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HOUSE OF COMMONS
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PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 23 November 2015

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Procurement

1. **Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure that the UK defence industry benefits from his Department's procurement decisions. [902257]

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Mr Philip Dunne): The strategic defence and security review will shortly set out for the hon. Gentleman and the House how we will invest more in bigger and stronger defence for Britain. The British defence industry plays a vital role in delivering more planes, ships, armoured vehicles and battle-winning capabilities for our armed forces. We are looking at how we can drive greater innovation into defence procurement, maximise the use of small and medium-sized enterprises, and ensure that investment decisions contribute to a more dynamic and productive economy.

Nick Smith: The important Ajax armoured vehicle programme for the Army has been in the pipeline for years, yet it will use Swedish, not British, steel. We are told that our specialist steelmakers are up to the task, so when did the Government ask British firms whether they could produce the steel?

Mr Dunne: As with all major defence equipment programmes, the contractors determine the materials, which includes sourcing steel on the basis of competitive cost, time and quality. In 2010, no UK steel manufacturer was able to meet the prime contractor's requirements, so no UK bids to supply steel for the Ajax programme were forthcoming. I can confirm for the hon. Gentleman, who takes a great deal of interest in this matter because the Ajax vehicles, after the 100th vehicle, will be assembled in Merthyr Tydfil, next to his constituency, that some 2,700 tonnes of steel—about 30% of the total requirement—remains open to competition, and that a competition is under way to supply sets of training armour that is open to applications from UK firms.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): A number of colleagues and I visited our magnificent new aircraft carriers in Rosyth last week. It was therefore with some interest that we learned this morning that the Government apparently intend to order a large number of joint strike

fighters to equip not only those aircraft carriers, but the Royal Air Force. Will my hon. Friend confirm the truth about that substantial increase in our fighting capability?

Mr Dunne: My hon. Friend is an experienced Member of the House and it will not be lost on him that after Defence questions, we have a statement from the Prime Minister, who I am quite sure will be able to address the question that he has just posed to me.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): It was excellent to welcome the Minister to Barrow-in-Furness again last week and make another show of the bipartisan support across the House for renewing the UK's nuclear deterrent submarines. Is there still a prospect of having the maingate vote before Christmas?

Mr Dunne: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for reminding the House that on Thursday last week, I accompanied him to his constituency to recognise the signature of the contract for the fifth Astute boat, Anson. It was good to be able to thank many of his constituents who have been involved in its construction. With regard to the investment decision for Successor, I think that that subject will come up shortly.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Of course, it is true that the defence industry can no longer source its requirements from the UK steel industry in many instances because of a loss of capability. Will the Minister work with colleagues in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, the defence industry and steel producers to put in place a long-term plan to ensure that UK steel develops the capability to meet the needs of the defence industry?

Mr Dunne: The Ministry of Defence is participating in the working group that was established last month by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General. Although steel is clearly a significant and important component in much defence manufacturing, the steel involved in all our current major programmes represented less than 1.5% of the steel manufactured in this country in 2013. Relatively speaking, although defence is important, it is a small contributor to the total steel output of this country.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): We are a maritime nation, so I welcome the newspaper reports—we will see whether they are true shortly—that the Prime Minister is to reverse his own decision and procure maritime patrol aircraft that are able, among other things, to defend our submarine fleet. One of the most visible signs of the botched 2010 strategic defence and security review was the photographs of our Nimrods being cut up into pieces, which we all saw in the newspapers at the time. When will the first of the new Boeing P-8s enter service?

Mr Dunne: The hon. Lady may recall that the programme she refers to, which was commissioned by the previous Labour Government, was more than £1 billion over-budget. It was reduced in scale by that Government to nine aircraft—more than half what was originally procured—and the prototype aircraft that was produced had more defects than any previous aircraft in production. We were not sure whether it would ever fly. That was the right

decision to take at the time, and now it is the right decision—if the Prime Minister is about to announce it—to have a replacement capability. We will have to hear when that will be available.

Maria Eagle: The UK has been without that vital capability for four years as a result of the 2010 decision—right or wrong—to which the Minister refers. Today we read that Britain had to call on our French and Canadian allies to provide aircraft to search for a Russian submarine off our shores. Can the Minister at least give the House a definite date by which we will again have our own maritime patrol aircraft?

Mr Dunne: I am sorry to have to disappoint the hon. Lady. It is now twenty to 3, so she must be a little more patient and see what the Prime Minister announces in his statement later this afternoon. I am quite sure that she will be in her place to hear it.

Arctic and High North

2. **Douglas Chapman** (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): What his policy is on the role of the UK in the security of the Arctic and High North. [902258]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Julian Brazier): The UK respects the sovereign responsibilities of the eight Arctic states while promoting our own interests in the region. We engage with the security of the region through the Arctic security forces roundtable, and directly with Arctic nations. We maintain naval and air assets capable of deploying to the region, and Arctic trained and equipped forces, including elements of 3 Commando Brigade.

Douglas Chapman: The Minister for the Armed Forces recently confirmed to me in a parliamentary answer that the Russian spy ship, the Yantar, passed through UK waters unhindered by the fleet ready escort. Scotland is on the front line of emerging threats from the High North, yet our defence footprint continues to shrink. Will the Minister confirm when UK naval surface ships will be rebased at Faslane and Rosyth, and say when we will see the re-establishment of RAF Leuchars?

Mr Brazier: I cannot confirm what the hon. Gentleman asks for about RAF Leuchars, but if he waits until half-past 3, he should hear some excellent news for Scotland.

Mr James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): There can be no question but that the retreating ice provides significant commercial opportunities, and that will lead to military stresses if we do not handle it correctly. The UK has a fantastic offer—namely, the Royal Marines who are trained in the Arctic; I have seen their work—so can we expand that capability? Secondly, we have not used under-ice submarines for a number of years. We have that capability so is it time that once again we used our submarines to operate under the Arctic ice?

Mr Brazier: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question, but he will have to wait until half-past 3 for confirmation of the future of our amphibious capability. I take on board his point about under-ice submarines, and I will write to him about that.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Perhaps I can help the Minister with a question that does not involve waiting until half-past 3. A lot of our focus is currently on the middle east and north Africa. Does he agree, however, that with two Russian Tupolev bombers off our coast recently, as well as a Russian submarine, it would be naive for us to take our eye off the strategic risk to the UK from the High North and Arctic region?

Mr Speaker: May I gently implore Members to proceed a little more quickly? We have a lot to get through, and questions and answers have been lengthy.

Mr Brazier: I thoroughly agree with the hon. Lady.

Mr Speaker: One of the finest parliamentary answers in the course of the hon. Gentleman's 28-year career to date.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Maritime patrol aircraft featured large in last year's referendum, but does my hon. Friend agree that they are pretty pointless, either manned or unmanned, unless there is the data-gathering and analysis technology to go with it, and the wherewithal to respond to any threats that emerge—something that the SNP failed to offer last year?

Mr Brazier: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): As my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) says, the High North is becoming one of the world's strategic hotspots. Does the Minister agree that, for a nation with a maritime history such as ours, seeking the assistance of France and Canada in locating a possibly hostile submarine is deeply embarrassing? Will he confirm that this is the third time the UK has had to call on such assistance?

Mr Brazier: The hon. Gentleman will have to wait until 3.30 pm for the detail, but I just remind him that the Defence Committee shared the Government's view that the Nimrod programme was dying. I am very glad that it should be possible to give some better news a little later today.

Brendan O'Hara: The lack of naval capability in the High North is indeed a worry. Given that just 14 months ago the workers at Scotstoun and Govan were guaranteed a bright future should they vote no to independence, will the Minister like to take this opportunity to make sure the promise made to them of 13 Type 26 frigates, is kept? Does he agree that if, at 3.30 pm, that promise is not kept, it will be a shameful betrayal of that workforce?

Mr Brazier: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I cannot give him a detailed answer. I can, however, say that the future for Scotland will look even brighter after 3.30 pm. We have just completed, in the past few months, the largest far north exercise in NATO history.

ISIL

3. **Richard Benyon** (Newbury) (Con): What contribution the UK is making to international efforts to degrade and defeat ISIL. [902259]

17. **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): What contribution the UK is making to international efforts to degrade and defeat ISIL. [902273]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Michael Fallon): The United Kingdom is already making a significant contribution to the international counter-ISIL coalition, with strike aircraft, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, and in helping to train Iraqi forces. In addition to the intelligence co-operation and border security support we have offered to France, the House will wish to know that yesterday I authorised the use of RAF Akrotiri as a diversion airfield for French aircraft striking in Syria.

Richard Benyon: Many of us, on all sides of the House, will support the Government as they make the intelligent case for extending the air campaign into Syria, and we reject totally the accusation that such a move would be a gesture. Does my right hon. Friend agree that our allies—not us, our allies—have been diminishing ISIL's command and control, restricting its ability to move en masse, and restricting its ability to take control of more ground? Is it not time to stop subcontracting our security to our friends?

Michael Fallon: I agree with my hon. Friend. We should not leave the fight against ISIL to French, American or Australian aircraft. While we are working through the Vienna talks, which aim to help to establish an inclusive transitional government to end the civil war and build more security for the Sunni areas of Syria, that should not either delay or deter us from degrading ISIL in eastern Syria, from where ISIL is directing the war in its region and directly threatening us.

Stephen Metcalfe: The Chief of the Defence Staff has said that not striking ISIL in its heartland in Syria is like a football team trying to win a match without entering the opposition's half. Is it not long overdue that we pushed up the pitch and stopped defending our goal line?

Michael Fallon: Yes. ISIL does not recognise the border between Iraq and Syria, and moves between both while the RAF can currently strike only in Iraq. It is illogical for us to be hitting ISIL targets in Iraq, while not targeting ISIL's core leadership, its lines of communication and its oil revenue base, which are all to be found in Syria.

20 [902276]. **Mr David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): What steps is the Secretary of State taking to squeeze ISIL's supply chain, particularly with regard to munitions and ammunition? ISIL is not just supplied by organisations in the region; countries and establishments outside the region must be supplying ISIL with arms.

Michael Fallon: Yes, we are intensifying our effort to cut off ISIL's sources of finance, in particular its ability to sell oil on the international market. We are also directly targeting its supply routes between Syria and Iraq, particularly in the region around Sinjar.

23. [902280] **Joan Ryan** (Enfield North) (Lab): The Democratic Union party—the PYD—holds political power in all three provinces of Rojava, in northern

Syria, including the war-torn province of Kobani. Will the Government be communicating or liaising with the PYD as it continues to resist Daesh in the region?

Michael Fallon: Yes. I discussed this matter in Ankara recently with the Prime Minister, Foreign Minister and Defence Minister of Turkey, who obviously want ISIL/Daesh pushed back from their own border in the remaining Manbij pocket between the two Kurdish areas. I emphasise, however, that all parties in Syria—Kurds, Shi'a, Sunni, Alawite, Christian and Druze—have to be brought into the process to deliver in Syria a more inclusive Government that can end this civil war.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): History gives us practically no examples of a determined enemy surrendering in response to conventional air bombardment, so what ground forces are credibly and seriously fighting ISIL/Daesh in Syria, other than some unpleasant Islamist groups, the Kurds—in a limited area—and the Syrian Government army?

Michael Fallon: There are moderate forces fighting Daesh in Syria that have also been engaged in the civil war. The key is to bring the civil war to an end as quickly as possible so that we can focus on dealing with Daesh. Troops are already involved in the conflict. We have been helping to train them and supplying non-lethal equipment to them, and we will continue to work with them to ensure that Syria is rid of both Assad and Daesh.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): The Secretary of State will be aware of a report published today in *The Independent* stating that in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in Paris, Islamophobic hate crime in the UK increased by 300%, the vast and overwhelming majority of victims being young Muslim women. When will the Secretary of State join the cross-party consensus in the Chamber and follow the example of President Hollande, who refused last week to give the terrorists the legitimacy they craved and instead rightly described them as “Daesh”? Does he not accept that the language we use is important and that language connecting Muslims and terrorism is dangerous and misleading?

Michael Fallon: I agree with almost all of that, although I am afraid I have not had time to read the report in *The Independent*. I myself prefer the term “Daesh” because it is more accurate and does not embrace the word “Islam”, but “ISIL” and “ISIS” have become accepted terms in the British media, and it might be too late to make that change.

19 [902275]. **Chloe Smith** (Norwich North) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is a direct threat to the UK and that we should now consider all necessary steps to stop it, across military, diplomatic, domestic and, indeed, humanitarian fronts?

Michael Fallon: I agree, and I know my hon. Friend will have noted the UN resolution passed to that effect. We have to confront this terror organisation with all means at our disposal, not simply by defending our territory here but by striking at its roots and dealing with it politically, culturally, financially and ideologically.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): People on both sides of the House will welcome the UN Security Council resolution passed on Friday night calling on member states to take all necessary measures against ISIL/Daesh, but will the Defence Secretary reassure Members on both sides of the House that, along with any proposed military action in Syria, there is also a parallel plan to secure peace, end Assad's reign of terror over his own people, put in place a timetable for a transitional Government in Syria and for the protection of religious and ethnic minorities?

Michael Fallon: Yes, I fully accept we have to persuade those with doubts about military action that there is a political track as well. Towards the end of the week, the Prime Minister will be replying to the questions posed—quite legitimately—by the Foreign Affairs Committee that deal with exactly that point: how a transitional Government can be put in place that has the support of all sections of the different communities in Syria and how that can lead to the provision of security, particularly in the Sunni areas, in northern Syria. However, that should not delay our dealing with a terrorist menace that has already brought slaughter to the streets of Paris and resulted in the deaths of our own citizens on a beach in Tunisia and one in Paris itself.

24. [902281] **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): Further to the answer given to my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), it is dangerous to wound an enemy and not kill him, especially if fighting a wild beast. Given that no air campaign alone has ever dislodged a determined enemy, what is the plan after we have bombed Syria? Where is the strategy? What ground troops are we going to put in?

Michael Fallon: In Iraq, we are assisting the legitimate Government of Iraq, the Iraqi forces and the Kurdish forces to push ISIL out of Iraq, and we are having some success in that. Of course in Syria we will in the end need ground forces that are local and locally supported. Prime Minister Abadi in Baghdad does not want British troops or American troops on the ground; that would further radicalise opinion, particularly in the Sunni areas. On the ground, the battle has to be won by local forces that have the support of the local population, but that should not deter us from making a start in dealing with ISIL's headquarters, from where this terrorism and slaughter is being directed.

Procurement: UK-produced Steel

4. **Grahame M. Morris** (Easington) (Lab): What his policy is on ensuring the use of UK-produced steel in items procured by his Department. [902260]

10. **Kelvin Hopkins** (Luton North) (Lab): What his policy is on ensuring the use of UK-produced steel in items procured by his Department. [902266]

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Mr Philip Dunne): Steel is sourced by our contractors from a range of UK and international suppliers, reflecting the need to ensure a competitive price and delivery at the required time and quality. UK suppliers have provided significant quantities of steel for major defence equipment procurement programmes, whenever they have been able to meet

specified standards. Our new Government guidelines, published last month, will help UK steel suppliers to compete effectively with international suppliers for major projects, including those in defence.

Grahame M. Morris: The Minister will be aware that Swedish steel was used in the construction of offshore patrol craft and also in Scout armoured vehicles. Many in the steel community feel that that is a betrayal. Does he, like me, feel that British-produced steel should be specified in defence procurement contracts in order to protect steel, a strategically important industry?

Mr Dunne: I am sure the hon. Gentleman will agree that the steel that is specified needs to be the steel that can do the job. We are open-minded about who can supply that, but we are adopting the new Government guidelines. For the offshore patrol vessels, some 20% of the requirement—about 775 tonnes—was sourced through UK steel mills.

Kelvin Hopkins: Public procurement policies should seek to assist British industry, especially steel. It is clear that other countries support their own industries in that way. Why not Britain?

Mr Dunne: That is why the Government have set up the steel procurement working group, chaired by the Minister for the Cabinet Office. The Ministry of Defence is sitting on that group. We are seeking to ensure that future orders are open to UK firms to tender.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): You can bet your bottom dollar, Mr Speaker—or rather, your bottom euro—that European countries will not be abiding by European Union law as far as procurement is concerned. Can my hon. Friend confirm—I am sure he can—that we will do all we can to procure British steel, providing it is of the right quality?

Mr Dunne: In accordance with your strictures, Mr Speaker, the answer to that question is yes.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): No one who has listened to the Minister's answers today would have any confidence that he was going to take any serious steps to ensure that British steel was used in the purchase of the line of Type 26 frigates, which we expect to hear about shortly. Can he say a little more about what serious steps he will take, to justify the answer he has just given to the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant)? Let us support the British steel industry through this very important Government contract.

Mr Dunne: The hon. Gentleman is right to point to the Type 26 procurement programme as the next major platform where there will be a significant steel component. We are determined, as a Government who are keen to support our steel industry, that defence contractors will have the opportunity to source that steel from the UK, and we will do as much as we can to help them in that endeavour.

Lariam

5. **Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): What steps his Department is taking to monitor the effects of the Lariam form of mefloquine on service personnel who have taken that drug. [902261]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Penny Mordaunt): Clinical studies and audits have been undertaken by the Ministry of Defence to assess the effects of Lariam. Those reports and their conclusions are a matter of public record. Lariam is not our first-line treatment and makes up about 1% of our anti-malarial stocks, but for some people, deployed in certain parts of the world, it will be the best drug to protect them from malaria.

Jim Shannon: It is becoming patently obvious that those who have had Lariam were not assessed fully before using it. Some of my constituents are those who are suffering most. Given the high level of potential suicide among service personnel, increased mental health concerns and stress-related issues, can the Minister confirm that the MOD will do a thorough review of the use of Lariam and that all service personnel will be assessed before Lariam is used again?

Penny Mordaunt: Before any drug is prescribed, an individual risk assessment of the patient is undertaken. In addition, as soon as a prescription is entered on to the electronic records system, a warning is flagged to ensure that the prescriber is absolutely sure that the recipient has not had a mental health problem. That policy is audited by defence primary healthcare organisations. If Members have constituents about whom they are concerned, they should encourage them to see their GP or their medical officer.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I very much endorse what the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said and I welcome the Minister's reply. Having suffered the consequences of Lariam myself, I ask her to look at the alternatives, of which there are several that have far less negative side-effects.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend and I can reassure him that Lariam is not our first-line drug. However, in certain parts of the world and given the particular medical history of some individuals, the drug is sometimes currently the only course of action. A new drug is coming on line, and it will be looked at.

Free Syrian Army

6. **Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab):** What resources the Government has supplied to the Free Syrian Army in the last 12 months. [902262]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Michael Fallon): Supporting moderates is a key part of our work to resolve the Syrian conflict, so that they can take their place in the inclusive transitional Government needed to defeat ISIL and provide security throughout Syria. In the last 12 months, we have helped train vetted members of the moderate armed opposition and provided support to help save lives, bolster civil society, counter extremism and lay the foundation for a better future in Syria.

Graham Jones: Do the Government not recognise that as part of the solution to the ISIS issue we need peace in Syria? Do they not recognise that what they are proposing is a failed policy, and that by investing in a

client as a proxy in a civil war, all we are doing is simply escalating the war and perpetuating a greater number of deaths?

Michael Fallon: I do not wholly agree with that. The work we are doing in Iraq to support the democratic Government of Iraq at their request has stemmed the onrush of ISIL and has started to push ISIL back, north up the Tigris and west of the Euphrates. We need to do the same in Syria, coming to the aid of moderate forces there who want to be free both of Assad, who is bombing his own civilians, and of ISIL, which represents a threat to us all.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Following the Russian intervention, what evidence is there on the ground that the Free Syrian Army is recalibrating its efforts—increasing them against ISIL and reducing them against Assad?

Michael Fallon: The picture in northern Syria in particular is confused; it is not a simple conflict with front lines as we would normally understand them. It is our long-term objective for Syria to be free of both Assad and ISIL, and we continue to work with moderate elements in Syria to provide them with the equipment they need and, where we can, with training outside Syria.

RAF Stations

7. **Stephen Phillips (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con):** What plans he has for consolidation of Royal Air Force stations. [902263]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): Any consolidation of Royal Air Force stations is being considered as part of the Ministry of Defence footprint strategy. The attacks in Paris remind us that the threats we face are growing in scale, diversity and complexity. We are therefore determined to configure our defence estate to optimise our support of military capability.

Stephen Phillips: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that answer. He will know that Lincolnshire is the home of the RAF, and while I appreciate that he cannot give definitive answers today, he will no doubt agree that that should remain the case and that there are very good reasons for consolidating more personnel and assets in our great county.

Mark Lancaster: My hon. and learned Friend is a champion, not only of his constituency but of Lincolnshire. He is right to say that that county has had a long association with the RAF. He is right that I cannot give any further details today—not even after half-past 3—but I hope to be able to provide further information in due course.

Military Veterans

8. **Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con):** What steps he is taking to support military veterans. [902264]

16. **William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con):** What steps he is taking to support military veterans. [902272]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): The Government provide a comprehensive programme of support for ex-service personnel. For those returning to civilian life, that includes an excellent resettlement package, a high-quality pension and compensation schemes and measures to meet veterans' health and welfare needs. The armed forces covenant stresses the importance we place on ensuring that veterans are not disadvantaged as a result of their service in the armed forces.

Craig Tracey: Research shows that veterans represent the largest single cohort in the overall prison population. What is the Department doing to address the issue, and will the Minister acknowledge the significance of charities such as Care after Combat, whose Phoenix project is intended to reduce reoffending in this important group?

Mark Lancaster: As my hon. Friend will know, armed forces veterans in prison are the responsibility of the Ministry of Justice, but the latest figures that I have suggest that approximately 3.5% of the UK prison population are veterans. All prisoners with a military history are eligible for the full range of interventions and services that are available from the National Offender Management Service, and armed forces charities, including the Royal British Legion, SSAFA, Care after Combat and Combat Stress, send caseworkers to support veterans in some prisons.

William Wragg: Members of our armed forces not only put themselves in great physical danger but subject themselves to great psychological pressures in order to protect our country and our people. What is being done to help veterans of my excellent local regiment, the Mercian Regiment, and others who are struggling with mental health issues?

Mark Lancaster: The MOD is determined to ensure that veterans with mental health issues are given appropriate support. NHS England spends £1.8 million a year on mental health services for veterans, including the provision of 10 veterans' mental health teams. Up to a further £18 million is funding the Combat Stress six-week intensive post-traumatic stress disorder programme. Subject to the forthcoming spending review, a further £8.4 million of Government funding will be provided over the next five years.

21. [902277] **Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): What conversations have taken place with the Chancellor to discuss the impact of tax credit cuts on military families, including the families of veterans?

Mark Lancaster: I am sure that the issue has been discussed, and that it will be addressed later this week when the Chancellor makes his announcement.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): What support is the MOD able to give local authorities such as my own, Sutton council, which are keen to establish "homes for heroes"?

Mark Lancaster: I recently announced that we were about to undertake a review of best practice. Following conversations with the chair of the Local Government Association, we intend to carry out that review to ensure that best practice is spread across local authorities throughout the United Kingdom.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The social care crisis is affecting people all over the country, including those who have sustained an injury or condition while serving our country. Those who were injured on or after 6 April 2005 receive a payment under the armed forces compensation scheme, which local authorities disregard when assessing them for social care, but those who were injured before that date receive the war pension, which is not disregarded. When will the Government address this inequality?

Mark Lancaster: That is primarily a matter for the Department of Health. I have been engaging in a series of negotiations with my counterpart in that Department, and I am sure that we will report to the House in due course.

Procurement (SMEs)

9. **Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase the proportion of his Department's procurement expenditure which goes to small and medium-sized enterprises. [902265]

11. **Seema Kennedy** (South Ribble) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase the proportion of his Department's procurement expenditure which goes to small and medium-sized enterprises. [902267]

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Mr Philip Dunne): We expect small businesses to take an increasing share of our increasing defence budget, as they provide a vital source of innovation and flexibility in meeting defence and security requirements. In October, we announced a new target to increase the proportion of Ministry of Defence procurement spent with SMEs to 25% by the end of this Parliament. That target is 10% higher than the one that was set during the last Parliament.

Pauline Latham: What role are SMEs playing in the Trident replacement programme—for example, in the Rolls-Royce propulsion supply chain?

Mr Dunne: The Successor submarine programme will be one of the Department's largest projects, and we expect about 850 suppliers across the UK to be involved. They will employ thousands of people in what is a very high-skilled domain, using cutting-edge technology. That will include the supply chain for Rolls-Royce nuclear propulsion systems based at Raynesway. Many of those companies will be SMEs, and I am sure that many of them will be from my hon. Friend's constituency in Derby.

Seema Kennedy: Will the Minister explain how the many small businesses in the defence supply chain in Lancashire can gain access to the £70 million innovation investment fund that the Secretary of State announced last month?

Mr Dunne: I pay tribute to the workforce in Lancashire, especially in view of the work that they will do in contributing to every single one of the F-35s. That is the largest defence procurement programme on the globe. Further particulars about the innovation fund will be announced in due course, and some may even be announced in the next hour.

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): What difference would the renewal of Trident make to the defence supply chain?

Mr Dunne: As I have just indicated to my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy), the Successor submarine programme will be the largest UK procurement of military capability for decades to come. That will filter through; I have referred to the 850 suppliers that we think will be participating, but the number may be greater than that. It will be an enormous programme that will last for many years and sustain thousands of jobs across the breadth of the country.

Armed Forces Covenant

12. **Paul Scully** (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): What plans he has to strengthen the armed forces covenant. [902268]

18. **Michael Tomlinson** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): What plans he has to strengthen the armed forces covenant. [902274]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): The covenant came into force under the Armed Forces Act 2011. Since then, the Government have undertaken a range of actions to build the covenant. Our fourth annual report to Parliament is due to be published in December 2015 and that will detail the progress we have made during the year. The Government are committed to continuing to honour our pledges and encouraging wider society to think about their contribution.

Paul Scully: I welcome the fact that all local authorities have signed up to the community covenant. How will the commitments be measured so that Sutton council and others can learn from the best and most proactive and we can encourage others to up their game?

Mark Lancaster: I, too, am grateful for the support that councils, including Sutton, have demonstrated to our armed forces community. All have signed the community covenant and many are extremely proactive. I recently had a meeting with the chair of the Local Government Association and the Minister for Housing and Planning to discuss what more we can do to encourage local authorities as they look to support our armed forces community. As a result, I understand that the housing Minister intends to write to all local authorities setting out examples of best practice and reminding them of the need under the covenant to honour their commitments.

Michael Tomlinson: A veteran in my constituency suffers from mental health issues as a result of military service. He is on the local council housing list, but is one or two steps away from priority status. May I urge the Minister to beef up the military covenant to ensure that our veterans are given priority status for housing as a matter of course?

Mark Lancaster: The Government are determined to honour the commitments made by the armed forces covenant to ensure fair treatment of veterans and their families in need of social housing. That is why this Government changed the laws so that seriously injured

servicing personnel and veterans with urgent housing needs must always be a high priority for social housing. It is, however, for local authorities to make judgments about the competing housing priorities in their areas, but if my hon. Friend writes to me with the details of this case, I will of course raise it with my Department for Communities and Local Government colleagues.

Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): Ten thousand of our homeless are military veterans, as are 10% of our prison population. How is the covenant tackling this problem?

Mark Lancaster: The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the £40 million invested in the veterans accommodation fund. I work very closely with a number of charities to ensure that we address this issue. He can see for himself at the Beacon home in Catterick, for example, or the Mike Jackson House in Aldershot, if he wishes to visit, and I would encourage him to do so.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): In the past five years, we have seen the pay and pension entitlements of service personnel cut in real terms, 30,000 redundancies and a failure to recruit the number of reserves that the Government planned to fill the gap. Now we read that annual increments and special allowances are also to be cut. Does the Minister accept that treating service personnel so shoddily will impact on morale and can be seen as a breach of the military covenant?

Mark Lancaster: I was hoping to avoid these words, but the hon. Lady will have to wait until 3.30 pm. I am confident that the remuneration package will remain an excellent package for our service personnel, but she will just have to wait a few more minutes to find out exactly whether or not to believe all the press reports she reads.

EU Withdrawal

13. **Ian C. Lucas** (Wrexham) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of UK withdrawal from the EU on defence and national security. [902269]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Julian Brazier): This Government believe we can, and indeed will, succeed in reforming and renegotiating our relationship with the EU. The cornerstone of our security is NATO, but the EU plays an important role complementing NATO, for example recently in imposing sanctions on Russia. Defence remains a sovereign issue.

Ian C. Lucas: The UK, together with other EU partners, has worked hard in areas—such as in Mali on EU training missions—which have made a significant contribution to defence. Will the Government give close consideration to how such missions would continue if Britain were to withdraw from the EU?

Mr Brazier: I can only repeat my earlier answer. We are confident that the renegotiation will succeed. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that the mission to which he refers, and others including the anti-piracy mission off the horn of Africa, have been a success.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): If this county were to vote to come out of the EU, would not the Minister welcome the tremendous advantage of that to the armed forces? The UK sends £350 million to the EU each week, and some of that money could be diverted to the armed forces. Would that not be a good thing?

Mr Brazier: My hon. Friend is not going to tempt me into speculating about what might happen after a withdrawal. I will say, however, that I am delighted to be part of a Government who are committed to spending 2% of GDP on defence, and I think that he is going to enjoy the announcement at 3.30 pm.

ISIL

14. **Gareth Johnson** (Dartford) (Con): What assessment he has made of the threat that ISIL poses to the UK. [902270]

15. **Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Con): What assessment he has made of the threat that ISIL poses to the UK. [902271]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Michael Fallon): We have seen ISIL attacks in Tunisia, Ankara, Sinai and elsewhere around the world, including on British citizens, most recently in Paris, as well as plots to commit murder on our own streets. ISIL poses a very direct threat to the United Kingdom, which is why we need to work with the international coalition to degrade and destroy ISIL in Iraq and why we need to consider what more we can do to deal with its headquarters and heartland in Syria, from where this threat comes.

Gareth Johnson: Given that ISIL is using its base in Syria to plan attacks on the UK, does the Secretary of State agree that it is absolutely absurd to restrict the British armed forces to acting only in Iraq, and not to empower them to act against those who threaten Britain and who are based in Syria?

Michael Fallon: I agree that there is a compelling case for us to do more in Syria, not least because it is illogical to tackle ISIL only in Iraq. Those borders are meaningless to that organisation. As the Prime Minister has said, we must tackle the head of the snake in Raqqa, and we will be making our case to the House and to the country, starting with his response to the Foreign Affairs Committee report later this week.

Andrew Rosindell: When major cities such as London are targets of terrorism, how is the Secretary of State collaborating with the Home Office to deal with out-of-London areas, including the shopping areas in constituencies such as mine, which could easily be under just as much threat as central London?

Michael Fallon: We work closely with the Home Office, particularly on counter-terrorism and on providing assistance to back up civil capacity. We have 5,000 troops trained and ready to support armed police officers at 24 hours' notice, and we will be increasing that number shortly. In the end, we can guarantee the safety of the United Kingdom only by defeating ISIL in Iraq and Syria, and I hope that my hon. Friend shares the new confidence of the Chairman of his Committee that the Committee's conditions can be met following the murders on the streets of Paris.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State will be aware of the concept in international law that when a sovereign state is unable or unwilling to take action against a non-state actor carrying out acts of aggression from its territory, there may be a justification for action. To what extent does he think that that applies to Daesh, and what comparisons would he draw between this situation and the operation of the Taliban in Afghanistan when it was supporting al-Qaeda?

Michael Fallon: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct to say that there is already a clear legal basis for military action against ISIL in Syria which does not require a United Nations resolution. None the less, I hope he will welcome UN Security Council resolution 2249, which provides clear and unanimous political endorsement by the entire international community for the military action already being taken by the counter-ISIL coalition.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Why are the Government turning a blind eye to ISIL selling off its oil to our NATO pals?

Michael Fallon: The Government are not turning a blind eye. On the contrary, we are doing our best to interdict those supplies of oil and to stop ISIL selling its oil on the international market. I have discussed this with Syria's neighbours. We also need to stop ISIL selling its oil to the Syrian regime itself.

Topical Questions

T1. [902282] **Chris Green** (Bolton West) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Michael Fallon): My immediate priorities are our operations against ISIL and the strategic defence and security review. July's announcement that the defence budget would increase in every year of this Parliament and that we would continue to meet the NATO 2% target means that we will be able to decide very shortly on what further capabilities and equipment we need to keep this country safe.

Chris Green: In March, I was delighted to host the Secretary of State on a visit to MBDA in my constituency. Is it not a sign of the Government's commitment to national security and economic security that they have signed a £300 million contract to equip our Typhoons with the latest missiles and that these will be manufactured at a new MBDA site in Bolton, thus safeguarding 400 high-tech jobs?

Michael Fallon: Yes. I do recall my visit and this is part of our now £178 billion equipment plan to provide the very best capabilities for our armed forces. These advanced, short-range, air-to-air missiles will equip our Typhoon jets with battle-winning technologies, helping to protect British airspace, to defend our NATO allies and to sustain hundreds of highly skilled jobs in MBDA's new £30 million plant in Bolton.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): One of the many things briefed officially to *The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph* this morning was that the MOD will only purchase five fewer frigates than planned. Does the Minister share my concern about needing enough frigates to protect our carriers on operations, with any reduction to this fleet meaning that the capability to operate the carriers will be impaired?

Michael Fallon: Yes, I can assure the hon. Gentleman, whom I am delighted to see in his place, that we will have enough frigates to protect the carriers. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will be making the frigate replacement programme very clear in just a few minutes' time.

T2. [902283] **John Glen** (Salisbury) (Con): Will the Minister advise the House on how central innovation is to the work of the MOD? Will he take this opportunity to spell out the role he sees the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory at Porton Down playing in the future strategy of defence in the UK?

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Mr Philip Dunne): We fully recognise the importance of innovation, and DSTL does vital work with industry and academia in leading science and technology initiatives to provide capability advantages for our armed forces. We expect it to continue to do so, including through the support it gives the university technical college and the proposed Porton Down science park in my hon. Friend's constituency.

T4. [902285] **Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Médecins sans Frontières has reported that one of its hospitals in Damascus was hit in an aerial attack on Thursday, further increasing the number of civilian casualties from air strikes in Syria. In the light of Friday's UN resolution on Syria, will the Secretary of State detail the additional measures that will be taken to provide safe passage and resettlement for civilian refugees should the UK vote to participate in air strikes?

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Penny Mordaunt): Prior to that incident, I met a number of non-governmental organisations to discuss a range of issues that the hon. Lady touches on, and I can assure her that this is at the forefront of our minds. Part of the reason for wanting to do more in this space is to prevent innocent civilians from being brutally slaughtered.

T3. [902284] **Alberto Costa** (South Leicestershire) (Con): Given recent media coverage about the different views across this House on Trident renewal, will my right hon. Friend tell me who is responsible for deciding Government policy, specifically on that?

Michael Fallon: Let me reassure my hon. Friend that policy on this side of the House is decided by the Prime Minister and the Cabinet—indeed, the whole Government and the whole parliamentary party are united on the manifesto commitment we made to renew the deterrent. I urge moderate Labour Members to turn up tomorrow and vote to support a deterrent that every previous Labour Government have supported since it was introduced.

T5. [902286] **Graham Jones** (Hyndburn) (Lab): What assessment have the Government made of Assad's high-tech military capability, provided by Putin, for example, surface-to-air missile systems; where they are located; and what risk there is of those missile systems or other high-tech equipment falling into the hands of ISIS?

Michael Fallon: We make sure that our own aircraft are equipped with the defensive aids that are necessary in each particular theatre. What we need to do is bring the civil war in Syria to an end and then focus on the task in hand, which is degrading and destroying ISIL in its heartlands. Syria needs to be free of both Assad and ISIL.

T6. [902287] **Simon Hoare** (North Dorset) (Con): With Blandford Camp at the heart of my constituency, will the Minister assure me that, with the evaluation of the defence estate being undertaken, its socio-economic importance for Blandford Forum as an important market town in North Dorset is taken into consideration?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): Although the defence estate is primarily configured to support military requirements, the Ministry of Defence does support local authorities in understanding any potential impact of changes, particularly when it comes to the opportunities to provide local resources as part of future town planning.

T9. [902290] **Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Lockheed Martin submitted a bid for the new maritime patrol aircraft contract. With the proposed C130 multi-mission aircraft costing around 40% of Boeing's, which also would have seen 80% of the project carried out by a UK workforce, will the Minister please enlighten the House about the process that was undertaken to award that contract ultimately to a costlier alternative that is not supporting British jobs?

Mr Dunne: Again, this is another occasion on which I have to tell the hon. Lady that she will have to wait for a few moments to be enlightened by the Prime Minister. What I can say is that, in the event that an MPA were to be procured as part of the P-8 programme, some billion dollars' worth of the programme is supplied by British companies.

Mr Speaker: Time for the good doctor again. I call Dr Julian Lewis.

T7. [902288] **Dr Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): I personally agree with the Government that ISIL/Daesh must be crushed in Syria as well as in Iraq, but the Secretary of State has made it clear that he wants to see the Syrian army forces defeated, too. We are reportedly being told to be more like Churchill than Chamberlain. Does the Secretary of State recognise that Churchill's great strength was that he knew when to recognise which is the greater and the lesser of two evils, and that is why he was willing sometimes to fight alongside unsavoury allies against a common deadly enemy?

Michael Fallon: I have always thought that Churchill's greatest strength, when confronted by a very direct threat to this country, was to be determined to do something about it.

T10. [902291] **Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): With the UK armed forces being the smallest they have been since the middle of the 19th century, will the Minister accept that, if the UK were to exit the European Union, it would significantly undermine our intelligence and security relationships with our European partners at a time when we need those relationships the most?

Michael Fallon: No, I do not accept that. Of course the membership of the European Union has enabled us to be as one in Europe in imposing sanctions on Russia for the action it took in Crimea and in the insurgency it stirred up in Ukraine, but the bulk of our defence rests on our membership of the NATO alliance.

T8. [902289] **Stephen Hammond** (Wimbledon) (Con): At a time when it is clear that our nuclear defence is key, will the Minister update us on the progress that the MOD is making in delivering our nuclear-powered Astute submarines?

Mr Dunne: Yes, as I have already said, I was delighted last Thursday to announce, in Barrow, the £1.3 billion contract to complete the build of the fifth Astute-class submarine. We will save money for the taxpayer and deliver the submarine ahead of the schedule of the previous one, and we are on track.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): I agree with the Defence Secretary that ISIL poses a very direct threat to the UK, but does he agree that, if the Government are to take military action against Syria, that action should be framed within a wider strategy? Military action can serve as only one strand of that wider campaign. The Government will also need to leverage political, diplomatic, economic and cultural tools that they have at their disposal.

Michael Fallon: I completely agree. Any military strategy to deal with ISIL in Syria as well as in Iraq has to be embedded in a wider campaign to win the struggle against ISIL, politically and diplomatically, to construct a moderate Government in Syria who have the support of all sections of Syrian society and to show how that will lead to greater security in the Sunni areas in particular in northern Syria once ISIL is defeated in its heartland.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What impact is our non-involvement in airstrikes over Syria having on our reputation among international partners?

Michael Fallon: Non-action—the decision to do nothing—has consequences, and, as my hon. Friend implies, has had severe consequences not simply for the reputation of this country among its allies but in Syria itself, where we have seen a vicious civil war with hundreds of thousands killed and millions displaced as a result of a decision by the west not to get involved and begin to put a stop to it two years ago.

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): It seems strange that we give high-level British forces training to those fighting ISIL but we do not give them any of our equipment, so they end up fighting with Russian or other weapons. Will we look at changing that, so that they get body armour, medical supplies and, perhaps, more hardware?

Penny Mordaunt: I am happy to reassure the hon. Gentleman that as well as providing excellent training, we are gifting non-lethal equipment.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that to say that we can eradicate Daesh through negotiation alone is at best a dishonest diversion, and that if we want to tackle this issue we need to use all the force at our disposal?

Michael Fallon: I agree, and that is reflected in the United Nations resolution. ISIL made no demands of those whom it went to slaughter in Paris the week before last. This is not an organisation with which we can possibly negotiate or employ diplomacy; it has to be defeated using all means at our disposal, including military means.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Having seen at first hand the brilliant veterans breakfast clubs which were first established in Hull and run by Dereck J. Hardman and Peter Barker, what more can the Government do to support those initiatives started by veterans themselves?

Mark Lancaster: Having been to several such events myself, I have to agree with the hon. Lady that they are an excellent scheme, and something on which I hope to make progress over the coming months.

National Security and Defence

3.32 pm

The Prime Minister (Mr David Cameron): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the national security strategy and the strategic defence and security review.

Our national security depends on our economic security, and vice versa, so the first step in keeping our country safe is to ensure our economy is, and remains, strong. Over the last five years we have taken the difficult decisions needed to bring down our deficit and restore our economy to strength. In 2010, we were ordering equipment for which there was literally no money. The total black hole in the defence budget alone was bigger than the entire defence budget in that year. Now it is back in balance. By sticking to our long-term economic plan, Britain has become the fastest growing major advanced economy in the world for the last two years.

