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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 24 November 2015

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Tibet

1. **Fabian Hamilton** (Leeds North East) (Lab): What discussions he had with the President of the People's Republic of China on human rights in Tibet. [902302]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr Hugo Swire): During last month's state visit, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and President Xi Jinping discussed the importance of ongoing dialogue on issues about which we disagree, including human rights. I set out the Government's position on Tibet, including our human rights concerns, in a parliamentary debate secured by the hon. Gentleman in June.

Fabian Hamilton: I thank the Minister for that answer. He will be aware that the UN Committee against Torture met last week in Geneva to review China's record, and it expressed serious concerns over China's continued use of torture to extract confessions from prisoners. In response, the Chinese delegation denied all allegations of endemic, systematic acts of torture. China also claims to hold no political prisoners at all. Will the Minister or the Foreign Secretary ensure that the routine use of torture in Chinese jails, including in Tibet, is raised with China at the next UN Human Rights Council?

Mr Swire: We would normally raise such matters regarding Tibet or anywhere else. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on keeping Tibet at the forefront of the House's deliberations, and there have been two debates on the issue, most recently in June and before that in December. The recent state visit was a huge success. President Xi acknowledged the importance of improving protection for human rights and said that China was ready for increased exchanges and co-operation on that issue with the UK. The UK is one of the few countries in the world to have an annual human rights dialogue with China, and that is an incredibly important architecture within which to press the Chinese and raise such matters. We shall continue to do so.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Minister will recall that in an exchange on 22 October he confirmed that China is ready to co-operate with the UK and other countries in the area of human rights.

Were matters such as Tibet and the persecution of Falun Gong practitioners, the alleged forced harvesting of organs, and the harassment of Ai Weiwei discussed with the Chinese President when he visited the UK?

Mr Swire: The right hon. Gentleman credits me with almost total recall, but our position has been consistent. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary raised the issues of Falun Gong and organ harvesting with State Councillor Yang Jiechi during the UK-China strategic dialogue in Beijing in August. We have raised specific concerns about reports of organ harvesting on numerous occasions, including in response to a written question on 15 July.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): What discussions have taken place to promote the importance of the freedom of religious expression in Tibet, in particular among the Uyghur people?

Mr Swire: We raise those issues consistently with the Chinese within the framework of the UK-Chinese human rights dialogue, and our annual human rights report is updated every six months. Some comments about the recent state visit have implied that our relationship with the Chinese is purely one of commerce, but that is wrong. This is not a binary relationship. As we get closer to the Chinese and are seen as a good partner to China on the world stage, and in terms of inward investment and trade between both countries, we can discuss such matters more maturely than many other countries can. It boils down to whether we believe in megaphone diplomacy, or in getting alongside the people we are trying to talk to, and pointing out that the way to do things is the way that we do things.

Political Stability: North Africa

2. **Jeremy Quin** (Horsham) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support political stability in Tunisia, Libya and the surrounding region. [902303]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Philip Hammond): The UK is actively supporting UN efforts, led by the Secretary-General's new special representative, Martin Kobler, to reach a lasting political agreement in Libya. We are helping Tunisia and other north African countries to build legitimate, inclusive institutions and develop their economies, as well as strengthening their counter-terrorism capabilities. I will visit Tunisia soon to discuss the effectiveness of UK political and security co-operation with that country, and I plan to meet UN Special Representative Kobler later this week.

Jeremy Quin: Does the Foreign Secretary agree it is in our interests for countries at risk of extremist infiltration, including those in north Africa, to receive advice, assistance and support in monitoring their borders, thereby helping to control them?

Mr Hammond: Yes, I agree. Since the Sousse attacks in Tunisia, we recognise that we need to focus a bit more attention on those countries that are, let us say, one step away from the chaos that is going on in Libya—countries that are making a success of things, but which still

have some vulnerabilities and are being targeted by the extremists. We need to help them to build resilience against extremism.

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary will know that Tunisia's economy has been badly hit by the collapse of its tourist industry. What steps is he taking to encourage other countries, particularly those in the Gulf states, to assist the Tunisians in maintaining both economic and political stability?

Mr Hammond: First, we need to work with the Tunisians to improve security so that the tourist trade can resume as soon as is practical. The EU is looking at the relaxation of olive oil quotas to allow Tunisia greater access to the European market for olive oil, a product it has aplenty, if it is able to export it. The Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), visited Tunisia a couple of weeks ago and discussed with the Tunisians a 49-point plan to support their economy. We are, with the French, seeking to act as cheerleaders for support within the European Union for the Tunisian economy.

Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): Does the Foreign Secretary agree that we should take this opportunity to encourage institutions such as the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, and a range of other organisations and institutions in our western allies—the United States, France and Germany, to name but three—to ensure political stability and democracy is brought to Tunisia, Libya, and, hopefully, other north African countries?

Mr Hammond: Yes, I agree. Of course, Tunisia is ahead of the game, as it were. It is one of the success stories of the 2011 Arab spring, with a functioning constitution and democratic elections. All of that is challenged, however, by the desire of the extremists to target such success stories. We must stand with them.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure the Foreign Secretary will join us in expressing outrage at the terrorist atrocity in Mali in which 22 people, citizens of Mali, China, Russia, Belgium, Burkina, Israel, Lebanon, the US and Senegal, were slaughtered. Given that we now see al-Qaeda, Boko Haram and Daesh-affiliated organisations operating across the Sahel and the Maghreb, including in Tunisia and Libya, will the Government say more about their regional approach to working with countries across the Sahara and the Sahel to tackle terrorism?

Mr Hammond: We are working with a wide range of countries, including, crucially, Nigeria. This is, of course, a pincer movement from Nigeria in the south and the Sahel in the north. We are working with a full range of countries. I would say, however, that if we are to stop the spread of terrorism, we have to tackle it at its heart, and its heart is in Raqqa, Syria.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The security situation in Sinai is a threat to Egypt and other countries in north Africa, as well as to the coalition against ISIL, as we saw with the recent terrorist attack.

What is the Foreign Secretary's assessment of the security situation in the Sinai region and its impact on political stability?

Mr Hammond: The security situation in Sinai is very serious. The Egyptian army is engaged in combat with terrorist groups across Sinai. The Foreign Office travel advice recommends against all travel to Sinai, except the area around Sharm el-Sheik. Sharm el-Sheik is itself still considered safe for travel, although travel through the airport is advised against. We seek to work with the Egyptian authorities to deal with the terrorist challenge it is facing in Sinai.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Does the Foreign Secretary believe that further air strikes alone will move us towards political stability in the wider region? Perhaps he will take this opportunity to address the efficacy of military intervention in Syria and how it will contribute to a wider initiative to end civil war and secure reconstruction. Does he have a plan for securing the peace that includes measures to close down all sources of finance and new recruits to the terrorist cult Daesh, including a Government inquiry into its financing? Why are the Government attempting to make a case for war while failing to address the clear and present need for a long-term, comprehensive peace plan?

Mr Hammond: The short answer, as we have acknowledged many times, is that, no, airstrikes alone will not destroy Daesh—as the hon. Lady implores me to describe it from the Dispatch Box—but they have to be part of the overall solution. On her other specific inquiries, if she will wait until Thursday, she can look forward to hearing from the Prime Minister how this fits into our broader strategy.

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary for his response, and I wait in anticipation for Thursday's statement. I am also grateful for his using "Daesh"; I wish that other Members would follow suit. As we understand it, in Syria today, the USA is bombing Daesh and does not support the Assad Government; Russia, which supports the Assad Government, says it is bombing Daesh but is also targeting rebels; Turkey is bombing Daesh but is also targeting Kurdish forces in the north; while the Australians, Canadians, Saudi Arabians and others are supporting the USA. If military action forces Daesh to give up territory in Syria and Iraq in the coming weeks and months, which force does he expect to take its place on the ground?

Mr Hammond: Again, the short answer is that the hon. Lady has correctly identified that the situation is extremely complex. As the Prime Minister has said, we have to resolve these two things in parallel: we have to get a political solution to the civil war in Syria so that we can get everybody dealing with the challenge posed by Daesh, instead of fighting each other, and that is what our comprehensive strategy will seek to achieve.

Beneficial Ownership

3. **Dr Paul Monaghan** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Governments of British overseas territories with financial centres on central registers of beneficial ownership. [902304]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (James Duddridge): I discussed progress on central registers of beneficial ownership with the Premiers of the Cayman Islands, the British Virgin Islands and Bermuda yesterday and will have a further opportunity to do so when they are in London next week for the joint ministerial council.

Dr Monaghan: In April 2014, the Prime Minister wrote to the overseas territories:

“The rest of the world is watching us closely and public registries will demonstrate the sincerity of our commitment to improve corporate behaviour and set a new standard for transparency of company ownership.”

It is clear he wants overseas territories to have public registers of beneficial ownership. Will the Minister ensure that overseas territories adopt public registers or, at the very least, ensure access for the public in line with the fourth EU anti-money laundering directive?

James Duddridge: The hon. Gentleman should give the overseas territories credit where credit is due. Progress has been made towards the greater use of central registers, and we are currently working on security and police forces’ access to them, but, in the longer term, he is entirely right: ultimately, we will have to move in the direction of public access to that information. But the overseas territories are making progress.

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): What progress have the British overseas territories made with the UK on the exchange of tax information?

James Duddridge: Clear progress has already been made. The territories have already fulfilled their commitments on automatic tax exchange, and this was achieved working in partnership with them.

Syria: Displaced People

4. **Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con):** What support the Government are providing to countries neighbouring Syria to help displaced people. [902305]

15. **Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con):** What support the Government are providing to countries neighbouring Syria to help displaced people. [902318]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): One of the five principal strands of the international counter-ISIL strategy is humanitarian and stabilisation support. The UK has been at the forefront of providing humanitarian support, having committed more than £1 billion to assisting host countries that have opened their doors to refugees fleeing Assad’s regime and terrorist organisations, including al-Nusra, al-Qaeda and Daesh.

Simon Hoare: Will the Minister, while carrying on this important work, work flat out with colleagues to build a robust and energised—there is the key point: energised—consensus against ISIL among the other countries of the middle east?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we must be energised. The Government are committed to working with the now 65-strong counter-ISIL coalition

on our five-point strategy: defeating Daesh on the battlefield; cutting off its funding streams; stemming the flow of foreign fighters; countering the online messaging; and providing the humanitarian and stabilisation support I have already mentioned.

Mary Robinson: Does my hon. Friend agree that we must do all we can to support the people living in refugee camps and the host communities in the region and to ensure they can return to their homes and rebuild their lives in safety and security?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have done a huge amount in providing stabilisation and humanitarian support to do just that—to allow people to stay in the region, but also to help the vulnerable who need to be taken away from the region and supported, which is why we are taking 20,000 refugees here in the UK.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): The issue for Syrian refugees in the region is that they are not allowed to work legally when they are in neighbouring countries. What are the Government doing to support countries such as Jordan economically, so that that can change and refugees may work in such countries legally?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. I visited Zaatari camp, which contains 100,000 refugees. What the hon. Gentleman said is an issue, and causes a bit of tension locally with people in the camp willing to be paid less, but wanting to work. We are working with Jordan and the United Nations to provide employment programmes. The skills can be kept up, so that when the guns finally fall silent in Syria we can transfer those skill sets back into the country.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): When I visited the Zaatari refugee camp, I saw at first hand the amount of aid that the UK Government are giving to help the situation on the ground in Syria, as well as in Lebanon, Turkey and elsewhere. The UK is the second-highest donor to those countries. Will the Minister update us on what progress has been made on getting other neighbouring countries and other partners to make their proper contribution to helping the humanitarian crisis in the region?

Mr Ellwood: I am grateful for the right hon. Gentleman’s support. Sometimes the number of 20,000 refugees that the UK is taking is taken out of context in comparison with the work we are doing to support people such as those in the Zaatari camp. We are providing support to other countries, but we are also encouraging the neighbours. That is one reason why we are hosting a conference here in February, along with Kuwait, to encourage other countries to provide donations so that we can be ready for post-conflict reconstruction both in Iraq and in Syria.

Syria

5. **Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con):** What discussions he has had with his Russian counterpart on the situation in Syria. [902306]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Philip Hammond): I discussed the situation in Syria with Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov at the two recent meetings of the International Syria Support Group in Vienna. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister also discussed Syria with President Putin in the margins of the G20 summit in Antalya last weekend.

Luke Hall: Does my right hon. Friend agree that when ISIL represents the most immediate threat to our national security, we should target its headquarters in Syria instead of leaving military action there to other countries?

Mr Hammond: I think my hon. Friend well knows my views and those of the Prime Minister on this issue. We believe that it is morally unacceptable to outsource to others an action that is essential to the defence of the United Kingdom and UK citizens around the world. That is why we are seeking to build a consensus in this House for taking military action against Daesh in Raqqa.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): On the situation in Syria, has the Foreign Secretary seen the letter in today's *The Times* in which nearly 200 Islamic scholars have denounced ISIS terror in the strongest possible terms? That is the sort of propaganda we should use, and the Foreign Office should use it in different parts of the world. Should we not make it perfectly clear, as those scholars have, that the atrocities in Paris have nothing to do with the wicked west? We went to war over Kosovo in order to protect Muslims—and we were right to do so.

Mr Hammond: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Our position is a moral one. We are defending the right of people—whether they be Christians, Yazidis, Jews or Muslims—to practise their religion freely against a tyranny that imposes its view by beheadings, rapes and mass deportations. We must end this terror. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that a vital tool in our armoury is the very substantial body of thoughtful, moderate Islamic scholarship around the world. We need to ensure—and when I say “we”, I mean all nations of good will, as this has to be led essentially by the Muslim countries of the world—that that moderate view prevails. We need to help the Muslims of the world reclaim their religion from the extremists.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend aware of this morning's appalling news that a Russian bomber has been shot down by a NATO country, Turkey? Is that not potentially extremely dangerous, given that nothing like that happened during the whole of the cold war period? If we are to get a solution in the north, we have to look to building a moderate Sunni regime in Syria and Iraq. We may have to go back at the end of the war to redraw the boundaries drawn up by Sykes-Picot.

Mr Hammond: Our view, and the strong view of, I think, all our partners and allies, is that we need to preserve the territorial integrity of Syria. I can promise my hon. Friend that if we start opening up boundaries in the region, we will prolong the agony.

As for the reports that have been coming in this morning of the shooting down of what was possibly a Russian air force jet near the Turkish-Syrian border, we

are seeking further details urgently in both Moscow and Ankara. Clearly this was potentially a serious incident, but I do not think it would be wise to comment any further until we have more certainty about the facts.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Following its shockingly brutal attacks in Paris, no one doubts that we must defeat Daesh in both Iraq and Syria, and that that must be linked to the urgent need for a peace plan to end the Syrian civil war. When does the Foreign Secretary expect a decision to be reached on which opposition groups will take part in the talks that are due to start on 1 January, and what is his current assessment of the chances of securing a ceasefire during the discussions about the formation of a transitional Government?

Mr Hammond: As the right hon. Gentleman will know, both those issues—the ceasefire and the definition of the opposition groups who will take part in the talks—have been at the heart of the International Syria Support Group's work. Working groups have been tasked with drawing up an agreed list of opposition participants, and I hope that when the ISSG next meets—we expect it to do so during the second week of December—we shall be able to approve a list. However, I should emphasise that there are still some differences among members of the support group. The Russians and the Iranians do not necessarily take the same view of who is an acceptable interlocutor as many of our other partners.

Hilary Benn: The unanimous agreement of United Nations Security Council resolution 2249 last Friday was a significant moment in the fight against Daesh, because the world community has come together to fight this evil using, in the words of the resolution, “all necessary measures”. What is the Foreign Secretary's latest assessment of how Daesh's base in Syria is contributing to and co-ordinating threats both to its neighbours and to the rest of the world, as we have seen recently and tragically in the killings in France, the suicide bombings in Lebanon and Turkey, the blowing up of the Russian airliner, and, of course, the killing of British tourists in Tunisia?

Mr Hammond: As the Prime Minister has said on many occasions, there is no doubt that the head of this multi-tentacled monster is in Raqqa in Syria. Its logistics, its controlling brain and its strategic communications, which are extremely effective, are all run from that headquarters. We will not destroy it by cutting off its limbs; we can destroy it only by going for the head and the heart. I should add that while some of the activity that is being conducted around the world in the name of ISIL is clearly directed from Raqqa, in other cases it is inspired by ISIL propaganda but not directly controlled from Raqqa, so it is a mixture.

EU Referendum

6. **Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP):** What steps the Government is taking to encourage voter participation in the EU referendum. [902307]

The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington): Our immediate priority is to ensure that the European Union Referendum Bill passes into law, so that those who are eligible to vote can do so. The Government are, however, also committed to supporting efforts to maximise

registration, and the Electoral Commission plans to launch a national public awareness campaign in the run-up to the referendum.

Steven Paterson: Given that even the unelected House of Lords is now calling for the voting franchise to be extended to 16 and 17-year-olds, and given the change in public attitudes, will the Government reconsider, and legislate for the extension of that franchise?

Mr Lidington: On three occasions, this House—the elected House—has voted against lowering the voting age to 16 for the referendum, and the Government will propose to overturn the latest amendment from the Lords. I must say to the hon. Gentleman that it is a bit rich for him and his party to carp about the franchise, given that they voted against having a referendum at all.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Will the Minister assure the House that following the completion of the Prime Minister's renegotiations there will be more than sufficient time before the referendum itself to air arguments both for and against remaining in the EU?

Mr Lidington: I can assure my hon. Friend that there is going to be ample time for those arguments to be aired both in this House and outside.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): May I press the Minister a little further on the issue of 16 and 17-year-olds? The other place passed its amendment on this by a big majority on 18 November. There are rumours of disagreements within the Government and within the Cabinet on how to respond. The Prime Minister has so far left the door open to change in the questions he has been asked previously about this. We know that 16 and 17-year-olds are capable of understanding the issues and we know they are interested and want to take part, so why will the Minister not agree to the amendment and give 16 and 17-year-olds a proper say in the future of our country?

Mr Lidington: There are hon. Members in various parts of the House who champion the cause of reducing the voting age to 16, but I say to the right hon. Gentleman that the right time to debate that issue is during discussions on proposed legislation where such a change would apply to the franchise for all elections and referendums and not as a one-off tacked on to a Bill for a particular referendum.

Refugee Crisis

7. **Carolyn Harris** (Swansea East) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with his counterparts in the EU Foreign Affairs Council on the refugee crisis. [902309]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Philip Hammond): As the hon. Lady can well imagine, I discuss the current migration crisis with my EU counterparts on a regular basis—for example at the Foreign Affairs Council last Monday in Brussels and when I met the Visegrad Group of EU countries in Prague the previous Friday. All of them agree now on the importance of a comprehensive approach to tackling the underlying causes of irregular migration, and the UK is playing a leading role in delivering this approach.

Carolyn Harris: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer. Can he share with us what progress has been made with our European colleagues to create simple and safe routes for refugees to be reunited with their families who have already found sanctuary in Britain?

Mr Hammond: The refugees we are mainly discussing in relation to the hon. Lady's question about discussions with my EU colleagues are those arriving within the Schengen area. As Britain is not in the Schengen area, clearly those people would not be able to access the UK in the normal course of events, so their future will be within the Schengen area unless and until at some point in the quite far-off future they obtain EU citizenship.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend explain what more action can be taken to stop Assad's murder of his own people, which together with ISIL terror, is contributing to the current refugee crisis?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Clearly there is agreement across the EU that we need to address these issues upstream, and one of the most pressing upstream challenges is the civil war in Syria. As I have already said once this afternoon, the Prime Minister will set out our comprehensive approach to that problem—military, political and humanitarian—on Thursday.

Robert Ffello (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): What part of the discussions at the EU Foreign Affairs Council has centred on the very real genocide that is happening, including in UNHCR refugee camps in Lebanon, Jordan and the Kurdish autonomous region, by radicalised Islamists linked to Daesh who are killing people—killing Christians—in those camps and driving them out of them?

Mr Hammond: I have to tell the hon. Gentleman candidly that that has not been the focus of the discussion in the Foreign Affairs Council about the migration crisis, but I am aware of concerns about what is going on in the camps. The UK's approach is to invest heavily in providing safe and appropriate facilities for refugees in the region so they can return to Syria in due course, and we will continue to advocate that approach and encourage our EU partners to put more money into that effort.

EU Reform

8. **Holly Lynch** (Halifax) (Lab): What discussions he has had with his EU counterparts on the proposals for EU reform in the Prime Minister's letter of 10 November 2015 to the President of the European Council. [902310]

9. **Wayne David** (Caerphilly) (Lab): What discussions he has had with his EU counterparts on the proposals for EU reform in the Prime Minister's letter of 10 November 2015 to the President of the European Council. [902311]

The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington): My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has had productive rounds of talks with every European leader and with the Presidents of the European Council, the European Parliament and the European Commission. The Foreign Secretary, the Chancellor and I also maintain regular contact with our counterparts right across Europe.

Holly Lynch: Will the Minister go further and confirm that the Government will not seek to tear up hard-won employment rights as part of this renegotiation with the European Union?

Mr Lidington: We believe that our flexibility opt-out from the 48-hour week under the working time directive is important for keeping employment levels in this country high, compared with the tragic levels of unemployment in many other European nations, and we shall certainly be fighting very hard to ensure that we keep that opt-out.

Wayne David: Will the Minister confirm that no treaty changes will be secured before the referendum?

Mr Lidington: I set out the position on that in my statement and my subsequent answers a week ago. It is important that we secure a package of changes that will be seen by all as irreversible and as legally binding.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): The Government used to complain about Tony Blair giving the UK's rebate back to the European Union, so why did the Prime Minister not ask for a reduction in our EU membership fee in his letter? Are the Government now happy that we gave up our rebate, or has the Prime Minister asked only for the things that he has already had agreed by the European Union, so that he can tell us that his negotiations have been a success—on the basis that if you ask for nothing and get nothing, it looks like a success?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend would do well to do as he has done before, and to applaud the Prime Minister's success in getting the first-ever reduction in the EU's multi-annual budget. I can assure my hon. Friend that the negotiations will be tough and, at times, difficult, but I am confident that they will end with a better set of relationships between this country and the EU.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): But surely it is the case that the very modest proposals set out in that letter are the only ones that the Government believe the rest of the European Union are prepared to agree to. That is why an end to free movement, which so many British people want to see, is not even going to be discussed.

Mr Lidington: We have made it clear that we want the freedom of movement for workers to be just that, and not a freedom to select the best welfare system anywhere in Europe. In our approach to this subject, we must also take into account the fact that hundreds of thousands of British citizens are able to work, study and live elsewhere in Europe.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Further to the previous question, will the issue of freedom of movement—the principle, not the detail—be discussed or not?

Mr Lidington: I have to ask the hon. Gentleman to re-read the letter that the Prime Minister sent to Donald Tusk last week. It makes it clear that, while we accept the principle of freedom of movement for workers, we want to secure changes to ensure that we can reduce the pull factors exerted by elements of our welfare system, which add to the migration into this country.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Following on from what my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) said, if the bar is so high and so tough, what are the difficulties? What is the Prime Minister really going to fight for? What is the thing that is holding him back? Where is it? Come on! The bar is so low that this negotiation is just a joke.

Mr Lidington: I perhaps look forward to the day when my hon. Friend is able to join me at ministerial meetings in Europe, where he will see that the task of negotiating is not quite as easy as he made out in his question. I cannot give a running commentary on ongoing negotiations, but I remind him that President Tusk said that the British requests are tough and that it would be “really difficult to find an agreement”.

That indicates that we have a real negotiation in front of us.

Yemen

10. **Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP):** What steps he plans to take to ensure that potential breaches of international humanitarian law by the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen are investigated. [902312]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): Britain has made its support for President Hadi in Yemen very clear and recognised his legitimate request for military assistance in deterring the Houthi-Saleh aggression, which has compounded an already dire humanitarian situation. We are aware of reports of alleged violations of international humanitarian law, and both the Foreign Secretary and I have received repeated assurances from Saudi Arabia of compliance.

Martyn Day: Can the Minister give a timeline for the “proper investigations” pledged earlier this month into any breaches of humanitarian law in Yemen?

Mr Ellwood: These investigations must be concluded, they must be looked into and they will be ongoing. The situation on the ground is very difficult and, in many cases, we are unable to have access to verify what has happened. I am pleased to say that progress is being made by the UN envoy, Ismail Ahmed, in bringing the parties together in Geneva very shortly, and that is where we need to focus in terms of getting a ceasefire in place.

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): The humanitarian consequences of the conflict in Yemen, a country I know well, are heart-rending. Does the Minister agree that international peace talks leading to a political settlement are the best way to bring an end to the humanitarian suffering and any potential breaches of international law in Yemen?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that we are discussing important challenges in the middle east, but unfortunately the scale of the situation in Yemen is dire; 20 million people are facing famine and starvation, as there is a lack of oil, water and the support that they need. There is no governance there and until we have a ceasefire, the port of Hodeidah will not be able to be opened up to allow that humanitarian support to come into the country.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Human Rights Watch has documented 27 air strikes since 26 March that appear to have violated the laws of war in Yemen. On 11 November, the Foreign Secretary that he supported “proper investigations” into human rights violations from all sides in the Yemen conflict. Can the Minister therefore explain why the UK failed to support the Dutch at the last meeting of the UN Human Rights Council when they called for a credible investigation into these violations?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady raises important points. I met non-governmental organisations and had a round-table discussion on policy, and many of these issues were raised. As she states, there was an international discussion on this matter in that process. We have been wanting to encourage Saudi Arabia and other parties that are involved—it is not just the Saudis in this coalition, but 10 other countries—and we want these cases looked into efficiently and properly by the country itself.

Mr Speaker: We are very short of time, but I want to make further progress.

ISIL: Iraq

11. **Stuart Andrew** (Pudsey) (Con): What assessment he has made of the prospects of defeating ISIL in Iraq. [902313]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Philip Hammond): Since operations by the global coalition began last year, ISIL has lost more than 30% of the territory it once controlled in Iraq. Most recently, Kurdish forces retook Sinjar, and Iraqi security forces have taken Baiji and are preparing to take Ramadi. Slowly but surely, ISIL is being pushed back, and I am confident that it will be driven out of Iraq in time.

Stuart Andrew: As chair of the all-party group on Islamophobia, I do wish we would formally refer to these people as Daesh. As they are steadily pushed back in Iraq, does my right hon. Friend agree that cutting their supply lines with Syria will hasten its defeat and, importantly, bring about the restoration of Iraq’s territorial integrity.

Mr Hammond: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. Of course, the retaking of Sinjar is a very important step in that, as it sits astride the most important supply route from Raqqa into Iraq. Ultimately, we need not just to cut the supply lines, but to go to the heart and the head of the beast in Raqqa.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State regard Turkey as a reliable ally in the battle against ISIL, given that not only has it today shot down a Russian jet, even though the Russians are also trying to fight ISIL, but it is buying oil from ISIL to prop it up and it is bombing the Kurds, who are also fighting ISIL? This Syrian engagement is an almighty mess.

Mr Hammond: I see that old habits die hard, and that the hon. Gentleman remains an apologist for Russian actions. Turkey is an important NATO ally. It holds the key to a number of really very important questions, both in relation to the battle against ISIL and to the migration challenge that Europe faces, and it will remain a very important partner for this country and for the European Union.

Syria

12. **Oliver Dowden** (Hertsmere) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to put in place a new political process in Syria. [902314]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Philip Hammond): Following my recent discussions in Vienna, an International Syria Support Group will now meet on a regular basis, in parallel with Syrian-led discussions between the opposition and the regime facilitated by the UN, to take forward a transition process for that country. The UK will work with our international partners to maintain momentum in this important endeavour.

Oliver Dowden: Is it not clearer than ever that the presence of ISIS in Syria represents an immediate threat to our national security? Given that the UK has significant military assets that could make a significant contribution to the fight against ISIS, is it not incumbent on us in this House to support our allies, and our failure to do so would cause complete bewilderment on their part?

Mr Hammond: It is true that we do have military capabilities, in particular the precision weapons available on Tornado aircraft, that would make a difference to the military battle on the ground in Syria. It is incumbent on us—and we have accepted this challenge—not only to make the case for military intervention, but to set that case in a broader context of a comprehensive approach to the Syria problem. The Prime Minister has taken on himself the responsibility of delivering his comprehensive strategy to the House.

Jo Cox (Batley and Spen) (Lab): It is ever more apparent that, unless we deal with the biggest recruitment sergeant for Daesh in Syria, namely the aerial bombardments and other abuses of civilians by the Assad regime, we will not tackle the cancer that is Daesh. Will the Secretary of State say a little more on how he plans to sequence and prioritise strategic UK engagement in efforts to bring about a ceasefire and political transition alongside a comprehensive plan to tackle Daesh?

Mr Hammond: Yes, we will do it through the International Syria Support Group that we have set up. The hon. Lady is absolutely right that we will not get a ceasefire or the opposition groups working with the rump of regime forces against Daesh unless and until they can be clear that Assad is going at a clear and defined point in the transition process. At the moment, we do not have agreement across the ISSG, particularly with the Russians and the Iranians, about that point. That is where we have to go, and the fundamental thrust of all our discussions is around trying to get agreement on a route for an exit by Assad so that the rest of the pieces of this jigsaw can drop into place.

Middle East

13. **Sir Nicholas Soames** (Mid Sussex) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with (a) the Gulf Co-operation Council and (b) other Governments on plans to improve security in the middle east. [902315]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): Given Britain's strong strategic, diplomatic and economic ties with Gulf nations and other states in the middle east, both the Foreign Secretary and I regularly meet our counterparts to discuss a range of issues including security. In recent weeks, the UK hosted the Egyptian President here in London. The Foreign Secretary has visited Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain. I have returned from Oman, and will shortly be heading to Kuwait—I say that hopefully, looking at the Whip on duty.

Mr Speaker: The Minister is a busy bee, and we are grateful to him.

Sir Nicholas Soames: As we face an epidemic of jihadist violence, can my hon. Friend assure the House that, in his extensive and close dialogue with our Gulf friends and partners, he will continue to press on them that the funding by some of them of these dangerous jihadi organisations really must stop?

Mr Ellwood: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. One of the five key traits of the strategy is preventing the funding that is taking place that is keeping ISIL alive. It is important that all countries across the middle east in the coalition of 65 work hard to prevent that from happening.

18. [902322] **Mrs Louise Ellman** (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister raise in his discussions the current terrorist attacks on Israeli civilians? Some 108 Israelis have been killed or injured by shootings and stabbings on the streets in recent weeks. Will he also condemn the incitement that goes with that, including the statement from the Palestinian cleric in Gaza who said that Jews should be turned into body parts to stab “the myths of the Talmud” out of their heads?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady raises a very serious point. Thankfully, in the past couple of weeks there has been a reduction in violence in the west bank. Since the start of the current spate of violence, we have spoken regularly with both sides—the Israeli Government and the Palestinian Authority—and we urgently need to de-escalate tensions and get all parties back to the table.

Rohingya: Burma

14. **Rushanara Ali** (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to prevent persecution of the Rohingya people in Burma. [902316]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr Hugo Swire): I saw for myself in July the desperate plight of the Rohingya community. Alleviating that situation remains a priority for us. We take every opportunity to press the Burmese authorities to tackle the issue, and we will continue to press the incoming Government.

Rushanara Ali: Last week, a key National League for Democracy official said that the plight of the Rohingya people is not a priority. What discussions has the Minister had with the new leadership about the refugee crisis—there

are 140,000 people in internally displaced camps, to which humanitarian institutions do not have sufficient access—and about reform of the discriminatory 1982 citizenship law?

Mr Swire: As I said in my written statement to the House on 20 November, the landmark elections on 8 November were

“a victory for the people of Burma”,—[*Official Report*, 20 November 2015; Vol. 602, c. 25WS.]

notwithstanding the fact that the Rohingya were disfranchised from those elections. That is something that the incoming Government will have to deal with. I concur with what President Obama has said about the Rohingya in the past few days. Like him, we hope they will be

“treated fairly and justly in their own country”,

and we believe, as he does, that they are

“deserving of the world's protection and the world's support.”

The incoming Government in Burma are going to have an awful lot on their plate and will have to manage expectations. We stand ready to help them to do so, and addressing the grievances of the Rohingya people must be pretty near the top of that list.

Mr Speaker: I should tell the House that I have written to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, I hope with the concurrence of the House, to congratulate her and the National League for Democracy on their magnificent victory on 8 November. I am very grateful to the Minister for what he has just said.

Topical Questions

T1. [902292] **Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Philip Hammond): My priorities remain the struggle against violent extremist Islamism in all its forms, including our response to the recent despicable attacks in Paris and the middle east; the containment of Russian actions that threaten the international rules-based system; and the renegotiation of Britain's relationship with the European Union. Decisions that have been taken in the strategic defence and security review will underpin the diplomacy that allows us to make effective progress in all of those areas, backing our undoubted soft power with hard power. Tomorrow I will travel to Malta for the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting and for the state visit of Her Majesty the Queen.

Cat Smith: Given the changes to the ministerial code, is it the Foreign Secretary's view that Ministers and the civil and diplomatic services remain bound by the UK's international treaty obligations?

Mr Hammond: I think the answer to that is yes.

T2. [902293] **Neil Carmichael** (Stroud) (Con): How does the strategic defence spending review provide the Foreign Office with new tools to deal with the situation in Syria, particularly relating to wider strategy and co-ordination?

Mr Hammond: I have said to my colleagues across Government, long before the publication of the SDSR yesterday, that the most important reinforcement our diplomacy could have is clear statements about this country's determination to back its armed forces. We have done that, first with the commitment to 2% and then, in the SDSR, turning that commitment into specific programmes and plans that will deliver to our armed forces the capability we need to back our soft power with hard power.

T6. [902297] **Ian Austin** (Dudley North) (Lab): I spent a lot of time over the weekend listening to people in Dudley tell me their views on Syria. On the whole, they said that they think there is a case for dealing with ISIL-Daesh, especially after the attacks in Tunisia and Paris, but they want to know exactly what practical difference Britain can make, how civilians will be protected, and whether there is a comprehensive plan to rebuild Syria afterwards, with a proper Government in place of Assad, who used chemical weapons on his people.

Mr Hammond: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman and I am glad to hear that he is carefully taking the pulse of his constituents. On the last point, as I have said several times already today, the Prime Minister will set out a comprehensive strategy. That is not just about military intervention, but about how we use that military intervention to achieve the political solution we need in the wider conflict in Syria.

On the specific military point, the UK does have capabilities that will make a difference. The dual-mode Brimstone missile on our Tornado aircraft is a precision weapon unlike anything that any of the other coalition allies are able to deploy. That in itself, because of its precision and its low payload, will ensure minimisation of collateral damage and collateral casualties. That is one of the reasons our allies are so keen that we take part in this campaign.

T3. [902294] **Lucy Allan** (Telford) (Con): There has been another weekend of deadly terror attacks on Israeli citizens, including a brutal stabbing yesterday. Will the Foreign Secretary condemn those attacks, and does he agree that sanctioned incitement to commit terror must end?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As I articulated in a previous answer, we need to get all parties back to the table. Unfortunately, it seems that the planets are misaligned at the moment. We need to reconfigure and ensure that all parties are able to come back and prevent the scale of violence from increasing.

T10. [902301] **Ms Margaret Ritchie** (South Down) (SDLP): What steps is the Foreign Secretary taking to ensure that genuine law-abiding refugees leaving Syria are not locked out of the asylum process as a result of border measures being introduced across the EU after the brutal attacks in Paris?

The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington): Clearly it is a matter for each member state of the European Union and other European countries to determine their

own border controls. The way forward has to be for asylum seekers to be properly assessed and screened at the first safe country they go to and for us to tackle the problem in the camps in the near east, so that people get some assurance of a decent life and opportunities for education for their children there rather than hazarding this appallingly dangerous voyage to Europe.

T4. [902295] **Dr Phillip Lee** (Bracknell) (Con): I gather that I have been successful in securing a debate next Monday on Britain's role in the middle east. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that in order that we play a constructive role in dealing with ISIS and other instabilities in the region we need a comprehensive strategy towards the middle east as a whole, not just Syria?

Mr Philip Hammond: Yes, I do agree. The Government are working up a Gulf strategy looking at how the UK will engage with this very important region—important for our security and for our prosperity as well—over the next five to 10 years.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): Does the Foreign Secretary agree that defeating Daesh abroad requires rock-solid unity at home? Britain's Muslim community are part of our pillar of strength. Will he join me in deploring yesterday's headline in *The Sun* which sought to cast doubt on that unity of purpose? Britain's Muslim community hate Daesh and want it defeated, and headlines like that in *The Sun* yesterday sow division when what we need is unity.

Mr Hammond: It is absolutely clear to me that the overwhelming majority of the Muslim population here in the UK and indeed across the Muslim world deplore what is going on and are sickened by the fact that it is being done ostensibly in their name. They are very clear that their religion does not in any way support or authorise the actions being carried out by Daesh, and we should help them to reclaim their religion from the terrorists and the extremists.

T5. [902296] **Karl McCartney** (Lincoln) (Con): Improving economic ties between the UK and sub-Saharan Africa is important, so what are the Government's objectives at the global African investment summit next week?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (James Duddridge): My hon. Friend is absolutely right that economic development is central to everything that we do. Ahead of the global African investment summit I will be meeting a collection of Presidents, Prime Ministers and Foreign Ministers at Lancaster House, to look at economic development and at working with those countries to develop their businesses alongside British business, to grow Africa out of poverty.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary has several times today mentioned the need for a comprehensive strategy. We have heard before about financial sanctions. Will he update the House on what conversations he has had with counterparts in the US and the EU about stopping the supply of cash and financial services to Daesh?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that the fight is not only on the battlefield but in cutting down on finances. At the working groups where we discuss these matters we are looking to freeze accounts. Huge amounts of work have been done through the financial services authorities to identify the flow of funds coming from large donations from individuals, but we are also looking at the money streams coming from Daesh itself as it sells exports, antiquities and oils. We are winning this, and that is reflected in the fact that the amount that foreign fighters get on a monthly basis has been reduced because the funding streams into Daesh are being reduced.

T8. [902299] **Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): Will the Government support all efforts to address the increasing instability in Burundi, which affects not just its own people but the entire region?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman's brevity should be widely followed.

James Duddridge: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising the situation in Burundi. It is important that there is a regional solution, and I have had discussions with the Rwandan Foreign Minister and the new Tanzanian Government, which have engaged the African Union and the EU. We got over a difficult moment a few weeks ago, but this is still a matter of grave concern, and I have had a number of frank and open conversations with the Burundian Foreign Minister. Indeed, I sent him an open letter, as did several members of the international community.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights estimates that Russian air strikes have killed 400 civilians, 97 of whom were children. When the Foreign Secretary meets Foreign Minister Lavrov in a couple of weeks will he urge him to refocus those air strikes away from the opposition armies that are fighting Assad's reign of terror towards the terrorists who brought down that Russian airliner?

Mr Philip Hammond: That is absolutely right. That is exactly what we have urged the Russians to do. If they want to fight ISIL we are happy to work with them, but at the moment a significant proportion—the majority, in fact—of their airstrikes are directed at the moderate opposition fighting Assad. In fairness, I should say that since the Russians acknowledged that it almost certainly was terrorist action that brought down that airliner they have directed a larger proportion of their strikes against ISIL-held territory.

T9. [902300] **Chris Skidmore** (Kingswood) (Con): Can my hon. Friend provide any further detail on discussions that he has had with the Iraqi Government about ensuring that measures are taken to promote security and enhance Iraq's economic regeneration in areas that have been liberated from ISIL's control?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: the focus should be on supporting Iraq. Unfortunately, many Sunnis in Iraq still believe that they are not properly represented in Baghdad. We are working with Prime Minister Abadi to encourage laws on the national

guard and on financial services to go through so that Sunnis have a place and are represented properly in Baghdad.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I thank the Under-Secretary for writing to me about my Yemeni constituents. I read the Home Office advice to which he directed me, but does he agree that it does not inspire confidence that the Home Office managed to mis-translate "Médecins Sans Frontières"? Will he meet me and the Home Office to discuss that further?

Mr Ellwood: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising that matter, and I should be delighted to meet her to discuss it in more detail.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): The world's attention is rightly on the middle east and Syria, but there is an ongoing situation in Ukraine. Has my right hon. Friend made a recent assessment of the situation in Ukraine, and has he had any conversations with his Russian counterparts?

Mr Lidington: We remain concerned about the situation in Ukraine. I was last there in early October, when I met the Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister and other Ukrainian leaders and parliamentarians. The latest situation is that there has been an upsurge of fighting in certain locations around Donetsk, and the key thing is to use all diplomatic energies to ensure that the Minsk process is followed through to the end, and that all parts of it are completed.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): We are right not to be part of Schengen, and we are right to call for reform, but does not the invoking of the EU mutual defence clause remind us why we have to be part of a reformed EU as well as part of NATO?

Mr Lidington: What France has done by invoking that article in the treaty is ask other member states—and crucially not the European institutions—to come to its assistance in all possible ways, to react to the terrorist onslaught on Paris the other week. It is important that we bear in mind that that treaty article refers to the need for the EU always to co-ordinate its work with that of NATO.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): The Foreign Secretary will be aware that the former Prime Minister of Canada, Stephen Harper, was robust in his support of self-determination for the people of the Falkland Islands. Will my right hon. Friend take the opportunity when Mr Trudeau visits this week to emphasise how grateful we are for the Canadians' support for the Falkland Islands, and to ask whether the policy will remain the same under this premiership?

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr Hugo Swire): My hon. Friend can be reassured that we expect the same from Prime Minister Trudeau, who is on his way to London to meet our Prime Minister and Her Majesty before travelling on to the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Valetta. We expect exactly the same relationship—it is an ancient and potent relationship between ourselves and Canada.

My hon. Friend will be aware that there has been an election in Argentina and we look forward to working with the new Government of Argentina who, we hope,

will not demonstrate the bullying and bellicosity shown by the former Government of Argentina to the people of the Falkland Islands.

Points of Order

12.35 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Last week at Prime Minister's questions the Prime Minister told the House that

"we have seen an increase of 3,800 in the number of neighbourhood officers over the Parliament and a 31% cut in crime."—[*Official Report*, 18 November 2015; Vol. 602, c. 665.]

On the 3,800 figure, in 2012 the Government lifted the ring-fencing of the neighbourhood policing budget, despite warnings from Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary that it would be the area most at risk from a cut of 25% in the last Parliament. Crucially, the Home Office figures prayed in aid by the Prime Minister are a consequence of the subsequent recategorisation of officers on response as having a neighbourhood function. It is not a genuine increase in neighbourhood policing. In truth, the Government's own figures show 17,000 police officers gone—12,000 from the frontline—and 4,500 police community support officers gone.

On the crime figures, I can do no better than quote from a Government exercise co-ordinated by the national fraud co-ordinator, in which he says that the results of the next crime survey of England and Wales will show a 40% increase in crime. I am sure you will agree, Mr Speaker, that on matters such as the police, crime and national security, it is essential that the deliberations of this House are informed by the facts. Has the Prime Minister indicated his preparedness to come to the House and put the record straight?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his attempted point of order and for giving me advance notice of his intention to raise it. The short answer is that I have not received any indication that the Prime Minister proposes to come to the House to correct the record. It is, of course, the responsibility of every right hon. and hon. Member to ensure the veracity of what he or she says. In the event that any Member thinks that he or she has erred, that Member has the responsibility to put the record straight. More widely, I know the House will understand that disagreement about statistics is part of the currency of political debate, in which the hon. Gentleman is a practised and dextrous expert. If there is an Opposition day ere long, I have a hunch that we will hear the sonorous tones of the hon. Gentleman, very likely from his vantage point on the Opposition Front Bench. Meanwhile, he has had a bite of the cherry and I hope he was satisfied with the taste.

