how we treat those who enter the services. In so doing, it is particularly important that we understand and act on our responsibilities to those who suffer as a consequence of their service, and to their families—for instance in relation to their housing needs. The Scottish Government's funding for supported housing in Cranhill is very welcome in that regard.

It was positive to hear the Prime Minister's comments at yesterday at Prime Minister's questions on the care that the forces medical services provide so well. It was also useful to participate in yesterday's Adjournment debate on veterans mental health provision, secured by my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron). There is clearly a will in this House to properly and effectively consider the mental health of our service personnel during and, importantly, after their service. We need to work together to ensure that the provisions of the Bill reflect that good will towards our armed forces.

We must commit to doing more work like the intensive post-traumatic stress disorder treatment programmes that NHS Scotland and Combat Stress are undertaking. Like the hon. Member for Portsmouth South, I have been fortunate to meet a number of organisations dealing with veterans over the last few months. It is striking how much of a support network is provided by charities such as the Coming Home Centre, Horseback UK and Scottish War Blinded. The work that they and others do to support our armed forces and our veterans is immense and we owe them a debt of gratitude.

I am pleased that Scotland is leading the way with the appointment of a Scottish veterans commissioner. That appointment is most encouraging, and it reinforces the Scottish Government's commitment to providing support to the 400,000-plus ex-servicemen and women living in Scotland and to the capacity-building funding they are providing to Veterans Scotland to allow the organisation to work on developing and improving support for our veterans over the next two years.

Let me briefly mention my own constituency. I was heartened by the focus on the veterans in East Renfrewshire as well as in neighbouring Inverclyde. Our local authorities are working together in Renfrewshire on a veterans support service, which provides local support to address individual circumstances.

Veterans and our current serving personnel will rightly expect this House to use the opportunity of this Armed Forces Bill to examine all the issues, including the creation of a federation, the extension of veterans' initiatives and how we continue with issues relating to the gathering and use of data, as was mentioned by the hon. Member for Strangford.

Mr James Gray: I strongly agree with much of what the hon. Lady has said in regard to veterans, mental health and a number of other things. However, I am a little unclear as to which part of the Bill she thinks can be amended to take account of the things that she proposes? For example, where will she get this proposed Armed Forces Federation into this particular Bill?

Kirsten Oswald: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and for his positive words. As I mentioned earlier, there are important discussions around these areas that we must bring forward in Committee.

In conclusion, let us be ambitious for our armed services, our veterans and this important Bill. Let us work in Committee positively to improve the Bill, to probe and to debate so that we make real positive progress for our armed forces and veterans.

1.11 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I welcome this Bill. As was said by a number of Members, including the Secretary of State and my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State, this is an important Bill in that it involves a key constitutional issue. This Bill might seem quite dry and boring, but it actually asserts Parliament's control over the armed forces and the fact that we have a standing Army. I am sorry that the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) did not understand the significance and importance of that. As he is new to the House, I may suggest to him very gently that if he does not understand something, it is perhaps better not to comment on it.

I am a veteran of Armed Forces Bills. I considered the Armed Forces Act 2006, which was a major Act in that it radically changed the disciplinary acts of the three services. Unfortunately, it then followed me into ministerial office in the Ministry of Defence. The constructive way in which that Bill Committee did some very detailed work over a number of months not only improved service discipline and brought the Acts into the modern day, but helped to address some of the public concerns.

The hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond) talked about Deepcut, and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned the service complaints commissioner. Getting those issues into place has involved a long journey. We are now in a good place with regard to the service complaints commissioner. I was on the Defence Committee when Nicholas Blake compiled his report on Deepcut. I met the families involved on numerous occasions. Were they let down by the system, by Governments and by the Army? Yes, they were. Could we turn the clock back and find out what happened in those cases? Tragically, the answer is no, but what came out of the Blake report was a step forward in terms of the armed forces commissioner. I welcome the Government's current commitment to the armed forces ombudsman. The Act tried, where possible, to apply to armed services personnel the modern standards

that we would expect in civilian life. That is difficult because we are asking people to do different things. Where possible, the two areas should be mirrored. Clearly, the transparency that people expect in their dealings with Government should also be afforded to members of our armed forces. The ombudsman is a move in that direction.

The Bill before us is a piece of cake compared with the 2006 Act. It tidies up quite a lot of minor issues. As my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State said, we will support that, and ensure that those issues are scrutinised so that any unintended consequences are addressed. It is important that we send a message to the members of the armed forces that we are taking these things seriously. When they raise matters that they are not happy with, we should consider whether we can amend and change things for them. Obviously, I am not talking about interfering with the rigid discipline that is required or breaking the chain of command. The hon. Member for Portsmouth South—I must welcome her to the House and say that she is a vast improvement on her predecessor—made a point in that regard.

One issue that came up in the 2006 Act—it is a continuing one that needs to be addressed—is whistleblowing. I am not talking about whistleblowing for minor complaints or things that are not relevant. If members of the armed forces have serious concerns, there needs to be a mechanism, or a safety valve, in the chain of command—I know that the ombudsman will address some of this—so that these things can be dealt with. That is very important.

The worst thing that happened in previous years was that some complaints were not taken seriously—that has improved greatly—and delay added to the problem. Quite minor things should have been dealt with lower down the chain of command. Not only would people have felt that they had been treated better, but the bureaucratic outcomes for both the armed forces and the individuals would have been better.

We had seven contributions in this debate. I am not sure that many were on the actual details of the Bill, but I will touch on some of the remarks. Let me turn first to the hon. Member for Portsmouth South. I congratulate her son on graduating from Sandhurst. The academy does a fantastic job. She made a really important point, which is that we need to be proactive, not reactive, on issues. Those issues could include mental health, service discipline or just the way that we treat people. I also pay tribute to the work of Castaway House. I visited it when I was a Minister and saw for myself what a fantastic job it does in supporting veterans and the wider armed forces community in Portsmouth and the surrounding area.

We also had a contribution from my friend, the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray), who paid tribute to the work of HMS Raleigh. I agree that the Royal Navy does a fantastic job there with its new recruits. One of the many highlights of my ministerial career was attending a passing out parade on HMS Raleigh. It is humbling to meet both the parents and the recruits and to see the dedication and hard work that goes into ensuring that those people are not only transformed in the short period that they are there, but given life opportunities to work within our armed forces, which many would never ever get.

The hon. Lady was a little bit naughty, which is unusual for her, when she referred to the nuclear deterrent. The hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) also referred to the Labour leader's position on the nuclear deterrent. May I reassure them that the Labour party policy on the nuclear deterrent has not changed? It was agreed at the Labour party conference this year that we are in favour of a minimal credible nuclear deterrent provided by four boats under the continuous at-sea deterrent. We are committed to ensuring that we are part of multilateral disarmament talks so that we get to that point that everyone in this House wants to get to, which is a reduction in the ownership of nuclear weapons.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: If the hon. Gentleman had listened to what I said, he would have heard that I referred to the continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent.

Mr Jones: I am not sure what point the hon. Lady is making. That is what I referred to. That is Labour party policy and it has not changed with what has happened in our great party in the past few months.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Will the shadow Minister explain how we could have a credible nuclear deterrent if we were to have a Prime Minister who had already said that he would never use it?

Mr Jones: It is up to the Prime Minister of the day to write whatever advice he or she wants in the letter to the commanders. The hon. Member for South East Cornwall said that our policy had changed, but it has not. It is very clear. End of story.

Labour Members past and present have contributed to the armed forces and I know that my constituency and those of many other Members make a tremendous contribution through their sons, daughters and others who work not only for the regular forces but for the reserve forces. I am proud to represent a constituency with a long history of connection with the forces, and long may it continue. I reassure everyone that I will ensure that I champion their interests and ensure that their welfare, which is important in terms of this Bill, is taken care of.

The hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse)—I am not sure whether he is in his place—made an important point. The Bill refers to drug testing, but, as we all know, one of the biggest issues that needs addressing, which was an issue when I was a Minister, is alcohol. The question is how we address that, not in a nanny state way but by ensuring that people's health is not affected by the drinking culture not only while they are in the armed forces but after they leave. Perhaps we could consider the question of alcohol and the armed services in Committee.

The hon. Member for Strangford talked about the contribution made by his part of the world to the armed forces as well as the idea of ensuring that people's voices and complaints are heard. I, too, welcome the Government's commitment to the service complaints commissioner.

We then heard three contributions from the Scottish nationalist party. I do not want to reiterate the issues about some of their points, but the Scottish nationalists cannot have it all ways. They cannot argue that they are

[Mr Kevan Jones]

committed to and want more defence resources for Scotland and then argue that an independent Scotland could produce even a fraction of what Scotland gets now.

I get a little disturbed when I hear the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife use the phrase “the distribution of spoils in the UK” to refer to the armed forces, as though the defence of this country is somehow about moving resources around the country in such a crude way. It is actually about ensuring that the country is defended and has the capability to defend itself. He talked about warships never being based in Scotland, but conveniently forgot to tell the House that our submarine base and defence are in Scotland and that that would be put at risk if we followed the proposals to abandon the nuclear deterrent that he and his party want us to follow. The Scottish nationalist party should be honest in this debate and say that what is being proposed for an independent Scotland would not have anything near the footprint or the proud history that is there at the moment. He referred fleetingly to the idea of regiments, and the idea that the SNP would reinstate all those regiments in an independent Scotland is complete nonsense.

The hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) mentioned the White Paper on independence. I read it in detail, and not only its costings but its military strategy were complete and abject nonsense.

Bob Stewart: I thank my friend for allowing me to intervene. The Scottish nationalist party would have six battalions of infantry, which is twice the number pro rata that my constituents have in England. Pro rata, Scotland has twice the number of infantry battalions that English men and women have.

Mr Jones: I agree, which is why the White Paper was complete nonsense. Not only did the sums not add up, but there were no practical proposals to generate those forces from an independent Scotland. Scotland would have information, surveillance, target acquisition, and reconnaissance capabilities and other assets but would have no capacity, because of the numbers involved, to analyse what was collected or what its purpose was. For example, it would need fast jets and other things. It was just bizarre, to be honest.

Brendan O’Hara: Does the hon. Gentleman think it fair and equitable that Scotland has only 6.3% of the armed forces personnel, down from 7.1% in 2012?

Mr Jones: I know that the Scottish nationalist party wants to play up its victim mentality, which it has turned into an art form that I admire, but the idea to which the hon. Gentleman’s White Paper refers, which is that Scotland could provide the manpower needed for its proposals from the Scottish population, which is getting older, was absolute nonsense—[*Interruption.*] May I give him some evidence? He needs only to look at the recruitment to Scottish regiments when they were reorganised. Why was one regiment in Scotland—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. We have moved way off the subject of the Bill. I understand that there is a desire to keep proceedings going, so I am

not trying to pin it down to a tight debate, but I like to try to keep the debate on the subject of the Bill at least a little, so I am sure that the hon. Gentleman could mention it now and again. Given his experience, I know that that will never be a difficulty.

Mr Jones: I would refer, for example, to the recruitment of overseas nationals from the Commonwealth. The regiments that had to backfill with Fijians were the Scottish regiments because they could not get the numbers within Scotland. If the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute has some magic pool of people in Scotland who will suddenly join the armed forces or if there is some huge boom that will happen in the next few years that means that 18-year-olds and fit individuals will join the armed forces, I would like to see them.

Brendan O’Hara: The hon. Gentleman is not exactly doing the idea of the United Kingdom a great service. Indeed, he is pointing out everything that is wrong with the current system.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I think we are now going to get back to the Bill. We have had enough playing around. Kevan Jones, have you finished?

Mr Jones: Certainly not.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is all right then. What I will say is that you have finished on this point.

Mr Jones: Absolutely.

Mark Spencer (Sherwood) (Con): I shall try to resist the urge to go off the point, Mr Deputy Speaker. The shadow Minister is a very experienced Member of Parliament and when he started his political career the world was a different place from what it is today. Does he recognise the necessity of having a much more flexible military system to deal with the threats that are evolving and changing in the world today?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I think I might be able to help here. The hon. Gentleman might have been referring to the civil war as regards Kevan Jones, as he has been around for a long time, but we are not going to open up a debate about when he first got here and how the armed forces have changed.

Mr Jones: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, however. It is not just the equipment and how we deploy things that has changed. The armed forces do not sit in a vacuum away from the rest of society, and that is one of the main issues for consideration. Things that were acceptable 20, 30 or 40 years ago for young people who joined the armed forces no longer are. When I was a Minister talking to senior military personnel, I heard that young people were far more questioning, although not in a disrespectful way, and more knowledgeable about their rights. They wanted to engage rather than take instructions. That is a challenge for the armed forces. We need to ensure that there are mechanisms in place for when things go wrong and, as I said in an intervention during the speech from the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond), a safety valve to deal with complaints.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: The hon. Gentleman mentioned that as a Minister he visited HMS Raleigh. Does he agree that during those six weeks' initial sea training, from the time they arrive until they pass out, a massive transformation occurs in those young people?

Mr Jones: Indeed. I have always said that. As the current ministerial team recognises, we should celebrate the life chances which membership of our armed forces gives young people. They get opportunities and skills that many of them would otherwise not have. That initial training is part of that ongoing process. It is not newsworthy to say that joining the armed forces is good for their career prospects, and what I am about to say might not be popular, but all the evidence suggests that it is good for their mental health as well. However, when things go wrong in service or after service, we need to make sure that mechanisms are in place to deal with that.

The hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) spoke about the armed forces federation, which might be relevant in that situation, although I am not sure how it would fit into the Bill. Clearly, this is the SNP's latest campaign issue, but may I disappoint the hon. Gentleman? I got there first: I introduced a ten-minute rule Bill on that topic in about 2005. In other countries, as he said, such organisations work effectively, and provided it did not interfere with the chain of command, an armed forces federation could improve the system, as it does in other countries, by acting as a safety valve. Alas, having read the Bill, which I am not sure others have, I am not sure how we could get that into the Bill.

We will examine the Bill in detail in Committee and my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) has outlined our approach. We will not oppose the Bill. Much of what it contains is sensible and includes a number of tidying-up measures. In any scrutiny process, it is important that any changes made do not result in unforeseen consequences, so in Committee we need to make sure that we road-test our ideas to destruction. I accept the assurance from the Secretary of State on the fire regulations. Those seem sensible, but it may be helpful if chief fire officers are asked for their views before the Bill goes to Committee.

I look forward to serving on the Committee for my third Armed Forces Bill. I am thankful that it will not be the marathon of the 2006 Bill. Our approach will be constructive, with the aim of ensuring the best outcome. Across the House, we want the best for our armed forces personnel.

1.34 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): We have had a useful and interesting debate. It is a pleasure to follow a veteran such as the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones). Compared with him, I feel like a mere newcomer as this will be only my second Armed Forces Bill. I am most grateful to hon. Members on both sides of the House for the contributions they have made and I thank them for their interest.

Unusually for the Ministry of Defence, this is the third piece of substantive legislation we have introduced in the past two years, the other two being the Defence Reform Act 2014 and the Armed Forces (Service

Complaints and Financial Assistance) Act 2015. I am grateful to the hon. Member for North Durham for his positive comments as the ombudsman starts her new role early in the new year. It is not too surprising that the Armed Forces Bill we have introduced this year is relatively modest and focused mainly on the service justice system. Modest it may be, but that in no way diminishes the significance of its provisions, as it provides for the continuation of the single system of service law under the Armed Forces Act 2006 which applies to all members of the armed forces, wherever in the world they are serving.

As we heard during today's debate, this Bill mostly covers a small number of issues relevant to the service justice system, plus the wider defence issue concerning statutory powers for MOD firefighters, which I will come to in a moment. Hon. Members raised a number of points about these proposals and also about issues that we have not included in the Bill. Indeed, much of the discussion seems to have been on issues that are not included in the Bill. I shall attempt to deal with as many of these as I can, and undertake to write to anybody to whom I fail to give an answer today.

My hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) made a passionate and well informed speech on behalf of the armed forces, based in no small part on his own service, to which I pay tribute. My hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) has a long-standing family connection to the armed forces and asked some detailed questions about Devonport, about which I will write to her in due course. My hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) made a plea for more investment in technology. He may be aware of the announcement by the Secretary of State of an innovation fund as part of the strategic defence and security review, and the increasing work of the defence growth partnerships. I encourage him to visit Army headquarters in his constituency, which I would be delighted to arrange. In fact, I sense an invitation winging its way to him as we speak.

My hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond) made a passionate speech. I am not sure I was entirely grateful to her for reminding me that it is 27 years since I went to Sandhurst, but I was cheered up to turn around and see my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). I think it may be a few more than 27 years since he went there. My hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South gave a powerful speech focusing on many areas of the military covenant, in particular mental health. This is a key area and she will be aware of the improvements that have been made in recent times, partly as a result of the "Fighting Fit" report by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison). I join her in commending the charity Combat Stress, which was the first charity I visited after taking up my appointment.

I shall respond to the contributions from other hon. Members as I touch briefly on some of the clauses in the Bill, but only those that were referred to during the debate. In her opening comments the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) raised the issue of visiting foreign forces being subject to the Act. I acknowledge her concerns and look forward to exploring the matter in Committee. I draw the attention of the House to the recent Westminster Hall debate on the unfortunate events at Bassingbourn, in which the current Government position was outlined.

[Mark Lancaster]

Clauses 3 to 5 simplify the process of charging offences under the 2006 Act. Both my hon. Friends the Members for Beckenham and for Filton and Bradley Stoke sought reassurance about the role of the commanding officer. Commanding officers will continue to be concerned with probably over 90% of service issues. It will be only about 10% of issues that they will not deal with directly, but they will continue to be kept firmly informed of what is going on.

The hon. Members for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) and for Garston and Halewood asked why sexual assault was not included among the most serious offences in schedule 2. I want to make it clear at the outset that sexual assault is absolutely unacceptable in wider society or in the armed forces. Schedule 2 to the Armed Forces Act 2006 sets out the most serious disciplinary and criminal offences, including murder, kidnapping, grievous bodily harm and rape. A commanding officer must make the service police aware of an allegation or circumstance which indicates that a schedule 2 offence may have been committed. To move sexual assault to schedule 2 would make it a legal requirement for every allegation of sexual assault—an offence which covers a wide range of conduct—to be referred directly to the service police, whether or not the victim wanted that to happen.

We take the view that there are already processes and safeguards in place to ensure that victims of such offences are properly supported and that any allegations are properly investigated. All commanding officers are under a legal duty to ensure that all offences are investigated appropriately. Guidance given to commanding officers makes it clear when it would be appropriate to make the service police aware of an allegation. Guidance also sets out clearly the way in which these cases should be handled and the support that is to be provided to victims. We believe that the current legal arrangements and the guidance to commanding officers provide an appropriate framework for investigating these offences, but I accept once again that that could be discussed in Committee.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned sexual harassment. This is as much about changing culture as it is about legislation. The Chief of the General Staff has made addressing issues of equality, diversity and inclusivity a priority in order to ensure that the Army is a modern employer that is capable of recruiting talent from all sections of society. The Army's change programme on maximising talent, which the Chief of the General Staff launched on 19 June, demonstrates the progressive nature of the measures being taken to ensure that talent is able to thrive, regardless of ethnicity, gender or sexuality.

The survey was conducted between March and April 2014 and was sent to over 24,000 regular and reserve men and women, and over 7,000 responses were received. The overall conclusion from the survey was that there is an issue with an overly sexualised culture in which inappropriate behaviour is deemed acceptable. Although that does reflect wider society, the Army's values and standards mean that it should not be accepted as the norm. I am delighted that the Chief of the General Staff is taking action to address that through his leadership code.

Clauses 14 and 15 deal with the powers of MOD firefighters in an emergency. I would like to reassure Opposition Members that the Chief Fire Officers Association was consulted and that the letter was published on its members' forum, advising all chief fire officers in England and Wales of the provisions. Only Hampshire fire and rescue service responded, and it was positive about the provisions.