Our renewed economic security means that today we can show how we can afford to invest further in our national security. This is vital at a time when the threats to our country are growing. This morning I was in Paris with President Hollande discussing how we can work together to defeat the evil of ISIL. As the murders on the streets of Paris reminded us so starkly, ISIL is not some remote problem thousands of miles away. It is a direct threat to our security at home and abroad. It has already taken the lives of British hostages and carried out the worst terrorist attack against British people since 7/7 on the beaches of Tunisia, to say nothing of the seven terrorist plots right here in Britain that have been foiled by our security services over the past year.

Of course, the threats we face today go beyond that evil death cult. From the crisis in Ukraine to the risk of cyber-attacks and pandemics, the world is more dangerous and uncertain today than even five years ago. So while every Government must choose how to spend the money it has available, every penny of which is hard-earned by taxpayers, this Government have taken a clear decision to invest in our security and safeguard our prosperity. As a result, the United Kingdom is the only major country in the world today which is simultaneously going to meet the NATO target of spending 2% of our GDP on defence and the United Nations target of spending 0.7% of our gross national income on development, while also increasing investment in our security and intelligence agencies and in counter-terrorism.

In ensuring our national security, we will also protect our economic security. As a trading nation with the world's fifth biggest economy, we depend on stability and order in the world. With 5 million British nationals living overseas, our prosperity depends on trade around the world, so engagement is not an optional extra; it is fundamental to the success of our nation. We need the sea lanes to stay open and the arteries of global commerce to remain free-flowing. So the strategy which I am presenting to the House today sets out a clear vision for a secure and prosperous United Kingdom, with global reach and global influence. At its heart is an understanding that we cannot choose between conventional defences against state-based threats, or the need to counter threats that do not recognise national borders. Today we face both types of threat and we must respond to both types of threat.

So over the course of this Parliament our priorities are to deter state-based threats, tackle terrorism, remain a world leader in cybersecurity and ensure that we have the capability to respond rapidly to crises as they emerge. To meet these priorities we will continue to harness all the tools of national power available to us, co-ordinated through the National Security Council, to deliver a full-spectrum approach. This includes support for our armed forces, counter-terrorism, international aid and diplomacy, and working with our allies to deal with the common threats that face us all. Let me take each in turn.

First, the bottom line of our national security strategy must always be the willingness and capability to use force where necessary. On Friday evening the United Nations Security Council unanimously agreed resolution 2249 calling on member states to take "all necessary measures" against ISIL in both Syria and Iraq. On Thursday I will come to this House and make a further statement responding personally to the Foreign Affairs Committee. I will make the case for Britain to join our international allies in going after ISIL at its headquarters in Syria, not just Iraq, and I will explain how such action would be one element of a comprehensive and long-term strategy to defeat ISIL, in parallel with a major international effort to bring an end to the war in Syria.

But today I want to set out how we will ensure that our armed forces have the capabilities to carry out such a task, and indeed any other tasks that might be needed in the years ahead. We will invest more than £178 billion in buying and maintaining equipment over the next decade, including doubling our investment in equipment to support our special forces. We will also increase the size of our deployable armed forces.

In 2010 we committed to an expeditionary force of 30,000. Today I can tell the House that by 2025 we are increasing that number to 50,000. As part of this, we will create two new strike brigades, forces of up to 5,000 personnel fully equipped to deploy rapidly and sustain themselves in the field. We will establish two additional Typhoon squadrons and an additional squadron of F-35 Lightning combat aircraft to operate from our new aircraft carriers.

We will maintain our ultimate insurance policy as a nation, our continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent, and replace our four ballistic missile submarines. We will buy nine new maritime patrol aircraft, to be based in Scotland at RAF Lossiemouth. They will protect our nuclear deterrent, hunt down hostile submarines and enhance our maritime search and rescue. And we will buy at least 13 new frigates and two new offshore patrol vessels. These will include eight Type 26 anti-submarine warfare frigates. We will design and build a new class of light, flexible general purpose frigates as well. These will be more affordable than the Type 26s, which will allow us to buy more of them for the Royal Navy so that by the 2030s we can further increase the total number of Royal Navy frigates and destroyers. Not one of these capabilities is an optional extra. These investments are an act of clear-eyed self-interest to ensure our future prosperity and security.

Secondly, turning to counter-terrorism, we will make a major additional investment in our world-class intelligence agencies to ensure they have the resources and information they need to detect and foil plots from wherever they

[The Prime Minister]

emanate in the world. So as I announced last week, we will invest £2.5 billion and employ over 1,900 additional staff. We will increase our investment in counter-terrorism police and more than double our spending on aviation security around the world. And I can tell the House today that we have put in place a significant new contingency plan to deal with major terrorist attacks. Under this new operation, up to 10,000 military personnel will be available to support the police in dealing with the type of shocking terrorist attacks we have seen in Paris.

We will also make a major new investment in a new generation of surveillance drones. These British-designed unmanned aircraft will fly at the very edge of the earth's atmosphere and allow us to observe our adversaries for weeks on end, providing critical intelligence for our forces. We will also do more to make sure the powers we give our security services keep pace with modern technology, as we will see through the draft Bill we have published to ensure that GCHQ, M15 and our counter-terrorism police continue to have the powers they need.

Thirdly, we will use our formidable development budget and our outstanding diplomatic service to tackle global poverty, promote our interests, project our influence, and address the causes of the security threats we face, not just their consequences. So alongside the strategic defence review, I am also publishing our strategy for official development assistance. At its heart is a decision to refocus half of DFID's budget on supporting fragile and broken states and regions in every year of this Parliament. This will help to prevent conflict, and, crucially, it will help to promote the golden thread of conditions that drive prosperity all across the world: the rule of law, good governance, and the growth of democracy. The conflict, stability and security fund will grow to over £1.3 billion a year by the end of this Parliament, and we will also create a new £1.3 billion prosperity fund to drive forward our aim of promoting global prosperity and good governance.

Building on our success in tackling Ebola, we will do more to improve our resilience and our response to crises, identifying £500 million a year as a crisis reserve and investing £1.5 billion over the Parliament in a global challenges research fund for UK science to pioneer new ways of tackling global problems like anti-microbial resistance. We will also invest £1 billion in a new fund for the research and development of products to fight infectious diseases, known as the Ross fund, and £5.8 billion in climate finance to play our part in helping poorer countries switch to greener forms of energy.

Taken together, these interventions are not just right morally—they are firmly in our national interest. They mean that Britain not only meets its obligations to the poorest in the world, but can now focus our resources on preventing or dealing with the instability and conflict that impinge on our security at home, investing at scale to create the economic opportunities that lead to long-term stability across the world and responding rapidly and decisively to emerging crises overseas. Acting on all of these fronts gives us greater influence in the world.

Finally, Britain's safety and security depends not just on our own efforts but on working hand in glove with our allies to deal with the common threats that face us all, from terrorism to climate change. When confronted by danger, we are stronger together. So we will play our

full part in the alliances that underpin our security and amplify our national power, and we will work with our allies in Europe and around the world, as well as seizing opportunities to reach out to emerging powers.

History teaches us that no Government can predict the future. We have no way of knowing precisely what course events will take over the next five years; we must expect the unexpected. But we can make sure that we have the versatility and the means to respond to new risks and threats to our security as they arise. Our armed forces, police, and security and intelligence services are the pride of our country. They are the finest in the world, and this Government will ensure they stay that way. Using our renewed economic strength, we will help them to keep us safe for generations to come. I commend this statement to the House.

3.43 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement.

As I said last week in the House, the first duty of a state is to protect its own citizens. At the moment, this country's overwhelming focus is on the threat we face from terrorism and how we can best ensure the defeat of ISIL. Labour supports the increased expenditure to strengthen our security services that the Prime Minister has announced to protect against the threat of terrorism. However, faced with the current threat, the public will not understand or accept any cuts to front-line policing. Everyone will be very concerned about the warnings we know that he has had from security officials and the police that the cuts will reduce very significantly the ability to respond to a Paris-style attack. Cuts affecting neighbourhood policing will damage the flow of vital intelligence that helps prevent such attacks. Will the Prime Minister give an undertaking now that police budgets after the spending review will be sufficient to guarantee no reductions in police or police community support numbers and to protect areas such as helicopter cover?

Will the Prime Minister also confirm that the Government will meet in full the request from the Metropolitan Police Commissioner and his advisers for the further resources they say are required to counter attacks such as those in Paris? The public, quite rightly, expect that.

We are naturally focused on the immediate threats today, but it is disappointing that there is insufficient analysis in the national security strategy of the global threats facing our country and people around the world, including inequality, poverty, disease, human rights abuses, climate change and water and food security—[*Interruption.*] I have no idea why Conservative Members find food security such a funny subject. The flow of arms and illicit funds enables groups such as ISIL to sustain themselves and grow.

Let me join the Prime Minister in paying tribute to the men and women who serve in the services. We must look after their interests in the decisions we make and pay particular attention to their welfare while serving and, just as importantly, when they have retired. Is the Prime Minister concerned that the latest Ministry of Defence survey showed that 25% of those serving plan to leave as soon as they can or have already put in their notice, and that the number dissatisfied with service life has risen to 32%? Does he think it is a coincidence that

those results come at the same time as the Government have capped armed forces pay and changed pension arrangements?

Although the Prime Minister is talking tough about defence spending today, the facts are that under his Government it has fallen in real terms by 14% and we saw many soldiers with many years' operational service putting their lives on the line being sacked days before becoming eligible for full pensions.

Does the Prime Minister not agree that changes proposed by the Chancellor to tax credits breach the spirit of the armed forces covenant? Will he confirm that the plan to cut the annual income of a corporal with two children by £2,300 a year will now be reversed and that such a family would not be made worse off by any other welfare cuts the Chancellor may be planning? What damage does the Prime Minister think will be done by the big cuts being planned to the civilian support of the armed services?

The country is united in its respect for those who serve, but there is widespread concern about how far lessons have been learned from recent military interventions. Will the Prime Minister confirm that he will update and revise the review in the light of the forthcoming findings of the Chilcot inquiry into the Iraq war? What is his response to this month's United Nations report that all sides in the continuing conflict and anarchy in Libya are committing breaches of international law, including abductions, torture and the killing of civilians, and that ISIL militants have consolidated control over central Libya, carrying out summary executions, beheadings and amputations?

Last week, the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr Clegg)—the former Deputy Prime Minister—wrote:

“Britain failed to provide meaningful backing to Libya in the wake of our air strikes there... We must learn from our mistakes.”

What lessons has the Prime Minister learned from the intervention in Libya in 2011, which, regrettably, has been followed by appalling chaos, persistent violence and the strengthening of ISIL?

Does the Prime Minister believe there is any prospect of Afghanistan maintaining its own security in the near future? How does he see Britain's role in helping to ensure that that happens, given the huge commitment made over the past 14 years and the ultimate sacrifice paid by 456 members of the British forces? How will he apply lessons learned in Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere to Britain's role in the escalating war in Iraq and Syria, ensuring that further disastrous mistakes are avoided?

Britain does need strong military and security forces to keep us safe and to take a lead in humanitarian and peacekeeping missions, working with and strengthening the United Nations. I recognise the increased commitment to the UN in the Prime Minister's statement. There is no contradiction between working for peace across the world and doing what is necessary to keep us safe at home—in fact, the very opposite is true.

My hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) will be leading a review about how we deliver that strong, modern protection for the people of Britain. Our review will seek to learn the lessons from Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, and look at our military capabilities and requirements in that light. We owe it to

the members of our armed forces and to the country as a whole to engage in the kind of review which is sadly lacking today.

The review will consider carefully and fully, on the basis of evidence and with the widest consultation and expert input, whether it is right for the UK to commit so much of the defence budget to continuous at-sea nuclear patrols, and if not, what alternative investments in our security and military capabilities would be required to meet the threats we face and ensure skills and jobs in our defence industries are fully protected. It will focus on the failure of the last Government to replace the Nimrod MR4A, leaving Britain to rely on asking for French planes for its airborne maritime capability. Why have the Government now chosen a replacement with virtually no UK defence content when it is in service?

Will the Prime Minister confirm—he was just talking about this—that the reduction in the number of Type 26 frigates we are procuring from 13 to eight will not impact on the Navy's ability to protect the carriers? Can the Prime Minister give some reassurance to the workers on the Clyde? Last year, they were told that 13 ships would be built; now it is eight. Can he confirm this is simply a first batch and the commitment of 13 frigates still stands?

Our review will question the wisdom of British arms sales to repressive regimes with links to the funding of terrorism, and be firmly founded on the importance of human rights across the world. It will recognise that security is about much more than defence, and look to fulfil the huge potential this country has to lead the way in peacekeeping, conflict resolution and peace building.

We have a highly professional and experienced diplomatic corps—some of the best diplomats in the world—as well as world-class peace and conflict research academics. Does the Prime Minister not agree that the severe cut in the Foreign Office budget is clear evidence of the Government's determination to sacrifice our place in the world on the altar of misplaced austerity? Will he commit to a human rights adviser in every embassy?

I return to everything that is uppermost in people's minds—

Mr Speaker: Order. I think the Leader of the Opposition is approaching his last question.

Jeremy Corbyn: Indeed, Mr Speaker. I am saying that we must have the police and security services fully resourced and able to do what is necessary to protect the public. I ask the Prime Minister to think very hard about the remarks made to him by senior police officers and the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police in this respect, and to assure the House today that those cuts in policing services will not go ahead.

The Prime Minister: I think the best that can be said about that is the longer the right hon. Gentleman went on, the less he had to say.

Most of the right hon. Gentleman's statement was spent talking about the importance of having troops within the UN, the importance of shipbuilding on the Clyde, the importance of investing in defence, and the importance of having high morale among our armed forces. Yet only two months ago, he said:

“Why do we have to be able to have planes, transport aircraft, aircraft carriers and everything else to get anywhere in the world? Why?”

[The Prime Minister]

Is that the same right hon. Gentleman who is now sitting opposite us thinking of all these uses for our armed forces, when just a few months ago he thought there was none?

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the police. Let me tell him that we are safeguarding investment in our counter-terrorism policing, and indeed increasing the capabilities that they have. There will be a full statement on Wednesday on all the spending decisions that we make. He might want to have a word with his shadow Chancellor, who very recently signed up to a proposal, at a time when we face this heightened security threat, to

“Disband MI5 and special police squads”

and to “disarm the police.”

The Leader of the Opposition thinks that they should not use their weapons; the shadow Chancellor thinks they should not have any at all. That is presumably what passes for a defence policy.

The right hon. Gentleman asked a series of questions. Let me answer them all. First, he asked how we set out the threats. We publish a risk assessment. The whole point of a national security strategy is to bring together all the threats we face as a nation—state-on-state threats, terrorism, pandemics, climate change and others—and set out in one place how we evaluate them and how we will respond to them. That is something that never previously happened.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about morale in our armed forces. There are no proposals here to reduce the proposals we have made on pay and increments in our armed services or to change the very generous pension arrangements. One of the best things for morale in our armed services is that those serving in our Army, Navy or Air Force and those who are planning to join our Army, Navy or Air Force can see that there will be a bigger Navy with more ships, there will be a bigger Air Force with more planes and people, and our armed services will be better equipped and supplied than they ever have been.

The right hon. Gentleman asked why we do not have human rights advisers in all our embassies. To me, advising on human rights is part of the role of an ambassador.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about learning lessons from previous conflicts. We are determined to do that. That is part of what the inquiry into the Iraq war should be about. However, we have not waited for that inquiry to learn the lessons. That is why, as I will explain on Thursday, it is so important that we bring together military strategy with diplomatic strategy, political strategy and development strategy. All those things should go together.

The right hon. Gentleman asked what lessons were learned from the Libyan conflict. Clearly we need to make sure, in such situations, that there are Governments and states that can continue, but I do not apologise for one minute for stepping in, with France, to prevent Colonel Gaddafi from murdering his own people in his own country.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the maritime patrol aircraft. It is right that we order them not only to protect the deterrent, which he, of course, wants to get rid of, but to make sure that we have greater safety, greater security and greater search and rescue functions.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the frigates. There is a real opportunity for Britain here. We are ordering at least eight Type 26 frigates, which have the full capabilities, but we will also look at developing a new multi-purpose frigate not only for ourselves, but, hopefully, to sell overseas. That opens the possibility that the number of capital ships in the Navy will go up, rather than down.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about ship workers on the Clyde. We have seen a great boost in naval shipbuilding because of the carriers. We want to keep that going, which is why two maritime patrol vessels will be built even before the frigates start being built.

The right hon. Gentleman told us a bit about his review. We look forward to that review, which will be carried out by Ken Livingstone—someone who has absolutely no idea about defence, but every idea about attacking hard-working Labour Front Benchers who try to do their jobs.

Finally, on a day when we are discussing a better equipped Army, a bigger Navy and a bigger Air Force, perhaps we ought to end with a quotation from the right hon. Gentleman who, as recently as August, said:

“Wouldn’t it be wonderful if every politician around the world instead of taking pride in the size of their armed forces did what” others

“have done and abolished the army and took pride in the fact that they don’t have an army”.

I know that it is depressing for Labour Members, but they might as well know about it. That is the view of the Leader of the Opposition.

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): Some difficult decisions were taken in the 2010 defence review so that our armed forces would be able to grow in the second half of the decade. May I welcome unequivocally the purchase of the new maritime patrol aircraft? If I may remind the Prime Minister, there was a gap because of Labour’s catastrophic management of the Nimrod programme. I also welcome the purchase of more F-35s. What impact will the decision to man the two carriers have on naval personnel numbers? What impact will the decision on the F-35s have on the future of the Tornado?

The Prime Minister: Because we want to operate both carriers and because of the great amount of equipment coming through in the Royal Navy, this defence review will see an increase in personnel in the Royal Navy of 400 people. My right hon. Friend is absolutely right about the maritime patrol aircraft. We did have to take difficult decisions in 2010 to get rid of the black hole in the defence budget. The Nimrod project was over time and over budget, and it was not clear that we would have been able to get it back on track. We have therefore had a gap in that capability, but today’s announcement shows how we will fill it.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister’s commitment to a contingency plan that will allow 10,000 members of the armed forces to support the police in the case of a terrorist attack. How long will it take to train those military personnel to allow for interoperability, and will he revise his plans to cut police numbers? One without the other is nonsense.

The Prime Minister: The thinking here is that just as in France it was necessary to surge the number of uniformed personnel on the streets—perhaps to provide a security cordon or keep people safe—so we should get rid of the divide that has existed for many years about the deployment of military personnel on the streets of Britain. The right hon. Lady asks when these people will be trained. The first 5,000 are already able to fulfil that function should it be necessary, and we will get to the figure of 10,000 that I announced. This is not about members of the armed forces supplanting or taking over from the police; it is about them being at the disposal of the police, perhaps to provide a security cordon or a certain amount of safety. In the past we had a rather artificial divide between those two functions, and it is time to get rid of that.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The Defence Select Committee will be assessing the SDSR against a checklist of the threats and vulnerabilities that were published in our report at the weekend, but I am sure that most Members will find at least some relief in the plugging of gaps such as naval aviation and maritime patrol aircraft, and especially in the emphasis on flexible and versatile armed forces to deal with our inability to predict crises before they are upon us. Will the Prime Minister say a little about press reports concerning the pay of armed forces, and will he indicate when the main gate contracts for the successor to the Trident submarines will be brought before the House for debate and decision?

The Prime Minister: I am sure that members of the Defence Committee have a checklist and will scrutinise that document thoroughly, and I look forward to their conclusions. We are keeping the annual pay upgrade and the increments that our armed forces have. A package has been set out for new joiners, and I am sure the Committee will consider that carefully. My right hon. Friend welcomed the maritime patrol. On the main gate decision, we will be moving ahead with the four submarines and at the appropriate moment we will hold a vote in this House.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): I thank the Prime Minister for advance sight of his statement, and I thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing the effective Opposition four minutes to respond to it.

Let me reiterate our support for measures in the SDSR that were pre-announced following recent terrorist incidents, including support for intelligence agencies, as well as other counter-terrorism capabilities such as special forces and cyber-security. The Prime Minister has announced a 2025 target for two deployable strike brigades, which is welcome in support of UN-sanctioned operations. Holding an SDSR every five years is a worthwhile exercise as it provides context and allows analysis of policy decisions. In the 2010 SDSR, there was no mention of the northern dimension, the High North or the Arctic—not a single mention when considering risks, opportunities or necessary responses, and not a single mention about our immediate northern backyard.

Five years ago, the Prime Minister made the disastrous decision to scrap and waste the entire fleet of Nimrod maritime patrol aircraft, throwing away £4 billion of taxpayer investment. That meant that—uniquely among the armed forces of our northern European neighbours—

the UK has had no MPA and has had to muddle through. Among other things, the Ministry of Defence has had to urge Scottish fishing vessels to report on passing Russian forces. The previous Defence Secretary confirmed that social media was a helpful source of information about Russian naval forces and—as is currently the case—the UK has been relying on French, Canadian or American MPA assets to patrol and screen around UK waters.

Not only has there been an MPA deficit, but the MOD has not been taking the northern dimension seriously. With the Atlantic to our west, the Iceland gap to our north and the North sea to the east, one would have thought that was a basic requirement. However, the UK has never, ever provided a single fast jet for NATO northern air policing from Iceland. Similarly, in recent years the Royal Navy has not provided any assets—not one single vessel—for NATO northern maritime patrol groups. These are facts. Today we learn there is some good news and that we can rectify the capability gap. It is welcome that there will be maritime patrol aircraft and that they will be based at RAF Lossiemouth. Will the Prime Minister say more about their in-service date?

Staying with the northern dimension, the UK does not station a single ocean-going conventional patrol vessel anywhere except the south coast of England. We have been told over a number of years that in Scotland we should be delighted that 13 Type 26 frigates will be built on the Clyde. In fact, voters in Scotland were promised 13 Type 26 vessels just so long as people voted No in the independence referendum. That was a clear promise. It is just over one year since the referendum, and No voters and shipyard workers are being betrayed in this SDSR, with a 40% cut in Type 26 vessels.

Under this Prime Minister, we have seen defence decimated in Scotland. Two out of three air bases have ceased flying operations. There has been a disproportionate cut to units and manpower. Tory Ministers promised an Army super-base in West Lothian and the doubling of Army numbers in Scotland with returns from Germany. Instead, that was dropped. Army headquarters in Scotland was downgraded and service personnel numbers in Fife and Moray are down considerably. Total personnel numbers are at a record low in Scotland.

The extended lifespan for fast jets is to be welcomed, but may I raise safety issues relating to traffic collision avoidance systems, which have still not been installed? Will the Prime Minister confirm that they were first recommended in 1990 and have still not been installed in all Tornado and Typhoon aircraft?

Moving on from issues relating to necessary and sensible conventional defence spending to the elephant in the room, Trident replacement, a weapons system of mass destruction that can never be used, we learn that the cost of its replacement is ballooning and squeezing out defence alternatives. How expensive does Trident need to be for this Government to realise that it is a super-expensive vanity project that does not deter? It has not deterred terrorism, cyber-attack or conventional attacks on the UK, its allies and friends. Even at this late stage, I appeal to the Government and to the Labour party to realise that it is a huge mistake to renew Trident. I remind them both that in Scotland an overwhelming majority of our parliamentarians and civic organisations, from our national churches and faith groups to the

[Angus Robertson]

Scottish Trades Union Congress, are all opposed. What kind of family of nations with a respect agenda imposes something on one of its members against its will?

The Prime Minister: Listening to the right hon. Gentleman, one would not think that Scotland was getting more Typhoons, more maritime patrol aircraft and more ships. The truth is this: the United Kingdom punches above its weight in the world and Scotland punches above its weight because it is in the United Kingdom and such a proud partner in our defence.

Let me answer the right hon. Gentleman's question about maritime patrol aircraft very clearly. The fact is that in 2010 we had to take difficult decisions. This was an aircraft that was not properly in service. We acted on advice because the costs were not clear and the capability was not clear. In any event, it was, as he would put it, guarding a deterrent that he does not want in the first place. He should welcome its replacement and he should welcome the fact that it will be based at RAF Lossiemouth.

On the in-service date, at least three of the aircraft will be in place by the end of the Parliament. The right hon. Gentleman asked about the role we play in defending northern Europe. We are looking very carefully at some of the patrolling missions, but UK Typhoons already provide Baltic air policing missions, which are hugely welcomed by those countries.

Finally, let me answer the question about naval issues and Trident. On the shipbuilding programme—we will be publishing a paper in 2016 on our shipbuilding strategy—the fact is that Scotland now has the opportunity to build more than 13 frigates because of the changes we are making. There will be eight of the Type 26 frigates and at least another five of the new type of frigate, probably more. They can be built in Scotland if the conditions are right. The only way these ships would not be built in Scotland is if Scotland was independent and did not have the national resources of the Royal Navy. That is what the right hon. Gentleman should be saying to ship workers in Scotland: the UK and our defence budget help to keep their jobs safe.

Finally, Trident is clearly not squeezing out other defence requirements, as today's document clearly shows. Here is the rub: the SNP describes itself as the effective Opposition—yes, they are wholly opposed to Trident and therefore wholly unsuited to government.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I greatly welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, particularly his comments about the extra investment in counter-terrorism and his reiteration of the money going to the intelligence and security agencies. In that context, will he help the House in identifying how the Government will carry out the necessary audit process—both for that massive expansion and for other expansion in expenditure—to ensure value for money?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. and learned Friend makes an important point. The new NSC sub-committee, which we will establish under the chairmanship of my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr Letwin), will ensure that these commitments are properly delivered and, along with other governmental organisations, that there is good value for money.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I also welcome the additional resources for counter-terrorism. We have the best counter-terrorism officers in the world, and this is the right time to increase the budget. Last week, the global terrorism index showed that last year 32,600 people were killed in terrorist attacks in 67 countries. In his statement, the Prime Minister is integrating what is happening in this country with our strategy abroad. He mentioned Tunisia, for example. How will the Tunisian Government be assisted by a national security strategy in our country, bearing in mind that what happens on the streets of Tunisia or Sana'a, in Yemen, ends up on the streets of London?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Countries as diverse as Tunisia, Yemen, Nigeria and Somalia can take heart from our strategy, because we recognise that their security and our security are inextricably linked. We want to help with things such as aviation security, on which we are massively extending our budget, and with building their armed services, policing and counter-terrorism capabilities. In the coming years, there will be an important role for our Army to play, in terms of forming training battalions, and for our intelligence services, as they increase their capabilities and trust in partner agencies, which can play an important role in keeping us safe.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I very much welcome the statement, particularly the commitment to naval platforms and manned and unmanned airframes, but to what extent do the through-life costings for the F-35 reflect the likelihood that UAVs will render the technology therein obsolete by the end-of-service date?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is a considerable expert on this. What we have, particularly with our partnership with the French, is a plan for the next generation of fighter aircraft being unmanned combat systems. The research is there, the work is being done—with the French and Americans—and choices about that will have to be made, but I think it is too early to say whether the next generation of fighter aircraft will be manned or unmanned, which is why it is right we are developing the F-35 Lightning with the Americans and that we think seriously about whether to move to fully unmanned platforms in the future. Personally, as an amateur rather than a professional, I have my doubts.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Prime Minister has said that he will come back to the House on Thursday to respond to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee. Will he also ensure a full day's debate in Government time on this issue, well before the Government table a motion on military intervention, so that we can have a full debate, not only on the day of a vote, but well in advance, and so that the House can give this proper consideration?

The Prime Minister: I will consider what the right hon. Lady says, but obviously we have a statement on Thursday, when I will be publishing our response to the Foreign Affairs Committee, and then, depending on the reaction of the House and the sense that right hon. and hon. Members have about whether we should move ahead with this, my intention would be to have a full day's debate and a vote subsequent to that in the

coming days and weeks. I think there is also a debate, I understand on Monday, in Back-Bench time for people who want to make further points about this issue, but I would put it like this. I do not think we are going to be under-spoken or under-considered before we take this step. We had the statement last week, we have had the statement today, which obviously has links to Syria, and we will have the statement on Thursday and then a debate in Government time, with plenty of time for people to air their views and then, I would hope, have a vote.

Mr James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): As one of the most outspoken and robust critics of the Government over the last five years for the very unfortunate defence cuts they have had to make for economic reasons, may I now be among the absolute first strongly and warmly to welcome the tone of the Prime Minister's announcement this afternoon, in respect both of the general direction and the 2% of GDP and also quite a number of the other detailed announcements, such as the nine maritime patrol aircraft? Does he agree that, in a fast-changing world, the last SDSR was out of date more or less by the time it was printed and that this one, too, will change rapidly? Will he commit to ensure that the SDSR and the national security strategy, on which it is based, should not be set in stone and unchangeable, but should be reviewed regularly?

The Prime Minister: First, may I thank my hon. Friend for his warm support for this approach? We did have to take difficult decisions in the last Parliament. I think it was right to freeze our defence spending in cash terms, at around £35 billion, but now we can see it increase. That is a choice we are making. We do not have to make this choice; it is an active choice we are making in order to deliver greater security.

My hon. Friend is right that these documents are not set in stone: they are living and breathing documents. However, I think it is sensible every five years to hold a defence review, but then to get on and implement it. If we endlessly re-examine and re-cook it, we will find that we have lots of people doing analysis and not enough people actually delivering the strategy, which in the end is what this is about.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): The very first duty of the Prime Minister of the day, and indeed the Leader of Her Majesty's loyal Opposition, should be to ensure the protection and defence of the people of this country, here and abroad. On behalf of my party, I warmly welcome the fact that the Prime Minister at least is living up to that requirement in the House today. In that context, I welcome his decision to commit to 2% funding for defence and the extra money and resources going into the security services. On maritime surveillance, I welcome the nine new aircraft being deployed, plugging the gap that has existed for too long. Finally, will he give an unambiguous commitment that the two new carriers will both be deployed as strike carriers going forward?

The Prime Minister: Both carriers will be brought into service and both will be crewed, and that is one of the reasons why we are looking for an increase in Royal Navy personnel of 400. They will be a very big addition to British power and will be the largest ships that the Royal Navy has ever had under its command.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the Government strengthen controls at our borders and integrate that properly with the new intelligence—which I must welcome—that my right hon. Friend is going to get? There is a clear danger at the moment that military action in the middle east could displace terrorists, who might shift tactics and want to seek either legal or illegal entry to our country.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right that having border controls only helps if we are also sharing intelligence with others about the people trying to cross those borders, and there are weaknesses in the European Union system on that, which we need to strengthen. I was discussing that with President Hollande this morning, but I would stress again—to be clear—that we have borders where we are able to stop and detain people and not let them in our country, even if they are European Union citizens, if we think they are a threat to our national security. That exists now for Britain. Some other countries in Europe are introducing borders like that on a temporary basis; ours are like that on a permanent basis.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): Does the Prime Minister accept that the continued existence of the so-called caliphate is itself probably one of the most important drivers of radicalising young people here and elsewhere, in Europe and the wider world? Does he accept that before the public can be convinced of the need to take further action, particularly in Syria, a clearer case needs to be made about what the aims are and what the scale would be?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The fact that ISIL is a so-called state and is committing these appalling acts both locally in Syria and Iraq and around the globe is one of the most important dangers that we face. He is also right that we will not degrade and destroy ISIL, as we need to do for our own national security, simply through the exercise of military force. We need to combine that with the proper diplomatic and political activities of backing a proper Government in Iraq and backing, over time, a transitional Government in Syria. Both those things need to happen. The point I shall make on Thursday is that I do not think we can wait for the political process to be completed in Syria before we start taking some of the action to degrade and destroy this organisation, which poses such a threat to us today.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement, and I know it will be welcome in the Shropshire defence sector—both the private and public sectors. Going back to Africa, as the Prime Minister seeks to reform the European Union and given that some of the causes of terrorism can be the lack of prosperity and unemployment, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, what more can the EU do, working with the Economic Community of West African States, the Southern African Development Community and the east African community, to ensure that we have a pan-African continental free trade area in order to reduce migration, increase prosperity and increase security?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to focus on this issue. The fact is that we need to see more development, more growth, more jobs and

[The Prime Minister]

employment in Africa, and Europe can have a real influence on that—not only through aid programmes, which can make a difference, but by making sure that there are fair trade arrangements in place not just between African countries and Europe but between African countries themselves. We have done a lot of work to promote intra-African trade because creating those sorts of markets, which ECOWAS is trying to do, will make a huge difference to the lives of people on that continent.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): May I welcome the Prime Minister's spending commitments on defence and overseas development, and ask him to ensure that in his statement on Thursday, he sets out how both will be used to take immediate action against ISIL and plan for the long-term reconstruction that Syria so desperately needs?

The Prime Minister: Let me pay tribute to the hon. Lady, who was arguing for increases in defence spending earlier this year. She was absolutely right about that. She is also right that we need to combine our overseas aid budget with our defence budget, because it is equally important to make sure that we build security, governance and systems through which countries can see that their countries are working for them. We will not solve the problem in Syria through missiles and bombs alone; it has to be solved by helping the Syrian people to have a Government and a country in which they can put their trust.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): RAF Coningsby, from which both Typhoons and the battle of Britain memorial flights fly, is in my constituency. As we have remembered this year the 75th anniversary of the battle of Britain, can my right hon. Friend confirm that the investment in fast jets and the increased number of Typhoon squadrons will ensure that we retain world-class capability?

The Prime Minister: I can certainly give my hon. Friend that assurance. I think that the Typhoon is proving itself, not just in Britain but elsewhere in the world, as an absolute world leader in terms of its capabilities. What this review delivers—my hon. Friend will be able to read about it more detail—is further upgrade of the Typhoon aircraft with the vital e-scan radar and the more modern weapons systems that it needs, so that it is good both as an air-to-air fighter and as a ground-to-air fighter. With that and the news about the extra Typhoons, I think Members of Parliament such as my hon. Friend can look forward to very strong defences in the years ahead.

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): As we know, the UK is bombing ISIL in Iraq and we know that Government want to bomb ISIL in Syria, so we have to ask the question whether the Government want to bomb ISIL less in Iraq or are they currently not bombing ISIL in Iraq to their full capability?

The Prime Minister: The point I would make to the hon. Gentleman is that the border between Iraq and Syria is not recognised by ISIL. It is literally a line in the sand, so it makes no sense, if we want to degrade and destroy ISIL, to restrict our activities—given that we have some of the most professional and dedicated pilots and some of the most efficient equipment anywhere in the world—purely to Iraq.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah! Time for a Hampshire knight: Sir Gerald Howarth.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): As the Prime Minister has already recalled, owing to the dire economic straits in which our country found itself thanks to the present Opposition, the 2010 review was a pretty bloody and painful exercise. I warmly welcome today's announcement, which has been delivered partly by the Prime Minister and partly by the Defence Secretary, but may I ask some specific questions about the strike brigades, which I also welcome? I understand that they are additional to the three brigades that we established in the 2010 defence review. Can they be delivered within the constraint of 82,000 regular Army personnel, and why will it take 10 years to deliver them? Can the Prime Minister expedite their creation?

The Prime Minister: Let me say first, in defence of the 2010 review, in which my hon. Friend was involved, that we did have to make difficult decisions, but I would argue that the moves that we made—reducing the number of battle tanks and focusing on such elements as flexible armed forces and information, surveillance, target acquisition and reconnaissance—resulted from our making the right judgments. Those were the things that we needed more of, and now we are able to supply even more of them.

My hon. Friend asked about the strike brigades. As he knows, we currently have the capability to deploy a brigade anywhere in the world and sustain it indefinitely. With the new armoured vehicles, such as the Ajax vehicles, and given the new way in which we are going to rotate armed forces personnel, instead of being able to deploy only one brigade we shall be able to deploy two, with greater mobility. Obviously the time that this takes will depend on how soon some of the new equipment comes on board, but my commitment to the House is to make sure that the strike brigades are ready as soon as they can be.

Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Before the Prime Minister makes his statement on ISIL and Syria on Thursday, may I urge him to listen carefully to Labour Members who have an open mind on this question, but want reassurances on specific issues—chiefly reassurances about humanitarian protection and the need to prevent further displacement and suffering, but also a specific commitment to long-term reconstruction and stabilisation once the conflict has ended?

The Prime Minister: I can certainly give the hon. Gentleman that assurance. My aim is to bring together the biggest possible majority on both sides of the House in favour of the action that I think is necessary. I am not saying that we will solve the problem simply by crossing a line from Iraq into Syria. We will solve the problem if we have a political strategy, a diplomatic strategy and a humanitarian strategy. Britain is leading the way in that regard, not least by organising next year's conference with Norway, Germany and Kuwait to raise the funds that are necessary to help the Syrian people wherever they are—and the more of them we can keep in Syria, the better.

Mr Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): Will the Prime Minister confirm that today's statement is good news for RAF Marham, the home of the Tornado force and the future home of Lightning II? Obviously the Tornados and Brimstone missiles are playing a vital role in the campaign against Daesh, but does he agree that there is now an overwhelming case for extending those strikes into Syria itself?

The Prime Minister: I can certainly reassure my hon. Friend that I believe the statement is good for RAF Marham, because it means more Lightning aircraft more quickly, and I think that that will be very good for the air base. As for what my hon. Friend said about Iraq and Syria, he knows that I agree. We must marshal all the arguments that we can on Thursday.

Mr Douglas Carswell (Clacton) (UKIP): I welcome the strategic review, much of which is common sense, but will Ministers do more to reform defence procurement and ensure that our limited defence budget is spent in the interests of our armed forces, giving them the equipment that they need rather than enriching a cartel of defence contractors?

The Prime Minister: I will certainly do all that I can on that basis. This issue is always difficult, because on the one hand we want to procure as speedily and swiftly as possible, while on the other hand we want to have a care for Britain's vital defence industry and the opportunity to help our allies with their capabilities; but yes, I think that, overall, ensuring that procurement was more swift and more speedy would be a good thing.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for stating unequivocally that the British Army might be placed on the streets of the United Kingdom. I remind the House that it has been operating on the streets of the United Kingdom for more than 40 years. I think the public will be very sympathetic to the idea, and will take great comfort in times of peril when they see our wonderful soldiers on the streets protecting them.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. During the flooding problems and during the Olympics we saw a number of British troops on our streets. The point I am making is that up until now there have been some rather arcane and old-fashioned barriers to stop this happening, for all sorts of very good historical reasons, but I think we are rather over that now. I think that if there were a terrorist attack and we needed to surge uniformed personnel to keep us safe, people would be very happy to see the military perform that role.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): In respect of the reorganisation of the Army, what consideration is being given to home-basing the Welsh regiments in Wales, all three of which are currently home-based in England?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to look carefully at that. Obviously, what is happening in terms of basing is that we are bringing a number of people home from Germany, so there are more basing opportunities in the United Kingdom.

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement. With the threat to our hard-won freedoms as clear today as it has ever been, I welcome the Government's efforts in the SDSR. Does my right hon. Friend agree that in the ever-changing security and defence environment, our most critical asset remains our men and women who serve, and that within the framework of this SDSR looking after our men and women both during and after their service will be a priority not only for him personally, although I know it is now, but for his Government?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend, with his considerable experience, is absolutely right to say this. We can talk about all the equipment in the world, but at the heart of it are men and women who are prepared to serve and put their lives on the line for us, and they should be looked after. I think when he looks through this SDSR, he will see we are committed to doing that. Indeed, what we have done with the military covenant—putting it on a legal footing, passing it into law, improving its terms every year—means there will be help for people for the rest of their lives.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): It is obviously right that our armed forces have both the equipment and personnel needed to protect our country and our people, but hard power and soft power go together, so may I press the Prime Minister further on the decision he is shortly to bring before the House about military action in Syria? Will he ensure that this is not just a decision for the House to say yes or no to the use of hard power—although, of course, it will be that—but that it is also a decision to use every diplomatic means we have, not to negotiate with ISIS but to forge a sustainable future for Syria thereafter?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely want to give that assurance. There is obviously the diplomatic work that is being done through the Vienna process to bring about a transition and political change in Syria. There is also the humanitarian side—Britain is the second largest aid donor in the world on a bilateral basis—to help Syrian refugees, and we will continue with that work. I very much see all these things as part of an overall strategy. There is not simply a plan to extend military action; there is a plan to step up in all of these areas.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's statement and congratulate him on increasing resources for our armed forces. May I add one tiny cautionary note? In my day we talked about divisions, but we are now talking about brigades. Can he reassure me that in the future the Army will not be reduced below 82,000, so we can do our job effectively around the world?

The Prime Minister: I can absolutely give my hon. Friend that assurance. I found reducing the size of our Army to 82,000 the most painful part of the defence review in the last Parliament. That is why it did not go ahead to begin with; I wanted to find every way to try to avoid it, so I can give my hon. Friend the assurance that it is not going below 82,000. One of the interesting things about this report is that, because of the way we are changing how the Army works, we would have the ability if necessary—I hope it will not be—to deploy an

[*The Prime Minister*]

entire division of our armed services in one go. That is a higher number—50,000—than the 30,000 envisaged at the last SDSR.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Like many Prime Ministers before him, this Prime Minister is already talking about a decision that he is going to put before the House to wage war in Syria. Has he got an exit strategy? Nobody else has ever had one.