Mr Graham Allen (Nottingham North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Children's Commissioner for England, Mrs Anne Longfield, today published a

report, "Protecting children from harm", which outlines the prevalence of child sex abuse in this country, where only one in eight cases of child sex abuse is reported to the authorities. Would it be in order to ask a Minister from the Department for Education to respond urgently on the very important matter of the prevalence of child sex abuse, hopefully even before Education questions on Monday?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that point of order. The question of whether a Minister comes to the House to make a statement voluntarily is a matter for the Minister. I was conscious of this matter, which was courteously drawn to my attention by the hon. Gentleman. My understanding is that the Government have just received the report and have not yet penned a response. I had a sense that the House would benefit from an exchange on the matter at the point at which the Government had determined a response, but these matters, as the hon. Gentleman knows, are kept under review. It would be perfectly open to a Minister to come to the House before Education questions or, if not, to do so pretty soon. I dare say the hon. Gentleman has his back channels by which he keeps in touch with the Government's thinking on this, and I feel sure that it will not be long before a very thorough exploration of the issues takes place on the Floor of the House.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Do you have it in your power to extend Foreign and Commonwealth Office questions? I know that a number of Members here would like to have raised an attack in Jhelum in Pakistan against the Ahmadi Muslim community, and to have heard from Ministers that they would call in the high commissioner for Pakistan to challenge him and to say to him that attacking people on the basis of faith is not acceptable.

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order. He speaks with all the moral force of a former Deputy Leader of the House, no less. I note his inquiry in relation to my powers. The short answer is that I do not have the power to extend Foreign Office questions or any other Question Time session—[*Interruption*]—although I sometimes find myself doing so anyway, as those on the Treasury Bench were quick to point out, more or less good-naturedly. The truth of the matter is that we often overrun a bit because I want to hear Back Benchers. The right hon. Gentleman has very cheekily and inappropriately, but I think on this occasion forgivably, made his point in his own way, even though he did not really have a right to do so.

Protection of Family Homes (Enforcement and Permitted Development)

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

12.41 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about guidance to local authorities on when to take enforcement action for breaches of planning law; to clarify guidance on the scope of permitted development rights; to make provision about rights and entitlements, including of appeal, for people whose homes are affected by such breaches; to make provision for the inspection and regulation of building under the permitted development regime; to establish financial penalties for developers who breach planning law in certain circumstances; and for connected purposes.

The Selly Oak Village and Bournbrook parts of my constituency were once particularly attractive places, full of small terraced and other family homes on a series of quiet, interlocking, tree-lined streets. Nowadays, a walk down Hubert, Teignmouth or Dawlish Roads reveals a very different scene. One is visually assaulted by a series of “To Let” boards of all shapes and sizes, installed at all angles. The streets, pavements and small front gardens are littered with skips, builders’ rubble, sand and cement, and there is constant noise at all hours, including at weekends, of additional bedrooms being hammered and bolted on to dwellings. Where once we could expect to see rows of small family homes, we now witness architectural carbuncles jutting at odd angles, extending into adjacent houses and covering rear gardens. Additional bedrooms are variously described as sheds, games rooms and saunas.

My local authority seems powerless to arrest this destruction. It says that enforcement action is costly and the guidance from central Government is unclear. Enforcement action is discretionary and local authorities are required to act proportionately. Birmingham City Council has advised me that it has no policy of limiting the number of planning enforcement cases that it pursues, but I note that there has been a steady reduction in recent years. To be fair, it has initiated a limited article 4 direction covering a small part of my constituency, which means that planning permission is needed before a family house can be converted into a house in multiple occupation for up to six people—a change, as I understand it, from class 3 to class 4 use. However, the problems continue. The issue is not confined to one area of my constituency or to one part of Birmingham, but affects many towns and cities across the country, as is evidenced by the broad support for the Bill.

Examples of the problems include those of Mr and Mrs White, a retired couple, who I believe are in the Gallery. The developer who bought the house next door commenced an extension that in effect changed their detached home into a semi-detached property, as the roof extension expanded to sit on top of their roof and guttering. The council failed to take enforcement action, despite the fact that the work commenced without planning approval and was beyond the scope of permitted development. A surveyor’s report has indicated the damage done to the external wall of their home. This has cost them thousands of pounds in court fees, but as yet, the problem continues.

In Tiverton Road, Mrs O’Sullivan complained that work on an extension, which included digging up the foundations in a shared alleyway, had commenced without planning permission. The council agreed to investigate, but advised in advance that

“in deciding whether it would be expedient to take enforcement action, the council has to take into account whether any breach of planning control unacceptably affects public amenity or the use of land and buildings which should be protected in the public interest.”

In this case, the extension was not covered by permitted development regulations and needed planning approval. None the less, the council judged that the risk to Mrs O’Sullivan’s property constituted limited harm, and that her loss of light did not justify action.

In Bournbrook Road, a constituent complained about a landlord’s development that exceeded the dimensions on the plan available on the council website, but was told that officers had concluded that it was not expedient to take any action. In Gristhorpe Road, Miss Tempest complained that the Britannia Group continued to build extensions designed to convert homes into eight-bedroom properties, despite planning permission being refused. Elsewhere in Gristhorpe Road, cowboy builders demolished, without permission, the chimneys and gas flues that supported the gas fire of an elderly couple, putting them at serious risk. At another property, when a constituent complained, the council admitted that a three-level development overlooking his garden and those of his neighbours completely disregarded the article 4 direction and was without permission.

I could go on. I have case after case of rogue developers and cowboy builders doing as they please. All these cases are about ordinary people who have worked and saved for their family home, only to find that landlords and developers are working hand in glove with cowboy builders to buy up nearby properties and turning their road or street into a series of mini-hostels. It is no surprise that the value of the properties then plummets to the point at which the only person buying is yet another developer, and so the cycle begins again.

As I have investigated the issue, I have become aware of an unintended consequence of the permitted development arrangements. I want to be clear that I have nothing against permitted development—I welcome the Government’s good intentions in trying to make it easier for people to make small alterations or additions to their home—but I am not sure that the Government ever intended this permission to be exploited by ruthless landlords and developers, who are destroying family homes and bringing misery to thousands of ordinary family and retired couples, such as the Whites. The local authority advises me that the changes in the law mean that many agents and owners are unclear about what they can and cannot build. Strangely, those who advise the rogue landlords always err on the side of ever-greater expansion.

My ten-minute rule Bill seeks to achieve four things. First, it calls on the Department for Communities and Local Government to produce clearer guidance for planning authorities on when enforcement action should be taken, and asks all local authorities to publish an enforcement plan so that there are fewer grey areas. Secondly, it calls for a simple right of appeal for the victims of rogue building when the local authority concludes that it is not expedient to act.

[Steve McCabe]

Thirdly, the Bill asks that extensions be checked independently against building regulations to make sure that they are safe. At present, there is nothing to stop a rogue developer employing his or her own inspector to sign off the dodgy work done by his or her team of cowboy builders. If we do not act on this, a tragedy will surely follow.

Finally, the Bill calls on the Government to consider the introduction of fixed-penalty fines to serve as a deterrent against the actions of rogue developers. The penalties would be modelled on those that the Government propose in clause 86 of the Housing and Planning Bill to deal with rogue landlords.

This ten-minute rule Bill calls for a modest number of changes that are designed to protect family homes, address the enforcement problems and ease the position on permitted development so that it once again fulfils the aspirations of Ministers, without giving a licence to ride roughshod over local people and destroy family homes and local communities. I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Steve McCabe, Paul Blomfield, Mr Nigel Evans, Michael Fabricant, Diana Johnson, Norman Lamb, Shabana Mahmood, Greg Mulholland, Jess Phillips and Dr Alan Whitehead present the Bill.

Steve McCabe accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 29 January, and to be printed (Bill 100).

Opposition Day

[11TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Trident

Mr Speaker: I advise the House that the amendment has not been selected.

12.52 pm

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House believes that Trident should not be renewed.

It is a pleasure to move the motion that stands in my name and the names of my right hon. and hon. Friends in the Scottish National party, Plaid Cymru and the Green party.

The SNP was elected to this place in such numbers in May on a promise to do three things: first, to argue that the maximum possible powers be devolved to the Scottish Parliament, via the full delivery of the vow; secondly, to fight tooth and nail against the failed and divisive policies of austerity, and to protect the poorest and most vulnerable in our society from the worst excesses of this Government; and thirdly, to oppose Trident. By bringing this matter to the Floor of the House today, the SNP can say that within the first six months of being here, we have done exactly what we promised to do. Of course, there is much more that we need to do on all those issues, but no one will ever be able to accuse us of not doing what we said we would do.

In recent months, Trident and the UK's nuclear—

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Brendan O'Hara: If the hon. Lady will forgive me, I will make some progress.

No one could deny that Trident and the nuclear deterrent have been at the forefront of public debate for many years, not only because this is the 70th anniversary of the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but because the United Kingdom will soon decide whether to commit to spending £167,000,000,000 over the lifetime of the Trident programme.

We had high hopes that we would not be a lone voice. When the rank and file of the British Labour party elected the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), an avowed unilateralist, as its leader, SNP Members hoped that there would be serious opposition to Trident. Of course, the mere thought of that caused palpitations among both the red and blue shades of the British establishment. I genuinely wish the right hon. Gentleman well in continuing his robust opposition to Trident.

Mrs Murray: While the hon. Gentleman is outlining the reasons behind the motion, will he explain the SNP's apparent incoherence during the Scottish referendum campaign, when it pledged to scrap Trident on the one hand and to seek to join NATO, a nuclear alliance, on the other?

Brendan O'Hara: I hope the hon. Lady will forgive me if I do not accept for a moment her definition of incoherence. If that was incoherent, the actions of Germany, Spain and many other members of NATO are equally incoherent. I would point—

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Brendan O'Hara: Please, let me finish the answer. I point out to the hon. Lady that the last two Secretaries-General of NATO have been Danish and Norwegian—countries that have exactly the same position that we advocate.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Brendan O'Hara: No, I will make some progress. I realise that you are very keen to get in on this debate—so keen that you left a little message on my door this morning.

Mr Speaker: I am not keen to get into this debate and I did not leave a message on anybody's door.

Brendan O'Hara: My apologies, Mr Speaker. The hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) left a little note on my door this morning. I will come to him.

John Woodcock: On that point, though.

Tom Tugendhat: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Brendan O'Hara: No, I will make some progress.

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman—

John Woodcock: He's frit.

Mr Speaker: That is a matter of debate. The hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) has the floor. When it is clear that he is not taking an intervention, he must not be hollered at from a sedentary position by Members on either side of the House. He is free to develop his case.

Brendan O'Hara: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I wish the right hon. Member for Islington North well. I say to Members of his party that being anti-Trident can be a vote winner. The fact that the SNP was returned in such great numbers on an explicitly anti-Trident platform is testimony to that.

In recent weeks, the Scottish Parliament, yet again, reaffirmed its outright and overwhelming opposition to Trident. The Scottish Government, the Scottish TUC, the Scottish Churches and great swathes of Scottish civic society have set their face against Trident.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): Will my hon. Friend take this opportunity to remind us how the different political parties in the Scottish Parliament voted on Trident? What decision was reached at the annual conference of the Scottish Labour party? Does he not think it

strange that the single Member of Parliament from the Scottish Labour party, who opposes Trident and whose party opposes Trident, is not even in the Chamber for this debate?

Brendan O'Hara: As my right hon. Friend points out, there is an established consensus among the Scottish political parties against Trident. The Scottish National party, the Scottish Greens, the Scottish Socialists and, as he says, the Scottish Labour party are all opposed to Trident. We have a Government in Westminster with just one elected Member of Parliament from Scotland, representing a party that failed to achieve even 15% of the vote in Scotland, yet they insist that they have the right to foist on Scotland weapons of mass destruction that Scotland has said it does not want.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Does my hon. Friend find it strange to see the contrast between the unified voice from Scotland and the confusion from the Welsh Labour party, which is for Trident and then against Trident, and that is quite apart from the First Minister, who wants to move it down to west Wales?

Brendan O'Hara: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. I have been asked a number of times by the media and the press, "Are you doing this simply to embarrass the Labour party?", but the Labour party needs no assistance from me in embarrassing itself on this matter.

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP) *rose*—

Brendan O'Hara: I will take the hon. Gentleman's intervention in a moment.

I have always argued that there is no moral, economic or military case for Trident, and—let us be absolutely clear—there is no moral case for any state to possess weapons of mass destruction. Possessing the wherewithal to destroy the world and everything in it several times over is not something to be proud of; indeed, it is something to be deeply ashamed of. I know of no creed, belief system or article of faith that has ever said it is okay to hold the threat of annihilation over one's neighbour, and to disguise it as peacekeeping.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the possession of nuclear weapons serves as a deterrent that has worked well for many years? In 1994 Ukraine unilaterally disarmed, relying on a treaty with Russia that meant it would not invade. That undertaking was broken and Ukraine is now suffering because of the absence of those weapons.

Brendan O'Hara: I will pick up the hon. Gentleman's point later in my speech. The idea of a deterrent is important and I will address that issue.

Not only is Trident morally questionable, but I believe it is economic madness. In 2006 when the Successor programme was first discussed, the likely cost of building new submarines was put at between £15 billion and £20 billion. Yesterday's strategic defence and security review put that cost at £31 billion, with £10 billion of contingency on top of that. That is £41 billion set aside to build submarines—the cost has doubled in the last decade, and I shudder to think what it will be in the next decade. Based on the Government's own figures,

[*Brendan O'Hara*]

the lifetime cost of Trident will be in the region of £167,000,000,000. That is real, taxpayers' money, and there is no escaping that fact. It may—indeed, it should—embarrass the Labour party that that money has been made on the backs of the poor and the most vulnerable in our society.

The Chancellor appeared at Faslane, appearing out of nowhere like Mr Benn—I mean the cartoon character, not the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn)—to announce £500 million of extensions to jetties. On the same day, the United Nations announced that it would be investigating whether the Government's policy of cutting welfare support to the disabled was a violation of their human rights.

John Woodcock *rose*—

Brendan O'Hara: I know that the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) is anxious to get involved in the debate, but as the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute I represent Faslane and Coulport, and I live roughly six miles from the base. For decades, my constituents have been told that their jobs and prosperity depend totally on that base.

Martin John Docherty (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): My hon. Friend's constituency is next to mine. Does he have the same grave concerns that I have about the alarming number of nuclear safety incidents that have been reported at Faslane naval base? There was a 54% increase in the number of incidents reported in 2013-14 compared with 2012-13. Such incidents threaten the safety not only of the workers at Faslane nuclear base—a large proportion of whom live in my constituency—but the communities that surround it.

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind the House that interventions should be extremely brief. It is not proper for a Member to read out what amounts to a mini-speech that purports to be an intervention.

Brendan O'Hara: I agree with my hon. Friend that safety is paramount, and I raised that issue last week in a debate in Westminster Hall. There are huge safety concerns among workers at Faslane about the cuts being made within the nuclear operations department.

I hope my hon. Friends realise that my election in Argyll and Bute suggests that we do not have to put all our eggs in one basket. Let me make it clear that by saying no to Trident, we are not saying no to Faslane—far from it. [*Interruption.*] The SNP has never, and will never, consider closing the Faslane base. Whether as part of the United Kingdom or—hopefully sooner rather than later—as part of an independent Scotland, Faslane will have a bright, non-nuclear future as a conventional naval base. Faslane is a fantastic facility, and its proximity to the north Atlantic means that its prospects are not dependent on having nuclear submarines based there. [*Interruption.*]

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Given the outrageous chortling from both sides of the House, does my hon. Friend agree that the only way that the UK establishment parties will support Faslane is if it has nuclear weapons? What a shocking proposal that is.

Brendan O'Hara: I agree with my hon. Friend. Today we have seen through any pretence that the Labour party is somehow taking a radical position on nuclear weapons—it is bewildering.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): I assure the hon. Gentleman that some Labour Members support his view. I am one of those, and I intend to vote for the motion this evening.

Brendan O'Hara: The hon. Gentleman's support is very much appreciated.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is generous in giving way. As I understood it, he said that without nuclear submarines at Faslane, and with the separation of Scotland from the rest of the United Kingdom, he would seek to have a naval base with ships at Faslane. He also said that he considered it a waste of money to build new hardware for the Navy because that money could be better spent on welfare. Those points do not seem to marry up.

Brendan O'Hara: I understand the hon. Gentleman's point, but at no point have we said that we will double-spend that money. Scotland's share of the money that we would save by not renewing Trident would be in the region of £15 billion over the lifetime of Trident, and that money could be invested in conventional defence and in turning Faslane from a nuclear submarine port to a state-of-the-art conventional naval base.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Brendan O'Hara: I will make progress. I have taken a lot of interventions and been very generous.

I have always argued that there is no military case for Trident because it is not a military weapon. Trident is a political weapon that can never, and will never, be used. Nevertheless, it is set to consume between 30% and 50% of the UK defence procurement budget.

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman understand that Trident is being used every day? Every moment that we have continuous at-sea deterrence, Trident is being used. The fact that it is never fired in anger is a symbol of its success.

Brendan O'Hara: It will come as no surprise to the right hon. Gentleman that I do not agree with him at all, and I will come on to the point about deterrence.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Brendan O'Hara: I will make progress. I have been very generous up to now.

The money spent on Trident is put into keeping Britain at the top table of the United Nations Security Council. Money that should be doing good—whether through peacekeeping, reacting to emergencies such as the Ebola outbreak, or relieving the humanitarian crises that are currently unfolding in the middle east and north Africa—is being sacrificed on a collective military and political ego trip that has more to do with status than with defence.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Brendan O'Hara: If the hon. Lady will forgive me, I will make some progress.

Indeed, Members should not just take my word for it. In a Defence Committee evidence session last week, General Sir Richard Shirreff, referring to finding money for Trident, said:

“you either go down the line of nuclear capability at the expense of conventional capability or conventional capability at the expense of nuclear. It seems to be that sort of zero-sum game”.

The problem with Trident is that it puts pressure on the rest of the defence budget to the detriment of our overall security. Even Tony Blair, not someone I seek to quote often in this place, wrote in his memoir about Trident renewal that

“The expense is huge and the utility...non-existent in terms of military use.”

He decided to go down the road of Trident renewal, however, because it would be

“too big a downgrading of our status as a nation.”

Caroline Lucas: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that nuclear weapons are actually making us less, not more, safe? They give out a signal to the rest of the world that the only way to guarantee security is by acquiring nuclear weapons, therefore driving proliferation rather than countering it.

Brendan O'Hara: I absolutely and wholeheartedly agree.

Tony Blair summed it up: the UK's obsession with having an independent nuclear deterrent is little more than a former imperial power indulging in a desperate search for a better yesterday. Possessing Trident is not about defence; it is about the illusion of continuing past glories regardless of cost. The fact is that we cannot afford it. Pride, it seems, will not let us back down. We would rather cut benefits from the disabled. We would rather take tax credits away from the working poor, as long as the bottomless pit of Trident is fed.

Mr Jamie Reed (Copeland) (Lab): On affordability, will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Brendan O'Hara: I will.

Mr Reed: I am exceptionally grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I have written to the former First Minister about these issues on a number of occasions and have not yet received any answers. In the event of decommissioning the nuclear fleet and the warheads at Faslane, where in Scotland would the nuclear materials be stored and disposed of, and how much would it cost the Scottish taxpayer?

Brendan O'Hara: Scotland is absolutely set to take its responsibility. Scotland accepts that we have responsibility and Scotland will take care of it, but to use that as an argument to re-arm is, frankly, ridiculous.

Andrew Bridgen: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Brendan O'Hara: I will make some progress.

The possession of top-end military capabilities without the ability to exercise them effectively is known in strategic parlance as a hollow force. To put that in a more colloquial way, we are acting as though we have a fur coat and nae knickers. Trident is a military and political ego trip paid for on the backs of the poor.

The UK independent nuclear deterrent is not all that independent. I refer hon. Members to the Defence Committee report of 30 June 2006, which states that the fact that

“in theory, the British Prime Minister could give the order to fire Trident missiles without getting prior approval from the White House has allowed the UK to maintain the façade of being a global military power. In practice, though, it is difficult to conceive of any situation in which a Prime Minister would fire Trident without prior US approval.”

In reality, it will be a US commander-in-chief who will ultimately decide. In 18 months' time, that commander-in-chief could be President Donald Trump. Does anyone seriously think that Trident makes the world a safer place?

Alec Shelbrooke: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Brendan O'Hara: I have already given way once to the hon. Gentleman. Let me press on.

Everyone accepts that the world has never been a more uncertain place. The world is changing and the threats are changing. They are most certainly not as they were 30 or 40 years ago. Many military strategists recognise that the changes have to be prepared for accordingly. They have identified important threats. There is mass migration into mega cities; by 2040, it is thought that 70% of the world will be urbanised. The great movement of people because of climate change and the search for natural resources, such as water and energy, will cause huge global problems too.

We are increasingly engaged in an ideological war with terrorism. Hybrid warfare and cyber-attacks will be among our enemies' main weapons. Indeed, the Prime Minister himself said that Daesh was an existential threat to the United Kingdom. We have to assume, sadly, that after the evil of Daesh is destroyed other ideologically driven groups will emerge. Looking ahead, in many ways the traditional nation state will not be the main enemy. Why then, given the radical changes happening in the world, is the UK's response exactly as it was 30 or 40 years ago—nuclear-armed submarines at sea 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year, with nuclear missiles pointed at and designed to obliterate European cities?

Andrew Bridgen: The hon. Gentleman makes the case for Britain's unilateral nuclear disarmament, a case we have heard many times in this Chamber over the years. How does he address the inescapable fact that the only nation that has ever had nuclear weapons used against it, namely Japan, did not have any?

Brendan O'Hara: I am not entirely sure what the hon. Gentleman is driving at. To perfectly honest, it was not exactly worth waiting for. It makes no military sense at all. I return to the view that Trident is not a military weapon; it is purely a political weapon.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is clearly satisfied that the Russian state is no longer a threat to western security and the

[Angela Smith]

security of the UK. Perhaps he could give us his reasons for thinking that. Why is he so confident that Russia is no longer a threat to the security of the UK?

Brendan O’Hara: The hon. Lady is advocating that every country in the world—Germany, Poland, Norway and Sweden—should arm itself to the teeth. Is she honestly arguing for that? Does she believe that Russia is going to come sweeping across the plains and invade the United Kingdom? Is that what she is honestly advocating? If she wants to argue that every country in the world should possess its own nuclear weapons, I advise her to take that to the Labour party. From the sound of it, she may well get some support.

As I mentioned at the start of my speech, there was a genuine, though forlorn, hope that, with the election of the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) as leader of the Labour party, there would at least be a debate on Trident in this place. I fear that the right hon. Gentleman has not managed to take his party with him. The paltry attendance of Labour Members today suggests exactly that.

The Labour party’s refusal to debate Trident will disappoint many in their own rank and file. I have no doubt that when the Prime Minister promises a vote on the main gate decision, as he did yesterday, I will see the right hon. Member for Islington North voting with the Scottish National party against Trident renewal. I fear he will have to swim through a tide of his own MPs going through the Lobby with the Conservative party again to support Trident renewal at a cost of £167,000 million. Labour loves to talk about being a multilateral party, but it cannot hide behind the fig leaf of multilateralism while committing the United Kingdom to this massive increase in nuclear weaponry. If the Labour party decides to support the Government in renewing the Trident missile programme, it will be as morally bankrupt as the Conservative party.

If Trident was ever an answer, it was an answer to a 20th-century problem, not to the problems we face in the 21st century. Trident is a purely political not a military weapon. It does not make us any more safe than nations that do not possess weapons of mass destruction. Trident is all about the UK projecting power. It is a desperate attempt to cling to the remnants of a fading imperial past, and is being paid for on the backs of the poor. Trident is diminishing the rest of the UK’s capability, and therefore there is no moral, economic or military case for renewing it.

1.20 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Michael Fallon): The Government welcome the opportunity to discuss our nuclear deterrent, so I thank the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) for tabling the motion.

In his statement yesterday, the Prime Minister set out the growing scale, diversity and complexity of the threats we face, and to tackle them we must have an array of weapons, up to and including the nuclear deterrent. It is worrying that, in a more dangerous world, the cross-party consensus we used to enjoy on our deterrent appears to be weakening. I remind Opposition Members that it was Labour Ministers—Attlee and Bevin—who in the

1940s argued for a nuclear deterrent with “a Union Jack” on the top of it, yet today the leader of the Labour party opposes his party’s official policy. He wants to scrap Trident and has said he is not prepared to use it.

Equally worrying is the non-attendance of the shadow Secretary of State, who has been admirably clear in opposing her leader while agreeing to lead a review of the policy. I can well understand her anger at the decision to appoint as co-chair of that review Mr Ken Livingstone, who wants not to review Trident but to abolish it. Indeed, he declared London to be a nuclear-free zone. This is like appointing an arsonist as the co-chief fire officer.

Our international allies look on with dismay at this shambles opposite, which can only be of comfort to adversaries. I appeal again to the tradition in the Labour party that proudly supports our independent nuclear deterrent to renew the consensus, to put aside party politics in the national interest, as the shadow Chancellor said on television on Sunday, and to join us in remaking the case for the deterrent.

John Woodcock: I pledge that Labour MPs will help the Secretary of State get through the programme we started in government, but will he pledge to base the main gate decision on the operational contracting need of the programme, not on political considerations?

Michael Fallon: I am happy to give the hon. Gentleman that assurance, and I look forward to debating and to the House deciding on the principle of renewing the four submarines—not the Trident missile—next year.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): When will we have a debate on Trident where we actually take a decision?

Michael Fallon: The decision had to await the publication of the SDSR yesterday, but I hope we can now take it in 2016. We will then have to get on and start building the Successor submarines, as I shall explain.

Successive Labour and Conservative Governments have judged that a minimum credible nuclear deterrent is critical to our national security—that a nuclear deterrent is the only assured way of deterring nuclear threats and blackmail by nuclear states. For more than 60 years, it has done that job. Whatever side of the argument we are on, let us pay tribute to the crews of HMS Vanguard, Vengeance, Victorious and Vigilant, their families and all those who ensure, and have ensured, that one of those boats is on patrol 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): As the wife of a submariner serving on HMS Victorious, I thank the Secretary of State for his tribute. The crews are doing their job and serving in the way they have been sent to do, defending our democracy, but he has to realise that none the less they do not all agree with his views on Trident.

Michael Fallon: I accept what the hon. Lady says, and of course if she is married to one of them, she will know better than anybody in the House, but I have met some of the crews and I have yet to meet a submariner who does not have faith in the job he is doing—but there we are.

The decision that Parliament has to take next year, which hon. Members just asked about, is not whether to replace the Trident missile or renew the warheads, but whether to replace the Vanguard submarines that need to be replaced by the early 2030s.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: What might the future of Faslane be without nuclear submarines and how many jobs, at the largest industrial employment site in Scotland, would be lost if nuclear submarines were banned?

Michael Fallon: There would obviously be significant implications for Faslane if the nuclear deterrent was no longer there, as was pointed out yesterday by GMB Scotland, which said:

“The commitment in the SDSR to multilateralism and to the successor programme going ahead is welcome as it is crucial to jobs”

in Scotland.

The Government were elected on a manifesto commitment to replace the Vanguard submarines, and it takes over a decade to build and trial a nuclear submarine, so we have to take that decision in 2016. Design work is already far advanced, and in yesterday’s review we announced further investment of £600 million, which takes the assessment phase cost from £3.3 billion to £3.9 billion.

I want to make three basic points about why renewal is vital. First, this is about realism. We are of course committed to creating the conditions where nuclear weapons will no longer be necessary. We have reduced our nuclear forces by well over half since the height of the cold war; this very year, I cut the number of deployed warheads on each submarine from 48 to 40, and by the mid-2020s, we will have reduced our overall stockpile of nuclear weapons to no more than 180 warheads. Unfortunately, those actions have not been matched by any other nuclear nation or stopped unstable nations seeking to acquire or develop nuclear weapons.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): My right hon. Friend mentioned costs. If we had had an effective Opposition yesterday, and even today, there might have been a greater focus on the cost overruns, which are what worry me. He is making sterling efforts to deal with the problem in the MOD, for which I salute him, but will he commit to holding the feet of the private sector to the fire and making sure there are no more cost overruns? This is too big a project to take money from the conventional forces.

Michael Fallon: I can certainly give my hon. Friend that assurance. I will come later to how we will deliver the successor programme and maintain that downward pressure on costs that he wishes to see.

I said that other nations have not matched our own disarmament. Russia is commissioning a new *Dolgoruky* class of eight nuclear submarines, is developing and preparing to deploy a variety of land-based ICBM classes, and is planning to reintroduce rail-based ICBMs. Last month, North Korea showed off a long-range ballistic missile carrying miniaturised nuclear warheads. It has carried out three nuclear tests and, in defiance of the international community, conducted ballistic missile tests. In an unpredictable nuclear age, we cannot

simply wish away threats that exist now or that may emerge in the 2030s, 2040s and right through to the 2050s.

Kelvin Hopkins: On 14 July this year, China, France, Germany, the Russian Federation, the UK and the USA, supported by the EU High Representative for foreign affairs, reached an agreement with Iran. The agreement included these words:

“under no circumstances will Iran ever seek, develop or acquire any nuclear weapons.”

Progress is being made by negotiation.

Michael Fallon: Indeed, and Members on both sides of the House should absolutely welcome that agreement with Iran, but we have not had similar progress from any of the other states that use nuclear weapons—and there are still a large number of states that are trying to get their hands on nuclear weapons.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Michael Fallon: I will give way again later, but I must make some progress.

My second point is about the practical effect of the deterrent. Our nuclear deterrent works. It deters aggression every single day. There have been many conflicts in the last six decades, and not one of them has involved a direct conflict between nuclear states. Not one country under the protection of an extended nuclear umbrella has been invaded. Our nuclear deterrent is operationally independent—the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) is quite wrong about that—and its command and control system as well as its decision-making apparatus are ours, and ours alone. It offers, of course, a second centre of decision making within NATO that will complicate an adversary’s plans. It is worth reminding ourselves that NATO is a nuclear alliance. One of the absurdities, if I may say so, of the Scottish National party’s position is that while opposing Trident it would—if voters had not rejected its separatism last year—have sought NATO membership and would then have benefited from its nuclear umbrella.

The third reason we must renew our nuclear submarines is that there is no alternative at the moment. How do we know that? We commissioned the Trident alternatives review in 2013. Having looked at all the alternatives—non-submarine alternatives, other submarine alternatives, non-continuous deterrent—it demonstrated that no alternative system is as capable or cost-effective as the Trident-based deterrent. If we accept that there is a threat—perhaps the SNP does not—that needs to be deterred, and if we accept that our enemies work nights and weekends, we must also accept that there can be no half-measures. A four-boat continuous at-sea posture is the minimum way to offer the security we need.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Will the Secretary of State therefore explain to me and my colleagues how Trident addresses the real current threat that we are experiencing—the threat from radical jihadism? Would those enemies not be jumping for joy if the UK ever even thought about threatening IS with nuclear weapons?

Michael Fallon: As the SDSR document pointed out yesterday, there are a series of threats to our country at the moment, and we have to deal with all of them. One of them has been the proliferation of nuclear weapons and the commitment of countries such as Russia to continue to spend more on developing their nuclear weapons, as I have pointed out.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Michael Fallon: I must make a little more progress.

We have to address the consequences of passing this motion tonight. It is scarcely believable that other nations, hearing the news from 4 o'clock today in the House of Commons, will suddenly decide to disarm or stop seeking nuclear weapons. There are 17,000 nuclear weapons in the world today. We wish there were not, but there are. Anybody voting in the Division tonight has to answer who, after we had got rid of our nuclear weapons, would continue to provide the deterrent.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): I wonder what message it would send to rogue and unstable nations if Britain were to scrap its nuclear deterrent.

Michael Fallon: It would send a terrible message—that we are not serious about deterring other countries, particularly those rogue countries that seek every day to develop exactly the kind of nuclear weapons that we already have.

We have touched in the debate on the future of HM Naval Base Clyde, which is one of the largest employment sites in Scotland. It is set to increase to 8,200 jobs by 2020 when all the Royal Navy's submarines will be based at Faslane. That is a reminder that the Successor programme is a national endeavour, involving thousands of people and hundreds of firms right across our country, including in Scotland. Our state-of-the-art submarines require skills that keep our Royal Navy and our country at the cutting edge, and they will inspire the next generation of engineers, software developers and designers. If the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute had his way, thousands of jobs would disappear and those manufacturing skills would be lost.

It has not been made clear to us how the SNP plans to deal with the industrial damage that will result from its decision. In the Scottish Parliament, it hid behind a vague motion that

“firm commitments must be made to the trade unions on the retention of defence workers' jobs”.

Workers on the Clyde do not want parliamentary motions; they want to be sure of a pay cheque every month. They want to know that they have got a job. Indeed, the acting Scottish secretary of the GMB, Gary Smith, said that diversification

“is based on Alice-in-Wonderland politics promising pie-in-the-sky alternative jobs for workers who are vital to our national security”.

That is the authentic voice of a Scottish trade union.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): The MOD permanent secretary Jon Thompson told the Public Accounts Committee in October that the Trident project is one that keeps him awake at night. Given the excessive escalation in Trident costs announced yesterday, can the Secretary of State not see how Trident undermines

conventional forces? He may not lose sleep over this, but is not the UK sleepwalking into a reduction in conventional forces because of his decisions?

Michael Fallon: The document we published yesterday, the strategic defence and security review, really gives the lie to the hon. Gentleman's proposition, because we are spending more on conventional defence, as well as renewing our Successor programme. The hon. Gentleman is right that the management of that programme has to be done properly and cost-effectively, so let me turn to the whole issue of cost.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Michael Fallon: I will make a little progress, and then give way again, as I know a number of hon. Members want to get into the debate.

There have been some wild reports, accentuated today, suggesting that the Trident replacement will cost £167 billion. That assumes a year-on-year growth in GDP of 2.5%.

That same logic would see us spending around £800 billion on overseas aid over the same period, with a Defence budget of about £100 billion in 2060. Let us look at the facts. We estimate that four new submarines would cost £31 billion—a cost spread over 35 years, which amounts to an insurance policy of less than 0.2% per year of total Government spending for a capability that will remain in service until 2060.

Let me put that £31 billion in context for the House and for those among my hon. Friends who are so keen on advanced high-speed railway lines. The Successor programme will cost £31 billion, with a contingency fund above that taking the total budget to some £40 billion. High Speed Two will cost £50 billion.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Secretary of State said that he would put the £31 billion in context. Does it not constitute a £6 billion increase in the last year? We should add to that the £10 billion contingency fund, and also take into account the promise in the review to spend £178 billion on equipment, which we are told is an extra £12 billion. It is clear that that extra money will actually be spent on Trident, and that the Secretary of State is cutting provision for tier 1 threats to pay for a nuclear deterrent to deal with what is classed as a tier 2 threat. There is no doubt that nuclear weapons are being paid for at the expense of conventional protection.

Michael Fallon: No cuts in weapons are included in the document that we published yesterday. On the contrary, there are more ships, more planes, more equipment for the special forces—more frigates being built on the Clyde. Let me very clear. The figure has increased—and we gave the House the correct update yesterday—since it was specified in a 2006 White Paper and adjusted again in 2011. The figure that we gave yesterday has been updated from the original estimate four years ago. The cost is £31 billion for the four submarines, with a contingency fund of £10 billion on top of that.

Let me now respond to the question that was asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), from the depth of his experience as Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee. Yes, we

must be eagle-eyed where costs are concerned. The new conventional submarines that are being built at Barrow, the Astute class submarines, are late, but the new Successor submarines cannot be late. We therefore believe, the Chancellor and I, that it is essential to reform the way in which the submarines are delivered, to ensure that continuous at-sea deterrence can be maintained, and to ensure that the taxpayer is given proper value for money. We are establishing a new delivery body for the Successor programme, and a new team at the Ministry of Defence, headed by an experienced commercial specialist, to act as the single sponsor for all aspects of the defence nuclear enterprise, from procurement to disposal.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree that, if we want to keep Britain safe, it is not a question of choosing between renewing our nuclear deterrent and taking the necessary action against ISIL—given that both are vital—and that it would be foolhardy, not to say arrogant, to believe that anyone in the House can predict the risks and threats that Britain will face in the next 30 or 40 years?

Michael Fallon: I could not have put it better. In our latest assessment, which is contained in the document that was published yesterday, we tried to estimate the threats to our country. We should be honest and humble about the fact that the 2010 review did not predict the resurgence of Russia and the action that it took in Crimea and Ukraine; nor did it predict the rise of ISIL. We try to predict, but we cannot be sure further ahead.

Last year, the people of Scotland voted to remain part of the United Kingdom.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Michael Fallon: I have already been generous in giving way.

Let me remind the House that the deterrent is for the whole of the United Kingdom, and that the people of Scotland will benefit from the security it provides.

Earlier this year, in the last vote on Trident, Parliament voted to support it by a majority of 327. Yesterday the Prime Minister confirmed our intention to hold a debate and vote on the principle of continuous at-sea deterrence and our plans for Successor. This afternoon we face the SNP motion, and our allies and our adversaries will be paying attention.

This is not a time to gamble with our security; on the contrary, it is a time to safeguard this generation and generations to come. Let me put it as simply as the hon. Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) just put it to me. If Members on either side of the House can be absolutely sure that no nuclear threat to this country will emerge throughout the 2030s, the 2040s and the 2050s, they should vote for the motion. I cannot be sure of that, and Conservative Members are not prepared to gamble with our nation's security.

1.44 pm

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to respond to the debate, which comes at a time when the Labour Party is conducting a review of our defence policies in general and our approach to Trident in particular.

The decision that Parliament will make in the coming months about the future of the United Kingdom's nuclear deterrent is a matter of huge importance for the country. It will affect our defence and security strategy for decades to come, as well as our global standing. As we have already heard today, it will affect thousands of livelihoods in the United Kingdom that depend on renewal of the deterrent. It will affect the role that the United Kingdom can play in global progress on disarmament, and it will go to the very heart of the UK's relationship with our NATO allies, for whom we currently provide an important arm of the Nuclear Planning Group.

Operation Relentless, the Royal Navy's codename for the continuous at-sea deterrent currently undertaken by the Vanguard class of submarines, has been patrolling since April 1969. The British people rightly do not expect parliamentarians to take a decision to end or continue such patrols lightly. They recognise that this is a question of complexity and a fine political balance, as well as a question of military effectiveness.

There are, of course, strongly and deeply held views on each side of this crucial debate, and we have the utmost respect for all of them, but let me be absolutely clear: this issue is too important for the future of our country for Members to play party-political games with it. We all know that the SNP scheduled this half-day debate not to influence Government policy—in fact, its contribution did not feature a single question to the Government—but to attempt to score cheap political points.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Toby Perkins: I will give way in a moment.

Anyone who may have genuinely believed that what we were going to hear today was a serious case presented by the SNP had merely to witness the speech made by the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara), who could barely contain his delight at the fact that the Labour party was reviewing its position. There has been no serious contribution to the debate about Trident, and no serious challenge to the Government. SNP Members are simply engaging in cheap political point-scoring, exactly as they did during an Opposition day debate back in January.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Toby Perkins: I will give way in a moment.

As we are conducting our review—

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Toby Perkins: I have just said that I will give way in a moment.

Hon. Members: Ooh!

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. We do not have ooh-ing and ah-ing in the Chamber—although we have not had any ah-ing; just ooh-ing. That is enough. The hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) does not wish to give way at the moment, but I am sure that he will in due course.

Toby Perkins: Indeed I will. [*Laughter.*] Once again, SNP Members are laughing. They think that this is a highly hilarious debate, but the fact is that it is not highly hilarious for the people whose lives depend on it, and it is not highly hilarious for the people who rely on the NATO umbrella and the nuclear deterrent for their security.

We feel that it is not appropriate to vote on this motion at a time when we are still conducting our review. We think that the motion is a cheap piece of political point-scoring—

Pete Wishart *rose*—

Toby Perkins: And on the subject of cheap political point-scoring, I give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Pete Wishart: We know that the Labour party is currently in a total and utter shambles and mess over Trident, but if the outcome of the review that is being undertaken by the former Mayor of London is a recommendation that the Labour party support its leader on the issue of unilateral disarmament, will the rest of the party back him?

Toby Perkins: I shall talk in more detail shortly about the way in which the review is being put together. However, in the case of an issue of this kind, on which there are plainly differences of opinion, it is nonsense to suggest that the involvement of different people with different opinions is a shambles. The position is absolutely clear: the Labour party is discussing this decision, and we will listen to a variety of views before reaching a conclusion.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I think that many Conservative Members will be very sympathetic to the serious way in which the hon. Gentleman is tackling this matter, but will he undertake to return to the House when the review has been completed, in order to clarify the Labour party's position for the benefit of the nation? It is obvious that there can be no fudging on the issue of nuclear deterrence: you are either in or out.

Toby Perkins: I will be able to offer a bit more clarity to the hon. Gentleman very shortly.

The SNP motion has, as the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute was honest enough to admit, not been without problems. The original motion, which each SNP Member signed without noticing the mistake, said Trident should not be "removed". Subsequently, they discovered they had made that mistake.

As the Secretary of State made clear, the motion talks about Trident, but actually the decision we are facing at the moment is about renewal of the Vanguard class of submarines, not renewing Trident at all. Important details like that may be lost on SNP Members, as, indeed, apparently was the outcome of the Scottish independence referendum, in which the majority of Scots voted in favour of staying part of the United Kingdom and they will be aware that that involved having Trident.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I am somewhat perplexed by the hon. Gentleman's assertion that we should not be discussing Trident. This debate is

about Trident and it is vital that we understand the position of Labour Members on this very important issue.

Toby Perkins: Once again, that makes it clear that this motion is all about the Labour party's position. I have attempted to clarify the difference between the decision this House will be facing shortly and the wording of the motion before us.

Liz Kendall: Does my hon. Friend share my disappointment that even though the SNP called this debate, it has failed to set out its position either on how it would replace jobs or how it would dispose of the weapons? Should not the debate have been about its policy, as it called this debate today?

Toby Perkins: For the second time today, my hon. Friend has hit the nail on the head. There is, of course, a whole series of inconsistencies in the SNP position. Today we were hearing that a decision to go forward with Trident would be choosing to buy nuclear capability on the backs of the poor, yet only half an hour before that we had heard SNP Members saying all the money being spent on Trident would instead be spent on conventional weapons. Either the money they are saving from Trident is going to be spent on hospitals, schools and transport, or it is going to be spent on conventional forces.

No one can blame the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute for being so confused, however, because if we look back through the history of the SNP, we see that this confusion is very long standing. In 2012, the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) was saying all the savings would be spent on conventional defence, then he and Nicola Sturgeon were saying in 2014 that they would be spending the money saved on Trident on childcare, then on "Good Morning Scotland" it was instead going to be spent on tackling youth unemployment and on colleges, and the Scottish Parliament motion in 2012 said it should be spent on welfare. So there is a long history of the SNP being utterly baffled about what this money is going to be spent on.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Would the hon. Gentleman be interested to hear that only a couple of weeks back I was being heckled that this magic money-tree could be spent on tax credits as well? That is another example to add to his long list.

Toby Perkins: If the hon. Gentleman does not mind, I will put that on the end of my list. [*Interruption.*] It is an important point. We are having a laugh, but the truth of the matter is that people deserve clarity on what is being said in this House. This is a matter of the utmost importance.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Toby Perkins: I will make a bit of progress, but I will happily take interventions later.