The hon. Members for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara), for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) and for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) all touched, understandably, on matters relating to Scotland. With regard to manpower in Scotland, there are currently 9,400 military personnel and 3,770 civilian personnel based in Scotland. The UK is delivering on a realistic plan for defence. The number of military personnel in Scotland is actually set to increase, but it is also likely to be affected by the SDSR, which will be published in due course.

The number of personnel at various locations across the UK, including Scotland, will fluctuate as the military make the necessary changes in unit moves to deliver the Future Force 2020 basing lay-down and target strength. The UK Government's basing plans, which were announced last year, offer clarity and stability in our defence footprint in Scotland. That is a visible sign of our commitment to Scotland and to Scotland's continued vital role in defence. On current plans, by 2020 Scotland will be home to all Royal Navy submarines, one of the Army's seven adaptable force brigades and one of the three RAF fast jet main operating bases. Her Majesty's Naval Base Clyde is already the single largest employment site in Scotland. Overall, employment figures will rise to 8,200 by 2020.

Hon. Members also touched on armed forces representation. Representation and safeguarding the wellbeing of service personnel are vital functions of the armed forces chain of command. The MOD recognises the British Armed Forces Federation and other such organisations as effective mechanisms by which the views of service personnel can become known. Service personnel are free to join them, provided they do not take a particularly active part in any political activity. To be honest, we are not aware of any groundswell of opinion from members of our armed forces that the remit of the armed forces federations should be extended or that they should be established on a statutory basis.

As I have made clear, the Bill is important to the armed forces, not least because it renews the legislation necessary for them to exist as disciplined forces. As the debate has demonstrated, it is also important to us here in Parliament, because it provides for our scrutiny of that legislation. That scrutiny is achieved by means of an annual continuation order, which must be approved by both Houses, and by primary legislation every five years.

I have a personal interest in this Bill. As a member of the reserve forces, I have been subject to the provisions of the 2006 Act, and many friends and colleagues still are. I also take very seriously the obligations that I have to the men and women who choose to abide by the high standards of discipline and behaviour that this Bill supports. I very much look forward to taking it through the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

ARMED FORCES BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Armed Forces Bill:

Select Committee

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Select Committee.

(2) The Select Committee shall report the Bill to the House on or before 17 December 2015.

Committee of the whole House, Consideration and Third Reading

(3) On report from the Select Committee, the Bill shall be re-committed to a Committee of the whole House.

(4) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House on re-committal, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall be taken in one day in accordance with the following provisions of this Order.

(5) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House and any proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which proceedings in Committee of the whole House are commenced.

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

Programming committee

(7) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings in Committee of the whole House, to any proceedings on Consideration or to proceedings on Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(8) Any other proceedings on the Bill (including any proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments or on any further messages from the Lords) may be programmed.—(*George Hollingbery.*)

Question agreed to.

ARMED FORCES BILL (SELECT COMMITTEE)

Ordered,

That the following provisions shall apply to the Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill:

(1) The Committee shall have 14 members, to be nominated by the Committee of Selection.

(2) The Committee shall have power—

(a) to send for persons, papers and records, to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House, to adjourn from place to place and to report from day to day the minutes of evidence taken before it;

(b) to admit the public during the examination of witnesses and during consideration of the Bill (but not otherwise); and

(c) to appoint specialist advisers either to supply information not readily available or to elucidate matters of complexity relating to the provisions of the Bill.—(*George Hollingbery.*)

Business without Debate

ELECTORAL COMMISSION

Ordered,

That the Motion in the name of Chris Grayling relating to the Electoral Commission shall be treated as if it related to an instrument subject to the provisions of Standing Order No. 118 (Delegated Legislation Committees) in respect of which notice has been given that the instrument be approved.—(*George Hollingbery.*)

Alcohol Harm and Older People

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

1.45 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): It is a pleasure to be here and I welcome the opportunity to speak about the very real and damaging effects of alcohol harm on older people. I am pleased that the Minister for Public Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Jane Ellison), is present and commend her for her passionate commitment to ensuring that key public health matters, and a strong preventive health agenda, remain high on the Government's set of priorities for this Parliament.

I should perhaps clarify at the outset that I am seeking not to promote further legislation or regulation in this sphere, but to highlight the need for more education and information to help people make positive choices about their drinking; to enjoy it but at the same time maintain their own health and wellbeing. We all want to live longer—and we are—but, importantly, we want to live longer and healthier so that we can enjoy those later years. That is why this subject is so important.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way so early in her speech—I indicated to her before the debate that I intended to intervene. The theme that she is talking about, which many Members of the House, including me, would agree with, is this: everything in moderation. In other words, people should be careful about what they take and how often they take it.

Fiona Bruce: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Although most people are able to drink in moderation and enjoy the benefits of the socialising and relaxation often associated with drink, for many others it comes with significant costs.

Before proceeding any further, I ought to clarify what I mean by “older people”. Depressingly, I am referring to those of us who are over 45. A huge amount has been done in the past few years to tackle excessive drinking by the young, and encouraging figures show that drinking among young people is falling. I am also referring not so much to binge drinking, which perhaps is what we all associate with drinking among young people, but to harmful drinking. That does not have to mean getting wildly drunk and being hungover the next day; it can be continuous drinking, perhaps every day of the week, which does not allow the body's organs to have a break from alcohol. People are often unaware that that can be extremely harmful.

Alcohol is a leading risk factor for death and disease in the UK; it is the leading risk factor after smoking and obesity. As a toxin, it is the cause of many acute and chronic diseases, and—Members might be surprised to hear this—it affects almost every organ in the body. The relationship between alcohol and liver disease is well known, but alcohol is also a risk factor in a number of cancers, in cardiovascular disease and in gastro-intestinal diseases such as pancreatitis, and of course it is also a leading cause of accident and injury. On that topic, the all-party group on alcohol harm, which I chair, is currently conducting an inquiry into the considerable

[Fiona Bruce]

impact of alcohol on the emergency services. I look forward to being able to update the House on that work in due course.

Given its associations with so many and such serious health conditions, it is unsurprising that the impact of alcohol on NHS services is considerable. In 2012-13 there were more than 1 million alcohol-related hospital admissions, where an alcohol-related disease, injury or condition was the primary reason for the admission or a secondary diagnosis. As the Minister will be aware, the costs of this to the NHS are estimated to be at least £3.5 billion per year—on its own, more than a third of the Treasury receipts from alcohol—yet estimates for the wider personal, social and economic costs of alcohol vary from £21 billion to £55 billion in England alone. We therefore have much to address.

I must emphasise, though, that recent trends in the decline of underage drinking and drinking among young people are encouraging, which leads me to believe that we can similarly address and support improved positive drinking among older people. The proportion of 11 to 15-year-olds who have ever had a drink fell from 61% in 2003 to 38% in 2014, and the proportion of those who got drunk in the past week declined dramatically from 26% to just 8% in the same period.

Encouragingly, this positive trend is beginning to extend to the 18 to 25-year-old age group, many of whom, interestingly, now choose not to drink at all. That includes my own son, a young man in his 20s. He is a sportsman who simply does not drink. A huge amount of work has been done in this area. I commend the Government and their partnership working with many agencies to educate and support this age group to reduce levels of harmful drinking. One of the successes has been the introduction of street pastors. Another has been the presence of club hosts in clubs and pubs, where people on the “older sister” model, perhaps slightly older than those who might drink irresponsibly, will approach a young person they think is drinking too much and say, “Perhaps you need to think about how much you’ve drunk.”

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for her comment about street pastors. In the past month, street pastors have started to be active in my constituency, with 13 churches and 43 volunteers coming together on this. That is a very clear commitment by community members themselves to address the issue. I recommend those in any constituency where there are no street pastors to ask the churches to be involved, because the benefits are great.

Fiona Bruce: I entirely agree. In my constituency, similarly, there are some excellent street pastor groups.

Voluntary organisations, the drinks industry, publicans and the police, together with local and national authorities, have done a huge amount to address drinking by younger people. With older people, though, much of their drinking is a hidden problem, particularly among the baby boomer generation who often drink at home, many of whom have a dangerously limited awareness of alcohol’s harmful effects. This is a ticking time bomb not just for the individuals concerned but in terms of the public cost of their healthcare in the years to come, with an increasingly ageing population.

According to the Health Survey for England 2013, 10 million people in England drink at a higher level than the Government’s lower-risk guidelines, with serious long-term implications for their health. This is particularly true of older people. Many of those in the baby boomer generation drink on an almost daily basis. The survey found that 14% of 45 to 64-year-olds drank alcohol on five or more days in the past week, compared with just 2% of their younger counterparts in the 18 to 24-year-old group. Alcohol-related hospital admissions among this middle-aged group account for 40% of all alcohol-related hospital admissions and 58% of all admissions for alcoholic liver disease. Tragically, this age group also accounts for the majority of alcohol-related deaths.

Some of the impacts of alcohol are rather less obvious but no less devastating. For example, there is a significant link between alcohol use and the risk of hypertension, which is a factor in a number of related illnesses such as stroke, heart disease and other vascular diseases. Alcohol is generally associated with poorer mental health. In later life, alcohol can be used as a comfort for many of the shocks that people experience in middle age, such as adjustment to life after divorce, redundancy, retirement, children leaving home, or bereavement. Loneliness or depression can also be a factor. These points in life can be very challenging, and they are all associated with higher rates of alcohol use. People need to be made aware that when these life shocks hit them in later life, as they do the majority of us, they need to look out to avoid slipping into harmful drinking patterns because the consequences can be catastrophic in just a few years.

The majority of older people are not aware of the potential damage they are doing to their health or relationships through unhealthy drinking. Office for National Statistics figures show that the greatest number of people who did not drink but now do drink are women over 65, many of whom live alone. That is a particularly concerning statistic that we need to bear in mind. Research by charity Drinkaware and by Ipsos MORI suggests that there is a large group of people who are sleepwalking into poor health. Only 20% of 45 to 65-year-olds think they will have health problems if they continue to drink as they do, yet more than a third are drinking at above the level of Government guidelines. Shockingly, one in nine says that they have already been told by a friend, family member or health professional that they should cut down.

Interestingly, this issue was raised in the previous debate—I do not think the Minister was here—when the shadow Defence Minister, the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), spoke about needing to address it for those who had been in our armed services, although not in a nanny-culture way. I strongly echo that.

For many, drinking is an everyday occurrence, but when confronted with it, people do not realise that even drinking at relatively low levels but on a continuous—that is, virtually daily—basis can be harmful. Here is a typical comment:

“On reflection when you look back it’s not the fact that I drink to get drunk constantly—that would be a separate issue...but as part of the relaxing process...on a daily basis at home. I just didn’t realise how many excuses I have to...drink.”

Misuse of alcohol has a devastating impact on relationships and families, and on children in particular. That should be given greater prominence. In 2012, a

survey by the Children's Commissioner, "Silent voices: supporting children and young people affected by parental alcohol misuse", estimated that between 1999 and 2009 more than 700,000 children were affected by parental or other significant adult drinking. It said that parental alcohol misuse is far more prevalent than parental drug use and called for a greater emphasis on it in policy and practice. It is a matter of social justice that we address this, not just for children but for the poorest in our society, because research shows that those who are less well-off are less resilient and more vulnerable to the impact of harmful drinking. Professional people, some of whom drink more, are able to withstand the impacts better.

As chair of the all-party group on alcohol harm, I urge that greater prominence be given to this issue, particularly to the harms caused to older people. A number of strands could be taken forward, alongside other initiatives that I am sure the Minister will consider. One very practical example was given in an excellent report that I had the privilege of launching here in the House last month: "Under Pressure" by the Treat 15 Expert Group, which comprises doctors, nurses and other health professionals. It suggested that whenever an individual has their blood pressure taken, mention could be made, just in those few minutes, of drinking being linked to the risk of high blood pressure, and indicators of the harmful health implications associated with that. It is estimated that about 7.5 million people in this country are at risk of high blood pressure. Just identifying the link with harmful drinking could help a large number of people to improve their health prospects. In those few moments, often when nothing else is done or said, there is a real opportunity, at no cost at all, for the medical profession to provide an important service.

There is also an urgent need for public education on the harmful effects that drinking can have on older people. People need information that is simple, accessible and non-judgmental. There are some innovative resources, such as the Drinkaware app and the Change4Life booze buster programme, which help people make informed choices about their drinking and support them to make a change that could have significant benefits for their health and wellbeing.

We also need more prominent, comprehensive and consistent public health messages from Government, the NHS and Public Health England about the risks of harmful drinking. A report will be released shortly and I look forward to reading its suggestions as to how the issue can be addressed. Given that people are living longer, it is important that they are informed about how to live healthier longer lives.

The alcohol industry also has an important role to play by working in collaboration with others. It is a key partner and has made a great deal of progress working in partnership with pubs and clubs and with the Government. The Government challenged the industry to remove 1 billion units from the alcohol market over two years. In fact, 1.3 billion units were removed—the equivalent, apparently, of the whole nation going dry for one week a year. One of the means by which that was achieved was through providing house wines of less alcoholic strength and smaller glasses. I also commend the industry for the fact that almost 93% of alcohol bottles now warn women that it would be better for them to consider not drinking during pregnancy.

Jim Shannon: There has been talk in the press over the past two weeks about the best message to give to pregnant women about alcohol consumption. Does the hon. Lady agree—perhaps the Minister will say this in her response to the debate—that the best message and policy would be that pregnant women should drink no alcohol whatsoever?

Fiona Bruce: That is my personal view. Women have suffered from mixed messages over the past 20 years and more. It would be very helpful to have a clear message. Just six years ago, only 17.6% of products carried a warning label about drinking in pregnancy; the figure is now 93%. I would like it to be 100% and it would be very helpful if the Government gave a clear message that not drinking in pregnancy is probably the wisest choice of all for the woman and her child.

In conclusion, I ask the Government to consider working in partnership with us to develop strategies to reduce alcohol-related harms in older people, just as they have done, with some success, to reduce unhealthy drinking in younger people. No one now questions the role of Government in promoting healthy eating. The same rule could, I hope, be undertaken in future, with similar, commendable vigour, by the Government with regard to encouraging healthy drinking.

2.3 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jane Ellison): It is delightful to be here, a little earlier than expected, for this important debate on alcohol harm and older people, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on securing it. She laid out extremely clearly some of the challenges we face.

Alcohol is one of the four biggest behavioural risk factors for disease and death in the United Kingdom, along with smoking, obesity and lack of physical activity. As my hon. Friend alluded to, it is also a significant contributor to some 60 health conditions, including circulatory and digestive diseases, liver disease, a number of cancers and depression. That evidence base is growing all the time, and it is important that we highlight that. Drinking can lead to a range of conditions and, as she said, it is estimated to have contributed to more than 1 million hospital admissions in 2013-14, costing the NHS a considerable amount of money. Much of that burden of disease and death is preventable. To this day, people continue to be affected by alcohol misuse, so it is right that we give the matter our attention. A lot of that is because of ignorance and misunderstanding, and because we perhaps do not talk about it as much as we should. My hon. Friend is also right to say that getting the tone of the debate and the advice right is sometimes a challenge.

There is a lot of interest in the issue in Parliament, and we have also heard about how alcohol misuse can have a significant and devastating impact on the lives of our constituents. I am sure that all parliamentarians present will have met people who, if they are not themselves personally affected, have seen their family affected by alcohol misuse. It is very sad when we see that.

Many of the concerns were set out in the all-party group on alcohol harm report earlier this year, and I congratulate the group on that work. Obviously, I have

[Jane Ellison]

met affected individuals and I have read many letters sent to me by colleagues detailing the concerns and frustrations of those who see the cost of alcohol harm and the impact it has on their everyday lives. They want action to be taken right across public life, including from Government, industry and beyond.

The majority of people who drink alcohol do so in an entirely responsible way. Although I welcome recent falls in alcohol consumption, we cannot be complacent, which I certainly am not. There are still many who drink above the lower-risk guidelines. As my hon. Friend has said, Office for National Statistics data suggest that the proportion of over-65s who are drinking above those lower-risk drinking guidelines is increasing. Harms such as liver disease, as well as the social impacts such as crime and domestic violence, remain much too high. This is an important public health issue, to which I continue to give attention. I regularly meet Department of Health officials to ensure that progress is maintained on cutting the number of people of all ages drinking at harmful levels. Before closing, I will touch on occasions in the next few months when we might pay particular attention to that topic.

A number of actions have already been taken. For example, sales of alcohol below the level of duty plus VAT were banned in May last year, to tackle the worst cases of very cheap and harmful alcohol, meaning it is no longer legal to sell a can of ordinary lager for less than about 40p.

In the last Parliament we worked with industry to take alcohol units out of the market. As my hon. Friend said, more than 1 billion units were taken out of the market. I have challenged industry to build on that: it is a good start, but we can go further and I have had discussions about what that new effort might look like. We can do more to make sure that we have the widest range possible of lower strength drinks available to the public. Some of the simple substitutions my hon. Friend has mentioned can make a considerable difference to help bring people back to lower-risk drinking.

We have also introduced an alcohol risk assessment into the NHS health check. It is aimed at 40 to 74-year-olds. Health checks provide a chance to identify and manage a range of risk factors, such as high blood pressure and cholesterol levels as well as alcohol consumption. They enable identification and brief advice interventions to be provided in primary care and, indeed, non-health care settings. We know that that can work, with one out of every eight people who receive an intervention to help them moderate their behaviour responding to it. Since April 2011, 5.6 million people have taken up the offer of a health check, and I continually challenge the system to build on that, because it can provide a reality check for many people who have not noticed harmful drinking creep up on them. That is really important.

All health professionals have a public health role and we need to make sure that the system has enough capacity and that our workforce are adequately trained to tackle challenges such as alcohol misuse and, of course, drinking in pregnancy, which we have debated often in this House. There is keen interest in the issue and perhaps we will return to it in more detail when we consult on the revised guidelines, which I will mention in a moment.

Since April, the standard general medical services contract has included delivery of an alcohol risk assessment to all patients registering with a new GP. That is another important moment at which people think about their health and there is a chance to have such a conversation afresh. That assessment has the potential to raise awareness of alcohol as a risk factor with a large percentage of the population. By 2018, about 60,000 doctors will have been trained to recognise, assess and understand the management of alcohol use and its associated health and social problems. It is important that in future doctors can give better advice on the health impact of the effects of substance use and misuse.

The Government have given local areas more powers and responsibilities to help them tackle harm in their populations. We have backed that with ring-fenced budgets to improve people's health, and that includes responsibility for tackling problem drinking. We have given local authorities more than £8 billion in funding over three years. As I have seen during my many visits as the Minister with responsibility for public health, local authorities are very well placed to take forward the public health role. They know their communities well, often at a level of detail that the Government could never understand, and they know where to put the right services to help their communities.

The Government have continued to work with Public Health England, which is giving higher priority to alcohol issues. In looking at alcohol during the next 18 months, PHE will examine how a whole-system approach might provide a focus, particularly on return for investment. Local authorities are keen to make sure that they spend money wisely and that their budgets yield good results. That is no less true for public health than for anything else. The work is intended to assist the Government, local authorities and the NHS to invest with confidence in evidence-based policies, prevention and treatment interventions. Public Health England's support for local authorities' public health role will continue to be vital. I do not want local authorities to try to replicate the evidence base that national experts obtain. Such experts should provide the evidence base, and local authorities can then be in the position to take it, adapt it to the local needs and build on it.

To help local areas to target and tailor their activities, Public Health England has developed both liver disease and local alcohol profiles. Those are very important tools to put in the hands of commissioners and those who know their communities best. The profiles provide transparent, comparable information to health and wellbeing boards, commissioners, service providers and professionals, letting them look at their own performance and, importantly, at that of others to see how to improve their outcomes.