The Prime Minister: The exit strategy is a Government in Syria who represent all its people. I would just make the point that when I first became Prime Minister we were nine years into an Afghanistan deployment, and I delivered that exit strategy by setting a time and a date by which our combat troops should leave that country and by which we should be training up the Afghans to take over. So yes, there must always be an exit strategy, and there will be a very clear one for this.

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): May I take this opportunity to welcome the Prime Minister's statement? I had the privilege of visiting the two aircraft carriers, including the Queen Elizabeth, in Rosyth last week, and I welcome today's announcement on them. Will he give me, as the Member of Parliament representing Warton, an assurance that the future of unmanned aerial combat vehicles will involve more than simply buying them off the shelf?

The Prime Minister: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. We have set out a separate budget item for working with the French and the Americans on unmanned combat vehicles for the future. As I have said, we cannot know exactly what form they will take, but the commitment, the money and the research are all there. I want Britain to stay at the cutting edge of these technologies. That is why we invested in Typhoon and that is why it is important to have this programme too.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): Like the Prime Minister, I pay tribute to the men and women who put their lives on the line every day in the name of our national security and defence. My constituent, Lance Bombardier Ben Parkinson, is the UK's most severely wounded surviving soldier. He has been greatly helped in the past nine years by the specialist healthcare and other treatments and services that have been afforded to him, but his family are worried that this might end when he is forced to leave the armed forces. The Prime Minister has pledged his support for Ben before. Will he arrange a meeting for me with a senior Minister and Ben and his family, so that we can secure his future?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to do that for Ben Parkinson and for the right hon. Lady. It has been an immense privilege to meet Ben. He is one of the bravest people I have ever met, and he always seems to have good humour and optimism about the future despite how much he has suffered. With the military covenant and the LIBOR fines, we have tried to put in place progressive improvement, year on year, in the services that we give to our armed forces personnel and their families. We have to recognise that, after the Iraq war and after 14 years of deployments in Afghanistan, we need to look after these young people for the rest of

their lives. They do not simply want tea and sympathy; they want fulfilling lives. They want the best possible prosthetic limbs and the best healthcare. They want to go on and do great things, and it should be our ambition as a country to help them to do just that.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. It is a very welcome declaration of long-term strategic intent on behalf of our country to remain a global nuclear power with armed forces that have global reach. May I remind him, however, that our defence industries are among our largest export earners because of what Her Majesty's Government have invested in research and technology over the years? If we are to sustain that, and the ability of our industries to help us to produce the capability we need in times of emergency, we will need not only to continue but substantially to increase the amount we invest in those industries.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for what he has said. He has spent a lot of time in this Parliament and the last one talking about the importance of clear strategy. To me, strategy is about setting the goals we want to achieve and then, crucially, making the choices that will make that happen. This document is all about choices. They are not choices that we have to make; they are choices that we have decided to make in order to maintain our global reach and power, for reasons not of national vanity but of hard-headed, cold-eyed national interest. We are a country that is engaged in the world and that needs to play that role.

I completely agree with my hon. Friend's point about research and development in the British defence industry, but we have to make sure that the industry understands that the Ministry of Defence is not simply a customer to be sold ever-more expensive equipment. It should be a core customer that can be used to develop the things that will be needed not only by our armed forces but by our partners, so that we can ensure that we have export earnings from these platforms that we have created ourselves.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): I hear unconfirmed reports that President Obama has already welcomed news that our MPA will be built in the USA. The lack of MPA has been a glaring and immediate gap in our capability, one felt particularly hard in Scotland. Will the Prime Minister confirm that the UK will initially borrow P-8s from the USA? Will he also confirm that there will be no capability gap between when the Rosyth-built carriers go to sea and the full deployment of F-35s on both carriers?

The Prime Minister: First, on the MPA, we have said that we will be buying the Boeing version. That is a US aircraft, but it is going to have a major British component; sometimes it is right to choose what is available rather than to start all over again from scratch. The hon. Gentleman can read all about what we are saying about the Lightning aircraft in the document. We are actually increasing the numbers that will be available for our aircraft carriers.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): Today's announcement represents a commitment to invest in the necessary capabilities to defend our country. It is undoubtedly

true that the simultaneous wise deployment of aid budgets and soft power assets is desirable, but does the Prime Minister agree that effective defence relies on not only the necessary budget, but an unwavering commitment to deploy those assets when this country's defence requires it?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right; our allies want to know and, when we are threatened, people want to know that we are not just prepared to invest in our defence assets, but prepared to use them. However, our defence and our overseas aid commitments go together, because they are both things that help to keep us safe.

Mr Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): With support for the Union in Northern Ireland growing ever stronger, may I help to assuage the concerns of the right hon. Member for Moray (Angus Robertson) by saying that we have lots of loughs and lots of ports, and that if the Government ever need a new home for Trident, Ulster is there?

The Prime Minister: I know that the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr Donaldson) and I are united as one in hoping it never comes to that.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con): Today's SDSR is very important for the Royal Navy in Portsmouth. Does my right hon. Friend remain committed to a fleet of 19 destroyers and frigates? How many more may he get of the lighter frigates? Will they be based in Portsmouth?

The Prime Minister: First, my hon. Friend can be secure in the knowledge that Portsmouth will have a very strong future, not least as the Queen Elizabeth aircraft carrier will be based there. I have already seen where it will go, and what a magnificent site and resource it will be. Today's announcement about commissioning a new multi-purpose frigate enables us to increase over and above from the 19 frigates and destroyers we are already committed to, because it will be a more affordable programme. Having seen all the work that our frigates do, we know that it is essential that we have that core anti-submarine task, but when we think of all the other work—drugs interdiction, helping off the coast of Libya and all the other tasks—I think we see that we would benefit from having a bigger Royal Navy fleet, with more different sorts of frigates for those tasks.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Will the Prime Minister set out how the national security strategy and strategic defence and security review will bolster the UK's ability to participate in the international diplomatic and military coalition for Syria and ensure that the UK can play a significant role in any post-Daesh stabilisation process in Syria and Iraq?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to do that. Obviously, there are some capabilities here that we have and are building that would be useful in the prosecution of the attacks on ISIL in Iraq and on Syria, but the right hon. Gentleman makes a wider point: because we have committed to this aid spending and because we are funding our diplomacy, we are able to play a much wider part in making sure that Syria has a secure future.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): I very much welcome the Prime Minister's statement today. Does he agree that there are at least three issues that enable us to defend our country? The first, obviously, is a strong Government who are willing to show and recognise the importance of defence. The second is a strong economy able to fund that. The third is the excellent companies we have throughout the country—companies such as the Marshall Aerospace and Defence Group in my constituency—which have the experience to deliver the defence that we need?

The Prime Minister: My hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right to say that crucial to our defence is a strong defence and aerospace sector that can keep us at the cutting edge of capabilities, because that is essential for our future.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): We are living through a time when there are worrying gaps in our capabilities, so today's announcements are very welcome, but may I press the Prime Minister on pay for the armed forces? Is he saying that new joiners will receive an inferior package, and, if that is the case, how will that affect morale?

The Prime Minister: We are trying to design a package for new joiners that is attractive for people in the modern workforce. We have to ask questions about how people want to be housed and what sort of flexibility they want at work during their lives. The fact that we are seeing so many more women join our armed forces will also have consequences that we need to consider. The new joiners' package is about taking all those things into account.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): To have an exit strategy is important, but, for me, the entrance strategy became compelling when we saw what happened on the streets of Paris on 13 November. It is important that we have effective resources for our armed forces, and that the RAF has extra Typhoons and Joint Strike Fighters. It is vital that it has the right kit, and emphasises the important manufacturing skills of the people working at Warton and Samlesbury at BAE Systems.

The Prime Minister: I have been to see those factories, and I know the incredible technical expertise that we have. The workers can be proud of the fact that Typhoon is absolutely a first-rate aircraft, and that it has a very strong future.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): The Ministry of Defence employs civil servants as nuclear scientists and nuclear engineers, and in a whole range of tasks, including logistics, training support and maintenance, as well as in the Royal Fleet Auxiliary. I understand that there is a cut of 12,000 to the MOD's civil service. How will the Prime Minister ensure that critical roles and tasks are not lost to the Ministry of Defence?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady makes an important point. There are civilian roles in the MOD that are hugely important, and she mentioned some of them. What we have done with this budget is say that we will meet the 2% of defence spending and that we have created this joint security fund that can be bid for by our intelligence

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services as well as our defence services. We said to the military, “Every penny you can save through efficiencies, you now know will go into extra capabilities.” That is why I can stand here today and talk about new squadrons, more members of the RAF and more people joining the Royal Navy, but all of that should be done without damaging any of the vital capabilities that civilians provide.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Of course Members of Parliament on both sides of the House have concerns about action in Syria. In that respect, we look forward to my right hon. Friend’s statement on Thursday. Does he agree that, every day we delay action in Syria, it not only lets down our allies and the Syrian people, but has the added effect of heaping confidence on, and boosting the morale of, ISIL fighters?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right that we do not want to let down our allies. We also should not allow dangerous terrorist organisations to build their strength by not intervening against them, but, to be clear, I do not wish to bounce the House into a decision. That is why I was very deliberate last week when I spoke about replying to the Foreign Affairs Committee, the report of which will be issued on Thursday. Members of Parliament will be able to take it away and consider it over the weekend. We can then have a full day’s debate, proper consideration and a vote. That is a proper process. I do not want anyone to feel that they are being bounced into a decision. I want this House to take the decision deliberately, but we should not take too long over it, because, as my hon. Friend says, every day that we spend is a day that we are not getting to grips with the ISIL menace.

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): The Prime Minister has announced £178 billion in procurement over the next 10 years. Will that lead to an increase in the procurement of equipment that can be used for the clearing up of landmines and the other detritus of war, which is so essential if development is subsequently to take place?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, the £178 billion is to be invested in defence equipment, aircraft carriers, frigates, destroyers, the new Ajax vehicles for the Army and such like. As for removing mines, that is something on which we can use our aid budget, and we do. For instance, we fund the Halo Trust and other such organisations, but I accept that there may be opportunities to do more.

Sir Edward Garnier (Harborough) (Con): May I, as others have done, warmly congratulate the Prime Minister and his Defence Ministers since 2010 on turning round the economy of the Ministry of Defence and its procurement regime, and thank him for committing to the 2% NATO expenditure target? Beyond that, I urge him to consider finding the additional two brigades not from existing troops with new insignia but by increasing the size of the Army from 82,000 to 102,000.

The Prime Minister: An ingenious idea was tucked away at the end of that question, but I think that we are capable of delivering these new strike brigades within

the level of 82,000. As I said, we are seeing a small increase in the RAF and in the Navy. What is important is that we make sure we get everything out of the resources that we put in, and that is what this review is about.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. A very large number of right hon. and hon. Members are seeking to catch my eye, and it is doubtful that I will be able to accommodate everybody. The Prime Minister is giving very pithy answers. Perhaps colleagues could follow suit and pose pithy questions.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): A regional solution involving all means at our disposal underpinned by the United Nations is essential if we are to defeat ISIS in its heartland. So too is the taking of all steps necessary in our homeland to protect the security and safety of British citizens. Will the Prime Minister think again, therefore, before proceeding with major cuts to front-line policing, because neighbourhood policing is the eyes and ears of the counter-terrorism effort?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for what he says about Syria. It is about bringing together the United Nations, the aid and development efforts that we can make, the political solutions that we want to pursue and diplomatic efforts, together with the military action that we want to pursue. I have said what I said about counter-terrorism policing, and the hon. Gentleman will have to wait for the statement on Wednesday to see the overall settlement, but I am in no doubt that all our police play a role in keeping us safe, and in the last Parliament we demonstrated that, with efficiencies, we can get more for less out of our excellent police force.

Mr Speaker: Perhaps the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) can be as short as his name.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): There is a tradition in the House that when there is a national crisis and our country is in great danger, the Leader of the Opposition comes to Downing Street to talk to, and then support the Prime Minister. Is the door to 10 Downing Street open to the Leader of the Opposition?

The Prime Minister: My door is always open to the Leader of the Opposition. He is a Privy Counsellor and is able to get Privy Council briefings on any subject he likes, and I have said from the moment that he was elected leader of the Labour party that if he wants to have a briefing by or a conversation with me, I will always make myself available.

Michael Fabricant: Don’t give away all our secrets.

Mr Speaker: We are extraordinarily grateful to the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) for his chunter from a sedentary position.

Mr Iain Wright (Hartlepool) (Lab): As the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans) said, there is a close link between our defence and security capability and our research, innovation and manufacturing capability. Yet the Prime Minister will know of the problems in the UK steel industry which show how vulnerable we are to

losing for ever large chunks of our manufacturing supply chains—chains that could be used for defence and security purposes. Will the Prime Minister outline to the House how he expects the defence growth partnership to evolve with the SDSR, and what steps he is taking to ensure we can maintain the skills, capability and competitiveness in our industrial supply chain so that we can meet our future security and defence requirements with British industry and British innovation?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that the partnerships that we formed with the defence industry and the aerospace industry are the basis of a long-term plan to work with them, and they can now see our long-term commitments on defence spending. We want to see more British steel procured for Government expenditure such as this. Almost all of the 82,000 tonnes involved in the carrier programme was sourced from British steel, and I very much hope that can be the case with these future procurements as well.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): The global challenges research and Ross funds are superb ideas of the Prime Minister's. Can we get on with them, please?

The Prime Minister: I am very grateful for my hon. Friend's support. He is very knowledgeable about these issues, and I am glad he thinks we made the right choices.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): There is much to welcome in the Prime Minister's statement, particularly what he said about deployable forces, but like some Members on the Government Benches, I have concerns about whether 82,000 regular Army personnel are enough to meet some of the challenges, and the scale of those challenges, particularly given what we have seen happening in reserve recruitment. Can the Prime Minister see any circumstance in which he may feel a need to increase regular personnel to meet the challenges out there?

The Prime Minister: Remember that the figure of 82,000 was always on the basis that we would have the 35,000 reserves. Recent figures have shown that we are now getting ahead of the targets that we set, and I pay tribute to the hard-working ministerial team. We need to make sure that we reach that 35,000. What the report today shows—I am sure the hon. Gentleman will want to look at it in detail—is that because we are changing the way that the Army works, over time we will be able to deliver two strike brigades, rather than one, and a force of 50,000, rather than a force of 30,000, showing that we can get more for the 82,000 than we had set out.

Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con): In his review of overseas development strategy, will the Prime Minister find resources to promote British values so that the woman in a country where she has to fight for the right to work knows that we are on her side, those of a minority faith have the right to worship their God, the gay man has the right to look forward to a loving future and, most of all, people with minority ideas have the right to express those freely without repression?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right that our aid budget is not simply about spending money; it is also about trying to help build what I call the golden thread of conditions—the rule of law, rights of minorities,

growing democracy—that helps to deliver inclusiveness and development. I spent some of Friday with the excellent Christian charity Open Doors, which promotes exactly that sort of work and was full of praise for what the Government are doing. It wants us to do more to protect the freedom to worship and that is something we should focus on.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): While we have been discussing the SDSR and listening to the Prime Minister, it seems that No. 10 has been briefing journalists, who are reporting that the Government intend having only a debate, and not a vote, on Trident main gate. Is this true?

The Prime Minister: No. I am very keen that we should have a vote. I think the hon. Gentleman is going to have a vote on Tuesday and if I am here, I will certainly —[*Interruption.*] Believe me, I would like a vote on gate, main gate, after-gate, pre-gate—the hon. Gentleman can have as many votes as he likes. I know one thing—all my hon. Friends know which gate to go through.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): The timely deployment of international aid and now of our armed forces can play a significant part in preventing difficult situations globally from deteriorating. With respect to the deployment of aid and our armed forces, can my right hon. Friend give a commitment that his Government will act thoughtfully but decisively?

The Prime Minister: I am sure that is the right approach to take. One should never approach these questions too hastily or without thinking through the consequences, but the question for us will be, “Will the world be safer—will we be safer—if we can act faster to degrade ISIL in Syria as well as in Iraq?” Because its headquarters are in Syria, it seems to me that the answer to that question is yes.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): For those of us who will have to make the decision in the very near future about British military involvement in Syria, will the Prime Minister say something about what lessons he thinks we can draw from the recent and current action in Iraq, and what that might tell us about what we might be about to see in Syria?

The Prime Minister: There are so many lessons that we need to draw from recent conflicts that it is not possible to set them all out at the Dispatch Box now, but let me take one. One of the mistakes that was made in Iraq was the sense that the entire state and establishment had to be dismantled after the invasion of Iraq. That left a vacuum that has now been well documented. In saying that we believe that Assad cannot play a part in the long-term government of Syria, we are not saying that all the institutions of the Syrian state have to be dismantled. Indeed, quite the opposite. It will be very important to have a transitional plan so that Syria has a state and institutions. They need to be institutions that can represent all the country, but it should not be part of our plan to dismantle them in a year-zero approach. That would not work and we must learn the lesson from the past.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): My right hon. Friend made some welcome comments about the deployability of a division in the imminent future.

[Tom Tugendhat]

As he looks across the Opposition Benches, will he comment on the importance of allies and friends at times like this? What France is looking for now is an ally in its time of need, and what our friends in the middle east are looking for is our commitment to our allies around the world.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend, who has great experience of these things, makes a very important point. Britain and France have been allies for so long, our militaries are so close, and our intelligence and security co-operation is so deep that it would be very disappointing for the French and for us if we had to say that we simply could not join them in helping them out, because helping them out is helping us out. As far as I am concerned an attack on Paris is an attack on us. It is an attack on our way of life—an attack on our values. Standing outside the Bataclan theatre this morning, you feel that with every sense of your being: this was an attack on the values we all hold dear. He is also right that the countries in the region that look to Britain for defence, support and protection will be concerned if we do not go to the aid of our closest neighbour and one of our oldest partners. That would raise questions about our reliability. That is one of the many considerations that everyone in this House should take into account when we come to this.

Martin John Docherty (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Along with my right hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Angus Robertson), I am delighted to hear about the MPA programme, which is a new and welcome asset to the fishing fleets of Fraserburgh who for the past five years have been doing the job with regard to the submarines from Russia.

On page 3 of his statement the Prime Minister says: “to meet these priorities we will continue to harness all the tools of national power available to us”. Does he accept that nowhere does he mention the Government’s reliance on the reservists and failure to meet reservist recruitment numbers? Does he therefore agree with the Defence Committee that the structure in Future Force 2020 is “manifestly the wrong structure for this new environment”?

Mr Speaker: No one could accuse the hon. Gentleman of excluding from his text any consideration that he thought might at any time be in any way material, and I am sure we are all deeply grateful to him.

The Prime Minister: We are very much targeted on getting the 35,000 reserves that we need. This has been a huge programme to turn around the performance on encouraging people to stand up and join, but it is now working well, and if we keep going with it, I am confident that we will get to 35,000.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): I welcome the SDSR, as I suspect it will be welcomed across Hampshire and its significant defence interests. Will the Prime Minister confirm that when it comes to our security, whether it be shoot to kill, hunting our enemies wherever they are in the world, or renewing our independent nuclear deterrent, every Member of this House, wherever they sit, can find safe haven under the leadership of this Government?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments. I hope that people will look at the arguments and at the current status that we have with ISIL, put aside party considerations and other considerations, and try to answer the question internally, as it were, and then through their vote, about whether Britain will be safer, our people will be safer and the world will be safer if we take more concerted action against ISIL.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement. I also thank him for the investment in security and intelligence announced last week, but restate that the frontline in intelligence and in responding to a terrorist attack is our local police forces. My local police force now regularly has only seven armed police officers on duty, and calls for help to neighbouring police forces have gone up by 43%. Can he assure the people of Brighton and Hove, who have a long history of dealing with terrorism, that should another terrorist attack happen, the local force can cope without calling on neighbouring forces?

The Prime Minister: We are looking at the number of armed response vehicles and armed officers that are available. I do not want to see the routine arming of the British police force, but it is possible to see a growth in the pool of armed experts that can be called on. As for forces sharing resources between each other and going to each other’s aid, that has always been part of the way that British policing has worked.

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): The extra investment announced by my right hon. Friend will be welcome in Fareham and along the south coast, particularly by firms in my constituency such as Boskalis Westminster Ltd, which is already making preparations for the arrival of the two new aircraft carriers in Portsmouth. Does he agree that the SDSR safeguards training for our Navy personnel, which is vital in the years ahead for the demanding role now expected of them?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about how important it will be to make sure that we have sufficient trained personnel to man our carriers and the new generation of destroyers and frigates. That is one of the reasons we are seeing an increase of 400 in the number of Royal Navy personnel. I think there is now a great offer that the Royal Navy can make to new recruits to encourage people to join, which is that we are going to have some of the most advanced equipment anywhere in the world, and it is going to be a great service to join.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement. There are logistical issues to be addressed for two new strike brigades. What new funds are being given to the Army to generate that new capability? What will be their fitness to move and how will they be moved to the conflict area, bearing in mind that our lift capacity is limited?

The Prime Minister: The aim of the new strike brigades is to try to make them more manoeuvrable themselves so that they are less dependent on lift from the other services. Today I visited RAF Northolt and talked to some of our Army personnel about the new Ajax class of armoured vehicles, which were formerly known as

Scout, and the new generation of Warrior armoured vehicles. They have longer reach, more capabilities and faster speeds in order to increase not just the deployment but the flexibility of our Army brigades.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): The security and intelligence agencies, including those in my constituency, play an absolutely vital role in identifying terrorists and keeping us safe, and the emphasis in the SDSR on strengthening our agencies is very welcome. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that he will press on with legislation to ensure that, underpinned by robust judicial oversight, they have the powers as well as the resources they need to protect our country?

The Prime Minister: I can certainly give my hon. Friend that assurance. He represents Cheltenham, and GCHQ is an amazing national resource. Many countries are extremely envious of the expertise we have built up over the years, and we should be very proud of what it does. We will invest in cyber—we will, I think, double the amount of money we put into cyber by the end of this Parliament—and establish a new cyber-command centre, which will also make a big difference.

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): In an increasingly uncertain world in which we cannot seem to predict the security measures needed in five years' time, let alone 30 or 40 years' time, does the Prime Minister agree with the Defence Committee's report, which came out over the weekend, on the need for the SDSR to be flexible in its response to known and unknown threats? Does he also agree that that has to be underpinned by a renewed nuclear deterrent, because unilateral nuclear disarmament is not the answer?

The Prime Minister: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman's last point. We should renew our deterrent, because in a dangerous world we want to have that ultimate insurance policy. I also agree with him that it is not possible to predict all the threats we will face over the coming period. That is why the report and my statement were so clear that we have to expect the unexpected and be flexible enough to prepare. That should not be an excuse, however, for not drawing together the threats we do know about and not making choices based on those threats. If the hon. Gentleman looks at page 87 of the document, he will see that we have set out tier 1, tier 2 and tier 3 threats. They will provoke a great debate among the experts about whether we have made the right choices, but at least we are setting out what the choices are.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): With David Brown Gear Systems in my constituency playing a key role in the supply chain to the Type 26 frigate programme, will the Prime Minister continue to ensure that UK companies in the supply chain, as well as the shipyards, continue to benefit from today's procurement announcement?

The Prime Minister: I will do my very best to deliver on my hon. Friend's request. That is what the defence growth partnership is about. Like any good customer, we are trying to say to defence companies large and small, "These are what our requirements are in the coming years. Work with us so that you can be a part of delivering their success."

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): As the Member for Glasgow South West, I will work with anyone to protect jobs in the Clyde. Can the Prime Minister assure me that Ministers will keep me and my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) updated on the procurement timetable for the Type 26 frigates? I impress on him that any delays might lead to short-term job loss, which I am sure he would want to avoid.

The Prime Minister: Having visited the shipyards in the hon. Gentleman's constituency and seen the incredible technical expertise of the people working on the aircraft carriers and other projects, of course I want to see that happen. We will produce a shipbuilding strategy in 2016, so he can play a full part in looking at that. What we are doing, because of the timing, is having two offshore patrol vessels built in the coming period, to make sure that there is plenty of work to be done on useful vessels that have a real purpose. Then there are the Type 26 frigates, which are almost ready to go ahead, and then we will have the new generation of frigates, which will be more cost-effective and could lead to the opportunity for Glasgow shipbuilders to build ships for other countries as well as for the UK. We have not actually managed to sell many of our warships in recent years. That might be because we have been creating ever more expensive and ever more complex warships, rather than also thinking about slightly more flexible vessels that others, such as the Australian and New Zealand navies—old friends of ours—might want to buy.

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): While the Leader of the Opposition appears a very lonely figure on the other side of the House, I can say that my right hon. Friend has the full support of the Conservative Benches. I welcome his statement. I also welcome the decision to refocus our aid budget on fragile and failing states. Does he agree that that will not only prevent conflict in the future, but provide an important tool in bringing stability to the middle east and north Africa and really put our national interest in much clearer focus?

The Prime Minister: I believe our aid budget is the act not only of a moral nation, but of one that cares about its own security, because broken or conflict states tend to produce huge problems and issues for us at home as well. Not only will focusing that budget make sure that we can reduce those risks, but by having such a substantial budget, we are able to act quickly and decisively, which also gives us influence in how these problems are solved.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): The Prime Minister has delivered an important and comprehensive statement to the House. Does he not agree that the defence and security of our country is enhanced and indeed strengthened by our membership of the European Union?

The Prime Minister: I believe that Britain's membership of a reformed European Union is in our national interest. At a time when we face great dangers and great uncertainty in our world, I think it is worth looking at all the organisations of which we are members, such as the G7, the G20, NATO, the EU, and indeed the Commonwealth—there will be a major summit this week—and recognising that these friendships and partnerships help to keep us safe.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Following on from that question, does my right hon. Friend think that our membership of NATO is more important to our national security than our membership of the EU?

The Prime Minister: In my view, NATO is the organisation that has kept us safe since the second world war. It has been a very successful alliance. If we can secure a reform of the European Union we will not have to choose between belonging to NATO and belonging to a reformed European Union; we will be able to belong to both. I can see the advantages of that because we will increasingly see—as we are off the coast of Libya—British ships involved in trying to deal with potential threats to our country as part of European Union work that is also at the same time sanctioned by NATO.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): In his statement, the Prime Minister correctly identified cyber-attacks and Daesh activities as the two biggest threats at the moment. Is it not the case that, for each of those activities, Trident is not a deterrent? With nuclear warheads travelling across Britain by road, is it not a £167 billion liability and target, not a deterrent?

The Prime Minister: Trident is not supposed to be a deterrent against cyber-attack. Trident is the ultimate insurance policy, in an unsafe and uncertain world, that we can never be subject to nuclear blackmail. That is why, if we look across the United Kingdom, we can see that people support having this ultimate insurance policy in a dangerous world.

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to the many small firms in the defence supply chain in my constituency of South Ribble and all over Lancashire? Will he tell the House how the review harnesses the idea of such small firms?

The Prime Minister: Small firms play a very big part in keeping us safe and providing our defences. What they can see from this is a long-term commitment—we had the defence review in 2010 and another in 2015, and we have repeatedly committed to those key platforms that will keep us safe—so small businesses can work out, through the defence growth partnership, how to become part of that success.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister confirm that the Government will maintain their commitment in grants to the Aerospace Technology Institute?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman will have to wait for the outcome of the spending review—he only has to wait another 48 hours. The partnerships that we have put in place for the defence industry, the aerospace industry and other industries have been successful in generating growth, jobs and intellectual property.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement, particularly the reaffirmation of his personal commitment and our commitment as a country to the 0.7% spending target for aid. Will he reassure my constituents that their hard-earned cash will be spent only where it is squarely in our national interests to do so?

The Prime Minister: I certainly give that assurance. When my hon. Friend reads the overseas development document that we are publishing today, he will see the clear guidelines and aims that we are setting. Of course we want to tackle extreme poverty. That should be at the heart of everything we do. I would argue that that is in our national interest too, but broken, fragile and conflict states should be a greater focus of our aid and development effort.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Having the right balance between the appropriate equipment and sufficient available appropriately trained personnel must be a priority if the planned strike brigades are to be a successful operational reality. The Prime Minister said that the armed forces are the pride of our country. Does he understand that his plan to cut almost 30% of the civilian jobs will inevitably lead to front-line troops doing back-room jobs, which will undermine our defence capability and our commitments in the military covenant?

The Prime Minister: I obviously do not believe that that is the case. We asked our armed services and the Ministry of Defence to look carefully at what savings they could find, in order that we could put as much of the taxpayer's hard-earned money as possible into the military capabilities that we need. In the end, the purpose of defence is to defend our nation. If we can find back-office savings and put them into the equipment we need, we should do it.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): The other week, I was privileged to see the good that UK aid is doing in refugee camps in the middle east and the good that the RAF is doing in helping to defeat ISIL/Daesh in the skies over Iraq. Closer to home, will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating the Sussex police and crime commissioner, Katy Bourne, and her officers on the work that they are doing to tackle extremism in our communities?

The Prime Minister: I certainly join my hon. Friend in doing that. This is not something that we have discussed today, but in defeating the scourge of Islamist extremist violence, as well as doing more overseas or upstream to combat it and investing in our counter-terrorism and intelligence capabilities here, it is crucial that we fight the extremist narrative. We must take on the extremists, out-argue them and demonstrate that what they are doing bears no relation to the true religion of Islam.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for giving the whole House advance sight of his statement through the national press over the past two days. He says that he will increase the deployable armed forces by 20,000 personnel to 50,000 by 2025. How is that consistent with cutting the Regular Army by 20,000 by 2020?

The Prime Minister: We have moved to an Army of 82,000 and an Army Reserve of 30,000. We are trying to make sure that as much of that is deployable as possible. That must be in our national interest. When we take money off taxpayers and spend it on defence, we must spend it as effectively as possible. Clearly, we want as much of our military to be deployable as possible.

Because of these reforms, we will be able to deploy a force of 50,000 if we ever need to. I argue that that is good progress.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the announcement on the SDSR and the fact that we will once again have a carrier strike capability. However, carriers cannot be deployed on their own; they need to be part of a group. Will the Prime Minister reassure me that the Royal Navy will have the resources and the fleet to provide a carrier group?

The Prime Minister: I can certainly provide that assurance. It is important that we have the frigates, submarines, helicopters and other things that are necessary to protect our carriers.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The review has thrown up a shopping list of £178 billion over the next decade. Firms in Northern Ireland are capable of delivering anything from missiles to uniforms. What specific steps does the Prime Minister intend to take to ensure that firms have the opportunity to bid and be part of the supply chain?

The Prime Minister: The Defence Secretary will set out an SME target for procurement. I also encourage firms in Northern Ireland to take part in the defence growth partnership, which is an opportunity for us to be a good customer, as I have said. A good customer talks to their suppliers long in advance of the order being made, so that they can prepare to bid for the work that is coming.

Mark Spencer (Sherwood) (Con): Members of the House rise to support Government spending commitments and often ask for more money, yet when it comes to cuts in Government expenditure they are not as enthusiastic. Can the Prime Minister do more to ensure that all Members of the House understand that we can have national military security only if we have national economic security?

The Prime Minister: At the end of this long statement my hon. Friend brings us back down to earth. None of these choices is possible if we do not have a strong economy that can support them. That is crucial.

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): Does the Prime Minister agree that the replacement of the Trident nuclear weapon of mass destruction should be a matter of serious consultation with the people of this country, including the people of Scotland who are expected to live next door to it? Is he scared of what the result of that consultation might be?

The Prime Minister: Of course this issue must be carefully thought through, but we have been clear that the decision on Trident is necessary. It has been part of Government programmes for many decades, it supports many thousands of jobs in Scotland, and I believe that it helps to keep our country safe.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): The interface between the police and the armed forces is crucial when events such as those in Paris take place. How does my right hon. Friend see that interface developing in the years ahead to ensure a rapid response anywhere in the country where it is required?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful that my hon. Friend has asked that question because it enables me to clarify a point that was raised earlier. Whatever the outcome of the spending review with the police, and however many police we have available, given the dangerous times we live in and the possibility of mass casualty attacks, it makes sense to break down barriers that were previously put in the way of the military being able to deploy rapidly on to the streets of our country. We have this plan for 5,000 trained military personnel—soon to be 10,000—on whom the police can call. That does not in any way undermine the police; it gives them an additional power to bring to bear at a time of great need.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): It is good that there will be more investment in the cyber-security programme, but the industry sector says that there is a skills shortage of staff to work in applied intelligence. How will the Government attract and train more specialists to address that critical skills gap?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. Hiring and maintaining people at GCHQ, and not losing them to what are now very well-paid industries, can be difficult. We must ensure that we train more people in maths and science, and that more girls study those subjects through to A-levels and degrees. That is beginning to happen in our country, and we must build on it.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): I know that any talk of co-operation between our defence forces and another European country brings some of our colleagues out in hives, but does my right hon. Friend agree that France is a country that shares our world view and has good armed forces? We must build on the Lancaster House agreement, and I hope that the Prime Minister's discussions with President Hollande went in that direction.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right. Britain and France are two European powers that have a similar place in the world, a similar belief in strong defence, and a similar understanding that that is an essential part of their global reach. That is why it makes such good sense for us to co-operate and work together. The Lancaster House agreement has us co-operating on even the most sensitive areas of nuclear technology, as well as more straightforward deployments, but I am still convinced that there is more we can do. There should be a great affinity between the British and French military. As we have seen from the successful French campaign in Mali, and from all the work we have done in countries as far afield as Afghanistan and Nigeria, there is a lot we can do by learning from each other and working together to make the world a safer place.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Will DFID's departmental budget be cut to fund the increase in the conflict stability and security fund? How much of the spending announced today will be double counted in both the 0.7% aid target and the 2% NATO target?

The Prime Minister: I can confirm that the DFID budget will go up. Of course, if one is spending 0.7% of gross national income on aid in a growing economy, one does not have to be Einstein to work out that the aid budget will go up. It is absolutely right that we use some

[The Prime Minister]

of the aid budget for the conflict, stability and security fund, which is allowed under the overseas development aid rules. It is also right that we spend some of our aid budget on vital science and research, which, again, is allowed under the rules. We were very clear about that in our manifesto and that is exactly what we are delivering.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and all colleagues for devoting two hours to this. I know it has been a long time, but these are very serious matters and they have been treated very seriously by the House.

I had been advised of a point of order, but Members have been afflicted by a bout of sudden reticence. It appears there is no such point of order at this time.

Northern Ireland (Welfare Reform) Bill (Allocation of Time)

Mr Speaker: Amendment (a) has been selected.

5.25 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mrs Theresa Villiers): I beg to move,

That the following provisions shall apply to the proceedings on the Northern Ireland (Welfare Reform) Bill:

Timetable

(1) (a) Proceedings on Second Reading and in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration, and proceedings up to and including Third Reading shall be completed at today's sitting.

(b) Proceedings on Second Reading shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) four hours after the commencement of proceedings on this Motion.

(c) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings up to and including Third Reading shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) six hours after the commencement of proceedings on this Motion.

Timing of proceedings and Questions to be put

(2) When the Bill has been read a second time:

(a) it shall, despite Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of bills not subject to a programme order), stand committed to a Committee of the whole House without any Question being put;

(b) the Speaker shall leave the Chair whether or not notice of an Instruction has been given.

(3) (a) On the conclusion of proceedings in Committee of the whole House, the Chairman shall report the Bill to the House without putting any Question.

(b) If the Bill is reported with amendments, the House shall proceed to consider the Bill as amended without any Question being put.

(4) Where paragraph (2) or (4) of Standing Order No. 83L (Reconsideration of certification before Third Reading) applies in relation to the Bill, the Speaker shall, where it is not possible to do so immediately in accordance with paragraph (7) of that Order, announce the Speaker's decisions under paragraph (2) or (4) of that Order no later than 15 minutes after the conclusion of proceedings on the previous stage of the Bill.

(5) Where a legislative grand committee decides on a Consent Motion under Standing Order No. 83M to withhold consent to the Bill or any Clause of or Schedule to the Bill or any amendment made to the Bill since Second Reading, the House shall proceed to Reconsideration of the Bill and any proceedings on consequential consideration without any Question being put.

(6) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (1), the Chairman or Speaker shall forthwith put the following Questions (but no others) in the same order as they would fall to be put if this Order did not apply:

(a) any Question already proposed from the Chair;

(b) any Question necessary to bring to a decision a Question so proposed;

(c) the Question on any amendment moved or Motion made by a Minister of the Crown;

(d) any other Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded.

(7) On a Motion so made for a new Clause or a new Schedule, the Chairman or Speaker shall put only the Question that the Clause or Schedule be added to the Bill.

(8) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (6)(c) on successive amendments moved or Motions made by a Minister of the Crown, the Chairman or Speaker shall instead put a single Question in relation to those amendments or Motions.

(9) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (6)(d) in relation to successive provisions of the Bill, the Chairman shall instead put a single Question in relation to those provisions, except that the Question shall be put separately on any Clause of or Schedule to the Bill which a Minister of the Crown has signified an intention to leave out.

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(10) (a) Any Lords Amendments to the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(11) (a) This paragraph applies for the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (10).

(b) The Speaker shall first put forthwith any Question already proposed from the Chair.

(c) If that Question is for the amendment of a Lords Amendment the Speaker shall then put forthwith:

- (i) a single Question on any further Amendments to the Lords Amendment moved by a Minister of the Crown, and
- (ii) the Question on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown that this House agrees or disagrees to the Lords Amendment or (as the case may be) to the Lords Amendment as amended.

(d) The Speaker shall then put forthwith:

- (i) a single Question on any Amendments moved by a Minister of the Crown to a Lords Amendment, and
- (ii) the Question on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown that this House agrees or disagrees to the Lords Amendment or (as the case may be) to the Lords Amendment as amended.

(e) The Speaker shall then put forthwith the Question on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown that this House disagrees to a Lords Amendment.

(f) The Speaker shall then put forthwith the Question that this House agrees to all the remaining Lords Amendments.

(g) As soon as the House has:

- (i) agreed or disagreed to a Lords Amendment, or
- (ii) disposed of an Amendment relevant to a Lords Amendment which has been disagreed to,

the Speaker shall put forthwith a single Question on any Amendments that are moved by a Minister of the Crown and are relevant to the Lords Amendment.

(h) Where a single Question would be put under sub-paragraph (c)(i), (d)(i) or (g) in circumstances where some or all of the Amendments concerned are certified under Standing Order No. 83O (Consideration of certified Motions or Amendments relating to Lords Amendments or other messages) in relation to a particular part or parts of the United Kingdom, the Speaker shall put forthwith—

- (i) a single Question on any Amendments for which the certification is in relation to England,
- (ii) a single Question on any Amendments for which the certification is in relation to England and Wales,
- (iii) a single Question on any Amendments for which the certification is both in relation to England and in relation to England and Wales, and
- (iv) a single Question on any Amendments for which there is no certification.

(i) Where a single Question would be put under sub-paragraph (f) in circumstances where, if there were (or are) separate Motions to agree in relation to each of the remaining Lords Amendments, some or all of the Motions would be (or are) certified under Standing Order No. 83O (Consideration of certified Motions or Amendments relating to Lords Amendments or other messages), the Speaker shall put forthwith—

- (i) in the case of any remaining Lords Amendments for which there would be (or are) Motions certified in relation to England, the Question that this House agrees to those Lords Amendments,
- (ii) in the case of any remaining Lords Amendments for which there would be (or are) Motions certified in relation to England and Wales, the Question that this House agrees to those Lords Amendments,
- (iii) in the case of any remaining Lords Amendments for which there would be (or are) Motions certified both in relation to England and in relation to England and Wales, the Question that this House agrees to those Lords Amendments, and
- (iv) in the case of any remaining Lords Amendments for which there would be (or are) Motions which would not be (or are not) certified, the Question that this House agrees to those Lords Amendments.

(j) If a division is held on a question put under sub-paragraph (h) or (i), the Amendments shall be agreed to only if, of those voting in the division—

- (i) in a case falling within paragraph (i) of that sub-paragraph, a majority of Members and a majority of Members representing constituencies in England
- (ii) in a case falling within paragraph (ii) of that sub-paragraph, a majority of Members and a majority of Members representing constituencies in England and Wales,
- (iii) in a case falling within paragraph (iii) of that sub-paragraph, a majority of Members, a majority of Members representing constituencies in England and a majority of members representing constituencies in England and Wales, and
- (iv) in a case falling within paragraph (iv) of that paragraph, a majority of Members,

vote in support of them.

(k) Paragraph (9) of Standing Order No. 83O shall apply to a decision made by virtue of sub-paragraph (j) above on a Question as it applies in relation to a decision made by virtue of paragraph (7) of that Order on a Motion.

Subsequent stages

(12) (a) Any further Message from the Lords on the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) Proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(13) (a) This paragraph applies for the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (12).

(b) The Speaker shall first put forthwith any Question which has been proposed from the Chair.

(c) The Speaker shall then put forthwith the Question on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown which is related to the Question already proposed from the Chair.

(d) The Speaker shall then put forthwith the Question on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown on or relevant to any of the remaining items in the Lords Message.

(e) The Speaker shall, subject to sub-paragraphs (f) and (g), then put forthwith the Question that this House agrees with the Lords in all the remaining Lords Proposals.