The hon. Member for Argyll and Bute said a moment ago that Labour's position needed clarifying, and I am happy to offer him that. Labour's position, as agreed by the national policy forum in 2014 and approved by Labour party conference in Brighton this year, is that

we are committed to a minimum, credible, independent nuclear deterrent, delivered through a continuous at-sea deterrent. That is the policy that was in the manifesto that all Labour Members of Parliament fought the 2015 general election on, and we are proud of the previous Labour Government's approach to, and success on, disarmament. That saw Britain make huge progress in nuclear disarmament through international frameworks. We almost halved the number of operationally available warheads to fewer than 160 and reduced the number of deployed warheads on each submarine. We also scrapped the free-fall WE177 tactical nuclear weapons in 1998, making the UK the only recognised nuclear-armed non-proliferation treaty country to possess just one nuclear system. All that is simply a declaration of fact.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) has recently been elected to be the leader of the Labour party and his views on the subject are well known. He appointed my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) to be his shadow Secretary of State for Defence knowing her clear position on this question.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on the way in which he is conducting this part of the debate. Will the review his party is carrying out consider the implications for HMNB Clyde, the submarine base at Faslane and for the Royal Naval Armament Depot Coulport and also the implications for Plymouth?

Toby Perkins: I can absolutely give the hon. Gentleman that assurance. This is very much a question about our military capability, but we can never ignore the fact that it is a very important economic regeneration question, too.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North announced at conference, the shadow Secretary of State for Defence will lead a review on all aspects of our defence policy including our nuclear deterrent. She has been clear that she is going to lead an evidence-based review in an open-minded, inclusive and transparent way that investigates the issues that have been reviewed on many occasions and also searches for any new relevant evidence.

Michael Fallon: The hon. Gentleman is doing something very important now: explaining how this review will operate. He says his hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State will lead the review; will that be led with Ken Livingstone or without him?

Toby Perkins: If the right hon. Gentleman had been slightly more patient, I would have got to precisely that point. If he bears with me, I will be able to enlighten him.

As I made clear, my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood will be leading that review, and my very next sentence is that, as is standard for policy commissions that will feed into the national policy forum, a member of the national executive committee, Ken Livingstone, will co-convene that review on behalf of the NEC. But, as the leader of our party said at conference and reiterated yesterday, it will be led by my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood.

Several hon. Members rose—

Toby Perkins: Let me make a little progress, because many Members wish to contribute to the debate and I am keen to give them an opportunity to do so.

It is really important for our politics and for those on both sides of the debate that we all embrace the opportunity to debate the cases for and against. Politics is changing; there is a mood out there for more transparency, not just in our party but in society as a whole. So we in the Labour party welcome this opportunity.

Pursuing a policy of multilateral, not unilateral, disarmament has been the accepted positions of the major parties in British politics for 30 years and, as a result, many of these issues have not been the subject of widespread and inclusive debate. We in the Labour party welcome this opportunity, and as someone who willingly supported the position the Labour party fought the last general election on, I say that all of us who support maintaining a nuclear presence should not be afraid to allow open and honest debate of this important issue.

Several hon. Members rose—

Toby Perkins: I am going to crack on, because I know many Members want to contribute. I will try and take some more interventions towards the end of my speech.

It would clearly be ludicrous for me to pretend that there are not differences of opinion within the parliamentary Labour party and the wider party on whether this is the right policy. In the end, national party conference and the NPF will decide what the Labour party's approach to this question will be in the future, but this year's Labour party conference concluded that there were more pressing contemporary motions to debate and so the NPF report reaffirmed the party's support for the continuous at-sea deterrent.

John Nicolson (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman mentions the Labour party UK conference, but I notice that he does not mention the Labour party Scottish conference, which voted against Trident. Does that count for absolutely nothing, as the hon. Gentleman's boss told her Labour party colleagues? Scotland just doesn't matter, does it?

Toby Perkins: I have to say that I think those kinds of comments are utterly offensive. The truth of the matter is—[*Interruption.*] Once again, we are discussing an important matter, and the people are watching and people's jobs are on the line, and SNP Members are laughing their way through this debate. The truth of the matter is that the Scottish Labour party had a vote at its conference, and of course that will be considered as part of all the many contributions made to this debate. The views of many people with a whole variety of opinions will be considered. The vote that took place and the views of individual members will be considered as part of that.

Angela Smith: My hon. Friend will understand, as a neighbouring MP, how important the Trident successor programme contract will be to places such as Sheffield, in terms of jobs in the supply chain. The tone of today's debate underlines the importance of the debate on Trident and the fact that it is a UK matter. It deserves a UK-oriented focus, not a narrow, nationalist outlook.

Toby Perkins: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the importance of the supply chain to this project, not just in the areas where it will be built but right across the country. This is a decision for the whole of the United Kingdom. It is one that we will all be responsible for, and that we will all have an opportunity to benefit from.

In the light of the lengthy procurement process required for complex weapons systems, Parliament voted in 2007 to

“maintain the strategic nuclear deterrent beyond the life of the existing system”.

The Secretary of State went into greater detail on the history of that decision earlier. We should also remember that there are 28 NATO alliance members who are offered protection by each other. The fact that our contribution through Trident is a vital reassurance was brought home to me on a recent trip to Brussels to meet NATO allies.

If Britain and France appeared to be weakening their nuclear contribution, there is no guarantee that other allies would not decide that they could no longer be secure under the NATO umbrella or that they would not look to procure their own deterrents. Our own unilateralism could, in fact, lead to an increase in the number of nuclear states. Today’s shooting down of a Russian aircraft, apparently by Turkish forces, should underline for us how precious that interconnection and mutuality is, how unpredictable the world is, and how important it is for those NATO allies on the southern and eastern borders of NATO that the UK sends a message to those who threaten us that we will be resolute and trustworthy.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I respect utterly the way in which the hon. Gentleman is addressing this issue. He talks about the Labour party reviewing its policies, but will he address the worrying point that, whatever the outcome of the review, the leader of the Labour party has made it clear that he would in no circumstances use the deterrent? Has the party’s policy not therefore already been decided? Even if Labour decides to go ahead with Trident, its leader has said that he would not use it, thereby denying it its potency as a deterrent.

Toby Perkins: I understand what the right hon. Gentleman is saying, but this project will be valuable to our country over 25 to 30 years and beyond. When we are making these significant infrastructure decisions, the day-to-day details are perhaps less important than the longer-term capability.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Further to the point made by the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Mr Dodds), the shadow Minister said earlier that the review was to be co-convened by Ken Livingstone. Will he clarify exactly what he meant by “co-convened”?

Toby Perkins: The review is being led by the shadow Secretary of State for Defence. I shall not go into the arcane details of Labour party processes, but a member of the national executive committee is involved in supporting that process. That is the role that Ken Livingstone will play.

As I said a moment ago, this is not the first time that SNP Members have brought this question to the House, but they will know that their own approach to defence has failed to stand up to close scrutiny. Their White Paper that preceded their failed referendum campaign was clearly uncoded and provided no breakdown of costs for equipment, personnel or budgets.

Brendan O’Hara: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Toby Perkins: I will not give way again; I am going to complete my speech—[*Interruption.*] We listened to the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute for quite some time, and I still do not know what he really thinks. The SNP’s White Paper failed to confront the contradictions between the party’s desire to join NATO and its desire to remove all nuclear weapons from Scottish soil. It was clear from the hon. Gentleman’s contribution that the SNP had no understanding of what would be involved when it said that it wanted to sign up to NATO. It thought that it could be a part of the alliance while being somehow removed from NATO policies. It cannot have its cake and eat it.

Brendan O’Hara: Does the hon. Gentleman believe that there is no such thing as a non-nuclear member of NATO? Does he not understand that the past two Secretaries-General of NATO have come from non-nuclear countries—namely, Denmark and Norway?

Toby Perkins: This is not a question of what my opinion is; it is a matter of simple fact that NATO is a nuclear alliance. Membership of NATO, which the SNP supports, requires allies to be members of the NATO nuclear alliance and to sit on the appropriate committees. So the fact is: an independent Scotland that was part of NATO would be covered by the nuclear umbrella. To be frank, I suspect that it is precisely because it would be covered in that way, with all the strength and security that that would offer, that it wants to be a member of NATO. That would give assurance to its own members. This is not a question of my opinion; it is a simple statement of fact.

Tom Tugendhat: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Toby Perkins: No, I am going to finish in a moment.

On the back of yesterday’s strategic defence and security review, the Government must clarify a number of the urgent issues that have been touched on already today. First, will they give us a breakdown of the new cost estimates for the Successor fleet that they have provided? Specifically, what are the latest figures for warhead and infrastructure refurbishment? Secondly, can the Minister confirm that the Treasury is to take the lead on the procurement of the Vanguard Successor class? If so, will he explain why? In setting out the mechanics of that arrangement, can he explain what it says about the level of confidence the Chancellor has in the Ministry of Defence? What input will Defence procurement experts have into the Treasury’s work on this? Was the decision made with the support of the Secretary of State for Defence, and if so, why did he think the matter would be better handled outside his own Department? Thirdly, will the Government clarify the timescales of the Successor programme? What criteria did they use to decide to further extend the life of the

existing fleet? What is the strategy underpinning that decision? And, most importantly, can the Department resolutely guarantee that the decision will not adversely impact on the maintenance of our continuous at-sea deterrent posture?

I hope that the Minister for Defence Procurement will have an opportunity to respond to my questions. They are questions that he might reasonably have expected from the Members who called the debate, as they have had much longer to scrutinise the Government on this matter, but of course they are only interested in highlighting the difficulties that they perceive in the Labour party.

In summary, the Labour party's review, under the stewardship of my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood, will consider any new evidence. It will examine the views of people from across the spectrum of opinions. It will allow people across the party, in the trade union movement and in communities right across the land to engage in the debate. It will learn about the facts and debunk the myths, as part of a national conversation. We will not shrink from the debates; we will relish them. This is an issue on which we believe there needs to be more light and less heat. We will not play political games with an issue as important as this, but the House can be assured that when that review has been concluded, the Labour party will have a position that has been the subject of the widest public debate in the history of military decision making. People will be able to have real confidence that the position we reach is one that the party—and, indeed, the country—can support with confidence.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. A great many people have indicated to me that they would like to speak in the debate. The House will be aware that another important debate is to follow, so I shall therefore have to impose a time limit on Back-Bench speeches of six minutes, starting with immediate effect as we hear from Mrs Sheryll Murray.

2.8 pm

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): Members will know of my special interest in the Royal Navy, as the mother of a serving Royal Navy warfare officer, although I am absolutely sure that my daughter would want to stick to surface ships rather than serving on one of the four Vanguard class submarines. I am really pleased that the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) has joined the family of people in this House who have a connection with the Royal Navy, and I hope that she will make many contributions to these debates.

It is now more than 70 years since these bombs were used in anger. We must remember that this is not new technology, and that the threat is real. That is why we must have a credible nuclear deterrent that others believe we will use if we are attacked. A continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent is essential, because the deterrent has to be credible. It gives the UK the ability to respond instantly from a moveable location; that assists in providing security against any possible threats. Throughout my life, under Labour and Conservative Governments, we have had a credible deterrent, because we had the leadership to back it up.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The hon. Lady and many of her colleagues have criticised the Leader of the Opposition for saying that he would never fire Trident, presumably because it is not a deterrent if we promise not to use it. Will she tell us in what circumstances she would have it on her conscience to launch an attack that would annihilate tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of innocent, unarmed civilians?

Mrs Murray: Having the deterrent and leading people to think we can use it is what the deterrent is about. It is no good publicising the fact that it will never be fired; that is a useless deterrent.

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): Let me try to put it in simpler terms, for those who struggle to understand what a deterrent is, by using the analogy of a burglar alarm. We have a burglar alarm at home that we turn on when we go out, because we hope it will put people off breaking in; and we have a nuclear deterrent, which is there when we go to bed, to keep our country safe.

Mrs Murray: We also need to remember that the UK's nuclear deterrent contributes to our collective security as part of NATO. If the UK did not have an at-sea deterrent, NATO's collective security would be weakened, leaving the UK dependent on others. That seems to be what the Scottish National party is determined that it wants.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): On the message of deterrence, does not having nuclear weapons mean that we are the most direct threat to other states that have them? Rather than the weapons being a deterrent, do they not make us a key target in this family of nations?

Mrs Murray: A deterrent is extremely important, and that is precisely what this is; it is not there to use in anger. I remind the hon. Gentleman of the words I started with: the last time these bombs were used in anger was 70 years ago. I am speaking today not just because I believe in a credible nuclear deterrent—I do—but because of the importance it has in my constituency. Trident has provided a massive amount of employment for my constituents, in the same way that Faslane and Coulport provide a massive amount of employment north of the border.

Carol Monaghan: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs Murray: I am sorry, but I have used up my time. The repair, refuelling and refit of the Vanguard class submarines is carried out in the D154 submarine support facilities at Devonport, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile). Devonport's expertise and experience should be used in any future programme. As a local county councillor at the time, I will never forget standing by the banks of the River Tamar in Mount Edgcumbe park, watching the first Vanguard submarine edge her way around Drake's island and into Devonport dockyard for its refit. Continuing to refuel and refit these submarines at Devonport is likely to safeguard up to 2,000 jobs. I fully support the Government in their goal of having

[Mrs Sheryll Murray]

successor submarines replace the Vanguard class ones, and having a credible nuclear deterrent to protect this nation for decades.

2.14 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): What a pleasure it is to follow such a thoughtful and well-informed speech from the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray). I wish you had been in for the start of this debate, Madam Deputy Speaker, because what a shambles it was. Let me give you, for background, the context in which the debate was called for. The SNP is presiding over a disgraceful mismanagement of the core activities of government in its nation. Let me tell the House of the dreadful mess the SNP is making of health and education; there is a need to do so.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): will the hon. Gentleman give way?

John Woodcock: If the hon. Lady will just take her seat for a moment—

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: So you are not giving way?

John Woodcock: Let me just explain—[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Let me clarify that the hon. Gentleman is not giving way right now, although he has indicated that he will do so shortly.

John Woodcock: Let me—

Alan Brown: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The hon. Gentleman says he is going to dig into the Scottish Government's record on health and education, but I do not think that is applicable to today's motion.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I am listening carefully to what the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) is saying, and I will decide if he has strayed from the motion. At the moment, my interpretation is that he is introducing his speech and that he will come to the precise point of the motion very shortly.

John Woodcock: You see, Madam Deputy Speaker, SNP Members do not like people holding them to account for their terrible failure. I was just explaining the disgraceful mess that they are making of schools in Scotland, where the poorest children are being left behind—

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP) *rose*—

John Woodcock: If the hon. Gentleman does not mind, I am not giving way. I would have been happy to take an intervention from every single one of you robots—you are getting your instruction—but the proposer of the motion refused point blank to take my intervention, so I am not taking any from a single one of you.

John Nicolson: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. May we have some clarification on whether the charming expression “robot” is parliamentary language or not?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Yes, Mr Nicolson, I was just turning over in my mind whether the description “robot” for a Member of this House would be considered derogatory. I have come to the conclusion that in some circumstances it might, and in some it might not. For the moment, I am concluding, for my own peace of mind, that the hon. Gentleman was thinking of a high-functioning, intelligent robot. Therefore, for the moment, I will not call him to order for the use of the word, but I am sure the House will be warned that we should be very careful in our use of language.

Ian Paisley: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I seek clarification: I thought the hon. Gentleman called the hon. Members “Roberts”, and anyone from Scotland should not mind that reference, bearing in mind Robbie the Bruce.

Madam Deputy Speaker: No, on the contrary. As to Mr Paisley's point of order, every eldest male member of my family for the past 100 years has been called Robert; it must be a good thing.

Mr Jamie Reed: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Given that colleagues from the SNP will misreport this debate on Twitter, would the use of the term “cybernat” be acceptable?

Madam Deputy Speaker: We will have no more points of order on this issue. Any term that is considered to be in any way derogatory towards an honourable Member of this House will not be allowed, and I will be listening very carefully for the rest of the debate.

John Woodcock: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am very happy to refer to SNP Members as honourable robots if that is any help, but robots they are, following their instructions in an extraordinary unity almost never seen before in this place.

I was making a point about the failure on hospitals over which the SNP is presiding—there is failure on waiting times, intolerable pressure on nurses and so on. Instead of addressing those points, the SNP seeks this parliamentary distraction of a debate on Trident, and we will not fall for it.

Ian Paisley: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman giving way, because he was not given way to earlier in the debate, and he should have been. He has set out the context of the debate. Does it surprise him that today, in the Northern Ireland Assembly, Sinn Féin, which butchered and bombed people across the entire United Kingdom, has a similar motion calling for the cancellation of Trident? Would he like to reflect on that?

John Woodcock: I do not know. It is certainly something on which the Scottish National party Member who winds up may wish to reflect. I will go back to the SNP in a moment, but first let me implore the Minister to respond to my questions, because, understandably, I was not able to intervene on the Secretary of State for a second time earlier in the debate. In his winding-up

speech—or he can intervene on me now—will the Minister make it clear that the change in management structure for this programme will in no way affect the superb workforce in Barrow-in-Furness, Derby, and so many constituencies around the country? The measure has long been discussed and is designed to get increased effectiveness out of the programme.

Furthermore, will the Minister comment on the extra pressure that may be placed on the ageing Vanguard class hulls by the further delay, and on whether the Royal Navy and his Department have carried out the scoping that will be required because of the extra delay in the in-service date for the new boats?

This is a debate about the Scottish National party, whose Members are sitting next to me. They seem perfectly happy to scrap 10,000 jobs in Faslane.

Carol Monaghan *rose*—

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP) *rose*—

John Woodcock: If everybody will sit down, I will explain my views. I would have been happy to have taken all these SNP interventions, but the proposer of the motion—the honourable chief robot—refused to allow me to intervene even once, so I will not take their interventions. They would be happy to throw on the unemployment scrapheap—

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP) *rose*—

John Woodcock: Madam Deputy Speaker, I will not give way to any of them. I wonder if you can explain that to them. It does not matter how many times they ask, I will not give way to them.

In the remaining time that I have, let me quickly read a list of some of the constituencies in Scotland that are affected by the submarine supply chain: Argyll and Bute, which we have already mentioned; Aberdeen North; Coatbridge; Chryston and Bellshill; Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East; Dunfermline and West Fife; East Dunbartonshire; East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow; East Renfrewshire; Glasgow Central; Glasgow North West; Glasgow South; Glasgow South West; Glenrothes; Gordon; Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath; Linlithgow and East Falkirk; Livingston; Midlothian; Motherwell and Wishaw; Paisley and Renfrewshire North; West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine; and West Dunbartonshire.

Chris Law: *rose*—

Kirsten Oswald *rose*—

John Woodcock: I will not give way. SNP Members would throw their constituents on the unemployment scrapheap.

Angela Smith: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): On that point—

John Woodcock: I will not give way, because I will not get any more time. I want to finish on the argument, which has been made clearly, that it is morally indefensible

for a state to possess nuclear weapons. I do not agree with that at all, because they are there to prevent nuclear weapons from being fired. However, if the SNP think that it is morally indefensible or even “repugnant” to possess such weapons, why is it happy to be under the nuclear umbrella of another nation? It is not the case that other NATO members do not have nuclear weapons. I do not think that I can use the word hypocrisy, but it is a rank wrong that the party feels able to shelter under that umbrella while being happy to name-call the rest of the United Kingdom for wanting to keep nuclear weapons.

The question is not whether we do, or do not, go ahead with Trident, because the votes on that are absolutely nailed on. This will go past the point of no return. The real question exposed in this debate is: in which SNP constituency—which place in Scotland—will the nuclear toxic waste, which the SNP has admitted it will take, go?

2.24 pm

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): This is an extremely important debate. Already this afternoon, we have heard some errant wrongs in the nature of our NATO alliance. I hope that Members will forgive me for taking a moment to correct them. NATO is a nuclear pact. NATO demands nuclear capability. NATO requires states to allow deployable nuclear weapons. It is simply incorrect to say that any member state can be a NATO member without tolerating, allowing, encouraging and even permitting the deployment of nuclear weapons from its states.

Germany has nuclear-capable artillery. Belgium has nuclear-capable aircraft. Denmark has runways for such aircraft and has subs basing for it in Danish waters. Every NATO state is nuclear-capable and allows the deployment and the firing of nuclear weapons from its territory. That is part of the 1949 alliance. If countries do not like it, they should not sign it; that is very, very clear.

NATO countries sign that alliance for a very good reason. It is because nuclear weapons work. Since 1949, no two nuclear states have fought each other or gone to war in any way. Why? Because nuclear weapons are appalling; they are utterly awful.

James Cartlidge: Does my hon. Friend agree with the many venerable academics who believe that, had it not been for nuclear weapons, it is almost certain that in the cold war period we would have had a third conventional world war, which would have been far more bloody and brutal than the first or even the second?

Tom Tugendhat: Absolutely. I thank my hon. Friend very much for that intervention. The appalling nature of nuclear weapons is exactly what keeps us safe. The very fact that they are an existential threat to so many regimes and to so many dreadful leaders around the world is exactly what puts them off. Few bunkers and no society could survive a nuclear attack, and that is exactly why nuclear weapons work: nobody wishes to face them.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): My hon. Friend is giving a very powerful speech. Does he agree that NATO is about making a conventional or a nuclear attack on its members absolutely futile? In short, in the nuclear age, the enemy is war itself.

Tom Tugendhat: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Indeed, in highlighting the fact that war is the real enemy, we need look only at the loss of life that we have seen from war this century. In the first and second world wars, we saw terrible destruction from conventional weapons. Ironically, those weapons were stopped by the two attacks on Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Though those attacks were utterly awful, and I will not in any way say that they were not, it is quite clear that what they did was prevent the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives—not just American lives, but Japanese lives too. Many prisoners of war, many of our relatives, survived the second world war—I am talking about the relatives of Members not just on the Government Benches but on the Opposition Benches too—because the horror of those two attacks brought an early end to that war, and thank God they did, because hundreds of thousands of lives were saved.

However, nuclear weapons do not work alone. They work as part of the spectrum of defence. They are part of everything from the infantry soldier with his bayonet right the way through to the Trident nuclear submarine. They work across the entire spectrum, because it is only the range that allows Her Majesty's armed forces to intervene at an appropriate level on each occasion. In exactly the same way as a diplomat requires the military for his words to have credibility, so too the soldier requires the submarine to know that he will not be undermined by an attack from one of the other states that may sympathise with the enemy.

John Glen: My hon. Friend is making a very powerful contribution. In his considerable experience working in the Ministry of Defence, has he ever seen a viable reorientation of defence expenditure away from the nuclear deterrent which would give us the same level of assurance around our defence?

Tom Tugendhat: Some work has been done on that, but only at a very basic level. The truth is that, when people rightly talk about the cost of defence and the cost of the nuclear deterrent, what they rarely consider is how much the conventional alternative costs. If we truly wish to deter and to persuade an enemy that we will not be steamrollered by their wish or blackmailed by their desires, we need to have a deterrent that allows us not to strike first, but to strike back. No conventional force offers the same pound-for-pound capability as the continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent. Members may not like it, but that is why the nuclear deterrent is the cheapest alternative.

Carol Monaghan: The deterrent is not working when Russian submarines in our waters are being spotted not by maritime patrol aircraft or vessels, but by fishing boats. We are now in the ridiculous situation where our deterrent is either to nuke them or to chase them away with bayonets.

Tom Tugendhat: The hon. Lady makes an entertaining but factually unsound point. Our capabilities are to chase them away with our hunter-killer submarines and the Royal Navy's patrol vessels, and that is exactly what they are doing. Most important, when we see those Russian submarines coming towards us, we do not immediately think, "Let's bow to Mr Putin's latest desires and hobble ourselves to the Kremlin's wishes."

Instead, we think, "They won't dare, because they know we can." That is what grants us the independence of action and guarantees us the independence of movement that we require as an active supporter of human rights and of the dignity of humanity in this world.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the ultimate proof that they are a deterrent is that although submarines may be circling the United Kingdom, they are not firing missiles?

Tom Tugendhat: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right.

Looking around the world, we might think that the real threat today is militant jihadism or a dirty bomb. That is, of course, true in the immediate sense, but I wonder how many Members on either side of the House would have looked around the world 20 years ago and said, "We've got to be worried about ISIS."

Danny Kinahan *rose*—

Tom Tugendhat: Forgive me, but I must make some progress. How many of us would have thought that, rather than being one of our allies, as we very much hoped she would be in the 1990s, Russia would be resurgent after the cold war, changing the borders of a European country for the first time since 1945 and sponsoring militias in Ukraine that intend to bring death not only to the peacekeepers we send, but to civilian aircraft flying overhead? Who would have predicted that? I would wager that no one would have predicted it. Because of that inability to predict, it is essential that we in the United Kingdom guarantee the ultimate security for us and our children. It is not enough to wish for peace—we must work for it and fight for it, and the nuclear deterrent is the ultimate proof that we will both work and fight for our own security.

2.32 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I should start by declaring an interest as a member of the Scottish CND.

Like the other members of the Public Accounts Committee, I have an advantage in approaching this debate, because we took evidence from the permanent under-secretary to the Ministry of Defence.

Tom Tugendhat *rose*—

Deidre Brock: Please let me make a little progress.

We heard for ourselves the MOD's misgivings about Trident and how it is unaffordable and threatens spending on other equipment.

The Prime Minister's war drums are beating. He wants to open up another war front in Syria, to add to the current commitments of service personnel around the globe, including in Iraq and Afghanistan. While we have troops engaged abroad, the MOD was telling us that the inventory of support material for the armed forces has been cut by a quarter in the past four years, and that the funding is about to be slashed from £30 billion to less than £10 billion by keeping what was described as

"the minimum amount of kit".

Spending on Trident, however, is to be protected and enhanced.

We were told that a huge gap of some £8.5 billion exists between what the generals, admirals and air chief marshals say the armed forces need and what Whitehall is prepared to provide. In the words of the permanent under-secretary,

“a process of going through what people want and saying, ‘I know you like that fantastic new thing. Actually, what you need is this’, will lower the bill.”

Whitehall bean-counters will be telling the armed forces what they really need, but spending on Trident will be sacrosanct. There will be no back-up body armour for troops on the battlefield, but there will be plenty of cash for Trident. Provision of troop transport options will be a matter for Whitehall, but the transport of weapons of mass destruction cannot be questioned.

We were told that the nuclear enterprise is what keeps the MOD’s senior civil servants awake at night. The permanent under-secretary said that the current annual running cost of Trident is

“in excess of £3.5 billion”,

but that if it is renewed the figure will rise to more than £5 billion a year. He said that he could drive savings in other areas,

“but that project is a monster and it is an incredibly complicated area in which to try to estimate future costs.”

Therefore, while Trident—an unusable and abhorrent abuse of scientific discovery and human imagination—can name its price and pick the pockets of any other budget in the MOD, other parts of the service are resourced or starved on a Whitehall whim.

Tom Tugendhat: I appreciate that the hon. Lady was in Australia at the time, acting in various episodes of “Home and Away”, but is she aware that during the 1970s the CND was largely funded by the KGB, as the Mitrokhin archive proves? Some of these arguments therefore sound a little hollow when they are made with the cash of our enemies.

Deidre Brock: That is a very amusing intervention, given that I am quoting the MOD’s so-called chief executive. The hon. Gentleman’s comments are not worthy of this place.

The air crews that the Prime Minister wants in the Syrian skies cannot be sure of a reliable supply of spare parts for their planes, but Trident will always have whatever it needs.

There is another insult in the midst of that mess, as the MOD outsources logistics and supply for armed forces to Leidos, an American firm that started out providing advice to the American defence nuclear industry. Those of us who campaigned in the independence referendum will recall being told that no vital pieces of defence infrastructure are provided by companies from outwith our borders. How things change and yet stay so much the same.

We might also want to take note of the legal position. My constituent Ronald King Murray—Lord Murray—who is a former Lord Advocate for Scotland and a respected legal thinker, has offered the opinion that nuclear weapons are illegal under international law. Given what the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) said about Hiroshima and Nagasaki, I point out that Lord Murray was a serving soldier preparing to attack Japanese positions when the first atomic bomb was

dropped in Hiroshima 70 years ago, and he thinks it may well have saved his life. However, he formed the opinion then, in spite of the preservation of his own life, that the weapon is probably illegal, and his opinion has not changed in the seven decades since.

Lord Murray suggests that the International Court of Justice might use the occasion of the case being brought by the Marshall Islands to update and enhance its 1996 ruling, which is that the use, or threatened use, of nuclear weapons was illegal. It may well decide now to rule that the possession of such weapons is illegal.

James Cartlidge *rose*—

Deidre Brock: I have nearly finished. The Government might not wish to take any note of legal advice on military issues—some previous Governments have shown a reluctance to take such advice too—but surely Ministers will not wish to ignore the effect that renewing Trident would have on other areas of defence spending. They do not have to listen to us; they can speak to officials at the MOD—cancelling Trident would be very good for their sleep patterns.

Kevin Foster: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Deidre Brock: I have nearly finished. The combined effects of spending cuts and the blind insistence on spending huge sums on a virility totem would leave poorly equipped frontline service personnel even worse off. I certainly hope that the Government would have the decency to consider them.

2.38 pm

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I was concerned to read that the motion for this debate has only one sentence:

“That this House believes that Trident should not be renewed.”

There is not much substance behind that, and as the debate goes on it worries me more and more. The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) has questioned the legality of Trident. That is a matter for legal debate, but the fact is that it and nuclear weapons exist.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: Given that so many nations have nuclear deterrents, does my hon. Friend agree that someone would have looked into that? Perhaps the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) should admit that she is wrong or that her argument is based on a personal interpretation.

Alec Shelbrooke: As my hon. Friend makes clear, a lot of legal advice on issues such as this is a matter of interpretation. We cannot bury our heads in the sand and say that we will not be involved in something that exists. The fact is that a nuclear threat exists.

About three years ago, the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), who is no longer in his place, and I went to Ukraine, to Kiev. This was after the Russian intervention in that area. As was mentioned earlier, the Budapest agreement of 1994 made it clear that, in return for unilateral disarmament, Ukraine’s borders would be protected by the United States, the United Kingdom and the Russian Federation. Yet, when

[*Alec Shelbrooke*]

the Russian Federation walked in, nothing could be done. As I mentioned in Foreign Office questions earlier today, the world's attention may have shifted to the situation in the middle east and Syria, but there is a live war going on today in Ukraine. I hold the United States partly responsible for that, because a weak foreign policy by what I consider to be one of the worst Presidents of the United States has allowed Russia to take strategic decisions and walk into countries such as Ukraine, knowing that there was no deterrent. Deterrence is what this debate is about. As my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry) said, no one has a burglar alarm because they want people to burgle their house; they have one as a deterrent. It is incredible that in a world that is so dangerous and becoming more so, we have a debate whose purpose is to try to disarm us as if the rest of the world would then fall into line.

Chris Law: I am intrigued by what the hon. Gentleman is saying. Following the logic about Russia invading Ukraine, and given that we have this deterrent, surely it did not work in that situation.

Alec Shelbrooke: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, because his intervention makes my point: there was no deterrent to stop Russia going into Ukraine because President Putin rightly recognised that President Obama would not intervene in international affairs. There were no checks and balances—no counterweight to what has become a new superpower. Putin just walked in, and was allowed to do so.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Does my hon. Friend recognise that Ukraine was persuaded to give up its nuclear weapons, and as a result Putin has been able to ride roughshod over international agreements?

Alec Shelbrooke: Exactly. I am grateful to my hon. Friend.

This debate is not about war-mongering. It is not about a desire to launch nuclear weapons; it is the direct opposite. It is about the fact that a nuclear deterrent has prevented major world conflicts, but today we see that there are conflicts taking place. We talk about Daesh getting its hands on nuclear weapons, or about North Korea, which would be able to launch an attack on South Korea. Let us not forget that there was never a peace treaty between North Korea and South Korea. Technically they are still at war, but they have been able to face each other off with conventional weapons for several decades. If that game changed with nuclear weapons, there would have to be western intervention concerning South Korea to make sure that it could counteract that threat from North Korea; otherwise, hundreds of thousands of innocent people would be murdered by a regime with no other intention than wiping out its neighbour. That is what a deterrent prevents. That is why this debate is so important.

Nobody in this Chamber, nobody in NATO, nobody in the western world and probably not even President Putin would want to use nuclear weapons. That is not what this debate is about. It is about making sure that when something exists, those enemies who would use it do not have the opportunity to do so because they know it would be pointless. North Korea will not launch

a nuclear weapon at South Korea if it knows that 10 seconds later it would disappear off the face of the map as well. However unpalatable that truth may be, that is the truth that has kept the peace.

If we consider the first world war, and then the second world war, which was fought with conventional weapons but had a much higher death toll and in which far more civilians were killed than in the first world war, we see that as technology advances and wars increase, more and more of the civilian population die. It was noticeable that when my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister stood at the Dispatch Box earlier this week, he made it absolutely clear that military action that may be considered in Syria would be part of a wider programme with targeted intervention to try to prevent civilian deaths. Western leaders today spend most of their time trying to work out how we can intervene to reduce civilian deaths, and there is nothing better for that than having the Government who may be pushing their people into war know that they themselves would be wiped out. That is hugely important.

There has been a lot of talk about whether Trident is the right thing to spend money on. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence said, it amounts to 0.2% of GDP. What would a war, even one fought with conventional weapons to which we may not be able to respond, do to the GDP of Europe, of the western world?

John Glen: Would my hon. Friend reflect on the fact that the £31 billion is rather less than the debt interest payment that we are still having to make as a consequence of the legacy of the previous Government?

Alec Shelbrooke: I agree with my hon. Friend, although I do not want to be too skewed towards other debates. My hon. Friend's comment is important, though, because this country cannot have a solid defence or a capable strategic defence review unless we have a strong economy. That has to go hand in hand with this debate.

None of us today wants to renew Trident because we are war-mongers. We are the exact opposite. But we have to be aware of the threats in our world—threats that we have to be capable of responding to even though we hope that we never have to respond to them. The last 70-odd years has proved that. In the Cuban missile crisis, when President Kennedy said that we were eyeball to eyeball with the Russians, they backed down because they knew that doing otherwise would mean the destruction of their own country as well as the country that they were attacking. That is the proof that, however unpalatable Trident renewal may be, the nuclear deterrent works.

2.47 pm

Mr Jamie Reed (Copeland) (Lab): This is a matter of profound national importance. It is a debate on the security of our nation, but it is also about our standing as a nation among our allies and in the eyes of our adversaries. The history of our position as a nuclear power stems from our desire to protect ourselves and not to shy away from our responsibilities to our allies.

We must acknowledge the historically critical role that the Labour party has played in developing the UK's independent nuclear deterrent. It is important to recognise too the Secretary of State's call today for consensus on this matter, which I warmly welcome.

It was the then Labour Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, who in 1945 began the preliminary work and feasibility studies that paved the way for the independent nuclear deterrent. Following the end of nuclear co-operation with the United States in the shape of the McMahon Act in Congress, in October 1946 the Labour Foreign Secretary, Ernie Bevin, pushed ahead with plans for Britain to develop our own system.

Tom Tugendhat: Will the hon. Gentleman allow me to join him in praising Mr Attlee, indeed Major Attlee, who fought with enormous courage in the first world war? Does he not think that his former leader would have looked at the nuclear alliance and thought, as the Romans did, “*Si vis pacem, para bellum.*”—“If you seek peace, prepare for war”?

Mr Reed: I absolutely agree: Attlee invented the nuclear deterrent, so of course he would have agreed with that. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution to today’s debate, which I welcomed.

One reason the debate is so important to me is that my constituency and the neighbouring constituency of Barrow and Furness have always been at the heart of our independent deterrent, and that is a source of immense pride in Cumbria. Not only that, but I was elected, as were my colleagues, on a clear manifesto commitment that reads:

“Labour remains committed to a minimum, credible, independent nuclear capability, delivered through a Continuous At-Sea Deterrent”. A number of colleagues have mentioned NATO. The principle of maintaining an independent deterrent is clearly demonstrated through our commitment to our NATO allies.

Angela Smith: I have visited the Barrow shipyard, so I totally understand the passion of the workforce and the commitment to the Successor programme project. It was not only Major Attlee who supported the nuclear deterrent but figures on the left of the Labour party, including Nye Bevan, who said that we should not walk “naked into the conference chamber”.

Mr Reed: Absolutely—I could not put it better. It is one of our party’s greatest achievements, and it should be recognised at every opportunity. I thank my hon. Friend for her steadfast support for the industry and the deterrent. She knows precisely what this means for the manufacturing sector in her constituency.

Alan Brown: To bring things into a more modern context, does the hon. Gentleman agree with one of my constituency predecessors—Lord Browne, the former Defence Secretary—who drew attention today to the January 2013 report by the US Defence Science Board, which basically said that nuclear weapons are at risk of cyber-threat and might be useless for deployment following cyber-attacks?

Mr Reed: No, I do not agree with that.

The most recent strategic concept from NATO reaffirmed its long-standing policy that

“as long as there are nuclear weapons in the world, NATO will remain a nuclear Alliance. Deterrence, based on an appropriate mix of nuclear and conventional capabilities, remains a core element of NATO’s strategy.”

Tom Tugendhat *rose*—

Mr Reed: Forgive me if I do not take any more interventions. I need to make progress.

The strategic concept continues:

“The supreme guarantee of the security of the Allies is provided by the strategic nuclear forces of the Alliance”, including, crucially, the UK. Although that clearly demonstrates the treaty obligations that we must maintain with regard to our allies in NATO and our NATO membership, it espouses the single most fundamental principle underpinning the argument for maintaining an independent nuclear deterrent: while other nations have nuclear weapons, so should we. This is not about bravado, international one-upmanship or, as has bizarrely been said, a virility test. It is a clear demonstration of strength and capability which provides deterrence. Although the threat from other nation states has reduced over the past few decades, only the most naive would say that it has fully diminished. While there are nuclear weapons in the world, the only effective deterrent is maintaining our own independent nuclear weapons. Unilateralism will never work. Believe me, this party has tested that theory to destruction. Only a multinational approach can rid the world of nuclear missiles.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Reed: I will not take further interventions.

We have managed to maintain our deterrent while reducing our warheads which, as a piece of policy craft, should be acknowledged and celebrated. We are the only major advanced nuclear country to demonstrate that.

Moving on to the economic side of the issue—we cannot disregard that—people well versed in the history of military and civil nuclear engineering will understand clearly the benefits of this industry to my constituents in west and south-west Cumbria. The expertise amassed over 70 years in Copeland and in Barrow-in-Furness has cemented our place as world leaders in nuclear technology and knowledge. It has provided a basis for highly skilled jobs that have enabled communities to benefit from vast private sector investment such as new nuclear reactors, alongside the successor programme in Barrow-in-Furness. Our position as world leaders has been hard earned, principally by my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow-in-Furness (John Woodcock) and me, by the trade unions, and by decades of work in the nuclear industry. Maintaining skills and expertise is crucial to the economic wellbeing and growth not just of my constituency but of my county and, indeed, the north-west of England.

The Trident replacement is forecast to generate as many as 26,000 jobs throughout the UK, with more than 6,000 at the BAE shipyard in Barrow-in-Furness where the submarines will be built. The livelihoods of many people in the south of my constituency depend on the renewal of Trident. People who advocate defence diversification—we heard from the Secretary of State that the GMB has described that as pie in the sky—have yet to put forward a comprehensive plan for how they would achieve that. We also have to take into account the impact on smaller companies that make up the supply chain. The 2014 update to Parliament on the project states:

“Work done to date has identified over 850 potential suppliers across the UK. This underlines the fact that the nuclear deterrent represents a significant national undertaking, which is drawing on

[Mr Jamie Reed]

cutting edge capabilities, innovation, design and engineering skills available in the UK, and is providing employment opportunities and development prospects for a substantial number of apprentices, trainees and graduates in a wide range of technical and other disciplines.”

The expertise, the cutting-edge capabilities and the innovation all have their birthplace in west and south-west Cumbria. The benefits of those opportunities for thousands of apprentices, graduates and trainees will be felt across every single community that I represent. Opponents of the renewal of Trident will make the case that the skills can be deployed in other industries without ever really making it clear what those industries are and how they intend to put in place the comprehensive retraining plans necessary to redeploy nuclear workers. In fact, the proponents of diversification have had nearly four decades to come up with a plan to demonstrate how diversification would work, and we are still waiting. There is no plan, and there never will be a plan.

We have to approach the world as we find it, not as we would want it to be. To vote against the renewal of Trident is to vote potentially to put thousands of people out of work, to waste knowledge and expertise amassed over decades, to neglect our duties to our allies, to diminish our ability to defend ourselves and certainly to diminish our standing in the world. Britain has proudly punched above its weight on the world stage for centuries. We are a global leader. We should never step back from this responsibility.

I find myself in a position where I am proud to support my constituents, proud to support my constituency, proud to support my country, and proud to support Labour party policy in the best traditions of Clement Attlee.

2.55 pm

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): I rise in support of renewal of the Trident nuclear deterrent. Before I speak about that, may I pay tribute to those Labour MPs who have put party politics to one side and are thinking very much of the British national interest? There is no Member of Parliament more valiant in that cause than the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), who has been a shining example of what it means to stand up for one's constituents. He has fought for the local economy that he represents and ensured that the arguments that he passionately believes in are held not just in the House but throughout the country. Many of us could learn from the work that he does on this important matter.

I grew up on the Clyde coast, not a million miles from Faslane. Indeed, I went to school in Dumbarton, which is close to Faslane, so I know how important HM Naval Base Clyde is to the local economy. With more than 8,000 jobs in the area by 2020, it is the engine of that part of Scotland. In fact, it is by far the largest employer in Scotland.

Carol Monaghan: In fact, there are many jobs associated with HM Naval Base Clyde, including support staff, staff in accommodation, and staff in local businesses. They would still be there if conventional warships were based in Faslane.

Mark Menzies: I admire the hon. Lady's optimism, but we have been told that there will be 8,200 jobs—an increase—as a result of moving Astute-class submarines up there. Does she honestly expect us to believe that there would be that number of jobs, either direct or indirect, as a result of her party's policy in an independent Scotland? In effect, the ships would be glorified fishery protection vessels, and they could be located anywhere.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mark Menzies: No, I will not give way.

That is what we are talking about. It is misleading at best to the people of Dunbartonshire to say that that number of jobs, jobs of that quality, and those skills will be there without a nuclear deterrent.

Brendan O'Hara: Does the hon. Gentleman believe that the people of Argyll and Bute, and the people of Dumbarton are so unaware of the circumstances in which they live that at the general election they could not work that out for themselves? Had they not believed what we were saying, I would not have been elected and my hon. Friends who represent Dumbarton would not have been elected.

Mark Menzies: Absolutely. Elections are always referendums on the future. I spent the day with the hon. Gentleman on Thursday looking at the aircraft carriers. If we took HM Clyde out of the equation, along with Coulport, Faslane and the skills that those high-paid jobs bring, his constituency would be a far poorer place.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP) *rose*—

Mark Menzies: I will not give way, as I want to make progress.

The independent nuclear deterrent is vital to the future of this country. It is vital for our manufacturing base, and for our skills base and apprenticeships. I have constituents at BAE Systems in Warton and Samlesbury who are working on the Successor class programme. There are engineers and apprentices who look forward to working on that programme. The length and breadth of the United Kingdom, men and women, young and old, and those in apprenticeships across all skills bases will be dependent on the nuclear deterrent and the Successor class programme, and we ignore that at our peril. If the Successor class programme is taken out of the equation, the result is not just the loss of the independent nuclear deterrent, not just the threat to our national security and not just the devastating impact it would have on places such as the Clyde. All our communities would suffer as a result.