PHE will also expand the Healthier Lives web tool, which includes indicators on alcohol hospital admissions and figures for waiting times and completions of alcohol treatment. That will allow an area to build up a complete picture of how well it is doing, particularly against national averages and comparable areas. As in all things in the world of public health, there is considerable local variation—the challenges are not all the same in different areas—so we need to give local areas such tools. We have seen good practice in Lancashire, which has used local alcohol profiles to inform its joint strategic needs assessment and to look at the mix and quality of the services it commissions.

Fiona Bruce: The Minister is quite right about variation. One of my concerns is about the increase in drinking among older women. Is anything being done specifically to look at how they can be helped to reduce the effect of alcohol harm?

Jane Ellison: I will come on to matters relevant to that, but I will also say more about a possible opportunity for a wider debate on this important issue a bit further down the line.

It is important to consider what can be done through secondary care. About 139 district general hospitals already offer some level of specialist alcohol service. I saw for myself such specialist work when I visited Blackpool in 2014. One team told me about how it took the opportunity of people being admitted for something related to alcohol to talk to them about their drinking. They described, with huge understatement, as a “teachable moment” the time when someone is in hospital having suffered, either through a disease or an accident, an unfortunate effect from alcohol. They are right: the idea of talking to people at the moment when they are most receptive is vital.

We would like to have similar alcohol care teams in every hospital to take such opportunities to identify the problem and provide brief advice to patients, as well as medical management. That is again based on the evidence that higher-risk and increasing-risk drinkers who receive brief advice are twice as likely to have moderated their drinking six to 12 months after an intervention—a quick response—compared with drinkers who get no intervention. We want greater use of such really good opportunities. It is not costly or, indeed, lengthy; it is about timeliness.

There are means for people to monitor and manage their own alcohol intake. Technology is increasingly deployed to good effect in a number of areas of personal health monitoring, and alcohol intake is no different. Apps such as the one developed by Drinkaware, which my hon. Friend mentioned, can help people to track how much they are drinking, what it costs them and even the number of calories. We know that personal estimates of weekly drinking are not always as accurate as keeping a log. That is quite well documented, so individuals may find apps and tracking mechanisms particularly helpful.

The Big Lottery Fund, in partnership with the support charity Addaction, is investing £25 million in an alcohol-related harm prevention and awareness programme for the over-50s. Rethink Good Health is a UK-wide programme aimed at those aged 50 and over. My hon. Friend very thoughtfully explored some of the reasons why people may find themselves in such a situation in later life. We would recognise from our constituency case load and perhaps from our social circles how life events can take a toll on health and lead to people drinking more. She mentioned some of them, but I would highlight how such problems can be a driver, and sometimes a product, of loneliness and isolation.

As the House will know, Dame Sally Davies, the chief medical officer, is overseeing a review of the lower-risk alcohol guidelines to ensure that they are founded on the best science. We want the guidelines to help people at all stages of life to make informed choices about their drinking. The guidelines development group, made up of independent experts, has been tasked with developing the guidelines for UK chief medical officers to consider.

The group has researched and is developing a proposal on the guidelines, including a UK-wide approach for guidance on alcohol and pregnancy. We expect to consult on that.

I know that that is an issue, and that there are worries about people receiving different advice, so let me say a word about the consistency of health messages. As I have said before at the Dispatch Box, where the evidence base is not completely certain—leading experts to reach slightly different conclusions—there will be a certain level of debate. I appreciate that that can be extremely challenging for the public and that there is a role for trying to provide clarity, but guidance must always be based on the best evidence base.

Jim Shannon: The Minister knows that Members of this House, myself in particular, have the utmost respect for her and her position, for what she does and for the guidance she gives. However, the very possibility of uncertainty poses an important question for us. The message must go out from the Minister and from us as elected representatives that during pregnancy, there must be no alcohol at all. That has to be evidence-based, as she said, but there should be the same message so that there is no uncertainty.

Jane Ellison: The UK chief medical officers are extremely alive to that challenge and it is something to which they have given considerable thought. Perhaps we will return to it when the guidelines are consulted on. I assure the hon. Gentleman that I have had that conversation and that I have been at pains to emphasise how regularly the issue comes up in Parliament. I know that it is being addressed and that it will be talked about when we consult on the new guidelines.

It is clear that there is more that all of us can do. We have to recognise the contribution that not just individuals, but businesses, communities and local government can make to help people better understand the risks associated with alcohol. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton that we need to do more. We are working to ensure that there is a better understanding of the risks.

This is an issue to which we will return. The publication of the new alcohol guidelines will provide a moment in the national debate when we can look at it closely with the public, experts, health professionals and industry. That will be a stimulus to fresh thinking, more public education and debate. Those in Parliament who have a particular interest in the issue will want to participate in that important debate. However, change will not happen overnight. I know that the hon. Members who are here will agree that raising awareness of the issue is key. We have an evidence base to show that, in some cases, raising awareness with individuals is the most important thing we can do to help them.

This debate has been an important opportunity to revisit these important issues. We will return to them in more detail in the coming months. That will be a great opportunity to reflect not just on the good progress that we have seen among younger people, but on the work that we are yet to do.

Question put and agreed to.

2.20 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 15 October 2015

[MR CHARLES WALKER *in the Chair*]

Prisons: Planning and Policies

1.30 pm

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Ninth Report from the Justice Committee of Session 2014-15, on Prisons: planning and policies, HC 309, and the Government response, Cm 9129.

As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. This debate is a voyage of discovery for many of us, because very few of us were members of the Select Committee at the time the report was drawn up—[*Interruption*]*—*apart from my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell), who will therefore carry the bulk of the burden on the report's technical detail.

As well as welcoming you to the Chair, Mr Walker, this debate gives me the opportunity to pay tribute to my predecessor as Chairman of the Committee, Sir Alan Beith. He was not only a very distinguished Committee Chairman, but a good friend to many of us, and I want to put on record how grateful I am for the support and wise advice that he has given me since I took over the chairmanship. I am sure that that will be recognised across the House.

This will not be a long debate. The report itself is not long, but it is important because it touches on key issues relating to prison policy. Interestingly, that has become topical once more with the very welcome comments from the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice. I am very grateful to see the Minister for prisons in his place today, and I thank him for the courtesy that he has already shown to our Committee in responding to a number of inquiries that we have made of him.

In essence, I want to concentrate on two issues that the report highlights: first, the size of the prison population, and secondly, the sort of regime and purposeful behaviour that we ought to see in our prisons. It is worth bearing in mind that against the background to this report, the most up-to-date figures, as of 2 October this year—after the report was published—show that the prison population is now 85,973. That is one of the highest rates of incarceration in western Europe, and we ought to pause to think about why that is the case. We know, too, that the National Offender Management Service is operating at about 98% of its usable operational capacity, so things are pretty tight in our prison regime. NOMS is—properly, I think—going through a period of substantial change, with significant modernisation work, and the Department will have to take its share of the necessary savings that we have to make as part of the deficit reduction strategy.

A number of members of the current Committee and I had the chance to visit Holloway prison recently, and I want to pay tribute to the governor and her staff there. Despite the pressures on them, they are clearly doing a great deal to modernise, improve and upgrade their

work, and they are getting very good results indeed. There are some very dedicated people in our Prison Service, and it is worth putting that on record.

That need for change, which is recognised at Holloway and right across the prison estate, has two aspects: first, the new-for-old policy, and secondly, the benchmarking scheme. The new-for-old scheme seeks to replace old and inefficient prisons with newer and more efficient establishments. Holloway is a good example of that. I remember, many years ago, as a young barrister, having to go to see clients in the old Holloway prison, which was a pretty dreadful establishment. The work that has been done with the modern building has made things much better. I think the last prison I had to visit was Chelmsford, and we are still dealing there with old establishments and old buildings. We only have to look at Wandsworth, Wormwood Scrubs and Pentonville to see that the nature of the estate constrains our professionals' ability to do rehabilitative work. I think that we all very much welcome the Lord Chancellor's comments and his commitment to look at finding the means to replace old estates with something new and fit for purpose. The report flags up that very important aspect of the work.

The benchmarking was described by Phil Wheatley, who was the former director of NOMS, as, in effect, finding what

“the most efficient way of doing everything”

is and then making sure that everybody does it. That is why a series of benchmarks were established—those of us who have been involved in local government will be familiar with the concept and approach.

The Committee agreed with both those matters in principle but raised a number of substantive concerns: first, the rising level of overcrowding; secondly, the fall in prison performance and the extent to which understaffing may be an issue; and thirdly, prisoner and staff safety in prisons. A linkage between all those matters is clear from the report.

Overcrowding is important. It is not adequate simply to say, “Overcrowding is merely about people sharing a cell.” It goes beyond that, as the Lord Chancellor rightly recognised in his recent comments. The current chief inspector of prisons has said that two problems stem from overcrowding. The first is the whole question of physical conditions. Prison is punishment in itself—the deprivation of liberty—and we have a duty to make sure that those who are deprived of their liberty, as a legitimate punishment, none the less have decent conditions in which to live. I know that the Minister is very committed to that, but we need to make sure that that is actually delivered in practice.

The second point is the impact that overcrowding has on access to purposeful activity, and my 25 years or so in practice at the Bar made me very conscious of that. All too often, I saw clients of mine on a merry-go-round, almost. They would go into prison and experience a lack of any purposeful activity while they were there, a lack of rehabilitation, and a lack of follow-up, and lo and behold, they were putting me in fees again perhaps two or three years later. That should not be the case. Neither my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) nor I, as lawyers, want to have repeat clients frankly. It is a failure of the system, but we see too much of that in the current circumstances. Overcrowding makes it harder to do the rehabilitative

[Robert Neill]

work that is so critical, as the Government recognise. Many prisons have to operate split regimes at the moment, where half the prisoners are locked up in the mornings while the other half engage in activity, then they swap. That constraint is needless and makes it harder to deliver what we want to do.

The figures on the current state of overcrowding have been rising steadily, as has always been conceded. There were some errors in the recording of that in 2013-14, but 24.1% overcrowding seems to be the accepted figure now for that year.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Is it not right to point out that certain exceptional areas of overcrowding can be concealed beneath that average figure? I think—I may be wrong—that, in particular, York and Swansea prisons have a dramatically higher level of overcrowding. To the greatest extent possible, we need to ensure that that is not concentrated too much in individual prisons.

Robert Neill: That is absolutely right. I remember going to Swansea some years ago, where there was overcrowding even then, and that continues to be the case. That variation is really not desirable. There is a raft of constraints, and that is why, again, the new-for-old policy is hugely important. HMP Thameside, for example, was almost specifically built with the intention that it should be crowded. It was almost designed on the basis of a lack of capacity—before this Government's watch, I hasten to add. However, we do need to address some real issues in that regard.

The Government are right to say that there are constraints on reducing overcrowding, because this is a demand-driven activity. We rightly cannot seek to influence directly how the courts sentence individual offenders. There will come a time, inevitably, when it is necessary for judges to pass custodial sentences. I know, as does any practitioner, that they do not do that lightly but, at the end of the day, the Government have to provide the necessary capacity to deal with that sentencing regime. At the moment—the Minister may have more up-to-date figures than me—the National Audit Office puts the cost of eliminating overcrowding at about £900 million. I accept that it is not possible to afford that in the immediate term, but it is important to have a programme that, over time, through capital investment, will bring on the new estate that will make dealing with the issue much easier.

Overcrowding is going to be an issue, but we need to manage and deal with that. That is why the Committee was anxious to see more attention given to overcrowding than has perhaps been the case. I think that the current Secretary of State recognised that in several comments; he certainly did so in the evidence that he gave in the first session of the new Committee in this Parliament.

The recommendation was to develop a broad range of measures to reflect the realities of prison conditions. Frankly, the Government were not willing to take that recommendation on board. I hope that they will think about that. The measurement at the moment may not be realistic in terms of capturing the actuality on the ground. We need not be wedded to any particular formula. There is no magic about the way the measurement is done. It is a question of what the most efficient measure is. I hope simply that the Minister and his

colleagues will reflect again on our recommendation, particularly in the light of the Government's new commitment to rehabilitation. Perhaps that is something we can do, because it is important that we have a measure that is measurable. One piece of evidence that we were given in the previous Committee was that the current system of measurement makes it very hard to measure the improvements and the outputs and inputs.

The other matters on which we concentrated were benchmarking and staffing levels. The inspectorate of prisons uses a four-stage healthy prison test in relation to its benchmarking. The four key figures are safety, respect, purposeful activity and resettlement. I do not think that anyone would disagree with those. Sadly, there has been, according to the evidence that the Select Committee received, a fall in those standards in the past couple of years. Each year, the inspector of prisons makes their report and provides a percentage figure for the inspected adult prisons and young offenders institutes that have been rated as good or reasonably good. Regrettably, the percentage of prisons so rated has fallen on each of those criteria, particularly in the past year.

Our report, comparing the figures for 2013-14 with those for 2014-15, showed that there had been a number of falls, which it is worth putting on the record. In relation to prisons inspected, the safety rating had fallen from 69% to 42%. The respect rating had fallen from 67% to 58%. For purposeful activity, it had fallen from 61% to 42%, and for resettlement it had fallen from 75% to 53%. It is fair to say that there has been an updating in the latest annual report, which I think was not available to the Select Committee at the time. It now shows safety at 52%, respect at 64%, but very worryingly from my point of view, purposeful activity at 39% and then resettlement at 57%. The linkage between purposeful activity and resettlement is, many of us would suggest, very significant. Although there are improvements on some scores, there is clearly more work to do. The Minister may have to hand yet more up-to-date figures, which I am sure he will share with us.

There is some improvement, therefore, but it does leave, overall—on the information that we have—the proportion achieving good or reasonably good ratings at about 40%. That means that 60% of prisons are not getting into that proper category. That is obviously a matter of concern. I know that the Government share that concern; I am very conscious that the Government are not complacent about the issue, but it is important that we put it on the record and see what is proposed to deal with it to take it forward.

Let me deal in particular with rehabilitative outcomes. I referred to the visit to Holloway by the current Committee. A number of my hon. Friends were on that visit. We were particularly interested to see how the restrictions on release on temporary licence sometimes denied mothers the chance to engage with childcare on ROTL and opportunities to work in the community before release. That is not, I think, for want of will among the staff involved, but it seems that we are not yet there in getting that delivered on the ground. I would be interested to hear from the Minister what more can be done on that.

The previous Committee called witnesses to find out as best they could what might have caused the fall in standards. The suggestion was that there was an issue about the incentives and earned privileges scheme—that,

of course, allows prisoners to access benefits in exchange for responsible behaviour—and about staffing levels. That was the view put by the witnesses. It has to be said in fairness that the Government took a converse view, saying that essentially this is a demand-led matter involving unexpected and more challenging prison population levels and a cultural increase in suicide rates, which I think is accepted and is a matter that we have to deal with. There is no simple, one-size-fits-all answer to all this, but it does warrant our continuing attention and concern.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): The report alludes to some evidence of increased suicide rates in the prison population and other aspects in relation to mental health in prisons. Does my hon. Friend agree that one way of addressing demand and some of the issues that he has raised about rehabilitation is to look wholesale at how mental health is tackled in prisons? As he will know, there is a very high prevalence of mental health problems in the prison population.

Robert Neill: My hon. Friend's intervention is very important. That issue concerned me when I was a practitioner. All too often I saw people with mental health issues, and frankly the estate and the arrangements were not geared up to deal with that adequately. On several occasions, one would find that the case had to be adjourned because the prison psychiatric service was not able to produce some of the necessary reports, never mind the ongoing care that was required. Often, particularly with short sentences, people are released, there are mental health issues, and there is not the follow-up. Everyone accepts that there is a need to do more about this. As I said, I am conscious that the will is not lacking; the issue is finding the best means of achieving our aim. I think that that is a most important point. Again, the age of the estate and the lack of activity contribute to the pressures on what are often quite fragile people. My experience always was that some people end up in prison because they are very bad people, but a lot of people end up in prison because they are vulnerable and fragile and their circumstances have worked out badly. They need some help to be rehabilitated. They are the people whom we can best rehabilitate, but often the facilities are not there to help them in the way that all of us would wish, so it is a very powerful point.

Understaffing of course contributes to those problems. We have seen that it affects the regime. The Government are of course doing their best in relation to restricted regimes and deploying staff on detached duty, but that is obviously not a long-term solution. We need to find a better way around the problem. It cannot be sensible in the long term that, for example, a laundry at Wormwood Scrubs, representing about £1.3 million of investment, was in effect inoperable for a period because there were not the staff there to deal with it. We have seen, for example, the inspection report on Her Majesty's young offenders institution at Cookham Wood: 36% of boys are locked up during the core day. As the report by Lord Harris of Haringey legitimately and properly highlights, these are young and often vulnerable people. They have to be punished; they have to be detained. That is right to reflect what they have done, but it is very hard to do the rehabilitative work with lock-up for that amount of time. We ought to address that as a matter of urgency.

Detached duty of course involves a degree of movement of staff. That places pressures on the staff themselves. It is necessary sometimes—I do not think that anyone would have an issue with the principle of it—but it is not desirable in the long term, because of the element of disruption for the staff themselves, but also for the prisoners. It is very difficult to build up the relationships that one would wish if one is having to detach staff and send them away from their normal arrangements. Also, of course, other staff have to work harder to compensate. It is actually a rather costly way to deal with the issue in the long term.

We have, however, seen improvements in staff turnover. We were concerned about staff morale and turnover. It is a credit to NOMS that staff turnover appears to have decreased from 15% in 2014 to 8% in 2015—credit where it is due for the work that has been done on that. There is also a recruitment drive to remedy the shortfalls. I understand that the number of officer vacancies has fallen to about 3% below the benchmarking levels. Again, that is welcome, but it is important that we sustain it, and I am sure that the Minister will update us on the work that is being done in that area.

The Committee's conclusion in its report was that the key explanation for many of the deteriorating performance levels was, in addition to the age of the estate, understaffing. That seems to be being taken on board, but I would like to know what is proposed to ensure that that is further borne down on and that we sustain the reduction in understaffing.

The Committee recommended that the Government should alter staffing benchmarks upwards to ensure that prisons returned to former levels of operational performance. The Government rejected that recommendation, and I would like to know more from the Minister about why they felt that it was not appropriate. I am sure we all agree that we ought to update and improve our statistics and benchmarking, and I would be interested to know the Government's current view and their proposals for the future. Do they anticipate further upward calibrations in the staffing benchmark, and how do they propose to deal with the problem of restricted regimes?

I will leave my hon. Friends to deal with the question of self-harm. I am conscious that I have already taken 20 minutes to open the debate, and others wish to speak. I hope that the Minister will help us on current self-harm figures. According to the figures that we have at the moment, some 2% of prisoners are on the basic regime, 52% are on the standard regime and 45% are on the enhanced regime, which indicates levels of vulnerability that need to be addressed as a matter of some urgency.

Evidence from the Prison Reform Trust highlighted the risks surrounding the first period of custody. I would be interested to hear the Government's response to that evidence and their view on how we should deal with it as well as with the number of prisoner-on-prisoner assaults, which remain a concern. Those have risen, as have the number of assaults on staff.

The previous Select Committee quite properly flagged up a number of issues in this report. There is a broader resources problem, in both capital and revenue terms, which needs to be addressed. The Committee concluded that we need to re-evaluate how we use custody, and alternatives to custody, in a cost-effective way that best promotes the safety of the public and reduces crime.

[Robert Neill]

That is entirely in line with what the Lord Chancellor said in his evidence to the Select Committee in this Session. I look forward to hearing from the Government precisely how we should take that entirely legitimate and deserving objective forward.

1.51 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is, as always, a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker, and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill). I was going to say that I am the last surviving member of the previous Justice Committee, but that would appear to suggest that all the others were dead. Since the hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) and the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) were two prominent members of that Committee, that is probably not the case. It was interesting to serve with them.