(f) Sub-paragraph (g) applies where, if there were (or are) separate Motions to agree in relation to each of the remaining Lords Proposals, some or all of the Motions would be (or are) certified under Standing Order No. 83O (Consideration of certified Motions or Amendments relating to Lords Amendments or other messages).

(g) The Speaker shall put forthwith—

- (i) in the case of any remaining Lords Proposals for which there would be (or are) Motions certified in relation to England, the Question that this House agrees with the Lords in those Proposals,
- (ii) in the case of any remaining Lords Proposals for which there would be (or are) Motions certified in relation to England and Wales, the Question that this House agrees with the Lords in those Proposals,
- (iii) in the case of any remaining Lords Proposals for which there would be (or are) Motions certified both in relation to England and in relation to England and Wales, the Question that this House agrees with the Lords in those Proposals, and
- (iv) in the case of any remaining Lords Proposals for which there would be (or are) Motions which would not be (or are not) certified, the Question that this House agrees with the Lords in those Proposals.

(h) If a division is held on a Question put under sub-paragraph (g), the Proposals shall be agreed to only if, of those voting in the division—

- (i) in a case falling within paragraph (i) of that sub-paragraph, a majority of Members and a majority of Members representing constituencies in England,
- (ii) in a case falling within paragraph (ii) of that sub-paragraph, a majority of Members and a majority of Members representing constituencies in England and Wales,
- (iii) in a case falling within paragraph (iii) of that sub-paragraph, a majority of Members, a majority of Members representing constituencies in England and a majority of Members representing constituencies in England and Wales, and
- (iv) in a case falling within paragraph (iv) of that sub-paragraph, a majority of Members

vote in support of them.

(i) Paragraph (9) of Standing Order No. 83O shall apply to a decision made by virtue of sub-paragraph (h) above on a Question as it applies in relation to a decision made by virtue of paragraph (7) of that Order on a Motion.

Reasons Committee

(14) (a) The Speaker shall put forthwith the Question on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown for the appointment, nomination and quorum of a Committee to draw up Reasons and the appointment of its Chair.

(b) A Committee appointed to draw up Reasons shall report before the conclusion of the sitting at which it is appointed.

(c) Proceedings in the Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion 30 minutes after their commencement.

(d) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with sub-paragraph (c), the Chair shall:

- (i) first put forthwith any Question which has been proposed from the Chair, and
- (ii) then put forthwith successively Questions on Motions which may be made by a Minister of the Crown for assigning a Reason for disagreeing with the Lords in any of their Amendments.

(e) The proceedings of the Committee shall be reported without any further Question being put.

Miscellaneous

(15) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply so far as necessary for the purposes of this Order.

(16) (a) The proceedings on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown for varying or supplementing the provisions of this Order shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.

(b) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to those proceedings.

(17) Standing Order No. 82 (Business Committee) shall not apply in relation to any proceedings to which this Order applies.

(18) (a) No Motion shall be made, except by a Minister of the Crown, to alter the order in which any proceedings on the Bill are taken or to recommit the Bill.

(b) The Question on any such Motion shall be put forthwith.

(19) (a) No dilatory Motion shall be made in relation to proceedings to which this Order applies except by a Minister of the Crown.

(b) The Question on any such Motion shall be put forthwith.

(20) The Speaker may not arrange for a debate to be held in accordance with Standing Order No. 24 (Emergency debates) on a day on which the Bill has been set down to be taken as an Order of the Day before the conclusion of any proceedings to which this Order applies.

(21) (a) This paragraph applies if the House is adjourned, or the sitting is suspended, before the conclusion of any proceedings to which this Order applies.

(b) No notice shall be required of a Motion made at the next sitting by a Minister of the Crown for varying or supplementing the provisions of this Order.

(22) Proceedings to which this Order applies shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of the House.

(23) (a) Any private business which has been set down for consideration at 7.00pm, 4.00pm or 2.00pm (as the case may be) on a day on which the Bill has been set down to be taken as an Order of the Day shall, instead of being considered as provided by Standing Orders or by any Order of the House, be considered at the conclusion of the proceedings on the Bill on that day.

(b) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to the private business for a period of three hours from the conclusion of the proceedings on the Bill or, if those proceedings are concluded before the moment of interruption, for a period equal to the time elapsing between 7.00pm, 4.00pm or 2.00pm (as the case may be) and the conclusion of those proceedings.

In the course of my brief remarks, I also propose to address amendment (a).

From the outset, let me say that the Government fully accept that what we are asking the House to do today is exceptional. We agree that taking all stages of the Bill through the House in a single day is not ideal and I fully understand that a number of right hon. and hon. Members will have misgivings about it. I would very much prefer not to have had to take this approach. I note the amendment tabled by the Social Democratic and Labour party. However, I can assure the hon. Members who tabled the amendment and the whole House that the Government are embarking on this procedure only because we view it to be absolutely necessary in this specific case.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): The Secretary of State may, like me, be a little reticent today, but will she reflect on the huge irony that on 5 September Martin McGuinness said it would be a huge mistake for the Secretary of State to be legislating on this matter, yet today he now welcomes it?

Mrs Villiers: I very much welcome the fact that there is now a broadly based acknowledgement among the Northern Ireland parties that the financial sustainability of the Executive is crucial for the success of devolved

power-sharing government, and that that requires the implementation of welfare reform. This has been a long and involved debate, but I am glad we have got to the right destination in the end.

I believe it is necessary to adopt this fast-track procedure to ensure that welfare reform is no longer an issue that is undermining the political process in Northern Ireland, as it has done over the past four years. I believe it is necessary to take this approach if we are to implement the agreement reached at Stormont last Tuesday, and I believe it is necessary that we take this approach to underpin the stability and survival of power-sharing devolved institutions at Stormont.

The proposed legislation is a fundamental part of the agreement reached last week. If we do not get it on to the statute book and continue with the implementation of last week's agreement, there will be a very serious risk that devolution would collapse, leading to a return to direct rule. A resumption of direct rule would inevitably mean many items of long and complex primary legislation being taken through by Order in Council month after month, potentially year after year. Not only would that mean denying such legislation the scrutiny in the Assembly, but it would inevitably take up large amounts of parliamentary time.

I do not propose to detain the House for long on this procedural matter, but it is important to understand some of the background of the Bill in order to emphasise its crucial significance and the crucial importance of getting it on to the statute book as soon as possible.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): The Secretary of State has chosen her words very carefully and very deliberately, describing rushing through all the stages of a welfare reform Bill in one day as "exceptional", "not ideal" and "absolutely necessary". Where does she think the emergency comes from? Who is going to renege on last week's very welcome agreement? Which party is going to renege on it? Why should we have emergency procedure today and rush through all the stages?

Mrs Villiers: As I will explain, the primary legislation enabled by the Bill has had extensive scrutiny over the last four years. The Order in Council published alongside the Bill reflects the proposed welfare legislation in the Northern Ireland Assembly that fell as a result of the tabling of a petition of concern. That proposed legislation had a First stage, a Second stage, a Committee stage, a Consideration stage, a Further Consideration stage and a Final stage, and there was an extensive debate on a legislative consent motion. It has, therefore, had extensive scrutiny, including 21 weeks of cross-party talks this year and last year. It is not an ideal way to legislate, but the proposed legislation, at its heart, has had extensive scrutiny.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The Secretary of State has outlined what debate there has already been on the terms of the Bill. Will she accept that one reason for the urgency is that, until the legislation is passed, Northern Ireland will continue to lose money by the day to the Treasury by way of payments that have to be made back because of the differences in the welfare arrangements, and the Northern Ireland budget cannot sustain that?

Mrs Villiers: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. The difference between the level of benefits in Great Britain and Northern Ireland is £2 million a

week, which is a drain on the resources of the Executive that they can ill-afford at this difficult time for the public finances. Successive attempts to resolve the welfare question over the last four years have foundered, which has contributed largely to a political crisis in Northern Ireland and the Executive's finances. By early autumn, it looked increasingly likely that the issue would bring down the devolved institutions themselves. As he points out, this has been costing the Executive money—approximately £2 million a week. That is the difference between what the Treasury is prepared to pay—to fund up to parity with Great Britain—and the cost of continuing to run an old, unreformed welfare system in Northern Ireland. The Executive estimate that the cost to their budget will rise to more than £200 million next year and to more than £500 million a year by the end of this Parliament. That is simply unaffordable, and the figures do not even take into account the costs of IT.

Although welfare is technically a devolved matter in Northern Ireland, up to now it has always retained parity with the rest of the UK and been fully integrated into the UK system, through the Department for Work and Pensions. Once Great Britain moves entirely to the new system, based around universal credit, Northern Ireland will no longer have access to the DWP computer systems on which it currently relies to assess and deliver people's benefits. It would be left with no option but to devise, implement and maintain an entirely separate and more expensive system and meet the massive costs of the IT needed to support it. For a small devolved Administration, that cost would be prohibitive.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The Secretary of State is explaining well the need for emergency legislation, and although it is not desirable to pass legislation in one day, it is far more desirable than the Assembly collapsing from not having a viable budget and all legislation having to come back here.

Mrs Villiers: My hon. Friend makes a fair point. We have to get a move on with implementation. We do not want the fresh start agreement to suffer the same fate as the Stormont House agreement, implementation of which stalled relatively early on. It is important we do all we can to move ahead with implementation.

Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): Is this not a massive climbdown by the Government? I say good luck and well done to the parties that stood out against the Government and their nasty welfare reforms. Should the Government not now fund a welfare system on the mainland in the same way as they are funding one in Northern Ireland with a £500 million bung to places such as Newry, Belfast and Omagh?

Mrs Villiers: I would describe the outcome of the cross-party negotiations as a sensible compromise. The welfare reforms we have introduced in Great Britain, which we think are a better system, will be implemented in Northern Ireland, but from its own resources—from the block grant. The Northern Ireland Executive have made the reasonable and legitimate decision to top up some of those benefits.

I go back to my previous remarks. The cost of a computer system would be massive. Budgets for other Departments would have to be cut significantly to pay

[Mrs Villiers]

for a more expensive welfare system, with an inevitable impact on front-line services and capital spending available for crucial infrastructure such as road improvements, almost all of which would probably be swallowed up by the need to build a new computer system. That scenario would undermine the credibility of the devolved institutions but, even more importantly, do irreparable damage to the political relationships that are central to making power-sharing devolution work in practice.

Last December in the Stormont House agreement, the Northern Ireland parties agreed to take forward welfare reform as part of a wider package of measures. It is well known, however, that by March this year progress had begun to founder, when the two main nationalist parties withdrew their support for the Assembly legislation on welfare reform. On 26 May, that legislation passed its final stage, with the backing of three of the five main parties then in the Executive, but was blocked by the other two parties using the petition of concern, meaning that it did not have the necessary cross-community support, so by June we were once again faced with almost complete deadlock. The Executive then passed a budget that was based on an assumption that welfare reform would ultimately be adopted, but which would exceed the controlled totals available from the block grant if it was not.

Ian Paisley: The Secretary of State might add that Northern Ireland has achieved a better deal in terms of welfare payments, and it could have done so a year ago if parties had not tabled the petition of concern and instead supported the changes. Now we have people on the mainland complaining that we have a better deal, but that is because we negotiated it, and it could have been operational a year ago. It is Sinn Féin that has done the U-turn, no one else.

Mrs Villiers: The hon. Gentleman is right that the arrangement could have been reached some time ago, but the important thing is that we have got to a sensible compromise. As for this being a good deal for Northern Ireland, I agree that the combined financial package—£2 billion under the Stormont House agreement and a further half a billion pounds or so under this agreement—will help Northern Ireland and will be a good deal, but it is aimed specifically at the challenges that are unique to Northern Ireland, such as dealing with peace walls, paramilitary-related crime and the terrorist threat.

Lady Hermon: I am most grateful to the Secretary of State for allowing me to intervene a second time. I wonder whether she could enlighten the House as to what exactly persuaded Sinn Féin, after all these weeks of arguing, rowing and opposing the welfare reforms, to do the deal last week? What was the turning point?

Mrs Villiers: I am afraid the hon. Lady will have to ask—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. This debate is on the allocation of time motion and we have Second Reading to come, so it might be helpful if we can try and stick to one point before we move on to the next.

Mrs Villiers: I promise to speed through the remainder of my remarks. The hon. Lady may wish to direct that question to Sinn Féin, but at the heart of it I think Sinn Féin, like the other parties in the Executive, really wanted to make devolution work and realised that, without compromise on welfare questions, the Executive would not have a sustainable budget and that pretty soon that would mean no effective devolution at all.

Last year we made it clear that, if the welfare issue were not resolved, we would have to legislate here to deliver welfare reform in Northern Ireland, even without the consent of the Assembly, but we acknowledged that that was a last resort, and we made resolving the issue a key goal of the talks getting under way. As the House will be aware, they began on 8 September and successfully concluded 10 weeks later, last Tuesday, resulting in a new agreement, called “A Fresh Start: The Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan”, which has been endorsed by the Northern Ireland Executive. In that agreement the Executive made a commitment to passing a legislative consent motion asking Westminster to legislate on its behalf for welfare reform. That motion was debated and passed by the Assembly last Wednesday with a majority of 70 to 22. It was supported by the First and Deputy First Ministers, and because it was backed by their respective parties—the DUP and Sinn Féin—it had the necessary cross-community support to succeed. The LCM therefore represents the clearly expressed will of the Northern Ireland Assembly that we in Westminster deliver this legislation.

The Assembly has moved quickly and decisively to deliver on its side of this crucial aspect of the fresh start agreement. It is now the responsibility of the Government to deliver on our side of that deal. We need to retain that momentum in the House; we cannot afford another stalled implementation process of the kind that occurred earlier this year. As both sides of the House acknowledged during my statement last week, if that were to happen, it is likely that early Assembly elections would result, followed by a real risk of suspension and direct rule. After all that has been achieved in Northern Ireland in recent years, that would be a very severe setback. It could take several years to re-establish devolution.

I urge the House to support the motion and the Bill that we shall debate shortly. In tabling this allocation of time motion, the Government have guaranteed six hours on the Floor of the House today for consideration of what is a very short Bill. I believe that will give us the opportunity to scrutinise all the tabled amendments and new clauses. With that in mind, I cannot support the SDLP amendment to the allocation of time motion, and if it is pressed to the vote, I must ask my colleagues to oppose it.

The motion as drafted reflects the long-standing practice of the House. Expedited legislation for Northern Ireland is by no means unusual. In fact, the last Northern Ireland Bill was very unusual and did not involve an expedited timetable. Withdrawing the amendment to the motion would allow us more time for debate on crucial amendments and new clauses as the debate continues this evening.

I also highlight the fact that the six hours of today’s debate is just one part of a much longer process. If the Bill passes, it will be followed by debates in both Houses to approve the Order in Council to be made under the powers contained in the Bill. It is also the case that the welfare legislation that it will enable us to introduce has

been considered in depth in the context of its application in Great Britain and debated in this House on many occasions. The order, published alongside the Bill, reflects the draft legislation for Northern Ireland that was debated at very great length in the Assembly. As I said earlier, it went through no fewer than six stages of scrutiny stretching over three years, plus the recent debate on the LCM.

These measures have therefore been very extensively considered and scrutinised in the Assembly, as well as being the major focus of two sets of cross-party talks lasting for a total of 21 weeks this year and last. None of the contents of the measures will come as a surprise. They are a crucial part of an agreement that is vital to the stability and survival of devolved government in Northern Ireland—an agreement that genuinely offers a fresh start for Northern Ireland and its devolved institutions. It is vital that we implement it as a matter of urgency. That is why I am asking the House to adopt this emergency procedure today. I commend the motion to the House.

5.43 pm

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): I beg to move amendment (a), after sub-paragraph (6)(b), at end, insert—
“(ba) the Question on any amendment, new clause or new schedule selected by the Chair for separate decision;”

I am glad to move this amendment, which stands in the names of my hon. Friends the Members for South Down (Ms Ritchie) and for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell) as well as mine.

The Secretary of State has tried to explain the circumstances in which we face this programme motion. The amendment does not alter the time taken by the House in respect of that motion—I wish it did. We would have liked to have more time, just as our colleagues in the Assembly—not just SDLP Members, but Members of other parties—wanted more time to debate the issue last week. The original vote in the Assembly—on whether the business should be taken there this week to give the Assembly parties time to digest things—was 58 to 33. That meant that the legislation would have come here following what happened in the Assembly.

The Secretary of State suggested that the legislative consent motion followed standard practice. It does not. Paragraph (6) of the timetable motion makes it clear that at the conclusion of the Committee stage, no amendment or new clause tabled by anyone other than the Government can be put to a vote. The right of the House to vote, properly, on an amendment has been completely circumscribed by the timetable motion as it stands.

The Secretary of State actually had the neck to say that if the amendment were withdrawn, that would allow more time for debates on crucial amendments and new clauses. By providing only two hours for the Committee stage and Third Reading, the Government have ensured that there will not be any significant time in which to debate any amendments or new clauses, and also—in paragraph (6)—that no new clause, and no amendment other than a Government amendment, can be put to a vote. That is a very unusual procedure, which Members should not tolerate. If they do, they will risk creating a precedent that they will regret.

Sammy Wilson: I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman is advancing this argument. Does he not accept that the legislative consent motion sent legislation back to this

House for this House to pass on behalf of the Northern Ireland Assembly? Is he saying that he would prefer this House to override the wishes of the people who are elected in Northern Ireland? That is what his argument amounts to.

Mark Durkan: It is not what my argument amounts to. If the Assembly is saying in the legislative consent motion tabled by Sinn Féin and the DUP that it wants the legislation to come here, we should do our legislative business in proper order. The hon. Gentleman is suggesting that there should not be any debate at all, and that we are lucky to have the right even to table amendments.

Let us look at what the legislative consent motion says. Members of other parties might like to know what they are being asked to support. If they are being told, “Take this on foot of the legislative consent motion”—if they are being told that the legislative consent motion is holy writ—they should bear in mind the fact that it says:

“That this Assembly consents to the Northern Ireland (Welfare Reform) Bill 2015 being taken forward by the Westminster Parliament”—

that is a reference to the Bill with which we are dealing today—and

“approves the welfare clauses of the Welfare Reform and Work Bill as initially introduced at Westminster”.

Many of us in this House did not approve those clauses as initially introduced. Many of us, in a number of parties, voted against aspects of the Welfare Reform and Work Bill. Is the idea that we must now, on foot of the legislative consent motion, turn ourselves inside out—members of the Labour party, the SDLP, the SNP and Plaid Cymru, and the Green party Member—and say, “We opposed the Bill when it was debated in this House, but we no longer oppose it? We now approve the welfare clauses that were in the Welfare Reform and Work Bill as initially introduced at Westminster.” Well, my position on those clauses has not changed, the position of my hon. Friends in the SDLP has not changed, and I should be very surprised if the position of members of the other parties had changed.

The legislative consent motion goes on to approve “the draft Welfare Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 2015; and the Executive’s proposals to enhance payments flowing from the agreement announced on 17 November 2015.”

Members might want to take a careful look at just what is in the legislative consent motion, and note that they are being asked to contradict their position in relation to the Welfare Reform and Work Bill as initially introduced here.

Some of us are trying to use the Committee stage to table due amendments which would be relevant to the Bill. The Secretary of State again tried to confuse things by referring to the amount of scrutiny that had been given to the Bill that was before the Assembly, which has now been largely transposed into a draft Order in Council running to 126 pages. What we are being asked to consider today is not that draft Order in Council, but the Northern Ireland (Welfare Reform) Bill, all 58 lines of it. Meanwhile, we are being asked to nod through 237 lines of a timetable motion so that we will not have the right to table amendments and put them to the vote. If the Secretary of State really meant what she said about time for debate on crucial amendments and new clauses, she would not be resisting this amendment;

[*Mark Durkan*]

she would be agreeing to it so that paragraph (6) would be amended and the Chair could put other matters to the vote if that is what Members and the House so wished. This is about good parliamentary procedure.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): Is the hon. Gentleman saying he would have been happy enough for the situation to continue as it was, with massive fines being paid back to the Government? Surely that is not his argument.

Mark Durkan: Mr Deputy Speaker, I am not sure how far you are treating some of these arguments as relating to the matters of substance as opposed to procedure, but the Secretary of State talked long on those points, as did others.

Let us be clear: a couple of different arguments have been used as to why everybody should just pass this through today as a matter of urgency. One has been that if we do not scramble this through fast, the institutions are in danger of collapse. Who was bringing the institutions to the brink of collapse? It was the very people who are being celebrated as heroes. The SDLP never threatened to bring the institutions down; we never once on any of these issues in the last number of years have used the word “crisis” or threatened the existence of the institutions. We have never said we would make this a make-or-break issue and the institutions would crash if we did not get our way. Sinn Féin and the DUP have variably and respectively, and sometimes collectively, said that at different times over the past couple of years, but it was never the position of the SDLP. We have adhered to our position on welfare reform without at any stage threatening the institutions. The position of Sinn Féin and the DUP came to threaten the institutions—because, after all, who else can threaten the institutions or bring them to the point of collapse but those two parties?

The second argument in relation to the exigency is the money argument. We heard it repeated again in the last intervention. Let us remember: the money argument arose because the Treasury chose to respond to the Assembly’s failure to pass the legislation by imposing what it at one stage called fines and also called penalties—indeed, DUP Finance Ministers used those words as well—but later we were told, “No, you can’t call them fines or penalties; they are savings forgone.” The fact is that it was a Treasury tactic: “Unless you pass this legislation—this karaoke Bill—through the Assembly on the same terms as we had it in Westminster, we will fine the block grant.”

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. We will have these debates later. As the hon. Gentleman rightly said, he is moving an amendment to the allocation of time motion, but we are in danger of opening up the entire debate at this stage, which I do not want to do, as I want to save something for the next part.

Mark Durkan: Yes, but I am partly answering points that the Secretary of State spent some time on and others made interventions on.

We must remember this point about the fines and the pressure that puts on the budget. It was the Treasury that chose to create a budget stress in the hope it would induce the Assembly to pass the legislation. That budget

stress became a budget crisis, and that budget crisis in turn contributed to the political crisis which the Secretary of State now tells us will be resolved by this Bill and this programme motion.

I will not stray into the areas where we are seeking to amend the Bill through the amendments tabled for later—I hope we can discuss those in Committee—but I want to make the point that Members of this House should not be under the illusion that they have to adopt a procedure with a timetable motion in relation to this Bill that they would not adopt for anything else because it is safe to do so as it is in the name of taking forward the peace process or the fresh start agreement.

There are parties that support some parts of the fresh start agreement but not other parts, and there are parties that support the welfare reform changes but do not endorse the whole of the fresh start agreement. Other Members in this House from parties outside Northern Ireland should not think they have to turn their own position on welfare reform and the current Welfare Reform and Work Bill currently going through Westminster inside out as a way of supporting progress and stability in Northern Ireland. Progress and stability in Northern Ireland can easily be supported in the context of this House following its due procedures and not accepting the almost unprecedented provision that means in Committee nothing other than clauses stand part or Government amendments can be voted on.

It is wrong that we are circumscribed by time, and it is wrong that we are being muzzled. This is all courtesy of Sinn Féin. It is to make sure we cannot table amendments that capture some of the amendments we tabled when the Assembly Bill came forward earlier this year. They were rejected by a petition of concern tabled by the DUP, and they were rejected by the votes of Sinn Féin as well. [*Interruption.*] Yes, and Sinn Féin and the DUP voted down SDLP amendments to the Assembly Bill that—[*Interruption.*] [*Interruption.*] Yes, they voted down amendments that were in the same spirit as the amendments the Conservatives had voted down in this House to the original Bill on welfare reform. The DUP voted down amendments and petitions of concern against amendments that were in the spirit of amendments it had supported in the original legislation, so it has turned it inside out, and that is up to it to do, and Sinn Féin.

No parties in this House need abandon their own positions. We should be able to take amendments in this House and vote on those amendments. The Government are in a compact with Sinn Féin and the DUP to make sure the amendments cannot be voted on. They do not want the embarrassment of the Tories having to vote down these same amendments that Sinn Féin voted down in the Assembly earlier this year: the picture of the Sinn Féin -Tory-DUP axis would then be complete because we would be able to show who had voted down which amendments consistently. The case would be that the Tories voted them down originally, then Sinn Féin and the DUP voted them down, and then the Tories voted them down again now. It is to avoid that picture. That is why we have this kangaroo parliamentary procedure that is being used.

From Sinn Féin, a party that in the past supported kangaroo courts, we now have a kangaroo parliamentary procedure whereby things were rushed through in the Assembly the other day by the legislative consent motion;

and now, not only are measures being put through on a timetable motion here, but the rights to table amendments with a view to their being voted on are being suppressed by this programme motion. Members should resist that by supporting the amendment.

The amendment to the programme motion will, if passed, not cost any time or add any delay, so it does not relate to any of the concerns that the Secretary of State raised. The programme motion could be passed with the amendment and there would be absolutely no jeopardy to the timetable that the Secretary of State has tried to impress upon the House.

5.57 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I know that there is an attempt by the SDLP and others to try to derail what has been agreed by parties in the “Fresh Start” document. The amendment before us today is an attempt to do that and also shows the inconsistencies that have existed since this impasse was reached in the Northern Ireland Assembly. We support the programme motion because we want this issue dealt with and we want it dealt with quickly. We want it dealt with for the following reasons.

First, despite what has been said by the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan), there is urgency given the financial consequences of delay for Northern Ireland. The issue is not just the haemorrhaging of money to the Treasury on a daily basis because of the differences between benefit rates in Northern Ireland and in other parts of the United Kingdom. I must also say that it is not unfair of the Treasury to be asking for this money. The parity principle has always applied when there have been changes in welfare and benefits in the rest of the UK. Although the matters had been devolved to Northern Ireland, the principle applied that provided Northern Ireland replicated and reflected the changes that occurred in the rest of the United Kingdom, the payments would be made in full by the Treasury, and as part not of the block grant but of annually managed expenditure. It was always clear, however, that if Northern Ireland decided that it wanted the luxury of having a different system—the Secretary of State has described the problems that that would cause—that difference would have to be paid for. When the SDLP and others blocked welfare reform changes in Northern Ireland, they knew what the penalty would be. That penalty is being paid today, and it will be paid tomorrow and every day for as long as the delay lasts. That will have an impact on the amount of money available for dealing with hospital waiting lists, for schools, for roads and for everything else.

Another problem has arisen as a result. It is not just a question of money haemorrhaging to the Treasury. There has also been an impasse in the rest of the budget, so money that should have been allocated as a result of monitoring rounds has not been allocated, and budgets that should have been set have not been set. We were heading for a budget overspend, which would have brought devolution to a halt. There cannot be devolution if there is no money to pay for the work of the Departments and the expenses that the Departments incur.

Ian Paisley: Does my hon. Friend accept that the sooner we get this legislation done, the sooner we can apply to the Treasury to reclaim some of those overpayments?

Sammy Wilson: I do not think there is any chance of reclaiming those overpayments. I wish that there were, but there is not. Unfortunately, we just have to pay. This issue needs to be dealt with as a matter of urgency today, and we support the Government’s proposal for the limited time.

The second reason for dealing with these matters quickly is that we have already had a debate on them in Northern Ireland. Indeed, I listened to the SDLP Assembly Member for West Belfast, Mr Attwood, talking in the Assembly for about 60 hours about his opposition to the measures and giving us his fanciful ideas on how we could avoid having to implement welfare reform in Northern Ireland—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. This debate is on the allocation of time motion. I know that the hon. Gentleman is building the basis of his argument, but I am a bit bothered that he is going to tempt other Members to talk about the same issues. I want to be able to get everybody debating the depth of the Bill.

Sammy Wilson: I hope that what I am saying is relevant, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The relevance is this: we do not need an extensive debate here in this Chamber because these matters have already been extensively debated, and decisions made on them, in Northern Ireland. The irony is that, only last week, the SDLP was arguing that there should not be a legislative consent motion because welfare reform should be decided in Northern Ireland. Now that the Bill has been shaped and agreed on by the parties in Northern Ireland, SDLP Members want Members of this House to be able to change it. They cannot have it both ways. They cannot argue that they do not want anyone else to get their sticky fingers on welfare reform, only to argue when the Bill arrives here that the House of Commons should make decisions that override the Northern Ireland Assembly.

For that reason, we support the Government’s allocation of time motion, which will allow these matters to be dealt with quickly. It will not allow amendments to be tabled that would change the Bill or the will of the Assembly. We want the will of the Assembly to be reflected. The Secretary of State knows what the will of the Assembly is, and the Bill reflects the views of the majority in the Assembly. We should therefore get this done quickly tonight.

6.3 pm

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): I rise to support the amendment tabled in my name and those of my hon. Friends the Members for Foyle (Mark Durkan) and for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell).

Subsection 6(c) of the motion refers to

“the Question on any amendment moved or Motion made by a Minister of the Crown”.

This seriously undermines the principle of parliamentary democracy and throws into question the role of the Cabinet, the Executive and Parliament. In proposing this, the Government are seeking to subjugate the role of Parliament in making decisions. As my hon. Friend the Member for Foyle has said, this instrument has been used incredibly rarely, and we must ask why the Government have decided to use it on this occasion. What secret deals took place in the meeting between the Prime Minister,

[*Ms Margaret Ritchie*]

the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister on 6 November? Perhaps this is unsurprising, given the rushed nature of this process. If we cast our minds back to Wednesday of last week in the Northern Ireland Assembly, we remember that the legislative consent motion was discussed, and that the draft Bill—all of whose stages we will debate tonight—and the Order in Council were published during that debate. Members across the Assembly therefore had little time to consider those matters.

Ian Paisley: Will the hon. Lady explain why, when her party was given every opportunity to put the boot into Sinn Féin for its mishandling of these matters and its U-turn, it is turning on the Government and everyone else instead?

Ms Ritchie: I remind the hon. Gentleman that this is a debate on the allocation of time motion. This action has been taken by the Government with the acquiescence of the Democratic Unionist party and Sinn Féin.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): The hon. Lady asked why this procedure was being used. The quick, honest truth is that it is being used to get this measure through in order to help Northern Ireland and the Assembly. I cannot see why she has a problem with that.

Ms Ritchie: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says, but we believe that this instrument is an abuse of parliamentary democracy, an abuse of this House and an abuse of the role of Parliament and of the Cabinet. This should not happen. There will be no diminution of the time available for debate on other aspects of the Bill. This is a matter of procedural priority and propriety, and of the accountability of this House. In any liberal democracy, there will be questions about accountability and about the role of Parliament and the Cabinet. The Cabinet should not seek to subjugate Parliament in this regard. We believe that this matter has serious implications for devolution in Northern Ireland, and that it could set a difficult and dangerous precedent for other devolved institutions in Britain as well as in Northern Ireland.

Sammy Wilson: Does the hon. Lady recall that last week, in a flurry of rhetoric, her own spokesman on this issue in the Northern Ireland Assembly asked, in terms, “How dare anyone take this issue, which we have fought for so long to have devolved, to the House of Commons so that people outside this jurisdiction can make decisions about what happens in Northern Ireland?” Is she now saying that he was wrong, and that she wants this House to make those decisions, over the heads of Assembly Members?

Ms Ritchie: The hon. Gentleman is trying to direct me down a certain path. That debate in the Northern Ireland Assembly dealt with the measures in the Bill and with the legislative consent motion. Tonight, we are debating my party’s amendment to the allocation of time motion. I remind Members of the motion’s statement that “the Question on any amendment moved or Motion” can be made only “by a Minister”.

That means that we can debate our amendments but we cannot move them. Is that not unquestionably undemocratic, in this particular House? Therefore, I second and support our amendment.

6.10 pm

Mrs Villiers: I think I covered most of the key points in my opening remarks. The motion, as drafted, is not unusual, and there is a fairly broad consensus on the need to progress with this legislation quickly. Right hon. and hon. Members will be aware of the grouping and selection, and I am sure they will be keen for us to debate everything we can in the hours ahead. I welcome the opportunity—

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con) *rose*—

Mrs Villiers: No, I am not giving way. I welcome the opportunity to debate the amendments tabled by the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) at the Committee stage, and I am sure he will have sufficient time to put on the record these points as he so wishes. Obviously, he has also had considerable time during this discussion to make a number of useful points.

Mark Durkan: I still wish to press the amendment to a Division.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 7, Noes 276.

Division No. 129]

[6.11 pm

AYES

Durkan, Mark	McDonnell, Dr Alasdair
Elliott, Tom	Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Hermon, Lady	Tellers for the Ayes:
Kinahan, Danny	Hywel Williams and
Lucas, Caroline	Dr Eilidh Whiteford

NOES

Adams, Nigel	Brine, Steve
Aldous, Peter	Brokenshire, rh James
Allan, Lucy	Bruce, Fiona
Amess, Sir David	Burns, Conor
Andrew, Stuart	Burns, rh Sir Simon
Ansell, Caroline	Burrowes, Mr David
Argar, Edward	Cairns, Alun
Atkins, Victoria	Campbell, Mr Gregory
Bacon, Mr Richard	Carmichael, Neil
Baker, Mr Steve	Cartlidge, James
Baldwin, Harriett	Caulfield, Maria
Barclay, Stephen	Chalk, Alex
Barwell, Gavin	Chishti, Rehman
Bebb, Guto	Chope, Mr Christopher
Bellingham, Mr Henry	Churchill, Jo
Benyon, Richard	Clark, rh Greg
Beresford, Sir Paul	Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Berry, Jake	Cleverly, James
Berry, James	Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Bingham, Andrew	Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Blackman, Bob	Collins, Damian
Blackwood, Nicola	Colville, Oliver
Boles, Nick	Costa, Alberto
Borwick, Victoria	Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Bottomley, Sir Peter	Crabb, rh Stephen
Bradley, Karen	Davies, Chris
Brady, Mr Graham	Davies, David T. C.
Brazier, Mr Julian	Davies, Glyn
Bridgen, Andrew	Davies, Mims

Davies, Philip
 Dinenage, Caroline
 Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
 Donaldson, rh Mr Jeffrey M.
 Donelan, Michelle
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duncan, rh Sir Alan
 Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
 Ellis, Michael
 Ellison, Jane
 Elphicke, Charlie
 Eustice, George
 Evans, Graham
 Evans, Mr Nigel
 Evennett, rh Mr David
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fallon, rh Michael
 Fernandes, Suella
 Field, rh Mark
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Frazer, Lucy
 Freer, Mike
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Marcus
 Gale, Sir Roger
 Garnier, rh Sir Edward
 Garnier, Mark
 Gauke, Mr David
 Ghani, Nusrat
 Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
 Glen, John
 Goodwill, Mr Robert
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, Mr James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Greening, rh Justine
 Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
 Griffiths, Andrew
 Gyimah, Mr Sam
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hart, Simon
 Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
 Hayes, rh Mr John
 Heald, Sir Oliver
 Heappey, James
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Heaton-Jones, Peter

Henderson, Gordon
 Herbert, rh Nick
 Hinds, Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Hopkins, Kris
 Howarth, Sir Gerald
 Howell, John
 Howlett, Ben
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hurd, Mr Nick
 Jackson, Mr Stewart
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, Mr
 Ranil
 Jenkin, Mr Bernard
 Jenrick, Robert
 Johnson, Boris
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnson, Joseph
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Kennedy, Seema
 Kirby, Simon
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Lancaster, Mark
 Latham, Pauline
 Leadsom, Andrea
 Lee, Dr Phillip
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leigh, Sir Edward
 Leslie, Charlotte
 Letwin, rh Mr Oliver
 Lewis, Brandon
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lidington, rh Mr David
 Lilley, rh Mr Peter
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Lumley, Karen
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackintosh, David
 Mak, Mr Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mann, Scott
 Mathias, Dr Tania
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria

Milling, Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Milton, rh Anne
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mordaunt, Penny
 Morgan, rh Nicky
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morton, Wendy
 Mowat, David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, Dr Andrew
 Neill, Robert
 Newton, Sarah
 Nokes, Caroline
 Norman, Jesse
 Nuttall, Mr David
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Paisley, Ian
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Mike
 Penrose, John
 Phillips, Stephen
 Philp, Chris
 Pickles, rh Sir Eric
 Pincher, Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Daniel
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, Mr Dominic
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr
 Jacob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Rudd, rh Amber
 Rutley, David
 Scully, Paul
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, Alok
 Shelbrooke, Alec
 Simpson, David
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith

Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Soubry, rh Anna
 Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Stewart, Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stewart, Rory
 Streeter, Mr Gary
 Stride, Mel
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swaney, rh Mr
 Desmond
 Syms, Mr Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Turner, Mr Andrew
 Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
 Vaizey, Mr Edward
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, Mr Ben
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watkinson, Dame Angela
 Wharton, James
 Wheeler, Heather
 White, Chris
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, Mr Rob
 Wilson, Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, William
 Wright, rh Jeremy

Tellers for the Noes:
George Hollingbery and
Margot James

Question accordingly negated.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Northern Ireland (Welfare Reform) Bill

Second Reading

6.23 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr Ben Wallace): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Welfare is a devolved issue in Northern Ireland. Over time, the agreed principle has been that welfare policy, spending and administration in Northern Ireland maintain broad parity with that in place in the rest of Great Britain. The parity principle has served Northern Ireland well. It means that benefit claimants have been able to avail themselves of the same rates of benefits as those in the rest of the United Kingdom. The UK Government have been clear that they will not fund a more generous welfare system in Northern Ireland than that in place elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

Over the past three years, the Northern Ireland Assembly has been unable to implement welfare reform legislation that mirrors that of the Welfare Reform Act 2012, which is in place in the rest of the UK. The Assembly's Welfare Reform Bill was introduced in October 2012, but was stalled at Committee stage in February the following year. Following a petition of concern, the Bill fell at its final stage in May this year.

The Secretary of State has outlined the implications of this failure to maintain parity, and the various steps that have been taken to bring us to where we are today, with Westminster having to legislate for welfare reform in Northern Ireland. As welfare is transferred, clause 1 provides the Government with a power to legislate for welfare in Northern Ireland via an Order in Council.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Will the Minister expand on the petition of concern? Is it an abuse of the parliamentary process, and is it anti-democratic?

Mr Wallace: Clearly, the use of petitions of concern is a matter for the Northern Ireland parties and for the Northern Ireland Assembly. All I ask is that parties in Northern Ireland recognise that the petition of concern is related to community concerns, and should not be used for things such as caravan legislation, or other such matters.

Taking this power enables the Government to implement Northern Ireland-specific flexibilities in the welfare system. When the 2012 welfare reform measures were first introduced, Northern Ireland's Department for Social Development negotiated certain administrative flexibilities with the Department for Work and Pensions. They included, for example, a slightly different sanctions regime and the ability for welfare payments to be made to claimants on a fortnightly rather than a monthly basis.

In addition, as part of commitments made under last year's Stormont House agreement, the Northern Ireland parties agreed a range of so-called top-up measures, which were designed to compensate claimants who were losing out as a result of the welfare reforms. The Assembly's Welfare Reform Bill—the one that fell in May—was amended to reflect the various administrative flexibilities and top-up measures.

In providing a broad power, the Bill allows the Government to implement these Northern Ireland-specific flexibilities and top-ups. That reinforces the fact that the Government's intent is not to impose Great Britain's welfare system onto Northern Ireland. Instead, we are proposing to use the power provided by this Bill to legislate for the Northern Ireland-tailored welfare system agreed by the Northern Ireland parties.

The Order in Council that will follow this Bill, if passed, will make that clear. The order is based largely on the Assembly's Welfare Reform Bill that fell at its final stage in May. It therefore includes: the reforms made in Great Britain by the Welfare Reform Act 2012; the various flexibilities agreed between the Northern Ireland Department for Social Development and the Department for Work and Pensions; the amendments agreed during the passage of the Assembly Welfare Reform Bill; and provisions that allow for Northern Ireland Executive-funded top-ups.

The second reason for opting for a broad power in this Bill is that it enables the Government to implement other potential welfare reforms, such as those contained in the Welfare Reform and Work Bill currently being considered by the Lords.

The Northern Ireland Executive have just endured almost four years of political instability owing to their inability to implement the last major set of welfare reforms. It is important that the fresh start envisaged by the Northern Ireland parties is given time and space to grow and strengthen. If the Assembly considers the 2015 welfare reforms too soon, it could jeopardise this new-found consensus in Northern Ireland. It is therefore necessary for the Government to legislate for implementation of these measures.

Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): The Minister is being very pragmatic in explaining the history behind this and why the Government are behaving as they are. Does he believe that it is desirable in the medium term that the welfare arrangements for Northern Ireland should mirror those of the rest of the United Kingdom, or does he think that this Bill will hold sway in the long term?

Mr Wallace: It is of course desirable that the welfare package and policy that this Government have come up with over the past four or five years is implemented across the United Kingdom. It is a good and well-needed reform. We also accept that, within the parameters of the devolved settlement, some devolved institutions have the ability to top up or be flexible in order to be able to deliver. In the long term, it will be interesting to see which delivers the best results for the people of those countries and whether our welfare reforms without flexibilities produce a better outcome than those that are adopted elsewhere.

Ian Paisley: Will the Minister state very clearly that there has been no change to parity? These are flexibilities that Northern Ireland has achieved. There are about a dozen very positive flexibilities and about 105,000 hard-working, low-paid families in Northern Ireland who will benefit as a result of the huge effort that has been put into resolving this issue.