I beg the Labour party to come to its senses. It should not be down to independent-minded Labour MPs who passionately believe in national security to recognise that. It should come from the top down. I hope that as part of its defence review Labour will come to appreciate the unique importance of Trident and recognise that British national security cannot be put at risk. We cannot hope for a safer world; we have to work to secure it, and the deterrence provided by Trident is an integral part of that security. I hope the Labour party will not let us down at the crucial moment.

I put on record my thanks to the Secretary of State and the team at the Ministry of Defence. Yesterday, the strategic defence and security review outlined how conventional forces would fit in with the future of our country. We are not relying solely on Trident for our defence. I welcome the anti-submarine warfare capability aircraft that were announced yesterday, which will be based in Scotland and will play an integral part in looking after the deterrent.

Dr Whitford: Is it not noticeable that in the report published yesterday there were no threats in tier 1 for which Trident would be appropriate as a response?

Mark Menzies: We know that we live in an unpredictable world. Every strategic defence review has almost been redundant by the time the ink was dry on the paper. At the time of the previous review, no one foresaw the so-called Arab spring or a resurgent Russia. It is vital that the Government maintain all the ability to respond to a threat, regardless what it might look like. That never occurs at a time of our choosing.

Conventional weapons are at the heart of our defence. That is why the Government outlined yesterday across all three services a very clear strategy, ensuring that conventional weapons and the modernisation of our armed forces were integral to it. But they would not be as effective if the United Kingdom were stripped unilaterally of our nuclear deterrent. Ultimately, it is a weapon that we all hope and pray will never be used, but the very fact that we have it sends out a powerful message to any potential adversary that the United Kingdom takes our security seriously, takes its defence seriously, and will defend its allies in NATO. We are not a country that can sit back and hope that someone else will secure our future for us. When we have done that in the past, we have sometimes been found wanting. The United Kingdom must always look after its own defence. I hope Trident and Successor class submarines will always be at the heart of that.

3.2 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to take part in a very important debate on a subject to which the House has not given sufficient time in recent times, although we have known for some years that we would have to address the issue. For the benefit of Government business managers, may I say that I think the House would be better served by a more substantial motion in Government time, which might allow wider consideration of the challenges that face us?

We are dealing today with an Opposition day debate. I listened with great care to the speech of the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara). It was remarkable that it focused on the position of the Labour party as much as it focused on the Government. That is a novel position for an Opposition day debate. In fairness, I am not entirely without sympathy for the approach, given the current difficulties in the Labour party. It is not that Labour lacks a clear position—in fact, I would suggest that Labour has too many clear positions and it is difficult to reconcile them all within the one party.

I have sympathy with the review that Labour is undertaking. I wish it well, but I have severe misgivings when I hear that Ken Livingstone has been put in charge

of it. Putting Ken Livingstone in charge of a review of nuclear weaponry is a bit like putting King Herod in charge of the nursery.

I commend the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) for his contribution to the debate and the manner in which he made it. The review could do an awful lot worse than to take as its starting point the Trident alternatives review that was carried out at the behest of my party in the previous Government, which looked at various alternatives and different ways in which the question could be approached.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: Can the right hon. Gentleman clarify the stance of his own party? A member who represents his party in my constituency claimed that we did not need a nuclear deterrent because we did not use it in the Falklands. Will the right hon. Gentleman clarify his party's policy, please?

Mr Carmichael: I am not responsible for every contribution from every member of my party in every constituency, any more, I suspect, than the hon. Lady would want to be for her own party. I will come to my party's position in a moment, because I think it is central to the debate and I want to put it on record. The hon. Lady has the advantage of being able to consider the terms of the amendment that was tabled but unfortunately was not selected for Division today.

It is worth remembering that we are having this debate only because the main gate decision, which was to have been taken in the previous Parliament, was delayed until this Parliament. When the Minister responds to the debate, I invite him to accept that although his party wanted to take that main gate decision in the last Parliament, events vindicate the decision that was made and this is the right point in the cycle to take it.

We live in an ever-changing and uncertain world. As the hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke), I think, said earlier, we cannot ignore the fact that nuclear weapons exist. I wish they could be uninvented, but they cannot. That is the basis on which we should approach this debate. It is not just about whether the position should be reviewed or not: it is about what the United Kingdom, as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, can do to take a lead in the international community and among the nuclear powers to ensure that there is a serious movement towards multilateral nuclear disarmament.

This was a formative debate in my early political years, as it probably was for you, Madam Deputy Speaker, in the 1987 general election, but the world was a very different place in 1987. The cold war was still at its height and the Soviet Union still existed. We have seen enormous change since that time, but the change has not all been in one direction. We have only to look at the situation in Ukraine and the Crimea to realise that such old enmities never die. It is not pertinent to say what is a tier 1 or a tier 2 risk at this point. The question is what the situation will be in the future.

Having said all that, I would still say that the Government's determination to pursue a like-for-like replacement for Trident ignores the different world in which we now live and misses the opportunity that we have as a force for multilateral nuclear disarmament to take a different approach—to take a step down the

[Mr Alistair Carmichael]

nuclear ladder—and as a nuclear power to meet our obligations under the various nuclear non-proliferation treaties.

When the Secretary of State addressed the House, he spoke of what he has done to reduce the number of nuclear warheads currently available for deployment. I commend him for that. He lamented the fact that this has elicited little response from other nuclear or nuclear-aspirant countries. I suspect that that is because despite the reduction in the number of warheads, the Government continue to cleave to the notion of continuous at-sea deterrence. The time has now come for a very long and serious look at whether that remains an appropriate approach. My party has reached the conclusion that it is no longer necessary or appropriate. We would like to see an end to continuous at-sea nuclear deterrence, while of course maintaining our deterrence capability. That would allow us to take something of a lead in taking the step down—[*Interruption.*] If the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) wishes to intervene, I will take an intervention, but I will not take sedentary chuntering.

John Woodcock: My hon. Friends and I are baffled about how this part-time deterrence would work. Why would it save money, how would it stop the first-strike capability, and what would the submarines do when they were not deterring?

Mr Carmichael: If the hon. Gentleman wishes to have a serious debate about this, then I am well in the market for that. He should understand, though, that this is a legitimate and substantial proposal that commands a lot of support among many people who understand and accept the need for nuclear weaponry but are prepared to look at how we use our position as a nuclear power and as a proponent of nuclear disarmament rather than as something that is—[*Interruption.*] Before he continues to shake his head, he might well find that his own party's review comes up with something very similar to this. He should be careful not to disparage today what he might find in his manifesto tomorrow.

It is unfortunate that this debate has occasionally generated more heat than light, but it is an important one that this House has to have, and I suspect that we shall be returning to it in the months and years to come. When we do so, it should be on the basis that this is our opportunity to be a leading force for nuclear disarmament in the world; it is not all just about the renewal of weaponry.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. It has been a lively debate and we are running out of time. After the next contribution I will have to reduce the time limit for Back-Bench speeches to four minutes.

3.12 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker, for permission to speak in this debate. I apologise to the House for the fact that because I was chairing a public sitting of the Defence Committee I could not be here for the opening speeches. For that reason, too, I have deliberately refrained from making any interventions.

Although the issue of strategic nuclear deterrence is very divisive, we can all agree that the calibre of the speeches on both sides of the House—and on both sides of the argument—has been very high indeed. If the Chairman of the Defence Committee had to mirror the views of its members, I would probably spend just over 90% of my time arguing passionately in favour of the nuclear deterrent and just under 10% of it arguing equally passionately against it, because we have, and are delighted to have, on the Committee the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman), who is a consistent and thoughtful opponent of Trident.

Fortunately, however, I do not have to mirror those views. The views I am expected to put forward are clearly marked as my own, and they have been pretty much the same for 35 years, half of them outside this House and the remainder inside this House. On my having been elected to chair the Defence Committee, something may have come as a bit of a surprise to people who looked at the list of the five hon. Members from the Labour Opposition who were kind enough to nominate me to that role. One was the shadow Armed Forces Minister, the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), and that is hardly a surprise. However, at the other end of the spectrum, I was fortunate enough to enjoy the support of the current Leader of the Opposition. The reason was that we both agree on one thing. Even though our views on whether we should continue to have a nuclear deterrent are diametrically opposed, we both agree that both sides of the case have a good argument to make, and that when we make it on the Floor of the House, everybody learns something.

With the support of the now Leader of the Opposition, I managed to secure, on 17 January 2013, the first full debate on the whole issue of Trident and deterrence in the main Chamber since the vote on 14 March 2007 when the initial gate was approved. Anybody who really wants to see both sides of the intellectual argument at their best could do no better than to get a copy of that debate, from which I shall repeat my five main military arguments.

I fear that I will not have enough time to deal with the point about cyber-vulnerability, so I commend to the House the article in *The Guardian* today in which Franklin Miller, a leading expert for 20 years on the American nuclear systems and, indeed, the holder of an honorary knighthood from this country, explains why there is no question of the nuclear deterrent being connected in any way to the internet and being in any way vulnerable in that regard. Similarly, on the question of tiers, I merely say that tier 2 threats are often more dangerous than tier 1 threats, and that is why the Defence Committee has just published a report in which we challenge the utility of ranking threats in this way.

Let me now stick to reciting my few arguments. There is not much time for any detail unless someone is kind enough to intervene on me. The first of the military arguments is the most important of all: that future military threats and conflicts will be no more predictable than those that engulfed us throughout the 20th century. That is the overriding justification for preserving armed forces in peacetime as a national insurance policy.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: Does my right hon. Friend agree that deterrence is probably our best defence?

Dr Lewis: That point leads directly to the question of what it means to say that we are “using” Trident. Those of us who believe that the possession of a deadly weapon is the best method of stopping other people who possess similar deadly weapons from using them against us, say that Trident is in use every day of the week, and if ever the button had to be pressed, it would have totally failed in its purpose.

My second argument is that it is not the weapons themselves that we have to fear but the nature of the regimes that possess them. Whereas democracies are generally reluctant to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear dictatorships—although they did against Japan in 1945—the reverse is not true. Let us consider what might have happened if in 1982 a non-nuclear Britain had been facing an Argentina in possession of even just a few tactical nuclear bombs and the means of delivering them. Would we then have dared to use our conventional forces against its inferior conventional forces?

The third argument is that the United Kingdom has traditionally played a more important and decisive role in preserving freedom than other medium-sized democracies have been able, or willing, to do. Democratic countries without nuclear weapons have little choice but either to declare themselves neutral and hope for the best or to rely on the nuclear umbrella of their powerful allies. We are a nuclear power already, and it is also much harder to defeat us by conventional means because of the existence of the English channel.

The fourth argument is that because the United States is our closest ally, if the continent of Europe were ever occupied and the nuclear forces of the United States had not been used, an enemy might feel that they could attack us with nuclear weapons with impunity.

Alec Shelbrooke: For those who say that our nuclear deterrent is in the hands of the Americans, what does my right hon. Friend make of the fact that every Prime Minister has to write a letter held in every submarine that is never, ever seen unless in the most dire circumstances?

Dr Lewis: My hon. Friend is exactly right. There is no question but that the Trident nuclear system is entirely autonomous. Indeed, nothing—not the Americans, not any form of cyber-bug—can possibly intervene if, heaven forbid, the worst happened, the United Kingdom were attacked in part or in whole and the submarine commander had to open the dreaded letter written by the Prime Minister.

The fifth and final military argument is the most important of all. I put this to people when they try to say, “Well, you’re inflicting cuts on our conventional capability.” The argument is that there is no quantity of conventional forces that can compensate for the military disadvantage that faces a non-nuclear country in a war against a nuclear-armed enemy. The atomic bombing of Japan is a perfect example, not only because the Emperor was forced to surrender, but because what of might have happened under the reverse scenario: if Japan had developed atomic bombs in the summer of 1945 and the allies had not, a conventional allied invasion to end the war would have been out of the question.

The debate should and will go on, and I congratulate SNP Members on giving us the opportunity to take part in it today.

3.20 pm

Mr Roger Godsiff (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): May I make it quite clear at the beginning that, during the cold war, I was a multilateralist? I have never been a member of CND, and I have no moral objections to nuclear weapons or to nuclear power. Indeed, once the atom was split in the 1940s, that could not be undone, even though Oppenheimer himself said that, in retrospect, he wished he had never discovered how to do it.

However, time has moved on and we live in a different world nowadays. There are usually two arguments why the UK should have a so-called independent nuclear deterrent. I have to say that in my opinion both of them are myths. The first myth is that the system is independent; it is not. The UK has four nuclear submarines, each can carry up to eight missiles and each missile can carry up to five nuclear warheads. The UK does not own the missiles; it leases them from America, where they are made, maintained and tested. Our four submarines have to go to the American naval base in Georgia to have the missiles fitted. It is of course said, “Oh, but we have operational independence.” That is also a myth. Does anybody seriously believe that the UK could deploy and use nuclear weapons anywhere in the world without the approval of the Americans, because I do not?

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Yes.

Mr Godsiff: Well, let those who believe it make their arguments. I do not believe it.

Simon Hoare: The hon. Gentleman asserts as a fact that something is a myth, but can he substantiate why he thinks what Conservative Members say, which is that the deterrent is independent in operational terms, is a myth? He is just spouting something said by Labour Members since 1983, but with no substantiation.

Mr Godsiff: The last time the United Kingdom acted with other countries was when they acted with France and Israel over the Suez canal in 1956. As I am sure Conservative Members are well aware, Harold Macmillan made it perfectly clear in his memoirs that the Americans said we had to leave Suez and end our military action, because if we did not they would bankrupt the country. If the hon. Gentleman feels that the Americans would be quite happy to let us deploy and use our nuclear weapons, he can believe that, but I do not. I want to move on.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman makes an extremely good point. Should the British public sleep soundly in their beds in a few years’ time knowing that, when it comes to our nuclear weapons, Donald might hold the Trump card?

Mr Godsiff: The second myth, which has not been argued today, but is often expressed, is that if the UK did not have nuclear weapons, it would somehow lose its place on the UN Security Council. Of course, that is also nonsense, because when the Security Council was formed, only one of the five permanent members—America—had nuclear weapons.

This country, like all other developed countries, faces threats to its security from rogue states, international terrorist groups and groups within our own society who want to destroy it. In my opinion, these threats are best

[Mr Godsiff]

met by our membership of NATO, the most successful mutual defence pact in history. It never attacked anybody between the time it was set up in 1948 and the end of the cold war. The tragedy of NATO has been that, after the cold war, it became not a mutual defence pact, but the world's policeman, which has caused enormous problems in its member countries.

The way to deal with threats from domestic terrorism is by having a fully staffed and fully financed security service, by ensuring that the police have the money to do the job they need to do and by ensuring that our own conventional forces are given the tools of the job when they are sent into military conflicts on our behalf.

Let me make this point. We have witnessed terrible terrorist atrocities in this countries—the London bombings—but did our ownership of nuclear weapons do anything to prevent them? We saw what happened in the terrible attacks in Paris last weekend, but France is a nuclear power. France has a nuclear deterrent, but did its ownership of its own nuclear deterrent deter the terrorist groups who carried out the atrocities in Paris?

I am not convinced that we should spend a huge sum of money on renewing our own nuclear deterrent, which, as I have already said, is not independent in my opinion. I very strongly believe that we should be members of NATO and that NATO members should not be averse to contributing towards the nuclear umbrella that America provides. I would have no objection to that, but I believe the idea that we should somehow have our own so-called independent nuclear deterrent just does not stack up.

3.27 pm

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): Yesterday's national security strategy and SDSR indicated the future strategy for, and shape of, our security and defence arrangements. The continued reliance on nuclear weapons of mass destruction—or the deterrent, as the UK Government prefer to call it—remains at their heart. In my speech, I will contend that these nuclear weapons do not serve Scotland or the UK as an effective deterrent. On one recent estimate, the cost will be £167 billion over the programme's lifetime. I would argue that these colossally expensive weapons are fundamentally a status symbol for the United Kingdom, as opposed to usable military weapons. As misguided as that sounds, successive Westminster Governments have been fixated on replenishing our cold war security system for another generation.

The Trident system comprises four nuclear-powered submarines equipped with multiple missiles armed with nuclear warheads. Each missile has the sole purpose of destroying an entire city and every living person within it, indiscriminately. Those cannot be legitimate weapons of war. We do not live in a time when our security is strengthened by those weapons. The ability to obliterate a major city is not something that defends us, if indeed it ever was.

In the past few weeks, we have seen the evil that extremist hate groups can bring to our doorstep. They are made up of splintered networks throughout our towns, cities and communities, which makes them formidable to take on. I would argue that that is where we should be taking action and employing our resources. I welcome the many aspects of yesterday's SDSR announcement

by the Prime Minister that will do exactly that. The investment in 1,900 additional security services and intelligence personnel to counter the threat of espionage is welcome. That is the kind of thing that we should be investing in. The commitment to take the threat of cyber-attack as seriously as any conventional attack is correct and I welcome it.

I want to see more investment in conventional capacity. Yesterday's announcement on maritime patrol aircraft was welcome. The aircraft that were taken away in 2010 are being replaced. The new aircraft are being put in Lossiemouth, where they should be, to defend our north coast. That widely acknowledged gap is now being filled. It was stated yesterday that our defence and security strategy is closely aligned with the plans of our NATO partners. I would argue that the UK contributes nothing to that defensive alliance other than the retention of nuclear weapons. If our strategic aim is genuinely to work, it should complement what our partners bring to NATO. Supporting NATO conventionally is the way to achieve that.

The cost of the Trident upgrade cannot be ignored, even by those who simply accept the nuclear deterrence philosophy without question. I am speaking, respectfully, to many Members in the Chamber. I object to these weapons anyway on moral grounds, and on the basis that they do not serve a military use, but their cost surely cannot be justified any longer.

Simon Hoare: I want to make sure that the hon. Gentleman understands that no Government Member would press that button with any relish or delight, but while foes and potential enemies have such weapons, it is absolutely right and proper that we have an equal defence mechanism to ensure the security of the realm. There are lots of debates that can be reduced to pounds, shillings and pence, but the defence of the realm is not one of them.

Steven Paterson: I would make two points in response. First, I do not accept the deterrence argument; that is why I am making the argument that I am making. Secondly, I ask Members who are looking at this matter with an open mind: is this system necessary at any price, when we are taking resources away from conventional weapons? That is a genuine question that has to be answered if we are to renew this system.

In the time that I have left, I want to quote—

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Steven Paterson: Yes, I will.

Gavin Robinson: I was conscious that you were looking for additional time. Can I get this right? You welcome yesterday's commitments to additional investment in national security by this country, which the SNP wants to leave. You will take the investment, the security and the support, but you want to leave this country and—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. The hon. Gentleman must remember that he is speaking through the Chair. I have no interest in this debate. He was speaking to the hon. Member for Stirling (Steven Paterson), not the Chair.

Gavin Robinson: You are quite right, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have heard that rebuke on numerous occasions and I am happy to follow all the other Members who have had to apologise to the Chair.

The hon. Gentleman knows the point that I am making. You want national security and investment from this national Parliament, but you want an à la carte—[*Interruption.*] Sorry, the hon. Gentleman wants an à la carte approach. I am not prepared to play fast and loose with our national security, and neither should he be.

Steven Paterson: I think that I am grateful for that contribution. It will surprise no one in this room that, as an SNP Member, I stand for independence. I believe that that is the best future for Scotland. However, I will play a constructive part in the security arrangements of the UK for as long as Scotland remains a part of it. That is a reasonable thing to do.

I was about to quote Major General Patrick Cordingley, who stated in *The Guardian* on 28 September that the funding for the Trident nuclear weapon system should not be ring-fenced, and that the costs should be weighed up against those for new planes, tanks and infantry. That is the argument that I would make, alongside my moral objections. We need to look at our conventional forces to see what more we can do to combat the threats that we face.

Simon Hoare: The hon. Gentleman's narrative stacks up if we are in a realm of debate in which we have to decide whether to have one or the other. At the moment, we are able to support our conventional services and have nuclear weapons. Are we not better off having two clubs in the bag, rather than just one?

Steven Paterson: My point is that we are not doing enough to strengthen conventional weapons; we could be doing more. For example, yesterday the number of frigates was cut from 13 to eight. I would like us to strengthen our conventional forces.

The replacement of Trident fails to address the threats outlined in the SDSR and the national security strategy. Instead, we should invest in conventional forces, equipment, intelligence, counter-espionage, and combating cyber-terrorism, as well as actual terrorism on our streets and the streets of our allies. I implore the House to consider what threats Trident actually combats, and to reject its replacement.

3.34 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): Trident is a term often used to describe the UK's entire nuclear weapons system, including Vanguard class submarines, Trident missiles and nuclear warheads. Each Trident D5 missile can hold up to 12 nuclear warheads, and each warhead has eight times more capacity to kill and destroy than the bomb that exploded over Hiroshima. Each submarine has 16 missile tubes, which means that it is technically capable of carrying 192 warheads. If deployed as per Hiroshima, 192 warheads, times eight, equates to killing 61 million people. With four submarines, that number grows to 250 million deaths. It would, of course, be far worse than that: a nuclear strike would lead to water supplies and arable land being polluted. Livestock would die; crops would fail. For those not initially killed by

our nuclear weapons, starvation would follow. By arming themselves with Trident, the UK Government are saying that they are prepared to inflict that fate on millions of innocent civilians if that were deemed necessary.

Nobody can win a nuclear war. An exchange of nuclear weapons would lead to a level of devastation that neither side, or indeed the planet, could ever recover from. I acknowledge that we have imposed limits on the use of those weapons, but that will come as little comfort to the dead and the dying. The plan is to use a maximum of 40 warheads. Obviously, while sitting in the cloistered atmosphere of Westminster and playing war games, somebody decided that 39 warheads were not enough, and 41—well, that would be plain barbaric.

The only rational thought that could justify the renewal of Trident would be a genuine belief that its existence in some way, shape or form contributed to a more peaceful world. Since world war two, the nuclear deterrent has not stopped wars in Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, the Falkland Islands—I could list 20 or 30 more countries. It has not deterred terrorist attacks in London, Tunisia, Mali, Paris or New York. If nuclear weapons have proved to be completely inadequate in preventing those wars and atrocities, what are its successes? What threat does Trident address, and who does it deter?

Dr Julian Lewis: The hon. Gentleman's argument is like saying that just because the antidote to one deadly disease is ineffective against other deadly diseases, we should not have the antidote.

Ronnie Cowan: If we had used our time, effort, money and ingenuity to fight deadly diseases instead of creating weapons of mass destruction, the world would be a better place today. We should be looking for humanitarian solutions, not for death.

Former Defence Secretary Des Browne, and Ian Kearns, the former adviser to Parliament on national security, stated:

"It has become clearer, for example, that a set of long-term threats has emerged, to which deterrence, nuclear or otherwise, is not applicable".

Former Conservative Defence Secretary Michael Portillo said:

"Our independent nuclear deterrent is not independent and doesn't constitute a deterrent against anybody that we regard as an enemy. It is a waste of money and it is a diversion of funds".

I agree with the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) when he said:

"The successor Trident programme is going to consume more than double the proportion of the defence budget of its predecessor...The price required, both from the UK taxpayer and our conventional forces, is now too high to be rational or sensible."

I am not naive, and I know there are dangers in the world, but the sort of threats that we need to address will not be placated by Trident. The UK Government have identified terrorism, cybercrime, pandemics, natural disasters, foreign instability and foreign conflicts as our primary risks over the next five years. Trident will not solve any of those issues. In the meantime, Scotland's coast continues to be poorly guarded, and our maritime reconnaissance is poor.

I am aware that the UK Government have finally committed to new maritime patrol vehicles, but the gap in our capability will remain, at least until 2020. Westminster's irrational commitment to Trident has

[Ronnie Cowan]

come at the expense of defence jobs in Scotland. Between 2000 and 2010, cuts to military personnel in Scotland were measured at 27.9%, compared with 11.6% across the UK as a whole. The decline continued between July 2014 and July 2015, as personnel numbers in Scotland dropped by a further 9.5%. At a lifetime cost of £167 billion, it is clear that Trident makes no economic sense. It solves none of our pressing foreign policy priorities, and it is draining resources from our conventional forces. Trident is not the solution; it is very much part of the problem.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. Three more Members want to catch my eye. I am very sorry to say that I will drop the speech limit down to three minutes, so that they can all be accommodated.

3.39 pm

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) on a superb speech. It is a pleasure to follow it, and I agree with everything he said.

I am speaking not for the Labour party, but for myself. I am a lifelong unilateral nuclear disarmer, and I have not changed my view one jot. I hope my party's commission comes around to my position. There are other members of the parliamentary Labour party who take the same view. We maybe in a minority, I do not know. However, tens of thousands of Labour party members outside this House and millions of fellow citizens take our view, and not the view that seems to have a majority in the House today.

I am the vice-chair of the parliamentary Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. At one time I was the national chair of the trade union CND. I marched from Aldermaston many, many years ago in a column of tens of thousands of people led by Frank Cousins, Barbara Castle, Anthony Greenwood, Tony Benn and many others in our movement who were unilateral nuclear disarmers. As has been said, nuclear weapons are an insane abomination. They are capable of vaporising vast numbers of people in one explosion and horribly injuring thousands more, as well as spreading toxic radiation across the world. Any sane person would say they had to go. I am not convinced that our fellow Europeans in Germany, Italy and Spain would vote for us to keep our nuclear weapons. I do not know, but I suspect not. One day, we will win the unilateralist argument in Britain and get rid of them.

Hon. Members have raised the issue of replacing jobs. Replacing jobs is quite easy. The issue is not the existence of jobs, but what those jobs make. If we had people making thumbscrews, we would say those jobs were not right, and we would replace the thumbscrews with something more benign—and nuclear weapons are much more horrific than thumbscrews. Nevertheless, we have to think about what people are doing in their jobs. We could replace all nuclear weapons jobs with jobs relating to conventional weaponry. Our forces are under-resourced. We heard from the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) that military experts and people in the forces say we need to spend money, not

on nuclear weapons, but on conventional forces. The construction of new ships would provide jobs in Barrow-in-Furness. Even just decommissioning existing Trident nuclear submarines—I want to go further than not renewing them and decommission them now—would provide a lot of work for some years to come. There are many arguments that I would like raise if I had more time, but that is it for now.

4.42 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I thank my Scottish National party colleagues for securing this important debate. Hon. Members have been challenging one another to be clear on nuclear weapons, so before I come to the substance of what I want to say in the very brief time I have, I want to put my party's position on the record. For the avoidance of doubt, let me say that my party believes that nuclear weapons, the possession of them and the willingness to use them, are illegal, immoral and a grotesque diversion of resources from the real threats we face.

Let me start by focusing on the misguided claim that nuclear weapons make us safer. I would argue that they do not and I am not alone in that. Last year, under the umbrella of the European Leadership Network, senior military, political and diplomatic figures, including former Conservative Foreign Secretary and former Chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee Sir Malcolm Rifkind, former Defence Secretary Des Browne and former Foreign Secretary Lord Owen, came together with the explicit aim of

“shining a light on the risks posed by nuclear weapons.”

Reporting in advance of the third international conference on the humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons, they warned:

“We believe the risks posed by nuclear weapons and the international dynamics that could lead to nuclear weapons being used are underestimated or insufficiently understood by world leaders.”

I could not agree more, and that would seem true of our own Prime Minister here today. His main argument for replacing Trident, as he said in response to questions on the SDSR yesterday, is that they are the “ultimate insurance” in an “uncertain world”. What he fails to acknowledge, however, is that it is precisely our possession of nuclear weapons in contravention of the treaty on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons that is exacerbating that uncertainty. It is leading to the very scenario that he is so keen to avoid.

The Secretary of State has said that we live in an uncertain world. Yes, we do, but the logic of his argument must be that every other country in the world should also seek to protect its populations by acquiring nuclear weapons. Is he relaxed about a world in which every single country is trying to acquire nuclear weapons? Does he really think that that level of proliferation will make us safer? I don't think so. By keeping and upgrading our nuclear weapons, we send a signal to the rest of the world that security is dependent on the acquisition of nuclear weapons. In the words of Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary-General:

“The more that those states that already have”

nuclear weapons

“increase their arsenals, or insist that such weapons are essential to their national security, the more other states feel that they too must have them for their security.”

The logical conclusion of the Government's argument is a world full of nuclear weapons, which will only make us less safe.

Under the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, the Government have a duty to pursue negotiations, in good faith, on effective measures relating to the cessation of the nuclear arms race and to nuclear disarmament at an early date. Replacing the Trident system means committing the UK to maintaining an arsenal of nuclear weapons for decades to come, in complete contravention of the NPT. Disarmament is the best way to reduce dangers and improve global security, strengthen the NPT regime, deter proliferation and de-escalate international tensions. Nuclear weapons are a diversion from the real threats we face, and we should get rid of them now.

3.46 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I rise to sum up for my party after a debate that, by coincidence, falls in the week when we heard the Government outline their plans for defence spending in the years ahead and when we will hear the Chancellor present his first autumn statement under a majority Government. I was struck yesterday when the Prime Minister pronounced from the Dispatch Box that Trident would not squeeze out other defence expenditure. From what we have heard today, he has clearly failed to convince some hon. Members.

I thank everyone who has taken part in this extremely thoughtful and thorough debate. It was interesting to listen to all the contributions, whether or not I agreed with what was said. I echo the thoughts of the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), who was clear about the importance of our having these discussions. Like my hon. Friends, I was elected on a clear platform of ensuring a stronger voice for Scotland, standing up against austerity and always opposing the renewal of weapons of mass destruction.

I am not surprised to hear enthusiasm from Government Members, such as the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), for keeping nuclear weapons. It was disappointing but at least clear. I am, however, disappointed to have seen such empty Labour Benches during the debate. As noted by the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams), that can only be because they are not clear about their position. Is it the Scottish Labour position of not renewing Trident? Is it the position of Scottish Labour leader Kezia Dugdale, who supports weapons of mass destruction? Is it the position of Scottish Labour members who do not? Is it the position of the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), who opposes Trident, or of his colleagues who support renewal, such as—I think—the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins)? Or is it something else?

Simon Hoare: There might be another reason for the absence of Labour Members. According to the newspapers this morning, they have all been told to go and campaign in Oldham West. For them, the fear of losing a by-election is far more important than the defence of the realm.

Kirsten Oswald: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I have nothing to add.

The hon. Member for Chesterfield's characterisation of the debate as a stunt was particularly unedifying and unhelpful. Our position on Trident could not be clearer

or more consistent, and it was both reasonable and appropriate that we sought a debate on it. The only stunts are the mental acrobatics of anyone trying to get their head around the ever-changing Labour position. The position of all hon. Members on Trident is important—this is a vital discussion—so I would have sincerely welcomed their full participation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara), who opened the debate, represents the constituency that houses our nuclear weapons. All hon. Members should read his logical, detailed and powerful speech. He pointed out the astonishing and rocketing costs of Trident. Anyone watching the television yesterday would have felt that the cost was going up with each news bulletin. This must surely concern us all. I must also commend my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin John Docherty) for his passionate and well-made points about nuclear safety.

Clearly, some Members, including Conservative Members, are very sincere in their belief in the merits of weapons of mass destruction. Although I disagree with the Secretary of State for Defence, I appreciated the measured and considered way in which he made his contribution. I support his positive comments about how hard our service personnel work. However, I cannot agree with his assertion that nuclear weapons are a means of defending ourselves against today's threats.

My hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) usefully pointed out the futility of nuclear weapons against threats such as those we currently face from Daesh. Although I did not agree with the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray), I was pleased to hear her say—I think—that she would not push the button, and I appreciated her thoughtful tone and manner.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: Let me put it on the record that I did not say I would not push the button.

Kirsten Oswald: I am grateful for the hon. Lady's intervention, but I am no clearer about her position on that issue. The measured approach in her earlier contribution contrasted with that of her colleague the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), who compared Trident to a burglar alarm. I disagreed, too, with the hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) and the hon. Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies). Again, though, I thought their contributions were sincere and interesting, and I thank them for the tone they brought to the debate.

I was disappointed by the Labour Member who suggested that opposition to Trident was a narrow nationalist issue. I must disagree, as this issue concerns every one of us. Frankly, I was appalled at the comments and the tone of the name-calling contribution from the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock). His contribution added absolutely nothing constructive to today. On the other hand, I thank the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins), who made a useful and constructive speech, making his principled objections to Trident clearly understood. I commend, too, my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) for her compelling and insightful speech, and her thoughts on the legality of the use of Trident.

[Kirsten Oswald]

I was also pleased to hear the knowledge and insightful contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan).

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) correctly pointed out that it is important that this debate is taking place now, as we rapidly approach main gate. I cannot support his call for a deterrent in another form, but it was positive to hear another Scottish representative participating in today's debate, and it is unfortunate that neither the Secretary of State for Scotland nor the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) were in their places for today's debate.

I was struck by the powerful remarks of the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), who focused on the dangers inherent in nuclear weapons, and by those of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr Godsiff), who rightly questioned the independence of the nuclear weapons we hold.

I have recently met both the Hibakusha—Japanese atom bomb survivors—and the mayor of Hiroshima. The message that these people who were so directly affected by these terrible nuclear weapons bring was clear. I dearly wish that the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling and the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) had been able to join me to hear directly from them what the impact of nuclear weapons on real people really is.

The point made in the powerful speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan)—that no one can win a nuclear war—was well made, and I can only applaud those sentiments.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) pointed out that if Trident ever gets through the main gate, it will become a steady drain on the defence budget. It will compete for resources with conventional equipment, which will get chopped and changed to suit the Government of the day's political requirements rather than the needs of the armed forces. The irony of our not flinching at the astounding hike in an already indefensible cost was not lost on my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Steven Paterson). I have to wonder why this same logic was not applied to Nimrod, which the Government broke up when the price went up, leaving our huge Scottish coastline with absolutely no maritime patrol aircraft. As my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute said, that is a strange, worrying and very skewed logic.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green pointed out that the deterrent simply does not deal with our current threats and that it does not stack up. In the context of a capped defence budget, this does not make sense, as we saw from the concerns raised by the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh). As the implications of the SDSR become clearer, there is no doubt that we will see areas in which the Government expect our armed forces to do less.

I remind the Secretary of State for Defence again that people in Scotland are clear: there is determined national opposition to the renewal of Trident. I say that with 57 of 59 MPs in Scotland being SNP Members, and with the Churches, much of civic Scotland and the Scottish TUC all in opposition to renewal.

As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee West (Chris Law), this Conservative Government have no mandate to impose their immoral views on the people of Scotland. They show a wilful disregard of the people of Scotland and of the message that was sent here from the ballot box.

3.54 pm

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Mr Philip Dunne): I am pleased to be able to follow the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald). I believe that she was making her debut in winding up a debate on behalf of her party, and I congratulate her on that. As she said, this has been a well-informed and at times passionate debate, and rightly so, because the strategic deterrent forms a key part of the Government's No. 1 priority: the defence of the realm.

The Government are committed to maintaining a minimum credible and assured deterrent, as was clearly stated in the manifesto on which they were elected to govern the whole of the United Kingdom. The hon. Lady argued that we should respect the wishes of the Scottish people, and we should indeed take them into account, but that is the same argument as was advanced by the then leader of the Greater London Council when he declared London to be a nuclear-free zone. No nuclear weapon would have been allowed in this country had his views been entirely respected. That is not an argument that we can respect, because we have responsibility for the government of the United Kingdom as a whole.

We are committed to building four new nuclear-armed submarines to replace the current four Vanguard class submarines, but not to replacing the Trident missile, which is the notional subject of the debate. As was pointed out by the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins), the subject of the debate is not, strictly speaking, what is at stake today, because what we are actually discussing is whether or not to replace the submarine class, rather than the missile system.

Why do we stand by our commitment? First, as the Secretary of State said, this is about being realistic. We do not live in an ideal world, much as we might wish to. Our deterrent is there to deter the most extreme threats to our national security and way of life. Those threats have not gone away, however much people might wish it were otherwise. The national security review which was published yesterday shows that, if anything, they are growing and becoming more complex and more diverse by the day.

Under the coalition Government, we as a nation took steps to reduce nuclear arsenals, and we have reduced the number of deployed warheads on each submarine from 48 to 40. Other nations with nuclear weapons have not responded to that unilateral action. They need to follow our example, and nations without nuclear weapons should end all notions of obtaining them. Those who wish to gamble with the nation's security do so with no ability to predict what the world might be like in decades to come.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Dunne: I am afraid that I have very little time.

Secondly, our deterrent works for us every day, for 365 days and nights each year, thanks to the brave service of so many of our valiant personnel serving on

the Vanguard class submarines—and, indeed, the husband of the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), whom she mentioned earlier. I believe that he has now retired from the Royal Navy, but I respect the service that he gave.

The fact that we have a continuous at-sea deterrent sows the seeds of doubt in the minds of our potential adversaries. As was emphasised by my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) in a powerful speech, continuous at-sea deterrence works because it provides the ability to strike back. It also provides another decision-making centre in the NATO alliance, and complicates and confuses an enemy's calculations.

Finally, there is no alternative. Notwithstanding the recollection of my friend and former colleague the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), the 2013 Trident Alternatives Review made it very clear that if we were to have a cost-effective way of delivering the minimum nuclear deterrent, Successor was the only viable solution. Moreover, the ramifications of removing our deterrent would be immense, putting at risk not just our national security and our position in NATO—the cornerstone of our defence—but our economy, our essential skills base, and thousands of jobs across the United Kingdom.

John Woodcock: I asked the Minister earlier if he would reassure the workforce that the change in the industry would not affect their jobs throughout the supply chain. Will he do that now?

Mr Dunne: I am about to respond to some of the comments that have been made today. Before I answer the hon. Gentleman's question, I want to deal with the fantasy figures presented by the SNP's defence spokesman, the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara), who had conjured up from nowhere the idea that if the nuclear deterrent ceased to exist, Scotland would benefit by some £15 billion as a result of not spending money on it. The cost of replacing the Vanguard class with the Successor class is, as identified clearly in yesterday's document, £31 billion spread over decades—over some 30 years—so the idea of a much larger figure is not correct.

Brendan O'Hara *rose*—

Mr Dunne: No, I am afraid I will not give way.

I welcome the hon. Gentleman's apparent admission that in the event that the deterrent was to be decommissioned, Scotland would take its share of the nuclear decommissioning risk and location of nuclear material. That is very welcome indeed and is in stark contrast to the responses we have had from the Scottish Government to the disposal project currently in consultation.

The hon. Gentleman also indicated no willingness to acknowledge there is any potential threat from nuclear-empowered nations. He was challenged and signally failed to provide an answer as to what the potential threat might be from Russia, despite the fact that every time there is an incursion into either air or sea space approximate to our national territorial waters SNP Members are the first to jump up and ask what we are doing about it. It seems that they have, as so often, double standards. Finally, I point out to the hon. Gentleman

that there has been no increase in nuclear weaponry in this country—far from it; nuclear weapons numbers have declined.

The hon. Member for Chesterfield gave a thoughtful speech from a somewhat confused party position. On the governance of implementing a delivery organisation to make sure we deliver the Successor programme on time and to budget over the years to come, I can confirm that this will remain subject to oversight by the MOD. We are in the process of working out how we best learn the lessons of delivering major procurement projects like Aircraft Carrier Alliance to get the industry properly aligned, and the Ministry and the delivery organisations currently within DE&S properly aligned, to work in partnership to deliver this vital programme.

Toby Perkins: The Minister said there will be MOD oversight. Does that mean the MOD will be leading this, or will it be led from the Treasury?

Mr Dunne: As the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State have made clear, this will be reporting through the MOD structures to the Secretary of State, and of course the Treasury will take its interest in the delivery of major programmes as it does in all our category A programmes, of which this will obviously be the largest.

We have had contributions from a number of Members across the House, and they have been well-recognised already. I do not have time to thank Members for contributing, but I would just say by way of conclusion that it was welcome to see consensus between most of the contributions of the Official Opposition and the contributions from the Government Benches. I recognise that many who stood up have done so with courage in speaking of their belief in the vital importance of our strategic deterrence, some despite the appalling provocations and bigoted comments from the former Mayor of London, who has allegedly been appointed by the Leader of the Opposition, without the courtesy of informing the shadow Defence Secretary, to, as we heard today, co-convene a Labour review of the strategic deterrent.

The hon. Member for Chesterfield did his best, but even he was unable to make clear what this review is for, who is in charge and what difference it will make. Heaven knows what will emerge from the review—we might get a clue from the vote imminently—but I was astonished to learn from the Opposition spokesman that he does not regard it as appropriate to vote on this motion in Parliament today. I say to those Labour Members who share my concern to maintain continuous at-sea deterrence, "Let your conscience guide you into the right Division Lobby this afternoon." I urge Members of both sides of the House to do the right thing for the whole of the UK, not just for today but for tomorrow, and restore the consensus that has kept us safe for decades.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 64, Noes 330.

Division No. 131]

[4.4 pm

AYES

Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina	Blackford, Ian
Arkless, Richard	Blackman, Kirsty
Bardell, Hannah	Boswell, Philip
Black, Mhairi	Brook, Deidre

Brown, Alan
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Chapman, Douglas
Cherry, Joanna
Cowan, Ronnie
Crawley, Angela
Day, Martyn
Docherty, Martin John
Donaldson, Stuart Blair
Durkan, Mark
Fellows, Marion
Ferrier, Margaret
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Hendry, Drew
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Kerevan, George
Kerr, Calum
Law, Chris
Lucas, Caroline
MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan
Mc Nally, John
McCaig, Callum
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, Dr Alasdair

McGarry, Natalie
McLaughlin, Anne
Monaghan, Carol
Monaghan, Dr Paul
Mullin, Roger
Newlands, Gavin
Nicolson, John
O'Hara, Brendan
Oswald, Kirsten
Paterson, Steven
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Robertson, rh Angus
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Sheppard, Tommy
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Stephens, Chris
Stringer, Graham
Thewliss, Alison
Thompson, Owen
Thomson, Michelle
Weir, Mike
Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Wilson, Corri
Wishart, Pete

Tellers for the Ayes:
Liz Saville Roberts and
Jonathan Edwards

NOES

Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Barron, rh Kevin
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Mr Henry
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, Karen
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David

Cairns, Alun
Carmichael, Neil
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Colville, Oliver
Costa, Alberto
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Creagh, Mary
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Byron
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
Donaldson, rh Mr Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard

Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, James
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Elliott, Tom
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Chris
Evans, Graham
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh Mr David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, rh Sir Edward
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, Mr David
Ghani, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, Mr James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, Sir Oliver
Heapey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hermon, Lady
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip

Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Boris
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kendall, Liz
Kennedy, Seema
Kinahan, Danny
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Pauline
Leadsom, Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Leslie, Charlotte
Leslie, Chris
Letwin, rh Mr Oliver
Lewis, Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Lilley, rh Mr Peter
Lopresti, Jack
Loughton, Tim
Lumley, Karen
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackintosh, David
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Mr Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Mathias, Dr Tania
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
McLoughlin, rh Mr Patrick
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Mordaunt, Penny
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mowat, David
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll

Murrison, Dr Andrew
 Neill, Robert
 Nokes, Caroline
 Norman, Jesse
 Nuttall, Mr David
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Owen, Albert
 Paisley, Ian
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Perry, Claire
 Phillips, Stephen
 Philp, Chris
 Pickles, rh Sir Eric
 Pincher, Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Daniel
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, Mr Dominic
 Redwood, rh John
 Reed, Mr Jamie
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Reynolds, Emma
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Rudd, rh Amber
 Rutley, David
 Sandbach, Antoinette
 Scully, Paul
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Shelbrooke, Alec
 Simpson, David
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Angela
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Solloway, Amanda
 Soubry, rh Anna
 Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline

Spencer, Mark
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stewart, Rory
 Streeter, Mr Gary
 Stride, Mel
 Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Mr Desmond
 Swire, rh Mr Hugo
 Syms, Mr Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Turner, Mr Andrew
 Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, Mr Ben
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watkinson, Dame Angela
 Wharton, James
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Heather
 White, Chris
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, Mr Rob
 Wilson, Sammy
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Wood, Mike
 Woodcock, John
 Wragg, William
 Wright, rh Jeremy

Tellers for the Noes:
Simon Kirby and
Sarah Newton

HMRC Office Closures

4.17 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House condemns the proposed closure of HMRC offices in Scotland and throughout the UK; believes that this will result in a reduced service to the public; is concerned about the potential loss of tax yield; is further concerned at the loss of jobs and expertise in local communities; further believes that this will undermine efforts to reduce the tax gap which currently stands at £34 billion; also believes that this proposal will undermine the ability of SMEs to access information and advice and that the proposed closure programme is flawed and counterproductive; and calls on the Government to halt its programme of HMRC office closures.