I am one of the few Members left on the Justice Committee, if not the only one, who had a role in preparing the report that we are debating. It was the Committee's first major report on prison policy. There were good reasons for undertaking it at the time, because prison policy was the subject of much reform. We wanted to look particularly at benchmarking and the new-for-old programme, which my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst has referred to. I want to comment on a couple of the points that he raised about resettlement and rehabilitation, and the engagement of prisoners in purposeful activity. Those are crucial, and they are very much interlinked in the whole programme.

As part of the preparation of the report, the Committee had a trip to Denmark and to Germany. Members might imagine, from anecdotal evidence, that the two places were very similar; in fact, we found them to be radically different. That was particularly true of Denmark. Although the feeling on the street may be that its regime is easy for prisoners, we found it to be quite stiff, and some good lessons arose from the experience. For example, we visited an open prison in Denmark that was surrounded by an enormous steel fence. That came as a bit of a shock to us, because one does not expect to see such a thing around an open prison, especially in Denmark. We asked why it was there, and the answer that we were given was that it was not so much to keep prisoners in as to keep the drug pushers out. That brought home to us the first point of similarity between the Danish system and our own: the acknowledgement that the use of drugs in prison is a major problem that has to be overcome. When we went to Germany, we found that there was the same level of drug use but, interestingly, it was not recognised to be a problem.

On our visit to Denmark we gained a particularly interesting insight into rehabilitation, which we bring out in a recommendation in the report, when we went to see how the prisoners cooked their food. I suppose that phrase gives the game away—the prisoners did not eat at enormous benches where food was slopped out to them in the style of the television series “Porridge”; the system allowed them to earn money in the prison and go to buy food, which they could cook communally for themselves and other prisoners. It is true that the knives used in the process were chained to the wall, but such a precaution is only to be expected in a prison.

That single activity was very important, because it created a sense of prisoner responsibility, which was absolutely conducive to the idea of rehabilitation. We pointed out that the Government should consider that for prisons in the UK, and I was pleased to see in their response that they would look to increase the opportunities for self-catering where appropriate. Perhaps I can push the Minister to confirm that that is happening—particularly in new-build prisons, where I think it is perfectly feasible and appropriate to work in such an arrangement.

Something else that we noted on our trip—this was most obviously the case in Germany—was the amount of industrial or commercial activity that the prisoners undertook. We visited a furniture operation in part of the prison, which involved prisoners in a tremendous amount of work producing excellent furniture for sale at a later stage. Such work is absolutely crucial: not only does it give prisoners dignity in work, which we have claimed to be important throughout the process, but it helps with their rehabilitation by giving them the ability to manage their own time and responsibilities. I am conscious that the ability to provide such a facility in prisons in this country is lacking. I ask the Minister what has been done, and what continues to be done, to take that forward.

Our impression from both trips was positive about prisoner rehabilitation. When I looked again at the situation in the UK, I saw that, as we demonstrate in the report, a lot of emphasis is placed on health and safety, on the safety of prisoners in prisons and on the sorts of figures that my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst mentioned concerning the performance of the prison estate. I cannot help but feel that those things are linked—that the decrease in safety and the increase of attacks in prisons are due to the difficulty of trying to make purposeful work happen.

Another issue that we point out in the report is the role of prison governors, who are seen by the general public as being almost like latter-day Roman governors in their own prison. In fact, they are not. We visited one prison governor who had virtually no control over the educational activities taking place in his prison. There needs to be some move back to giving prison governors control of the places they run and what they do in them, which will improve the workings of the prisons and the outcomes for prisoners. Implementing the key recommendations of the report will help.

2.1 pm

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): It is an immense pleasure, Mr Walker, to serve under your chairmanship once again this week, as I do every Wednesday afternoon on the Select Committee on Procedure. I do not think that I have ever taken part in a debate that you have chaired in Westminster Hall.

It is a pleasure to respond to this report by the Select Committee on Justice. The previous speakers have been incredibly kind to the Government. When I read the report, I thought what uncomfortable reading it would be for Ministers and officials, as it does not pull its punches at all. The hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) has been incredibly generous in his presentation of the report; his manners are a credit to his parents. I do not think that I will be quite as polite. I am under no illusions about the nature and

scale of the task faced by the Ministry of Justice in tackling the crisis that is beginning to take hold in prisons. It is a crisis, and I do not use that word lightly. I have avoided using it for my first four years in this role, but I am beginning to think that a crisis is exactly what we are seeing.

The report explains very well the overcrowding and violence, and that there is zero improvement in reoffending figures. *[Interruption.]* The Minister is asking his officials. They will find a not statistically significant reduction in reoffending figures—a wasted five years in the previous Parliament. Opportunities have been missed to improve outcomes. It seems that almost every opportunity has been taken to make matters much worse.

The most urgent issue that the report, quite rightly, addresses is that of violence in prisons. The Minister and I have had debates in here on that very issue. I know that he is acutely aware of the level of the problem and he knows of my longstanding concern, which dates back to early in the previous Parliament, when I met one of his predecessors, the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), along with prison officers from the north-east.

One of the officers, Craig Wylde, had been assaulted by an inmate with a history of violence who had barricaded himself into his cell at Frankland prison near Durham. The inmate attacked several officers with a broken bottle, causing life-changing injuries. As far as I am aware, they have not all been able to return to work. That case brought home to me that violence in prisons is not just a case of throwing punches or the inappropriate use of restraint techniques. It can be extremely serious.

For the first time that I can remember, this year we lost a serving custody officer while she was at work. That happened since the publication of the report; I am sure it would have been included. Although she was not in a prison at the time, the tragic event reveals something about the level of risk that prison staff take on a daily basis. At Prime Minister's questions in the week following that dreadful murder, members of neither Front Bench—I do not reserve criticism just for the Government Front Bench—used the opportunity to pay tribute to Lorraine Barwell in the way that they, quite correctly, do when a member of the armed forces or a police officer is killed in the line of duty. It saddens me to acknowledge that this reveals something of a disparity of esteem in the eyes of the media and the public. That is not right and we must all work to put it right. Prison officers are brave public servants working to keep us safe. They deserve equal respect and acknowledgement for the job they do.

I have spoken for the Labour party on prisons since 2011. Throughout that time, the deterioration of standards in jails has been shocking, and they were not in a great state to begin with. I worked in prisons in the early '90s; I know exactly the state that they were in then and I see the state that they are in now. I have seen nothing but decline. The situation is not, in any way, the responsibility of those working in our prisons. They are not to blame. Overcrowding, understaffing and a lack of political interest or leadership is responsible. The statistics are really quite grim. As the report states,

“since 2012 there has been a 38% rise in self-inflicted deaths, a 9% rise in self-harm, a 7% rise in assaults, and 100% rise in incidents of concerted indiscipline...There are fewer opportunities for rehabilitation, including diminished access to education,”—

we all remember the book ban—

“training, libraries, religious leaders, and offending behaviour courses.”

There have been 43 suicides and five homicides in prisons in the past six months. Serious assaults on staff are at an all-time high, with overcrowding, drugs and radicalisation getting worse or, as the chief inspector feels, becoming accepted as part of prison life. The most telling paragraph in the report is paragraph 17 on page 70. I want to read a few sentences from it. It is quite disturbing and I would like to hear the Minister's response. It says:

“It is possible that the Ministry might be taking the matter of the sudden rise in self-inflicted deaths seriously internally, but downplaying publicly its significance, and the potential role that changes in prisons policy might be playing in it, is ill-advised as it could be construed as complacency and a lack of urgency.”

That is how it is construed. I do not suggest for a second that that is how the Minister intends it to be construed or that he personally feels that way about it, but that is the perception in jails. That is why he urgently needs to set his mind about the issue.

I have spoken in similar terms on so many occasions, as have organisations representing staff and others with an interest in prisons, but the Government continue to speak in the same terms. We hear about the rehabilitation revolution, working prisons, and through-the-gate support, but it is all starting to wear very thin. The Government's disdain—shown through their inaction, if not their words—is unforgivable. As well as a new Justice Committee Chair and, mostly, a new Committee, we have a new Secretary of State. It is great to hear him. Some of the things that he is saying are very welcome but we have to see more than just words.

However, even in the grimmest of times—and I think these are the grimmest of times in prisons—there are always shining examples of success. We have all visited prisons and seen workshops preparing offenders for employment, amazing charities working to maintain vital family links, prison officers helping inmates to read and businesses, such as Timpson, going to great lengths to provide jobs on release. I admire those working in our prisons to contribute to the gargantuan task of reducing reoffending.

The Government have made a start, and I want to encourage more of the same, but we must assess the effectiveness of such interventions and focus funding on those proven to be most effective. It is incredibly frustrating to find that the work that does happen is so patchy and is not enough to have a significant impact on reoffending figures, which is probably because the methods are very inconsistent and delivery sometimes lacks quality. Access to courses, as we know, is extremely limited, and understaffing leads to offenders spending time idle and to missed opportunities to put right bad attitudes.

I welcome the new Secretary of State's declarations. I completely support him when he says that he wants better education in our prisons, and more of it. I support him when he says that he wants to work to create a system in which every offender gets a chance to change—absolutely. But, so far, his words are lacking in substance, and he has not yet come up with a single policy that tells us how he will achieve his aims. We look forward to hearing about those policies, but so far we have not.

[*Jenny Chapman*]

The Secretary of State does not need me or anyone else to worry about him all that much, but in his rush to reform our penal system he must not forget the needs of victims or neglect the vital task of maintaining public confidence in criminal justice. I share many of the concerns that he expresses, but he must remember that, if public confidence is lost, his opportunity to reform will vanish, too. The Minister will probably ask, “What would you do?” That is a fair question. We would fundamentally change how prisons are managed. It is pleasing to hear the Secretary of State utter similar words.

The report also observes that prison governors are “effectively becoming contract managers”, which the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst articulated well. Prison governors are constrained in their operational decisions, and the Committee rightly concludes that

“relegating governors to an oversight and partnership management role with much reduced discretion undermines their control over the performance and safety of the establishment and their ability to govern their prisons using their professional judgment, as they are trained at public expense to do.”

I would like to see the creation of prisons that are not centrally run from Whitehall. Instead, we should have locally run establishments. If hospitals, colleges and fire services are best run by local stakeholders, why not our prisons? It has never made sense to me that, at a strategic level, prisons should be entirely detached from the services needed to house, heal, educate and employ their inmates on release. It is no wonder that prisons do not succeed more often and that homelessness, unemployment, mental illness and drug and alcohol abuse are all commonplace among those recently released from prison. We know that those factors all contribute to reoffending and that roughly half those released from custody reoffend within a year.

I am glad that the Secretary of State seems to be coming round to that point of view. When we hear his concrete proposals, I have no doubt that we will do our best to support him, but it is widely accepted that work to prevent prisoners from returning to crime has to begin before release. That is better achieved if agencies with expertise in preventing homelessness or combating drug addiction have a stake in devising and delivering prison regimes, not just in providing programmes within a prison or providing support after release. That would be a major reform, and it would need to be piloted. Some service providers need to confront the consequences of getting things wrong the first time by taking a lead in putting things right. High reoffending rates are not the responsibility of the Ministry of Justice alone.

Conservative estimates say that about 23% of the prison population have been through the looked-after system. If that group were better provided for and prevented from committing crimes, we would save the Treasury an absolute fortune. Even if only half that group were kept away from crime, we would prevent some 10,000 people from becoming victims, saving about £270 million each year in incarceration costs.

Alongside a change in management, we need a change in inspections. Her Majesty’s inspectorate of prisons produces excellent, insightful reports that act as catalysts for change in the institutions concerned, and more widely—ending the handcuffing of women in labour is

a good example. If, as the report suggests, Parliament is to be asked to devolve many of the decisions on running prisons to establishment level, we must have confidence that high standards of security and safety will never be compromised. I suggest that we need a new kind of inspectorate with more frequent unannounced inspections that produces reports with real clout. Too often, we see the response to a poor inspection report centre on the appointment of a new governor. I have read so many times that things have improved dramatically since an inspection took place, but inspectors need the ability to insist on meaningful and immediate change.

I encourage the Government to put more effort into preventing people from getting involved in crime in the first place. As the Committee rightly observes, prisons have no control over which, or how many, inmates they hold. As has been observed, effective policing, work with troubled families, Sure Start and good mental health services for young people are all ways in which the Government can improve outcomes in prisons. The Minister should share the love for prisons by trying to get some of his colleagues in other Departments as interested and as keen to improve things as I know he is.

The Committee rightly observes that, with the need to make financial savings in the medium term, there is no scope to spend more on prisons. I therefore encourage Ministers to look closely at the Youth Justice Board. We have committed to extending the YJB’s responsibilities to include 21-year-olds and to developing a women’s justice board because we want to reduce demand on prison places by intervening early to divert those at risk of committing crime away from harming themselves and others. We need to see the proper use of restorative techniques and beefed-up community orders, but never at the expense of public confidence. We must always be mindful of the needs of victims.

I never felt unsafe when I worked in prisons. I benefited from quality supervision and good support from all grades of staff. Uniformed officers took leading roles in preventing bullying. They demonstrated daily how to keep calm in tricky situations and how to de-escalate violent disagreements without anyone getting hurt; they knew how to listen. They were trained to support rehabilitation day in, day out without any fuss or particular expense. The report captures that very well, as did the Committee’s earlier report “Role of the Prison Officer”, which I commend to the Minister.

Twenty years on, prison officers are undervalued and underused. We need to support them so that they are not, and never will be, just turnkeys. As the Committee put it in 2009—it is just as true now as it was then—prison officers’ sense of vocation

“needs to be encouraged, nurtured and developed as far as possible rather than, at best, being taken for granted and, at worst, ignored.”

I am grateful for this debate. It is not often that we get the opportunity in this place to have a good romp around the issue of prisons, but this debate has afforded that, and I look forward to the Minister’s response. There is one more thing that I committed to ask the Minister. I now have a regular slot on BBC Radio Berkshire to talk about Reading jail. The Chairman of the Committee and the report discussed the “new for old” programme. It is a sound strategy in principle, but in some places such as Reading, there are empty, mothballed prisons at strategic sites in towns with potential global

heritage value. Local people in Reading are getting frustrated at the Ministry of Justice's lack of ability to decide what to do with the site. If the Minister or his officials can put the minds of the people of Reading at rest about the future of that site, that would be welcome, and would save me my early morning slot on Radio Berkshire.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, I remind Members that we will hear from the Chair of the Committee for a few minutes after the Minister has finished his speech.

2.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Andrew Selous): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I thank the colleagues who have spoken so knowledgeably in this debate; I know that they all care deeply about the issues, and I am grateful for their remarks and the expertise that they bring to our proceedings.

Let me start with the issue of prison reform, about which much has been spoken. It is true that our thinking on the issue is emerging and developing; I am grateful to the hon. Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) for her support for what she has heard so far. As she and others have said, it is clear that our current system fails to rehabilitate offenders and ensure that criminals are prevented from reoffending. Our prisons must offer offenders the opportunity to get the skills and qualifications that they need to turn their lives around, particularly qualifications that have value in the labour market and are respected by employers.

Key to the reforms that we are putting in place is the role that prison governors play in helping drive through change. We have many dedicated and hard-working governors—I had the pleasure of going to a Prison Governors Association meeting on Tuesday—and the Justice Secretary and I want to ensure that those who run establishments are more autonomous and accountable but also demand more of our prisons and of offenders. Currently, governors do not have control over what happens in their prisons. We want to give governors that control, and we want to incentivise and reward them for delivering the right outcomes.

The Secretary of State has also acknowledged that working conditions in much of the current prison estate—particularly older Victorian prisons, which have high levels of crowding, as the Chair of the Committee and others have mentioned—are not conducive to developing a positive rehabilitative environment. He has made clear his ambition to replace aging and ineffective Victorian prisons with new prisons that embody higher standards in every way they operate. On the final comments made by the hon. Member for Darlington, we are actively considering all those issues and have set out the direction of travel. Over the past five years, we have sold 16 prisons, considerably more than in the previous 20 years or so. Our record has been one of taking action where we need to, and we are actively considering all those issues.

The money we make from selling off old prisons should be reinvested in commissioning a modern, well-designed prison estate that designs out the faults in existing structures that make violent behaviour and

drug taking harder to detect. The Government recognise fully that the private sector has innovated well, particularly in its use of technology in prisons, and that there are opportunities to innovate further across public sector prisons.

We must also tackle overcrowding, which the Chair of the Committee also quite properly mentioned, with sufficient places to meet demand that all provide a safe and decent living environment. We have recently delivered 1,250 new places in the four new house blocks at Peterborough, Parc at Bridgend in south Wales, Thameside and the Mount outside Hemel Hempstead, and we are currently building a 2,106-person modern fit-for-purpose prison in north Wales. We recognise the Committee's concern about the impacts of a rise in the prison population. The need to be prepared for unexpected rises in demand will always be necessary. As the Committee recognised, we keep the capacity for each population cohort under review and rebalance the estate as required.

I move now to the issue of education and employment, which has quite properly featured highly in this debate. Prison should offer offenders the chance to get the skills and qualifications that they need to make a success of life on the outside—a second chance to make the best of the education that, in many cases, they did not get when they were younger. That is a crucial area of our reform agenda, and the Secretary of State and I are putting in place steps to help make prisons places of purpose by increasing education and employment opportunities for offenders. That includes working with other Departments, such as the Ministry of Defence, to expand work opportunities.

I also pay tribute to companies such as Halfords. I have mentioned the academy that Halfords runs in Onley prison, where instructors and prisoners work together in a well-equipped workshop. They all wear Halfords sweatshirts, and prisoners go out on day release to work in Halfords stores. After they complete the course, on release, there are jobs available for them as bicycle mechanics in Halfords stores. That is an excellent model providing employment on release, and it is exactly what I want to see a great deal more of.

Jenny Chapman: The examples that the Minister cites are entirely appropriate and excellent, but they are just examples. The situation is patchy. What plans does he have to make that kind of experience the norm? My observation is that it is incredibly difficult to create such models of good practice throughout the country. It is something that Ministers have struggled with ever since I can remember.

Andrew Selous: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. We need to do better, and I am extremely ambitious and impatient to do more. I assure her that I regularly raise the issue with my officials, and I will continue to do so, because I share her impatience at the scale of the challenge. We need to act at pace to do something about the issue.

That said, work in prisons continues to grow steadily, with 14.9 million hours worked across the estate in 2014-15. However, as I said, I am determined to do much more. Increasing numbers of prisoners are also engaged in learning, but Ofsted inspections confirm that one in five prisons has an inadequate standard of education provision and another two fifths require

[*Andrew Selous*]

improvement. That is why the Secretary of State has asked Dame Sally Coates, a distinguished former headteacher, to chair a review of the quality of education in prisons, which will report in March 2016.

The review will examine the scope and quality of current provision in adult prisons and young offender institutions for 18 to 20-year-olds. It will consider domestic and international evidence of what works well in prison education and identify options for future models of education services in prisons. In the meantime, work is already in progress to improve the quality of learning and skills in prisons, including: finding ways to improve class attendance and punctuality; collecting better management information, which is key; improving support for those with learning difficulties and disabilities, including mental health issues, which my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) raises rightly and regularly; and developing more creative and innovative teaching.

On that point—I have mentioned it before—Swaleside has a good maths and English programme in the physical education department, of all places, that has been particularly successful at helping harder-to-engage prisoners improve their English and maths skills. That is exactly the sort of thing that I am talking about, and we need more of it.

In August last year, we introduced mandatory assessment of maths and English for all newly received prisoners, so we now have a proper baseline measure of prisons' standards of literacy and numeracy. We have also invested in a virtual campus, a secure web-based learning and job search tool, currently available in 105 prisons to support prisoners' education.