Mr Wallace: It is absolutely the case that those flexibilities may turn out to suit the people of Northern Ireland, but it is also the case that the flexibilities and top-ups

will be funded by Northern Ireland from the block grant. The UK Government will not fund on top of the existing UK roll-out, as has been clearly set out by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. It is important to get the message across that the funding to push forward with those flexibilities is coming out of the Northern Ireland block grant.

Ian Paisley: Will the Minister clarify another point? When the Minister for Social Development introduced this in the Assembly at the end of last week, he put it on the record that the Executive will be able to reclaim some of the financial penalties that the Treasury has already taken from the block grant. Is that the case?

Mr Wallace: The hon. Gentleman is right. Certainly, in the negotiations, some of the penalties due for not implementing the welfare legislation will be returned to Northern Ireland. I am happy to write to him setting out the envisaged amount and the exact timing of when it would start to be rebated.

It is important to stress three important considerations at this point. First, the Bill does not affect the legislative competence of the Northern Ireland Assembly. In other words, if the Assembly can agree to do so, it can continue to pass welfare legislation. The Bill therefore creates a situation in which welfare is both devolved—meaning the Assembly can legislate for it—and effectively reserved, meaning the Government can legislate for it as well. That situation may be unusual, but it is not without precedent, certainly when it comes to Northern Ireland. For example, there is similar concurrent legislative competence over regulations governing the flying of flags in Northern Ireland.

Secondly, the legislative approach outlined in this Bill has arisen at the request of the Northern Ireland parties. The Assembly last week granted its consent, by an overwhelming majority of 70 votes to 22, to this Bill. Consent was also granted to the Order in Council that will follow this Bill, and the welfare clauses of the Welfare Reform and Work Bill as initially introduced at Westminster. Thirdly, I can assure the House that the UK Government have no intention or desire to legislate on an ongoing basis for welfare in Northern Ireland. Welfare is properly devolved to Northern Ireland and will remain so. That is why clause 3 time-limits the power so that an order cannot be made after 31 December 2016.

As already noted, an Order in Council will follow this Bill. The order will make provision for welfare reform in Northern Ireland equivalent to the Welfare Reform Act 2012, and as I have pointed out, will provide for the various Northern Ireland-specific flexibilities and top-ups. First, legislating in this way, by an Order in Council, is the normal convention for secondary legislation with a devolution aspect. Secondly, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has commented, it is essential that welfare reform is implemented in Northern Ireland as soon as possible. Given that speed is crucial, the only way to have the necessary legislation in place in the desired timescale is to delegate the detail of the welfare provisions to secondary legislation. Members should, however, be comforted by the realisation that the content of the Order in Council largely mirrors that of the 2012 Act, debated at length and in great detail in this House. There will be an opportunity to debate the order next week. I trust Members will reserve any detailed questions regarding welfare reform for that debate.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): Given the complexity of an Order in Council in any circumstances and of the Bill that is being taken through the House at breakneck speed this evening, will the Minister please express some element of regret that neither the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee nor the Work and Pensions Committee had an opportunity to scrutinise them and report to the Northern Ireland Office before the Bill came to the House?

Mr Wallace: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made it clear that nearly all the provisions in the order have been thoroughly debated in the Northern Ireland Assembly over a long period, and this House has given considerable scrutiny to the 2012 welfare reforms and is doing so for ongoing reforms in the 2015 Bill. I am happy to arrange for the hon. Lady, should she so wish, to meet officials from the Northern Ireland Office and the DWP to discuss in detail any concern she has about the order between now and the debate next week, if that satisfies her.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): The Minister touched on the Welfare Reform and Work Bill. It is not really covered in the Order in Council. Will it be the subject of a different Order in Council subsequently under this legislation, or do the Government intend to amend the Bill to extend it to Northern Ireland?

Mr Wallace: The answer is that, yes, it will be subject to an order different from this one, which is due next week, as far as I understand.

In conclusion, I emphasise the points made by the Secretary of State. This is a good Bill for Northern Ireland, a Bill which will help resolve the long-running, politically divisive stalemate over welfare reform. The Bill is a crucial element of establishing and building on the “Fresh Start” announced last week. The Bill and the subsequent Order in Council do not guarantee political stability in Northern Ireland, but without them political stability and progress are, frankly, impossible. Our approach may appear unusual or unconventional, but it does have the cross-community support of the vast number of Northern Ireland’s elected representatives. This Bill offers the only realistic prospect of resolving Northern Ireland’s welfare reform impasse, and I commend it to the House.

6.35 pm

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): I thank the Minister for opening the Second Reading debate. Let us remind ourselves that the last few months in Northern Ireland have been very difficult. The murders in the summer and the budgetary stalemate on the issue of welfare led to a political crisis with potentially massive consequences for future governance. Months of talks throughout the year, culminating in the last 11 weeks, seemed at times to be going nowhere. So notwithstanding the failure to come to a conclusion on how to deal with the past—to the huge disappointment of all of us, not least the victims—there is huge relief that an agreement has been reached. All those involved—the Secretary of State, the parties, the Irish Government and many, in fact all, Members here—deserve credit for getting us to this point.

Without an agreement there was the real risk of the collapse of devolution or indeed the return to direct rule, either of which would have been unthinkable. However, that has been avoided and that is why I think the

[*Vernon Coaker*]

agreement is significant. As part of the agreement on welfare, a consent motion was agreed by the Northern Ireland Assembly to allow us to legislate for welfare reform here at Westminster, with a measure designed to ensure that the reform can take place as soon as possible without further financial penalties to allow stability to return and normal government arrangements to proceed. Of course, welfare reform is devolved to Northern Ireland, but the Assembly has consented to our legislating in this instance.

We should not forget that the agreement reached has also allowed other very significant measures, aside from welfare reform, to be adopted and other moneys released for the benefit of the people of Northern Ireland: measures such as additional funding to the Police Service of Northern Ireland to combat the continuing terrorist threat, and money and increased efforts to tackle paramilitarism and cross-border crime. I want to highlight the funds for community initiatives such as bringing down the peace walls.

Today we are being asked to agree primary legislation that will enable the Secretary of State to reform the welfare system to apply the Welfare Reform Act 2012 and welfare aspects of the 2015 Bill to Northern Ireland. We will not oppose this legislation, but let us be clear: we have over recent years opposed much of the Tories' welfare reform agenda and we will continue to do so. We accept, however, that the agreement does allow Northern Ireland certain welcome exemptions and the ability to mitigate the impact of these cuts. For example, there is the exemption from the bedroom tax and the £585 million to be made available over four years from the block grant to help with that; and to lessen the impact on the working poor, £240 million will be used to relieve the impact of the tax credit cut on the 120,000 families affected by it. That demonstrates clearly that the Tory Government's welfare cuts, and indeed their austerity programme, are as much a problem for Northern Ireland as they are for any other part of the UK. However, as I said, we support the welfare mitigation measures as they recognise something I believe the rest of the UK understands as well, namely the special and particular circumstances that exist in Northern Ireland. Preserving the principle of parity in social security between Northern Ireland and Britain is more than just a convention. The Good Friday agreement specifically cited social security as an area where parity is normally maintained, and that principle remains important.

Many of the problems of significant mental illness, long-term worklessness and dependency on sickness and incapacity benefits exist in many parts of England, Wales and Scotland, but we know that Northern Ireland is a society coming out of conflict, so these welfare problems and issues are more complex and must be handled with greater sensitivity. Poverty remains a feature of life for a variety of groups, with a significant number of people in Northern Ireland still living in absolute poverty. Northern Ireland still has the highest disability living allowance claimant rate among working adults at 10.1%, according to the latest figures, whereas the average across Britain is 4.9%. Mental health remains a huge issue, with one in six people affected, and the suicide rate is 70% higher than the UK average. That is why we will

not oppose the flexibility in the implementation of the welfare changes that this legislation and subsequent orders will allow.

Alongside any welfare reform programme there must be a jobs and growth programme. I urge the Secretary of State and the Government to work much more rigorously with the Northern Ireland Executive and business to give such a programme greater urgency. Reforming welfare is more than cutting benefits; it is about training, skills, opportunity and tackling low aspiration and educational underachievement. This has to be recognised, and new programmes are needed as part of increased efforts by the Treasury in regard to how the new National Infrastructure Commission, for example, affects Northern Ireland, the potential consequences of the EU referendum and the impact of poor broadband access. Welfare reform coupled with attention to such aspects would make a much greater difference.

I will ask the Minister some questions, which may help in his summing up and in future deliberations. First, he set out the timetable for one of the orders, but can he spell out the timetable for the Orders in Council which will follow from this paving legislation and the process that will apply to them in view of the consultation that was asked for and the meetings that he referred to? Secondly, what scope is there for that consultation with respect to these orders? In the Assembly debate on the legislative consent motion, the Minister for Social Development spoke of agreement in principle to the change to the welfare system in Northern Ireland being introduced at Westminster. Will the Minister explain what that agreement in principle means? Thirdly, so that we can all be clear, will he outline which welfare parts of the Welfare Reform and Work Bill this legislative process covers? Fourthly, can he confirm that the plan is that any regulations necessary to implement the Evason group's recommendations for mitigation will be subject to Assembly scrutiny and approval before they are made in this House?

This has been a tough road and nobody doubts that, with such a high level of welfare need in Northern Ireland and huge reliance on incapacity benefits, change is needed. As I have said, we will therefore not oppose these measures, but change in Northern Ireland has to reflect its special circumstances. All the parties have sought to convince the Government of this, some would say with much success. However, in Northern Ireland as well as in the rest of the UK, a different Government programme of jobs, growth and investment alongside reform would be of greater benefit.

This legislation falls at the end of 2016. Will the Minister explain why that date was chosen? Given that sunset clause, let us hope we can all build a secure future in Northern Ireland so that we do not find ourselves in yet another crisis in a year's time. We will not oppose the Bill as the dangers of an agreement not being reached were huge, with potential restoration of direct rule. This has been averted. Northern Ireland's political institutions are stabilised, notwithstanding the continuing debate, so let us ensure that as the UK Government work with the Irish Government and all the parties, we continue to support the building of a peaceful Northern Ireland where there is prosperity, fairness and opportunity for all. That has to be our continuing task.

6.45 pm

Dr Alasdair McDonnell (Belfast South) (SDLP): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute to this debate. It provides us with a brief opportunity to examine the provisions of the Bill in some detail, but I cannot help thinking that the much more appropriate place for such a debate and decision making would be the Northern Ireland Assembly. It is no secret that welfare reform has proven a contentious issue not just in the last round of talks, but for some time. The Secretary of State and the Under-Secretary will be familiar with the many arguments that I and colleagues made, not only over the past 10 weeks, but in the annual crisis talks that we have held over the past three years.

On a point well made by the shadow Secretary of State, focusing on welfare reform in isolation and neglecting the serious challenge of joblessness will simply fail. It will not work. Punishing and sanctioning people for a failure to get a job that does not exist, without looking at the wider economy, is economically illiterate. The Secretary of State will no doubt assure us that the proposed changes to corporation tax will solve all our problems, but I do not believe they will and a large number of experts agree with me. Corporation tax is a valuable tool at our disposal, but it is not the silver bullet. It will not solve all the problems. The SDLP has always agreed with the need for welfare reform, but never at the cost of crucifying some of the most vulnerable and marginalised in our society.

Over 10 long weeks of negotiation the Secretary of State has heard me and other colleagues repeat the need to move away from welfare reform and start to address the serious issue of joblessness. Although our hard won peace process helped transform Northern Ireland, it was never meant or expected to be the final chapter. The majority of sensible people believe that if we are to see our society and its people fully emerge from conflict, we need another kind of transformation. We need a prosperity process that produces training, skill development and economic opportunity. We need to do something about the vicious downward spiral of low skills, low wages and low productivity that strangles much of our economic hope.

At the core of our prosperity process has to be strong collaboration between business and third-level education, linked in turn to research and development investment, in line with best practice in Britain, the south of Ireland and right across Europe. It never ceases to shock me that Northern Ireland has a population of 1.8 million and a mere 700,000 of them—much less than half—are economically active. We are falling much too far behind our neighbours on this side of the Irish sea, in the south of Ireland, and across Europe. A massive programme of sustainable economic regeneration is urgently needed to generate the revenues we need to build prosperity in Northern Ireland. If less than half of our population is economically active, how can that not have a devastating impact on living standards for so many?

We must tackle the low level of economic activity in that adult population by seeking to provide a wide range of regionally balanced economic opportunities. Our goal must be to get at least 1 million of those 1.8 million people across Northern Ireland into meaningful and worthwhile work. Lifting our economy is one of the best ways of helping those on welfare to get the hand up that they are promised. We must put meaningful

economic regeneration at the heart of our devolved Administration. Only then can our people realise their hopes, aspirations, ambitions and full potential.

I am deeply disappointed that the fresh start agreement made no reference to job creation, economic development or prosperity, despite these issues being raised repeatedly at every plenary session of the recent talks. The biggest challenge that we face is getting people into work or into meaningful apprenticeships and genuine skill improvement as a pathway towards jobs. I repeat that we are caught in a vicious downward spiral of low skills, leading to low wages, and, in turn, to very low productivity. This cycle has to be broken.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that low skills and unemployment would hardly be helped if this Bill were to be stopped and £10 million a month of penalties reinstated?

Dr McDonnell: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's comment, but the point I am making—I hope he would take it because it affects his constituency as well as mine—is that it is all very well to talk about moving people from welfare into work in places like the south-east of England or London, where there are jobs, but we cannot move people from welfare into work if there is no work for them to go to.

The vicious cycle has to be broken, but it will not be broken by pious platitudes or wishful thinking; it can be broken only by active intervention by both the Government here and the Executive at Stormont. I repeat my previous calls to the Secretary of State and to the Northern Ireland Executive to honour commitments that we have discussed across the negotiating table over the past 10 weeks, and plead for each of us to play whatever part we can in generating prosperity. If we fail to create prosperity, we run the risk of institutions failing again, with recurrent crisis and a return to the process through Stormont House 3, which none of us wants.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mrs Theresa Villiers): I think it is worth reflecting on the fact that there are 30,000 more people in work in Northern Ireland, compared with 2010. The Northern Ireland economy is growing again—it is recovering—and the Executive should take some pride in that because they have obviously contributed strongly to it.

Dr McDonnell: I welcome the Secretary of State's comments and the commitments she has made. I know that she probably has empathy with much of this.

This is not just about my constituency. The hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) is sitting behind me. I look at a town such as Ballymena, which will apparently lose some 5,000 jobs in the next two or three years. That is horrific to me; I grew up not far away from it. That is the problem I am looking at. These people need our attention and need some hope, because there is nothing there but despair. However, I leave it to the hon. Gentleman to make that point, as he has done very well on many occasions.

The SDLP has tabled amendments that would provide some flexibilities. They are a reflection of, and very compatible with, some of the amendments we made during the consideration of the Welfare Reform Bill at

[*Dr Alasdair McDonnell*]

Stormont that was voted down by Sinn Féin and the DUP. These flexibilities would limit the Secretary of State's power and influence in making a benefit cap in Northern Ireland and reduce the maximum period of the sanction from 18 months to six months. We are deeply concerned by the outcome of the sanctions in Britain, which have treated claimants extremely unfairly. We feel that this is a matter properly to be dealt with in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

It is now time that this Government recognised the unique circumstances of people living in Northern Ireland, who are crying out for fair play and an economic opportunity. Put simply, they are crying out for hope and a better future for themselves and their children. Seventeen years after the Good Friday Agreement, it is time to make good on the promises made at that stage of prosperity, peace and hope for all our people.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I want to take the hon. Gentleman back to his point about the amendments. Clearly, if they went through, that would again break parity, so there would be a financial cost to all that, and the IT systems in Northern Ireland would have to compensate as well. Who would pay for that?

Dr McDonnell: I think the amendments are cost-neutral and do not break parity, and they would work for all our constituents—not just mine but the right hon. Gentleman's.

6.54 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): First, I welcome the fact that we now have this Bill before the House of Commons. Had the Government listened to us some time ago, we might have saved a year in which we would have saved the money that is now being returned to the Treasury. More importantly, we would have saved the damage that has been done to devolution. Apart from the costs involved, the stalemate that has arisen from the failure to agree the welfare reform proposals that we thought had been agreed this time last year in the Stormont House agreement has led to a budgetary crisis in the Assembly. During that stalemate, many of the spending proposals could not be undertaken, with a budget that we knew would have been overspent had we gone through to the end of the year. All that has played out badly in Northern Ireland with regard to the credibility of the Assembly.

This agreement, and the fact that we have now removed one of the most toxic issues that was affecting the work of the Assembly, namely welfare reform, is therefore to be welcomed. I am glad that we have now got this issue on to the Floor of the House.

Lady Hermon: The hon. Gentleman is a very senior member of his party, and rightly so—he has been in it for an awfully long time. Will he therefore give us some insight into the negotiations which—thank goodness, after all this waiting—managed to persuade Sinn Féin to agree to this deal? What was the turning point? What was the significant agreement with Sinn Féin whereby it agreed to welfare reform? I am intrigued to know what his new leader, or future leader—[*Interruption.*] I would

be delighted, in fact, if there was a new leader, but will he just answer the question instead of speculating about the leadership?

Sammy Wilson: If the hon. Lady had thought of the trend that there has been since the DUP became the largest party in Northern Ireland, she could easily have identified the reason why this has happened. We were told that we could not get devolution because Sinn Féin would never divorce itself from violence, and then it did; we were told that we could never get policing and justice devolved because Sinn Féin would never support the police, and then it did; and we were told that we could never get welfare reform through because Sinn Féin was opposed to it, and we faced it down on that. The record of the DUP should not be compared with the record of the Ulster Unionist party when it was the largest party in Northern Ireland, because it rolled over to Sinn Féin whereas we have stared it down on all these issues and succeeded. I cannot get into the mindset of Sinn Féin. All I know is that a year ago it was saying that under no circumstances would it accept Tory diktats on welfare, and now it has asked the Government to bring forward this legislation, to take it through the House of Commons, and to implement the changes.

I welcome that, because our party never accepted that the devolution of welfare was necessary. Given the parity principle, we would always have been caught in a position whereby we either reflected Westminster legislation or paid the cost of it, which, even in terms of different systems, was never going to be sustainable. Now we are where we are, and I am pleased about that, because it removes one of the biggest barriers to making devolution work in Northern Ireland. I hope that we have now laid the foundation for more workable devolution in future, because we are a party that believes in devolution and wants to see it work. I think that the sacrifices we have made indicate that.

Secondly, this measure brings immediate benefit to Northern Ireland. It removes the toxicity that existed around welfare reform, but also enables us now to move on to deal with the issues that need to be dealt with.

The hon. Member for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell) said that one of the reasons he is not happy is that the agreement does not provide for jobs. I want people in my constituency to be off welfare and to have the dignity of work, but the hon. Gentleman said that the deal does nothing to get people into employment. However, it paves the way for corporation tax changes in Northern Ireland, which will be a job creation measure. Half of the savings made from fraud and error in welfare can be retained by the Northern Ireland budget. The agreement specifically says that we can deal with training and youth unemployment. A capital financial package will be available for shared education and shared housing, which will create jobs for people in the construction industry. The Northern Ireland Executive will also be able to keep some of the capital receipts from the sale of assets, and they can be ploughed back into the economy.

The hon. Gentleman was, therefore, wrong to say that the Bill does nothing but penalise people on welfare without giving them an alternative. The Executive now have in their hands the means to provide some of the things that he and I are concerned about. I know that he was not making a cheap political point, because he has a record of being concerned about unemployment not

just in his own constituency, but right across Northern Ireland. At least this agreement secures the resources by which some of those issues can be addressed.

Thirdly, although we cannot deviate from parity without there being some cost to Northern Ireland, the Executive have taken it upon themselves to look at where we could change some of the welfare issues and put our own imprint on the Northern Ireland welfare system. Over the next few years, £585 million will be devoted to just that. On cuts to the spare room subsidy, for example, we took the view that we did not have the housing structure to allow for the flexibility required in the housing market, so we have put money into exempting people from the benefit reduction that would have incurred. On the changes to rates—or council tax, as it is known in the rest of the United Kingdom—we have put £17 million aside so that low-income families will be supported and not lose out. Money has also been put aside for tax credit changes. The approach has been tailored. The Bill will go through—as has been agreed by the Executive, and asked for by the Assembly—with those flexibilities. It is a good deal, which is one of the reasons we will be pleased to go through the Lobby tonight in support of the Bill passing through this House.

Finally, there are still those who wish to conduct guerrilla warfare against the institutions in Northern Ireland. Some of them do so because they want to score points against other political parties. We have seen an example of that today. Last week, the Social Democratic and Labour party criticised Sinn Féin in the Assembly, saying, “How dare they dilute devolution by asking for this welfare reform Bill to be taken to the House of Commons? The House of Commons should have no say over it, because it’s a devolved issue.” Now that the Bill has come here, however, SDLP Members are complaining because the House of Commons cannot have a say on making changes. That was, of course, a convenient way of beating Sinn Féin.

Others, such as Traditional Unionist Voice, would have liked the Bill to have been delayed, because they hoped the whole deal would unravel as a result. They want to destroy devolution, despite all the benefits it has brought to Northern Ireland. For that reason, it is important that we address the issue urgently. It has taken long enough to strike the deal, and now that it has been struck let us deliver it for the people of Northern Ireland. Tonight the House of Commons can play a role in helping to improve conditions in Northern Ireland by passing this Bill.

7.5 pm

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): I am glad to have the opportunity to speak about this most extraordinary Bill. It is so sad that it has become necessary, not because of what it does—we welcome much of what is in it and the fact that it can now happen, and it takes us out of the quagmire of inactivity that I spoke about in the Chamber a few weeks ago—but because our legislators in Northern Ireland are unable to do it themselves and are happy to pass the buck to Westminster. It is also a worse deal than that offered in the original Stormont House discussions, and it shows that the Government are happy to listen to only the two main parties in Northern Ireland, rather than the five that are in the coalition or the opposition coalition.

Mrs Villiers: I want to reassure the hon. Gentleman that the Ulster Unionist party was one of a number of parties that I listened to. It repeatedly said that the Executive had to have a sustainable budget, and that was undeliverable without welfare reform, so the agreement reflects input from the UUP.

Danny Kinahan: I take that on board, but only to a certain point. We were not listened to as much as we wanted, and we were certainly ignored quite a bit at the end as the two main parties took control.

Sammy Wilson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Danny Kinahan: Not at the moment.

Was it a case of, “Any deal will do,” perhaps to keep the Prime Minister happy or, more importantly, to fit in with the First Minister’s resignation and glorification at his party conference last weekend? That is deeply worrying.

Some five weeks ago I spoke about the Stormont crisis in an effort to show this House that the present Stormont devolved system does not work. The current Government do not work and I intend to show why that is the case. During that debate we highlighted the fact that, out of the £80 million in the social investment fund, only £1 million had been spent. I also showed that shared education, the racial equality strategy, same-sex marriage and many more things were all stalled by the Executive. I also raised the fact that welfare reform could not be agreed, because Sinn Féin had pulled out of the Stormont House discussions after initially agreeing with them. The consequence is that all our Departments are grinding to a halt; no budget was agreed as a result of welfare not being agreed. So, here we are, passing it over to Westminster to do it for us.

I remember it being made very clear in the Stormont Chamber that, in effect, all the Finance Minister had to do was allocate the Barnett formula funds to the various Departments and that she was no more than a glorified accountant. It seems that we cannot even do that. We have had to hand over the responsibility to Westminster so that it can do the allocation for us.

Stormont is a legislative Assembly—its job is to legislate. May I make it absolutely clear that my party—the Ulster Unionist party—has all along been against handing power back to Westminster? Yet here we are, handing back to Westminster the power to legislate. It is very sad that Stormont cannot even do what it was set up to do.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): Could the hon. Gentleman brief the House on exactly what suggestions his party made in the negotiations?

Danny Kinahan: I would also like the hon. Gentleman’s party to say what it agreed with Sinn Féin along the way. [*Interruption.*] I was not involved at that point.

In this fresh start—or should we call it a false start?—Stormont cannot sort out paramilitaries, so it sets up a panel to advise us on how to deal with them, and it cannot decide who the vulnerable are, so it sets up a panel to advise us, and so it goes on. Stormont can legislate, so it legislates to give that very power away. In my time at Stormont, I saw nothing but strategies, reviews, reports and, in so many cases, parked initiatives, which are now all sitting on shelves and gathering dust. That shows Stormont unable, as ever, to take action; unable to act; unable to do what it is there for; and unable to make things happen.

[*Danny Kinahan*]

If we read through the overlong false start document, we can see many examples of exactly that. It is all buried in the language of stall and inaction, and all stuck in the quagmire of indecision. The agreement has wording such as that it

“has the potential to nudge history forward”.

I do not want the word “potential”; I want a document to say that it “will” nudge history forward. The document sets up a strategic taskforce body to report and bring forward recommendations for a strategy. We need not strategies, but actions. It sets up a trilateral ministerial meeting that will set out goals. That is an improvement of the wording, but we need more on how we can achieve goals and how we can get actions.

On community engagement and prevention, the document talks of three programmes on vulnerable people, participation and influence, and women and reducing offending. Those programmes are yet to be produced; again, we need actions. I hope those programmes proceed with actions, not strategies. Furthermore, to deal with paramilitaries, we are setting up a panel to produce a strategy. That is another strategy, but at least this one has a written promise to put into action the panel’s recommendations. There is much more. Today’s action is an abdication of responsibility. Indeed, one of the Sinn Féin Members of the Legislative Assembly has said that the

“suggestion that responsibility for administering the benefit system should be returned to Westminster would be a betrayal of the most vulnerable in society.”

This deal is a worse deal than the one supposedly agreed in the Stormont House agreement—or Stormont Castle deals—of 11 months ago. Sinn Féin Members, who reneged on that deal, must feel pretty silly: they held up the whole agreement and the budgets of every single Department, to the point where nearly every person in Northern Ireland felt the pain—all, we believe, so they can be seen to oppose austerity in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

We now have this Bill handing power over to Westminster so that parties can blame the Brits, blame the English for the cuts and blame all of you in Westminster for good housekeeping. That is the same good housekeeping that the Stormont Finance Minister argued for and accepted only three years ago. That seems to be in the past: DUP Members are now happy to hand the power over so they too can blame Westminster. I wonder why—there must be an election coming. They are as bad as Sinn Féin at times, ducking their responsibilities and playing politics with our fantastic little country.

This deal is worse. DUP Members are happy to accept £345 million in full mitigation, minus the tax credits, rather than the £564 million in the original Stormont House discussions. They are happy to accept £500 million for shared education, but it is now aimed not just at shared education, but at shared housing. They are happy to tie themselves to the unknown welfare cuts through Westminster that may arise this Wednesday or in next year’s Budget. It seems that no one thought of that. They are happy to lose the return of welfare fines that we have already paid due to their inaction: some £100 million in 2013 to 2015, and I believe a further £29 million of wasted welfare fines from this year—money we could have better spent in so many other areas.

Sammy Wilson: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that one reason why we paid money back was that his party, when it was having its Jeremy Corbyn moment, was prepared to oppose the welfare changes and was therefore responsible for some of those payments? He cannot run away from that and blame it on somebody else; his own party took that stance.

Danny Kinahan: We had very good reasons for taking that stance at the time. We can certainly complain because we are where we are today.

We really need help on welfare in Northern Ireland. It pains me to say so, because I do not want to be part of a begging bowl Government. I want to see Northern Ireland thrive. We have the high-tech skills, the best schools and the entrepreneurs, but we also have the unemployed, the disadvantaged and mental health problems that the years of troubles have left us with. As other hon. Members have said, we do not have the jobs and skills base for those at whom the welfare reforms are aimed. We need reskilling and the right manual jobs for this new welfare system to work.

The roll-out of universal credit in Northern Ireland has experienced major delays and other problems while dealing only with the easy cases. On the disability living allowance and personal independence payment, Northern Ireland has a higher proportion of DLA claims for poor mental health than in Great Britain: in 2010, mental health issues were the disabling condition for 23% of all DLA claims in Northern Ireland, whereas the equivalent figure was 12% in Great Britain. When it comes to tax credits, the changes will hurt far too many, and even with the Chancellor’s minimum wage plans, the childcare help and housing plans, 121,000 people will still be left short by just under £1,000 a year, which will affect our economy, our health service and, of course, our mental health numbers. We need to mitigate the tax credit cuts. With Westminster as yet not changing its plans, Stormont will have to pick up the effects of these cuts. That is one reason why this deal is not as good as it could be. As I have said, it is worse than the original Stormont House agreement.

The Bill really shocks me in that it is only agreed by the two main parties. It is almost as though the Government wanted a deal at any cost, but many have felt that we needed a whole new deal—not a Stormont House agreement, but a complete reworking of all post-Belfast agreement deals. We could have done not with a fresh or even a false start, but with a new start to tie up all the loose ends, such as the legacy issues; better government with a proper opposition; proper action not just on speaking rights and finance, but on a change in the committee structure; and a reworking of the petition of concern, but not into the damp squib of what looks like an effectual code.

So much more could have been included in the deal. I wish we had seen it as a way of drawing a line in the sand. I believe today is a sad day for Northern Ireland. We have shown how big a failure our Stormont is in its present hands and how it cannot agree on anything. I want to see Northern Ireland really thrive. It has the skills, and if we could have more action and more decisions, it can get there. I am grateful for what we have got today, but it could have been so much better.

7.17 pm

Mr Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): I do not know where to begin in following the hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan). I must say that to

him with the greatest sincerity. I suppose I have the advantage of being in politics a little longer than him. I have a long memory, and when people start to rewrite history, as he has this evening, it beggars belief. I was a member of the party to which he now belongs, and I witnessed that party's failure of leadership at critical times in Northern Ireland. Many of the problems we have today are the result of that failure of leadership, such as on the Belfast agreement.

The hon. Gentleman talked about post-1998 agreements, but the core issue and problem with Stormont is what the Ulster Unionist party created in 1998. That is the difficulty we have. Would that we could change it and get the reforms that we desperately want. The DUP has been out ahead consistently arguing for reform at Stormont from 1998, and it continues to argue for that reform. I note that one of the reforms he did not mention is the reduction in the number of MLAs. My party supports that and would like it to happen now. There are lots of ways in which we can make Stormont more effective and tidy up the mess that others have created.

I believe that this is a better deal for Northern Ireland. I am absolutely convinced of that. It is a better deal for the people I represent for a number of reasons. It will create an opportunity to bring prosperity to Northern Ireland. We need that. I am proud of a Northern Ireland that stands on its own two feet, not a Northern Ireland that is on its knees. That is the kind of Northern Ireland that I want for the people I represent in Lagan Valley—a constituency that was once the heart of the Irish linen industry, which created employment, generated prosperity and gave people hope. That is where we want to get to. I want people to have employment and the dignity of work. The agreement provides part of the framework that will help us to achieve that. On that, we are most certainly with the Government.

I believe that welfare reform, which is the purpose of our debate this evening, is needed. Even the SDLP supports the principle of welfare reform. We have supported the Government on some aspects of welfare reform and opposed them on other elements, because we recognise that there are different circumstances in Northern Ireland arising out of more than 30 years of conflict, which have left us running behind the rest of the United Kingdom. We have a higher level of post-traumatic and conflict-related illness, which means that we have more claimants than other parts of the United Kingdom. Our economy has also been affected. The slowness of the recovery is due, in part, to the many years of under-investment. A lot of the money that we needed for investment went into security in Northern Ireland. We are beginning to move beyond that. We are looking to build a Northern Ireland that is about prosperity.

I say with the greatest of sincerity to the hon. Member for South Antrim, if we keep talking Northern Ireland down and talking in negative terms, how on earth do we ever hope to attract investment to South Antrim and other parts of Northern Ireland? How on earth will we send out a positive message in a very competitive world, where many countries are looking for investment, if we go around with long faces and talk down the little country that we belong to? That is negativity. It is not the true spirit of the once-proud Ulster Unionist party.

When I hear the hon. Gentleman saying that his party does not agree that this Parliament of the United Kingdom should legislate for Northern Ireland, I have

to pinch myself. Is that the party of Jim Molyneux? Is it the party of Enoch Powell? Is it the party that argued from these Benches over the years for a Northern Ireland that was proudly part of the United Kingdom and of this Parliament? The Ulster Unionist party is now reduced to decrying the idea that this Parliament should legislate for our part of the United Kingdom. It is incredible that a Unionist would argue that this Parliament has no right to legislate for Northern Ireland. It is a Sinn Féin argument that I did not think I would hear a Unionist utter. This Parliament has the right to do it and should do it. That is why we support the legislation that is before the House this evening. The Assembly had the opportunity to debate it and a number of parties oppose it.

Interestingly—I am drawing towards a close, Mr Deputy Speaker—the hon. Member for South Antrim talked about tax credits and the need to protect the vulnerable. When it came to the vote on tax credits, the Democratic Unionist party went into the No Lobby and the hon. Gentleman abstained. In the other place, when there was the opportunity to do something about tax credits, the Ulster Unionist party was nowhere to be seen. Its peers disappeared. When I hear the cant that comes from some of these Benches about the need to protect the vulnerable in our society and the need to protect working families in South Antrim, I wonder where the hon. Gentleman was when some of us took the stand that needed to be taken for those vulnerable people in South Antrim.

My party fully supports what is happening here this evening because we want to move on; we need to move on. We have been bogged down for far too long. We want prosperity for Northern Ireland—let's get on with it.

7.24 pm

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): I welcome the opportunity to participate in this debate, but I regret that the Northern Ireland (Welfare Reform) Bill is not being discussed in the place where it should have been discussed: the Northern Ireland Assembly. All of us should have the higher ambition of ensuring the fulfilment of a meaningful devolution process. As one of the parties that negotiated the Good Friday agreement along with both Governments, supported by the majority of people on the island of Ireland through the two referendums that established the political institutions, we believe that this debate on welfare reform should be taking place in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

As a party, we believe in the principle of welfare reform, but we recognise that people do not choose to be on benefits. It is not a lifestyle choice, as was pointed out during the debate on the Welfare Reform and Work Bill back in July.

For a party that has always supported devolution, it is not just a matter of regret but the cause of a deep sense of anger that the power to deal with this welfare legislation has been passed back to this Chamber from the Northern Ireland Assembly through a legislative consent motion, simply to save the blushes and electoral fortunes of Sinn Féin, with the acceptance and acquiescence of the DUP.

The right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr Donaldson) referred to tax credits. I recall us all going through the No Lobby, but it is interesting that this enabling legislation will facilitate in-work tax credit

[*Ms Margaret Ritchie*]

reductions. The DUP will support that, which is something of an anomaly. That is a difficult situation that it will have to explain to the electorate.

Mr Jeffrey M. Donaldson: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Ritchie: I am happy to give way to the right hon. Gentleman.

Mr Donaldson: I thank the hon. Lady for giving me the opportunity to make it absolutely clear that 105,000 families in Northern Ireland will, as a result of this agreement, be protected in respect of tax credits. That is what the DUP has delivered.

Ms Ritchie: It is interesting to note that, according to research carried out by the Library, 112,500 people in Northern Ireland are in receipt of tax credits and the annual £60 million of tax credit top-ups for the next four years will meet only 40% of what Northern Ireland will lose.

Sammy Wilson: I do not mean to cut the hon. Lady off during a flourish of rhetoric, but does she accept that the welfare reform legislation does not include changes to tax credits? Those have been made through other legislation that is totally separate. It is wrong to set up a straw man by indicating that there is a connection between this legislation and tax credits.

Ms Ritchie: My understanding is that the British Government, whose representatives are here today, including the Secretary of State, are claiming that that is the situation.

The people of Northern Ireland fought long and hard with political parties and both Governments to secure the democratic political structures. The SDLP wants to see the bedding down of those institutions through political stability; economic prosperity; greater devolution in respect of fiscal flexibilities, broadcasting and telecommunications; and the deepening of the north-south and British-Irish structures that were facilitated by the Good Friday agreement and the Northern Ireland Act 1998. We do not want to see power removed from the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Executive to be given to the Secretary of State and this Chamber. That was not the purpose of the Act that we voted for in 1998, when power was given to the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Executive.

Lady Hermon: Will the hon. Lady just reflect on the past few months? If she and her colleagues have ever listened to the Stephen Nolan show on Radio Ulster, they will have realised that the prolonged arguments over welfare reform have, most regrettably, managed to bring the Assembly into disrepute. As a committed devolutionist—I know the hon. Lady shares my views—does she agree that unless we settle the argument over welfare reform, the majority of people in Northern Ireland might prefer direct rule? I am sure she would not want that, and it is not something that I wish for, but the issue has to be settled and the Bill will do that.

Ms Ritchie: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. As a committed devolutionist I want to see devolution in Northern Ireland, and I want it to grow and deepen. That is why I do not like the fact that the Bill is being discussed in this Chamber. As for what happens on the Stephen Nolan show, I would say that the people of Northern Ireland are sick, sore and tired of in-and-out Ministers who lasted for 10 minutes, and who did not bring a certain level of judgment and decision making to urgent issues such as waiting lists and other things that impacted on the daily lives of our constituents. Let us hope that from this day forward we can all move on and have the ability and capacity to deliver for all the people.

I welcome the top-ups and the mitigation measures, and I hope that they will still exist after the Chancellor's comprehensive spending review. As the Secretary of State will recall, during questions on her statement I asked her about that specific issue, and she confirmed that that would be the case. I hope that those measures will not be cancelled as a result of cuts that might flow from the comprehensive spending review, or as a result of announcements that the Chancellor might make about mitigation for tax credits that will allegedly come from decisions that were made in the House of Lords on the Welfare Reform and Work Bill some weeks ago.

Mr Gregory Campbell: The hon. Lady is waxing eloquent about top-ups, and the DUP agrees with her. Does she find it difficult to reconcile her effusive support for the top-ups in the Bill with her party's attempt to derail it?

Ms Ritchie: The SDLP never tried to derail the top-ups or mitigations. I well recall meetings that we had in 2012. In February 2012 a delegation, including my hon. Friends the Members for Foyle (Mark Durkan) and for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell), met the then Minister in the other place—Lord Freud—to deal with these issues. We suggested that one top-up could deal with the eradication of the bedroom tax, and it took many months for the then Minister for Social Development to come to that realisation. We had a further meeting in November 2012 with Lord Freud at the DWP, and at that stage we again understood from him that a top-up for the bedroom tax would be one mitigation measure. We had no problem with that because we support those mitigation measures and we want to ensure that they are retained and bring a level of comfort and solace.

Let me emphasise again that nobody chooses to be on benefits. It is not a lifestyle choice; it is due to force of circumstance. For example, people do not necessarily have access to employment in the area where they reside, or the necessary travel arrangements to get to particular places of employment; or sadly, as in the constituency of the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley), many people have lost their jobs, and do not find suitable employment that corresponds with their academic, engineering or vocational qualifications. That is a matter of deep regret.

The Government, working with the Northern Ireland Executive and the Assembly, must ensure that resources are invested and projects equitably distributed to afford balanced regional development throughout Northern Ireland in a way that allows job opportunities in the west and the south-east to compare with those in the city of Belfast.

This Bill should not be being discussed in Westminster, and its Second Reading and further stages should have been dealt with by the Northern Ireland Assembly. In that respect, the power of devolution has been removed. We have tabled amendments to curtail the Secretary of State's power over our welfare system—power that has been handed over by Sinn Féin and the DUP. We have heard much about Sinn Féin and Tory cuts, and they are happy to allow the Tory Government to implement those cuts along with the support of the DUP. Devolution was hard fought for and hard won in Northern Ireland, and the SDLP unquestionably refuse to give it up.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): Rather than reflecting on where we are this evening, would the hon. Lady not do better to spend her time focusing on the SDLP's failure to promote any consensus on welfare over the past three years in Northern Ireland? If she had focuses on those actions, we would not be here tonight.

Ms Ritchie: The hon. Gentleman will not be surprised when I say that I disagree with his viewpoint. The SDLP tabled amendments to the Bill in the Assembly, and those revenue-neutral amendments were refused and declined by the DUP and Sinn Féin.

Mark Durkan: Does my hon. Friend recall that in 2011 in the Northern Ireland Assembly, when the Welfare Reform Bill was going through this House, the SDLP proposed in the Assembly that a special committee should be set up to undertake parallel scrutiny and to anticipate the implications of that Bill, so that we could have consensus and address Whitehall? That was voted down by the DUP.

Ms Ritchie: I thank my hon. Friend. I well recall that because I was a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly at the time, and I was party to that proposal. I clearly remember that we were trying to achieve consensus on the best way to ensure that the best mitigation measures were put in place. That proposal was refused by the DUP and Sinn Féin—the cosy partners in government who deliver only for themselves and not for the wider public.

I speak as a former Minister for Social Development who had direct responsibility for benefits, and I well remember introducing a household fuel payment Bill, which was separate from measures that existed in Britain. That Bill sought to address fuel poverty and ensure that people who felt it would be difficult to pay for both eating and heating—we agreed with them—did not have to make that choice. The SDLP has always stood by the people and by the principle of consensus, and it is a matter of deep regret that others did not do so. I regret that the Bill is not being dealt with in the Northern Ireland Assembly, and that the power of devolution on these matters has been removed from our colleagues in the Assembly on a cross-community basis.