The UK Government's recent announcement of the planned closure of 137 local Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs offices across the UK is part of their continued drive to rain down a regime of austerity cuts on our family of nations.

HMRC employs 8,330 people across Scotland, which represents 13% of all UK HMRC staff. Although we do not have the full information from the Government on how many jobs will be lost, the BBC has reported—

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that it was a democratic outrage that the Government produced a statement on this matter during a parliamentary recess, and that a Government statement was not made at the Dispatch Box of this House?

Hannah Bardell: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. It is yet more evidence of this Government's lack of respect for Scotland and for Scottish workers.

Following the announcement, the BBC reported that more than 2,000 jobs could be lost in Scotland. As yet, we have no detail. With your indulgence, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will list the offices that are set to close across Scotland to highlight the scale and impact of the decision: one office to close in Aberdeen by 2021; one office in Bathgate and Livingston, my own constituency, by 2020; one office in Cumbernauld by 2020; two offices in Dundee; three offices in East Kilbride; three offices to close and consolidate into one large office in Edinburgh; and two large offices to close and consolidate into one large office in Glasgow.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): I am pleased to say that I support the motion. The motion also refers to HMRC offices throughout the UK. Does she have statistics for the whole of the UK as well as for Scotland?

Hannah Bardell: I do not have them to hand, but I would be happy to hear the hon. Gentleman's specific views and discuss them with him.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP) *rose*—

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP) *rose*—

Hannah Bardell: I am going to make some progress.

An office is also going to shut in Inverness, and offices in Irvine and Glenrothes are also in the process of closing. Those closures are distressing news for the employees, their families and the communities affected,

Question accordingly negated.

[*Hannah Bardell*]

including in my constituency of Livingston. We must remember that behind every closed office and every job lost are individual folk, some of whom I and my colleagues have met in recent weeks following the announced closures. Many of them have proudly worked for HMRC for 10, 20 or more than 30 years. Many have spent their whole careers in their local HMRC offices and are fiercely proud of the work they do.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con) *rose*—

Hannah Bardell: I am going to make some progress. Three of the Scottish centres announced for closure—those in East Kilbride, Cumbernauld and my constituency of Livingston—employ staff who issue specific guidance to the public on access to and eligibility for tax credits. With the prospect on the horizon of the Chancellor returning with his tax credit cuts, it is unthinkable that that support will be withdrawn from our communities.

The budgets of Government Departments and public bodies will suffer as a result of the austerity measures. They will be reduced by the Chancellor, who continues to cut despite the advice of many academics. Indeed, only yesterday, a report by City University said:

“George Osborne could be forced to borrow billions of pounds more than forecast by 2020 if he sticks with spending cuts that will hit economic growth”.

Two academics from City University projected that by 2020 the Government will be forced to report a £40 billion deficit instead of the planned surplus, undermining the Chancellor’s fiscal charter, which dictates that the Government borrow only in times of distress.

Craig Williams (Cardiff North) (Con): Despite the context set out by the hon. Lady and the very difficult economic circumstances, will she welcome the jobs that the consolidation and new office plan will create in Cardiff, the capital of Wales?

Hannah Bardell: New jobs in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency will, of course, be good news for his constituents, but I want to know what the Chancellor has to say to people in Scotland and other parts of the UK who are going to suffer and lose their local tax offices.

Simon Hoare *rose*—

Hannah Bardell: Let me make some progress. The City University report is proof that this Chancellor’s attempt to run an absolute surplus is not working and is not credible.

SNP Members were elected on a manifesto that offered an alternative, fiscally credible plan for a modest 0.5% increase in public spending, which would have injected £140 billion into the economy. The proposed closure of HMRC offices will have a disproportionate effect on Scotland, because the vast majority of the UK Government’s ring-fenced Departments lie outside Scotland.

David Simpson *rose*—

Hannah Bardell: If the hon. Gentleman gives me some time, I would like to make some progress.

The most recent proposed closure of local HMRC offices will result in Scotland being left with no HMRC offices beyond the central belt of Scotland. The plans fail to understand or take into account the diversity and needs of the Scottish economy. There are a wide range of industries beyond the central belt of Scotland, including farming, fishing, whisky, tourism and, indeed, oil and gas. Many of those industries rely on the ability to work with their local tax offices, given the complexities of their businesses.

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP) *rose*—

Hannah Bardell: I give way to my hon. Friend.

Hon. Members: Oh!

Callum McCaig: I do not know why people are upset—I have not spoken yet. As a former resident of the great city of Aberdeen and a former worker in the oil industry, my hon. Friend will understand the complexity of an industry that relies heavily on contractors and the need for specialist tax advice. Will she explain to hon. Members the distance between Aberdeen and Edinburgh? They are not just down the road from each other, but those making this decision seem to think that that is the case.

Hannah Bardell: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. I am aware of the complexities of the oil and gas industry, but I am afraid that the Government and Conservative Members do not seem to appreciate them.

The world of work is changing, and many people across the UK are choosing to start and develop their own small businesses. In particular, women are choosing to take charge of their own destiny and start their own businesses, many of them from home. A network of good tax support is essential to support those businesses, run by men and women, if they are to thrive.

I was recently visited by a constituent who has a farming business. He impressed on me the importance of access to local HMRC services and face-to-face support. Industries such as farming often operate a year in arrears to very tight margins, and I and my colleagues have grave concerns about the impact on them and a wide range of other sectors, not least small and medium-sized enterprises.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I called my local tax offices today to see whether I could pop in to speak to them. For the past year they have been unwilling to allow anyone to see them face to face. People can contact them only by phone, so it makes no difference if they are based in the region or locally.

Hannah Bardell: The hon. Gentleman makes my point very well.

David Simpson: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Hannah Bardell: I have just got to my feet again, so let me continue. John Allan, the national chairman of the Federation of Small Businesses said:

“Our members have repeatedly told us about difficulties getting practical help from HMRC when complying with their tax requirements. The current online offering is limited, often hampered by poor broadband connectivity, and the phone help line is hard to navigate, with long waiting times.

Over the long-term, this modernisation programme must bring substantial benefits and efficiency savings. In the short-term however, members will be concerned that the closure of these tax offices will simply compound existing problems.

The Government need to reassure businesses that disruption is kept to a minimum. This should be used by HMRC as an opportunity to deliver services that are easy to access, provide clear and consistent help tailored for smaller businesses and provide the certainty they need for their tax affairs.”

If the Chancellor will not listen to the SNP, perhaps he will listen to the Federation of Small Businesses.

These closures have been happening for some time. In March 2013, the UK Government announced that they were to close all of their 281 inquiry centres by June 2015, and it was reported that closures would result in the loss of 1,300 jobs. A consultation on plans to streamline HMRC inquiry and support services through the use of telephone consultations occurred in 2012, and HMRC piloted the new service in the north-east of England from June to December 2013. In October 2014, HMRC announced plans to close 14 offices across the UK by December 2015. It was reported that that would affect 453 civil servants, and a further 690 administrative employees had been offered voluntary redundancy.

The Public Accounts Committee said in the first half of 2015, following the closures, that only 50% of calls from the public were answered by HMRC, down from 73% in the last financial year. Tam Dolan, the PCS branch chairman in Dundee, said:

“This decision is baffling. HMRC have trained staff doing an excellent job, receiving more calls than they can handle. For PCS members in Dundee, making these staff redundant while recruiting elsewhere sends a message that Dundee doesn't feature in HMRC's long-term plans.”

Simon Hoare: The hon. Lady is being typically generous with her time. In the sunny uplands of Scottish independence, what detailed analysis would her party, as a Government, have undertaken as to the quantum of HMRC staff and offices it would have in a newly independent Scotland?

Hannah Bardell: The hon. Gentleman is getting a little ahead of himself; I will come to that.

Ironically, during the referendum many argued that independence for Scotland would result in job losses in public services. It was lauded as the Union dividend, and we in Scotland were told by the then Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Danny Alexander, who sadly is no longer in his place:

“That dividend is our share of a more prosperous future. It is the money that will pay for better public services and a fairer society.”

In July and August 2014, the Scottish Labour party tweeted that 3,200 jobs at HMRC were

“just one of the reasons that being part of the UK is best for Scottish jobs...and 1,400 jobs at HMRC in Cumbernauld are dependent on us staying in the UK.”

That was clearly not the case. I hope that those on the Labour Benches, who will also no doubt have constituencies affected by these closures, will reflect on those comments and think carefully about who can be trusted when it comes to jobs in Scotland.

The tax gap in 2013-14 was estimated to be £34 billion, which amounts to 6.4% of total theoretical tax liabilities. Small and medium-sized enterprises account for the

largest portion of the overall tax gap—some £16.5 billion—followed by large businesses with some £9.5 billion. We in the SNP take the view that the vast majority of SMEs actively want to contribute to society by paying tax and that a high proportion of the SME tax gap will have been lost through errors and miscommunications.

Mr Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Hannah Bardell: I shall continue. The UK Government's plan to slash 137 local HMRC offices across the UK will inevitably have a knock-on impact on the ability of SMEs to access information and advice on tax.

I would like to give my personal thanks to Gary Stein and his PCS colleagues who met me, my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) and MSP Angela Constance immediately after the closure announcement. I know that other PCS colleagues held similar meetings across Scotland and the UK. Gary and his PCS colleagues are working hard to engage staff and management in offices in West Lothian and have made clear their concerns about morale and the range of issues that I have highlighted. It cannot remain unsaid how valuable our local unions are in this process, and I am sure that it is not without sinister intention that the Government have marched ahead with their undemocratic Trade Union Bill, which would mean that the important work that our unions do in such situations would be made ever more difficult. Never has it been more vital that we have good engagement with the workforces who deliver essential public services.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Hannah Bardell: I would be happy to do so.

Lady Hermon: I know that the hon. Lady is storing up the best until last, but in the meantime I am grateful to her for allowing me to intervene. We have a serious issue in Northern Ireland. We are the only part of the United Kingdom to share a land frontier with another EU member state, which gives rise, very unfortunately for HM Treasury, to fuel smuggling and the loss of a huge amount of revenue along the border with the Republic of Ireland. The announcement of the closure of HMRC offices in Northern Ireland has serious consequences, so will the hon. Lady reflect on that before she calls on someone else to intervene?

Hannah Bardell: I share the hon. Lady's concerns, which will be shared across Scotland and other parts of the UK. My local PCS representatives spoke about what they felt was a perfect storm brewing. The greater the pressure we put on our public services and the more we squeeze them, the more likely it is that there will be major breakdowns in the system.

I am going to finish up. [HON. MEMBERS: “Oh!”] I am sure that the hon. Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) can save his intervention for speeches by other colleagues. I urge all parties across the Chamber to support our motion and ask this Tory Government in the strongest terms to think again on these nonsensical and ill-conceived HMRC closures.

4.32 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): I am delighted to be able to respond to this debate, because protecting the country's tax revenues is a key part of the Government's long-term economic plan, and because we have already made great steps in modernising the way in which tax is collected.

The changes announced on 12 November are an important part of HMRC's operational modernisation programme, designed to create a modern, efficient organisation that continues to protect this country's tax revenues. Modernising and improving the efficiency of HMRC, enabling it better to tackle evasion, drive down avoidance and improve compliance, has been a key Government objective since 2010.

We have made substantial investments to achieve that aim, not least the provision of an added £800 million in the summer Budget, which will help HMRC to recover an additional £7.2 billion. As a result, we have succeeded in driving down the tax gap as a percentage of total liabilities from 7.3% in 2009-10 to 6.4% in 2013-14. This fall represents an additional £14.5 billion in cumulative tax collected. Over the last Parliament, HMRC secured about £100 billion in additional compliance yield, including a record level of £26.6 billion in 2014-15. We have also made important cost reductions to the operational side of HMRC, and I make no apology for that. HMRC cannot be immune from the requirement that its resources are spent wisely.

David Simpson *rose*—

Mr Gauke: I shall give way to the very patient hon. Gentleman.

David Simpson: I thank the Minister for giving way. It was friendly fire for the SNP, but it did not accept it.

The Minister will acknowledge the disappointment in Northern Ireland about the fact that 10 offices are closing. We do not have the full numbers for those who will lose their job or when the redundancies will happen. Further to the comment by the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), we are vulnerable at the best of times, but with the land border this will make it even worse.

Mr Gauke: First, this is about offices, not about staff. On the numbers of people likely to be employed—for example, in Northern Ireland—it should not be taken that because offices are closing, the total number of staff employed by HMRC in Northern Ireland as a whole will be reduced. Of course, HMRC is aware of the specific issues with smuggling and is determined to address them. Let me reassure the hon. Gentleman about numbers of staff. It should not be taken from the announcement of office closures that there will necessarily be a reduction in staff in Northern Ireland at all.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Does the Minister not realise that when offices are closed, that has an effect on staff? With the best will in the world, there will be redundancies. Can he give us the numbers of staff affected? More importantly, I have schoolteachers in my constituency who want to sort out their pension problems. They use the HMRC hotline but they cannot get through—nobody responds to them. What is the Minister going to do about that?

Mr Gauke: The point I am making is that of course the closure of offices has an impact on some of the staff working in those offices. To answer the hon. Gentleman's first question, by 2027, when the process will have been completed, approximately 4,000 of the existing 58,000 people employed by HMRC will not be within reasonable daily travel distance to an HMRC office. I want to be completely straightforward with the House of Commons. That is the scale by 2027.

On customer service, I agree that HMRC's standards need to be high, and there have been times in recent months when they have not been at an acceptable level. I am pleased that performance is significantly better than it was in April, May and June this year. It is still not as high as we would like it to be, but it is above the average standard over the past six or seven years. We still have further to go.

In order to ensure a high level of customer service and to make sure that we bring the yield in, it is important that HMRC's resources are deployed efficiently and effectively, and it is important that we ensure that services can be delivered in the most efficient way possible.

Sir Simon Burns (Chelmsford) (Con): On staff numbers, my hon. Friend will be aware that the office in Chelmsford will be closing and will be based in Stratford in east London—20 or 25 minutes' train journey from Chelmsford. Can people who work in Chelmsford take some reassurance from what my hon. Friend has said that the redeployment of staff from Chelmsford in Stratford is a viable proposition?

Mr Gauke: Yes, I think I can provide that reassurance to my right hon. Friend. An organisation that can make better use of technology and improve the way it works will find that there are some activities that it currently performs for which it requires large numbers of staff, but that it will not necessarily need those staff members in future. There are, however, a number of things that HMRC does that will mean that it requires those staff members. HMRC will become a more highly skilled organisation. It will need highly talented people to be able to ensure that we get the money in. My right hon. Friend provides a good example. There may be people currently working in, for example, Chelmsford who have skills that HMRC needs. They will be able to work in Stratford. I can point to other examples of similar circumstances throughout the United Kingdom.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I do not disagree with the overall picture that my hon. Friend paints, but the decision to base the regional hub for Yorkshire in Leeds rather than in Bradford is crass. If it can be shown that locating the regional hub in the Bradford district will be cheaper for the taxpayer and offer better value for money, and that the calibre of the staff could be accommodated in and attracted to that base, will my hon. Friend give a commitment to revisit this decision and look at what the Bradford district can offer?

Mr Gauke: I welcome the fact that my hon. Friend supports the view that we should move to a smaller number of regional centres. I am conscious that there are different views on locating the hub in Leeds and Bradford. HMRC's analysis is based on the fact that it

has large numbers of staff who live and work in, for example, York, Harrogate or Sheffield. Returning to the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Sir Simon Burns), if those people are to be redeployed, it is substantially easier for them to go to Leeds, because there is a direct train service to Leeds, than it would be for them to go to Bradford, for which they would have to travel into Leeds and change, and their commute could then be beyond what would constitute reasonable daily travel. In fact, I should have said Hull rather than Harrogate, but there are similar points as regards staff living in Harrogate, and in Doncaster, in that it is easier to get to Leeds than to Bradford. As always, I am more than happy to listen to the arguments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), and by others. Indeed, I am to have a meeting with Bradford MPs over the course of the next week or two to hear the arguments that they wish to put.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Gauke: I am spoilt for choice, but I give way to the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley).

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): On a very specific point, the Minister will be aware that there is a special investigations unit in Northern Ireland dealing with serious and organised crime gangs and extra-special tax affairs of certain individuals. That unit, which was based at Moira house, is faced with closure. Where will it now be based to deal with these specific issues for Northern Ireland?

Mr Gauke: There are a handful of specialist centres around the United Kingdom as a whole, but the intention with Northern Ireland is to work out of one main office in Belfast.

I welcome the fact that HMRC's expenditure on its estates fell from £371 million in 2010-11 to £255 million in 2014-15, and that these plans will generate further savings of £100 million a year by 2025.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Gauke: Let me just make this point and then I will take plenty of interventions.

That will allow HMRC better to concentrate on its core task of revenue collection. Yes, there are savings for HMRC in reducing its estate costs, but it has made it very clear to me that regardless of what the spending review settlement will be tomorrow, it would move in this direction because it believes that the best way in which it can deliver services and collect tax is through regional centres. That is the important point.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I pay tribute to the staff of HMRC, who do a very tough and challenging job in collecting the taxes that pay for our vital public services. The Minister has mentioned his recent concerns about customer service, and I have had constituency correspondence from HMRC confirming that that has not been adequate to date. Can he explain, in specific terms, how cutting office numbers, thereby removing the local knowledge and memory of staff, increases the quality of customer service that people can expect?

Mr Gauke: It might be helpful to the House if I set out a little history in terms of how HMRC has operated. When it was formed in 2005, it had 572 offices spread all over the country. That is an inefficient way of doing business in the 21st century. Reorganising that network of offices was a policy priority even then, and that is why, following several reorganisations, the number was reduced to 393 in 2010.

It now stands at 170 offices, ranging in size from 5,700 people to fewer than 10. That is a start, but it is still not enough in terms of finding efficiencies.

The changes announced last week represent the next stage of HMRC's estate transformation programme. Over the next 10 years, the department will bring its employees together in 13 large modern offices, equipped with the digital infrastructure and training facilities they need to work effectively. The new high-quality regional centres will serve each and every region and nation in the United Kingdom, creating high-quality skilled jobs and promotion opportunities in Birmingham, Belfast, Bristol, Cardiff, Croydon, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham and Stratford.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Gauke: Let me just make this point and I will then give way.

There are significant advantages to such a system. The new offices will have the capacity to host multiple lines of businesses and have senior jobs on site. They will offer employees the opportunity to build their careers and skills in one office, and encourage upskilling. They will be in locations with strong transport links and close to pipelines of talent. They represent the way in which business is done in the 21st century.

Mr Jim Cunningham: The Minister has been very generous in and good about giving way. He mentioned that 4,000 employees may be affected by 2027. Is he saying that he can redeploy all those employees?

Mr Gauke: To return to that point, I gave the statistic that 4,000 of the current 58,000 people employed by HMRC will be outside a reasonable daily travel distance by 2027, as HMRC has acknowledged. I am afraid that there will have to be redundancies for those people, assuming that they are still working for HMRC, over the course of that period. I would make the point that the vast majority of HMRC staff—I recognise that this is difficult for those who are not in such a position—will clearly be able to work in the regional centres I have mentioned.

David Mowat (Warrington South) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the current level of customer service in HMRC is unacceptable? The speech of the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) would have made sense were it not for the fact that, currently, about 40% of calls are never answered. It is not even that they are answered after 40 minutes; they are never answered. Does he agree that regional centres enabling us to flex the number of staff must form a coherent approach to getting calls answered, which cannot be done with 190 centres?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I am pleased to be able to tell him that the numbers are not quite as bad as that at the moment—80% of calls are getting through—but we need to ensure that quality is higher. The point is that it is easier to provide flexibility when there are fewer centres.

For example, people can be moved from processing jobs. As I said earlier, some processing jobs will not be necessary in future, but a lot of the compliance jobs will be necessary. If we want people to continue to work for HMRC by upskilling them—moving them out of processing jobs by getting them involved in more highly skilled compliance work—that will be easier to deliver if they are already working in the same building, with the same people and with training facilities. That is why it is absolutely the right measure to ensure that there are opportunities for existing staff.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Gauke: I am again spoilt for choice. I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow).

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I believe that 3,000 extra staff were laid on to help to handle phone calls at weekends, and I welcome that. May I put in a bid for the Minister to reassure us that we will still have human beings at the end of the telephone in this great new system, which I fully support?

Mr Gauke: Yes, there will be human beings. It is true that, following the problems earlier this year, HMRC brought in an additional 3,000 people to work on the telephones. Those people have been trained up and are now deployed. That explains why there has been a significant improvement in performance over the past few weeks, although there is still more work to do.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): I commend the Government on making it a priority to clamp down on tax evasion. That contributed to the collection of an extra £11.9 billion in the last tax year. The Anchorage House site in Chatham in my constituency has long played a key role in closing the tax gap. Will my hon. Friend meet me to discuss the future of the large number of dedicated and skilled workers?

Mr Gauke: I am certainly happy to meet my hon. Friend. I have had a request from my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) to discuss this matter. Again, I am happy to meet him and I suspect that my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) would also like a meeting. I am happy to meet them. I think that HMRC is right to move in this direction, although I appreciate that it creates certain issues. Some of the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst) will have the option to work in the Maidstone office, which will stay open for four years longer than the Chatham office. I am sure that a number of them will take that up.

Chris Stephens: The Minister has been most generous. Many MPs and tax experts support the view that a visible and local HMRC presence is essential to maintaining

confidence in the tax system. Does he not believe that the measures that have been announced by HMRC will open the way for more tax avoidance?

Mr Gauke: No, I do not. As I have made clear, the number of HMRC officers has been falling since its creation in 2005, including over the past five years, and we have seen the closure of inquiry centres, as has been touched on, but HMRC's success in dealing with tax avoidance and evasion over that period has been marked and has improved. The truth is that HMRC deals with tax avoidance and evasion principally through sophisticated data analysis and by bringing together highly skilled people. The more that we can do of that, the bigger the difference we will make.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): If HMRC requires visibility, is any consideration being given to mobile offices in vans, like mobile libraries? For example, Northern Ireland has one big office in Belfast, but it could send vans down to Armagh, Enniskillen or Londonderry.

Mr Gauke: HMRC's "needs enhanced support" service was brought in as a partial replacement of the inquiry centres. My hon. Friend raises an interesting point about HMRC's presence. However, it has a strong record in dealing with avoidance and evasion, there has been a substantial increase in prosecutions and it is hard to open a newspaper without reading reports of the wealthy facing significant tax bills because HMRC is successfully closing down tax avoidance schemes. That shows that HMRC is reducing this behaviour.

Mr Mak: I am heartened by the Minister's confirmation that reducing the tax gap and protecting tax revenues remains a key priority. Will he confirm that the progress in that area has been strong since the Government took office, resulting in more than £57 billion extra tax revenue being collected compared with 2005-06?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend is right to say that our record is strong, and we remain absolutely committed to that priority.

Kelvin Hopkins *rose*—

Mr Gauke: If I may, I will make a bit of progress. I am conscious that I am being generous to the people who wish to intervene, but I should also be generous to those who wish to take part in the debate.

Mr Speaker: Of whom—I know that the Minister will find this helpful—there are no fewer than 19. I point out very gently, because the Minister has been generous in taking interventions, that his speech, probably as a result of that, is significantly longer than that of the person who led the debate. I am sure he would not want that to be the case.

Mr Gauke: I certainly would not, Mr Speaker.

HMRC has done this the right way and told staff first. It has kept people fully abreast of its proposals for a number of months, and it has held events up and down the country to ensure that it works with staff. As I said earlier, this is a locations announcement, not a workforce announcement, and the Department's policy is to keep redundancies to an absolute minimum.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Gauke: I will not. I have listened to Mr Speaker and I take his words very seriously. I will make progress.

I say to the hon. Member for Livingston that the changes that HMRC is talking about, such as trying to find efficiencies through centralisation, are not unique to HMRC or the UK Government. The Scottish Government have also brought forward proposals to rationalise their estates. They brought forward proposals to close up to seven of Police Scotland's 10 control rooms, and we hear of plans to close regional fire stations, following the consolidation of local fire authorities into one national body. There have been cuts to the number of court buildings across Scotland, and the number of incorporated colleges was cut by almost half. I am sure that the Scottish Government had good reasons for doing that, but so do we, and it is right that we take such steps.

In conclusion, if we want HMRC to do its job effectively, we must ensure that it is fit for the challenge. We must be willing to modernise, find efficiencies, target resources, and make long-term strategic decisions. That is precisely what HMRC is doing by transforming itself into a smaller, more highly-skilled organisation, with modern, digital services, and a data-driven compliance operation that will deliver more for the taxpayer at lower cost. What would the opponents of change prefer? Do they want to rely on a structure that in many respects dates from before the internet era, or to pump in more money without examining where it is going? It is surely right that HMRC carries out efficiencies, targets its resources, and concentrates on delivering for the British taxpayer. That is the policy it has embarked on, and it is already increasing revenue yield and closing the tax gap. That is the policy that the changes will help achieve, and I urge the House to reject the motion.

4.57 pm

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): I salute the Minister's efforts to make a good fist of things, and the efforts of this Government, and the previous coalition Government, to clamp down on tax avoidance. More should be done, but they took good steps. We need a well-functioning HMRC because we need taxes to pay for the goodies that we and our constituents want. We need a well-functioning HMRC to assist business and to maintain the confidence of taxpayers. We need a well-functioning HMRC for effective anti-money laundering steps, to clamp down on tax evasion, and to protect revenue.

It is desirable for HMRC to act efficiently, and technology is changing what it and other large organisations do. For example, 80% of self-assessment returns are now done online, and that availability of information from HMRC—including specialist knowledge—is greatly aided by the internet. There is a difficult balancing act for HMRC between providing information and guidance to businesses and individual taxpayers, and not providing tax advice, and sometimes that is difficult for staff. Like other Members, I pay tribute to the overwhelmingly hard-working and skilful staff at HMRC around the United Kingdom. It is no criticism of them that we still have a considerable tax gap. Having more staff is likely to help close that gap.

The National Audit Office estimates an 18:1 return on employing extra staff—that means that £1 more in salary means £18 more in revenue. There is, of course, a law of diminishing returns in that scenario. HMRC itself, through its chief executive, estimates a return of 11:1.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentions valued staff. Does he agree that, as the Minister said, thousands of valued and very experienced staff will not be able to relocate and will therefore be lost to the Revenue?

Rob Marris: I agree, and I will come on to that in a moment. We have to look at the debate, and at what is happening with HMRC, in the context of the economy overall and the Government's finances. In the past five years, national debt has gone up 55%. Instead of it taking five years to sort out the deficit, the Government's own estimates say it will take 10 years. GDP per capita has stalled. The balance of payments deficit is at the highest it has been in peacetime, at 5% of GDP. Productivity has stalled. Home ownership is markedly down. It is now said that we have the fourth lowest rate of home ownership of any European Union member state. Correspondingly, net household debt is rising alarmingly. That is the economic context; we need to protect revenue.

There are problems, of course: the tax gap, to which I referred; an insufficient number of collectors; and an insufficient number of staff dealing with evasion and artificial avoidance measures. There is the difficulty—created, I have to say, by the previous Labour Government—of the disastrous contract with Mapeley, which is based, I think, in the Bahamas. The ownership of the leases of HMRC offices was transferred to Mapeley in 2001. As far as I am aware, the proposals we heard on 12 November do not address that issue in any way, except to say that we are dumping all the offices. Nothing has been said about what will happen to the leases and so on. Perhaps the Minister, in closing, could tell us a bit more about the intersection between the plans and the wretched leases with the wretched Mapeley.

Staff numbers are markedly down in recent years. According to the Office for National Statistics, between 2007 and 2010, under the previous Labour Government, the number of HMRC staff went down 9%. Under the five years of the coalition Government it went down a further 24.4%—a cumulative drop of 31.4%.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman may have been contacted by local trade union representatives in his area. The Public and Commercial Services Union came to see me. It understands that HMRC is currently spending in the region of £70 million on overtime. Does he agree that that indicates that HMRC needs more, and not fewer, staff?

Rob Marris: I agree. There are problems with the workforce, to which several hon. Members have referred. The chief executive of HMRC wrote to me on 12 November, saying:

“We expect that 90% of our current workforce will be able to either work in a regional centre or see out their career in an HMRC office.”

[Rob Marris]

That says to me that the chief executive of HMRC reckons 10% will either not transfer or be made redundant. That is worrying.

Reference has been made this afternoon to response times. In the first two quarters of 2015, 12 million calls went unanswered—half of all calls to HMRC. Only 39% of calls were answered within five minutes. In the third quarter of this year, after an infusion of staff, the rate of answered calls went up to 76%. That is a great improvement—except that the target is 80%, and in 2014-15 the answer rate was 72.5%. I have to say to the Government, and particularly to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who has a family business, that this is the worst of statism. If HMRC were a business, it would have gone bust with that appalling customer service, but because none of us has any choice but to pay taxes, it remains in business. It should not do so. It certainly needs transforming, but cutting the number of staff does not seem to me, or my party, the way to do it.

On anti-money laundering, London is thankfully a major world financial centre, but we have a huge problem with the regime set up to deal with money laundering and to counteract it. The average HMRC fine in 2014-15 for money laundering was £1,134, according to Transparency International, which I thank. That seems a remarkably low figure, although it is not helped by the fact that 14 different regulators are involved in accountancy. If that is not sorted out, HMRC staff cannot do their job properly in relation to anti-money laundering, let alone tax evasion.

As has been said, since June 2014, HMRC has not had any face-to-face walk-in centres. There are a few teams of mobile advisers—a man in a white van dashing around Northern Ireland or northern Scotland, up to Caithness or wherever—for those who desperately need a face-to-face interview, but that is a very unsatisfactory state of affairs, and not one that encourages the taxpayer to feel confident that they are getting the service they should from HMRC. It is extremely worrying that the number of offices is being reduced from 170 to 13.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend will recognise that this is a massive programme involving 56,000 staff, the closure of 140 offices and relocation to 20 sites that have yet to be acquired, all within five years. In the 2015 civil service staff survey, almost 80% of HMRC staff thought their management were unable to manage change effectively. Does he agree that there are huge risks in the programme, and that it is potentially a disaster waiting to happen?

Rob Marris: There are huge risks, partly to do with insufficient funding, insufficient staffing and an insufficient number of offices. I regret to say that in my constituency, Crown House—the second and final HMRC office in my constituency—will close. The only silver lining for people in my region is that the specialist office in Telford, Shropshire, down the road, will continue to be HMRC's IT headquarters.

As a result of these relocations and closures, it is likely that HMRC will haemorrhage staff. It employs a lot of specialist staff. Unlike in many other Departments, an awful lot of staff in the Treasury are very mobile, as there is a ready outlet to the private sector, which often pays more.

Chris Stephens: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that HMRC will have to publish an impact assessment in respect of the social and economic changes and staff with a disability or caring responsibilities?

Rob Marris: I do agree, but I will say more on that in a couple of minutes. Views vary on whether the closure programme is wise. Last week, the Financial Secretary to the Treasury and I again met Stephen Herring from the Institute of Directors, who broadly—this is paraphrasing his position—welcomes this kind of move because he thinks that technology has transformed, and should further transform, how HMRC operates, and that it should be driven by business efficiencies and so on. The Association of Chartered Certified Accountants is broadly in favour of this sort of change, too. Its head of taxation said it was

“reasonable to restructure the offices and we support there being higher skills”.

Correspondingly, the Public and Commercial Services Union, which does a great job representing its members in HMRC and across Government, has grave misgivings—to say the least—about the programme, as does the Association of Revenue and Customs, which is part of the FDA union and represents senior people in HMRC.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend feel that adequate and meaningful consultation, with full regard to the facts, was undertaken on this decision?

Rob Marris: I do not, but again, I will say more in a couple of minutes.

At one end of the spectrum, the IOD says it broadly supports this type of change, and at the other end, the unions say they have grave misgivings. The president of the Chartered Institute of Taxation—hardly known as a supporter of the Labour party, the SNP or any political party—has said:

“Taxpayers and tax professionals alike will be anxious that a public body that is struggling to meet its public-facing service targets has announced that it is about to lose many staff and close its local offices.”

The Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales—I do not know what the position is in Scotland—says that the timing of the changes

“could stretch HMRC to breaking point”,

and that the restructuring of HMRC could be disruptive and could distract its leadership.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the distribution of well-qualified civil servants around the country will alter fundamentally, and that it is simply not on to say to well-qualified civil servants in north Wales that they have to go to Liverpool, no tax offices being left in north Wales at all?

Rob Marris: I tend to agree with my hon. Friend. I cannot make any commitment from the Front Bench that a Labour Government would keep every tax office open, but to keep this issue in proportion, in 2010 we had about 393 tax offices collecting an average of well over £1 billion each. Any business that was bringing in that amount of money would be kept open.

David Mowat: I am listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman's argument. Perhaps he could tell us, on behalf of the Opposition, how many tax offices he thinks we should have. Do we go back to 310, or whatever the number was, or is 170 about right, or should it be even lower? What is the hon. Gentleman's number?

Rob Marris: This is a classic case of this Government putting the cart before the horse. They announce the closure programme before they have got adequate information. We need a public consultation on this kind of change; we need a business consultation; and we need parliamentary scrutiny, by the Public Accounts Committee and the Treasury Select Committee, for example. Only when that process has been gone through, could I—or, I would venture, other hon. Members—form a view about how many HMRC offices should be distributed around the United Kingdom, given the changes brought about by technology and the desire for efficiency, and, balanced against that, the desire for a customer-facing service.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is generous in giving way. I accept that there has not been meaningful consultation and not enough scrutiny of the financial case. Does he agree with me, following what was said by the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), that where an alternative financial, economic and social case can be put, it should be reconsidered?

Rob Marris *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Before the hon. Gentleman, who is an experienced and versatile Member, replies, I remind colleagues that the convention—a fairly long-standing one—is that the Opposition Front-Bench spokesperson for the party whose Opposition day it is not would ordinarily make a Front-Bench speech of about 10 minutes. The hon. Gentleman is a little over that. I am conscious that 18 Members wish to speak, and this is not a conventional Opposition day but the SNP's Opposition day, so a brief contribution from the Labour spokesman is absolutely right and proper, but we need to get on to Back-Bench debate pretty sharpish.

Rob Marris: I am grateful, Mr Speaker. In fact, I had finished my speech but for the intervention. I shall respond to it briefly now. I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain), and I think the Minister was very open in responding to the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies). That is precisely the sort of investigation we needed before these sweeping changes were announced. There should be consultation, investigation and much more publicly available evidence.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman confirms his reputation as a gentleman. It is very much appreciated that he took what I said literally. We shall have to start with a five-minute limit. I call Mr Philip Davies.

5.13 pm

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I am in a difficult position, because I did not agree with much of what the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) had to say in respect of her overall analysis of the situation.

I tend to agree with the Minister's view: it is preferable to save jobs rather than save buildings, if the choice comes down to that. However, I think the way in which HMRC has gone about this has been rather cack-handed, so I do not feel able to support the Government either. I shall have to reflect further before the Division at 7 o'clock.

I want to focus on the decision in West Yorkshire. In Shipley, a tax office employing 924 staff is due to close. In Bradford there are two further offices, one with 358 employees and the other with 632. HMRC currently employs a total of 2,300 people in the Bradford district. To close down all the offices in Bradford and locate a regional hub in Leeds makes absolutely no sense.

The Minister will say that of course everyone is going to be a nimby and argue for their own areas but he must look at the bigger picture, and I accept all that. I would not decry any of it. My starting point is this: what produces the best value for money for the taxpayer in the United Kingdom? That should be at the forefront of what the Government are trying to do, but what they are actually doing, in a rather bizarre way, is locating a regional hub in a place that will be more expensive for the taxpayer than a very feasible alternative. If this is all about value for money for the taxpayer, why on earth should the Government make that decision? They should be making decisions based on what will be cheapest for the taxpayer.

Let me explain to the Minister why it would be more sensible to base a regional hub in Bradford rather than Leeds, and draw his attention to the flaws in the Government's decision. Accommodation costs in Bradford are at least 20% lower than those in Leeds. That, too, would be a considerable saving for the taxpayer, and I do not think the Minister should turn his nose up at it. Most of the staff who will be moved would commute over shorter distances, because so many existing workers are from the Bradford district, and it would be much better for most of the staff to stay there.

The Minister may or may not wish to confirm this, but the decision seems to have been made on the basis that the only way to recruit top-quality staff, or staff with a certain ability, is to locate the offices in Leeds rather than Bradford. Not only is that insulting to Bradford, but it is based on no facts whatsoever. It is complete and utter bunkum. Saltaire, in my constituency, contains one of the most technologically advanced businesses in the country, Pace International. It is the biggest provider of set-top boxes in the world, and it does not seem to have experienced any problems recruiting high-level and high-quality staff to the Bradford district. If HMRC's argument made any sense, the Minister would be saying that companies like that could never locate in the Bradford district, and that they would have to go to Leeds to acquire staff of the necessary calibre. HMRC's thinking has been flawed from the start.

If that has not persuaded the Minister, I suggest that he visit any of the stations on the Airedale line in the morning, and then visit Leeds station during the rush hour. If he does so, he will find legions and legions of people—thousands and thousands—who live in Airedale, in the Bradford district, and who would presumably prefer to work there but are making the journey into Leeds to their jobs. They are already attracted to the Bradford district. They are already living there. If the Minister and HMRC's argument made any sense, they

[Philip Davies]

would all be living in Leeds. If that were the place to be, they would not be living in Bradford. Bradford is a place where many people choose and prefer to live, and it is ridiculous of HMRC to argue that the only way to attract quality staff is to base an office in Leeds.

It seems to me that this is all about what is in the best interests of the London-based HMRC staff. I am delighted that the hon. Members for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) and for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) are present. We will all work together, and I hope that the Minister will listen to the arguments and change his mind.

5.18 pm

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for giving me an opportunity to contribute to the debate. The time constraint just goes to show how important the motion is. I hope that in future there will be time for us to debate this important issue seriously.

More than 800 staff are employed at HMRC's two facilities in my constituency, Sidlaw House and Caledonian House. When I met some of the staff last Friday, they confided in me their fears about the recent announcement of significant job losses, which is just the latest in a series of devastating attacks on public service jobs that Dundee has endured at the hands of successive Westminster Governments. That is completely at odds with what is happening in Dundee just now. The city is undergoing a £1 billion regeneration project—one of the most extensive in these islands—and employment is on the up, bucking the national trend. At the stroke of a pen, however, this Westminster Government have single-handedly put at risk the progress the city has recently been making to create and protect jobs. This has been done without public consultation or ministerial sign-off.

Unlike Scottish Government civil servants, HMRC staff will not be covered by a ministerial commitment to no compulsory redundancies. At Caledonian House, for example, we understand that 130 jobs are to be stripped from the city. I am told that the work carried out there predominantly relates to corporation tax and compliance. Ten years ago, there were more than 200 HMRC staff there. The office now occupies half the space, and it looks as though it could be boarded up by 2018.

Skilled employees, some of whom have 30 years' experience and have provided decades of loyal service, have been abandoned by an organisation to which they have dedicated their whole career. The office currently has only two members of staff at grade 6 or 7. I disagree with the Minister's statement that training would continue. There used to be 10 staff at those grades as well as four trainees, of whom there are now only two.

Staff at Caledonian House are being told that the best outcome they can hope for is a possible transfer to the new Edinburgh or Glasgow centres. If—I repeat, if—HMRC chooses to re-employ those staff, which I am told is by no means automatic, the impact on them and their families will be dramatic. Most HMRC employees in Dundee will be well outwith an hour's commute of the new regional offices in Edinburgh and Glasgow, which is what HMRC defines as "reasonable daily travel". So by HMRC's own definition, it will be asking staff to do something that it does not consider to be reasonable.

Caledonian House is set to be shut down and boarded up by 2018, as I have said, yet we are being told that the new regional centres in Edinburgh and Glasgow will not open until 2020-21 at the earliest. That raises another question. What plans, if any, does HMRC have for the 130 staff at Caledonian House? In a letter that I recently received from HMRC's chief executive Lin Homer, she stated:

"As Caledonian House is some distance away from the new regional centre, our employees will not automatically move to the regional centre once this office closes."

So there we have it, in black and white: HMRC can offer no guarantees of job safety to existing employees at Caledonian House. They will be forced to apply for a job at the new regional centres. If that is not a betrayal of a loyal and dedicated workforce, I do not know what is. At Caledonian House alone, there are 10 couples working under the same roof, so there will be an impact not just on sole employees but on couples. This will have a devastating effect on the lives of those families.

The rationale for closing Caledonian House early is shrouded in mystery. HMRC has stated:

"The closure date for Caledonian House reflects the timing of when we will restructure the work that is currently located there."

However, two senior officials who visited Caledonian House on Tuesday 17 November could not tell staff how those restructuring plans would play out. What are we to take from this? One local union representative told me:

"Mixed messages or misinformation are the only assumptions that can be made."

Neil Gray: Does my hon. Friend share my concern that last year in the independence referendum the Better Together parties were quick to point out that the only way of securing HMRC tax jobs in Scotland was to vote no? Was that a betrayal?

Chris Law: In a word, yes.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that HMRC is making this up as it goes along. There are 650 people working at Sidlaw House who have been offered nothing more than empty promises about a potential move to the Department for Work and Pensions to work on universal credit. We know that the DWP is undertaking its own potentially far-reaching estate review in the face of what are likely to be swingeing cuts in tomorrow's autumn statement, which could very well see it, too, pulling out of the city altogether. The employees at Sidlaw House deserve better. They deserve to know the truth.

Dundee cannot afford to lose these highly skilled jobs. The plans as they stand represent an absolute hammer blow for the city, with at least 130 skilled jobs being cut by a Tory Government with no mandate in Scotland. As I have said, there is also no clarity about the 650 jobs at Sidlaw House, or whether they will be transferred to the DWP. Families across the city will be devastated by this news and worried about the future. I cannot stress my opposition to this strongly enough.

5.24 pm

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): As a newly elected member of the Public Accounts Committee, I recently had the opportunity to look

closely at HMRC's efforts to increase the amount of tax it collects and how it plans to do better. Our latest report, published on 3 November, made it clear that it is our opinion that HMRC has continued to fail in its customer service standards, and that if it is to collect much more of the tax due to the Treasury, modern, fit-for-purpose systems that support the Government's "Digital by default" agenda must be in place.