In addition to education inside prison, the Government also fully support prisoners using temporary release to take up work, training and educational opportunities in the community as well as to maintain ties with families. Although that should never come at the expense of public protection, it is a powerful tool for reintegrating offenders back into the community and preparing them for release. All the measures taken since the ROTL review in 2013 focus on minimising the risks taken in allowing temporary release and ensuring that releases are purposeful. The latest data show a 39% reduction in recorded instances of ROTL failure. We agree that ROTL can be a useful resettlement tool; it is important not to let abuse by a small number of people undermine it. We will review the impact of the new measures in 2016, so we can be sure that the public is protected while avoiding unnecessary restrictions on purposeful rehabilitative ROTL.

I turn to young people and young adults in custody. Although fewer young people are committing crimes for the first time, those who enter the youth justice system are some of the most troubled in our society, and too many go on to commit further offences. The significant reductions in volumes mean that the youth justice system now faces very different challenges. We need to consider whether the structures and delivery models created in 2000 are appropriate to meet the challenges of 2015 and the changes to the public service landscape. We also need to ensure that the youth justice system provides maximum value for the taxpayer. In recognition of the continued significant reductions in

the number of young people in custody, as well as the scale of the financial challenge, we will not pursue plans to build a secure college, although we remain committed to improving education for all young offenders.

Robert Neill: May I raise one point on young offenders in particular? The Minister is right to highlight the changes that have been made and the reduction. The report from Lord Harris of Haringey highlighted the particular need for work to be done with those vulnerable people at risk of harm in custody. When will the Government make their response to the report?

Andrew Selous: We have promised a response in the autumn. We are actively considering that extremely important report, about which I will say a little in a moment if my hon. Friend, the Chair of the Justice Committee, will allow me.

In September, we announced a departmental review of the youth justice system, led by Charlie Taylor, the former chief executive of the National College of Teaching and Leadership. I recognise the importance of clear responsibility for the young adult offender group. We have therefore appointed a deputy director of custody for young people, within NOMS, as senior lead on operational policy on young adults. We are also working to improve the evidence base around what works best with young adult offenders. That includes developing and testing a tool to screen for emotional and social maturity, which should help us to understand need better and better tailor services and interventions for young adult offenders in prison or in the community.

The shadow Minister quite properly raised prison safety. The safety of our staff as they deliver a secure prison regime is an absolute priority. We are tackling dangerous new psychoactive substances, to help drive down the number of assaults and violent incidents. Measures have been taken to help deter prisoners from violence. For example, we brought in, for the first time ever, a joint national protocol between NOMS, the Crown Prosecution Service and the police, to ensure that there is a nationally consistent approach to referral and prosecution of crimes in prison. That is a really important mechanism. It is a significant change and will play its part in reducing violence in prisons.

The Serious Crime Act 2015 has brought in two new offences. Unbelievably, it was not an offence to possess a knife in a prison—if you can believe that—without authorisation. That has now changed. We are bringing in a new offence of throwing or projecting any item over a prison wall. The link to violence is very clear; it is mainly drugs that are thrown over the walls, and we know that new psychoactive substances are involved in provoking many violent incidents. That is why such measures are important.

We are bringing in other measures to record and understand the incidents of violence in prisons and the response to those incidents. We are developing a violence diagnostic tool, to enable better analysis at national, regional and local levels, and operational guidance for governors, to advise staff in prison on how they might better manage both potential and actual violent incidents. We are also piloting body-worn cameras in 22 public sector and two private sector prisons. I visited Glen Parva recently and was impressed by what I saw. The staff told me that they felt a lot safer; the prisoners also told me that they felt a lot safer, which is important.

We will evaluate that early next year. We do not underestimate the hard work and challenges faced by our prison staff in dealing with serious violent incidents. We will continue to support our staff and help them to maintain safe and secure prisons.

The issue of self-inflicted deaths was rightly raised earlier. Whenever a prisoner takes their own life, it is a shocking and tragic event that is felt round the whole prison. We take our duty to keep prisoners safe extremely seriously. On any given day, prison staff provide crucial care to more than 2,000 prisoners at risk of self-harming. At times, that means someone literally sitting 24/7 outside a cell door, if necessary. We continue to make every effort to improve the care that we provide to vulnerable prisoners and learn from every individual incident.

It is too simplistic to attribute self-inflicted death or self-harm to staffing reductions or benchmarking. Deaths have occurred in contractor prisons, which have not been subject to reductions, as well as public sector prisons. All prisons are required to have procedures in place to identify, manage and support people who are at risk of harm to themselves. NOMS has put in place additional resources to undertake this safer custody work. NOMS is also reviewing the operation of the case management process for prisoners assessed as being at risk—procedures for assessment, care in custody and teamwork, known as ACCT. It is considering the recommendations of the Harris review into deaths of young adults in custody, about which the Chair of the Justice Committee rightly asked.

The Committee expressed concerns about staffing. The prison system has been under some pressure as a result of a rise in the prison population, combined with staffing shortages. That is most notable in London and the south-east, where the economic recovery may have contributed to a higher than anticipated staff turnover. Immediate action was taken early in 2014 to manage those recruitment shortages, including an accelerated recruitment campaign, the introduction of the Her Majesty's Prison Service reserves, and staff sent on detached duty to the prisons with the greatest shortages. In the 12 months to June 2015, 2,230 new prison officers began training. Of those, 1,820 were new recruits and 410 were existing NOMS staff who have regraded to become prison officers. In the past 12 months to June 2015, there has been a net increase of 420 prison officers. Those officers will go at least some of the way to dealing with the issues of violence and safety that have been raised throughout the debate. We are also looking to recruit a similar number this year with our ongoing recruitment campaign.

There are, however, establishments where it remains hard to recruit. To address that issue, NOMS has looked at a number of options based on evidence, such as turnover, volume of vacancies and reward in other industries. A decision has been made against organisational objectives, Government policy on public sector pay and financial affordability, to improve our reward offer for prison officers at those sites. NOMS has worked, and will continue to work, to support its staff and provide them with the skills and development opportunities that they need to perform their duties with confidence and the necessary skills.

I shall quickly touch on the role of the external monitoring bodies. I wrote to the Chair of the Justice Committee in July, clarifying that the reference in the

NOMS original response to the Justice Committee to a review of the independence of all criminal justice inspectorates was made in error, for which I apologise. A corrected version of the NOMS response has now been relayed in Parliament. I assure the House that in the absence of such a review, both the Secretary of State and I remain absolutely committed to safeguarding the imperative of an inspectorate that operates, and is perceived to operate, fully independently of both the sponsoring Department and the organisations in its remit.

The last major point I want to cover concerns our transforming rehabilitation reforms. As the Committee will know, reoffending has been too high for too long, which is why we have reformed the way that offenders are managed in the community. The transforming rehabilitation reforms seek to get the best out of the voluntary, public and private sectors to help offenders turn away from crime. These reforms mean that for the first time in recent history, virtually every offender released from custody will receive statutory supervision and rehabilitation in the community, including those offenders sentenced to less than 12 months in custody. We expect the new providers to make real contributions towards reducing reoffending, and we are closely monitoring their progress. The reforms have made substantial changes to how we manage offenders in England and Wales, and I am proud to be part of the team that has made those changes happen.

Of course, there remains much work to be done as we embed these reforms, and I take this opportunity to thank probation and prison staff for their continued hard work. They are doing a magnificent job, and they deserve our congratulation and recognition.

Regarding work, I agree with the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell). I was interested to hear about the experience in German prisons; the Singaporean prison system also places a very high emphasis on both getting prisoners into work in prison and getting them into employment afterwards. I am grateful to him for making that point.

The hon. Member for Darlington was absolutely right to refer to the tragic death of Lorraine Barwell. It was an horrendous incident and I can assure the hon. Lady that it was taken extremely seriously within the Ministry of Justice; reviews are ongoing and a charge of murder has been brought. The flag on the Ministry of Justice flew at half-mast on the day of the funeral. The hon. Lady's comments were absolutely right. I myself have said it many times before and I say it again now: prison officers are on the front line, keeping us all safe. We owe every one of them a debt of duty. They may not be in the public eye in the way other front-line professionals are, but what they do is every bit as important. We need to recognise that on every occasion.

Thank you very much, Mr Walker; I am very grateful for having had the chance to respond to the debate. I hope that I have managed to respond to all the points raised this afternoon. If I have not done so, I will gladly write to hon. Members.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Mr Neill, perhaps we can hear from you for a few minutes in summary.

2.41 pm

Robert Neill: Thank you very much, Mr Walker.

[Robert Neill]

I am very grateful to all the hon. Members who have participated in this debate, and I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell), who is also our Committee's rapporteur on European issues. He is sort of a de facto vice chairman of our Committee, and I am particularly grateful for the long and continuing interest that he takes in these matters. I have found his expertise immensely helpful.

I am grateful to both the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman), and the Minister for their comments. All I gently say to the shadow Minister is that my old pupil master always said that the most effective form of cross-examination was the politest and sometimes that is not a bad policy to adhere to, either as a politician or an advocate. That does not mean that the cross-examination is not pressed home, when necessary. The hon. Lady raised important issues, but I start from the premise that I am a fan of the Minister, and of the Lord Chancellor and new Secretary of State for Justice. I believe that they both want to do the right thing, and I know that the Minister's personal commitment to prison reform and rehabilitation is very strong indeed.

I am also conscious that when the Government came into office they had to deal with some very significant financial challenges, which any of us who held office at that time had to confront. So I accept that there were pressures, and I also accept the point that we are dealing with very complex issues; very few people indeed end up in prison because of a simple set of motives or factors. Generally, a raft of issues come together and we need to recognise that.

I welcome the reforms that the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice is proposing. That is why I, and I think all of the Committee, want to give them a fair wind. Reducing capacity is important, and I think we will press the Government over the coming year or so for more detail on precisely what the plans are to

reduce capacity. Will there be an increase both in the build and in finding genuine, constructive and publicly credible alternatives to custody, wherever possible?

Also, I welcome the Minister's commitment to doing more work on the follow-up of offenders once they are released. There is an awful lot of professional opinion now that questions the value of short sentences in particular, where very often there is no chance to do any real rehabilitative work. In the past, we have seen people released with virtually no supervision at all. Increased follow-up of offenders is certainly a move in the right direction, but the Select Committee will want to keep a very careful eye on this issue. In that context, as I have already done on the Floor of the House I welcome the appointment of Dame Sally Coates, whose reputation in relation to this matter is a very high one.

This issue is about making things purposeful and the Minister is right to observe that the best rehabilitation of all is work and a sense of self-worth, and if we can try to promote those things in our prison regime that will be hugely effective.

I, too, pay tribute to the work of prison officers, and to Lorraine Barwell and others. Those of us who have practised in the criminal courts know the pressures on custody officers and prison officers, right the way through the system; it is not only in the prison environment that there are pressures but in the court environment and the transfer environment. Those officers all deserve our full support in relation to those matters.

I hope that this has been a useful report and a useful debate, and we look forward to continuing discussion of this matter. As the Minister will know, there will be a further significant inquiry by the Select Committee, on the basis of Lord Harris's report and related matters. I look forward to the Minister and others doubtless giving evidence to us then.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Ninth Report from the Justice Committee of Session 2014-15, on Prisons: planning and policies, HC 309, and the Government response, Cm 9129.

Civil Legal Aid

2.45 pm

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Eighth Report from the Justice Committee, Session 2014-15, on impact of changes to civil legal aid under part 1 of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, HC 311, and the Government Response, Cm 9096.

I am delighted to have secured this debate on the operation of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, or LASPO as it is often called. I welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Justice to his place. We now commence our discussion of the second of the Justice Committee's important reports that we are considering today.

I was prepared to give these reforms of legal aid a fair wind when they were introduced, but I also have concerns about them, as I think the Committee does. I do not say that because the objective of saving money is not important and, indeed, a significant imperative. I sympathise with the predicament of the Minister and of his predecessors; having been a Minister in an unprotected Department myself, I am very conscious that the financial circumstances that the previous Government inherited were dire, and changes had to be made and economies found. I accept that entirely.

Nevertheless, I and the rest of the Committee are concerned that the reforms may have had some unintended consequences, which perhaps we can now sensibly revisit. I was not a member of the Committee at the time the report was produced, but reading through it, a number of the concerns expressed chimed with my own experience as a constituency MP and, for what it is worth, my experience at the Bar. Although I no longer practise at the Bar, I still keep in touch with those who do.

Perhaps we can deal with some of the main issues that were highlighted in the report, and I look forward to hearing my hon. Friend the Minister's response. I say that because, once again, I detect in both his comments and those of the Secretary of State a willingness to be open-minded about revisiting situations where it can be shown that there are perhaps better, more nuanced and more effective ways of obtaining the objective that we all want to achieve—having a legal aid system that concentrates resource where it is needed and that helps those who are in genuine need, but that does not encourage unmeritorious litigation. I think that we all share that view.

The Committee raised several issues on which I am interested in hearing my hon. Friend the Minister's comments. First, there was a concern that the reforms, in a sense, were undoubtedly financially driven. There is nothing wrong with that in itself; it was a necessity at the time. Both the then permanent secretary and my hon. Friend's predecessor as Minister were frank and fair about that to the Committee; savings needed to be made, and made quickly. However, that meant that no research could be undertaken about the impact of the reforms. Now, we are about a year on and although, frankly, it is unusual to conduct a Select Committee inquiry on reforms after only about a year, we are now able to see some of the impacts and I hope that gives us a chance to revisit some of the issues.

The position, of course, is that the MOJ is unprotected. The Committee was concerned that, although it may not have been intended, in practice the reforms introduced in April 2013 may well have begun to impede access to justice. If that is the case, we need to be prepared to accept it, and we should revisit the issues.

There were four objectives that the Government perfectly reasonably set themselves: to discourage unnecessary and adversarial litigation at public expense; to target legal aid at those who need it most; to make significant savings in the cost of the scheme; and to deliver overall better value for money for the taxpayer. There is nothing wrong with any of those objectives, but the evidence that the Committee received suggested that at least three of them have not been successfully achieved. That is why we need to be prepared to look at them again.

Access to justice is fundamental to a system based on the rule of law, and it is therefore important that any changes we make to the ability of the citizen to access proper legal advice are based upon objective evidence. That is the first and primary concern.

In terms of a saving, the National Audit Office concluded that the Government had exceeded their savings target by £32 million, because they were not funding as many cases as was predicted. Many Members will have people come to their constituency surgeries with debt issues, and in debt cases the shortfall was in the region of 85%. That indicates to me that the projections were pretty much based on back-of-an-envelope calculations and may not have had a great deal of research behind them. I am happy to be corrected if that is not the case. Given the speed at which it was acknowledged that that was happening, I can understand why that might be the case, but perhaps that is all the more reason to look again at the matter, if that is what is happening.

I am happy to see an underspend when it is genuine, but if it is an underspend because people who ought to be entitled to legal advice and support are not getting it, that is a failure in the system, and we need to find out precisely why that is so. One of the Committee's concerns was that there was a significant lack of public information on accessing legal aid, and I have found that in my surgeries. In a comparatively prosperous part of suburban London, I have a lot of constituents coming to me who are unaware of how best to access legal aid and what their rights are. I suspect that the situation may be very much worse in other, more socially challenged parts of the country. We urgently need to revisit that issue.

The suggestion that people are simply moving to pro bono is not good enough. The pro bono work done by members from both sides of the profession is very important, but at the end of the day that is not a substitute for proper advice. That needs to be addressed, and I look forward to hearing what the Minister says on that.

Secondly, we have the operation of the exceptional cases funding scheme, which is an important part of the legal aid system. It was specifically and properly designed to ensure that any changes did not put us in breach of our obligations under the European convention or the European Union, and that is right and proper. The then Lord Chancellor described the scheme as a "safety net" on Second Reading of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Bill. I have no problem with a

[Robert Neill]

safety net, but we need to see how effective its operation has been. The evidence to the Committee on that raised concerns for us.

I appreciate things may have moved on—I am sure the Minister can update us if they have—but at the time of the Committee's report, 7.2% of applications for ECF were granted. When the usual risk assessments and impact assessments were carried out for the legislation, the estimate was for that figure to be between 53% and 74%. I know from when I was a Minister that impact assessments are sometimes not entirely borne out in practice, but we are talking about a massive difference. When the figure is about one tenth of the top end of the impact assessment estimate, that indicates to me that something is going seriously awry. Either the impact assessment was very badly off indeed or the operation of the scheme has borne down much more heavily on deserving cases than Ministers ever intended. Some 60% of the grants that were made were for family representation at inquests, and that is good. I had a meeting recently with Inquest, which is an important and valuable body that does hard work in that field. Representation in that area is critical, but what about the rest of the significant shortfall? We need to examine that a little more.

We found—this is worth reciting—some exceptional cases where applications under the ECF were refused. They are exceptional cases; that is the whole point. An illiterate woman with learning, hearing and speech difficulties was facing an application that would affect her contact with her children. That was not regarded as suitable for exceptional cases funding, and that is difficult for many of us to appreciate. The judge in one case told us of a woman with modest learning difficulties who was unable to deal with representations from the lawyer on the other side. She is now facing possibly not seeing her child again. That troubled me in particular, because that coincides with my conversations with district and circuit judges and practitioners who operate in this field.

Anyone who goes to their county court will be aware of such issues, which raise a fundamental equality of arms argument. The other side is very often the local authority, which is represented by solicitor or counsel. Against that is someone who may not be able on their own to deal adequately with the process. To say that that is not an exceptional circumstance would be an unfair consequence of the scheme, and that sort of thing should not happen again in future.

I will give one further example. A destitute blind man with profound learning difficulties lacked the litigation capacity, so the official solicitor made an application on his behalf. Initially, that was rejected, and it had to go to judicial review. We should not be having to do that. That is clearly where the operation of the system, rather than the intention of Ministers, was at fault, but it means that we need to bear down carefully on how these cases are processed in the first place. I do not want a legitimate objective of efficiency and saving to get a bad name because of how it is carried out in practice.

Against that background, the Committee concluded that the low number of grants and some of those details meant that the scheme was not acting as the robust safety net that was intended. The risk of miscarriage of

justice is real in some of those cases, and we should not allow such things to happen as a consequence of the reforms. We are concerned that so far we have heard no evidence of the Ministry investigating the significant disparity between the predicted number of grants—the 53% to 74% estimate—and the actuality of less than 8%. Will the Minister say what steps have been taken to investigate that enormous disparity? What steps are being taken to ensure that the scheme operates in a more equitable and just fashion? That is hugely important for the scheme's credibility.

There has, in fairness, been an improvement in recent months, and I am sure the Minister will update me further. The statistics for April to June 2015 show an increase, with grants made to just over one third of all applicants. That is partly because Ministers reviewed the guidelines, and that was right and proper, but it required a review and decision by the Court of Appeal to make that happen. Ministers acted promptly on the basis of that decision, and I give them credit for that, but one third is still way short of the bottom end of the benchmark of 50%. We need more detail on what is being done to ensure that the percentage becomes more realistically near the estimate.

The number of applications remains low, and I would like to know what more can be done on that. The Committee's inquiry involved some 35 oral witnesses over a period of months and some 70 pieces of written evidence. It is a not insubstantial piece of work that was undertaken by my colleagues who were on the Committee at the time. One reason that the Committee found for the low number of applications was the length of time that it takes to complete the form. That is not insignificant. I can remember sitting in the cells as a practitioner, completing the legal aid form before we went up on the first remand hearing. The form has gone well beyond that now, and the truth is that lawyers cannot claim the time for completing the form.

[MR GRAHAM BRADY *in the Chair*]

I welcome you to the Chair, Mr Brady, as always. I am not here to make the case on behalf of lawyers, but completing the form is generally beyond the capacity of many lay people, particularly those with any difficulties. They need help to do it and the solicitor will not be remunerated for doing it. Many do it out of their professional sense of duty and obligation, and they are right to do so, but the form is an impediment. In many areas of Government, we are successfully making forms simpler and putting things into plain English. If we are able to make forms simpler in a raft of areas, including planning applications, local government matters and court forms, we ought to be able to do it for the application forms for these matters. What are the Government going to do on that?