Mr Wallace: We are not taking away the power; we are taking the power in parallel. The power remains in the Northern Ireland Assembly, and should Ministers there wish to do so at any time in the future, they could bring forward welfare legislation. We are not removing the power, we are sharing it in a parallel process.

Ms Ritchie: I thank the Minister for that helpful intervention, but it would be much more helpful if he and his colleagues supported our amendments, which would help to clarify matters and to further delineate such measures. Before he winds up the debate, will the Minister reflect on our amendments as we move to the Committee stage?

Sammy Wilson: The hon. Lady does at least engage in debate on these issues. We might appreciate her anger against the welfare reform proposals were it not for the dual standards that her party has adopted. She is railing against some of the measures in the Bill. For example, her party opposes the bedroom tax, as she calls it, but it was her own Minister who introduced the removal of the spare room subsidy for people who live in the private sector. On the one hand, she condemns the Government for picking on people in the public sector, but her own Minister introduced it for people in the private sector, where rents are even higher.

Ms Ritchie: I well recall that measure being debated and it related solely to the private rented sector.

I regret that the Bill has not been taken in the Assembly, where it rightfully belongs. I hope the Minister will reflect on our amendments in his winding-up speech and provide greater clarity. I hope Northern Ireland can be a place of work, endeavour and prosperity. That is our job, the job of Parliament, the job of Cabinet and the job of the Northern Ireland Executive.

7.42 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate and I thank you for calling me, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I am reminded of the passage in Scripture from Ecclesiastes chapter 3, verses 1 to 8:

“To everything there is a season”.

I believe the season for change is now and that the Bill can deliver that change for people.

I would like to start by paying tribute to the outgoing First Minister and DUP leader, the right hon. Peter Robinson. The DUP has been at the forefront of securing a new future for a new Northern Ireland, striking the right balance between bringing those of us more sensitive to the past along with those who found it easier to move on. It is thanks to people such as Peter Robinson who made difficult decisions and were willing to sacrifice themselves personally and politically, and even in terms of their health, that we have had the longest ever sustained period of power-sharing. We provided free travel on public transport to everyone over 60 and secured the single largest ever investment in Northern Ireland by supporting Bombardier's £520 million investment in the new C-Series aircraft. In difficult economic times, when heating prices were escalating, we made payments totalling £22.5 million to 150,000 households, which each received a £150 fuel payment. Devolution, with the DUP and Peter Robinson at the helm, has delivered for Northern Ireland.

I put on record my thanks to the Secretary of State and the Minister for their patience, good temperament, energy and civility, and for staying the course. I say well done to the Secretary of State and to the Minister.

[*Jim Shannon*]

It is fair to say that the welfare reforms passed in this place in 2012 have plagued the Northern Ireland Executive and the Assembly over the past three years. Since the restoration of devolution in 2007, no other proposed legislation has had such a troubled passage through the Assembly, including other welfare reform. Indeed, the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) guided a welfare reform Bill through the Assembly in 2010, despite the fact that it included some controversial changes to the employment and support allowance and the introduction of the bedroom tax for the private rented sector.

The failure to pass equivalent legislation to the Welfare Reform Act 2012 in the Northern Ireland Assembly has undermined political stability in Northern Ireland and threatened the very existence of devolution, largely because of the impact it was having on public finances and the sustainability of the Executive's budget. Consistent with the statement of funding policy, Her Majesty's Treasury began fining or penalising the Executive two years ago for the savings forgone as a result of the failure to pass welfare reform at Stormont. In 2013-14, £13 million was lost. Last year, the Executive's coffers lost £87 million. This year, it has been approximately £9.5 million each and every month. In such tough financial times, that was money the Executive could ill afford to squander.

I am sorry to say that Sinn Féin and the SDLP failed to live up to their responsibilities. They even failed to live up to the commitments they made in the Stormont House agreement just last year. They were content to see the Executive lose more than £150 million, with one SDLP MLA even telling the Assembly that it was a price worth paying. Have we ever heard anything as nonsensical as that? A price was certainly paid, but it was paid by every person in Northern Ireland. It was paid by vulnerable people in Northern Ireland who were deprived of services for which the Executive could not afford to pay. The £9.5 million a month that the Executive have been losing could have paid for 1,800 knee operations and 2,100 hip operations. The self-styled defenders of the vulnerable—we have them here, sitting in front of us—were, by their inaction and irresponsibility, hurting and harming the vulnerable.

This past week, a way forward has been agreed. The fresh start agreement, forged after 10 weeks of talks, reaches a resolution on welfare reform. The agreement will see welfare reform enacted in Northern Ireland—what we are debating today—but recognises Northern Ireland's particular circumstances via various flexibilities. The agreement explicitly rules out the introduction of the social sector size criteria, or bedroom tax as it has become commonly known. That is an appropriate reflection of the fact that Northern Ireland's social housing profile has been skewed towards three-bedroom family homes and that in certain places, especially Belfast, moving from a three-bedroom home in one part of the city to a two-bedroom house elsewhere may involve crossing a peace wall. It is not, therefore, a simple or straightforward option for many.

The agreement also sets aside £345 million, an average of approximately £86 million a year over the next four years, to mitigate the worst impacts on Northern Ireland of welfare reform, including the bedroom tax. Professor Eileen Evason will head up a small working group to

bring forward proposals within this financial envelope to maximise the use of those resources. The £345 million, and the very welcome £240 million set aside to compensate those hardworking people also adversely affected by the Government's proposed cuts to tax credits, comes at a cost to the Executive, but we believe it will protect the most vulnerable. This party is out to ensure that we protect the vulnerable.

Some, in essence those who have resisted welfare reform from the start, have turned their attention to the fact that the Bill is passing into law through Parliament, as opposed to the Assembly. We have heard that from previous speakers. The Assembly, of course, passed a legislative consent motion last week. The argument that this legislation is not being scrutinised properly is false. In the past few weeks, it has been debated and debated and debated, in the Assembly, in its Committees and on the airwaves like no other issue in the history of devolution. The truth is that welfare reform needs to pass in Northern Ireland or else the existence of devolution will be in serious and immediate jeopardy. That is the fact of it. Without the enactment of the deal reached last week, the Executive's budget will not work. More public money that could be spent on health and education will head back to the Treasury. Financial flexibility secured at Stormont House will collapse and the long-term sustainability of the Executive's finances will be fatally undermined. On the whole, the agreement looks like a good deal for stability, for Unionism, for all parties and for Northern Ireland. We have a chance to go forth and build on all that has been achieved to date and to continue to build a new Northern Ireland for all our citizens.

I hope that the fresh start can be just that, but for now it is important that we make the transition from agreement to implementation as smoothly as possible. We have been waiting months for the agreement to cement Northern Ireland Assembly's future, and today we are playing our part in that process, ensuring that—to use a recently used phrase—we are not on the wrong side of history. As our First Minister said in his last speech to the party conference as leader on Saturday, Ulster is no longer at the crossroads, but on the motorway to a better future. Building on the achievements of the Northern Ireland Executive, led by the DUP and Peter Robinson, we have secured the exemptions, subsidies and incentives we need to keep Northern Ireland moving forward: the promise of more than £500 million; formal structures that deal with the scourge of paramilitarism and confine that episode to the history books—where it belongs; more help for health, including financial commitments, including for those with mental health issues and other vulnerable people in our society; and, of course, the devolution of corporation tax, which, as many of us know, is a game changer.

David Simpson: My hon. Friend will have heard the speech from the hon. Member for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell), who said that corporation tax was not a silver bullet. Is it not ironic that during the negotiations on the financial bail-out, one of the things the Republic of Ireland held on to was the corporation tax level?

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We know corporation tax is not a silver bullet, but it would make a big, big difference to Northern Ireland. We see it as the catalyst for more jobs, a better economy, improved opportunities and the wage packets that people need in

Northern Ireland, so we would like that issue resolved as well. As he said, Northern Ireland has for too long been at a competitive disadvantage from the Republic of Ireland's much lower rate of corporation tax.

Mr Gregory Campbell: The day after the agreement was signed, the headline in one of the main newspapers in the Irish Republic was that the battle was on for jobs. They obviously appreciate the nature of the competition and the advantage that Northern Ireland will now have over them.

Jim Shannon: The battle is truly on, and the battle for us, as MPs, is to ensure that the jobs come to Northern Ireland, and that is what we will do. With Northern Ireland enjoying relative peace and a highly educated and motivated workforce, we now have the power to revolutionise its economy.

Dr Alasdair McDonnell: The hon. Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) misconstrued my argument. I said that corporation tax was a useful tool but not a silver bullet and that we could not continue to do without the necessary skills, apprenticeships and general training. Major companies, including Almac in his constituency, are having to move abroad. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that, along with corporation tax, we need the necessary third-level education and skills?

Jim Shannon: For the record, the money to upskill the workforce to do those jobs is provided in the agreement. When it comes to further education or upskilling in companies or factories, the agreement gives us the chance to do something. We have to realise the good things about the agreement. My right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Mr Donaldson) talked about people in the House and outside too often talking down Northern Ireland. That talk frustrates and scunnens me. We need to consider the positives.

The Northern Ireland economy needs to bring in the quality and world-class jobs that too often our young people seek on other shores. We need to bring them home and give them the chance to do those jobs in Northern Ireland. The agreement does just what it says on the tin: it gives us a fresh start. Let us finish the job and keep Northern Ireland on that motorway to a better future. Moving forward, we do not want Northern Ireland to be a special case under any circumstances. Building the new and leaving behind the old still remains the aim, but it is hard earned, and provisions such as corporation tax and others in the deal will facilitate the transformation of Northern Irish society.

In conclusion, no Northern Ireland Member is enamoured with the proposed welfare reform legislation, which is why we opposed most of it, but we have to be realistic. Social security in Northern Ireland has always operated on the basis of parity with Great Britain. Refusal to enact reforms will come at a cost. Northern Ireland can and will pay a price to protect the most vulnerable, and the fresh start agreement does just that. It is time for sense to prevail. Northern Ireland will have the most generous welfare system in the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. We will also put our public finances back on a sound footing, not least by unlocking a sizeable financial boost from Her Majesty's Government. Most importantly, however, we will have saved devolution.

7.56 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Is it just me or if a constituency starts with "South" do others get depressed after that Member has spoken? It appears to be a trend. After the hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan) spoke, I was depressed. In fact, his analysis of Northern Ireland's economic situation as a result of the crisis gave me a headache that not even aspirin could cure. The hon. Member for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell), too, depressed me when he told me that 5,000 jobs were going in my constituency. Thank goodness it was an exaggeration! It is depressing that 1,800 jobs are going and that another 500 will be affected, but they have not gone yet and efforts are being made to help people into better employment. Moreover, they will receive such generous redundancy payments—among the most generous ever—that they probably would not be entitled to the welfare reform package anyway, and we are hoping to move them into other manufacturing jobs. So the comparison of chalk with cheese comes to mind. Then, of course, we had the oration from the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie). At one point, I saw the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State flee, and I thought she was going to end up speaking to Jonathan Wood and Timothy Timber, while people ran to get some air and to revive because they were getting so depressed.

The picture is not that bad. That message has to go out loud and clear. It is not that bleak or awful.

Mr Jeffrey M. Donaldson: They should cheer up.

Ian Paisley: Yes, they should cheer up. We should all cheer up.

I welcome the fact that Westminster is legislating on this matter. This is the sovereign Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and if the Assembly is incapable or dysfunctional, this place should threaten to take those powers from it—and it should take them. Thankfully, some people, having made threats, saw the light. In that regard, we have seen an important change in the political regime. For years, when Sinn Féin threatened, Sinn Féin got. Mr Blair was quick to bend over for their every wish because they made threats. So I must salute the Government, because when Sinn Féin threatened, Tough Theresa stood up to them. When they threatened, Tough Theresa said no, and I think we should salute her for it. That was no roll-over Unionism from the Government, and we welcome it. We welcome the change of regime and the fact that Sinn Féin cannot go on making threats or suggesting ominously that things could come to a sore and sad end if they do not get their way.

I welcome the fact that that is no longer the case under this regime, but let us look at some of the U-turns that have been performed in the last year and a half, because they are amazing. In an Assembly debate, Martin McGuinness, the Deputy First Minister, made the most derogatory comments about the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mike Penning), the Northern Ireland Minister at the time. He said that the Minister had entered into this debate

"in a very clumsy way"

and that he had

"ventured into areas of responsibility for the Assembly and the Executive—areas that he had no right to venture into."

[*Ian Paisley*]

Last week, Mr McGuinness voted for this Minister to have a direct say in those affairs. He said one day, “You can’t go into that area,” and the next day he voted for this Minister to take these powers and make the decisions for him.

Mr McGuinness is well and truly on record as threatening Tough Theresa, going so far as to say on 5 September this year that

“Any move by the British government to impose...welfare” reform on Northern Ireland “would be a huge mistake”

that would seriously undermine devolution. Of course, it was Mr McGuinness—Mad Martin—who made the huge mistake of making a threat and then not being able to follow up on it.

Ms Ritchie: In the hon. Gentleman’s elaboration of his debating point, perhaps he could provide some elucidation of why Sinn Féin somersaulted. What happened in that meeting with the Prime Minister on 6 November to precipitate that somersault?

Ian Paisley: Here is what happened: an agreement was made—an agreement that the public can cast their eye on and then support or reject. Of course, the Assembly has already indicated that it will support it. We have had the mild approach by the hon. Lady, but she should be standing up to Sinn Féin tonight, poking them in the eye and telling them that they are the ones who have rolled over. She should be joining us and supporting us in this campaign. I welcome the fact that others have stood up to them.

Mr McGuinness also made very critical comments of what he called “millionaires’ row” in this House. He said that it was because of those millionaires that these terrible welfare reforms were being introduced. As it turns out, he has now asked the same millionaires to implement them because he could not do it.

I can understand why the hon. Member for Jarrow (Mr Hepburn) and other Members in this House now look jealously at Northern Ireland. The welfare reform system, with its flexibilities, that we now have in place—and could have had over a year ago if we had been listened to then—is, to quote the Secretary of State, the most generous and best welfare reform system in the world. That is what she said last week. I welcome that fact, and I can understand why other Members are casting envious looks at Ulster at this time. I hope the flexibilities that have been introduced will demonstrate that we were correct to make the effort—both through our Department for Social Development at home and on these Benches—to secure them.

Those flexibilities should be reflected on briefly in this House. We have ensured, for example, that individuals on benefits in Northern Ireland will not be financially worse off as a result of the changes. We are ensuring that the moneys that Northern Ireland will spend will mean that a family on benefits will not be made worse off by the changes that are made—that they will be able to continue to budget on the sort of income that they have now. The frequency of universal payments that we will allow for will enable people to have payments made flexibly over a month, instead of just receiving a one-monthly payment. That is a very important change to help low-income families to manage their incomes wisely.

The split in universal credit will be flexible in Northern Ireland, so that people will not be penalised in the ways that, it is alleged in this House, mainland people in receipt of those payments could be penalised. We have also ensured the direct payment of universal credit to landlords, so that people can avoid getting into rent arrears. That is an important point to make. We have protection for those receiving housing benefit—my hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) touched on those changes—and we have ensured that the sanctions for those on benefits will be changed. We will ensure that there will not be waste—that the right benefit goes to the right person at the right time—but that, for example, the strict sanctions with civil penalty provisions in the Welfare Reform and Work Bill will not apply and that the sanction period will be reduced to two years. For those who may face sanctions, it is an important to make the point that a more forgiving system will be put in place.

Where both people in a home are on benefits and that home breaks up, we have also ensured that one claimant cannot spite the other claimant by stopping their benefit. There will also be good flexibility for joint claims in homes. There will be changes to the medical reports system in Northern Ireland—changes that I know are jealously looked at by Opposition Members from constituencies on mainland Britain. We have lone parent flexibility, which is not available to the same extent here, and there will be an extension of discretionary housing payments in the social sector.

Those measures and many, many more will help low-paid families in Northern Ireland and people on benefits. That is something that we strive to do because it is those families who have put us on these Benches and given us the privilege to speak for them. We are the voice for those voiceless people. We were prepared to speak up for them and make this welfare change, which was coming down the tracks, more palatable than it would have been otherwise. I am very proud of the stand that my party has taken to ensure that we made those changes and secured those flexibilities.

I welcome the point that the Minister of State made to us about how the Executive will be able to reclaim some of the financial penalties that Northern Ireland has already paid—and could be paying—and which the Treasury has already taken from the block grant. I look forward to the Minister calculating what they are and writing a nice big juicy cheque to give the money back to the Northern Ireland Executive at some time in the future.

As part of the fresh start agreement, a panel will be formed under one of the best known experts, Professor Eileen Evason, who will look at how the legislation is affecting people and will advise us on it. I do not think anyone who knows Eileen Evason or has followed her career could ever say that she would be a patsy for anyone or will pull her punches. She will tell it as it is, and I believe people will listen, because her expertise far surpasses that of many people who deal with these issues in Northern Ireland. I think her advice and guidance will be most welcome.

The hon. Member for South Down made some calculations. It is important to put on record the facts about the amount of money that will be available. The Stormont Castle agreement made available an average of £90 million a year to mitigate the most harmful

aspects of the Welfare Reform and Work Bill. The fresh start initiative will make available £345 million over a four-year period. That is a significant difference, and that money is for the exact same purpose. In addition, the fresh start agreement is making available a further £240 million over those four years to deal with the proposed reductions in tax credits. Obviously we await the Chancellor's statement on Wednesday to see how that will be fully calculated.

This is good for Northern Ireland. It could have been an awful lot worse. We could all easily get depressed, with some Members saying, "We just don't want anything to do with it," but we have to be engaged in the art of what is possible and practicable, and that is what we are trying to do as constituency Members in this House.

8.9 pm

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): My constituency does not have the term "south" in it, although I may have to begin by slightly depressing the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) by responding to one of the final points he made. He made some big claims about the "Fresh Start" deal, talking about how the original Stormont House deal provided for mitigation measures of £90 million a year on average, whereas the "Fresh Start" deal involves £345 million over four years. I think most people would know that four £90 millions comes to £360 million, which is slightly more than £345 million, if we are talking about the average of four years.

Many points have been raised in the debate—points that go far and wide away from the immediate subject of the Northern Ireland (Welfare Reform) Bill. I will have to follow others in covering some of that ground, relating to the provenance of the whole debate and the Bill.

The SDLP, has been castigated and people have said, "Oh, you never tried to build consensus on welfare reform." As I tried to explain in an intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie), as far back as when the original legislation was going through this House, we tried with other Assembly parties to build a consensus in the then Assembly, to anticipate what the implications would be and not to wait for the legislation to be passed through this House, with the Assembly and a Minister being faced with the need to take forward karaoke legislation that would not be to our taste or liking. We tried in late 2011 to get a special committee set up in the Assembly precisely to do that on an all-party basis and to feed into the legislation as it was coming through this House.

Among the issues that we said we wanted to address at that time was the bedroom tax. When the legislation was going through, the SDLP was the only party from Northern Ireland that spoke about the implications of the bedroom tax for Northern Ireland and said that measures were needed to deal with it. There we were; we were adopting that approach in this Chamber, and we were trying to work with other parties in the Assembly properly to address those issues. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Down has said, as well addressing the issues in this Chamber, we were meeting the Minister for Welfare Reform, Lord Freud. Early in 2012, he acknowledged that many of the claims made by the hon. Member for North Antrim about allowing for flexibility and the split in universal payments were promised to us. He said that if the Assembly had a

unified approach to trying to get those measures, they would be made available. We were promised that the Department for Work and Pensions would have no problem if the legislation for Northern Ireland included the direct payment of housing benefit to landlords. We were also promised that the DWP would make sure that the computer system it was bringing forward would allow for that.

Much of what is being called part of the conclusion to this good "Fresh Start" approach was always available—some of us had always worked on that basis and had always advocated it inside the Assembly, yet we were being told by DUP Members, including the hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) who is unfortunately not in his place, that we were scaremongering when we expressed our concerns about the implications of this Bill.

The hon. Member for North Antrim, among others, has referred to the mitigation of sanctions, but again we fought and argued over that issue in the Assembly and in various all-party talks, trying to get agreement with all parties. We had useful discussions, not least with the DUP Minister for Social Development, about that and other matters. I do not think anyone could say that at Stormont House 2014, the SDLP was found wanting in trying to make sure that we could reach some agreement and resolution on welfare reform.

As I have said, we subsequently ended up being castigated. Sinn Féin accused the SDLP of having sold out or caved in on welfare reform before anybody else, but the point we made in Stormont House was that we wanted to ensure that there would be mitigation and that any mitigation measures would be sustainable and within the devolved budget. That is why we indicated that we could go for a mitigation package. The First Minister told us on a Wednesday evening that officials were telling him that this "option C package", as it was called—it was a combination of other options—would cost £93 million out of this year's devolved budget.

The SDLP said that we wanted to see improvement in estimates in some areas, but that we could go with £100 million out of this year's budget and the projections beyond that. The UUP wanted to see estimates improved and the Alliance had some concerns about the estimate being more than was allowed for in the budget, but said that it would go with the £93 million if it bought about a deal. Sinn Féin on that Wednesday evening said that it would not go with that. It said that it had to be "option C plus", but it could not tell us what was in that option. It thought it would cost a lot more money. Sinn Féin representatives said that somebody somewhere in the building would be able to tell them, and they would be able to tell us.

By the Thursday evening, the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister came into the Executive room where the five parties were meeting, and the First Minister informed us that he and Martin had been having conversations with each other and with officials, that they now had an agreement and that it would cost £94 million out of the budget. Once again, the SDLP position was that we wanted to see the estimates and that we would allow up to £100 million. That is what helped to bring about the fact that people saw that there was a way of solving welfare reform problems. The Stormont House agreement said that proposals would be developed and would be brought to the Assembly,

[*Mark Durkan*]

but whenever the legislation came to the Assembly, it was exactly the same as the draft Bill that had existed before Stormont House agreement. That is why the SDLP tabled amendments in the Assembly. They were not Bill-shattering amendments in any way, but they nevertheless triggered a petition of concern from the DUP, which had the effect of a veto. In any case, the amendments were voted down by both Sinn Féin and the DUP.

Ms Ritchie: Does my hon. Friend agree that those amendments were cost neutral, which was clearly acknowledged by the Minister for Social Development?

Mark Durkan: Several of them were. Some would have had cost implications, but many were cost neutral. That was one of the arguments that the Minister made at the time. We checked whether the British Government were consulted by the Minister or anybody else and asked whether there would be a problem if the amendments were passed, but the British Government made it clear that they were not consulted and that they had not acted against our amendments in any way. They were not saying that our amendments would have threatened to derail the Stormont House agreement or were in any way in breach of it. It was entirely the decision of Sinn Féin and the DUP to veto our amendments by the petition of concern and by voting against them.

You will not want me to anticipate the Committee stage too much, Madam Deputy Speaker, but the fact is that the amendments we have tabled for the Committee stage capture some of those same amendments. I ask people to read those amendments in the light of what my hon. Friend the Member for South Down has said because they would not derail or damage the Bill.

On the wider politics of this matter I can perhaps reach some agreement with the hon. Member for North Antrim, because they involve a strange change of position on the part of Sinn Féin. All along, Sinn Féin said that it was going to oppose welfare reform completely. All along, it said that no claimant—now or in the future—would be a penny worse off as a result of any changes. SDLP Members said that we could not subscribe to that position. We said that could not pretend that we could guarantee by any tactics, in the Assembly or here, that we could protect every last penny of benefit for any existing claimant or any new claimants into the future. We were very clear, honest and honourable about that.

Sinn Féin election posters this year were on the theme of “Stop the Tory cuts”. Some of us said that Sinn Féin was in no position to stop Tory cuts unless it was in a position to stop a Tory Government, and, as a party that does not take up its seats, that was not going to happen. It was a nonsense, but that is what Sinn Féin said. We were told by Conor Murphy:

“The Tories have no mandate in the north for their cuts agenda. The local parties need to make it clear that Tory cuts to public services and the welfare state are unacceptable.”

Now, apparently, those Tory cuts to the welfare state are acceptable to Sinn Féin. Martin McGuinness told us:

“I am not prepared to preside over the austerity agenda that the British government are inflicting on our executive. My conscience would not allow me to do it.”

Well, he has got over his conscience now, and he is quite happy; perhaps he is pretending to himself that he is not

presiding over it by virtue of having handed the power to Westminster. I may now receive a voice-activated intervention from the Minister, who will tell us that the power has not been handed over and that Westminster will have a parallel, or concurrent, legislative power, which Stormont will also have. There will be a power switch on both walls, but only the power switch on the Westminster wall will be activated and used for the next 13 months during which, after the Bill is passed, a series of orders and regulations will be made.

We have been told about the sunset clause. Sinn Féin seems to be allowing some people to suggest, in social media, that it is a very clever thing, and that a big line is to be drawn in the sand at the end of 2016, because many of the more nefarious and controversial aspects of the current Welfare Reform and Work Bill are meant to kick in in 2017. The sunset clause, however, will apply only to the decision-making powers that are now being taken by the Secretary of State. It will not apply to the content or effect of any of the decisions that are made by him or her. All the changes that are made in direct rule legislation here, in Orders in Council and in other instruments, will still apply in 2017 and beyond.

We have heard many references to the Assembly’s legislative consent motion. We should bear in mind that it includes the words

“approves the welfare clauses of the Welfare Reform and Work Bill as initially introduced at Westminster”.

Some of us did not approve those clauses as they were initially introduced; we argued against them, and voted against them. I recall members of the DUP expressing concerns about some of those clauses, voting against them, and voting for amendments. Unusually, the legislative consent motion did not even make provision for amendments. Other such motions have not just allowed Westminster to pass a Bill, but allowed amendments to be tabled. For some reason, this motion precluded that.

Many of us are in difficulty because we are being asked, on Second Reading, to approve matters on which we have already voiced and recorded our disapproval. That applies not just to the SDLP, but to a number of other parties. We are being told to do that because it will be the great deal that will move everything forward. Members have touched on other aspects of the deal, but my concern relates directly to the Bill.

I am certainly not saying that we should set aside the mitigations and the other measures that have been so carefully agreed to. Indeed, I think that we should have done more work on those. I also think—I raised this at Stormont House in 2014—that we need to think, collectively, about whether there is the proper demarcation between Westminster and the Assembly in relation to welfare reform.

Perhaps we should look at some of what has been happening in Scotland. I am not suggesting that we should adopt an exact model of the Scotland Bill, but I think we should take account of some of the issues and ideas that have flowed from those debates. I think we should look to the longer term, and ensure that we do not fall into the trap of either allowing karaoke legislation to be pushed through the Assembly as a result of “budget bullying”, or creating the potential for political crises. There is a different delineation in the scope of the devolution of welfare in Scotland. I think that we may need to examine what is happening there, given the

emphasis that many Members here have placed on some of the most sensitive benefits in Northern Ireland, relating to disabilities and other long-term conditions including mental ill health.

It was part of the original Stormont House deal in 2014 that parties would be prepared to look at how wider issues of devolution—not just tax, but benefits—were being handled elsewhere, with the aim of securing a more sustainable adjustment for the future. If we want to avoid the spasmodic crises in which parties end up trying to find a brink on which to teeter every time there is disagreement about important issues such as these, we may need to do something else.

When I raised the need to ensure that we were in a better position in the future and suggested ways of dealing with the medium to longer-term issues, I did not receive much support from members of other parties. The First Minister merely said that my problem was seeing around too many corners too early, and that perhaps we should just let some things go and they would be all right when we got to them. The fact is, however, that we anticipated a great deal of difficulty with welfare reform, which is why we argued for a different approach in the Assembly all those years ago, as well as here. We have been proved right, to the extent that, if we had all taken a different course together, we might be in a better position.

The Bill gives the Secretary of State power not just to translate the rules in relation to benefits from the 2012 Act, but, as the Minister has indicated, to prepare an Order in Council to translate proposals in the Welfare Reform and Work Bill. The legislative consent motion refers to “the welfare clauses”. I note that the shadow Secretary of State did not receive an answer to his very fair question, which my party colleagues also asked in the Assembly last week: what exactly is meant by “the welfare clauses”? Some Members seem to believe that they do not include tax credits, but the Treasury now counts tax credits as welfare for many purposes, including the welfare cap. We have different notions of welfare, and the welfare measures in that Bill are not restricted to conventional social security benefits; they extend to tax credits as well. We have a right to more clarity, and I hope that the shadow Secretary of State will receive a clear answer to his question.

This has been a bit confusing. When my hon. Friend the Member for South Down pointed out that not all the tax credit losses would be covered by this package, we were told that tax credits were nothing to do with it because they did not constitute devolved welfare. At the same time, however, DUP Members have claimed that the mitigation on tax credits has been the significant part of the deal, and the main justification for accepting it. They cannot have it both ways. They cannot say that it must be counted for the purpose of one side of the argument, but not for the purpose of another side.

In response to the challenge presented by the fact that some are not prepared to work for consensus, the Secretary of State may well confirm that in the Stormont House talks we made it clear that we wanted all the parties to agree that the Institute for Fiscal Studies should be invited to provide us with a quick regional analysis of the implications of the Welfare Reform and Work Bill and the tax credit changes. That would also test the Secretary of State’s argument at the time that the Welfare Reform and Work Bill was a good deal for

Northern Ireland—she used exactly the same words she is using for this Bill for the Welfare Reform and Work Bill, before the Government were moved to say they would amend it or mitigate it in some way. On these measures, she said that we needed to take account of the changes in terms of the tax thresholds and the national living wage that would make good the loss. We were saying, “Let’s get the IFS to do this so we’re not just relying on figures from our own officials in the Department for Social Development or anywhere else.” Again, however—surprise, surprise—the SDLP put forward an idea for all the parties to go with, that was informed and would have been neutral and constructive, but it was not supported. That was not for lack of action by us to try to take a consensus approach and make sure all parties have a better-informed approach in that regard.

We were being told by the Secretary of State—Sinn Féin and the SDLP in particular were being told this—both publicly from the Dispatch Box and in the talks that there would not be a deal on the past if there was not a deal on welfare reform. It was said that welfare reform had to be settled and move forward or else there would be no progress on the past. But now we have a deal that gives us welfare reform moving forward in the way the Government want—entirely in the Government’s hands—and we do not have a deal on the past moving forward. People want to know how that came about; it is not only the victims who want to know that.

When we listen to Sinn Féin on this, it tells us, on the past, “No deal is better than a bad deal,” but then we ask them about welfare reform, and they tell us, “A bad deal is better than no deal.” It is a complete contradiction; the only consistency is Sinn Féin’s inconsistency and lack of principle. Of course Sinn Féin might well try to tell us, “Oh no, we’ve delivered on our promise,” because Gerry Adams’s big promise was, “No one will have a reduction to any benefit under the control of the Assembly or the Executive.” So how does Gerry keep his promise? He removes it from the control of the Assembly or Executive and hands it to direct rule.

We must remember that it is direct rule we are giving; it is going back to the old Order in Council position. Such measures cannot be amended—indeed, the sponsoring legislation for the system we have tonight cannot even be amended either, unfortunately, because of the way the allocation of time motion works. That is what we are stuck with; that is the choice Sinn Féin has made and it has yet to explain adequately why.

Sinn Féin does not have the protections it says it wants, therefore, and it now tries to pretend that we are in a completely new situation because of 8 July—because the Chancellor announced a Budget on 8 July that changed everything and threatened a lot more people. We all knew there was going to be a Budget on 8 July. In fairness, Sinn Féin, like ourselves, pointed out during the election, and even back last year at Stormont House, that whatever package we had, if the Tories got back into government other cuts could be sought. There was speculation: sums of £12 billion or £16 billion were mentioned. We also knew that, even if Labour returned to government, it was committed to applying the welfare cap on a UK-wide basis. So we knew there were going to be difficulties. Therefore, for Sinn Féin to pretend that a completely new situation that nobody could have predicted came about with the return of the Conservative Government and the Budget of 8 July is completely wrong.

[Mark Durkan]

Sinn Féin's argument back in July was that all parties should work together in facing the Government and we should join forces with Scotland and Wales as well. When some of us looked for that approach at the recent Stormont House talks, we found there were no real takers for it, not even Sinn Féin, which had advertised itself as the main sponsor and advocate of that way forward.

People will want to know why we have come to this position, therefore. They will want to know why Sinn Féin has used the so-called threat of collapse of the institutions to collapse its own position. We have known for some time that the DUP has been in something of a roll-over mode in relation to welfare reform legislation, because the DUP position has been that once the legislation went through Westminster—[*Interruption.*] The DUP position has been that, once the legislation went through Westminster, we have no choice but to go along with it; that has essentially been the line it has pushed in the Assembly. It also never objected to the fine and never raised any argument against it. One would think that it was almost in on it at the beginning as a tactic. The threat of a fine was never used before in relation to welfare changes, which were not always reflected in Northern Ireland on the basis of parity, but it was used this time. But essentially, the DUP's position has been to say, "We weren't really for that legislation when it went through Westminster", even though there were parts of it that they did not really oppose. DUP Members actually voted down amendments from the House of Lords, including measures to protect child benefit from the benefit cap. The DUP's position has been to say, "We have to comply with this", whether in the name of parity or to avoid fines. It has adopted a roll-over approach.

Gavin Robinson: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman is making every effort to build consensus on this issue. He has said on a number of occasions that this is "karaoke" legislation. Is he really saying that, while he is happy to follow the substance of what is being asked of him, he is having difficulty in striking the right tune?

Mark Durkan: The karaoke legislation is the legislation that goes through the Assembly. The Assembly is told that, in the name of parity, it has nominal legislative power, but it has to stick to the words and music set down by Whitehall; otherwise, there will be fines, penalties and threats. That kind of budget bullying would rightly not be accepted in relation to the new devolved procedures in Scotland. I am sure that the Treasury would think twice before daring to apply penalties and fines in relation to the concurrent decision-making powers that will apply under the Scotland Bill. The Minister talked about parallel powers. The Scotland Bill contains measures referring to decisions being made concurrently. Some decisions are to be made by the Secretary of State for Scotland and others by Scottish Ministers, but the clauses refer to decisions being made concurrently and to consultation. There is no suggestion that a disagreement between a Secretary of State and Scottish Ministers would result in the kind of budget penalties that have been invoked in the context of Northern Ireland. That brings me back to the point that we shall need to look at this in a wider context after we get over this particular episode.

I was making the point that the DUP has been in an acquiescent, roll-over mode for some time. The bizarre thing is that Sinn Féin is now in hand-over mode in this regard. Its best way of holding on to its position is to hand over power to the British Government—the Tory Government—and to give them direct rule in relation to these matters for 13 months. Some of us have tabled amendments that would provide a middle way, even though the DUP and Sinn Féin have already got a legislative consent motion through the Assembly. The effects of that could be mitigated if we were to pass amendments to better delineate the powers that the Secretary of State could exercise, as well as the other powers that we are told will remain seated with the Ministers in the devolved Assembly, not least those relating to the vexed question of sanctions. The hon. Member for North Antrim mentioned that in his speech.

Many people in this House have fundamental concerns about how the sanctions regime that stems from the 2012 Act operates. I have even heard Conservative MPs saying that, although they have no problem with the rationale behind the benefit changes in the Act, they have serious questions about the sanctions regime. I believe that Members from Northern Ireland and elsewhere share those concerns. Having listened to the debates on the Welfare Reform and Work Bill and the Scotland Bill this year, I know that Members have concerns about how the sanctions would apply in Scotland and elsewhere.

That is one reason why some of us are making decisions in the name of consensus. We think we are putting forward concerns that other parties have expressed, and we are trying to create a legislative answer to them and have trust in ourselves. After all, I heard the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr Donaldson) saying that we should not be talking down Northern Ireland and its institutions. Some of us are trying to maintain the democratic institutions there, even if Sinn Féin and the DUP have to let some of these matters go, and we should at least ensure that we hold on to our responsibilities relating to sanctions, among other things. We have to do more than have a form of devolution that says, "Yes, we have all the power and we are making all the decisions, but this one we didn't want. A big boy made me do it." Sinn Féin's answer this time is, "A big girl is going to do this for us." I refer to "Tough Theresa", or whatever the hon. Member for North Antrim is going to call her. That is not good enough, because if we are to give people confidence, we have to show that we are serious about using our powers when we have them and not let them go. That applies to the corporation tax power as well as to other things that other people talk about.

The final point I wish to make is about the wider aspect of the fresh start. Some of us made strong contributions about paramilitarism during the Stormont House talks. We emphasised, and shared papers with other parties about, a whole community approach to rooting out all traces and vestiges of paramilitarism in our society—not just singling out groups and singling out parties. We suggested a common declaration that should be taken by everybody. We put forward those proposals—we did not see proposals from other parties. We are glad that some of our proposals have found their way into the fresh start, but we think the proposals there could be better, stronger and more amplified. Similarly, we proposed a whole enforcement approach, covering all the policing agencies and the Her Majesty's

Revenue and Customs pursuits that should be undertaken, including those on a cross-border basis. We sought a whole community approach and a whole enforcement approach.

My hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell) has said that he was disappointed about the wider economic aspect of the package, and we see the reason for that when we compare what is in the package with the range of proposals and ideas that my party put forward and shared with other parties. I hear Conservative Members talk about the importance of reducing corporation tax so that we can compete with the south, and somebody was quoting a recent newspaper headline. We need to remember that our task in the north is not just to compete with the south with a comparable rate of corporation tax; we need to recognise that the south has built up because of its huge investment in further and higher education and in skills, and a very significant investment in infrastructure, and we are not matching that in the north. It is not there in the current programme for government and it is still not there in the vision after the fresh start. We need to be moving a lot further on that.

It is not only the south we need to be competing with; we need to recognise that as a regional economy, localities and city constituencies such as mine are having to compete with cities and city regions on this island, too, which are benefiting from things such as city deals and various other packages and measures. Although I do not buy all of the bluff and guff that goes with the whole northern powerhouse idea and so on, the fact is that significant drivers for economic growth are being given, they are allowing cities and regions to shape things for themselves and we are leaving ourselves out of them in Northern Ireland. We should have had something in the class of city deals as part of this package, too.

Where there are positive things that allow us to move forward on issues, my party is prepared to recognise them. We are not going to be in denial about those things where there are difficulties. As ever, we need to build on what we have. We might not like exactly how we got here and we might not like the detail, but we always have to build forward—that remains our approach. As we build forward, we have to remember that the Assembly is meant to take on its responsibilities and to meet them, and it should not have been sliding over as handily as it did just to spare the blushes of Sinn Féin. The hon. Member for North Antrim says we are being too light on Sinn Féin, but we must recall why the motion has been put through here in the way it has been. We must remember why it is all being done so fast and why no amendments can be tabled. That is all designed to minimise the difficulty and the embarrassment for Sinn Féin. The timing of all this is not just to convenience the step-down by the First Minister; it is to cover and convenience the climbdown by Sinn Féin.

8.44 pm

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): It is interesting to follow the fascinating and detailed contribution from the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan), with its insight into welfare reform. Let me make it clear at the outset that the name of my constituency does not begin with the word “south”—or indeed with the word “north”—but it does have “South” contained within it. I am happy to live up to that record—I hope it

will not be as depressing in the minds of some as others have been or claim to be. My aspirin has already gone, so I think I will move on.

The Secretary of State, who is not in her place at the moment, must feel privileged to be referred to as “tough Theresa”. It certainly goes way beyond some of the names that I recall other Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland being called in the past. For example, I remember “Traitor” and “Lundy” to name but a couple, and there are loads more as well.

I am pleased that welfare reform is moving forward, because we could not continue as we were. I also wish to put it on the record that I, too, was disappointed that this did not go through the Northern Ireland Assembly for a reasonable and proper debate. I did note some Members saying, “Why shouldn’t the UK Parliament legislate for it? It has every right to.” Of course it has every right to do so. I do not deny that, and nor does my hon. Friend the Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan). However, the reality is that we have devolution, and under devolution we should debate these issues, but, as the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) said, if there is a dysfunctional and unworkable Assembly, why should the UK Parliament not legislate? That is right. If the Assembly is dysfunctional, then, yes, let us legislate, and that is exactly what we are doing.

I must say though that had we had the debate in the Assembly, we might have achieved more clarity. For example, nearly £600 million will come from other Northern Ireland Departments to support welfare reform and tax credits. We could have had some indication of where that money was going to come from and what Departments would be affected—would it be Health, Regional Development, or Culture, Arts and Leisure? In bringing this matter to this place, that is the type of debate we are missing, but we are where we are, and that is what we must progress with. I want to reiterate once again that I am pleased to see welfare reform progress, because we could not continue as we were.

I assume that some parties in this House will have huge difficulties with this. The parties that voted against welfare reform in the past will find it hard to support this legislation. That may be so, but we must progress. Yes, Northern Ireland is getting a better deal in respect of money coming in to welfare reform and substituting for tax credits, but let us not forget that that money is coming from our own Northern Ireland block grant, which means that it will have to come out of other Departments and it will have to be paid for by the Northern Ireland Executive moneys. I noted that the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr Donaldson) made an all-out attack on the Ulster Unionist party. He has every right to do so, and I am sure there will be more of that as time goes on. We will just take it as it comes.