At the moment, HMRC's 58,000 employees are spread across 170 offices, many a legacy of the 1960s and 1970s. Their staff numbers range from fewer than 10 to some 6,000 people. To meet the customer service standards and increase tax revenues, the service needs to be providing its customers with modern services, at a lower cost to the taxpayer. As the Minister mentioned, this year HMRC recruited 3,000 additional staff to customer-facing teams. Those staff are providing services in the evenings and at weekends, building capacity outside normal working hours, which helps the taxpayer who is trying to sort out her tax payments. That is a great step forward: a major government body is changing its working practices to meet its customer demand. Many more customers now want to work out their tax payments online, at a time of their choosing. HMRC's investment in digital services, simpler and more user-friendly portals and work with accountancy software designers to make small business financial packages automatically link into HMRC's reporting systems is freeing up staff to deal with more complex tax problems.

Rebecca Pow: Are not 80% of customers already filling in their tax forms online? That proves exactly what my hon. Friend has been saying about modernising being the right approach.

Mrs Trevelyan: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention, because what she says is exactly right. We have to be mindful of that situation as HMRC moves forward in this digital world. HMRC collected £518 billion from UK taxpayers in 2014-15, an increase of £12 billion on the previous year. Over the past five years, a continuously increasing tax take has been matched by a reduction in running costs from £3.4 billion to £3.1 billion. I believe the Chancellor is totally committed to supporting HMRC to do its job better, and the Budget in July gave it a further £800 million to invest in compliance work over the next five years and collect an additional £7 billion in tax take.

There will, however, remain a tax gap, and challenging and overcoming that will continue to need the most modern systems and highly qualified staff. In search of such, the move to modern, regional centres across the UK will bring together the skills and the efficiency of resource and talents to maximise tax collection. HMRC expects the majority of its existing staff to be able to move to the regional centres, with a 10-year phasing to minimise redundancies. There will eventually be a modern, digitised organisation with fewer staff, but I have every hope that the programme of change is being well managed—I will be continuing to monitor it, as will the PAC.

I have some concerns about the regional centre plans. For example, I question the need for two London-based sites, in Stratford and Croydon, given that there is no base in East Anglia, where I would have thought running costs were lower. In the north-east, we already have a

major HMRC centre at Longbenton in Newcastle, which supports a wide variety of tax-collecting divisions. The changes in staffing levels and working hours are starting to improve customer service there, and it is key that we make sure HMRC maximises the investment in its quality of staff and effectiveness across the UK to get the maximum benefit. HMRC's modernisation of its efficiency and digital service provision is vital if the service is to continue to reduce that tax gap in order to help us to pay for the public services—the goodies, as the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris) called them—we all want to see, to transform its services to customers and to be able to clamp down further on the minority who are still trying to cheat the system.

5.28 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): On 12 November, HMRC made its "Building our Future: location strategy" announcement. As far as I am concerned, that is the precursor to the end of 50 years of my constituency's links with the civil service as a major public employer. More than 2,500 hard-working, committed, loyal and productive staff at four sites will be affected by the announcement, of whom almost 700 are my constituents. Many of them are my friends, and many of them work in specialist and complex areas of investigation and administration. Regrettably, I found out about the detail—I use the word "detail" very loosely—in a very short letter from the chief executive. It was sent at 2.14 pm on 12 November, which was when Parliament was in recess. It said:

"I am writing to let you know that HMRC has today announced the next step in our ten-year modernisation programme to create a tax authority fit for the future, committing to high quality jobs and the creation of 13 new regional centres serving every region and nation in the UK."

Members should consider how it feels to tell that to the hundreds of people who will lose their jobs, and to the thousands who will be moved out of my town centre. It seems that every Tom, Dick and Harry knew about the change before I did, and that is disrespectful not to me, but to the thousands of people in my constituency who are affected.

On reading the letter, it almost felt as if I should be grateful to HMRC for continuing to employ people anywhere to collect tax, and as if the service was expanding rather than contracting. I do not know how it managed to do that, but it did.

As I understand it, almost 170 offices will be closing, and they will be replaced by 13 regional centres and four specialist sites over the next five years, although some existing sites will remain open for longer. By 2021, HMRC will be operating out of just 35 locations. For staff in Bootle, the news is particularly shocking.

Litherland House is expected to close in 2018-19, followed by the Triad tax office and St John's House in 2019-20. Comben House will also close. Those closures will have a significant and, in many cases, devastating impact on large numbers of people, staff and families. The implication in the letter is that staff should be grateful for having a job, even if it has a major effect on their lives, which is an absolute disgrace.

Many staff will face additional costs, with car parking charges and so on, and a detrimental effect on their family lives. They will have to travel to a regional centre,

[Peter Dowd]

the location of which they have not yet been told. HMRC has announced that it will move to these regional centres, but it will not say where those centres will be. It will be devastating news wherever it is if it is not in the centre of my town. Many questions must be asked, but before I ask some of them, let me just quote Accountancy Live, which is a web-based professional site. It says:

Tax advisers and professional bodies are sceptical about whether HMRC's plans to close 137 offices...cut real estate costs and save £100m, will deliver improvements in customer service levels, amid concerns that the changes could stretch the tax department to breaking point."

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the cuts will put HMRC under even more pressure at a time when more resources are needed to militate against the ongoing problems that both HMRC and Concentrix are causing? Numerous constituents have contacted me, suffering from the inadequacies of both departments, and I am sure that those problems will only be exacerbated by the cuts.

Peter Dowd: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. It is a fantasy to suggest that, by closing all these offices, we will be able to collect more tax and to tackle fraud.

Let me put a few questions to the Minister. When will the locations of the new regional centres be announced? Has an equality impact assessment been carried out on all the areas affected, particularly the four sites in my constituency? When did HMRC establish which sites were to close, and why was the decision not subject to consultation with Members of Parliament, trade unions, the Treasury Committee, and the Public Accounts Committee? Will the impact of additional costs be factored into the departmental deals, as there has been a pay freeze for God knows how long? What level of community or local business consultation has taken place ahead of the announcements? As far as I am concerned, absolutely none has taken place. Have the following losses to HMRC been taken into account? What about redundancies, income tax, local business tax, increase in jobseeker's allowance, income support claims, national insurance contributions? The list goes on.

In my constituency specifically, what will happen to the 136 benefits and credits staff currently based at the Triad? When Litherland House closes, how will the other Bootle offices accommodate the staff? What will be the cost of the temporary building adjustments needed until 2020? What will be the cost of altering the software in order to move profiles around sites during the transition period? The questions go on, but we have had not one answer. I demand answers to those questions.

5.35 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I wish to make the case not only for Alexander House in Southend to remain open and keep its jobs, but for it to expand. I am beginning to think that my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) will support the idea of Southend becoming the regional site.

Like the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd), I knew nothing about the planned closure. My hon. Friend the Financial Secretary and I have had a private

chat and I do not blame him. He is an excellent Minister and we have a very strong Treasury team. My hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) and I share responsibility for Southend and the building is in his constituency, but I think that just as many of my and his constituents work there. I have been on the back foot on this issue, but not anymore—I am on the front foot now. I remind my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary that he visited Alexander House two years ago. He, my hon. Friend and I had a wonderful tour of the building and he learned at first hand about its strong tradition and the loyalties among its staff. It has superb expertise and I think it is the second or third biggest employer in the borough of Southend. My hon. Friend the Financial Secretary seemed very impressed with everything he heard. Indeed, Her Majesty the Queen visited the building a few years ago and I know that she was also very impressed with everything she saw.

I absolutely support and accept the overall strategy. Our Treasury team is doing a wonderful job in sorting out the public finances in the light of the terrible mess we were left with in 2010. However, I was born in Stratford and I hate to be in the position of pitting one area against another. The hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) is a splendid colleague, but Stratford is getting everything. It got the Olympic games—I chaired the Bill for that—and it now has my football team, West Ham, so I am loth to stand by and remain silent. My hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed spoke about East Anglia and questioned the logic of having the office in Stratford. I do not understand, either. I would have thought that, on economies of scale, Southend was entirely the right place for it to go.

As it stands, Southend will lose 1,265 jobs, which is absolutely devastating. I am also told that the Southend base will continue as a transitional office for staff from other nearby offices that are due to close before Southend. When my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary or my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary sum up the debate, I do not know whether they will say for how long Southend will be a transitional office, but I imagine that once those other employees have moved to Southend they will not want to leave, because, as we all know, it is this country's premier seaside resort and the alternative city of culture 2017. I know from my discussions with the local authority that Southend will offer the Treasury a very attractive deal if my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary agrees to have Southend as a regional site.

I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary has agreed to meet my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East and me. I hope we will have a detailed discussion about travel arrangements and possible redundancy payments, but I ask my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary to think again. I hope that I and my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East will be able to persuade him to have the regional site in Southend.

5.39 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I am pleased to have the opportunity to take part in this debate and to put on record the profound disappointment and, indeed, anger felt by my constituents, who have for years worked incredibly hard at Cumbernauld tax office. I want also

to express the huge disquiet felt across the town at these proposals to close down our biggest employer and relocate good-quality jobs elsewhere. All that comes, as other hon. Members have said, with little in the way of explanation and even less in the way of consultation.

On any view at all, the announcement made two weeks ago about the HMRC offices is of enormous significance and has the potential to cause immense disruption to the staff affected, to the communities where those tax offices are currently based and to the services that HMRC provides in collecting taxes. It is astonishing to me that the Government think that such a major announcement does not merit so much as a ministerial statement.

I have received no correspondence from HMRC, so I feel like I have been missed out a little compared with honourable colleagues. However, my colleague Jamie Hepburn MSP received a letter similar to that sent to my hon. Friends, full of vague management-speak rather than information. There were no parliamentary debates until we secured this one. PCS representatives were not consulted on the criteria used by HMRC for site selection or on outline decisions, and they agree with neither. That is not good enough at such a huge moment for HMRC and its staff.

HMRC claims that £100 million of estate savings will be generated each year by 2025, despite not knowing where these brand-new city centre sites will be and how much they will cost. If HMRC has such confidence in the model it proposes, the supposed savings that it will make and the claimed benefits to service standards, it should have nothing to fear from extensive scrutiny, so let us have that extensive scrutiny. Will the Government agree to a full debate on, and scrutiny of these detailed proposals here in Parliament, to both public consultation and full consultation with PCS, and to the pausing of implementation while all that is under way?

To say that the months leading up to the announcement have been a frustrating and worrying time for hard-working and dedicated staff in HMRC offices across the UK would be a grave understatement. Up to 1,600 people in Cumbernauld will be directly impacted once we factor in IT staff provided by contractors, as well as catering and cleaning staff. Most frustratingly, between woolly press releases, vague correspondence and contradictory information at staff meetings, many questions remain unanswered. HMRC's letter to my colleague Jamie Hepburn, which I think was almost identical to that received by the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris) and others, said that

"90% of our current workforce, including the majority of those working for us in your constituency, will be able to either work in a regional centre or see out their career in an HMRC office".

The hon. Gentleman raised several issues arising from that letter. I would also ask, how big is the majority of staff who will continue to be able to work in HMRC offices? There is a grave lack of clarity.

The Government have said that there will be no compulsory redundancies. Yet, on the other hand, workers in Cumbernauld have been told that no voluntary packages will be available to them. Given that we know that the Government require a cut in the workforce in the west of Scotland in order to fit them in the new office, people are rightly asking whether the Government are seeking to lose staff on the cheap, hoping that they will jump without having properly to compensate them.

Staff also ask whether it is coincidence that rules on acceptable travel distances in the event of relocation have recently been tightened to their detriment and why travel allowances have been limited to three to five years. What about those who already commute from a considerable distance east or north of Cumbernauld, many of whom are closer to Edinburgh? Why are they not being allowed to choose the Edinburgh hub ahead of Glasgow? Will there be options such as home-working or other creative solutions? While measures on retraining and redeployment could be positive, we need to see so much more detail before we can judge how meaningful they are.

Most importantly, people need to know when exactly they will be expected to move. Is it soon, towards the end of the five-year period or some time in between? Is their job moving with them or are they moving to a new job in terms not only of location but of role? HMRC claims that people will be better able to develop careers up to senior levels, but my constituents fear that their good-quality roles will be replaced with poorer quality work.

On so many levels this does not seem a well thought-through plan, and it should go back to the drawing board. What is particularly perplexing in the context of Cumbernauld is that some of the proposed regional centres will hold as few as 1,200 staff. Cumbernauld hosts between 1,500 and 1,600, so why not retain it if that is efficient enough as part of the new model?

5.44 pm

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate. I also welcome the modernisation of HMRC. It is right that the service is streamlined. Value for the taxpayer and customer service must be at the heart of our reforms, and I truly believe that it is possible to save money and improve customer service. At the end of the day, like many things in business, it comes down to efficiency and productivity, both of which have proved increasingly difficult to achieve in the current system, as has been pointed out.

It is imperative that we collect the taxes that are due and crack down on tax avoidance. People in my constituency of Taunton Deane often raise that with me, and Members from all parts of the House are concerned about it, which is why we need a system that will get to grips with problems, especially tax avoidance. Bringing together a highly skilled workforce based in specialist buildings will help to meet that challenge. I have sympathy for people who work in offices that are going to close, but the existing offices are old-fashioned, and many of them are in buildings built in the 1960s and '70s. They are stuck in the dark ages.

Chris Law rose—

Rebecca Pow: I am going to plough on, because we have been told that we cannot speak for long.

A move out of outdated offices, many of them in London, will help to achieve major savings on those antiquated properties. It is the kind of common-sense approach that all businesses take to achieve cost savings and to improve efficiency. I have been assured that it is anticipated that many staff will move to new regional centres. Bristol has been proposed as the centre for the south-west, but I would like to suggest that the county town of Somerset—Taunton, in the heart of my

[Rebecca Pow]

constituency of Taunton Deane—be considered for a regional centre. I would welcome a discussion on that, and I have been contacted by the powers that be in Taunton Deane. There is a wonderful location for such a centre on junction 25 of the M5 in our new strategic employment site, providing easy access for everyone, everywhere.

Chris Law: *rose*—

Rebecca Pow: I am going to plough on.

Streamlining office buildings is not the only component of the modernisation programme, as we have heard. There is a full programme of measures, including investment in online services; new compliance techniques; and other initiatives that make it easier for taxpayers to access the system. We are all keen to pay our taxes. The benefits of those measures, as I have said, have come into play, as 80% of customers complete their self-assessment online, saving time and money, and moving us towards a 21st-century system.

I have been approached by many constituents about the difficulty of accessing the tax office. I have intervened in such cases and, once I have done so, the service has been good. However, I welcome the upgrade and I fully expect that it will make life easier. Indeed, the 3,000 extra staff who came on board at the weekend to handle phone calls will help. As I have said, I applaud the opportunity for more personal contact where appropriate.

To sum up, major investment in a new, modern system with highly skilled staff, many of whom are already working for HMRC, and many of whom we will train, will bring in more revenue at less cost to the taxpayer, so the streamlining of HMRC, once it beds in, will be a win, win, win.

5.48 pm

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): I say to the Minister that this was an absolutely appalling announcement. It was appalling in the way it was done. I was sitting in a conference at 2.14 pm—I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) for reminding me of the time—with two Tory Ministers talking to us in north Wales about rebalancing the economy when I received a missive, not from a Minister or the Government but from a civil servant telling me that 350 people in my constituency in Wrexham would be made redundant or transferred from north Wales to Liverpool, where they would be in hot competition with individuals from Bootle trying to find jobs. I was told by email what the Conservative Government think of north Wales.

Never has there been a sharper contrast between rhetoric and reality. This Government supposedly talk about rebalancing the economy. Other colleagues in the Chamber have made the point that the sites identified and set out in the letter that was sent to us do not yet exist. This was an ideal opportunity for the Government to take a sensible approach to rebalancing the economy with taxpayers' money, by shifting jobs out of areas that are economically successful and expensive, such as London or Cardiff, to other areas, such as north Wales. In Wrexham there are places available to house highly skilled workers providing a first class service in a new online age. The House need not take my word for it. We have in Wrexham high quality service companies

such as Money Penny, which provides virtual office services, and DTCC Avox, which provides company search facilities not just within the UK, but right across the world. They are expanding and bringing jobs to Wrexham in order to be more competitive.

This Government do not know their backside from their elbow. They do not recognise that already we have 350 highly skilled people in Wrexham who are doing an excellent job. In addition, we have people in the local economy who have been identified by the private sector as being particularly skilled at providing exactly the services that this Government or any Government need to bring in more money to eliminate the deficit that the Minister told us in 2010 would be gone by today but is still there because of the economic incompetence of the Tory party.

Philip Davies: The hon. Gentleman made the point, as did the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd), that the sites were not known yet. A site is already available in the Bradford district that HMRC could move to, whereas in Leeds there is no identified site yet. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is very bad negotiation for the Government to say that they are going to go to a particular place without a site, because if they do identify a site the landowner will have them over a barrel when the negotiations take place?

Ian C. Lucas: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, and I commend him—which, I think, is a first in the 14 years I have been here—for his excellent speech. The points that he made mirrored many of the points I have been making and intend to make. It makes no sense whatsoever for the Government to approach the issue in the way they have.

I shall speak specifically about Wrexham because I am here to represent my constituents. It is incredible that the only HMRC service in Wales will be in Cardiff city centre. Cardiff city centre is boom town. The announcement from HMRC was followed last week by the BBC announcing the creation of its new centre for Wales in Cardiff city centre, so HMRC had better hurry up and find a site or there will be no room left in Cardiff.

The Minister is a reasonable man. I find it incredible that he has been in the Treasury since 2010, because he is a reasonable man. I ask him please to look at the announcement again. I mean it seriously. I cannot understand the rationale for the announcement economically, politically, intellectually or in any sense. He should listen to the sensible debate. I am grateful to the SNP for bringing the topic to the Floor of the House and I will certainly support the motion today.

We desperately need a fundamental rethink, because the Government are talking about our money—our money, taking jobs away from a place like Bootle! They should be using public money to support economic development in the parts of our country that need it most. That is common sense, I say to the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow). I ran my own business, and if I did it pursuing policies like this, I would have been bankrupt before I started.

5.55 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): In opposing this motion, I wish to applaud HMRC's excellent work over recent years. Thanks to its endeavours, there has

been a reduction in the tax gap to its lowest level of 6.4%. That is a long-term trend showing that the targeted approach to tackling non-payment is working. However, the issue facing HMRC today is that in attempting to calculate and pay their taxes, taxpayers are spending 30 minutes or longer waiting to discuss their affairs. In the first half of 2015, 50% of callers were not answered at all.

It is clear to me that the current tax centre arrangements are not working and need modernising. It makes huge sense to replace the numerous local offices, where staff levels range from 6,000 employees to just 10, with regional centres that will give a more balanced and even coverage. This follows the trend of other service operators in moving to a regional model. Indeed, it is not just service centres that are moving to regional, or indeed country, models. Last Friday, listening to the First Minister of Scotland on an excellent “Desert Island Discs”, I was struck by her reasoning for moving Scotland’s police towards a one-country force. I therefore ask why it has taken so long for HMRC to move to this type of model. Banks were setting up current account centres when I was a 16-year-old working as a cashier for Abbey National in my holidays. [*Interruption.*] It was many years back.

In an increasingly technological age, it is outmoded to continue to argue, as this motion tacitly does, that the effectiveness of an operation is down to the number of workers, or their location, rather than the completion of the work itself. In many public-facing industries, technology means that human input is no longer required or required less. In reducing and streamlining its staff numbers, I welcome HMRC’s intention to invest in technology to make itself more efficient. In an age when many of my constituents elect to complete their work online, it makes more sense to move funding to the areas where HMRC is able to target avoidance.

In my constituency, where we have two offices that will be replaced by a regional centre in Croydon, for the past year it has not been possible for my constituents to go and discuss their tax arrangements: that walk-in service has been unavailable. I therefore cannot see how they will be inconvenienced by the fact that the person they speak to on the phone is no longer in Hastings but in Croydon.

It is of course always regrettable when new service models, driven by new technologies, and the preference of the public to work online rather than deal face to face, lead to the potential for redundancies. As is the case for any employee faced with the uncertainty of redundancy, I have the greatest sympathy for those impacted, and I am glad that our economy is performing strongly enough to give confidence and optimism to those who may be rejoining the jobs market. However, I contend that it would be wrong to hold back modernisation, to use otherwise resources that can be better targeted in the sophisticated fight to win more tax receipts, and to fail to address the shortcomings in customer service. I therefore welcome these changes to HMRC and will vote favour of them today.

5.59 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The Government have been dismantling their tax services in Wales for 15 years, and the “Building our Future” location proposals are the final nail in the coffin of a tax service that used to operate a very effective network

for taxpayers across Wales. Not so long ago, there were offices to be found in 22 towns and cities. Fast forward five years from today and the Government propose that there will be only one centre, and that will be in south-east Wales.

HMRC’s Porthmadog office at Ty Moelwyn in my constituency is once again earmarked for closure. It is the home of the tax office’s Welsh language unit. This is not just about offices, but about staff. There was no mention of the Welsh language unit in the mail merged letter I received during the recess. The office in Gwynedd is well placed to attract and retain fluent Welsh-speaking staff. It offers that rare thing—a naturally Welsh-speaking workplace. Importantly, it also serves the region of Wales where demand for Welsh-language services is highest. As one of its users, I urge every Welsh speaker to take advantage of using the office, even those who lack the confidence to discuss financial matters in Welsh, not for the good of the language, but because the Porthmadog staff are good at their job.

Beyond Porthmadog’s specific and limited Welsh language remit, HMRC’s commitment falls far short of the statutory requirement, according to the Welsh Language Act 1993, to treat the Welsh and English languages as equal when providing public services in Wales. I am currently working on behalf of a constituent who has been told that he cannot use Welsh to resolve a chapel’s tax affairs. Business customers tell me the same about their businesses. Others complain of waiting for 40 minutes and more before the telephone system will allow them to access the service in Welsh.

The proposal is that the service can be maintained just as effectively in Cardiff. The county of Gwynedd is home to 77,000 Welsh speakers, which is 65.4% of the county’s population; Cardiff has fewer than half that number of Welsh speakers. The Government are intent on moving the service from a rural region where Welsh is the language of everyday life and civic administration to an urban centre 150 miles and four hours’ drive away, which is about as far from its likely users as it is possible to go and still be in Wales.

The tax office has had the honesty to admit that it is not realistic to expect workers from Porthmadog to travel to south-east Wales. Workers at Wrexham and Swansea are being offered the option of transferring to Liverpool or Cardiff. That sounds fair until we recall that former reorganisations offered workers the option of moving to workplaces that are now in turn threatened. This is in the month when it was announced that unemployment in Wales rose by 3,000—news that was described by the Secretary of State for Wales as a “disappointing set of figures”.

The closure of the offices is a body blow to plans to devolve tax powers to Wales. On the one hand, the Tory Government extol the virtue of Wales taking more control over our taxes—Plaid Cymru has proposed that for years—yet, on the other hand, the means of administering such powers is shuffled across the border to England. The level of reorganisation proposed should be subject to proper public and parliamentary scrutiny at UK level, as well as with the PCS Union.

There are specific issues unique to Wales that must be addressed. First, changes to how Welsh language services are provided should be the subject of a language impact review, as is customarily required for public sector Welsh language schemes. Secondly, the administrative

[Liz Saville Roberts]

requirements of increasing tax devolution should be identified and the views of the National Assembly for Wales sought.

I urge the Government to reconsider the impact of their proposals on services in Wales, on services to Welsh speakers and on services to the nation as a whole in the light of the devolution agenda, and in particular to reconsider the significance of well-paid public sector jobs in a low-wage economy such as that of Dwyfor Meirionnydd.

6.3 pm

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Moving more of HMRC's work out of central London, which has some of the world's most expensive office space, will enable it to make substantial savings. It is right that HMRC makes whatever savings it can on its property costs so that the money that it does have can be used to improve customer service and maximise tax revenues. It cannot be sustainable for its 58,000 full-time employees to be spread across 170 offices around the country, many of which, as has been, said are little more than a legacy of the 1960s and 1970s. That is highly inefficient.

However, while recognising the need to modernise and reform, we have a responsibility to make sure that HMRC's staff are treated fairly. I therefore hope that everything possible will be done to retain skills and expertise within HMRC by making sure that as many of the workforce as possible are redeployed. In particular, I emphasise the need for support for the local workers in Brierley Hill in my constituency who choose to transfer to the Birmingham regional centre, and for support and retraining for those who do not transfer to the new centre. I hope that in implementing the changes, HMRC's management will work closely with colleagues to see how many Brierley Hill and Merry Hill staff might be taken on by the Department for Work and Pensions when the Merry Hill office is transferred to the DWP.

My constituents in Dudley South expect the same high standards from HMRC as they expect from banks and retailers. This programme will help meet those expectations. People in my constituency will welcome the creation of a regional centre in the west midlands, with the high-quality jobs and skills such a centre brings. I am pleased that as part of the modernisation programme, HMRC plans to work with universities and local colleges to attract the best and brightest talent. Although I recognise the importance of Birmingham as Britain's second city, I urge HMRC not to rule out the black country as a suitable location for the west midlands regional centre.

Quite rightly, Members and residents expect HMRC to increase tax revenues, while cutting running costs, as it has done over the last five years. An additional £11.9 billion was collected last year and an additional £57 billion has been collected over the past decade. Total tax revenue has increased in each of the past five years, during which time HMRC has reduced its running costs from £3.4 billion to £3.1 billion, including £210 million in sustainable cost savings last year alone. However, HMRC cannot rest on its laurels; it must continue to build on these significant achievements. We expect a lot from HMRC.

The changing demands on the organisation mean that ways of operating that might have been appropriate in the past might not be appropriate for the future. Like all organisations, HMRC must continue to adapt if it is to be as effective and responsive as we all want, while operating as efficiently as we must all surely demand. We owe it to HMRC's leadership to allow them the independence they need to make the changes that they have decided are necessary to meet the challenges. That is why I will support the Government and oppose the motion this evening.

6.7 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to speak in this extremely important debate.

It has been announced that the Hawbank Stores site and the East Kilbride Plaza site in my constituency are due to close in 2021. The Queensway House site is due to close in 2026, but that proposal is tentative and depends on whether better lease terms can be agreed.

The restructuring of HMRC is a direct result of the Treasury's demand for a 30% cut to its budget to satisfy the Chancellor's austerity agenda, which the majority of the people of Scotland did not vote for. The result is that many people in my constituency face uncertainty and anxiety over their future because of the Westminster Government's ideological drive to cut public services.

The East Kilbride tax office and its workforce are a significant and long-standing institution in the local community and in the economy of my constituency. Everyone in my constituency is related to or knows someone who works there or has worked there. In fact, my grandmother worked as a tax office clerk in East Kilbride some 30 years ago.

Some workers may have the opportunity to be relocated to the proposed regional offices. That will be of no consolation to those who lose their jobs and neither will it negate the anxiety in the interim, as people wait to find out their fate.

At a time when tens of billions of pounds are still lost to tax evasion, these cuts make no sense. They are likely to have a detrimental impact on society and the economy at a local and national level. Removing those jobs from the local area does not only affect the employees involved because it has a wider impact on the whole community. It is likely to have a significantly adverse impact on local businesses and other jobs, and cause great difficulty in promoting economic growth. We want to encourage companies and services to locate to our constituency, not to leave. For those workers who are moved to regional offices, the additional and enforced commute is likely to impact on their personal lives by reducing the time that they can spend with their families. That is likely to have additional financial implications owing to extra travel and the bearing it could have on childcare.

The closures are counterproductive and send a clear message that the Government are going soft on tax collection and tax evasion. It is appalling and draconian that three offices are proposed to close in my constituency. Oscar Wilde famously wrote:

"To lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness."

I suggest that to lose three tax offices is unforgivable, and if the closures go ahead, it will be ingrained forever that the Conservatives are no friends of the people of East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow.

I urge the Minister to return to the drawing board—he has been described by some as “reasonable”—and to consult, review, conduct impact assessments, and urgently to meet me and local staff, my colleagues and devolved Governments, and my hon. Friends who have spoken today.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. I am sorry but I must drop the speech limit to four minutes to ensure that we accommodate everybody.

6.11 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas) mentioned that this announcement had been a surprise. The skilled staff of the HMRC office in Inverness were anticipating some changes, but instead they received a hammer blow. The plan to close 137 local offices and replace them with 13 regional centres by 2027 hid the news that that will happen in Inverness in 2017-18—hardly time to draw breath on the decision. HMRC employs 8,330 people in Scotland, which is 13% of all UK HMRC staff—hardly a dividend worth retaining if that is the way we are to be treated.

The Public and Commercial Services Union has said that 11,000 full-time equivalent staff posts had been cut from HMRC since 2010, and that any further cuts would be “absolutely devastating.” Its general secretary, Mark Serwotka, stated:

“Closing this many offices would pose a significant threat to the operation of HMRC, its service to the public and the working lives of staff, and the need for parliamentary scrutiny of the plans is undeniable and urgent.”

I am delighted that the SNP has initiated this debate in the House to provide just that.

In my constituency, more than 50 staff face losing their jobs. Many are women and over 50 years old, and—most importantly—all are skilled in dealing with complex tax problems for people across the UK. Not only do they save money for HMRC and the taxpayer, but they save businesses from going into administration and provide people with vital advice. I have met those workers, and I was impressed with how flexible they can be, and how they operate in a virtual team. They have been retrained many times in the past.

The Government talk about creating a more modern HMRC, but why have they not taken time to look at Inverness, the fastest growing city in Scotland? The hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) spoke about the expense of London, but there is nothing expensive about Inverness. It has great people and a great facility, yet that is being taken away. That is not the best way to deal with the issue. There is no evidence of any assessment of the impact on staff with disabilities or caring responsibilities, or of the social, economic and environmental effects of this move.

Chris Stephens: Do not the points raised by Members from across the House show that, given the lack of a basic impact assessment, the proposals should be ripped up and we should start again?

Drew Hendry: I completely agree with my hon. Friend, who is the vice-chair of the parliamentary Public and Commercial Services Union group and knows what he is talking about. There has been no assessment. Skilled workers in my constituency have dedicated their lives and careers to working for HMRC, and they have been left cold by this announcement. They have been hung out to dry. It is absolutely vital that there be a review focusing on the people who have spent many years training to do a job that it is very hard to do from a call centre elsewhere. To exploit their skills would be the right thing to do; to dismiss the skills and the people and throw them on the scrapheap is the wrong thing to do.

It is ludicrous for such a massive change to be made without any public or parliamentary consultation. The Minister has an opportunity to look again at this proposal. From around the Chamber he has heard, and will continue to hear, the stories of people who have devoted themselves to making HMRC work. There are still huge challenges ahead for HMRC. It is time to halt the plans and do something different: something that values the people working in the service, values the collection of revenue, and makes sure that the decision made is sensible for the people of Scotland and all the nations of the UK.

6.16 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): First, it is nice to see the Treasury Minister on the Front Bench. It is a shame, however, that he did not feel it was necessary to come to the House of his own accord to account for his unprecedented reorganisation of HMRC. I congratulate the Scottish National party on securing this important debate.

One issue that has not been covered so far is that of HMRC staff in lower bands who rely on tax credits to supplement their income. To travel from Sheffield to Leeds, as they will have to in future, some employees will receive an excess travel allowance. However, the allowance is tax deductible and could take them over the threshold for tax credits, meaning they lose their entitlement to that lifeline. Is the Minister aware of this issue, and will he look into the specific cases of those on tax credits employed by HMRC who may lose out as a result of this decision?

It is difficult to imagine that in a county such as Yorkshire—the largest in England, in which at person could be up to 100 miles from Leeds—there will not be significant disruption for staff and taxpayers alike. What are the enhanced transitional arrangements to deal with HMRC being “rationalised”, in a county of our size, into one regional centre? What steps has the Minister put in place, not just for the tax official in my constituency who will have an 80-mile round commute—way beyond the one-hour suggested guideline—but for the small business owner living in Grimsby who wants face-to-face tax advice and will now face a 150-mile round trip for the privilege? The Minister and I both know it is unlikely that that person would make that trip. As a result, individuals will continue to be overpaid or underpaid, wasting HMRC’s time. In the past year for which figures are available, mistakes in the calculation of pay-as-you-earn led to almost 5 million people being mistakenly overpaid or underpaid. Almost a quarter of all tax investigations remain open more than 12 months later, and 3,800 are open over three years after being opened.

[Louise Haigh]

These issues are not new to the Government. In 2011, the Select Committee on the Treasury found that there were

“Unacceptable difficulties contacting HMRC by phone”; it recommended that HMRC improve the service at contact centres, and the better targeting of letters that threaten serious consequences against individuals. That recommendation is particularly relevant. Many hon. Members have constituents who will have been contacted recently by the US multinational Concentrix, a company contracted by HMRC to handle some of its functions relating to tax credits. The performance of Concentrix has been little short of abysmal. A report by the National Audit Office in July revealed that the £75 million contract has resulted in savings of just £500,000—somewhat short of the £285 million that was projected. Tax credit recipients are bearing the brunt of the failing contract; tax credits have been wrongly stopped by Concentrix, and people have simply been unable to get in touch with it, leading to serious financial hardship.

In response to the same Select Committee report, the Government said that

“HMRC conducts full reviews before any changes are made to the opening hours of its face to face enquiry centres. The recently introduced changes”—

in 2011—

“in opening hours were made only after extensive public consultation, including a full equality impact review.”

They also said that the physical presence of HMRC is based on a geographical picture of the areas of higher tax risk across the country. In this unprecedented reorganisation, however, there has been no public consultation. The new offices’ locations have been based not on a picture of tax risk, but instead on wherever is most convenient to the Government in each region. I hope the Minister will correct me on this assumption and answer some of my questions. More broadly, the Opposition hope that the Government will recognise that the closures are the falsest of false economies, and will serve only to reduce tax take and damage further the relationship between HMRC and the businesses that sustain our economy.

6.20 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): I congratulate the SNP on securing this debate. Attempts were made to get it on the Order Paper earlier, but important worldwide events obviously squeezed it out.

I also congratulate the Government on having, in one fell swoop, cheesed off every region and nation of the UK. Some 300 workers in Middlesbrough and 400 in Stockton South, the constituency represented by the northern powerhouse Minister, will be affected by these closures. The Middlesbrough and Stockton offices will close in 2018 and 2019. This follows the loss of 2,200 jobs at Sahaviriya Steel Industries, as well as of 1,000 contractor jobs and more than 6,000 in the supply chain. We also had 800 workers sent home when construction stopped at Air Products and, on the same day this announcement was snuck out, 700 redundancies at the Boulby potash mine. I have never known such a tidal wave of job losses, and for the Government to rub salt into Teesside’s wound at this time shows a callous disregard for the fortunes of Teessiders.

Chris Stephens: I extend the solidarity of my constituents to those of the hon. Gentleman. This is an insult to his constituency, given the pressures it is already under. Is it not extraordinary to hear Government Members say that this is about modernisation and people filling out tax returns online, given we were told only a fortnight ago that a trade union member could not use online balloting?

Andy McDonald: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. It is interesting how that rationale is adopted for certain arguments, but not universally spread.

It was a disgrace how the announcement was made. It was not made at the Dispatch Box by a Minister answerable to Members, but was snuck out on the internet during the recess. It was disrespectful to the people losing their jobs and to the House. The Government should be ashamed of themselves. I rang the chief executive and said, “What on earth are you playing at?”, and I asked whether a socioeconomic assessment had been done. The Minister is not interested in the impact on people’s lives, but Opposition Members are. I am sick to death of hearing Government Members say, “I feel your pain,” and “We’re doing everything to help.” I was told that about Teesside staff. Well, it is a funny way to look after staff—to say, “By the way, your job’s going.” It is ridiculous.

Ministers say that more than half of staff will retire in situ, so that is okay: they will not suffer because they can stay until they retire. Those jobs will disappear. There will be no continuity or benefit for future generations. Every time we have this consolidation in the north-east of England, it is always Teesside that loses out, and the jobs go north. On this occasion, we are talking, in the first instance, about consolidation at Waterview Park in Sunderland. It is only 30 miles away, but it is two hours 25 minutes by bus. It will add five hours to people’s working day. How on earth will people go to their school open evenings, attend to their elderly parents, or run the girl guides, or whatever it might be? What sort of quality of life is that? There is never any regard for these things.

These jobs will not come back, and there is no way people can maintain a decent pattern of life. This will simply mean more pain for Teesside. The Government must stop these closures, on which there has been no proper consultation, and use the comprehensive spending review tomorrow to provide targeted assistance to help Teesside attract the high-quality, well-paid work that is so urgently needed.

6.24 pm

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): It is clear today that the Government have simply failed to make the case for these changes. They have failed to make the case in Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales and England. Here, there are just a few loyal, new Tory MPs keen to curry favour by saying what a wonderful thing the proposal is, alongside some hard-working constituency MPs who have talked about the damage that it will do to their constituency—all credit to them for doing so.

More importantly, the Government have not made the case for these changes to the 8,000 staff who will lose their jobs and their livelihoods, or to the many businesses, particularly the small and medium-sized enterprises that are the so-called lifeblood of our economy,

that are deeply concerned about the changes. The Government have not even made the case to the chartered accountants who deal with the tax offices and do such a good job to ensure that tax affairs are in order.

HMRC has failed to provide an acceptable service level to customers. We know that from the Public Accounts Committee report earlier this year, which pointed out that it takes an average of 14 minutes and 22 seconds to answer a call. We should think about what that means to a hard-working chartered accountant or a small business. Sometimes these people have a great need for advice about the future of their business. How can the Government possibly argue that cutting 8,000 jobs will make this poor performance, which is already not good enough, any better?

One Conservative Member said that there are many things that humans cannot do, but if we speak to these small businesses and chartered accountants, we find that what they think is lacking is the ability to talk to people when they need advice because they are not sure of something. Things are already not good enough, so getting rid of more people with local knowledge who are able to assist and advise is simply madness. In this case, humans are essential, and it is short-sighted thinking to deny it.

My constituent Stephen Oliver, a chartered accountant, is one such person who has advised people in my constituency. He has been telling me for years about the inadequacies of dealing with the tax office. He is one of the many people who are deeply concerned that these changes will make the situation worse. There is widespread opposition from the accountancy sector—surely something that this Government should take seriously, but currently do not. These entrepreneurs and SMEs are people who not only contribute to the economy, but want to stay on the right side of the law. They want to fulfil their tax obligations and contribute to society. Can Ministers confirm that they have done an analysis of the cost to the economy? There will be such a cost arising from lost productivity as a result of the increases in the time taken to answer the phone.

Finally, in the limited time available, let me say that in response to my written questions on how many staff will be reassigned from individual offices to regional centres, Ministers have confirmed that that has not yet been finalised. In my constituency, Peter Bennett house in West Park is being closed, which is regrettable for the employees. Will Ministers confirm that this move will be planned in such a way that it will have the least impact on staff and their families? That is something that they have not yet done. As right hon. and hon. Members have said, the Government have not made the case in any of the four nations. They really should think again and properly consult all those affected.

6.28 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I align myself with comments made by Members across the House, and particularly those from my region, including my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) and my near neighbour, the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), who made a persuasive and common-sense argument that I want to build on.

In reply to my question last week about HMRC and about meeting Bradford MPs, the Prime Minister's response was welcome, and I appreciate the opportunity to meet

the Minister to discuss my concerns. However, the second part of the Prime Minister's response was, quite frankly, unacceptable. His reply with statistics about the falling claimant count in Bradford completely misses the point. In any case, the count is falling in Bradford not because we suddenly have lots of a good new jobs, but because of sanctions, dubious self-employment and low-wage zero-hour contracts. We need a proper industrial strategy that will address that shortfall, and will help to bring high-quality, well-paid jobs to the city.

The decision to close HMRC offices in Bradford will mean the loss of more than 2,000 jobs which are precisely the type of jobs that we need. Regardless of the number of jobs that are transferred, that will have a devastating effect on our local economy.

Andy McDonald: Does my hon. Friend agree with what was said by his near neighbour the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) about the costs that will be incurred by the transfer of the service to Leeds, an area with significantly higher rental values, to a property that does not exist? How on earth will that save money? Does my hon. Friend agree that this is just a false argument?

Imran Hussain: I entirely agree. As I said in an intervention, this decision has been ill thought out, and no economic or social case has been made against Bradford and the surrounding region. The decision has come as something of a hammer blow to Bradford, as there is a clear case for siting the office there: a case that makes clear the positive reasons for doing so, as well as the danger of a negative economic impact if work is pulled out of the city. We have a talented and young workforce who are crying out for opportunities such as this, and, as we heard from the hon. Member for Shipley, we have an identified site next door to the transport interchange. As well as being close to four top universities, we have the internationally renowned Bradford University School of Management.

Nor can I find any good reason for moving the entire operation to Leeds. The Public and Commercial Services Union—the civil servants' union—has already complained about the lack of consultation and the fact that no one has had a chance to see, let alone scrutinise, the figures that have been used to come up with this plan.

Philip Davies: Is there not every indication that Leeds does not want the hub to be based there, because it could attract private sector investment to any of the sites involved? Have the Government not effectively, and unnecessarily, crowded out private sector investment in Leeds?

Imran Hussain: The hon. Gentleman is quite right. This could have a detrimental effect on Leeds, and on the private sector in particular.

As I stand here representing Bradford, let me make clear my demand to see the figures and the argument for the move to Leeds. Such an important decision must be made openly, and in the full glare of public scrutiny, if we are to be persuaded that the move is not taking place for the convenience of London-based civil servants. Bradford has struggled for years to overcome the effects of de-industrialisation, and has had to tackle many problems. If HMRC relocated to Bradford, it would be

[Imran Hussain]

a great help and a step on the road to the city's way forward. It is just starting to show signs of recovery and a return of confidence, but the removal of these jobs will be a bitter blow.

I urge the Government to ask HMRC to reconsider its decision and look seriously at the compelling case for Bradford, and I ask them to be bold enough to change their minds.

6.33 pm

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): The debate has been very enlightening, and I thank every Member who has participated in it. I was going to begin by saying that the House was clearly divided on the matter, but I shall have to change that to "clearly not divided", given the many fine contributions that we have heard from Conservative Members.

I was reminded that, many years ago, a sociologist called Georg Simmel had said that the most worrying thing was not people debating or arguing, because at least they were motivated enough to address the issue in question; the biggest problem arose, he said, when there was apathy and people did not participate. We have heard some tremendous contributions today, and witnessed some tremendous engagement. There is certainly no apathy in the House of Commons when it comes to this important issue. I remain of the view that the UK Government have made a serious error with their closure plans, and I think that the majority of those who have contributed to the debate would agree with that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) pointed out that although some £34 billion was being lost through inefficient tax collection, the Government's great idea was to close offices and make redundant the very staff we need to collect those taxes. She shone a light on a range of shortcomings in the Government's plans, including the scale of office and personnel cuts.

In my summing up, I want to refer to everyone who has made a contribution today, as all the contributions have been important. I shall start with the Minister, who, with his usual calm and attempted reason, gave us a fine tour de force. I would like to pick him up on one or two points, however. I was particularly aggrieved when he used the Scottish Government as an example, saying, "Look at what they have done by bringing all those colleges together", as though that were an example of the downsizing of an entire estate in Scotland. Nothing could be further from the truth. Let me give the Minister an example. There is now only one college in Ayrshire—Ayrshire college—but it retains not only its Ayrshire college campus but the campus that was James Watt college in Kilwinning. It has also retained the campus that was Kilmarnock college, and the Scottish Government are now investing £50 million to expand that campus.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I have met representatives of businesses in Ayrshire, and they have been nothing but complimentary about the courses at Ayrshire college and the students that come out of it. The college has just won three categories in the Scottish Qualifications Authority awards last week.

Roger Mullin: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. There are many hon. Members on these Benches who could say similar things about their colleges and the way in which they are served.