A separate issue that causes concern relates to legal aid in family law cases, particularly in what is sometimes termed the domestic violence gateway. Happily, I never practised in that field, but I know that it is one of the most stressful that a lawyer, judge or litigant can encounter. The intention was—I do not doubt its goodness—that legal aid would be available where a litigant can show evidence of abuse within the past two years, with an exception where there is clear evidence of a conviction arising from domestic violence. That is the easy bit.

We were concerned by the evidence to our inquiry on the operation of that need, in the absence of a conviction, to show evidence of domestic abuse from within the past two years. We found that some 39% of women who contacted a domestic violence charity about abuse did not have one of the prescribed forms of evidence. That leads us to conclude that the prescribed forms of evidence are too rigid and that there ought to be greater nuance and discretion around that.

Also, as anyone who has dealt with such matters would know, many people struggle with the two-year time limit, because family law cases have often dragged on for years. Relationships that can be abusive, often with as much emotional and psychological pressure as physical pressure, are all part of a picture that builds up over time. In such a relationship, where there may be children and it is difficult for the person to walk away, the strict adherence to a two-year limit can be artificial, and perhaps the guidelines do not coincide with the reality of life as many of us know it from our surgeries, and certainly as many experienced practitioners know it. So I hope we can look at that issue again.

The Committee recommended that the Legal Aid Agency be allowed discretion to grant funding where, although the facts might not immediately fit the criteria, the victim of abuse would be materially disadvantaged by having to face the alleged perpetrator of the violence in court. We would not allow that in criminal proceedings, and we should not get into such situations in family proceedings, either. I hope the Minister will give us more details on that. I doubt it would increase the spend. The numbers are not great, but the potential injustice is very great, so I hope we can revisit that issue.

I am sorry that the Government rejected our recommendation. I ask the Minister, on behalf of the Committee, to think again. It is not good enough to say it is a catch-all clause and will lead to large amounts of litigation. I am sure it is possible to draft a sensible form of discretion that is not a blank cheque, but goes further to reflect reality than the current arrangements. We are a year on now. On the basis of the open-minded approach that the Secretary of State and his team are taking, now is a good time to revisit it in the light of experience and perhaps seek evidence from the practitioners and judges who hear such cases as to what might sensibly be put into the form. I hope the Government will think again about that.

The third issue that we raised, which again coincides with my own experience independently of the report, is sometimes called “sustainability and advice deserts”. There are parts of this country where it is very difficult now to find a lawyer to take on a civil legal aid case. Again, if in comparatively prosperous Bromley it is hard to find a solicitor to take on legally aided family work, it is a lot worse in many other parts of the country, never mind in rural areas where the question of simple physical access to a suitable solicitor can be significant. This is classically the area where pieces of research were to be published in 2015, but we have not yet seen the fruits of that research. Perhaps the Minister can tell us when it will be made public, because I have no doubt that the Committee will wish to revisit some of the considerations in the light of that.

The fourth area of concern stems from the increase in litigants in person. The contention at the time—I was prepared to give it a fair wind—was that there would be

behavioural change through the removal of legal aid so that fewer people would choose to go to court to resolve their problems. I am not sure the evidence bears that out. I do not want to be an amateur psychologist, but perhaps the motives that lead people to go to court are not of a purely transactional nature. Sometimes, particularly in the most difficult cases, there are pressures that go beyond the ordinary straightforward business decision that we might make as to whether we litigated over a contractual matter, for example. This is not that sort of case. Very often there are other deep pressures that play upon people, which we may not have taken fully on board.

Also, I do not think we have done enough to promote the alternative of mediation, which I shall come to in a moment. On re-reading, I felt there was a finger in the wind approach to the assessment about behavioural change. The wind does not seem to be demonstrating that that is happening in the way that we would wish. Certainly the anecdotal evidence that we heard from people before the Committee, and others, was that there had been a significant increase in litigants in person. There is not a systematic means of collating that information; perhaps there should be. Even in the family courts where some figures are available, the accuracy and their significance was debatable. If we are to have such policy change we ought to know, and it should not be too difficult to work out. If litigants in person and those who are represented are logged, it should not be too difficult to pull the figures together so that we know better where we stand.

The National Audit Office was concerned that the increase in litigants in person in the family courts had cost the family court system an additional £3.4 million. I was disturbed at our evidence hearing on Tuesday to hear a senior official of the Department suggesting that there was no impact. Anyone who talks to anyone who sits in the county courts would say otherwise. There is an impact. We all know that litigants in person often take longer to present their case, which consumes court time and also affects soliciting as the costs run up on the other side, so it is in nobody’s interest in the long term to save money under one head of the justice system, but increase it on the courts budget, which is itself hard-pressed, on the other. Perhaps we need more evidence and a willingness to revisit that, too.

Moreover, often the increase in litigants in person is of people with real difficulties in coping with the system. We have moved on from a situation where the litigant in person was a fairly articulate person who chose not to employ a solicitor or a barrister—not something I would ever encourage, of course—because that was a sensible decision and they were able to deal with a straightforward case on its own merits. We now often deal with people coming before the courts with significant educational and communication difficulties and dealing with complex cases.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): I want to make a serious point about what the hon. Gentleman has just said. The advice to litigants who propose to represent themselves is based on the fact that it is difficult for them to be objective. They are not in a position to sit back and look at the entire thing, and that often causes great delays going down the wrong road.

Robert Neill: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. That coincides with my own experience. Early and prompt access to legal advice can give an overall saving in costs to the system as well as producing a better outcome in terms of justice. I could not agree with him more. It is potentially a false saving and we should be wary of going down that route. I hope that we can have an update on the Government's research and findings.

It is perfectly fair to say that the Government relied on the additional grant to fund personal support units in the courts. That is useful, but patchy. In some of the county courts that I have visited, there was limited personal support available. I had an instance of someone who was simply trying to fill out the form being told that they could not be helped at the local county court, but had to go to the royal courts of justice. They went to the royal courts of justice and got an out-of-date form, so they had to make two trips. That is not achieving the objective that the Government want, so we need to have an update on how the work is coming on.

Some reliance was also placed on the use of McKenzie friends and the unbundling of legal services. Unbundling can have its role, but my limited experience as a civil practitioner caused me deep concern about the use of McKenzie friends. The lack of objectivity that the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) referred to applies to McKenzie friends, too. I can certainly think of one case that was needlessly dragged out and the client sent in an entirely wrong direction, ultimately to their own considerable cost, as a result of an unregulated and ill-informed McKenzie friend, so I do not think they are a proper substitute. Such cases ought to be the exception rather than the rule. It is unfortunate that the Government rejected without any explanation the Committee's recommendation on consulting on regulating McKenzie friends, or at least reviewing the whole operation of that type of quasi-advocate.

One of my two final points link to the question of a lack of alternative. The Government rightly have a commitment to mediation. We have the mediation pledge that successive Governments have signed up to. Increasing the use of mediation was an objective of the Government's reforms. The estimate was that the number of mediation assessments in family law alone would increase by 9,000, and that was budgeted for. That was all well and good, but the evidence that the Committee received showed that the number of mediations fell by 17,000, or about 56%—it more than halved. The National Audit Office concluded that the Ministry of Justice had a "limited understanding" of why people go to court. The assumption that people would take up mediation was not adequately evidenced. In somewhat the same way as with legal aid, there is a lack of understanding of what mediation is available, how it is best accessed and how it is resourced.

My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell), who was present for the earlier debate, is a member of the Justice Committee, and he has recently set up an all-party group on alternative dispute resolution. That is a worthy cause, and I hope that several hon. Members will take an interest in it, because there is a lot more we can do to resolve a raft of issues in a non-adversarial fashion. Not enough is being done on that, and the Government need to be much more proactive. I would be interested to know what they intend to do to work out why there was such a disparity between the assessments and the actual uptake. I would also be interested to

know what work is being done as part of the initiative they rightly introduced with Sir David Norgrove's work on the family mediation taskforce. The taskforce is a step in the right direction, and we welcome it, but there are other areas where much more work can be done to increase the take-up of mediation. Although there has been an improvement, take-up is still about half the 2012-13 figure, and it is important to have some explanation of that.

The Government's fourth objective was value for money in the system. The difficulty is that we cannot really quantify that at the moment, because there is no evidence regarding knock-on costs elsewhere in the system. The Committee thought—again, this coincides with my experience—that early intervention is often a cost saver. One witness described it as a fence at the top of the cliff, rather than an ambulance at the bottom, and there is a lot of common sense in that. Sensible early intervention saves time, saves money and saves injustice being done to parties. I hope the Ministry will look again at that.

The Committee recommended establishing a review of the reforms' knock-on costs, but the Ministry rejected that on the basis that the Act would be reviewed between three and five years after implementation and that there had been no complaints. That rather misses the point, because there is already evidence of knock-on costs and of the reforms not working as planned. If we want them to bite and to be genuinely sustainable, waiting three years is quite a long time. That is why the Committee revisited them after one year. I hope the Minister will be able to say that the Government will move more swiftly to review the knock-on costs.

The Committee raised a number of issues. I wish the reforms a fair wind. However, I, as a loyal supporter of the Government, have concerns, as does the Committee, on a cross-party basis. It is right to take those concerns on board, because we need to look at them seriously. Having dealt with some of the immediate economic pressures that existed previously, it may be possible for us to revisit this issue and to adopt a more nuanced approach to making savings. Indeed, we may recognise other areas in the legal aid and criminal justice system where savings can sensibly be made. However, the ability to access justice in a fair way is critical to the equality of arms and to the system's integrity. None of us would want that to be undermined—I know the Minister would not—and that is why the Committee raised the issues it did in its report. I look forward to the Minister's response.

3.13 pm

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Brady. The hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), the Chair of the Select Committee, remarked in the last debate that his pupil master advised him that the most effective form of cross-examination is polite cross-examination. Well, his examination of the report was polite and fair, but it was also honest—it was a proper critique of the issues the Committee covered. I am afraid, however, that I will be rather more impolite than the hon. Gentleman.

The report is a damning indictment of the Government's haphazard, ham-fisted approach to reforming legal aid. The Committee has set out in clear terms what an

unmitigated disaster the reform of civil legal aid has become under this Government. Their ill-advised attack on legal aid, in the guise of reform, has undermined a long tradition of access to justice. The legal system in England and Wales was once the envy of the world, but I hope hon. Members do not think I am being over-dramatic when I say that other countries are now starting to rather disregard it, and it is being quite heavily criticised. We should be proud of a history in which the poorest and most vulnerable have had access to the law.

The Government had four objectives in the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act. Those were to discourage unnecessary and adversarial litigation at public expense; to target legal aid at those who need it most; to make significant savings in the cost of the scheme; and to deliver better overall value for money for the taxpayer. Of those four objectives, they have achieved only one. Significant cuts have been made to the cost of the scheme, but at what cost to justice? Indeed, one wonders whether there is any saving in reality.

Criticism of LASPO is wide-ranging, coming from the Bar Council, the Legal Aid Practitioners Group, Citizens Advice and many others. The Law Society has argued that many people are being denied access to justice as a result of the huge changes to civil legal aid.

It is obvious from the report that the knock-on effects of such large cuts were not thought through. The driving force behind them was purely ideological. There was no evidence-based approach to legal aid—there was just a “slash now and see what happens next” approach. As a Back-Bench Member, I served on the Committee that considered the LASPO Bill. We heard evidence from various groups and speeches by Members from both sides of the House warning the Government of the risks. However, all of that was categorically ignored by a Government whose aim was to make the cuts and to ask questions later.

The report is clear that

“the urgency attached by the Government to the programme of savings militated against having a research-based and well-structured programme of change to the provision of civil legal aid.”

The evidence given by Dame Ursula Brennan gave the game away. Her concession that the primary motivation for the decisions was the size of the spend shows the intellectual deficit behind the changes. Access to justice should have been at the top of the Government’s list when it came to reforming legal aid, but, as we have seen in the last few years, it appears to have been an afterthought.

The Government claim to have targeted legal aid at those who need it the most, but I am afraid that is laughable. The Select Committee Chair gave anecdotal evidence from practitioners in the relevant area, and it is true that members of the Bar and solicitors who practise on a daily basis in civil legal aid areas encounter major difficulties as a result of the changes to the law. I could continue, but the critique by the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst included all that I wanted to say. He was fair and is clearly objective about what he has read. I know that he was not involved in the work on the report, which was done by members of the Committee under its former Chairman in the previous Parliament.

Attacks on access to justice have led to massive shortfalls in advice. We should all be concerned about it. The impact of the cuts is devastating in both civil

and, indeed, criminal legal aid. I do not want to digress too much, but today criminal solicitors throughout the land are being told whether they have managed to get a contract for criminal legal aid in duty cases. I very much fear that the Government are going to make the same mistakes that they made with criminal legal aid under LASPO. Will the Government make a commitment to bring forward their review, so that the changes to civil legal aid can be rigorously and thoroughly examined? The Labour party recently announced a full review of legal aid, to include criminal as well as civil legal aid, led by Lord Willy Bach. I wonder whether that may prompt the Government to bring forward their own review of the Act.

3.22 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Dominic Raab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Brady, for what I believe is the first time—certainly as a Minister. I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to the debate. I am sure many colleagues will have noticed that I am not the Minister responsible for legal aid, and I want to convey apologies on behalf of my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary, the Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Mr Vara), who is caught in the joys of the Committee on the Welfare Reform and Work Bill. I shall address issues of substance—technical and detailed as they are—and principle as best I can. If I cannot deal with them I shall follow them up; or I am sure my hon. Friend will be able to.

I welcome the report and scrutiny, and particularly the tenor of the approach to the issue taken by the Chairman of the Select Committee on Justice. He began by pointing out that all the reforms are happening in the context of trying to deal with the deficit, and noted that the Ministry of Justice is not a protected area. There are no easy choices in this area and I welcome his emphasis on that. At the same time, I think it is agreed across the House that legal aid is a vital element in any fair justice system and I am proud to say that our system remains very generous. Last year we spent £1.6 billion on legal aid. That is about a quarter of the Department’s expenditure. All sorts of issues arise in connection with methods and modalities of legal aid reform—I thought that the Select Committee Chairman handled this aspect of the matter well—but it is incumbent on those whose bottom-line position is that we need to spend more to explain responsibly where the money will come from. They should explain whether it would be from prisons, within the Ministry of Justice budget. We have just had a debate on prison reform and we all understand how difficult the pressures are there. If more spending on legal aid is not to come from the Ministry of Justice budget will it be from the schools or health budgets?

Karl Turner: The point, which the Committee made very well, is that there is not necessarily a real saving. There may be a top line saving. Legal aid spending may be reduced, but that is going down the road to another Department. Some other area has to pick up the bill in the end.

Mr Raab: That is not correct or accurate and I will address the point in detail shortly. The hon. Gentleman must face up to the fact that the shadow Justice Secretary

[Mr Raab]

in 2011, the right hon. Member for Tooting (Sadiq Khan), made it clear that the Labour party's position then was that cuts would have to be made. I have heard little of substance from the hon. Gentleman other than that the Labour party, even under its current leader, is punting the whole issue into review. It sounds a little to me as if there is a lot of critique but not many positive ideas about what to do.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): In the context of the need for cuts, should we not bear it in mind that one of the issues of concern to the Committee was the underspend on legal aid? There were concerns about lack of information about its continued availability. Is not it important to ensure that where there is legal aid those who may be entitled to it are notified of that, to ensure that they get access to justice?

Mr Raab: My hon. Friend is right and that is a more legitimate question to raise.

For all the bean-counting, and the importance of the deficit, the Government have a responsibility to ensure that those in the greatest hardship, at times of real need, are provided with the resources to secure access to justice. As well as being grateful to the Select Committee Chair, I am grateful to all hon. Members in this and the previous Parliament for their diligent and careful scrutiny of our legal aid reforms. Some fair points have been made in the reports, and by the Chairman today.

When the programme to reform legal aid commenced in 2010, the scale of the financial challenge faced by the Government was unprecedented, so we had to confront those difficult decisions. It was our clear intention to remove legal aid for some types of cases while protecting access to justice in key areas. That is why we have sought to make sure that legal aid remains available for critically important cases: where someone's life or liberty is at stake; where they may, for example, lose their home; in cases of domestic violence; or where children may be taken into care. We were clear about wanting more cases to be diverted from court where suitable alternatives are available. Let us face it; the justice system is there not for lawyers but for society, citizens and victims. There is no doubt that in many cases the court should be the last, not the first, resort.

The changes we had to make to legal aid have been contentious. They were debated extensively, with amendments made throughout their passage, before they were approved by Parliament. Those changes need to be judged fairly, given the passage of time. Yes, the reforms in the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 have made a considerable contribution to my Department's programme to reduce its spending, and we are on course to achieve our planned savings; but legal aid continues to remain available where it is most needed. For example, last year we began funding legal representation on more than 46,000 new proceedings under the Children Act 1989 and almost 14,000 proceedings related to domestic violence protective injunctions. Those are the kinds of cases where it is really important that there is still a safety net.

We have also made sure that funding will be provided, where it is needed, through the exceptional funding scheme. That scheme has been criticised and it remains

the subject of continuing litigation. I am sure that hon. Members will appreciate that I cannot comment on that litigation. The exceptional funding scheme has never been intended to provide a general power to fund cases that fall outside the wider generic scope of legal aid. That is not its purpose. The scheme is expressly aimed at making sure legal aid is provided when it is required strictly under the European convention on human rights or otherwise under EU law. In the two years following the implementation of LASPO we have granted exceptional funding in almost 300 cases, and the number of grants is rising with each quarter. In the most recent quarter, April to June 2015—I think that the same figures were cited by the Select Committee Chairman—there were 121 grants, the highest number since the scheme began and a three-fold increase on the same quarter of the previous year.

That the scheme has been subject to litigation is not surprising: it is a new regime, so litigants will seek to test its limits, particularly given the professional sector we are talking about. Having said that, we will listen to the concerns of the courts and address them where necessary—for example, by updating guidance or amending regulations to reflect the detail of the latest case law. My hon. Friend the Chair of the Select Committee made a point about the complexity of the forms; we are looking at that and will see whether we can simplify how they are presented.

Litigants in person are not a new feature of our justice system. People involved in litigation are engaged in a range of disputes and have a range of different needs and capabilities. For many people, representing themselves might be the right choice, whether because they literally want their day in court, physically; because of financial considerations; or because of the nature of the case. Litigants in person have always been a feature of the family justice system. Family court judges are well practised and rather good at stretching and striving to find the right kind of support and to allow flexibility so that litigants in person can give the best evidence possible.

I am not saying that we should disregard the impact of the reforms on litigants in person. In anticipation of an increase in numbers, right at the outset we put in place £370,000 of extra support for organisations, including new guidance. We have kept that under review and, where there have been concerns, we have taken further action, which is why we announced £2 million of further support for litigants in person in October last year.

Karl Turner: Is the Minister suggesting that the significant increase in litigants in person is based purely on the choice of the litigant, rather than the fact that they are just not in the position to access a lawyer, whether because of an advice desert in the area where they need advice or for other reasons?

Mr Raab: No. As the Chair of the Select Committee pointed out, we are talking about behavioural conduct—human beings in very difficult situations. Sometimes their lives might be chaotic or difficult, or they might be under pressing conditions. I am not sure that we can say precisely why it has happened, because there could be a variety of reasons. The fact is that there is now a new litigants in person support strategy in place, led by the advice, voluntary and pro bono sector, which builds on

domestic and international advice and evidence. Progress has been made, with increased provision of face-to-face, phone and online support.

It is not right to claim that increasing numbers of litigants in person have created knock-on costs that undermine savings from legal aid reform. The National Audit Office looked at the matter very closely and reported that the additional costs of the changes are relatively small compared with the gross figures—we are looking at around £3.4 million a year, compared with the scale of the civil and family legal aid savings achieved, which the NAO estimated at around £300 million a year. The suggestion about knock-on costs is therefore just not right.