Mr Jeffrey Donaldson: And give it back.

Tom Elliott: Yes, we will do that as well. The right hon. Gentleman pointed his finger at the Ulster Unionist party, saying that we were to blame for what we have. Yes, it is easy to lay the blame on the Ulster Unionists, but let me remind him that his party has been the largest party in the Northern Ireland Assembly for the past 12 years. We still have the IRA army council in place, the IRA with arms and IRA members shooting people on our streets. I would prefer it if that were not the case, but that is the reality. I say to him that he should not

[Tom Elliott]

point the finger at the Ulster Unionist party. His party has had 12 years to make the running in Northern Ireland, and take a lead on the issues. It is time that we made some progress.

Lady Hermon: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for taking an intervention. I just want to prompt him to pay tribute to a Nobel peace prize winner. We do not have many in Northern Ireland, but Lord Trimble is certainly one of them, and he gave very courageous leadership to the Ulster Unionist party when it needed it. I am speaking as one who has been in the Ulster Unionist party and who is proud to say that about him.

Tom Elliott: I thank the hon. Lady for paying that tribute to Lord Trimble. I agree with her, and I would pay tribute also to John Hume, another former Member of this House. Indeed, I also wished Peter Robinson a happy retirement here in this Chamber the other day. I think that all Members make a contribution to our society. David Trimble and John Hume took risks. I have to say that, for me, that sometimes went too far, but I said that at the time. I was open and upfront about the fact that I thought a better deal was on the table, but we are where we are. We need to progress, and we need to rid Northern Ireland of terrorism, paramilitarism and criminality. The fact that that has not happened yet is a huge failure in our society.

We need to ensure that welfare reform protects the most vulnerable in our society, and I hope that we will do that, but we will not know the workings of that until a few years have passed. Why have we wasted so much time? The welfare reform legislation passed through this House three years ago. Why have we wasted time, money and energy in Northern Ireland by not progressing it? I do not agree with all the welfare reform changes, but that reform is here. It is part of our society, and we should be moving forward. It has cost our society in Northern Ireland dearly. To see that one only has to look at how the health waiting lists have spiralled over the past few months. We are told that that is because money is coming out of healthcare to support welfare institutions. We could not progress the way we were going.

In Northern Ireland we have our fair share of the most vulnerable in society because of the decades of our troubles. We need to protect those people but we also need a practical, sensible review and we need reform. We could not continue as we were. People need to be realistic and accept that we need to build our economy in Northern Ireland the way the economy is being built everywhere else. We are all happy to play our part in that—I do not think that any Member in this Chamber would disagree—but we need society to play its part as well. We need people to accept that if we are to build a consensus in Northern Ireland, it has to be genuine. We have to rid our society of those criminals who are fuel-laundering, those who are still out shooting people and those who rule by the gun and the bomb. We cannot allow that to continue, and we need society to stand up to those people and say, “Enough is enough.” We need to move forward.

I am pleased that we are progressing with welfare reform. I heard some of the detailed explanations given by the hon. Member for Foyle. I will not repeat that detail, but there are many aspects of this that will be challenging

for society in Northern Ireland over the next number of years—not least will be the challenge for other Departments as to where the £585 million will come from over the next four years.

8.53 pm

Vernon Coaker: I thank all the hon. Members who have contributed to the debate. I will start with the comments of the hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Tom Elliott) who was asked to join in a tribute to David Trimble. It is important that we remember those giants of history who have contributed to where we are now. In a very decent way, the hon. Gentleman went on to talk about John Hume, another giant who helped Northern Ireland to progress to where we are at present. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about the announcement made by Peter Robinson at the weekend. I had the privilege of speaking to Peter for a few minutes on Saturday. He is another man who has made an enormous contribution. I am not sure whether the hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone realised what he then said. *Hansard* will correct me if I have got it wrong and I shall apologise, but I think he said that they all took risks to move forward. Sometimes it is important that people who lead take a leap and take a risk in order to move forward.

In a powerful speech, the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr Donaldson) said that we have to try to move on from welfare reform. That said it all. We cannot be trapped by it. The hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) said that the stalemate that existed has had not only a financial cost but a credibility cost for the institutions of Northern Ireland. The hon. Gentleman was right when he pointed that out. Of course it is difficult and of course it poses challenges, but the agreement offers a way forward.

There are challenges for the Government too. As the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) pointed out in his contribution, it would be helpful if the Government could provide clarification on the questions that I and others asked, in order to inform our discussion. Notwithstanding the need to paint a positive picture of Northern Ireland, we would all agree that it is a great place, it is open for business and investment is going there. I know the Minister would agree that, as the hon. Members for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell), for South Down (Ms Ritchie) and for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan) pointed out, it is important that alongside a welfare package, there is a jobs and growth programme to ensure that every community in every part of Northern Ireland benefits from opportunity, jobs and investment. That is something that the Government, working with the Northern Ireland Executive, would benefit from if they pursued it with more rigour and more vigour.

The Minister can, like the Secretary of State, if I may chide her slightly, comment from a Treasury brief that X number of jobs have been created and X millions of pounds have been invested, but for some those opportunities are not available and that needs to be addressed.

The hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) helpfully pointed out that part of the reason that the welfare reform changes are acceptable is the flexibilities that are built into the system and the top-ups that are available. Clearly, those will have to be worked out on the basis of the report to be done by Evason. It would be helpful if the Minister could say a little more about that when he winds up the Second Reading debate.

The hon. Member for Foyle, as I said, has been a determined welfare campaigner. I set out some questions, he set out some questions, and they need to be answered—

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is approaching the end of an extremely important speech, which was greeted with great support in all parts of the House. When the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) quoted from Ecclesiastes 3, he referred to everything having a season. Like everyone else in the House, I thought of the following line:

“a time to break down, and a time to build up”.

Is this not the occasion when we must start to build up?

Vernon Coaker: I thank my hon. Friend for that. He said that I could put it into my remarks, but I do not have the confidence in biblical matters that he has. I sometimes need biblical help.

In the end, the failure to agree in Northern Ireland could have resulted in the collapse of devolution or the return of direct rule—a situation that is not acceptable to any of us. Because a majority in the Northern Ireland Assembly has consented, we are legislating here on welfare reform, and legislating in a way that will enable Northern Ireland to move forward and continue to make the progress we all want.

8.59 pm

Mr Wallace: With the leave of the House, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will respond to the debate. It has certainly been a powerful debate with many powerful contributions. I totalled up the amount of time spent on Members' speeches, and the average length was 23 minutes. There have been many Second Reading debates in which Members have had only three or four minutes to speak, whether on an important subject such as this or about other matters. That shows that, despite the concerns about the legislative timetable, Members from Northern Ireland have been able to get their points across in the most powerful ways. Of course, we should not be surprised about that. I have never felt that oratory is dead in Northern Ireland. One cannot be trained in oratory; one is born with it. It is a gift that falls on all the Northern Ireland politicians I have met, or nearly all, from whichever side of the divide or the debate they come. Many Members from elsewhere in the United Kingdom have enjoyed their contributions today.

It is important to answer many of the points raising during the debate. I start, of course, with the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker). I thank him for his support throughout this whole process. He has shown real leadership throughout, as before the election did his predecessor, the hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis). I know that it was not always easy for Labour Members to talk about the welfare reforms that we were proposing, but nevertheless they showed real leadership. One of the reasons we are here today is that Labour has supported the Government throughout this process.

The hon. Gentleman asked me to spell out the timetable for the order. The order envisaged in the Welfare Act 2012 will be introduced imminently once this Bill is passed, as I hope it will be. The Order in Council covering the Welfare Reform and Work Bill would be introduced if and when that Bill is successfully enacted. Obviously, we could not do anything before then.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the Evason group. We hope that all its recommendations would be subject to the Assembly's approval and that it would be in the power of Ministers in the Executive to take them forward should they choose to do so.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the December 2016 timetable. That was the timetable that all parties envisaged would allow us to put in place the welfare reforms that were required and to take account of any changes between then and now. It is important that there is time for those to be in when enacted.

Finally, on the hon. Gentleman's concerns about economic prosperity for Northern Ireland, the economic pact is alive and well; it has not been rescinded or changed. There is still the potential for a city deal, as the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) said. That is in the gift of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Vernon Coaker: I asked one other question that is quite important—namely, which of the clauses in the Welfare Reform and Work Bill will relate to the orders that are to come after the passing of this enabling legislation?

Mr Wallace: I was getting on to that, and indeed I have the answer. The Welfare Reform and Work Bill is about more than just welfare. For example, it has clauses on full employment reporting obligations and apprenticeship reporting obligations that would not be considered to be welfare measures, while on the other hand it has a benefit cap that would be so considered. If he looks at the Bill, the hon. Gentleman will see that some parts directly impact on welfare, as welfare measures, while others, such as the reporting mechanisms, do not. I will be happy to write to him in detail subsequently.

The hon. Member for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell) made a strong contribution. I always feel and understand his heartfelt compassion for his constituents who are on benefits and welfare. I pay tribute to him for his leadership of the SDLP and the good grace with which he has taken the recent change of leadership. I look forward to continuing to help and support him in trying to make sure that his constituents get into work and off benefits. We are really determined to make sure that the economic pact delivers for Northern Ireland, alongside the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan) made known his view that the UUP was locked out of the process and the concerns it raised were not addressed. Every single one of the UUP's concerns, including a sustainable budget, legacy issues, paramilitary monitoring and organised crime, is addressed in this deal. They were addressed previously in the Stormont House deal and they are addressed in the new deal that we have before us tonight. The deal also comes with a significant amount of money: £185 million of new money will be made available to tackle paramilitarism and organised crime in Northern Ireland.

I add my tribute to that given by the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr Donaldson) to his party leader. On devolution, the departing First Minister has navigated a very difficult course. I was in the Scottish Parliament in the late 1990s, so I know that devolution is not straightforward, and devolution in a multi-party system is even harder. It is a real tribute to him that he has managed to bring Northern Ireland to this point and secured a new start with this deal. I hope that

[Mr Wallace]

whoever follows him—perhaps the right hon. Gentleman’s powerful speech was a leadership bid—will continue in the same vein. As the shadow Secretary of State has said, this is about leadership. It is also about taking risks with one’s own electorate, not just those on the opposite side.

I say to the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) that it is not our wish, either, that the Bill be taken through in this way. We do not want Westminster to have to pull back some of the powers to pass welfare legislation. If we were in a different place at a different time, the Stormont Assembly would have agreed it, but unfortunately Northern Ireland needs consensus and the SDLP is just one of the parties involved. Although I admire its determination for consistency on welfare reform, the fact of the matter is that we could not let the situation continue.

We asked the Assembly to pass a legislative consent motion, and it is important that I put on the record its wording:

“That this Assembly consents to the Northern Ireland (Welfare Reform) Bill 2015 being taken forward by the Westminster Parliament; approves the welfare clauses of the Welfare Reform and Work Bill as initially introduced at Westminster; the draft Welfare Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 2015; and the Executive’s proposals to enhance payments flowing from the agreement announced on 17 November 2015.”

Who are we to override that legislative consent motion? We believe in devolution, and a legislative consent motion from the devolved Parliament is asking this House to resolve the lack of consensus on welfare, to deliver for the people of Northern Ireland.

I say to the hon. Member for Belfast South that the biggest barrier to lifting people out of poverty in Northern Ireland is a dysfunctional Northern Ireland Assembly. Devolution, when it works, will deliver a better deal for the people of Northern Ireland, and it is important that we get over the current barrier by passing time-limited measures in this House, so that we can move forward together.

Tom Elliott: I appreciate the Minister’s helpful summary, but does he accept the assertion made by the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) that the deal is being approved by this House only because the Northern Ireland Assembly is dysfunctional and unworkable?

Mr Wallace: I do not think that the Northern Ireland Assembly is dysfunctional. It deals with people’s problems and issues every day. The Ministers I have met since my appointment make daily decisions that can result in improvements. On welfare, however, after four years of the tortuous freezing of government, something had to be done. If the Northern Ireland Assembly grasps the deal that the parties have achieved, the future will be all to play for. The ability to deliver and to improve the lives of people in Fermanagh and South Tyrone is better than the situation for many of my constituents. A lot of Members who are not from Northern Ireland will be slightly envious of the flexibility, funding and generous package on offer to the people of Northern Ireland. We do that with good will, because we want Northern Ireland to move away from its troubles and give the best chances to its people.

Ms Ritchie: Perhaps the Minister could take a little liberty and spell out some of the mitigation measures relating to in-work credits that the Chancellor might outline on Wednesday as part of the comprehensive spending review.

Mr Wallace: As much as I might like to say that the Chancellor rings me up to consult me on such major issues from time to time, I, like the hon. Lady, will have to wait and see.

I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his kind comments about me and the Secretary of State. I want to place on the record that without the Secretary of State’s determination and patience this deal may never have happened. Patience is a quality that many politicians do not possess, but she certainly does. [Interruption.] I am always for a good career move, but it is true.

It is tempting to follow the hon. Member for North Antrim down the path of his speech about Unionism and the sovereign Parliament, but I shall resist doing so. Suffice it to say that I will help him to lobby the Mayor of London for more buses from Wrightbus in his constituency, and I will do everything I can to help him and Ministers in the Executive to facilitate jobs to mitigate the losses at Michelin. Ministers from the British Government are all here to help job prospects in Northern Ireland, and I will continue to do so.

I say to the hon. Member for Foyle that we had to move forward on the issue of tax credits and welfare reform in Northern Ireland. As I said earlier, the fact is that there was no consensus, and in the end it was important to resolve this issue. Northern Ireland could not continue to lose the money every day and every week because it could not implement the welfare changes that people deserve.

Lady Hermon: The Minister has talked about the issues that have attracted consensus and those that have not. He will know that the Stormont House agreement did reach consensus about dealing with the legacy of the past. So much so in fact, that in late October the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee was circulated with draft clauses on dealing with the past. What on earth has happened to them? Have they been scuppered in the deal on welfare reform?

Mr Wallace: The agreement refers to continuing to try to address the legacy. I wish that was covered in the Bill and that we were dealing with it now—I and the team have spent a lot of time working on that draft legislation—but the issue has not gone away. We need to deal with it, and we will continue to consider the options. I ask the hon. Lady to recognise that the Northern Ireland Assembly still has the ability to get on and deal with the legacy should it so wish. I urge it to start that process, because we cannot just move on in relation to welfare and leave the legacy issue behind. I agree with her, and I will be pressing the parties to take forward that issue.

Mark Durkan: Is the Minister now suggesting that the Assembly, having passed legislation on welfare reform to Westminster, should act under its own steam to legislate in relation to the past?

Mr Wallace: I am merely stating the reality: the Assembly has the power not only to pass welfare reform, but to deal with the legacy. A lot of what this is about is the lack of consensus in the Assembly. This issue is not about where power resides, but where purpose and determination resides in some of the parties. We hope, as does nearly everyone in Northern Ireland, that the legacy issue is dealt with. We will give support throughout the process for that to be done, and we urge the parties to do it.

Lastly, I hear what the hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Tom Elliott) says on the UUP's concerns about the paramilitaries and the past. I, too, share such concerns. That is why we have got £185 million more to invest in pursuing and monitoring paramilitaries or ex-paramilitaries, as they may or may not be. It is really important to continue to keep a lid on the security situation and persuade people away from the path of violence to make sure that the only things about which we disagree in future are things such as welfare reform and the main social policy issues. I do not want to have to deal with paramilitaries in my back garden any more than he does. That is why we should all welcome the fact that the fresh start will bring £185 million to the table to continue to support the police—the PSNI—and the security services in monitoring paramilitary activity.

We should remember what the Bill is not about. It is not intended to diminish Northern Ireland's devolution settlement. It is not a power grab by the UK Government. As I have said, we would much rather not have had to intervene at all, but the Bill is necessary finally to resolve the welfare reform impasse. That is what the Bill is about. It is intended to secure a fresh start, to provide political stability and to secure a basis for the Executive's budget. I urge the House to support it.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Committee of the whole House (Order, this day).

Northern Ireland (Welfare Reform) Bill

Considered in Committee (Order, this day)

[SIR ALAN MEALE *in the Chair*]

Clause 1

POWER TO MAKE PROVISION IN CONNECTION WITH SOCIAL SECURITY, CHILD SUPPORT MAINTENANCE AND ARRANGEMENTS FOR EMPLOYMENT IN NORTHERN IRELAND

9.15 pm

Mark Durkan: I beg to move amendment 1, page 1, line 3, at beginning insert

'Subject to subsection (3A) below.'

This amendment provides limitations on the Secretary of State's power to recommend that an Order in Council be made affecting social security and child support maintenance, and employment and training for employment, in Northern Ireland.

The Temporary Chair (Sir Alan Meale): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 2, page 1, line 18, at end insert—

'(3A) An Order in Council under subsection (1) or any order or regulations under subsection (2) may not, in particular—

- (a) prescribe a period of more than 3 days for which a universal credit claim does not arise;
- (b) provide for any sanction period of more than 26 weeks;
- (c) amend section 129A (appropriate maximum housing benefit) of the Social Security Contributions and Benefits (Northern Ireland) Act 1992;
- (d) provide for a benefit cap;
- (e) make any limit on the number of children for which any child benefit, child tax credit or child element of universal credit can be claimed;
- (f) specify or determine the level or form of sanctions;
- (g) make any provision or have any effect which would provide a claimant with less than 15 days' notice in which to provide a good reason why sanctions should not be applied in that claimant's case.'

This amendment limits the changes that the Secretary of State may make through an Order in Council as regards sanctions, a benefit cap, entitlement to child benefit and limitations on housing benefit, leaving these issues to be dealt with under the existing devolved arrangements.

Amendment 3, page 2, line 6, at end insert

'and the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Provided that the text of the statutory instrument containing the Order shall be laid before the Northern Ireland Assembly seven days before approval can be given.'

This amendment requires that the Northern Ireland Assembly approves a draft of any Order in Council made under this bill before it is made, and that sufficient time is given for due consideration.

Clause stand part.

New clause 1—*Duty to report*—

'(1) In respect of an Order in Council under section 1(1) or any order or regulations under section 1(2) the Secretary of State will, within twelve months, publish a report of its operation which must include—

- (a) comparative data and information on numbers of claimants and, where relevant, dependants and the relative value of benefits, allowances, payments or credits so as to reflect any difference in provision before and after the operation of the order or regulation;

- (b) assessment of any impact in respect of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998; and
- (c) reflection of observations from independent welfare advice service providers.

(2) In publishing any report under subsection (1), the Secretary of State must—

- (a) lay the report before the House of Commons;
- (b) send the report to the Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly; and
- (c) be available to appear before a committee of the Northern Ireland Assembly to address, or answer on, the report.’

This amendment confers a responsibility on the Secretary of State to report on the first twelve months of operations and impacts on any orders made under this Act. It would ensure the Secretary of State had to lay the report before the House of Commons, send the report to the Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly and appear before a Northern Ireland Assembly committee.

Mark Durkan: It is a pleasure to be here under your chairmanship, Sir Alan, even if it is not a pleasure to be dealing with this sort of fast-track, microwave legislation. It is unfortunate that, under the terms of the allocation of time motion, although my hon. Friends the Members for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell) and for South Down (Ms Ritchie) and I have been able to table these amendment and will be able to speak to them, we will not be able to vote on them. We tabled amendments 1, 2 and 3 and new clause 1 in this group and another amendment that will be discussed along with clause 3 stand part in a later group. I will stay off that for now.

The Second Reading debate went a lot wider than the content of the Bill. In Committee, we will look at the Bill as we debate the clauses and amendments. I will introduce our amendments by following up on what we said on Second Reading. Our amendments would create a different delineation and more definition in respect of what functions will be exercised, following the legislative consent motion and the passage of the Bill, by the Secretary of State and what functions will remain to be exercised by a devolved Minister working through the devolved Assembly. For us, that seems to be a more sensible way to do things.

Our amendments relate to issues that Members of this House from different parties in Northern Ireland and, indeed, from beyond Northern Ireland have expressed concerns about and that a wide range of people in the Northern Ireland Assembly have expressed concerns about. Therefore, we do not think it would do any injury to the course that the Secretary of State says will be open after the passage of the Bill or to the path forward on welfare reform that the DUP have talked about for these amendment to be considered.

We are told that it is entirely compatible for the same powers to be held concurrently in the Assembly and in Westminster. It must be equally compatible if we make sure that there is agreement and understanding about who will take the lead in respect of each particular function, given the sensitivities and issues involved. If the powers that are taken by the Secretary of State are about satisfying the requirements of the Treasury and others in respect of levying fines and penalties and controlling the rules and rates for benefits, some of the other matters, such as the flexibility of administration and sanctions, could safely and properly be left with the devolved Assembly and the devolved Minister. That is the purpose of amendments 1, 2 and 3. I will address new clause 1 separately.

Amendment 1 would provide some exceptions to the powers that will come to the Secretary of State. Clause 1(3) provides a sweeping range of powers for the Secretary of State in respect of Orders in Council or subsequent regulations, and the amendment would introduce a new subsection to qualify those powers. Amendment 2 would restrict the exercise of powers that would come to the Secretary of State, so that direct rule powers could not be used to

“prescribe a period of more than 3 days for which a universal credit claim does not arise”—

again, that picks up on an issue that has been voiced by many people, not just those in Northern Ireland but people coping with benefits in Britain.

Under amendment 2, the Secretary of State would not have power to

“provide for any sanction period of more than 26 weeks”,

or to amend housing benefit under the Social Security Contributions and Benefits (Northern Ireland) Act 1992. The Secretary of State would also not be allowed to

“provide for a benefit cap”,

and as the Minister told us when winding up the Second Reading debate, changes to the lower rate of benefit cap under the current Welfare Reform and Work Bill will come in a subsequent Order in Council following this Bill. Many hon. Members—including DUP Members—expressed concern about the lowering of that benefit cap and voted to amend or oppose it, so I would have thought it entirely consistent for them to support an amendment to limit the power of the Secretary of State in that regard.

Sammy Wilson: The hon. Gentleman has gone through a list of the changes he wishes to see. His colleague, the hon. Member for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell), said that he believes that these changes will be cost neutral. Will he explain which of his amendments will cost money to the Executive, and which will bring more money in so that they balance out?

Mark Durkan: In response to my hon. Friend the Member for South Down, I said that some of these amendments are cost-neutral. That was what the Minister told us at the time, and some of those points can be repeated for this exception. The Minister in the Assembly said that some of these proposals were cost-neutral. However, some of them will not be cost-neutral, and I make no pretence in that regard.

Proposed new subsection 3A would deny the Secretary of State the right to

“make any limit on the number of children for which any child benefit, child tax credit or child element of universal credit can be claimed”.

Many people have opposed the two-child rule, and the amendment would mean that we do not hand that rule to the Tory Secretary of State when many of us are opposed to it.

Tom Elliott: To follow up the question from the hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), if some of the amendments are not cost-neutral, where does the hon. Gentleman think the money will come from? Will it come from the block grant and the £585 million currently in place, or from Her Majesty’s Government?

Mark Durkan: Those matters will have to be properly negotiated and determined. We have also been told about a possible revision by the Chancellor on his approach to some of these matters—in fairness, it is not only Opposition Members who have raised questions about aspects of the two-child rule and some of the other changes. This is about ensuring that we do not unduly hand more powers to the Secretary of State than the Assembly might want. We have been told by the Minister that although the Secretary of State will have these powers, the Assembly will have the same powers and can move on these matters should it wish. The question about whether to make provision for these issues or whether to do things differently will arise for the Assembly in any case.

Proposed new subsection 3A(f) would deny the Secretary of State the power to specify or determine the level or form of sanctions, and paragraph (g) would disallow the power for the Secretary of State to

“make any provision or have any effect which would provide a claimant with less than 15 days’ notice in which to provide a good reason why sanctions should not be applied in that claimant’s case.”

Those two provisions pick up on concerns aired in England by various welfare advice services, Churches and charities on the basis of their experience. Those concerns have, in turn, been reflected in Northern Ireland.

One thing puzzles people in Northern Ireland when they ask, “How did they come to this deal?” People might understand that parties have yielded from their previous position because of budget exigencies—the penalties and fines squeezing tighter—and that maybe they have said, “Well, we cannot hold out on the position of trying to protect everybody on all benefits.” We never took that position. We thought Sinn Féin had taken an impossible stand with the promise to protect all benefits for all times. But people want to know why they changed their position. It is one thing to move in relation to benefit rules and annually managed expenditure that then flows to Northern Ireland for the social security agency to administer benefits to people, but why, if there were those sorts of budgetary reasons for shifting, did they have to move on the sanctions regime as well?

A very sensible course could have been to differentiate between power over the sanctions regime and the other powers. After all, we have been told by some hon. Members on Second Reading that the first Order in Council under the direct rule powers will contain a differential on sanctions arrangements between Northern Ireland and Great Britain, even though another DUP Member told us that under the power the sanction arrangements would have to be the same and that we could not differentiate. We have been told there is a differentiation, but if the direct rule power will be differentiated surely it would be better to say that decisions on the level and form of sanctions, and what mitigations might be brought in on the application of sanctions, should remain a devolved matter. After all, it will still be devolved civil servants taking those decisions, engaging with claimants and talking to them about these sensitive matters. We therefore tabled amendment 2 to qualify the Secretary of State’s powers.

When one recalls all the fundamental objections to welfare reform and Tory cuts, and the rhetoric used—for instance by Sinn Féin—most of it was reserved for the Tory sanctions and preventing them from being imposed.

Sinn Féin, like others, pointed to evidence on the number of people who have died while enduring benefit sanctions. Questions have been raised about inquests and other reports. It therefore seems strange that there was no apparent effort on the part of Sinn Féin, or anybody else negotiating the deal, to differentiate between the power on sanctions and the actual determination on benefit rates and rules. If the skin in the game for the Treasury is meant to be that they want to know that welfare spending in Northern Ireland is roughly on a par or in line with Great Britain after the Welfare Reform and Work Bill, it really did not need to go the whole way of having direct rule sanctions. A better deal could have been struck.

Amendment 3 provides that the Assembly should be notified of any Orders in Council or regulations created by the Bill—we are told they will last for only 13 months—and that there should be Assembly approval of any draft order made under the Bill. It’s funny: lots of hon. Members have said that we should pass the Bill unthinkingly, unquestioningly and without amendments because the Assembly passed a legislative consent motion, yet those of us who have tabled amendments are saying we want the Assembly to have the power of legislative consent so that these issues can be better scrutinised and the interests and rights of the Assembly’s constituents can be voiced.

9.30 pm

Who are the people who really want to listen to the Northern Ireland Assembly? In his Second Reading winding-up speech, the Minister asked who was he and who were we to question what the Assembly might say about a legislative consent motion. Well, if he opposes the amendment, he is basically saying that he does not care what the Assembly might say. He is saying that we should avoid a legislative consent motion, but, in my book, the effort to avoid one is as bad as any attempt to ignore one. Who should be afraid of legislative consent? If the Assembly is notionally keeping these powers—if they are not a full reversion to direct rule but consubstantial powers between parallel seats of legislative power—surely, given that one seat of legislative power is deferring to the other, it should at least have the right to express legislative consent on the detail of legislation.

We will end up with the Secretary of State introducing measures, on foot of legislation from the DWP or under pressure from the Treasury, and those parties in Northern Ireland that favour the Bill will say that they disagree with the detail, just as they claim to disagree with some details of the Welfare Reform and Work Bill and just as they say they voted against some of the 2012 Act. When it comes to it, they will say they are powerless, yet the plea of powerlessness will come from those saying we have not given up, but actually retained, that power. Surely it would be more honest to build in legislative consent to Orders in Council. That is what amendment 3 would do.

I will leave it to others to debate clause stand part, to which I know the Minister will be speaking, but new clause 1, again in my name and those of my hon. Friends, would place on the Secretary of State a duty to report. It states:

“In respect of an Order in Council under section 1(1) or any order or regulations under section 1(2) the Secretary of State will, within twelve months, publish a report of its operation”.

We then say what should be covered:

“comparative data and information on numbers of claimants and, where relevant, dependents and the relative value of benefits, allowances, payments or credits so as to reflect any difference in provision before and after the operation of the order or regulation”.

It is about transparency and accountability. It is also entirely consistent with amendments tabled to other Bills by Labour and the Scottish National party requiring reports to be laid either six or 12 months after the operation of particular legislative changes. We have seen that in respect of Scottish welfare provisions and amendments to the Welfare Reform And Work Bill. It would enable people to compare the difference.

The new clause also states that the report must include an “assessment of any impact in respect of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998”—

the equality protections and provisions—and provide a “reflection of observations from independent welfare advice service providers.”

Again, it is about transparency around operations and effects. It also states that the Secretary of State should lay such a report before the House of Commons and send it to the Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly. In previous Bills, that has been the means by which a matter is shared with the Assembly—because the Speaker then shares it with MLAs. It also says that the Secretary of State should

“be available to appear before a committee of the...Assembly to address, or answer on, the report.”

The reason for that, to go back to this point, is that if we are being told that these are parallel powers—if the text of the fresh start agreement tells us that power has not been given up and that Stormont has not let any power go—then the Government at least need to exercise the power of accountability for how some of the changes may be operated.

If we subsequently have a devolved Minister with those responsibilities after the sunset clause runs out, it would also make sense for the Assembly and the relevant committee of the Assembly to be able to distinguish between decisions that were taken by devolved authorities and those taken by the Secretary of State under these powers. That is another reason for the report-laying obligation, which would allow that function to be properly discharged. It is about saying that the Secretary of State would not be taking these powers without any line of accountability to the Assembly. It is also about saying that, in the course of retaining its powers, the Assembly will actually exercise some of those powers. It is about the spirit of some of those powers, in the context of ongoing scrutiny, legislative consent and accountability for some aspects of the operation.

None of the amendments in this group would be show-stoppers for the Bill or would cripple it in any way. They would not mean, as I would like, that everything stayed with the Assembly or that the Secretary of State did not have the power in her hands to direct Tory changes to benefits, which other parties said they were absolutely going to prevent from happening. However, the amendments would avoid the confusing twilight zone between the double sets of powers, with doublespeak about what is being done and the effects of decisions on people, and would therefore ensure more joined-up accountability.

The amendments seem to be reasonable and consistent with many of the concerns that have been expressed by other hon. Members, including DUP Members. When their reasonable concerns have been reflected in these amendments, I do not know how anybody could reasonably object to them.

Ms Ritchie: I am pleased to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alan.

It does not seem very long ago since we were debating the Second Reading of this Bill. Like my colleagues in the SDLP, I would have preferred all stages of the Bill to be taken through the Northern Ireland Assembly, because we believe in the primacy of devolution and in, shall we say, the primacy of Parliament. The role of Parliament should not be subjugated by the Executive or the Cabinet.

The amendments, which my hon. Friend the Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) has spoken to—the Government have muzzled us by preventing us from pushing them to a vote—are about curtailing the Secretary of State’s power, because we believe in respecting and upholding the democracy of devolution. My hon. Friend has highlighted the purpose of the amendments, which is to provide greater clarity and definition of the powers that will reside with the Assembly and those that will reside with the Secretary of State.

On such a critical issue as welfare, the various aspects of which have such an impact—whether it is the benefit cap, sanctions or the four-year benefit freeze—it is important for the Secretary of State or the Minister to clarify tonight where the power lies and where it is delineated between the Assembly and here in Westminster. As my hon. Friend has said, we want to know who will take the lead on each of these powers.

On new clause 1, we are anxious to ensure that there are full measures of transparency and accountability, and that the Secretary of State gives evidence on the detail of the claimants and gives detail on the assessments in respect of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which deals with equality implications. We know that in the case of Northern Ireland, perhaps because of legacy issues stemming from the conflict and the troubles, and perhaps because of levels of disability and mental illness, there is a proportionately larger number of people eligible for benefits and in receipt of them. As I say, that may follow from the trauma they have faced and the degree of mental illness they may have suffered or because of the lack of access to jobs. As my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell) has said, we need equal investment of resources in jobs, skills and training to ensure that we are able to develop a balanced approach to regional development. We want to know what will be the impact of all these measures on individuals in the wider community.

When it comes to accountability, therefore, it is important that the Secretary of State, in keeping with new clause 1, lays a report in the House of Commons, sends the report to the Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly and appears before the relevant Committee. That could be the Social Development Committee or the new communities Committee. That will depend on what happens with our amendment 4, which would limit the Secretary of State’s power to June 2016, and would involve a new mandate and a new Department as per the requirements of the Stormont House agreement.

We are seeking clarification this evening; we are not seeking to disturb or dismantle. We are trying to make a Bill much better, much more accountable and much more effective to ensure that there is a better deal for benefit claimants.

Dr Alasdair McDonnell: It is a privilege to speak under your chairmanship, Sir Alan. I will be brief in the interest of time. For me, however, this Bill should not have come before this House in the first place, and it would not have done so if the DUP and Sinn Féin had faced up to their responsibilities instead of avoiding the hard decisions and handing control of welfare back here. However, this is the situation we face, which is why we SDLP Members have tabled a number of amendments. They have been well outlined in detail by my hon. Friends the Members for Foyle (Mark Durkan) and for South Down (Ms Ritchie), and I may refer to them generally later.

The amendments will limit the involvement of the Secretary of State in the welfare system—or the outworkings of the welfare system—of Northern Ireland, and provide flexibilities and protections that we have long advocated. The Secretary of State and the Minister are familiar with the arguments that my hon. Friends and I have made not just in the last 10 weeks of talks, but in the now annual crisis talks that we have had over the last three years. As I said on Second Reading, focusing on welfare reform in isolation and neglecting the challenge of joblessness will simply fail. Punishing and sanctioning people for a failure to get a job, without looking at the total lack of job opportunity in the wider economy, is economically dysfunctional.

I emphasise again that we must tackle the fundamental issue of low-level economic activity in Northern Ireland's population, and that we must start by providing a wide range of regionally balanced, job-related, third-level education, training, apprenticeships and employment opportunities. In my opinion, we need an ambitious strategy to get 1 million people across Northern Ireland into employment. We believe that this cannot and will not be achieved easily through this Welfare Reform (Northern Ireland) Order. We are letting down victims and their families. I find it disappointing that the fresh start agreement makes no reference to job creation, although we have raised and discussed it on many occasions. Many people do not think that it is working for Northern Ireland. They believe that it is a cover for the DUP and Sinn Féin to get through elections.

9.45 pm

The SDLP fought hard for devolution, and we will continue to support devolution and good government. However, we are annoyed by the utter disrespect and contempt that some parties have shown for the hard work and the contribution that we made during the talks, and the number of papers that we presented. The SDLP is committed to protecting devolution and making it work. We are committed to making Northern Ireland work for all its people, regardless of politics, colour, creed or class. The very purpose of devolution is to improve the lives of our people. There can be no cherry-picking—no handing back of legislation when it does not suit us.

Let me say something about our amendments, very briefly. We ask for the sunset clause—about which my hon. Friend the Member for Foyle spoke in detail—to be brought forward to 1 June from the arbitrary date of

31 December, to reflect the fact that there will be Assembly elections in May. We also ask for any changes approved under the order to be dealt with in the Assembly as well as here. The Secretary of State would be required to provide the text of future orders seven days in advance to avoid a repetition of what happened last Wednesday, when the Assembly was given only hours in which to scrutinise this vital piece of legislation. We also ask the Secretary of State to publish, within 12 months, a report outlining the impact that the order has had on claimants, particularly those covered by section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, and including observations from independent welfare advice service providers.

We have also tabled amendments to provide flexibilities for claimants, along the lines of the amendments that we tabled at the consideration stage of the Northern Ireland Welfare Reform Bill, which Sinn Féin and the DUP voted down. Those flexibilities would limit the Secretary of State's power to impose a benefit cap in Northern Ireland, and, indeed, the need for that power, and would reduce the maximum period of sanction from 18 months to six. We believe that the sanctions regime on this side of the Irish sea has proved disastrous, and we would prefer to avoid that.

Ultimately, we believe that the issues involved should be decided by the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Mr Wallace: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alan.

The first two amendments will limit the changes that can be made through an Order in Council regarding certain areas such as sanctions, the benefit cap, entitlement to child benefits, and housing benefit. Amendment 3

“requires that the Northern Ireland Assembly approves a draft of any Order in Council made under this bill before it is made, and that sufficient time is given for due consideration.”

The purpose of the new clause is to place a responsibility on the Secretary of State to report on the impact of the first 12 months of any orders made under the Bill. It would require the Secretary of State to lay the report before the House of Commons, send it to the Speaker of the Assembly, and appear before an Assembly committee.

It is important to emphasise at the outset that the Bill in its present form has received the legislative consent of the Northern Ireland Assembly, which was delivered last week by an overwhelming majority of 70 votes to 22. We intend to resist amendments on that basis. I am sure that Members will join me in not wishing to undermine the consent that the devolved Administration has given the Bill by subsequently amending it.

In relation to amendments 1 and 2, it should be borne in mind that the Welfare Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 2015, which will follow the Bill, was also explicitly included in the Assembly motion that was debated and voted on last week. The agreement that was reached last week makes it clear that the Government will legislate to enable welfare reform to be implemented along the lines of the Assembly's 2012 Welfare Reform Bill, which failed to pass in May. For that reason, the welfare reform order is based largely on this Bill.

Furthermore, the changes proposed by these amendments go beyond what was included in the Assembly's Welfare Reform Bill. They do not therefore have the consent of the Assembly. If we were to accept them, Westminster would be legislating, in effect, without the Assembly's

[*Mr Wallace*]

consent. I advise the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) that his concerns are best taken forward in the Northern Ireland Assembly. The Assembly retains legislative competence over welfare and therefore there is a degree of flexibility in how the Northern Ireland welfare system operates. I am sure that the SDLP will continue to argue forcefully for its position in the Assembly, but given that the motion passed already referred explicitly to the Welfare Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 2015 and the fact that changes proposed by this amendment can be made by the Assembly, the amendment is simply not needed.

Turning to the third amendment, it is worth remembering that it took almost three years for the Assembly's Welfare Reform Bill to pass through its various legislative stages in the Assembly, until it finally fell in May of this year. There is an expectation on the part of those parties that have signed up to the fresh start that welfare reform will be implemented as quickly as possible. That is why the Assembly granted its legislative consent to this approach to address welfare reform the day following the agreement. Therefore, it is unnecessary to lay this order before the Assembly for seven days. To do so would only unduly delay further the implementation of welfare reform. It would no doubt leave the majority of MLAs scratching their heads and asking, "Why are we being asked to give our approval to an order that we have already approved?"

I will consider clause 1 in more detail. Clause 1 allows the Secretary of State to make provision for social security, child maintenance and arrangements for employment in Northern Ireland by Order in Council. This clause provides the vehicle for the Government to deliver welfare reform in Northern Ireland. It allows for an Order in Council made under this power to put in place a framework that will be supplemented by detailed policy to be set out in regulations by the Secretary of State or the Northern Ireland Department for Social Development. The clause provides that an Order in Council may make provision for further delegated legislation to be made by either the Secretary of State or the relevant Northern Ireland Department, allowing for detailed implementation to be carried out either in Westminster or in Stormont.

The clause allows for considerable flexibility in the drafting of the Order in Council, as this is a power that may be used on more than one occasion for slightly differing purposes, to implement possible future welfare reforms that need to be made before December 2016, for example. Finally, the clause provides that an Order in Council made under these provisions is subject to the affirmative resolution procedure.

Turning to new clause 1, I agree that it is important that the impact of welfare reform is fully understood in Northern Ireland. That is why I am pleased to see that the Northern Ireland Department for Social Development is committed to reviewing the operation of the Welfare Reform (Northern Ireland) Order that will follow this Bill. This is surely preferable to placing a commitment on the Secretary of State to report on the operation of an Order in Council made under clause 1(2) of this Bill. The Department for Social Development is better placed to understand Northern Ireland's unique circumstances and to assess the impact of welfare reform there.

It is also worth remembering that we are legislating as part of the agreement reached last week. I am concerned that placing an obligation on the Secretary of State to report overlooks this fact, and gives the impression that welfare in Northern Ireland is no longer devolved. We are not taking back welfare. The Department for Social Development remains responsible for implementing the welfare reforms.

I ask the hon. Member for Foyle to withdraw the amendments, and I beg to move that clause 1 stand part of the Bill.

Mark Durkan: The Minister implied that the amendment would affect just one Order in Council—the one that is in draft at the moment—but of course it would apply to various Orders in Council. He identified the problem that, having passed a legislative consent motion, the Assembly would wonder why the matter had come back to it.

We are used in this House to dealing with different stages of legislation and dealing with different decisions. There is no reason why there should not be more scrutiny.

On the Minister's argument about the legislative consent question—that these amendments would breach the legislative consent motion because that motion does not address amendments—I make the point that legislative consent motions can be retrospective. After all, the legislative consent motion in the Assembly last week was about retrospectively endorsing the welfare clauses of the 2015 Welfare Reform and Work Bill as originally introduced, even though one of the parties that voted for that in the Assembly had voted against those provisions in this House. So I do not believe that those arguments stand up.