The Minister claimed that part of the reason for the proposed changes was to create greater efficiency. Well, that would be clever! As many Members have said, we currently have a rather inefficient way of gathering taxes. There are telephone calls that cannot be answered and letters that sometimes cannot even be opened, let alone responded to, yet the way we are supposed to solve this problem is to cut, cut and cut again. That does not make any sense.

The Minister also indicated that some of the closures would happen in such a way that it would be viable for the people affected to move from their current location to a new one.

Drew Hendry: Try that in Inverness!

Roger Mullin: My hon. Friend has just stolen my line. I was about to say, "Try that in Aberdeen."

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): I might add, "Try that in Enniskillen." People would have to go to Belfast, or even perhaps even across the Irish sea to Glasgow.

Roger Mullin: I agree with the hon. Gentleman entirely. I know Enniskillen and many other places in Northern Ireland very well. I am sure he would agree that many people, particularly in communities on the fringes near the border, might feel vulnerable and fear having to go to the big city of Belfast to have their needs met. A number of Members from Northern Ireland have pointed out the specialist nature of the needs of people there, because of cross-border issues and the like.

I have happily crossed swords with the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris) on a number of occasions. He made one of his typically thoughtful and detailed speeches, and we are grateful for that. He will forgive me if I cannot cover all the points he made, but one thing that struck me about his contribution was his comment that of course there is a need to have new technology and the best new ways of working, but that does not mean we need to deny the right of people to have human contact and get advice and guidance that can be provided only by human beings. We are not luddites opposing the Government—

Chris Law: Or robots!

Roger Mullin: Or robots. We are people who want to see a balanced way of providing a service to the people in this important area. The hon. Gentleman also talked about things he has rehearsed in other places, such as the problems of the tax gap and the great need to have people with real expertise to tackle different forms of tax evasion. He gave many helpful quotes from many different professional groups that are with us in opposing what the Government are planning.

The hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) gave an especially fine analysis of the situation in his local area. I particularly enjoyed his comment that HMRC was proposing a cack-handed approach to finding locations to site its offices. He provided a compelling critique of

the regional positioning that is taking place, and I thank him for that. My hon. Friend the Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) pointed out that his city, undergoing a £1 billion expansion in so many ways, is now to be denied a tax centre for the many thriving and developing small businesses and individuals in that great city of Dundee—what a ridiculous proposition. He also said that the Scottish Government have a policy of “no compulsory redundancies”, but we have not heard those words trip off the tongue of any Minister in this debate.

The hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) focused well on the issues of customer service that need addressing, giving a balanced critique of the Government yet cleverly still finding some areas to support—I pay tribute to her for being so adept at that. The hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) gave a fine, reasoned analysis, particularly of the human contact needed and the disrespect that has been shown in the way in which this announcement has been given to the public. He was the first to raise that point, but he will doubtless realise it was mirrored in what was said in many subsequent contributions. I want the Government to say something about that in a contrite manner when we hear from them shortly. Like others, the hon. Gentleman raised the need for impact assessments, including equality impact assessments. I have found no effective assessment of any sort connected with this major initiative, and that is completely ridiculous.

The hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) made another compelling case about location, even if it was surprisingly positive about the economic strategy being pursued by the Government. In the context of this debate, I will dwell on the fact that he, too, lent his voice to the critique that even people who believed in this type of policy would not choose the locations that have been chosen to enact it. My hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) pointed out how the significant, large and well-respected tax office in Cumbernauld is to be thrown to the wind, along with so many other offices in Scotland. He called, as have others, for much greater scrutiny of the Government’s proposals in this regard.

The hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) offered a paean to her Government, claiming that they were pursuing a policy of common sense, yet she, too, still managed to give a critique of the locations being chosen by the Government. Listening to almost all the contributions from Tory Members, it appears that they liked the policy but just did not agree with any one of the locations that have been chosen to enact it.

The hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas) talked about the appalling way in which this matter has been announced and pursued. He said that it showed disrespect to the House. I particularly liked his deep analysis of the situation, when he said “They don’t know their backside from their elbow.”

The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) gave the most loyal of speeches, but I have to say that I disagreed with almost every word of it. I could steal a line from someone else and say, “He had all the right words, but just in the wrong order.”

The hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) mentioned the importance of the Welsh language and the need for an impact assessment. Something that was missing was the lack of concern about what is

happening in the highlands and islands and the Gaelic-speaking communities in Scotland. We need to have proper impact analysis and proper care for the people in our communities.

The hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) called for effective care and support for the workers involved, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), who made that point in at least six interventions. My hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) pointed out the way in which three offices in her constituency are again been cast to the winds without any real and effective consideration. *[Interruption.]* I think that I am being encouraged to wind up.

Let me quickly mention the fact that my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) and the hon. Members for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald), for Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland) and for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) were all stunning in their analysis.

6.46 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Damian Hinds): I am not quite sure how to follow the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin).

Protecting the country’s tax revenues is of course a vital part of our long-term economic plan. It is particularly important given the contributions that we expect the tax system to make to delivering an overall surplus in 2019-20. As an integral part of that, we strengthened HM Revenue and Customs’ ability to carry out its job as effectively and as efficiently as possible.

In 2009-10, the tax gap stood at 7.3%. By 2013-14, it had fallen to 6.4%, and that represents an additional £14.5 billion in cumulative tax collected. Over the past Parliament, HMRC has secured around £100 billion in additional compliance yield, including more than £38 billion from big businesses and £1.2 billion from the UK’s richest 6,000 people. Our investments, including £800 million in the summer Budget, helping HMRC to recover an additional £7.2 billion, have been vital to achieving that success. As well as that, it is clearly important that the structure and organisation of HMRC are fully fit for the 21st century, and that is what these changes are all about.

Philip Davies: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Damian Hinds: I will not just at the moment, if that is all right with my hon. Friend.

The primary objective is for HMRC to bring its workforce closer together in regional centres so that they can collaborate better, providing more opportunities for economies of scale and of scope and for individuals’ career progression. That will allow them to deliver higher quality public services at a lower cost to the taxpayer. It is simply not efficient to have HMRC’s 58,000 employees spread throughout 170 offices across the UK.

Andy McDonald: While the Minister is on the subject, does he want to tell the House what assessment he has made in socio-economic terms of the damage that will be caused by those tax offices and workers withdrawing from those very communities?

Damian Hinds: As the Financial Secretary to the Treasury said, this is about moving into more efficient and more effective regional centres in which, in those places, jobs will be created. The great majority of people are within travel time of those centres and will be able to move.

Mrs Hodgson: Will the Exchequer Secretary give way?

Damian Hinds: I will not for the moment. I want to see how things go and to try to cover as many as possible of the points that have been raised during the debate.

The consolidation has been ongoing since the formation of HMRC in 2005, when it had more than 570 offices. Most recently, in 2014, it announced the closure of 135 older-style walk-in centres, to which vulnerable customers had to make the effort to travel. HMRC replaced them with a dedicated “needs extra support” service, whereby officials go to meet the customers in their own home or at a convenient location. I have met and spoken to HMRC staff who have made the change from the old service model to the new one, and have heard about how much more effective it is in supporting those who need most help.

Peter Dowd *rose*—

Damian Hinds: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I will not give way.

Keeping HMRC’s valued employees fully engaged has been a central part of the transformation programme. The proposals were initially announced internally 18 months ago. Since then, HMRC has held about 2,000 events across the country, talking to and consulting colleagues on the changes.

Philip Davies: This is a really lazy reorganisation by HMRC, which appears to have picked either the biggest place in a region or the one that is easiest for the London staff to get to by train. Will the Exchequer Secretary consider what has been said in this debate and go away and look at the issues from a properly local perspective?

Damian Hinds: I assure my hon. Friend that that is not the way in which the process to identify the locations has been conducted. My hon. Friend the Financial Secretary mentioned earlier the combination of site and location-specific criteria. Critically, the process has also involved mapping out where HMRC staff live, in order to calculate reasonable travel distances and the locations to which those individuals can reasonably travel. In the case of HMRC staff employed in Leeds and Bradford, 130 live a more reasonable distance from Leeds than they do from Bradford.

Peter Dowd: What does the Exchequer Secretary have to say to my constituents who have been connected to the civil service for half a century? What does he have to say to the town that will be devastated when those 2,500 jobs move out?

Damian Hinds: There are a great number of job opportunities in Liverpool, near the hon. Gentleman’s constituency. This will be a different type of operation, with more disciplines co-located in the same building,

so there will be more opportunities for collaborative and efficient working and for career progression and development. Everyone working for HMRC will have the opportunity to discuss their personal circumstances with their manager ahead of any office closures or moves, including any issues that need to be taken into account when making decisions.

Andy McDonald: Will the Exchequer Secretary give way?

Damian Hinds: Not at the moment. As I have said, HMRC has mapped the geographical location of all of its employees, to work out which locations work best for most people. We envisage that the new office structure will give more people more opportunities, which is good for them as well as for the organisations as a whole.

I have not given way as much as I might have done, because I wanted to respond to as many as possible of the points that have been raised during the debate. The questions were many and the minutes available are few, but I shall do my best. If I omit anything crucial that has been raised, I will write to the hon. Member concerned.

The official Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris), rightly raised the question of the Mapeley leases. It is precisely because of the expiration date of those leases, which account for about two thirds of the estate, at the end of the private finance initiative contract in 2021 that this is a one-off opportunity to make this change to the estate footprint. If the opportunity is missed, there will not be another one like it for some 15 years.

I have been asked a number of times, quite rightly, about the number of compulsory redundancies. Of 58,000 staff in total, 4,000 are expected not to be in reasonable travel time of a regional centre, but that is not the same as saying that there will be 4,000 compulsory redundancies. Every year, many people retire or move away from organisations, including HMRC.

Andy McDonald: What counts as reasonable travel time?

Damian Hinds: I will in a moment come to the point that the hon. Gentleman is shouting out from his seat. The average age of employees in the organisation is late 40s or early 50s, and this is a 10-year plan, so compulsory redundancy should be a last resort.

What counts as reasonable travel time will depend on the circumstances of the individual and will include consideration of factors such as caring responsibilities, which is one reason for providing the opportunity of one-to-one discussions, quite rightly, with all employees. Typically, reasonable travel time is taken to mean around an hour, but that does not mean that that is correct for everybody in every circumstance in every location.

A number of hon. Members, including the hon. Members for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) and for Bootle (Peter Dowd), my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) and the hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas), complained about the manner in which the announcement came out. I make no apology for the fact that the staff were told first. On the day of the announcement, the entire HMRC senior team was out in the field at those office locations to carry out face-to-face discussions with staff. The direction of

travel had been shared with staff 18 months earlier, and in the intervening time some 2,000 events had been held up and down the country to discuss the changes. In terms of contact with MPs, I can confirm that HMRC will be happy to discuss the situation with them.

Ian C. Lucas: Will the Minister give way?

Damian Hinds: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I will not, because of the time.

I want to respond to the specific points that hon. Members have rightly raised about their constituencies. On Shipley and Bradford, my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary has agreed to meet Bradford MPs, as they know. The chief executives of HMRC and of Bradford's local authority are also due to meet to discuss the issue. We have heard about Chatham and Chelmsford. I should explain that they are both two-stage programmes with a transitional arrangement in place for three or four years at Maidstone and Southend respectively. The hon. Member for Bootle raised the question of not knowing exactly where in Liverpool the regional centre would be. This programme stretches over a number of years, and it is right that as an organisation goes into a commercial negotiation over premises, it does not identify the exact location it has in mind because, as was mentioned in the debate, that would put up the price that was asked.

I want to reassure the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) that HMRC is very conscious of the importance of the Welsh language service and intends there to be no denigration of service to Welsh speakers as a result of these changes. I want also to reassure colleagues from Northern Ireland that we expect the number of staff in Northern Ireland to go up at the end of this period, rather than down. HMRC absolutely recognises the unique issues in the Province.

The Scotland-specific proposals will see the opening of two regional centres, in Glasgow and Edinburgh. In addition, a specialist crime centre will be maintained in Gartcosh. Although discussions with individual employees are ongoing, HMRC's presence in Scotland will remain consistent, at 12% of its total workforce as against only 8% of the UK's population. To respond to the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law), the 600 jobs at Sidlaw House will move to the Department for Work and Pensions, while we will do everything to find alternative options working one-to-one with those at Caledonian House who are outside reasonable travel times for the new regional centre.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP) *claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).*

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.

Main Question accordingly put.

The House divided: Ayes 154, Noes 301.

Division No. 132]

[6.59 pm

AYES

Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
Alexander, Heidi
Allen, Mr Graham
Arkless, Richard
Ashworth, Jonathan

Austin, Ian
Bardell, Hannah
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi

Blackford, Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blenkinsop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Boswell, Philip
Brake, rh Tom
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Butler, Dawn
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chapman, Douglas
Cherry, Joanna
Cowan, Ronnie
Crausby, Mr David
Crawley, Angela
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Davies, Philip
Day, Martyn
Docherty, Martin John
Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
Donaldson, rh Mr Jeffrey M.
Donaldson, Stuart Blair
Dowd, Jim
Dowd, Peter
Durkan, Mark
Edwards, Jonathan
Elliott, Tom
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farron, Tim
Ferrier, Margaret
Flynn, Paul
Gardiner, Barry
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Griffith, Nia
Haigh, Louise
Hanson, rh Mr David
Hayman, Sue
Hendry, Drew
Hermon, Lady
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Hosie, Stewart
Hunt, Tristram
Hussain, Imran
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jones, Graham
Jones, Susan Elan
Kerevan, George
Kerr, Calum
Kinahan, Danny
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lewis, Clive
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan
Malhotra, Seema
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr Gordon

Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCaig, Callum
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, Dr Alasdair
McDonnell, John
McGarry, Natalie
McLaughlin, Anne
Meale, Sir Alan
Mearns, Ian
Monaghan, Carol
Monaghan, Dr Paul
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Morris, Grahame M.
Mulholland, Greg
Mullin, Roger
Murray, Ian
Newlands, Gavin
Nicolson, John
O'Hara, Brendan
Onn, Melanie
Oswald, Kirsten
Owen, Albert
Paisley, Ian
Paterson, Steven
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Pugh, John
Reed, Mr Jamie
Rees, Christina
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Marie
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Robertson, rh Angus
Robinson, Gavin
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shannon, Jim
Sheppard, Tommy
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Cat
Smith, Owen
Spellar, rh Mr John
Stephens, Chris
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
Tami, Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thornberry, Emily
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Vaz, rh Keith
Weir, Mike
Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Mr Mark
Wilson, Corri
Wilson, Sammy
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Ms Rosie

Wishart, Pete
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Marion Fellows and
Owen Thompson

NOES

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

Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, James
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
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
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, rh Sir Edward
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, Mr David
Ghani, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
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
Gummer, Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, Sir Oliver
Heapey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick

Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Boris
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kennedy, Seema
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Pauline
Leadsom, Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Leslie, Charlotte
Letwin, rh Mr Oliver
Lewis, Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Lilley, rh Mr Peter
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Lumley, Karen
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackintosh, David
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Mr Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Mathias, Dr Tania
May, rh Mrs Theresa
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
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Norman, Jesse
Nuttall, Mr David
Offord, Dr Matthew
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Phillips, Stephen
Philp, Chris
Pickles, rh Sir Eric
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Daniel
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Mr Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, rh Grant
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Solloway, Amanda
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Mr Desmond
Swire, rh Mr Hugo
Syms, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thrup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth

Tugendhat, Tom
 Turner, Mr Andrew
 Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Wallace, Mr Ben
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watkinson, Dame Angela
 Wharton, James
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Heather

White, Chris
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, Mr Rob
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, William
 Wright, rh Jeremy

Tellers for the Noes:
Simon Kirby and
Sarah Newton

Question accordingly negatived.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I do not know whether you are aware that cinema distributors in this country have refused to carry an advertisement for the Lord's prayer by the Church of England, despite the fact that it has been approved by the British Board of Film Classification and by the Equality and Human Rights Commission. What action do you think I might take to draw this to the attention of the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, who might do something about this fundamental attack on free speech?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): That is not a point of order, but the good thing is that you have raised it on the Floor of the House, it is now on the record, and I am sure that, quite rightly, people will look at it closely. I hope that at some point people will come back to you on the point you raise.

Iran: Nuclear Issues

[Relevant documents: 3rd Report from the European Scrutiny Committee, Session 2015-16, HC 342-iii, Chapter 5; 8th Report from the European Scrutiny Committee, Session 2015-16, HC 342-viii, Chapter 1.]

7.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I beg to move,

That this House takes note of the following unnumbered European Union Documents concerning restrictive measures against Iran: a Council Decision (CFSP) 2015/1050 of 30 June 2015 amending Decision 2010/413/CFSP, a Council Decision (CFSP) 2015/1099 of 7 July 2015 amending Decision 2010/413/CFSP, a Council Decision (CFSP) 2015/1130 of 10 July 2015 amending Decision 2010/413/CFSP, a Council Decision (CFSP) 2015/1148 of 14 July 2015 amending Decision 2010/413/CFSP, a Council Decision (CFSP) 2015/1336 of 31 July 2015 amending Decision 2010/413/CFSP, a Council Regulation (EU) 2015/1327 of 31 July 2015 amending Regulation (EU) No. 267/2012, a Council Decision (CFSP) 2015/1337 of 31 July 2015 amending Decision 2010/413/CFSP, a Council Regulation (EU) 2015/1328 of 31 July 2015 amending Regulation (EU) No. 267/2012, a Council Decision (CFSP) 2015/1863 of 18 October 2015 amending Decision 2010/413/CFSP, a Council Regulation (EU) 2015/1861 of 18 October 2015 amending Regulation (EU) No. 267/2012, and a Council Implementing Regulation (EU) 2015/1862 of 18 October 2015 implementing Regulation (EU) No. 267/2012; supports the Government's view that, had the suspension of certain EU restrictive measures against Iran not been extended in the final stages of negotiations, the prospects for reaching an agreement would have been significantly diminished; and agrees that the amendments to EU legislation to meet the obligations set out in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action contribute to ensuring that Iran's nuclear programme will be exclusively peaceful.

Over four months have passed since the E3+3 and Iran reached agreement on the joint comprehensive plan of action and the historic deal that now imposes strict limits and inspections on Iran's nuclear programme. During that time, there have been a number of important developments. In recent weeks, crucial steps have been taken to begin implementation of the agreement. Earlier, in the summer, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary marked another diplomatic breakthrough with Iran when he travelled to Tehran to reopen our embassy there. This is therefore a welcome opportunity to discuss the nuclear agreement with Iran. I am grateful to the European Scrutiny Committee for its recommendation that the House debate these matters and for its work in examining the many EU measures that relate to the negotiation and implementation of the deal.

The past few months have not been easy. The review processes in Washington and Tehran saw tough and impassioned debate. Opponents of the deal, on all sides, will continue to challenge it.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Has Washington actually approved the deal—by “Washington”, I mean the Senate and Congress?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. If I may, I will come on to the developments in the region and the wider E3+3 context later.

Crucially, we remain on track for successful implementation. The deal was adopted as planned on 18 October. Adoption day was an important landmark. It means that the deal is now in force and Iran is

[Mr Ellwood]

beginning to take the required steps to limit its nuclear programme. We are therefore on track towards implementation day.

Let us be in no doubt about the significance of successful implementation. An Iranian nuclear weapons capability would constitute a major threat to national, regional and global security. Full implementation of the agreement will remove that threat. Iran will grant the International Atomic Energy Agency unprecedented access so that it can verify compliance with the strict limits placed on Iran's nuclear programme. Those limits mean that Iran's break-out time to acquiring sufficient fissile material for a weapon will be at least one year for at least 10 years.

The UK, along with its E3+3 partners, played a crucial role in more than a decade of negotiations to resolve this most challenging of issues. The UK is committed to playing its part in ensuring that a nuclear weapon will remain beyond Iran's reach. I hope that the Government continue to enjoy support from both sides of the House in our efforts.

In recommending that this debate be held, the European Scrutiny Committee referred a number of different documents to the House. Given the time constraints, I hope that hon. Members will forgive me if I give only a general description of them. Broadly speaking, they fall into three different categories. I will give an overview of each in turn.

When, in November 2014, the E3+3 and Iran agreed to continue negotiations on Iran's nuclear programme, the interim agreement—the joint comprehensive plan of action—was extended until 30 June 2015. This provided for the continuation of voluntary measures by Iran to freeze the most concerning aspects of its nuclear programme in exchange for limited US and EU sanctions relief. As the negotiations reached the end game, all parties felt that an agreement was indeed within reach, but was unlikely to be secured by the 30 June deadline. As such, the first group of documents extended the suspension of EU sanctions for a few days at a time, as the negotiations edged towards the key date of 14 July. I cannot stress enough how sensitive the negotiations were at that stage. Had the limited sanctions relief lapsed, the prospects for keeping Iran at the negotiating table would have diminished, if not disappeared completely.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Did the sensitivity of the circumstances that the Minister describes lead to the delay in debating this matter, given that so much time has since passed?

Mr Ellwood: There were of course delays, but, as I have articulated, had we not taken the measures, and introduced and pursued the documents we are now discussing, we would not have kept Iran at the negotiating table, which it was important to do to get the result we now have.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): I am not entirely clear about my hon. Friend's answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash). Were there sensitivities prior to the agreement

on 14 July, or did they come afterwards and therefore contribute to the delay in having the debate in this House?

Mr Ellwood: I do not believe that there was a delay in debating the matter in this House. I am delighted to be here today. I will certainly look at the detail of the point that my hon. Friend raises. I am articulating why there were delays and, indeed, extensions in the discussions and in the requirements for the documents to be in place in order to secure agreement with Iran.

Following the agreement of the joint comprehensive plan of action on 14 July, the second set of documents extended the limited sanctions relief, this time for a longer period. That created a window to allow Iran to take the required steps to limit its nuclear programme and to allow the International Atomic Energy Agency to confirm that those steps had been taken ahead of full sanctions relief. Had the limited sanctions relief not been extended, the incentive for Iran to complete those actions would have been greatly diminished.

The final set of documents deals with the crucial matter of the implementation of EU commitments under the deal by providing the legal framework for the termination of the nuclear-related economic and financial EU sanctions on Iran. Those measures were passed on adoption day, 18 October, as was required by the joint comprehensive plan of action. In adopting those measures, we and our partners demonstrated our intention to honour our commitments fully and in good faith. Iran still has plenty of work to do to live up to its commitments. That is why the sanctions relief will come into effect only on implementation day, when the IAEA verifies that Iran has completed the crucial steps in its nuclear programme.

To conclude, I will emphasise three crucial points that are illustrated by the documents and their adoption. First, the documents highlight the importance of close engagement with our diplomatic partners. The success of the negotiations was based on strong co-operation among the E3+3. Maintaining the pressure and the effect of EU sanctions was vital to bring Iran to the negotiating table. That required the co-operation of all 28 member states. The smooth implementation of the agreement and robust enforcement of the sanctions that remain in place will require a similarly united effort in the coming months and years.

Secondly, by providing the opportunity, through sanctions relief, for Iran to re-engage with the world economically, this deal and these documents are allowing the Iranian people to feel the tangible benefits of international co-operation.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The point that the Minister is making is a strong one. Although the deal focuses on nuclear issues, it sets a framework for bringing up other issues that we have concerns about in Iran, not least the continuing persecution of Christians.

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Yes, Iran has come to the table and we have an agreement in place. That allows us to have a dialogue, through the opening of our embassy and so forth, with a country that has a long way to go on human rights, the introduction of justice systems and so forth. The strength of our relationship will allow us to be far more frank on the issues that he rightly raises.

There are opportunities for the United Kingdom. The Government are determined that British businesses should be well placed to benefit when the sanctions are lifted. The Foreign Secretary and the Minister of State for Trade and Investment have visited Tehran with UK delegations that included representatives of the engineering, infrastructure, banking and oil and gas sectors. Together, they are beginning to build the crucial links that will allow British businesses to take advantage of the opportunities in Iran.

Finally, the documents show that we are ready to implement the deal fully and robustly. As we enter the implementation process, our aim will be same as it was throughout the negotiations: to give the international community confidence that Iran's nuclear programme is and will remain exclusively peaceful. That is why we could accept a deal only if it shut off all possible routes to an Iranian bomb, and why the sanctions relief will not take effect until the IAEA verifies that Iran has taken the agreed steps to limit its nuclear programme.

Mr Jim Cunningham: To return to my original question, has the American Senate gone along with this agreement? I am sure the Minister remembers that the Republican party was not that happy about the deal.

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman is right. There were extensive negotiations in America and concerns were raised, as they were in this House, but I understand that the Senate has now confirmed American support for this deal.

Sir William Cash *rose*—

Mr Ellwood: In conclusion, the IAEA will have unprecedented access to verify that Iran continues to honour its obligations. The Government were grateful for support that they received from across the House throughout the negotiation process. As our attention turns towards a robust interpretation of this historic agreement, we look forward to enjoying similar support as we ensure that the threat of an Iranian nuclear bomb never materialises.

7.25 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): The nuclear deal that was agreed in July between the E3+3 and Iran was the culmination of many years of intense diplomatic efforts. At its heart is a simple concept, but it nevertheless took a huge amount of work to reach a robust and verifiable agreement. The simple concept is that Iran will desist from its efforts to develop a nuclear weapon in exchange for the lifting of sanctions that have had a major impact on its economy over many years.

I pay tribute to the efforts of all those involved in those intense diplomatic efforts, and particularly Baroness Ashton of Upholland who played such an important role during her five years as the EU's High Representative for foreign affairs, and Jack Straw who was important in getting the process started and who remained an unstinting supporter of it during the last Parliament. Such diplomacy is not easy. Trust was in short supply, for understandable reasons, and there were—and remain—many who said that the deal could not work. Agreement is one thing, but its implementation matters even more.

The European Union played an important co-ordinating role in the talks, and all parties have testified to the value and importance of that role. The agreement is a good example of what can be achieved when the UK works with others and uses the EU to increase its leverage when patient but determined diplomacy is used. There must have been many times when it all seemed too difficult, but the thing that concentrated the minds of negotiators—this should also give pause for thought to critics of the deal—was the consequence of having no deal or of allowing negotiations to fail. What would that have meant for nuclear proliferation? What would it have meant for the middle east or for other situations—such as those now at the forefront of our minds—in which Iran is involved, if we did not have the increase in trust that has come about as a result of this agreement? That does not mean that all our issues with Iran are over, but the agreement has helped to build trust. If it is implemented properly, that trust will increase.

This debate focuses on how the sanctions regime is to be lifted, and on the snapback mechanism incorporated into the deal should it be judged that Iran is not implementing its commitments properly. The lifting of sanctions is linked to the implementation of the agreement, and that must be verified by the IAEA. A positive report by that agency will trigger the lifting of sanctions. The Deputy for Legal and International Affairs at Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mr Abbas Araghchi, told reporters in Vienna in the last couple of days that he expects the deal to be implemented in January next year. That follows approval of the deal by the Iranian Parliament last month. We welcome that aim. It shows momentum behind the agreement, although it will, of course, be important that the claim of implementation is properly tested and verified by the IAEA.

The European Union has already begun preparing for the lifting of sanctions. Last month the EU High Representative, Ms Mogherini, said that the EU had “adopted the legislative framework for the lifting of all nuclear-related economic and financial sanctions”.

That decision will, of course, only take effect when the agreement is implemented. The Government, in keeping to this timetable, exercised an override of the normal scrutiny procedures on some of the measures. That is never ideal, but in the circumstances, given the combined international efforts to get the deal implemented, I believe it is understandable. For our part—the Minister put the question to me—we remain supporters of the agreement as long as it is fully and properly implemented, and as long as the IAEA is given full and proper access to all the facilities it needs to inspect to satisfy the international community that both the spirit and the letter of the agreement are being adhered to.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The European Scrutiny Committee did not object to the scrutiny override in these circumstances. Its objection has been to the delay in scheduling this debate, which was asked for in September. Here we are in November and we have finally got it. It is the slowness that is the source of complaint.

Mr McFadden: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. He will know the point he raises is something of a recurring theme in examining these issues. It is good that he clarifies that it is not the override that was

[Mr McFadden]

objected to. I am glad he agrees with me that, while it is never ideal when dealing with something like this, it is sometimes understandable.

In conclusion, at a time when there are many grave international issues before us, this diplomatic achievement should give us cause for some cautious hope and optimism. I appreciate that some have doubts and some still lack trust in this, but the best way to answer those doubts is to have a full, proper and strictly verified implementation of the deal. If we have that, we can move forward both to progress on non-proliferation and to the building of trust that can be of wider benefit in the region.

7.32 pm

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): I am sorry the Minister thought it unnecessary to give way to me towards the end of his speech. I always take these things in good part, but I did want to ask him a question.

There is an enormous crisis in the middle east, with ISIS/Daesh and the other factors at play—not to mention the Russians—and the interaction between all that and the peace and stability we all earnestly wish for. The reality is that this kind of document—in fact, it is not just one document; I have counted them and I think there are 14 in all—and the deal being done must have some bearing on the current situation. It would be unthinkable that there would not be such interaction at a diplomatic level, given the importance of Iran in the whole middle east crisis we are experiencing at the moment—all the documents, the involvement of the United Nations Security Council, which endorsed it on 20 July, and the interaction with not only our own Prime Minister but the President of France and Chancellor Merkel, who put out a statement in September 2015. That is not unimportant to say the least in relation to the events taking place at this time.

My main message is this: given the importance of the diplomatic interaction, and bearing in mind the fact the matter relates to nuclear issues and potential nuclear threats and their relationship to Israel, not to debate this subject at the right time really did not give the House of Commons an opportunity to discuss it when it really should have been discussed. That is the main point I want to make. I am so grateful that the Minister has now decided to come to the Dispatch Box.

Mr Ellwood: I thank my hon. Friend for his courtesy in allowing me to intervene, despite my being discourteous to him, for which I apologise—I thought we were going to go round in circles on the issue of the date. On his first point, as soon as the deal was made, the Foreign Secretary made a statement to the House, but given Government business, this was the first date we were given for coming to the House. On the second point, I am pleased that Iran is now participating in the Vienna talks. He is absolutely right that this is the first indication of what I hope will be a more responsible attitude from Iran towards regional security.

Sir William Cash: I do not intend to go into the complexities of the foreign policy implications, because that would warrant a much longer debate and involve not only the Minister for Europe but the Foreign Secretary—with respect to this Minister's pay grade. This is vital

to our security. One needed only to witness the discussions as they unfolded in Switzerland, at which the Foreign Secretary was present, the to-ing and fro-ing and the analysis that was brought to bear to realise the importance of this issue. That was the point I wanted to make about the timing. It is important, when we say a European document is of legal or political importance, that the matter is debated on the Floor of the House in the appropriate manner and at the right time. The UN Security Council voted to adopt resolution 2231 on 20 July, and these documents have been pouring out ever since. There is a more recent document, dated 18 October, which is getting nearer to now, but we are at the end of November. But I have made my point clearly enough.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I know that the hon. Gentleman, in his capacity as Chair of the European Scrutiny Committee, agrees that all major European matters, even those which we might eventually agree or give a cautious welcome to, deserve the full scrutiny of the House. As he points out, these documents were considered on 9 September, and the Committee recommended that they be brought to the Floor of the House as soon as possible after the October recess. It is seven weeks later. Has he had an explanation from the Government about why it took so long, and has he been given cause to believe that the remaining 21 scrutiny documents will be brought forward for debate, either here or in Committee, within a reasonable timeframe?

Sir William Cash: This is the first opportunity we have had to put the point about the timing to the Minister. It is because we recommended it for debate that we can raise the question in this context. On the logjam of documents, to which the hon. Gentleman, who sits on my Committee, rightly refers, it is the constant and persistent determination of the Committee to get issues debated as early as possible, as he knows. I will not go down that route now—it is for another occasion—but I take very seriously what he says.

Because this is such a controversial matter, others have made observations on it, and I would like to quote what Roger Boyes, the diplomatic editor of *The Times*, said on 15 July. The Minister might think that circumstances have improved since then in terms of bringing Iran and Russia nearer to the negotiations and getting a better result in respect of ISIS/Daesh, but I will quote what he said anyway, because it is of some interest. He says:

“There is nothing game-changing about teaming up with a wobbly Iran. The accord with Tehran can then only be judged narrowly as to whether it is a success as a piece of arms control statecraft—and whether the release of sanctioned funds makes Iran more or less menacing. Consider what would happen without a nuclear deal, President Obama said yesterday: no limits on the nuclear programme, on centrifuges, on the plutonium reactor. But the president has to consider this too: how does one maintain leverage on Iran once the sanctions have been lifted? Denied access to a suspicious nuclear site, inspectors will be able to appeal to a joint commission that includes delegates from Iran, Russia and China. Delays are thus built into the verification system and the idea that sanctions can come crashing quickly down again is over-optimistic. Parts of the deal read like a cheater's charter; there is too much wriggle room.”

I put that forward not in my own name, but because I think it important for the House to hear the views of an experienced diplomatic editor such as Roger Boyes. He continues:

“What happens in ten to 15 years when the deal has run its course, restraints are lifted and a wealthy Iran which has retained its nuclear expertise, which has grown in zealous confidence, decides to remind a small Gulf state who is boss? The deal is an open invitation to Sunni princelings to invest in their own nuclear deterrent. In the meantime Tehran will have the money to throw into the subversion of its neighbours and expand its arms exporting business.”

On the other hand, to illustrate the controversy and importance of all this, Sir Richard Dalton, a former British ambassador to Tehran who obviously knows a lot about it, argued that there were good reasons to believe that it will stick, including

“the ‘snap-back’ provisions to restore sanctions in the event of violations”

and the fact that

“Iran will not want to risk a military attack, which would grow more likely if the deal fell through; no viable better agreement available and no international support for more sanctions if the US were seen to have vetoed the deal”.

Then there would be an Iran, he says, that

“is tired of being punished for something that it has not intended to do since the supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei’s ban on nuclear weapons, which dates from 2003, the year Saddam Hussein was toppled.”

He goes on to say that Iran

“has recognised that it cannot develop sustainably as a nation without allaying international concerns.”

It also “values its reputation”, and

“renegeing on its commitment not to build nuclear weapons, or withdrawing its agreement to the utmost transparency, either during or after the agreed 15-year limits on its enrichment activities” would

“demolish that reputation, with no appreciable gain to its security because of the retaliation and regional arms race that would follow.”

That just gives an indication and a flavour of the complexity and controversy that lies behind all this.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I am glad my hon. Friend has brought this sort of politics into the debate. All this reminds me very much of the darkest days of the cold war, a policy of containment and the fact that the then Soviet Union had different factions—modernisers and hardliners. Can we not hope that a policy of containment in the case of Iran might lead eventually to the emergence of a modernisers’ victory, albeit slowly and perhaps over decades?

Sir William Cash: One must indeed hope so. In the extremely complex and dangerous world that we now inhabit, we must also hope that some sensible diplomatic and useful solution—I would not call it a compromise—can be found.

To conclude my remarks, in September 2015, our own Prime Minister, the President of France and the Chancellor of Germany were saying:

“Iran will have strong incentives not to cheat”—

the opposite, I think, of what Roger Boyes was saying—

“The near certainty of getting caught and the consequences that would follow would make this a losing option.”

The first moment of truth is due to come at the end of this year, which I think the Minister understands very well, when the International Atomic Energy Agency is due to report on whether Iran has fulfilled the commitments that will enable international and thus

EU sanctions to be substantially lifted, which is not the same as the fact, as many people seem to think, that they have been lifted already. This is a process, and this is what will transpire towards the end of the year.

Mr Ellwood *rose*—

Sir William Cash: I think the Minister will confirm that.

Mr Ellwood: I can confirm that, but let me add that we shall have another yardstick to examine in February, when elections will be held for the Majlis, the Iranian Parliament. The type of candidate who will be allowed to stand will give the world the first indication of whether Iran is moving in a new direction. We hope that moderate candidates will step forward and will be allowed to stand, given that they have been denied that opportunity in the past.

Sir William Cash: I remind the House of what was said by my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg). We need to deal with the substance, and that is what the European Scrutiny Committee is there to do. It is there to go beyond the purely textual confusion that can arise from our having to debate a number of different documents—14 of which have not been fully set out—within a fairly limited time span. We need to get to the heart of what this is all about.

I am glad that the Minister said what he said just now. We want to be positive, but we also want to hold him and the Government to account. This is a hugely serious matter, and it is essential for it to be debated in good time. We could have debated it earlier, and, while we understand the position, we regret and deeply deplore the fact that it has not been debated until now.

Given what the Minister has said, I have nothing further to add, other than to express the hope that the Foreign Affairs Committee will note the significance of what is going on here—I know that my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), the Chairman of the Defence Committee, already does—so we can start to have a proper discussion that it is properly timed, not only in the context of the IAEA and the end of the year, but in the context of the February discussions in Iran to which the Minister referred.

7.46 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I welcome the debate. It is right for us to have an opportunity to debate the nuclear deal with Iran, and the means of its implementation, on the Floor of the House. I recognise that there have been debates in Westminster Hall, and that the Foreign Secretary made a statement to the House following the agreement of the deal back in July, but the European Scrutiny Committee is right to exercise its power to call for serious matters to be brought to the Chamber. I know from my work on the Procedure Committee that the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) will continue to push for more opportunities for his Committee’s concerns to be debated here. My hon. Friend the Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) has expressed similar concerns.

[Patrick Grady]

At the same time, I have some sympathy with the Government's position. I recognise the need to move quickly in response to the Lausanne accord and the subsequent agreement, which was, of course, concluded very shortly before the summer recess.

The Scottish National party has been fully supportive of the joint comprehensive plan of action that was agreed by the E3+3 and Iran. I echo what was said by the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) about the considerable amount of work done on that agreement by members of many different parties and Governments. I also agree with him that this was one of the significant achievements of the European Union, and an example of the benefits of co-operation through the EU.

As we have heard, the aim of the deal is to ensure that Iran's nuclear programme is exclusively peaceful, and Iran has guaranteed that it will never seek, develop or acquire any nuclear weapons. In return, the EU and the US will lift related sanctions. The documents incorporating that sanction relief into European law are the subject of this debate. The SNP hopes and believes that the disarming of Iran will aid long-term stability and peace in the region. Indeed, there is a clear and present need to extend the work that is being done in order to ensure that no country in the region possesses nuclear weapons. During one of the debates in Westminster Hall earlier in the year, I made the point—as others have done—that if Iran can be seen to choose a peaceful path, others in the region could follow suit. We know that the wider middle east region is sorely in need of paths to peace and stability.

We spent a long time today debating the renewal of the UK's nuclear capability. Weapons of mass destruction are a threat to humanity, regardless of where they are located, so any agreement that works towards non-proliferation and, ultimately, disarmament is to be welcomed.

The Scottish National party supports the lifting of EU sanctions in relation to Iran's nuclear programme, but we continue to support the retention of the asset freezes and travel bans for human rights violations. In 2014 alone, Iran is believed to have executed over 700 people—many in secret—including children under the age of 18 and political dissenters. This is unacceptable and inhumane. Continued international pressure needs to be brought to bear to protect human rights in that country. However, we welcome the reopening of the UK embassy in Tehran and the work that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has begun in building trade links between the UK and Iran. Re-establishing those formal links will go a great way towards facilitating the process of re-establishing significant trade links between our countries.

The current sanctions regime is extensive and complex, and has clearly and deliberately suppressed trade over the last decades. The sanctions have worked insofar as they have brought Iran to the negotiating table, but their implementation has had an impact on its oil exports and the value of its currency, resulting in lost revenues. When implementation day arrives, the majority of the United Nations Security Council measures will be removed, along with the totality of European Union sanctions, including the embargo on Iranian oil and

prohibitions on energy investment. This will present a significant boost to the Iranian economy and open up significant trade and investment opportunities.

However, the SNP believes that, over and above re-establishing trade links, the UK Government need to ensure that cultural, educational and economic links with Iran are strengthened to rebuild our bilateral relationship. This should include work to review the visas available to Iranian students studying at UK higher education institutions and the post-study work visa, as well as making a commitment to grow UK trade with Iran.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) noted on the day of the statement that Iran's President Rouhani was a distinguished graduate of Glasgow Caledonian University, which is in the constituency neighbouring mine; he received his doctorate in 1999. We pay particular tribute to his role in the thawing of relations between Iran and the west. Dr Rouhani is the President of a young, growing country with huge economic potential, and the removal of sanctions will signify a commitment to peace on all sides. It presents an opportunity to build peace through strong trade, educational and cultural links between the west and Iran. We Scottish National party Members welcome that opportunity and any moves that will take us towards a more just and peaceful world.

7.52 pm

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): Many Members on both sides of the House continue to have concerns about the Iranian nuclear deal. We have debated the issue on several occasions in Westminster Hall, and I remain disappointed that the opportunity to debate the full deal in Government time has never been afforded to the House. Back in June, the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), said:

"I would certainly ask the Backbench Business Committee to make time for it to be debated on the Floor of the House as well as in Westminster Hall."—[*Official Report*, 16 June 2015; Vol. 597, c. 21WH.]

Unfortunately, that has not occurred. The Secretary of State did make a statement to the House in July, but limited time prevented a debate on the merits of agreeing to the deal. I do not intend to open up that discussion again, but I want to ask the Minister to clarify what the Government are seeking to achieve through this evening's motion, and what the possible impacts might be on the middle east region.

The motion tonight is rather convoluted and requires the casual observer to undertake some research to determine what each of the EU Council decisions and subsequent amendments refer to. In the round, they seek to remove sanctions on transactions regarding foodstuffs, healthcare, medical equipment, equipment for agricultural or humanitarian purposes below €1 million, as well as transfers of personal remittances below €400,000. In addition, the motion is about suspending restrictive measures concerning the prohibition on the provision of insurance, reinsurance and transport for Iranian crude oil; the prohibition on the import, purchase or transport of Iranian petrochemical products and on the provision of related services; and the prohibition on trade in gold and precious metals with the Government of Iran, its public bodies and the Central Bank of Iran, or persons and entities acting on their behalf.

It is fair and rational to ask who will be the main beneficiary of the lifting of these sanctions. Surprisingly, it might not be the Iranian Government themselves but one individual, the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, through his direct control of one of the most powerful and secretive organisations in Iran, the Setad Ejjraiye Farmane Hazrate Emam, or Setad.

Setad has become one of the most powerful organisations in Iran, although many Iranians, and indeed many in the wider world, know little about it. In the past six years, it has morphed into a business juggernaut that holds stakes in nearly every sector of Iranian industry, including finance, oil, telecommunications, the production of birth-control pills and even ostrich farming. The organisation's total worth is difficult to pinpoint because of the secrecy of its accounts, but Setad's holdings of real estate, corporate stakes and other assets total about £60 billion, according to Reuters. That estimate is based on an analysis of statements by Setad officials, data from the Tehran stock exchange and company websites, and information from the US Treasury Department.

The motion seeks to remove secondary sanctions on Setad and about 40 firms it owns or has a stake in, which will have a huge impact on events in the middle east. The de-listing of Setad has no direct connection to Iran's nuclear programme, but its significance is in the company's relationship to Iran's ruling elite. The company has interests in almost every sector of Iran's economy. It built its corporation on the systematic seizure of thousands of properties belonging to religious minorities, business people and Iranians living abroad—we have seen that in the history. Iranians who said their family properties were seized by Setad described in interviews in 2013 how men showed up and threatened to use violence against them if the owners did not leave the premises at once. Although there may be no evidence that Khamenei is personally enriched by Setad's assets, it is through Setad that Khamenei has access to resources that allow him to bypass rivals and other branches of government.