Encouraging greater use of mediation has been a key plank of our wider reforms to the justice system, and it is germane here. Mediation can be quicker, cheaper and less stressful means of dispute settlement than protracted litigation. It is right that we try to keep a whole range of disputes outside of the courts. As I said earlier, the justice system is there for citizens, not just lawyers. Mediation also plays a role in reducing conflict and helping the parties to communicate better with each other.

Admittedly, the volume of individuals diverted from court into family mediation was not as expected following the reforms, but family relations are difficult to predict, particularly on a societal scale. Nevertheless, we acted quickly to address matters when it became clear that the behavioural shift was not being achieved to the degree that had been hoped for and estimated, although it was only an estimate. The Family Mediation Task Force was established in January 2014 to respond to the situation, and we accepted many of its recommendations.

Robert Neill: I understand the point the Minister is making, but, perhaps precisely because it is difficult to predict these things, would he accept that it is not realistic to wait three to five years for a review? Would he be prepared to review the situation in this coming year, in light of that very unpredictability?

Mr Raab: I say to my hon. Friend that, in fairness, it can be argued both ways. One could argue that we ought to have a look now because of some fluidity in the figures, or one could say, “Hold on, shall we see if it settles down and we get a slightly bigger picture? Otherwise we’ll only end up having a second review or implementing reforms based on an initial review without having the big picture.”

Robert Neill: Again, I understand what the Minister says, but will he also bear in mind that there is not only the issue of the unpredictability that is acknowledged on all sides, but the fact that there is a significant underspend? If there is a significant underspend, which is quantifiable, that tends to indicate fairly strongly that some cases that should be getting legal aid are not, even on the estimates that were made.

Mr Raab: That is a fair point, but I am not sure whether that alone would justify bringing forward the review. We want to gauge the long-term direction of the reforms, but I take on board my hon. Friend’s point, which he made perfectly reasonably.

The actions taken as a result of the Family Mediation Task Force’s recommendations include the mediation information and assessment meeting and the first session of mediation for both participants, where one participant is eligible for legal aid. The number of publicly funded mediation starts have now increased for five consecutive quarters and are at their highest volume since the quarter April to June 2013. We acknowledge that the volumes are not where we would like them to be, but we are working on it. While the figures bed down and we tweak the system, we acknowledge that it has not been perfect or particularly easy to estimate with any great precision, but we are seeing significant and substantial improvements. Given the trajectory we are now seeing, it is not right to rubbish this aspect of the reforms.

We have also worked to increase awareness of legal aid and the Civil Legal Advice service on the Government web pages. There is a new, enhanced “Check if you can get legal aid” digital tool available, which provides interactive information to help individuals to assess their eligibility for legal aid. The service has been designed and tailored around the needs of applicants following extensive user testing—it has not just been put up there on a whim. A new communications strategy will be launched this autumn to increase the awareness of our partners, stakeholders and their front-line advice providers, on the availability of legal aid and the Civil Legal Advice service through the new digital tool.

Domestic violence is undoubtedly one of the most important dimensions of the reforms and their impact. I assume it goes without saying that domestic violence and abuse appals everyone present, as well as everyone across the House and across society. That is why it is a priority for the Government, and why we retained legal aid for protective injunctions, such as non-molestation orders. On top of that, in private family law matters—cases concerning child arrangements and financial matters—funding might be available for those who would be disadvantaged by facing their abuser in court. That is an important innovation.

Of course, evidence is required to ensure that the correct cases attract funding, but we have listened to and responded to specific concerns. Following an early review of the system, we made changes to make evidence easier to obtain. Since we intervened, the number of grants in such cases has risen quarter on quarter and by 25% over the past year. We will keep that under review and we will keep responding to the evidence, because that is the responsible thing to do.

I would like to touch briefly on the proposed residence test, which is also important. It is also the subject of litigation that is before the Court of Appeal today, I think, so I cannot comment on the detail. Nevertheless, I want to make it clear that the Government believe, as a matter of principle, that individuals should have a strong connection to this country in order to benefit from our civil legal aid scheme. We believe that the test we have proposed—with important exceptions for vulnerable groups—amount to an approach that is fair and appropriate.

I want to pick up on some of the points that were made in the previous speeches. The Chair of the Select Committee referred to the estimates of the spend; we need to be honest that they were estimates. The scheme is demand-led, so it is difficult to make estimations with great precision, but, when needed, legal advice will be

[Mr Raab]

available. We will be conducting a post-implementation review. He may argue that it should take place sooner rather than later, but there are arguments both ways. We should not have a review too quickly before the reforms bed down; otherwise, we risk not seeing what the full impact and implications are, and we will get only a partial view.

Alex Chalk: Does the Minister agree, however, that the other relevant consideration is that the longer we leave it, the more scope there is for some people who should have access to legal aid to be denied it? That can have significant implications for those individuals. That is one of the competing considerations to bear in mind.

Mr Raab: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and he makes the point fairly. As policy makers we always face that issue, but I am not entirely convinced—the Minister responsible for legal aid will have to think about this and come to a conclusion—that the balance of argument is in favour of risking a rushed review. We should wait and see how the reforms bed down. The Minister responsible for legal aid may take a different view, but I am sure he will give the matter careful consideration, as I have today.

I want to raise two or three other issues in the time available. First, McKenzie friends were rightly raised; they are an important issue. We will consider the report and the updated guidance from the judiciary once we have got it. The right thing to do is to wait until we have got the expert advice from the judiciary before we come to a conclusion.

Other questions were asked about domestic violence and why the rules are not subject to greater discretion. That is a perfectly legitimate issue to raise, but we need objective evidence to apply the rules in a way that maintains the basic integrity of the system. We can have a debate about some of the detail of it, but that is an important point to note. I want to emphasise that the two-year time limit relates to the evidence of the abuse, not the abuse itself. I think there has been some misunderstanding about that important distinction.

I hoped that the Labour party would take a slightly more consensual approach, because in 2011 the then shadow Justice Secretary, the right hon. Member for Tooting (Sadiq Khan), told MPs that the legal aid budget is unsustainable. He said:

“We’ve got to be honest with the British public. When Labour left office, the legal aid budget was £2.1bn out of an overall MoJ budget of £8.5bn. That’s a lot of money. If you want to make savings you can’t cut courts, you can’t close prisons, you can’t cut probation, so the point that I make and I still make is: there are savings to be made.”

He was absolutely right, and if the shadow Minister disagrees he needs to explain where the extra money is going to come from. Punting it into review and saying they are going to pay for this thing by getting the Bank of England to print extra money—an idea that has been panned by the Governor as not only economically irresponsible but likely to hurt the most vulnerable in society, including the elderly and the poorest—will not do in a serious debate. We need credible contributions like the one today.

Karl Turner: Listen, the point is this. My right hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Sadiq Khan) made those comments in 2011. The reality is that the Opposition criticised the changes in the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 throughout all stages of its passage through the Commons. Indeed, many changes were made in the Lords. The point is that the Select Committee is criticising the Act now. It is an objective criticism, and in truth the Chair criticised it more than I did.

Mr Raab: The reality is that before the previous election the Labour party’s clear position was that cuts need to be made. Unlike the Chair of the Select Committee, who made a number of detailed points about the substance—

Karl Turner: It was not.

Mr Raab: Exactly. It said very little on the substance; the hon. Gentleman is quite right. We have not had, amid the carping and criticism, any serious alternative approach on the “how”, rather than the “whether”.

Karl Turner: It is coming.

Mr Raab: Well, we will wait for that, just as we are waiting for proposals on a range of social policy areas. In fact, there seems to be very little policy that is not up for grabs and up for review.

We have made significant reforms to the legal aid scheme, and we believe they are sustainable. We do not say that they have been easy choices. The Legal Aid Agency undertakes regular capacity reviews of supply, which continue to show sufficient capacity in all categories of civil law in the majority of procurement areas. Where that is not the case—for example, where a provider has withdrawn from a contract—the agency has taken action to find alternative provision.

I recognise the strength of feeling on this subject and the importance that hon. Members from both sides of the House attach to it. The Ministry of Justice and the Legal Aid Agency routinely and closely monitor the operation of the legal aid scheme, taking action when issues or problems are identified. I have tried to set out as best I can the areas where we have already responded. We do not say that we got it right first time without glitches or problems in the implementation.

We have also committed to conduct a post-implementation review of our legal aid reforms within three to five years of implementation—in other words, by 2016 to 2018 at the latest. The precise timing and the form of the review will be guided by our assessment of the extent to which the reforms have reached a steady state, as I have already indicated, and by Government and wider stakeholder research and evidence on the impact of the reform. I appreciate that there is a perfectly proper debate to be had on the timing, but we want to wait for that evidence and research to come through.

I am grateful for the Select Committee’s report and its approach. I am grateful to hon. Members who have spoken in this debate. I appreciate the points made by the shadow Justice Minister, and I hope I have been able to address as many of the questions as possible. I am happy to follow up further afterwards if that is not the case.

3.46 pm

Robert Neill: I am very grateful to the Minister for the careful and considered way in which he dealt with this debate, having picked up what under different circumstances we would call a late return. I understand the constraints, and, as I hope I made clear, I am certainly not against making savings within the system. I will take the Minister at his word when he says that there is a need for objective evidence. We will continue to press the Government, because that objective evidence needs to be quantified sooner rather than later. We need to look at the knock-on costs, which I do not think have been adequately taken into account.

I welcome the expert advice that has been taken on McKenzie friends. The Committee will want to press the Government for a timetable on that, but we need not do so today because it is a small, simple and relatively cost-neutral change to the system, which will be of benefit. I hope that, given that the Minister accepts the need for objective evidence, he recognises that that must also apply to a quantification of the

impacts, which we have not seen. We must deal with why the underspend arises at the level it does. That is the fundamental issue we raised, and it has still not been fully addressed.

I am grateful for the Minister's response, but the Select Committee will inevitably need to return to this issue. It is important to understand why there is an underspend so that we can ensure that the proper advice and support gets to the people who need it, which is an objective that I know Members on both sides of the House share.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Eighth Report from the Justice Committee, Session 2014-15, on impact of changes to civil legal aid under part 1 of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, HC 311, and the Government Response, CM 9096.

3.47 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 15 October 2015

BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

Pricing Practices (Groceries Market)

The Minister for Skills (Nick Boles): On behalf of the Government, I am today announcing that we have published a response to the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) welcoming their report and recommendations in respect of the super-complaint made by Which? alleging pricing malpractice in the groceries market.

The Government are pleased to see the CMA do not consider there to be a systemic problem in the grocery market in how retailers present prices. We also welcome CMA's plans to take action where they have identified examples of potentially misleading and confusing practices. The CMA did find however that more could be done to reduce the complexity in unit pricing to make it a more useful comparison tool for consumers.

Addressing the recommendation concerning price promotions and special offers the Chartered Trading Standards Institute is today publishing its consultation on a revised pricing practices guide. BIS will consult later in the autumn on proposals to simplify and improve unit pricing to help the consumer compare prices more easily across similar products and therefore identify the best deals. We will continue to work closely with Which? CTSI, retailers and supermarkets, including through the BIS expert working group, and welcome continued input from the CMA.

[HCWS240]

UK Green Investment Bank

The Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills and President of the Board of Trade (Sajid Javid): My written statement of 25 June provided an update on work to move UK Green Investment Bank plc (GIB) into private ownership. It was always our intention that GIB should mobilise maximum private investment in the green economy. This reflects our policy aim of getting the market to work in tackling green policy challenges.

Bringing private ownership directly into GIB is part of this aim and a natural next step for the company now it has proved itself a successful commercial enterprise capable of operating with private sector capital rather than relying on public funding for its investments. It will allow the bank to access a much greater volume of capital than would be the case if GIB were to remain in Government ownership meaning it can grow its business, move into a wider range of sectors and have the greatest possible impact in mobilising investment so that more green projects get financed more quickly than would otherwise be the case. The plans have the full support of the company and its independent board, including chair, Lord Smith of Kelvin.

As I said in my previous statement, a key objective in moving the company into the private sector is that it should be free to borrow and raise capital without this affecting public sector net debt. Giving GIB this freedom is essential if the company is to invest in accordance with its ambitious green business plan.

It is now clear that to achieve re-classification of GIB as a private sector enterprise, we need to remove the public sector controls imposed on the company by the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Act 2013. Unless we remove these controls, there is a real risk GIB would remain classified to the public sector even after a sale so would remain subject to Government control over its capital raising. This unintended effect of the legislation has only become apparent in the course of our work to facilitate GIB's transition into the private sector.

In view of this, as a necessary part of the privatisation process, we now propose to use the Enterprise Bill, through an amendment shortly to be tabled at the Lords Committee stage, to repeal the relevant sections of the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Act 2013 relating to GIB.

I recognise that in taking this step, people will wish to be assured GIB will nevertheless continue to invest in green sectors as Parliament envisaged. I wish to make clear that the Government also want and expect a privately owned GIB to continue this clear focus on green sectors—mobilising more private capital and further accelerating the transition to a green economy.

It is clear from preliminary feedback that potential investors are interested in acquiring a stake in GIB precisely because of its unique green specialism and its green-focused business plan. As part of any sale process, we would expect potential investors to confirm their commitment to GIB's green values and to set out how they propose to ensure these are protected.

I will provide further updates about the transaction as soon as possible.

[HCWS239]

TREASURY

UK Bilateral Loan to Ireland

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): HM Treasury has today provided a further report to Parliament in relation to the bilateral loan to Ireland as required under the Loans to Ireland Act 2010. The report relates to the period from 1 April 2015 to 30 September 2015.

A written ministerial statement on the previous statutory report regarding the loan to Ireland was issued to Parliament on 15 June 2015, *Official Report*, column 1WS.

[HCWS247]

Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing (Risk Assessment)

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Harriett Baldwin): Money laundering can undermine the integrity and stability of our financial markets and institutions.

Countering terrorist financing is also important in protecting national security and forms a key part of the UK's counter-terrorism strategy.

Money laundering is a global problem and the laundering of proceeds of overseas corruption into or through the UK fuels political instability in some countries. The European Commission's 2013 impact assessment of anti-money laundering and terrorist financing points to global criminal proceeds potentially amounting to some 3.6% of global GDP; around US\$2.1 trillion in 2009.

The Government have already taken steps to improve the anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist financing regimes including by:

launching the Economic Crime Command in the National Crime Agency in 2013;

publishing the UK anti-corruption plan in 2014 and setting up a new specialist international corruption unit in the NCA;

strengthening the confiscation regime under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 and creating a new offence for participation in organised crime;

introducing a reporting process for anti-money laundering (AML)/counter-financing of terrorism (CFT) supervisors, improving the transparency and accountability of supervision and enforcement in the UK;

building asset confiscation enforcement (ACE) teams to crack down on those who refuse to pay their confiscation orders, contributing to the recovery of £199 million last year, the highest amount on record;

forming a new partnership with the financial sector to create the joint money laundering intelligence taskforce;

and launching a review of the suspicious activity reports (SARs) regime.

Today, the Government are publishing the UK's first national risk assessment of money laundering and terrorist financing. It identifies and assesses the UK's money laundering and terrorist financing risks, drawing on data from UK law enforcement and intelligence agencies, anti-money laundering supervisors, Government Departments, industry bodies and private sector firms.

The national risk assessment has found that while the UK's response to money laundering and terrorist financing risks is well developed, more could be done to strengthen the UK's anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist financing regime, including in the following areas:

the understanding of certain types of money laundering, and particularly in relation to "high end" money laundering, where the proceeds are often held in bank accounts, real estate or other investments, rather than cash;

the consistency of the UK's supervisory regime, and specifically the understanding and application of a risk-based approach to supervision;

the priority given to combatting money laundering by law enforcement agencies and the effectiveness of their response.

The Government will take forward these findings in a comprehensive action plan. The priorities for the action plan will include:

fill intelligence gaps, particularly those associated with "high end" money laundering through the professional services sector;

enhance our law enforcement response and build more effective public-private sector partnerships, to tackle the most serious threats;

address the inconsistencies in the supervisory regime that have been identified;

work with supervisors to improve individuals' and firms' knowledge of money laundering and terrorist financing risks;

increase collaboration between law enforcement agencies, supervisors and the private sector to support prevention and detection.

The Government are committed to ensuring that the anti-money laundering regime is effective and proportionate, with businesses and regulators taking a risk-based approach to implementation. The Better Regulation Executive is leading a "red tape" review into the UK anti-money laundering regime to identify for example where companies are confused as to what is required or are undertaking unnecessary activity which diverts attention away from where there are real risks. The results of this review will inform the action plan.

The UK is periodically assessed under mutual evaluations by the Financial Action Task Force. The national risk assessment and the action plan will be kept under review and will inform the UK's next evaluation.

A copy of the report has been deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS244]

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

TV Licence Fee Enforcement Review Report

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr John Whittingdale): On 16 July 2015, the TV licence fee enforcement review, independently led on behalf of the Government by David Perry QC, was published and laid before Parliament.

In accordance with section 77(3) of the Deregulation Act 2015, I am now pleased to present a short report setting out my response to the review, and its recommendations.

The review has provided a fundamental contribution to the debate on the future of the TV licence fee enforcement regime, and I can confirm that the issues highlighted, and the recommendations made, will be considered in further detail during the forthcoming charter review.

As this report will play a central role in the debate, I do not propose to make regulations under section 78(1)(a) or (b) of the Deregulation Act 2015 at this time. This will be kept under review throughout the charter review and I will make a statement to the House taking a firm decision in due course as part of that process.

A copy of the report has been deposited in the Libraries of both Houses. Attachments can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenstatements>.

[HCWS246]

DEFENCE

Service Museums

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): My right hon. Friend the Minister of State in the House of Lords, Earl Howe, has made the following written ministerial statement.

I am today announcing the start of a comprehensive review of the three service museums; the National Army Museum, RAF Museum and National Museum of the Royal Navy, all of which are executive non-departmental public bodies (ENDPBs) of the Ministry of Defence. In this capacity, the service museums provide independent advice to the Secretary of State for Defence on the promotion and management of armed forces heritage matters.

This review is part of the Government's commitment to ensuring, and improving, the accountability and effectiveness of public bodies on a regular basis. The review will be conducted in accordance with Government guidance for reviewing ENDPBs, and will focus on the core questions of the continuing need for the functions of the ENDPBs, their effectiveness and their governance arrangements. It will be carried out in an open and transparent way, and stakeholders will be given the opportunity to contribute their views.

I will inform the House of the outcome of the review when it is completed.

[HCWS248]

EDUCATION

School Expansion

The Secretary of State for Education (Nicky Morgan): I have today written to the headteacher at the Weald of Kent Grammar School in Tonbridge, Kent, to confirm that I have approved their proposal to expand on to a new site in Sevenoaks, Kent.

It is this Government's policy that all good and outstanding schools should be able to expand to offer excellent places to local students. The Weald of Kent Grammar School is one of the top performing schools in the country, with 99% of its students achieving five A* to C grades in GCSE exams in 2014, and 98% of sixth form students achieving at least three A-Levels at grades A* to E.

The Weald of Kent Grammar School submitted a proposal for expansion in 2013. At that stage the then Secretary of State could not approve the proposal as an expansion because the proposal at that time was for a mixed-sex annexe when the existing school was single sex. The school submitted a revised proposal in September 2015 under which girls will be educated on both sites alongside a mixed-sex sixth form. I am satisfied that this proposal represents a genuine expansion of the existing school, and that there will be integration between the two sites in terms of leadership, management, governance, admissions and curriculum. I am also satisfied that the excellent quality of learning currently delivered will be replicated across the newly expanded school. I welcome the fact that the newly expanded school will better meet the needs of parents in the local area, with 41% of existing pupils at the Weald of Kent Grammar School already travelling from the Sevenoaks area.