Similarly, we believe that there is value in the production of a report, not just for now but to provide clarity in the future. The consequences of this legislation could otherwise end up being argued about for many years. Arguments could arise, for example, about the downstream effects of direct rule decisions and of devolved decisions. We still have an interest in the reporting implications of new clause 1, so we would like to retain the option to return to the new clause later. To facilitate that, and to allow discussion of the other clauses, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 1 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2

SECTION 1: SUPPLEMENTARY PROVISION

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

Mr Wallace: Clause 2 provides that Orders in Council made under the power in the Bill are to be treated as Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly. That will help to ensure that any order forms a sustainable part of the Northern Ireland legal framework. For technical reasons, an exception is made for the purpose of section 6 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 2 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 3

EXTENT, COMMENCEMENT, SUNSET AND SHORT TITLE

Mark Durkan: I beg to move amendment 4, page 2, line 35, leave out “31 December 2016” and insert “1 June 2016”.

This amendment seeks to bring forward the end date for the Secretary of State’s decision making powers to take account of the fact that there will be a new assembly and a new devolved department from May 2016.

The Temporary Chair (Sir Alan Meale): With this it will be convenient to discuss clause 3 stand part.

Mark Durkan: Amendment 4 stands in the names of my hon. Friends the Members for South Down (Ms Ritchie) and for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell) and I. It relates to the sunset provision. The Bill provides that the power that is to come to the Secretary of State, while apparently not leaving the Assembly, will last until the end of 2016. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Down has said, the Assembly will have a new mandate from next May. There could be new Ministers and possibly new departmental structures as well, if the fresh start programme and previous decisions from Stormont House are followed.

The excuse is being made about the exigencies of the requirement to move on welfare reform to break the supposed deadlock between welfare reform, the budget and the implementation of other measures. It is said that that all has to be done now. We might be told that there will be an Order in Council to transpose the 2012 Act’s provisions into Northern Ireland legislation first, and that there will be a subsequent Order in Council to deal with the current Welfare Reform and Work Bill’s provisions. There could also be supplementary regulations after that. There is no reason, however, for the powers to stay here until the end of 2016.

The shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), asked earlier why that date had been chosen. The most that the Minister could tell him was that it was what the parties had asked for. Two of the parties might have asked for it, but the rest of us did not, because we were not privy to the selection of that date. It therefore seems sensible to allow a newly created Department with its new Minister, and the Assembly with its new mandate, to take the full flush of powers that they should have, without anyone having to look over their shoulder to see what the Secretary of State is doing. It would be very good for that new Minister to be able to say that they will be exercising full responsibility and for the new committee in the new Assembly to have its full remit in terms of full legislative competence. That is why we have tabled a proposal to bring forward the date of the sunset clause.

We also seek to give people better assurance: if Ministers are assuring us that this is not intended to create direct rule for the long term or indefinitely, and that it is a temporary measure, we should make it even more definitely temporary. We should also make the timetable of that temporary arrangement more compatible with what is being provided on the Assembly’s own electoral cycle and calendar. That is the point of our proposal.

10 pm

One other point I wish to make is that the date of the end of 2016 is being confused by some people as a date which will mean that the changes planned for 2017 as a result of the Welfare Reform and Work Bill would not stand. I expect the Minister to confirm that the Bill’s sunset clause relates only to the decision-making powers and not to the effects or the reach of those decisions themselves, which will stand after the sunset clause has lapsed; there is no need for the sunset clause for those decisions to stand. So I do not know why parties would argue against an earlier date for the sunset clause. Given that the Government are so reluctant about this matter, I do not know why they would resist an earlier date.

Ms Ritchie: I rise to support amendment 4. As my hon. Friend said, this Assembly mandate is scheduled to conclude at the end of March 2016, with elections scheduled for Thursday 5 May. For that reason, we believe it would be more prudent and more effective if the sunset clause were brought forward to 1 June 2016. That would enable a new Assembly mandate and a new Department of communities to be in place, so officials with a Minister would be equipped to deal with these issues. There could then be no ambiguity about what the responsibilities of the Secretary of State were and what those of the Minister for communities were in terms of this legislation.

Mr Wallace: Let me just respond to the points made by the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) about the sunset clause. I can confirm that it refers to the powers being taken in the Bill, not the measures passed under the Secretary of State or via those powers. The December 2016 date was chosen because the aim is to get this welfare reform through, get the Assembly back up and running, and get Stormont back to running on full engines. The idea that we should risk that by picking a date that will not give us enough time not only to pass the legislation, but to implement it is crazy. Missing the deadline by a couple of months or weeks would put at risk all the hard work that has been done over the past few months and years. December 2016 is viewed as the best timetable for achieving the implementation of both the 2012 Act and the Welfare Reform and Work Bill, which is currently going through Parliament.

Clause 3 provides that the Act extends to England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. This is to allow for any subsequent and consequent amendments that may be required to legislation that has a UK-wide extent. The Bill has practical application only in Northern Ireland, as it is concerned only with welfare in Northern Ireland. The measure also allows the Act to come into force on the day that it is passed to ensure that the subsequent Order in Council can be quickly laid in Parliament. The most substantial element of the clause is the sunset provision, which sets out that no Order in Council can be made after 31 December 2016. I request that the hon. Gentleman withdraw his amendment and that clause 3 stands part of the Bill.

Mark Durkan: I indicated in response to the debate on the previous set of amendments that, if we were to have any kind of sample Division in relation to these amendments, our main interest would be in putting new clause 1 to a vote. I note what the Minister has said. I do not accept his arguments, and make the point that the

[Mark Durkan]

sensible time for the Assembly to take the powers is when it is a few weeks into a new mandate. I hope, with all the optimism and confidence that has been expressed, that the Assembly would be in good and sufficient order when it takes its new mandate, with its new departmental structures and with its new arrangements for bringing forward a programme for government. It would seem to be a more sensible timetable, but we will not take the time of the House now by pressing for a Division. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 3 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause 1

DUTY TO REPORT

(1) In respect of an Order in Council under section 1(1) or any order or regulations under section 1(2) the Secretary of State will, within twelve months, publish a report of its operation which must include—

- (a) comparative data and information on numbers of claimants and, where relevant, dependants and the relative value of benefits, allowances, payments or credits so as to reflect any difference in provision before and after the operation of the order or regulation;
- (b) assessment of any impact in respect of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998; and
- (c) reflection of observations from independent welfare advice service providers.

(2) In publishing any report under subsection (1), the Secretary of State must—

- (a) lay the report before the House of Commons;
- (b) send the report to the Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly; and
- (c) be available to appear before a committee of the Northern Ireland Assembly to address, or answer on, the report.” —(Mark Durkan.)

This amendment confers a responsibility on the Secretary of State to report on the first twelve months of operations and impacts on any orders made under this Act. It would ensure the Secretary of State had to lay the report before the House of Commons, send the report to the Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly and appear before a Northern Ireland Assembly committee.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The Committee divided: Ayes 5, Noes 171.

Division No. 130]

[10.06 pm

AYES

Durkan, Mark	Skinner, Mr Dennis
Elliott, Tom	Tellers for the Ayes:
Kinahan, Danny	Ms Margaret Ritchie and
McDonnell, Dr Alasdair	Margaret Ferrier

NOES

Andrew, Stuart	Bingham, Andrew
Argar, Edward	Blackman, Bob
Atkins, Victoria	Boles, Nick
Bacon, Mr Richard	Borwick, Victoria
Baldwin, Harriett	Bottomley, Sir Peter
Barclay, Stephen	Bradley, Karen
Bebb, Guto	Brine, Steve
Berry, Jake	Bruce, Fiona
Berry, James	Burns, Conor

Burt, rh Alistair	Lewis, Brandon
Cairns, Alun	Lidington, rh Mr David
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Lilley, rh Mr Peter
Carmichael, Neil	Lord, Jonathan
Clark, rh Greg	Loughton, Tim
Cleverly, James	Lumley, Karen
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey	Mackinlay, Craig
Coffey, Dr Thérèse	Mak, Mr Alan
Colville, Oliver	Mathias, Dr Tania
Crabb, rh Stephen	Maynard, Paul
Davies, Byron	McCartney, Karl
Davies, Chris	Menzies, Mark
Davies, David T. C.	Merriman, Huw
Davies, Dr James	Metcalfe, Stephen
Davies, Philip	Milling, Amanda
Dinenage, Caroline	Mills, Nigel
Dodds, rh Mr Nigel	Milton, rh Anne
Donaldson, rh Mr Jeffrey M.	Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Doyle-Price, Jackie	Mordaunt, Penny
Duddridge, James	Morris, Anne Marie
Ellis, Michael	Morris, David
Ellison, Jane	Morris, James
Ellwood, Mr Tobias	Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Elphicke, Charlie	Neill, Robert
Eustice, George	Newton, Sarah
Evans, Graham	Nuttall, Mr David
Field, rh Mark	Offord, Dr Matthew
Foster, Kevin	Paisley, Ian
Freer, Mike	Parish, Neil
Fuller, Richard	Patel, rh Priti
Fysh, Marcus	Penning, rh Mike
Gale, Sir Roger	Percy, Andrew
Garnier, rh Sir Edward	Philp, Chris
Gauke, Mr David	Pickles, rh Sir Eric
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl	Pincher, Christopher
Glen, John	Pursglove, Tom
Goodwill, Mr Robert	Quin, Jeremy
Graham, Richard	Quince, Will
Grayling, rh Chris	Raab, Mr Dominic
Green, Chris	Robinson, Gavin
Griffiths, Andrew	Rosindell, Andrew
Gummer, Ben	Rudd, rh Amber
Gyimah, Mr Sam	Rutley, David
Hammond, Stephen	Scully, Paul
Hands, rh Greg	Shannon, Jim
Harper, rh Mr Mark	Sharma, Alok
Harrington, Richard	Shelbrooke, Alec
Harris, Rebecca	Simpson, David
Hart, Simon	Skidmore, Chris
Hayes, rh Mr John	Smith, Chloe
Hermon, Lady	Smith, Henry
Hinds, Damian	Smith, Julian
Hoare, Simon	Spencer, Mark
Hollobone, Mr Philip	Stewart, Bob
Hopkins, Kris	Stewart, Iain
Huddleston, Nigel	Stewart, Rory
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy	Swayne, rh Mr Desmond
Javid, rh Sajid	Syms, Mr Robert
Jenrick, Robert	Throup, Maggie
Johnson, Gareth	Timpson, Edward
Johnson, Joseph	Tomlinson, Justin
Jones, Andrew	Tracey, Craig
Jones, Mr Marcus	Turner, Mr Andrew
Kirby, Simon	Vaizey, Mr Edward
Knight, rh Sir Greg	Vara, Mr Shailesh
Kwarteng, Kwasi	Vickers, Martin
Lancaster, Mark	Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
Latham, Pauline	Walker, Mr Robin
Leadsom, Andrea	Wallace, Mr Ben
Lefroy, Jeremy	Warman, Matt
Leslie, Charlotte	Wharton, James
Letwin, rh Mr Oliver	Wheeler, Heather

White, Chris
Whittaker, Craig
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wilson, Sammy

Wood, Mike
Wragg, William
Wright, rh Jeremy

Tellers for the Noes:
Margot James and
George Hollingbery

Question accordingly negated.
The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.
Bill reported, without amendment.
Third Reading

10.17 pm

Mrs Villiers: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have taken part in the debates this evening, and all the Members of the Legislative Assembly and others who have settled the question of welfare reform in Northern Ireland.

This Bill fulfils an important commitment made following the recent political talks, which culminated in the fresh start agreement. The enabling power contained in the Bill paves the way for the introduction of a modern, reformed welfare system for Northern Ireland. The Government's welfare reforms have at their heart the principles that it should always pay to work and that the vulnerable will always be protected. The benefits cap will ensure that no one household can claim more in benefits than the average family can bring home by going out to work. This is welfare support when people need it, not welfare support as a way of life.

The legislation will help us deliver our long-term economic plan. It will replace a system that was not working, a system that was not fair to the people trapped in dependency and poverty, and not fair to the hard-working taxpayers who paid for it. An unreformed welfare system was not sustainable in Great Britain and it is not sustainable in Northern Ireland. I believe that the reforms that this Bill will allow us to implement will help more people in Northern Ireland to get on because it will enable them to get into work, with the dignity of a job, the pride of a pay packet and the peace of mind that comes from being able to support their family. As in Great Britain, the reformed system will help people to make the journey from dependence to independence, providing more opportunity and greater security.

Before I conclude, I want to be clear that this Bill and the Order in Council that is to follow do not represent the Government taking a decision to impose something on Northern Ireland, but rather what the Northern Ireland Executive have agreed and what the Northern Ireland Assembly supported in its recent LCM vote. Together with the top-ups that the Executive will implement and fund from the block grant, Northern Ireland will have the most generous welfare system in the United Kingdom and one of the most generous in the world.

We have been having the debate on welfare reform in Northern Ireland for nearly four years. The dispute over the budget has been a drag anchor on Northern Ireland politics for too long, and it is time to get this matter settled. I firmly believe that without these questions of financial sustainability being resolved once and for all, we would be on an inexorable path to direct rule,

and that is an outcome that nobody in this House wants. The Stormont House agreement ran into trouble at the implementation stage. This is our chance to learn from experience in trying to ensure that the fresh start agreement stays on track and plays its part in delivering effective, confident and stable devolved government for Northern Ireland. I commend the Bill to the House.

10.21 pm

Vernon Coaker: I join the Secretary of State in thanking everyone who has played a role in bringing the Bill to this stage and in taking it through this House—those inside the House and those outside it.

I repeat that we have not opposed the Bill, despite our serious concerns over welfare reform, as it avoids a collapse in the devolved institutions or a return to direct rule, which would have been unthinkable and a disaster for Northern Ireland. I say again to the Government that alongside welfare reform, a jobs and growth programme is needed. Notwithstanding that, today we have helped to resolve the impasse that there was in Northern Ireland, allowing its Government to carry on with the peace and progress that they want and we all want for them.

10.22 pm

Ms Ritchie: Today we have had all the stages of this welfare reform Bill for Northern Ireland. At this third and final stage, we would say again that we must have a higher ambition and aspiration to ensure the fulfilment of a meaningful devolution process in Northern Ireland. By that, we mean that we should not have brought the Bill here, as we have said during all its stages. We would also say that we have seen the Secretary of State and the Conservative Government succumb to the unwillingness of Sinn Féin and the DUP to take such a Bill through the Northern Ireland Assembly.

From a societal point of view, this enabling Bill is about addressing the needs of families and individuals who need to access the benefits system to ensure that they can live and rear their families with a relative degree of comfort. Being in receipt of benefit or having to access the benefits system is not a lifestyle choice. People are forced into this trap because of lack of access to jobs and employment, because they have lost their job or their place in employment, or because insufficient resources have been placed where jobs were located, or not located. My hon. Friends the Members for Foyle (Mark Durkan) and for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell) and I believe that there needs to be a twin-track policy that enables investment in jobs—new jobs and the sustaining of existing jobs—and investment in skills and training to ensure and facilitate all having the necessary access to employment and therefore not having to rely on benefits.

Our proposed amendments sought to curtail the power of the Secretary of State and to clarify the twin-track approach—the parallel powers—of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Secretary of State in relation to welfare. At this late stage, we say that the Secretary of State should report directly to this House, the Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the wider community with regard to the claimant count, the sanctions and the Bill's requirements.

Obviously, we believe that this Bill should have been taken on the Floor of the Assembly, to fulfil the ambitions of all those people on the island of Ireland, both north

[Ms Ritchie]

and south, who voted for full devolution. We and, I think, other Members from Northern Ireland still believe there should be more devolution measures and that we and all the citizens we represent have an enormous opportunity. We will strive to work with the Government and the Northern Ireland Executive to achieve a more fulfilled economy and training sphere.

10.26 pm

Mr Dodds: I thank the Government for bringing forward this Bill this evening. It will settle the issue of welfare reform for Northern Ireland after many years of dispute, not because of any unwillingness by three of the parties in the Northern Ireland Assembly—ourselves, the Ulster Unionist party and the Alliance party—but because it was blocked over and over again by the SDLP and Sinn Féin. It was rich of the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) to complain that it was not being taken in the Northern Ireland Assembly, because it was as a result of her party's actions that it could not get through the Assembly.

Anyone who opposes or who has opposed this Bill, or who voted with those who tabled amendments to it, are, in effect, in favour of continuing the stalemate and of continuing to fine the Northern Ireland Executive £2 million a week for failing to implement welfare reform. They are against having a sustainable budget in Northern Ireland and in favour of the continuation of a welfare system that is separate from that used in the rest of the United Kingdom. The absence of top-ups would mean that the increased cost to Northern Ireland would become greater with every passing year, and new computer systems would also cost hundreds of millions of pounds a year. Those who opposed the Bill in Committee

earlier and who will vote against it tonight will, in effect, be voting for the collapse of the Northern Ireland Assembly and a return to direct rule, which would result in the full implementation of all the things they rail against, without any top-ups or amelioration for the Northern Ireland Executive.

This has been a good day for Northern Ireland, because we have finally made progress in implementing the Stormont House agreement, putting the finances of Northern Ireland on a sound, sustainable footing, and creating a welfare system that is good, reformed and fit for purpose in meeting the needs of the people of Northern Ireland. This has been a good day for this House and a good day for Northern Ireland.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

That the draft International Fund for Agricultural Development (Tenth Replenishment) Order 2015, which was laid before this House on 24 June, be approved.

TERMS AND CONDITIONS OF EMPLOYMENT

That the draft Exclusivity Terms in Zero Hours Contracts (Redress) Regulations 2015, which were laid before this House on 19 October, be approved.—(*Simon Kirby.*)

Question agreed to.

Antibiotics (Primary Care)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Simon Kirby.*)

10.29 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): First, I would like to declare an interest. Over 20 years ago, I was responsible for trying to launch a C-reactive protein point-of-care test, along with other point-of-care tests. The timing and circumstances were not right then, but things have moved on, and I believe the time is now right to get C-reactive protein point-of-care testing established in the primary care setting.

Last Monday was world antimicrobial day and that, along with the extensive media coverage over recent days about antimicrobial resistance and the vast difference between summer and winter antibiotic prescribing, makes this a very timely debate. Antibiotics have been widely used to treat infections for more than 60 years, and without doubt the use of antibiotics has saved many millions of lives. I doubt if there is any right hon. or hon. Member who has never taken an antibiotic at some time in their life, but such extensive use of antibiotics has now become a real issue and a ticking time bomb.

Although new infectious diseases have been discovered nearly every year during the past 30 years, very few new antibiotics have been developed in that time, meaning that existing antibiotics are used to treat more and more infections. The consequence has been an increase in the prevalence of resistance to antibiotics, which in turn puts our ability to treat routine diseases in serious jeopardy. At present, treatment-resistant bacteria are responsible for approximately 25,000 deaths across Europe each year, which is a similar number to those dying in road accidents. The national risk register of civil emergencies has estimated that a widespread outbreak of a bacterial blood infection could affect 200,000 people in the UK. If it could not be treated effectively with our existing drugs, approximately 40% of those affected might die as a result, which is 80,000 people. There is an urgent need for action to slow the spread of antimicrobial resistance.

For a number of years, there has been a clear consensus among clinicians, academics and policy makers that antimicrobial resistance represents a major current and future danger to the foundations of modern medicine. In recognition of that danger, tackling the threat of antimicrobial resistance has been identified as a key priority by the Government, Public Health England and the chief medical officer. Just two years ago, the chief medical officer described the threat of antimicrobial resistance as

“just as important and deadly as climate change and international terrorism.”

I wish to focus on antibiotics in primary care and what measures can be taken to have a real impact on the way in which they are prescribed, which is currently almost like handing out a bag of sweets at the fair. In fact, 97% of patients who ask for antibiotics are prescribed them, whether or not they should have them. Owing to the popularity of primary care in the UK, that setting represents the part of the healthcare system where antibiotics are most likely to be prescribed, with 74% of them prescribed in that setting. International comparisons show that antibiotic resistance rates are strongly related to antibiotic use in primary care.

Despite guidance encouraging a reduction in antibiotic prescribing rates, nine out of 10 GPs say they feel pressured into prescribing antibiotics. In the UK, we do like taking antibiotics. In 2013, data showed that 41% of residents had taken antibiotics in the previous 12 months, compared with a European average of 35%. Nationally, in 2013-14—the most recent year for which I have managed to get hold of the data—a staggering 41.6 million antibiotic prescriptions were issued, at a cost of £192 million to the NHS.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the Adjournment debate. She has outlined the issues and the epidemic potential among those who do not respond to antibiotics. Does she agree that we need something focused not just on England and Wales, but on the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland because this strategy has to help us all? In her submission to the House, will she say—perhaps the Minister could respond along the same lines—whether we should have a UK-wide strategy to address the issue for the constituents of all Members of the House and further afield?

Maggie Throup: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman. It is not just a UK-wide issue; it affects the whole world. That is one of my concerns. We need to play our part to set the trend for the whole world, because this is a global issue.

As I said, antibiotic prescriptions in 2013-14 cost the NHS £192 million. What is more worrying is that many of the 41.6 million prescriptions were unnecessary and will undoubtedly have contributed to the growing issue of antimicrobial resistance. More than half the antibiotics used in primary care are for respiratory tract infections, most of which are viral or self-limiting.

So what can be done to halt the ticking time bomb? Just last Wednesday, Public Health England called for NHS patients to become “antibiotic guardians” by thinking carefully before asking for drugs and taking more care to prevent the spread of infections by washing their hands and accepting the flu jab. I believe that we can go even further in reducing the use of antibiotics in ways that are better for the patient and that save the NHS money.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing this issue before the House. Does she agree that the big problem, which she has touched on, is that a lot of people put pressure on their doctors to give them antibiotics, falsely thinking that they will cure a cold, which is a virus, when antibiotics are only useful against bacterial infections?

Maggie Throup: My hon. Friend is right. That is what we need to make clear. People often do not understand that the causes of those illnesses are quite different.

My local clinical commissioning group, Erewash CCG, is working hard to empower patients to take responsibility for their health, very much along the lines of the antibiotic guardians idea. As part of the initiative, it wants patients to learn to recognise when it is right to visit the GP and when it is right to seek alternative advice, such as that of a pharmacist.

I want to come back to where I began: the little device that performs the C-reactive protein point-of-care test. I can tell that hon. Members are wondering what C-reactive

[Maggie Throup]

point-of-care testing is. A point-of-care test is a diagnostic test that is quick and easy to perform. It can be used during a patient consultation or completed while the patient waits. It allows for immediate diagnosis and treatment choice. Such point-of-care tests are designed to be used by people who are not laboratory scientists.

A C-reactive protein point-of-care test is a blood test that measures the amount of protein called C-reactive protein in a person's blood, using just a drop of blood from the finger. Evidence shows that the test can deliver significant benefits when used in the primary care setting. It is used in the primary care setting in several European countries and has been shown to reduce unnecessary antibiotic prescribing by empowering GPs to make informed decisions.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case for how innovation in the NHS can be the key to securing significant savings and a change in the culture of antibiotic use among the general public. Does she agree that it is about time NHS England moved quickly and decisively to empower people to change their behaviour in respect of managing their own health?

Maggie Throup: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. That is exactly why I secured this debate. We need to move quickly because this is a ticking time bomb that we must address sooner rather than later.

Point-of-care testing can reassure patients that they do not need antibiotics and will recover without them. There is evidence that C-reactive protein point-of-care testing could reduce the number of antibiotic prescriptions issued in primary care for acute respiratory tract infections by up to 42%. That represents millions of prescriptions every year. It has been calculated that using C-reactive protein point-of-care tests in primary care has the potential to save £56 million a year in prescription and dispensing costs. At the same time, C-reactive protein point-of-care testing could make a significant contribution to the UK's antimicrobial resistance strategy.

I am sure that all hon. Members will have visited a GP with a cough and a cold and feeling pretty bad, and thinking that a short course of antibiotics is just what is needed to get rid of the bugs. They expect to leave the GP's surgery with a prescription for antibiotics and already start to feel better. The problem with that scenario is that there is a high probability that those antibiotics will be useless, because the cold is not a bacterial infection, but a viral or self-limiting infection that antibiotics will not touch. The consequences are far reaching. First, the drugs will have been ingested unnecessarily, and it is likely that antibiotics will have increased antimicrobial resistance in the population. Secondly, a prescription will have been issued unnecessarily, which is a wasted cost to the NHS.

Let us consider an alternative. The hon. Member will still visit their GP with a cough and a cold and feeling pretty bad, but now by using just a drop of blood from their finger, a C-reactive protein point-of-care test can be carried out and will give an almost instant result. If the level of the protein is low to medium, no antibiotics are needed. The hon. Member will leave the GP's surgery without a prescription, but knowing that they will start to feel better without one. If the level of the protein is

high, a prescription for antibiotics can be issued. Such a simple measure is better for the patient, does not add to the ticking time bomb of antimicrobial resistance, saves the need for a prescription, and saves the NHS millions of pounds. I am sure hon. Members will be asking why it is not happening already.

Such a simple test can also be used for more complex cases than coughs and colds. With the life-limiting condition idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis, GPs find it hard to differentiate between the ongoing condition and an underlying infection. An underlying infection, which could be tested by using the C-reactive protein point-of-care test, may require hospitalisation, but the ongoing condition would not. In such instances, it is not just about whether to prescribe antibiotics; it is about whether a hospital bed and all the resources alongside it are needed. Surely a low-cost, point-of-care test is worth its weight in gold given that scenario.

Despite recent reforms, the NHS still works in silos and is inflexible when it comes to funding a test that originally would be carried out in the hospital laboratory. The majority of testing required by primary care is done by block contract through the local hospital, and additional testing is seen as a cost burden on the GP—that was the barrier I hit more than 20 years ago.

Today, C-reactive protein is included as a recommended area of best practice within the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence clinical guidelines for pneumonia, which state that

“clinicians should consider a point-of-care C-reactive protein test for patients presenting with lower respiratory tract infection in primary care”.

That recommendation was made by the NICE guideline development group and based on antibiotic prescription rates, mortality, hospital admission rates, and quality-of-life outcomes. Antibiotic prescription rates were felt by the guideline development group to be the most relevant direct outcome influencing that recommendation.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): As my hon. Friend pointed out, antimicrobial resistance is a particular problem in emerging economies—in India in 2014, 58,000 babies died because of AMR. Does she think that it would be wise to use international development budgets to tackle that severe and growing problem?

Maggie Throup: My hon. Friend makes a good point and I completely agree with him.

When one prominent GP wanted to introduce the point-of-care test, he was refused funding. He is now funding it through other sources as he feels that it provides better patient care than just issuing antibiotic prescription after prescription. Things must change for the sake of the patient, to reduce the number of prescriptions, to contribute to the battle against antimicrobial resistance, and ultimately to save the NHS millions of pounds.

The recently launched review of antimicrobial resistance, chaired by Jim O'Neill, is entitled “Rapid diagnostics: stopping unnecessary use of antibiotics” and states that “rapid point-of-care diagnostic tests are a central part of the solution to this demand problem, which results currently in enormous unnecessary antibiotic use.”

That is why I am asking the Minister to do whatever she can to break down the silos, create the funding streams for C-reactive protein point-of-care tests in primary care, play her part in implementing our national

antimicrobial strategy and save the NHS millions of pounds that could be redirected to disease areas that would really benefit from an injection of funds. This is a win-win-win situation and it must be addressed as quickly as possible.

10.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jane Ellison): Let me begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) on securing this very well attended debate on a very important issue. The hour is late, but there are a number of hon. Members in the Chamber, reflecting the importance of the debate, and they have made well-informed interventions. I will attempt to address all the issues raised, but if there is anything I do not get to I will look to write to hon. Members.

This debate is timely. Antimicrobial resistance awareness week, a news item in *The Lancet* and news from other countries, in particular China, have helped to underline the issue that, on occasion, can sound quite dry. If people wonder what the issue is, it has been aptly illustrated in recent weeks. The prescribing and use of antibiotics has a direct impact on antimicrobial resistance. As my hon. Friend made clear, it is one of the biggest global health challenges we face and I spend a lot of time talking about it to Health Ministers from other countries. The costs of antimicrobial resistance are very significant. The O'Neill review on antimicrobial resistance, commissioned by the Prime Minister, estimates that a continued rise in resistance by 2050 would lead to millions of additional deaths worldwide each year and an economic cost of up to \$100 trillion worldwide. This is a really big issue.

My hon. Friend described exactly the problem we face in terms of the appearance and spread of bacteria that are resistant to treatment by current antibiotics, and the threat that poses to modern medicine. She provided some examples of that threat. Without effective antibiotics, medical advances such as organ transplants, and even minor surgery and routine operations, will become high risk procedures. Procedures we assume can now be done as minor day surgery will suddenly become again a serious threat because of serious resistant infection. Antimicrobial resistance is a global problem that needs to be tackled at a national and global level to ensure antibiotics are used wisely.

As my hon. Friend and others will know, in 2013 we published the "UK Five Year Antimicrobial Resistance Strategy" to address this significant threat. It takes a "one health" approach, addressing human, animal, food and environmental aspects of antimicrobial resistance. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is, as ever, in his place. On many occasions I disappoint him by saying that matters are England-only, but I am delighted to be able to confirm that this is a UK-wide strategy. We are working on it in close collaboration with Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. At the heart of our strategy is the need to use antibiotics more effectively. The key is how we change both public and health professional behaviour, and my hon. Friend described the challenge we face.

The English Surveillance Programme for Antimicrobial Utilisation and Resistance—just another one of those catchy little titles we come up with in the health world—is

a very important programme. The 2015 surveillance report shows that general practice accounts for 74% of prescribed antibiotics. The number of antibiotic prescriptions in primary care has declined for the last two years and are now lower than in 2011. However, analysis of the data suggests that although there have been fewer prescriptions, higher doses or longer courses of antibiotics are being prescribed. Total use of antibiotics continues to increase in the NHS, albeit at a slower rate. We still have a significant challenge. It is a challenge for all of us and, as my hon. Friend said, behaviour change is right at the heart of how we tackle the problem, both for those who prescribe and for those who use antibiotics—both are crucial to our response.

In August, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence produced its stewardship guidelines for the health and social care system, which covered the effective use of antimicrobials, including antibiotics. We understand the pressures, as have been well described here, that primary care prescribers face every day. We know, as my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) illustrated, that sometimes people expect to leave their doctor with a certain prescription, even if it is not the right thing. To support GPs, therefore, we have been working with the Royal College of General Practitioners to provide them with suitable tools to reduce levels of inappropriate prescribing.

Last week, research by Antibiotic Research UK found that doctors prescribed 59% more antibiotics in December than in August, despite many of the illnesses treated by antibiotics not being seasonal. That, too, touches on the challenges. One of the key resources doctors have at their disposal is TARGET—treat, antibiotics responsibly, guidance, education, tools—which is hosted on the RCGP website and aims to increase primary care clinicians' awareness of the importance of antimicrobial resistance and responsible use. Health Education England continues to work with Public Health England to ensure that the competence and principles of prescribing antimicrobials are embedded throughout the professional curricula.

In a recent trial, the chief medical officer, Dame Sally Davies, wrote to a sample of high-prescribing GPs in England, explaining that their prescribing rates were significantly higher than those of other similar GPs and asking them to reassess their prescribing protocols. This intervention resulted in a 4% reduction in levels of prescribing in those practices. That is encouraging and more trials are planned. I put on the record the gratitude of this Government and Governments around the world to Professor Dame Sally Davies for the work she has done in spearheading not just our national AMR campaign but the international campaign. I have watched her galvanise whole countries to action on this subject. We are extremely lucky that she is leading the charge.

NHS England's introduction of a quality premium on antibiotic prescribing for 2015-16 is another significant step. The purpose is to act as an incentive to reduce levels of antibiotic prescribing in both primary and secondary care. We are encouraged by the early results and expect a reduction in levels of antibiotic prescribing in the next set of data covering 2015-16.

We are not overlooking the consumers of antibiotics: the public. We need to improve their understanding about their appropriate use and are active participants in European antibiotic awareness day, which has just passed and which looks to engage the wider public.

[Jane Ellison]

My hon. Friend the Member for Erewash highlighted the extremely important antibiotic guardian programme. We have set a target to reach 100,000 antibiotic guardians by next March. We also urge all colleagues—this is where MPs can be extremely helpful—to bring this up with their local NHS. If they ask about it, people will realise its importance, so I ask them to do so as part of their routine contact with local NHS institutions.

Public Health England, working in conjunction with the RCGP, has developed a range of patient information materials to help them think about how they care for themselves when they have a self-limiting infection, such as a cold, and when to consult a health professional. Critically, my hon. Friend referred to diagnostic testing, particularly the C-reactive protein test. I understand her frustration—sometimes it feels like things move rather slowly—but I hope that the attention the strategy has received illustrates our desire to move faster. In fact, the driving force behind the UK-wide strategy is about gearing up the whole health system to react more quickly.

Most antibiotic prescribing is done in the absence of a test to determine the nature of the illness and whether an antibiotic prescription is likely to help. Making better use of technology is a key part of our work. Greater access to and use of rapid diagnostic tests will help us to avoid unnecessary treatment and provide more targeted treatment where infections are diagnosed, which, of course, will mean better outcomes for patients.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): My hon. Friend might note that, in the case of malaria, the introduction of rapid diagnostic tests has substantially reduced the inappropriate use of important antimalarials.

Jane Ellison: That is an excellent illustration of the potential of rapid diagnostic tests, and of course we had exciting news on malaria recently.

In December last year, NICE recommended that GPs should consider carrying out C-reactive protein testing for people presenting in primary care with symptoms of lower respiratory tract infection if, after clinical assessment, a diagnosis of pneumonia has not been made and it is not clear whether antibiotics should be prescribed. I understand that the test is increasingly being used in primary care, although the evidence for its use is mixed and the role of normal clinical diagnosis remains critical.

We want the right test available in the right place, from patients' homes and the high street to primary and secondary care. That work is being undertaken as part of the implementation of the UK antimicrobial resistance strategy. To further develop the use of diagnostics in clinical practice, we are investing £1.3 million of research funding through the National Institute for Health Research. That research is being undertaken by Cardiff University, focusing on GPs' use of the C-reactive protein test to help to target antibiotic prescribing to patients with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. It will be interesting to see how that research goes, and I am sure we will return to it.

In addition to the important work to improve appropriate prescribing, we should not forget the vital role of infection prevention and control—it was good to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash note that. We have made significant progress, with dramatic reductions in some infections in recent years, but there is always more to do. We can make a significant contribution to that agenda by improving our ability to prevent infections in the first place. That includes work with NICE to develop clinical guidance and best practice information.

We have strengthened the code of practice on the prevention and control of infections to clarify for providers the measures needed to ensure effective infection prevention and antimicrobial stewardship. We will also improve infection prevention and control by introducing an indicator, as part of local antimicrobial resistance implementation plans from April next year, to help CCGs. That will be another good opportunity, from the spring, to ask CCGs how their plans are going and whether they can explain what they are doing locally. It was good to hear Erewash CCG being cited. I am sure my hon. Friend will hold its feet to the flames, as will others.

Let me touch briefly on the international scene. It was good to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) talk about India. I had the pleasure of talking to the Indian Health Minister about this very topic at the World Health Assembly in Geneva in May. Tonight's debate is not about the international aspect, but I would be delighted if any Member wanted a debate focusing on that, because the UK can be proud of our record in that regard. To give one example, as part of our focus on global antimicrobial resistance, the UK has committed £195 million over five years to the Fleming fund, which will support antimicrobial and infectious disease surveillance in developing countries, where we know drug resistance has a disproportionate effect. We were delighted to see all 194 member states agree to the World Health Organisation's global action plan at the World Health Assembly earlier this year. The Government are now working towards the UN General Assembly in 2016 and are continuing to champion this agenda there.

Let me conclude by reaffirming our commitment to delivering improvements in the way antibiotics are used in the NHS. I take the challenge that my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash has highlighted and we will make sure that the NHS hears that from tonight's debate. The work we have undertaken, and are continuing to undertake, means that we now have significantly better data and information on how antibiotics are used in both primary and secondary care, but we have much more to do. I welcome tonight's debate as a reminder of the task that lies ahead of us.

Question put and agreed to.

10.59 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 23 November 2015

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council

The Minister for Culture and the Digital Economy (Mr Edward Vaizey): The Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council will take place in Brussels on 24 November. Fiona Hyslop, Scottish Government Cabinet Secretary for Culture and External Affairs, will represent the UK at the culture and audiovisual sections, and the Deputy Permanent Representative to the EU, Shan Morgan, will represent the UK at the sport section.

Culture and Audiovisual

The Council will be invited to adopt draft Council conclusions on culture in the EU's external relations with a focus on development co-operation. The UK welcomes these conclusions, which propose the establishment of an ad hoc task group to contribute to the preparation of a concrete, evidence-based, shared and long-term approach to culture and development co-operation.

It will then consider draft Council conclusions prioritising intercultural dialogue in the future work of the Council. This would involve the establishment of an expert group to take stock of existing policies on intercultural dialogue, with a special focus on the integration of migrants and refugees through the arts and culture, which we welcome.

The Council will then have a policy debate on how best to act together against the destruction and illicit trafficking of cultural heritage in conflict areas. In this debate the UK will encourage the European Union to take forward targeted interventions that play to its strengths and areas of competence, and avoid duplication of effort with other bodies. We will also highlight our own efforts in this area,

During lunch there will be an informal debate on the importance of digitisation to culture and heritage. The UK will agree that digitisation is a powerful tool which can help deliver many cultural, social, and educational objectives. We will be stressing that to reach its full potential all actors in the sector must be encouraged to develop their own digital strategies without unjustified constraints being imposed by Governments.

Sport

Turning to the sport sector, the Council is expected to adopt conclusions on the representation of the EU member states in the foundation board of WADA and the co-ordination of the EU and its member states' positions prior to World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) meetings. These conclusions review the 2011 resolution and conclude that no change in the current procedure is required.

The UK will be invited to adopt the conclusions following the meeting of the WADA foundation board on 17-18 November 2015.

My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, who is responsible for Sport, has been approved to be one of the EU representatives on the foundation board; this is expected to have been ratified at the WADA meeting.

The UK is also expected to adopt Council conclusions on the promotion of motor skills, physical, and sport activities for children.

The conclusions ask for member states to consider implementing cross-sectorial policies, with the education, youth and health sectors among others, to promote physical activities and motor skills in early childhood taking into account, in particular, the following recommendations of the health education physical activity expert group.

The UK will note that it already has in place physical activity guidelines for infant and children targeting notably policy makers, local authorities, parents, family and wider community, ECEC settings, schools and sport clubs, in collaboration with scientific experts.

There will then be a policy debate on the educational potential of sports in helping disadvantaged youth to find their place in society.

The UK will look to share examples and best practice from initiatives across our sporting and education landscape.

Other Business

The EU Commission will present an update on the regulatory fitness (REFIT) exercise in the audiovisual sector, and other relevant initiatives of the digital single market strategy.

This will be followed by information from the Luxembourg presidency of the Council on the state of play concerning signing of the Council of Europe's convention on the manipulation of sports competitions.

There will then be an information point concerning the outcome of recent meetings of the WADA, as well as information from the presidency on the informal meeting of Ministers for Sport which took place in Luxembourg in July 2015.

Finally there will be a presentation from the Netherlands on their work programme and priorities for their forthcoming presidency of the Council, which will run for six months from January 2016.

[HCWS323]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

NATO Parliamentary Assembly

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Philip Hammond): The following will represent the United Kingdom at the NATO Parliamentary Assembly:

Baroness Adams of Craigielea
 Richard Benyon MP (Leader)
 Lord Campbell of Pittenweem
 Mary Creagh MP
 Martin Docherty MP
 Nigel Dodds MP
 Mike Gapes MP

James Gray MP
Lord Hamilton of Epsom
Lord Jopling
Jack Lopresti MP
Jason McCartney MP
Madeleine Moon MP

Baroness Ramsay of Cartvale
Jamie Reed MP
Andrew Rosindell MP
Alec Shelbrooke MP
Bob Stewart MP

[HCWS322]

Petition

Monday 23 November 2015

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Police Cuts in Merseyside

The petition of Residents of Merseyside,

Declares that Merseyside Police has already lost 1600 people since 2010; further that if cuts don't stop now, Merseyside Police will lose all PCSOs, the entire mounted section and 1000 more police officers and staff; further than additional cuts will affect the teams which fight serious and organised crime, investigate rape and sexual

violence and tackle hate crime; further that the cuts will also affect the Force's ability to provide neighbourhood policing, as it is depleted from a strength of more than 7300 officers in 2010 to fewer than 4500 officers in 2019; further that this situation could get even worse if the Chancellor decides to cut the police budget even further on November 25th; further that more cuts may put the safety of Merseyside residents at risk; and further that with crime already starting to rise, the petitioners believe that these damaging cuts should be stopped before they seriously weaken the Force's ability to keep residents safe.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to end the cuts to Merseyside Police.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[P001562]

ORAL ANSWERS

Monday 23 November 2015

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Monday 23 November 2015

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PETITION

Monday 23 November 2015

	<i>Col. No.</i>
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