The school expects to be able to start educating pupils at its new Sevenoaks site from September 2017.

My decision in this case has been taken on the basis of the proposal from the Weald of Kent, in line with legislation and criteria determining what constitutes an expansion. It does not reflect a change in this Government's position on selective schools. Rather it reaffirms our view that all good schools should be able to expand, a policy which is vital to meet the significant increase in

demand for pupil places in coming years. Further applications from good selective schools to expand will continue to be considered within the framework of the statutory prohibition on new selective schools and would have to meet the criteria for being a genuine expansion.

[HCWS242]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Justice and Home Affairs Council

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): First I would like to send my apologies that a pre-Council letter was not sent ahead of the Council on this occasion. This is a rare occurrence owing to a combination of late finalisation of the agenda for Council, and conference recess.

The Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) Council took place on 8 and 9 October in Luxembourg. My right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Justice, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon and I attended on behalf of the United Kingdom. The following items were discussed.

The interior session on 8 October began in mixed Committee with Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein and Switzerland (non-EU Schengen states) where the presidency provided an overview of their paper on the future management of the EU external border. The subsequent discussion saw calls for enhanced collective responsibility for the external borders, including some support for the Commission's calls for a fully-fledged EU border and coast guard and an extended mandate for Frontex, although the presidency was clear that member states must retain primary responsibility for controlling their own border. The Commission also drew attention to the role of EU smart borders and the Schengen information system in balancing border management and security, and the need for further consideration on whether more was needed to ensure the proper functioning of the Schengen acquis. The October European Council will return to this subject.

There was also an update on the relocation mechanisms agreed at the 14 and 22 September extraordinary JHA Councils, and the implementation of the 'hot spots' screening centres in Italy and Greece, with calls for all member states to provide Frontex and the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) with additional personnel and resources. There had been some progress, with implementation underway in Italy and starting in the Greek islands imminently, but it was clear more work was required, including on the return of those not requiring protection. Concerns were also raised regarding the likely effectiveness of intra-EU relocation and further secondary movement. Discussions on an agreed list of safe countries of origin and a permanent crisis mechanism for relocation (amending the Dublin regulation) would continue at official level.

The UK was clear that the current situation required a new international approach- strict enforcement of rules was required for those who abuse member states' asylum and migration systems but we should be generous to those who needed our help. Economic migrants needed to be returned swiftly, including from hotspots, so that the right messages were received by those intending

to set out for Europe. The UK would continue to support EASO and Frontex and will offer additional assistance, building on the offer already made this summer. I also made it clear that the UK would be willing to use its expertise in helping Greece set up the necessary systems and structures.

Returns were the subject of a separate debate, with the Commission introducing an EU action plan on returns, Council conclusions on the future of EU returns policy and a returns handbook, and stating that by the end of October there would be 10 joint EU return flights to African and Western Balkan countries. An EU returns office will be established within Frontex to co-ordinate all returns action and better use will be made of existing tools such as SIS and EURODAC databases. The main challenge remained countries of origin not accepting their nationals back, despite recognised international obligations for them to do so, leading for calls for greater use of conditionality in broader relations with key third countries.

The UK reiterated the importance of returning those not requiring international protection, in order that help could be focused on those in greatest need, which meant that effective returns of those not requiring international protection in Europe was vital. Identifying safe countries of origin was welcome, but the EU needed to go further.

I, also suggested that considering claims from certain countries as inadmissible except in exceptional circumstances could be the next step in tackling abuse, and that the use of detention was also necessary. The UK argued that it was important to consider seeking leverage with third countries to secure co-operation, that detention was often necessary and that the EU should take forward discussions on multi-purpose centres and safe zones outside of Europe to which economic migrants could be returned. I expressed the Government's support for improved returns mechanisms, in particular at the EU external border and noted that the UK will carefully consider all current and future proposals.

The presidency sought a steer from Ministers on its proposals to unlock discussion on the "visa package"—a recast of the union code on visas ("the visa code") and proposed touring visa. The Commission and member states had been deeply divided on the proposals. There is no impact for the UK as we are not involved in either of these measures because they build on those parts of the Schengen acquis in which we do not participate. Ministers endorsed the presidency's proposals for continuing discussions at official level.

The lunchtime discussion was on migration and development. Following a briefing by Luxembourg's Development Minister, interventions veered to familiar ground on hotspots and relocation. The UK supports the hotspot proposals and continues to push for their rapid implementation, but we continue to oppose relocation.

The Europol Director (Rob Wainwright) updated Ministers on the recent Blue Amber operation, a series of joint operational action weeks co-ordinated through an operations room at Europol. The presidency concluded that the Committee on Internal Security (COSI) would continue to prioritise serious organised crime under the EMPACT priorities.

During a discussion on the fight against terrorism, the council adopted conclusions calling for an improved firearms intelligence picture and robust standards on

firearms deactivation. The UK supports the Council's position and has urged member states to prioritise the actions set out in the Council conclusions. The Commission is undertaking a study into further proportionate measures that can ensure greater passenger security. The UK called for the sharing of best practice in relation to rail security.

The Council agreed to step up the voluntary removal of terrorist propaganda through the Europol Internet Referral Unit (IRU). The UK welcomed the results achieved by the IRU so far and supported the upscaling of the programme, calling on more member states to second national experts to the unit. The Council agreed to enhance counter narrative work with the Syria strategic communication advisory team (SSCAT)'s support. The Government welcome the SSCAT 2016 project as a tool to support member states to improve their capacity to deliver strategic communications campaigns to counter the influence of violent extremists.

The presidency updated Ministers on the implementation of the renewed internal security strategy 2015-2020. The presidency had set the following priority areas for implementation under their tenure 1) fight against terrorism 2) tackling illegal migration 3) completion of the Europol regulation 4) completion of the EU PNR directive. The following presidency trios were encouraged to continue with a six monthly implementation plan, but also to establish an 18 month joint implementation strategy to retain continuity over the medium term.

The presidency updated on progress on the Europol and passenger name records (PNR) trilogue negotiations. Both the presidency and the Commission urged member states to continue lobbying their national Members of Parliaments to ensure they fully understand the value of PNR. I reiterated the need for intra EU data to be included for any directive to be effective.

Justice day started with a ministerial breakfast meeting on the implications of the Taricco judgment in relation to the draft directive for the protection of the union's financial interests. There was broad agreement to retain the title V legal base and the UK, supported by other member states continued to oppose the inclusion of VAT fraud in the directive protecting our red line.

The presidency reiterated its aim to complete negotiations on both the general data protection regulation and the accompanying law-enforcement focused directive by the end of the year. With a general approach on the regulation secured in June, the presidency presented a compromise text on the directive and sought approval from Ministers to enter trilogue negotiations with the European Parliament as soon as possible. The Commission welcomed the text, noting the delicate balance that had been achieved between operational effectiveness and privacy for data subjects, and the need to create a level playing field across the EU, for all forms of data processing.

The UK welcomed the changes made during expert discussions and urged the presidency to defend the Council position during trilogue, particularly the ability of law enforcement agencies to withhold information where appropriate for operational reasons, and to transfer data to third countries. Most other member states agreed and considered the draft to be a good balance between the rights of data subjects and needs of law enforcement agencies. The general approach was agreed.

The Commission updated Ministers on the recent decision by the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) to strike down the EU-US "safe harbour"

agreement, which established a framework for the transfer of data from the EU to the US. In its view, the ruling was a clear statement on the importance of data protection as a fundamental right, and validated the Commission's to review the safe harbour agreement. The Commission acknowledged however, that the invalidation of safe harbour would require data controllers to rely on other legal grounds for the transfer of data to the US, such as contractual clauses, binding corporate rules, or consent. The Commission assured member states it wanted to see uniform application of the ruling, and expected that national data protection authorities would provide consolidated advice to business through the article 29 working party.

The Commission reiterated the need to work with the US on a revision of the safe harbour agreement. It noted that negotiations on a revised framework had been ongoing for almost two years. The Commission felt that the ruling would ensure greater clarity about the safeguards that a revised agreement would need to provide.

The presidency sought Council agreement to certain articles of the proposed regulation establishing a European Public Prosecutors Office (EPPO). The Council expressed provisional agreement. The UK does not participate in the EPPO. We noted our non-participation and registered our strong interest in ensuring that the scope of any EPPO does not go beyond the treaties.

During lunch, the presidency presented a progress report on the work of the EU accession to the European Convention of Human Rights and a summary of the problems with the draft accession agreement identified by the CJEU in its opinion of December 2014. There was some support for the presidency's proposal that the EU reaffirm its commitment to the accession process. The UK, along with the Council legal service, highlighted the profound challenge presented by the Court's opinion. The discussion concluded with the Commission recognising the difficulties faced, but agreeing to provide technical papers to assist the Council in identifying solutions to the issues raised by the CJEU.

Ministers discussed the migration situation, and the particular challenges it raises for judicial cooperation and tackling xenophobia. This included the role Eurojust might play in supporting member states in tackling these issues.

Additionally, there was a general discussion in response to the immigration crisis and best practice in co-operation between Governments and internet service providers to tackle hate speech online.

Under AOB, the Commission reminded member states that the victims' rights directive would be coming into force on 16 November 2015. The UK is committed to transposing the victims' rights directive by the deadline.

[HCWS249]

JUSTICE

HM Courts and Tribunal Service

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Shailesh Vara): In the last financial year HM Courts and Tribunals Service (HMCTS) collected over £550 million of fines, other financial impositions, fixed penalties and orders, and that money has helped to fund vital services for taxpayers.

To build on this work, in July 2013 my Department began a procurement competition for a new provider of criminal court compliance and enforcement services, and a preferred bidder was identified in January 2015.

Following reconsideration of the Department's requirements, we have decided that outsourcing these services to a single supplier is not the best option for HM Courts and Tribunals Service. This decision is based on the need to ensure that any contract we let completely meets our requirements, provides best value for the taxpayer and complies with procurement law.

Ministers have set out the importance of reforming HMCTS to provide a modern and efficient service for society. Improving compliance and enforcement services will continue to form a key part of that work. We believe that in-house modernisation is the best option for HMCTS.

[HCWS237]

Coroner Reforms

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities and Family Justice (Caroline Dinenage): The Government are committed to making sure bereaved people are at the very heart of the coroner system.

I am therefore pleased to announce the launch of a post-implementation review of the coroner reforms in the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 ('the 2009 Act'), which will include a call for evidence into people's experiences of coroner services.

Before the last Government implemented the 2009 Act's coroner reforms, in July 2013, it undertook to review their impact after they had been in place for 18 months.

Since assuming responsibility for coroner policy and legislation following the general election I have considered the appropriateness of this Government carrying out such a review.

The reforms have now been in place for just over two years and I believe that this is a good period of time against which to assess the impact of the reforms and seek views on people's experiences of the system

The Government are keen to hear the views of:

The providers of local coroner services—coroners, their officers and other staff, and the local authorities that fund coroner services;

those who have used coroner services under the 2009 Act—bereaved people and the voluntary organisations, including faith groups, who support them;

others who interact with coroner services—such as pathologists, other doctors and registrars; and

others who have been affected by and have experiences of coroner services under the 2009 Act.

We will seek views for eight weeks, starting today. After that we will consider the responses we have received and publish a post-implementation review report. Any proposed action arising from the findings of the review will be announced at that time.

The review is available at: <https://consult.justice.gov.uk>.

[HCWS243]

TRANSPORT

EU Informal Transport

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Patrick McLoughlin): I attended the first formal Transport Council meeting under the Luxembourg presidency (the presidency) on Thursday 8 October 2015.

The Council unanimously agreed general approaches on two proposals which form the “market pillar” of the fourth railway package: the proposal amending directive 2012/34 establishing a single European railway area, and the proposal amending regulation (EC) No 1370/2007 concerning the opening of the market for domestic passenger transport services by rail. The general approach texts mandate competitive tendering for public service contracts as a rule, but with several derogations to allow for direct awards in certain circumstances. I welcomed the efforts of the presidency to progress the fourth railway package, and set out the great success of rail liberalisation in our domestic market. I thanked the presidency for the provision allowing directly awarded contracts in exceptional circumstances, but expressed my disappointment in the changes to the texts allowing these in wider cases. I put forward the view that this had limited the ambitions of the market pillar and would lessen competition. However, along with all other member states I recognised the positive steps towards liberalisation that had been made and in the spirit of compromise supported the general approach. The presidency expressed their ambition to engage swiftly in trilogue discussions with the European Parliament and conclude negotiations on the package.

The Council held a policy debate on the review of the Commission’s 2011 White Paper on Transport. I agreed that the objectives set in 2011 are still largely relevant and their importance in ensuring that transport remains a key driver for growth and the single market. I welcomed the Commission’s commitment to better regulation and REFIT, and emphasised the need for EU initiatives to be targeted, proportionate and effective. I also highlighted the opportunity and challenges that digitalisation poses for the EU.

Over lunch there was a debate on cross-border co-operation in rail security following the Thalys incident in August. I put forward my support for the exchange of best practice between member states and transport operators, rather than any legislative initiative.

The presidency provided an update on the European fund for strategic investments and the transport infrastructure investment opportunities available. Some member states made limited interventions to welcome the long-term investment opportunities and the ability to combine with other financing streams and one member state expressed opposition to the use of private investment in long-term infrastructure projects.

Under Any Other Business, the Commission provided an update on new emissions testing procedures and the state of play on the real driving emissions tests. The Commission reiterated the three main actions following the Volkswagen situation: investigations being carried out in member states, the real driving emissions proposal, and in the future revisions to type approval legislation. The Commission asked all member states to respond to

proposals. Germany gave a comprehensive update on domestic action, and I along with other member states welcomed the Commission’s call for domestic investigations. I also expressed our support for the real driving emissions proposals and stressed that independent and accurate tests were key to restoring confidence among consumer and environmentalist groups.

Also under Any Other Business, the presidency provided an update on the outcome of the informal Transport Council on Wednesday 7 October and the declaration on cycling.

I was also able to hold bilateral discussions with my EU counterparts from Germany and the Czech Republic to discuss the VW emissions situation. I also met the Dutch Transport Secretary to discuss their preparation and priorities for the forthcoming Dutch presidency.

[HCWS238]

EU Transport Council

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Patrick McLoughlin): The UK was represented at official level at the informal Transport Council held under the Luxembourg presidency (the presidency) on Wednesday 7 October 2015.

The theme of the informal Transport Council was cycling as a mode of transport. The main agenda item was the presidency’s proposal for a declaration of Ministers on cycling as a climate-friendly transport mode.

The declaration called upon the Commission to integrate cycling into multi-modal transport policy, develop an EU-level strategic document and set up a European focal point on cycling. It also set out some action points for member states which included, for example, the designation of a national focal point for cycling and for national transport infrastructure projects to focus on strengthening cycling networks.

The UK outlined the importance of cycling in the UK, and the range of economic and health benefits it brings. Support was offered for other member state views on establishing national and European focal points for exchanging best practice. The UK welcomed the fact that “road safety” and “smart mobility” were referenced, as addressing behavioural matters is a key aspect of encouraging people to cycle. The UK also highlighted the importance of respecting the principle of subsidiarity and the fact that cycling is a devolved matter and so is best managed on a national and regional level.

[HCWS241]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Priorities on Pensions

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr Shailesh Vara): My noble Friend the Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Baroness Altmann) has made the following written statement:

“The new state pension comes into payment from April 6 next year. This reform will bring much-needed clarity to a system that few people truly understand, and will reduce the need for pensioner means-testing. Alongside this, over

5.4 million employees have been enrolled into a workplace pension by around 60,000 employers, dramatically increasing the number of people saving for later life. However, they represent around only three per cent of employers as large and medium-sized firms were first to implement automatic enrolment.

The Government's priorities are to carry through those important reforms to ensure they are a success. This means new state pension being delivered as smoothly as possible and small and micro employers getting the help and support they need as they meet their automatic enrolment duties.

Government and the pensions industry are also currently working through the changes following from the new pension flexibilities which allow scheme members to have more freedom and choice about how and when they withdraw their pension savings.

All these reforms will increase the number of people saving into workplace pensions, introduce new freedoms allowing savers to access their cash, and implement a new state pension that will be far easier to understand in the future. However, we are conscious of the need to ensure Government, providers, employers and members are able to focus on these changes to ensure their success.

That is why we have decided that the time is not right to implement defined ambition, collective benefits and automatic transfers. The time is not right to ask the pensions industry to absorb the new swathe of regulation that would be needed to make such further reforms work effectively. The market needs time and space to adjust to the other reforms underway and these areas will be revisited once there has been an opportunity for that to happen".

[HCWS245]

ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 15 October 2015

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
ATTORNEY GENERAL	467	WOMEN AND EQUALITIES—continued	
Court Time	473	Diversity Reporting.....	485
Crown Prosecution Service: Rape and Domestic Violence	470	Gender Pay Gap	477
Drones	472	Gender Pay Gap	483
Human Rights Act 1998	467	Harassment Online	486
Human Trafficking Offences: Forced Labour.....	474	New Businesses (Government Support)	479
Vulnerable Witnesses.....	471	Pregnancy and Maternity Discrimination	480
WOMEN AND EQUALITIES	475	Science, Engineering and Maths.....	484
Caste Discrimination	479	Setting Up Businesses	485
Child Poverty	488	Women and Girls in Sport	475
		Women’s Refuges	487
		Working Families Tax Credit	482

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Thursday 15 October 2015

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS	21WS	JUSTICE	29WS
Pricing Practices (Groceries Market).....	21WS	Coroner Reforms	30WS
UK Green Investment Bank	21WS	HM Courts and Tribunal Service	29WS
CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT	24WS	TRANSPORT	31WS
TV Licence Fee Enforcement Review Report	24WS	EU Informal Transport.....	31WS
DEFENCE	24WS	EU Transport Council	32WS
Service Museums	24WS	TREASURY	22WS
EDUCATION	25WS	Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing (Risk Assessment).....	22WS
School Expansion	25WS	UK Bilateral Loan to Ireland.....	22WS
HOME DEPARTMENT	26WS	WORK AND PENSIONS	32WS
Justice and Home Affairs Council.....	26WS	Priorities on Pensions.....	32WS

No proofs of the Daily Reports can be supplied. Corrections which Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked in the Daily Report, but not telephoned, and *the copy containing the Corrections must be received at the Editor's Room, House of Commons,*

**not later than
Thursday 22 October 2015**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF THE VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their Speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), on application to the Stationery Office, c/o the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons, from whom the terms and conditions of reprinting may be ascertained. Application forms are available at the Vote Office.

PRICES AND SUBSCRIPTION RATES

DAILY PARTS

Single copies:

Commons, £5; Lords, £4.

Annual subscriptions:

Commons, £865; Lords, £600.

LORDS VOLUME INDEX obtainable on standing order only. Details available on request.

BOUND VOLUMES OF DEBATES are issued periodically during the session.

Single copies:

Commons, £65 (£105 for a two-volume edition); Lords, £60 (£100 for a two-volume edition).

Standing orders will be accepted.

THE INDEX to each Bound Volume of House of Commons Debates is published separately at £9.00 and can be supplied to standing order.

All prices are inclusive of postage

CONTENTS

Thursday 15 October 2015

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 467] [see index inside back page]

Attorney General

Minister for Women and Equalities

Redcar Steelworks [Col. 489]

Answer to urgent question—(Anna Soubry)

Business of the House [Col. 498]

Statement—(Chris Grayling)

Wilson Doctrine [Col. 515]

Application for emergency debate under Standing Order No. 24

Armed Forces Bill [Col. 517]

*Motion for Second Reading—(Michael Fallon)—agreed to
Read a Second time*

Alcohol Harm and Older People [Col. 548]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

Prisons: Planning and Policies [Col. 187WH]

Civil Legal Aid [Col. 207WH]

Debates on motion for Adjournment

Written Statements [Col. 21WS]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