The nuclear deal, reached in Vienna in July, allows the conglomerate to open bank accounts abroad and procure financing for partnerships. Secondary sanctions have previously prevented foreign banks that wish to operate in the United States and the UK from dealing with Setad. Although most of Setad's holdings are in Iran, it has some global reach. The Setad-linked entities being removed from US and UK secondary sanctions include firms based in South Africa and Germany. Already, one Setad firm appears to be moving to take advantage of the changes; the Ghadir Investment Company, which the US Treasury identified as a Setad-linked firm, signed a €500 million contract with the engineering unit of Finmeccanica in Italy, as a spokesman confirmed in August.

The even more troubling aspect of the motion is who operates Setad and the other companies that will benefit from sanctions relief. Some have said that the people of Iran will benefit from that relief, but I disagree. It has been claimed in the media that the Iranian revolutionary guard corps, a branch of Iran's military accused of funnelling arms and other support to Hezbollah and President Assad of Syria, has placed top commanders at the heart of more than 200 Iranian companies. Backers of the nuclear deal have argued that sanctions relief and renewed access to \$150 billion in frozen assets will not benefit the revolutionary guard in its support of

terrorist organisations in the region because restrictions remain in place against Hezbollah and Hamas. Such a view is not shared by others, including me.

A US think-tank, the Foundation for Defence of Democracies, says that some 229 Iranian companies have board members or shareholders belonging to the revolutionary guard, which also has links to President Assad. The FDD claims that the revolutionary guard either controls or holds shares in 14 companies listed on the Iranian stock exchange, with a combined economic worth of \$17 billion. That is in addition to other companies, such as the construction corporation Khatam al-Anbiya, which has secured more than \$20 billion in Government contracts and is believed to be the biggest private-sector company in Iran.

Earlier this month, Barack Obama said that the nuclear deal would result in more funding for the Iranian revolutionary guard, but that the alternative was war. He said:

“We have no illusions about the Iranian government or the significance of the Revolutionary Guard and the Quds Force. Iran supports terrorist organisations like Hezbollah. It supports proxy groups that threaten our interests and the interests of our allies—including proxy groups who killed our troops in Iraq.”

We all agree with the words of the Prime Minister in the House only yesterday, when he made the following clear and concise point:

“In ensuring our national security, we will also protect our economic security.”—[*Official Report*, 23 November 2015; Vol. 602, c. 1049.]

He meant here in this country. The Prime Minister is absolutely right that by protecting the United Kingdom's economic security we can protect our country. It is my belief that by maintaining sanctions on the Iranian economy, we can prevent resources being fed into the conflict in Syria and other countries in the middle east. I urge the Minister tonight to follow the money and see where it takes him.

7.59 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the Minister for what he has put forward. In his introduction, he used some terminology that I shall refer to, but I put it on the record that I do so not to attack him, but to illustrate my point.

I have spoken on this matter before, Mr Deputy Speaker, so you will know what issues I wish to address. Interestingly, every Member who has spoken tonight has talked about human rights, and about the persecution of religious minorities in Iran. I have this question: is it not perhaps a wee bit premature to agree to the suspension of sanctions? I wish to make it clear that I am not against the idea of a suspension, but I am against the principle if we have not seen the changes that we want to see.

On whether it is premature to agree to a suspension, I wish to refer specifically to human rights and religious beliefs. Other Members have given some stats on this matter, and it is important that we do so. This year, Iran has put to death almost 800 people—that is compared with 700 people last year—and it could rise to 1,000 by the end of the year. As Members have said, a number of those people, some of whom were children, were executed for their beliefs and some for minor reasons.

[Jim Shannon]

May I make a particular plea for the Baha'i faith in Iran? In the past year, 108 Baha'i people have been arrested, and some 200 Baha'i-owned businesses have been shut down or threatened. More than 7,000 pieces of anti-Baha'i propaganda have been disseminated in the Iranian media during this Administration. Whenever I hear about sanctions being weakened, I ask myself where the evidence of change is in Iran when it comes to human rights and those who have a religious belief.

Article 13 of the constitution of Iran denies recognition of the Baha'is as a religious minority in Iran. It strips them of the constitutional protections—such as they are—that are afforded to other religious communities. Baha'is are denied due process and equality before the law, which greatly concerns me. Some 780 incidents of economic persecution against Iranian Baha'is have been documented by the international community, including shop and factory closures. We did not hear that at the world conference that was held in New York in September. There has been the denial or the non-renewal of businesses and licences, and dismissals from private business after the application of Government pressure. Such attacks on those who pursue the Baha'i faith have been almost continuous.

When we consider the reduction of sanctions, I therefore ask where we have seen evidence that we should do that, especially when we consider the human rights abuses and the persecution of members of the Baha'i faith? The hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) referred to this as controversial matter, and I believe that he is right, especially when I think about how Christians have been persecuted because of their belief. They have been specifically targeted, and thrown into prison. Some of them are still there despite illness and bad health. The number of Christians in Iran has been reduced by 300,000. Why is that? It is because they have relatives overseas and want to join them. It is because they are persecuted in Iran, and to survive and to worship their God as they wish to do and as they should, they have to leave Iran.

When it comes to the reduction of sanctions, I think about the Christians who have had to leave Iran. They would go back if they could and if they had the right to worship. Christians are discriminated against when it comes to jobs and education. They are abused and kidnapped. Some young girls are put into arranged marriages, and there have been acid attacks on young Christian girls in Iran, which are well documented in this House. Given that evidence, why should we reduce the nuclear sanctions?

Kevin Foster: Like me, the hon. Gentleman is passionate about reducing the persecution of those who profess our shared faith. Does he agree that this is not about removing all sanctions on Iran, but about the start of a process in exchange for a specific agreement on nuclear issues? That will allow a framework for the future and enable us to further engage with Iran and deal with the many issues of domestic policy on which we strongly disagree.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman has the same interest as I do in reducing the persecution of Christians and those of all religious beliefs around the world. I have the same passion as you.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Not me.

Jim Shannon: I apologise, Mr Deputy Speaker. I meant the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), although I know you share our interest.

Everyone in this House wants to see change in Iran—how could we not?—but I have to see evidence of changes on human rights. Under article 13 of the constitution of Iran, it is impossible for those of the Baha'i faith and other religious beliefs to enjoy such rights. The Minister says that he wants “smooth implementation of the agreement.” I am a friend and supporter of Israel, for many reasons. I am a Christian and believe that Israel is the land of God's chosen people. That is my opinion and belief. At the same time, I understand that that does not give them the right to do everything they want. I think of Israelis trying to protect themselves. Some of those in Iran who are part of the process of changing the sanctions have said that they want to see the destruction of the state of Israel. That does not mean firing a couple of bombs—it means no Israel. Given such statements, where is the “smooth implementation of the agreement” when it comes to Israel? Last Saturday I attended an event in support of Israel at the Parliament buildings at Stormont in Belfast, and the speakers there were very aware of what we were trying to say. When it comes to agreed steps to reduce the nuclear programme, where is the evidence of change among the Iranians we are talking to?

Many see Iran as part of the axis of evil in the middle east. Sometimes we have to jump into bed with people we are not terribly happy to jump into bed with, but it happens. Sometimes we have to make agreements with people who are a wee bit unpalatable. I understand that, but I would love to see the evidence that the issues of human rights and religious belief are being addressed. I want an agreement as much as anybody else in this House, including the Minister and the right hon. and hon. Members who have participated in this debate, but I want an agreement that safeguards religious beliefs for all in Iran and that addresses the situation of those who are persecuted because of their beliefs, those whose human rights are abused and those who are under threat.

I respect the Minister greatly and know that he is genuinely trying to achieve something we can all get behind and support, but I want to know what is happening with human rights and religious beliefs. What is happening with regard to those who need help? They do not have a voice in Iran, so let us in this House be their voice.

8.9 pm

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who always makes interesting and important points, none more important than those he was making today about the persecution of Christians.

I want to cover initially the question of the scheduling of this debate, which has been raised in interventions both by me and by the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) because the scrutiny of European Union decisions by this House is important. It is a fundamental democratic right that this House is able to scrutinise the decisions made by the Government, and that needs to be done in a timely fashion. This debate was asked for

in September; we are now two months on. It is worth bearing it in mind that the longest outstanding demand for a debate was one first made nearly two years ago. The second anniversary will come up in January, and if we have not had the debate by then I shall no doubt hold a birthday party for it. It is quite improper of Her Majesty's Government to treat the House of Commons in that fashion. When debates are asked for, if the Government do not want to give them, there is a procedure under Standing Orders to put a motion before the House to refuse the debate.

Mr Ellwood: I say in all politeness and courtesy to my hon. Friend that we are now spending a lot of time discussing when the debate should happen. It is happening now. With respect to the European Scrutiny Committee, we have made it very clear that this is the earliest I have been requested to come to the House. I would have been delighted to come earlier. I make it clear that we have had other debates. Now that we are here, I suggest that we focus on the issues.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. We do not want to get into a debate about when we should have the debate. I know that the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) wants to get back to the issue and is going to bring us back to it now.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I must finish my point on this crucial issue because it is appalling of the Government to take this high-handed line with scrutiny in the House of Commons. It may be that the Minister did not know that this debate was asked for, but if he cared to read, daily, the daily agenda and the requirements for debates, he would have seen that this debate appeared day in, day out. If the Minister has not heard that from his officials, or read it for himself or been told it by the Whips, that is not the fault of the European Scrutiny Committee; it is that the Government are deliberately obstructing debate in this House. They always have time.

I will finish on this point shortly, Mr Deputy Speaker, but it is so important because we need to have these debates scheduled properly and quickly. The time that we have now is outside the normal sitting hours, so the argument that there was no day previously when it could have been held is false. We could have an extra 90-minute debate on any day since the request was made by the European Scrutiny Committee two months ago. And that is not the worst of the Government's treatment of debate in the House. It is quite wrong that the Government should shy away from democratic accountability. I shall say no more on that today, but it is a subject that I will come back to if the Government do not treat the Chamber of the House of Commons properly.

To come on to the documents, I am afraid that I am going to change tack because the Government find me in support of what they are trying to do and, indeed, accepting of the override of scrutiny. When it comes to sanctions on individuals and the lifting of those sanctions, they cannot necessarily go through the full scrutiny process prior to the decision being reported to the House because, particularly when sanctions are being imposed, people would have the opportunity to avoid them in advance. There is a natural understanding of

the confidentiality in relation to imposing and lifting sanctions and of the sensitivity with which this was being discussed with Iran. That is completely reasonable.

The second point that is worth making is that most of this was agreed under article 29 of the treaties on the European Union, which operates under unanimity. That is relevant because it shows that the European Union can work on a unanimous basis without any sacrifice of sovereignty by the individual member states. That is a model for future European activity—that we should take action when everybody is agreed because it is then much more powerful.

That is the next point: what has been done has succeeded and what was being aimed for was of the greatest importance. Trying to ensure that Iran did not become a nuclear state in the broad perspective of global security must have been a pre-eminent interest. It is worth noting that the most rogue of rogue states, which I think is North Korea, is secure in its wrongdoing and its internal oppression and is cocking a snook at the rest of the world because Kim Jong-un has a nuclear weapon. Those of us who wish to see a sensible world order want a limit on the number of states with nuclear weapons, and want to try to stop states that are on the margins of the international order getting hold of nuclear weapons. This is a successful policy that has had great advantages for security, but in the process that the Government have undertaken with other states and with the United Nations an important step has been taken in bringing Iran back into the global community. I slightly disagree with my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) and, indeed, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I think it is a great advantage that Iran is back in the community of nations.

It has long been the case that the best way of achieving international security is dealing with nation states, but all nation states have an inherent interest in their own stability. They wish to maintain law and order within their own nation because it threatens their rule if they do not do so. That makes most nation states in most circumstances the enemy of the terrorist. The terrorist is a greater threat to the United Kingdom than the rogue nation state is likely to be. Equally, the rogue nation state is easier to deal with, because it has a structure that can be attacked from outside if fundamental national interests are offended. Terrorists cannot be attacked in that way, because they are harder to pin down.

We have come to the point in British foreign policy—and, perhaps more importantly, US foreign policy—at which Iran is being brought back into the family of nations. That could be a significant boost to our ability to ensure security in the middle east but also more broadly because it goes back to a fundamental principle that has generally been accepted by most countries since the peace treaty of Westphalia in 1648: the principle that it is the nation state that underpins that security. It is what went wrong from the late 1990s onwards, when it was thought better to interfere in the internal activities of nation states to make them better nation states. That policy turned out to be fundamentally wrong-headed.

We have gained three very good things from the suspension of sanctions. First, it has been shown that the EU can work on the basis of unanimity. Secondly, it has reduced the likelihood of Iran having a nuclear bomb, and, thirdly—this is overwhelmingly the most

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

important—there has been a change of attitude back to treating the nation state as the building block of global security. I very much hope that the Government will apply that in other cases.

8.17 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I congratulate the Chairman of the European Scrutiny Committee and all its members on securing this important debate on the Floor of the House and on their contributions.

I am particularly pleased to have a brief opportunity to take up where my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) left off. I regard the deal with Iran as a positive development. I also regard the regime in Iran as thoroughly undesirable and potentially dangerous, but thoroughly capable of modernisation and reform if handled correctly by the international community. I entirely concur with the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), a fellow member of the Select Committee on Defence whose presence I greatly value, on the terrible way in which Christians in particular, Baha'i faith members and other minorities are treated. The behaviour of such a regime, awful though it is, is no more awful than the behaviour of Stalinist Russia. In fact, Stalinist Russia was responsible for innumerable deaths, yet did not produce world war three, which might easily have happened in the nuclear age or, even if nuclear weapons had not been invented, might perhaps have been more likely to happen in the aftermath of world war two.

Where am I leading with this line of argument? It will soon become apparent, because some of us on the Conservative Benches are, according to reports in the paper, being exhorted—I have not been exhorted on the subject myself—in relation to the dilemmas of the middle east, to be more like Churchill than Chamberlain. While I was listening to earlier contributions, a memory stirred and I took the opportunity to check. The memory was correct. When Winston Churchill wrote his multi-volume history of the second world war, volume 3 was entitled “The Grand Alliance”.

What was the grand alliance? It was the coming together of three very different powers, at least one of which was utterly incompatible on normal criteria with the other two. The three powers were, of course, the British Empire, as it still was, the United States of America and Soviet Russia. Churchill was the prime example of someone who knew how to do what one must do in an imperfect, evil and dangerous world when a conflict breaks out. He knew how to choose in an undesirable dilemma which was the lesser of two evils.

I will take the liberty of trying the patience of the House by pointing out something that we have probably heard many times before: when Churchill decided to speak up for Joe Stalin and Soviet Russia, he was reminded of his long-standing aversion to the Soviet system and his claim that Bolshevism should have been strangled at birth. His instant response was, “If Hitler invaded hell, I would have at least a good word to say for the devil in the House of Commons.”

How does that relate to the sort of societies we are looking at in the middle east? Once upon a time, this House had a choice about how to behave towards those

societies. In particular, very much in the afterglow of the ending of the cold war, we were told that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. My party was in opposition. We believed what we were told, but there was another reason too why people like me spoke and voted in favour of the removal of a particular dictator, Saddam Hussein—we hoped that what would emerge from the removal of such a dictator would be some form of modernisation and democracy. What actually re-emerged was the thousand-year-old hatred between Sunni and Shi'a, particularly between those who line up with Iran and those who line up with the Sunnis.

Churchill's grand alliance meant that he had to line up with Stalin in order to avoid the greater threat posed by Hitlerism. By happy coincidence, we have found ourselves with two debates in the same Chamber on the same day about the two concepts to which, above all, in my personal opinion, we owe the fact that we did not end up with world war three. The first concept is deterrence, and the second is the one to which I referred in my intervention on the Chairman of the European Scrutiny Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash)—that is, containment.

I look at the various societies in the middle east, because I no longer think that by bringing down dictators we will get pluralistic democracies; and I no longer think, therefore, that if we bring down Assad, we will get a better result than when we brought down Saddam Hussein or Muammar al-Gaddafi. When I look at the recommendation that we heard from the Defence Secretary in answering a Defence question only yesterday—that our aim, by bombing, will be to get rid both of Assad and of the Islamist danger of ISIL—I ask myself how this is different from the generalship of the first world war which could perhaps have been excused for the Somme but certainly could not have been excused for Passchendaele the following year.

If one does the same thing over and over again and expects to get a different result, then one is insane, and if one does something that worked in the past, then one might get a better result. For Russia, what worked in the past was a combination of deterrence and containment. I look at Iran and say to myself, “Here is a prime candidate for containment”, because Iran is an authoritarian society, and parts of it may be described as totalitarian, but certainly the impression I get from people who talk about it and know about it is that it is far short of the sort of extremist totalitarianism that features in the concept that underlies ISIL or, I must say, the reality that underlies the society of Saudi Arabia, which is supposed to be our ally.

When I look at these different societies, I ask myself which are the most likely, if we can contain them, or keep the lid on them, to develop and evolve—just as our own society, over 500 years or more, developed and evolved—in a modernising direction. I think that Iran is a strong candidate for a society which, if contained and prevented from doing something too terrible, has the prospect of developing in precisely the way described by my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset, such that it comes back into the comity of nations and does not go further and further into extremism that is exported. The extremist Islamist creed is a fascist, totalitarian creed. Iran, like the Stalinists, has the potential for being held in check and allowing a modernising trend to emerge.

I was interested in what the Chairman of the Committee said when he cited a former ambassador to Iran as evidently someone who thought that there was hope of positive development. On Syria, I have been in close touch with Mr Peter Ford, a former ambassador to Syria who likewise sees the regime there as brutal, or perhaps worse than brutal, but as authoritarian rather than totalitarian. In a choice between freedom, authoritarianism and totalitarianism, we all choose freedom, but sometimes the choice is only between authoritarianism and totalitarianism. The Government want us to choose neither. That is not Churchillian. Churchill knew the difference, and faced with totalitarianism or authoritarianism, I know which choice I would make.

8.28 pm

Mr Ellwood: With the leave of the House, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will respond to the debate. Let me first say that I did not realise how hugely anticipated it was; now I certainly realise. I am grateful to be able to respond to some of the important contributions that have been made.

I am grateful to the Labour spokesman, the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), for his support and that of his party. He is right to pay tribute not just to the EU and the work that has been done with Federica Mogherini, but to Baroness Ashton. I certainly join him in that.

The Chairman of the European Scrutiny Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), articulated the balanced arguments on how we move forward in taking advantage of the opportunities but deal with the huge challenges that remain.

I would point out that there is an irony in spending 30 minutes of a 90-minute debate on discussing its timing. I suggest that if we want to continue to scrutinise what is happening on this important issue, the Backbench Business Committee should be approached. In response to one remark, I should make it clear that I have no power over that, but I look forward to further scrutiny of this matter.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) made an important remark on the links between Glasgow and the current President of Iran. The hon. Gentleman spoke about the importance, as we embark on a new relationship with Iran, of establishing cultural and educational ties. We are certainly trying to do that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) made a detailed speech that covered a large number of issues and concerns. I very much appreciate that he has concerns about companies linked to the IRGC. I can confirm that sanctions will remain on individuals listed for terrorism and abuses of human rights reasons, and many companies listed as linked to IRGC members are not due to be considered for delisting for eight years. I hope that that will reassure him.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made a passionate speech. He is now recognised in the House for his passion and commitment on human rights. He was absolutely right to raise such matters from the very start. The Iran nuclear deal is out of the way, but we must use the new links at every opportunity, whether through the Foreign Secretary speaking to Foreign Minister Zarif or the visits that will now take place with parliamentarians going to Tehran. Indeed,

I raised these very matters when I met the deputy Foreign Minister during his recent visit to the United Kingdom only three weeks ago.

My hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) reminds us that other nations are seeking to procure nuclear weapons, and there is also North Korea. I absolutely agree with him that we need to prevent those on the margins of international order from gaining a nuclear weapon. I would add that there are also non-state actors about which we need to be concerned.

We may possibly hear again the speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) on Thursday. I certainly agree with him that this is an opportunity for reform, but one that needs to be handled absolutely correctly.

The nuclear agreement reached in July was certainly a major achievement. The deal will ensure that for the next 10 years, even if Iran reneges on the deal, it would take it at least 12 months to acquire even the necessary fissile material for a single nuclear weapon. Iran's enrichment capacity will be reduced by more than two thirds of the current level. For 15 years, it will enrich uranium only to the level of 3.67%, which is way below the 90% level required for a nuclear bomb. Its stockpile of enriched uranium will be reduced to just 300 kg, down from more than 8 tonnes.

There will be no nuclear material, uranium enrichment or enrichment research and development for 15 years at the underground Fordow site, which will be converted into a nuclear physics and technology centre. Iran's research and development will be limited, and it will not be able to enrich with advanced centrifuges for 10 years. The Arak heavy water reactor will be redesigned and rebuilt, so it will no longer be able to produce weapons-grade plutonium. Both the uranium and plutonium routes to a bomb will therefore be cut off. With the passing of adoption day last month and the agreement of the official document for the Arak project last week, Iran has begun to take the actions necessary to bring its nuclear programme within the limits I have outlined.

The deal and the restrictions are now very much in force, but I make it very clear that we are not starry-eyed. This is an agreement based not on trust, but on transparency and verification. Iran will grant the International Atomic Energy Agency unprecedented access to verify Iran's actions to give us confidence that it is complying with its commitments. Some of the monitoring commitments, such as the implementation of the additional protocol, will last indefinitely. Put simply, if Iran did renege on its commitments and attempted to break-out for a bomb, we would know and have time to respond.

Looking ahead, allowing Iran to receive significant economic and financial benefits through the gradual lifting of sanctions will be vital to ensuring that it continues to abide by its commitments. We want Iran to feel the benefits of the deal. By adopting these measures, we have kept our side of the deal. It is now up to Iran to take the required actions on its nuclear programme. Only when those actions have been taken and the IAEA has verified that they are complete will the nuclear-related financial and economic sanctions be lifted. If at any stage we suspect Iran to be in breach of its commitments, all previous UN, EU and US sanctions can be re-imposed.

[Mr Ellwood]

To conclude, the past year has been one of the most momentous for British relations with Iran, but we are under no illusions about the challenges ahead. Iran's interference in regional affairs and its support for terrorist groups remain sources of deep concern. We will continue our robust support for the security of our allies in the region. However, not capitalising on the momentum that has been created by the nuclear deal and refusing to re-engage with Iran would be a perverse response to the progress that we have made.

If mutual trust and confidence can, gradually, be built, there is an opportunity for Iran to realign its approach to regional and global affairs. This opportunity, if embraced, offers Iran a route towards playing a constructive role in the region and feeling the economic benefits that re-engagement with the world will bring. We want to see signs that Iran is willing to move in the right direction. That is not just what we want, but, I believe, what the people of Iran want.

We, too, have a burden of responsibility to live up to our side of the deal. Iran must feel the benefit of sanctions relief if it is to continue to abide by the terms of the agreement in the long term. As such, the UK is working to encourage British businesses to take advantage of the opportunities that will arise once sanctions are lifted. With the embassy in Tehran open again, British diplomats can engage with Iran fully to find a way to work together in the struggle against ISIL, to speak candidly about human rights, and to build a trade and investment relationship that brings benefits to both our countries.

We are going into this deal with our eyes open. We remain optimistic about what can be achieved, but realistic about the challenges we face.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House takes note of the following unnumbered European Union Documents concerning restrictive measures against Iran: a Council Decision (CFSP) 2015/1050 of 30 June 2015 amending Decision 2010/413/CFSP, a Council Decision (CFSP) 2015/1099 of 7 July 2015 amending Decision 2010/413/CFSP, a Council Decision (CFSP) 2015/1130 of 10 July 2015 amending Decision 2010/413/CFSP, a Council Decision (CFSP) 2015/1148 of 14 July 2015 amending Decision 2010/413/CFSP, a Council Decision (CFSP) 2015/1336 of 31 July 2015 amending Decision 2010/413/CFSP, a Council Regulation (EU) 2015/1327 of 31 July 2015 amending Regulation (EU) No. 267/2012, a Council Decision (CFSP) 2015/1337 of 31 July 2015 amending Decision 2010/413/CFSP, a Council Regulation (EU) 2015/1328 of 31 July 2015 amending Regulation (EU) No. 267/2012, a Council Decision (CFSP) 2015/1863 of 18 October 2015 amending Decision 2010/413/CFSP, a Council Regulation (EU) 2015/1861 of 18 October 2015 amending Regulation (EU) No. 267/2012, and a Council Implementing Regulation (EU) 2015/1862 of 18 October 2015 implementing Regulation (EU) No. 267/2012; supports the Government's view that, had the suspension of certain EU restrictive measures against Iran not been extended in the final stages of negotiations, the prospects for reaching an agreement would have been significantly diminished; and agrees that the amendments to EU legislation to meet the obligations set out in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action contribute to ensuring that Iran's nuclear programme will be exclusively peaceful.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

LEGAL AID AND ADVICE

That the draft Civil Legal Aid (Merits Criteria and Information about Financial Resources) (Amendment) Regulations 2015, which were laid before this House on 22 October, be approved.—(*Jackie Doyle-Price.*)

Question agreed to.

EUROPEAN UNION DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 119(11)),

DESIGN OF THE ENERGY MARKET

That this House takes note of European Union Document No.11018/15 and Addendum, a Commission Communication: launching the public consultation process on a new energy market design; and supports the Government's approach of welcoming the Commission's consultation which addresses the challenges that decarbonisation creates for Member States' electricity systems and the effective functioning of the internal energy market, while working to ensure that any future legislative proposals preserve an appropriate balance of competence between the Member States and the Commission.—(*Jackie Doyle-Price.*)

Question agreed to.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Tuesday 1 December, the Speaker shall put the questions necessary to dispose of the motion in the name of Secretary Patrick McLoughlin relating to High Speed Rail (London - West Midlands) Bill: Instruction (No. 5) not later than 60 minutes after the start of proceedings on that motion; such questions shall include the questions on any amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; proceedings may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(*Jackie Doyle-Price.*)

DELEGATED LEGISLATION (COMMITTEES)

Ordered,

That the Motion in the name of Chris Grayling relating to the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority shall be treated as if it related to an instrument subject to the provisions of Standing Order No. 118 (Delegated Legislation Committees) in respect of which notice has been given that the instrument be approved.—(*Jackie Doyle-Price.*)

PETITION

Wheelchair access to railway stations

8.38 pm

Mark Spencer (Sherwood) (Con): I am delighted to present this petition. One of the privileges of being a Member of Parliament is the people one meets. I was privileged to meet a young lady from my constituency called Emma Donaldson, who is a vociferous and tenacious campaigner for disabled rights.

Emma has a great social life, despite being in a wheelchair, and has many friends not only in my constituency, but all over Nottinghamshire. To see some of those friends, she wants to get on a train at Hucknall in my constituency and get off at Kirkby-in-Ashfield in the neighbouring constituency of Ashfield. To her frustration, she is unable to do so because the train station at Kirkby-in-Ashfield does not have disabled access. That means that she has to go on to Mansfield and get a bus or taxi back to visit her friends.

Many of the constituents of Sherwood, when we put this matter to them, found it amazing that in 2015 there are railway stations at which disabled access is very poor. In addition to this petition, there are 500 signatures on another petition that we have collated for Nottinghamshire County Council and Network Rail to draw attention to the fact that the disabled access at Kirkby-in-Ashfield station, in particular, is very poor.

The petition states:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to put measures in place to ensure that the platform at Kirkby-in-Ashfield train station is accessible to wheelchair users.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the Sherwood constituency,

Declares that the platform at Kirkby-in-Ashfield train station is not accessible to wheelchair users; further that this is discriminatory and adversely affects the quality of life of those who require a wheelchair to get around as it prevents them from being able to travel in a dignified and independent fashion; further that the platform at Kirkby-in-Ashfield train station should be fully accessible to all train users; and further that another local petition on this matter was signed by 472 individuals.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to put measures in place to ensure that the platform at Kirkby-in-Ashfield train station is accessible to wheelchair users.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P001560]

Mobile Telecommunications Market: Contracts

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Jackie Doyle-Price.*)

8.40 pm

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): We have a very intimate relationship with them; many of us sleep next to them; they are often the first thing we see in the morning and the last thing we see at night before we go to bed; we rarely let them out of our sight, and when we do we panic for a second; if we accidentally leave them at home, we will invariably go back for them; we get nervous when anybody else touches them. I am talking, of course, about our mobile phones, because those devices are completely embedded in our day-to-day lives. We use them to communicate with loved ones, to conduct business, to buy and sell things, and to entertain, educate and inform. We love our mobile phones, but we do not always love the mobile phone operators or the prices that come with them.

About 95% of UK adults have a mobile phone, and we have one of the highest smartphone adoption rates in the world at 75%. According to consumer group, Which?, just 35% of consumers trust their mobile phone operators, and of the top 100 brands for customer service in the UK, only one of those operators is in the top 50—Three comes in at No. 42, and the other companies came in at Nos. 67, 95 and 96. As a category, that is even below the banks. Also according to Which?, more than 70% of consumers are on the wrong contract for their needs, and that is costing the British public up to £5.4 billion a year more than necessary. In other words, the average UK household could save around £160 a year by choosing a more suitable tariff.

We rarely change our mobile phone company or our tariffs. More than half the UK population have never changed their carrier, and only 6% change carriers or switch each year—that figure is down from 9% a couple of years ago. It is therefore hard to square the general level of dissatisfaction with mobile phone operators and the phenomenon of paying more than we need to, with that incredibly low switching level.

Anyone who has ever tried to switch from one mobile phone operator to another knows that it is a difficult task. The current process requires consumers to almost simultaneously contact their existing provider to terminate their current contract, while getting their desired provider to activate their new one. That is time-consuming, and it often involves conversations about a porting authorisation code—the PAC—or unlocking devices. That is so confusing that many people simply give up and do not bother. No wonder that switching is at that miserably low level of just 6%.

To work out whether or it may be worth switching, people need to know what else is on offer, although that is not always easy. Only a third of price comparison sites contain the best available deals. When someone calls their current provider and informs them that they are thinking of switching, they are often put through to something called a retention department where—as if by magic—all of a sudden a better deal appears. That prompts the question of why, if a transparently better offer was available, it had not already been communicated to the consumer.

Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that transparency is particularly important for the elderly? People are often encouraged to get a mobile phone by their children or grandchildren in case of an emergency, but they are not always technologically savvy enough to know what kind of tariff or package is right for them. They are at high risk of being hugely over-charged when their contract comes to an end, particularly as they get older.

Nigel Huddleston: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Research by Which?, and others, has shown that as we go through the age brackets, the number of people switching goes down. Many more people in the elderly age groups are on the wrong contract, and many more do not really know what the process of switching involves. I know that Age UK campaigns on that issue.

What can be done about this issue? The good news is that some progress has already been made. In July, Ofcom launched a consultation on consumer switching, seeking views on a range of mobile switching options. I await the results with interest. The Government have a strong record on consumer affairs, and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills recently set out six specific proposals, or principles, on switching intended to cover a range of industries including not only the mobile sector but broadband, banking and energy. In these, the Government recognised that consumers should be able to switch quickly, at an agreed date, for free, with access to data in a format that can be easily understood and that the switching process should be gainer-led, eliminating the need to contact both losing and gaining operators. I believe we are unique in Europe in still having a loser-led system for switching.

Things are moving in the right direction. I am aware that some operators themselves are keen on the gainer-led system, including Three. In many ways, I feel I am pushing at an open door on switching. I am confident about progress on switching, but further work is needed on contract transparency and tariffs.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I liked the hon. Gentleman's introduction. I remember my first mobile phone: it was the size of a red brick and I used to carry it everywhere. It filled my hand and two pockets. Mobile phones are a part of life, more so today than ever. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the advantages consumers have is that competition in the market has pushed the price down? Companies want to hold on to their customers as if with glue and they will not let them go. Companies are very reluctant to let go of businesses in particular, because they see their commercial value. Does he think more needs to be done for companies involved in industry and commerce?

Nigel Huddleston: Indeed. The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. The debate is focused on the consumer, but the same principles absolutely apply to business: the same discussions and concerns about the customer service of some operators apply equally to business.

When I received my electricity bill the other day, I was very pleased to see a note at the bottom of the bill that said:

"Good news—you're already on our cheapest overall tariff. We'll let you know once a year if this changes."

Would it not be great if there was something similar in the mobile space? Instead, we are paying £5.4 billion more than we have to. Even if that figure is exaggerated and even if it is not correct or just a fraction of that, we are still talking about a significant sum. There are three key reasons why we are significantly overpaying for our mobile services. First, some consumers are paying for services they never use, with 58% generally going under their minutes allocated and 63% under on their text limit.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. On consumers paying for services they do not use, does he agree that it is even worse if consumers are paying for a service they cannot use? They enter into a contract in good faith, but are then trapped into a service that does not provide mobile signal at home, on the commute into work, or at work.

Nigel Huddleston: I completely agree. I am focusing on the contract side of things today, but it is absolutely the case that when consumers consider moving operators they look at maps of coverage and whether they can get a 3G or 4G service. That is one of the points to consider. Often they are then persuaded that an alternative operator will fulfil their needs, only to find out when they open the phone at home that that is not the case. There are no repercussions to that and no compensation. That is a major concern that needs to be addressed.

Nusrat Ghani: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the design of mobile phone plans. Does he support encouraging mobile operators to have flexible plans that allow people to pay for a combination of data, calls and texts that reflects their needs, instead of their having to pay more for a plan with unnecessary extra minutes, just because they want more data?

Nigel Huddleston: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point that touches on the whole purpose of this discussion. Many people are either on plans with services they never use, in which case more flexibility would be appreciated, or paying a penal rate for services they did not anticipate using but ended up using. That is costing consumers hundreds of millions of pounds a year—I think that £885 million a year is spent on out-of-tariff charges, for example.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I am on the Labour Benches because I want to give the impression that Labour Members are also interested in this important consumer issue. In fact, I should be sitting beside my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. The hon. Gentleman is meant to be making a short intervention, not trying to score political points, in what is actually an Adjournment debate. I am sure that hon. Members want to hear from the hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), so I want a short intervention.

Gavin Robinson: It was only a quip, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I have a sim card for an iPad that I do not use, but I have discovered that for the last two years the provider has been removing £10.21 from my bank account

every month. When I phoned and asked to cancel the charge, I was told I needed the serial number on the sim card, which I no longer had. Is that not something that should be looked at—taking finance for a service that is unavailable?

Nigel Huddleston: I know that many Labour colleagues are also very concerned about this issue, but the hon. Gentleman makes a good point about the failure of customer service and the perception that providers can dip into our accounts, regardless of whether the service is being delivered or is adequate to an individual's needs. We are building a picture here of the customer service challenges among the mobile operators.

There is another point of which many Members will be aware from their constituency correspondence. It concerns a situation where a consumer signs up to a contract, perhaps with a new device, that is then bundled with a service charge. Go forward 24 months, to when the contract expires, and instead of being over, the contract is rolled forward, and we get this bizarre situation where the consumer continues to pay for the device as well as the service. This can be a considerable hit on their finances. Some 46% of mobile users do not change their tariff as soon as their initial bundle ends and so pay an extra £92 effectively for handsets they have already paid for. This is a dire consequence of such behaviour. More transparency and proactive communication would help. Such behaviour is why levels of switching and the major carriers' reputations for customer service are so low.

I understand that mobile businesses are businesses not charities—we expect them to make a profit and invest in infrastructure; they employ hundreds of thousands of people and contribute millions to the Exchequer every year; they do many positive things—but they need to realise that it is possible to make a profit and give good customer service. A good start would be for operators to make switching easier, separate handset costs from service costs, make that clear in bills, which some do but many do not, and proactively communicate the best available deals to customers.

I ask the Minister and regulators to put more power back in the hands of mobile customers, and I ask mobile operators to do the right thing by their customers and avoid unnecessary regulation and legislation. I thank my hon. Friends for participating in this debate, at a much later hour than originally anticipated, and I particularly thank the Minister for taking his time to attend the debate. He brings vast experience to this arena, and I hope he will continue to work with colleagues in both the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills to create an even more competitive, fairer and consumer friendly mobile market in the UK.

8.54 pm

The Minister for Culture and the Digital Economy (Mr Edward Vaizey): I am extremely grateful, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the chance to respond to this important debate brought by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), in which there have been telling contributions from other hon. Members and hon. Friends.

I confess that at one or two points during the debate, I was confused. I was confused at the beginning, with my hon. Friend's opening remarks about bedtime habits.

I wondered where we were going, but I am glad we got straight back on to the straight and narrow, without straying too far from the subject. I was confused, too, by the movement on the Opposition Benches, and wondered which party each of the Members belonged to, but I knew that the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) could not have been a member of the Labour party, because it is still debating its policy on this issue. It will come before the shadow Cabinet next Monday, but various labels in the shape of a mobile phone have been left around by different factions in the Labour party, which are expressing their position on this issue on each other's doorknobs.

As time is short, I shall not give the House a potted history of my relationship with the mobile phone. It is, I think, telling for all of us that we can now measure our age in terms of our mobile phone acquisition. I can now say in a pub or club that I am old enough to remember buying my first mobile phone. My children will not be able to say that. It was, in fact, politics that brought me into mobile phone territory; I bought one when I was a candidate for Bristol East. I decided that, given that I was going to wage a vigorous campaign in the 1997 election, I would need a mobile phone. I can tell you, Mr Deputy Speaker, that it was very effective, as I turned a 5,000 Labour majority into a 17,000 Labour majority. My mobile phone and I have never looked back, and it is never far from my hand.

We need to talk about the subject in hand. It is an important subject: mobile contracts. It is no secret that there are probably more mobile phone contracts than there are now people in the United Kingdom. It is thus an important issue to pretty much every adult in the country. It is important that people feel that they are being treated fairly, and that, as hon. Members have said, they are given clear and accurate information and can switch providers easily. It is important that the switching process is made as easy as possible to help consumers and provide greater competition.

We have a good, competitive mobile market in the UK. We have four main network operators, but we also have what are known as mobile virtual network operators. The UK is relatively unique in having such competition in that respect, with companies such as Tesco and Virgin providing over-the-top networks. This kind of competition keeps prices low and means that consumers are offered a wide range of tariffs. It is also why the average price of a mobile package has come down by over two thirds in the last decade in real terms.

However, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire was right when he pointed out that there are low levels of trust in the mobile sector. In fact, one in four of us tends to distrust or strongly distrust mobile providers. We have discussed this issue with some of those providers, and it is obvious that they need to work to improve consumer trust, and that more needs to be done. To repeat my earlier point, that means access to clear and accurate information about the deals on offer, the basis on which charges are made, the quality of the service provided—my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani) intervened on that point—and how to complain when things go wrong.

Ofcom has taken action to improve the situation. It has set clear standards for contracts. It stops them, for example, from automatically rolling over, which used to be a practice in the industry. It has also ensured that

[*Mr Edward Vaizey*]

when prices change, those price changes are communicated clearly. It is important, of course, that consumers can walk away if the price changes in a contract. In fact, mobile providers have been fined almost £3 million for mishandling complaints, and Ofcom publishes complaints on its website.

Although trust in the mobile providers is quite low, satisfaction with the service and value for money is quite high, with nine out of 10 consumers saying that they are either satisfied or very satisfied. We will continue to work with the industry to increase consumer confidence.

We have a number of principles when we look at this market. One is that consumers should not be trapped in contracts in which they are not getting the coverage they expected to get. Ofcom is discussing with mobile providers the possibility of their offering redress, which would include allowing customers to leave a contract when service was unacceptable. There is now a cooling-off period, which enables customers to leave a contract without incurring a penalty within 14 days of it starting. That allows those who buy mobile phones to check their coverage levels over the period, and to cancel their contracts if they are not receiving the coverage that they would expect. A lack of coverage in the home is the most likely scenario. We want to improve mobile coverage generally, which is why we signed a landmark deal to ensure that 90% of the UK's land mass would be covered by the end of 2017.

Let me say something about switching, which is the main subject of tonight's debate. As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire said, many more people switch their car insurance or their energy supplier than change their mobile provider, and the number of those who do so is falling. Those who do switch, however, find the process fairly or very easy. In 2011, we made changes through Ofcom. For instance, we speeded up the process for customers to switch mobile providers while keeping their phone numbers, which was important. However, we think that further improvements can be made.

In the summer, Ofcom published the results of a consultation on mobile switching. As my hon. Friend said, there are two options. There is the gaining provider-led process—the new provider clearly has an incentive to make the process as smooth as possible—and there is a simplified version of the existing process. It is important for Ofcom to consult on that, and we look forward to seeing the outcome of its work.

As my hon. Friend mentioned in his excellent speech, we are seeking evidence across the economy in our search for ways of making it easier for consumers to switch providers. We have said that switching should be free to consumers unless they have consented to charges, and that that consent must be arrived at fairly: the consumer must understand what the charges are likely to be. The process must be quick, and must be completed on an agreed date. It should be led, by and large, by the organisation that has the most interest in making it work effectively. Consumers should have access to their

consumption or transaction data, because that will inform them of the existence of what might be a better contract. If websites and tools are receiving payments from suppliers, they should make that clear, and should also make clear how it affects the presentation of results. There should also be an effective way of enabling consumers to secure redress if something goes wrong in the switching process.

There are three stages in the process: gaining access to clear information, assessing and comparing the elements of the information gained, and being able to act on the information easily. We propose further measures to improve consumers' ability to make informed decisions, which can be grouped into the same three stages.

First, there is the question of access. We want providers to ensure that billing and charges are clear by breaking down the separate elements of a bill. According to Which?—as my hon. Friend has pointed out, tonight and previously—70% of people are on the wrong mobile phone contract, in the sense that they are probably paying more than they should. Separating the various charges would make it easier to inform consumers. We also need to run consumer awareness campaigns, because consumers may think that switching is more difficult than it really is.

Secondly, there is the need to assess whether the new provider will give consumers the coverage that they want. Ofcom launched mobile coverage maps in the summer, so that consumers can compare the services and levels of coverage offered by different providers throughout the country. As I said earlier, gaining access to transaction and usage data in a suitable format will allow them to compare the different offers in the marketplace.

Thirdly, we are committed to making switching as easy as possible. We want to legislate for that, and we are looking into how we could do so. We will work with Ofcom in our part of the economy, as it were, with the aim of introducing, across the board, processes in which the gaining provider leads the switch, and customers have less contact with the provider that they are leaving. As my hon. Friend pointed out, when consumers leave providers, the providers introduce plenty of hurdles—or, as they might say, incentives—to encourage them to stay. We think that our work will help to ensure that consumers have a consistent, simplified experience when switching.

Obviously, we cannot be complacent. Ofcom's work on mobile switching, and our commitment to quicker, easier switching in communications markets, will provide for an effective, consumer-friendly environment in which switching provider will be less hassle for the consumer. We will constantly consider whether further action is needed to ensure that consumers can take informed decisions and have absolute clarity about their mobile contracts.

Question put and agreed to.

9.5 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 24 November 2015

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

World Prematurity Day

9.30 am

Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered World Prematurity Day.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. This subject does not get enough attention in this place, or indeed in the media. In the previous Parliament—in a Westminster Hall debate and elsewhere—I raised the subject of stillbirth, as I have a very good friend who suffered possibly one of the worst stillbirth events that I have ever heard of. I asked lots of questions in this place on that subject, including at Prime Minister's questions, because I truly believe that we need to raise awareness of these matters. I worked very closely with Sands and with a charity called Bliss, whose strapline is, "for babies born too soon, too small, too sick".

Those organisations really care passionately about neonatal issues.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I warmly congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this very important debate. I have received a number of emails about the debate, including from a constituent, Samantha Evans, whose son Dylan was born in the 27th week of pregnancy. Across the emails I have had, there is a wonderful sense of how great the care provided by the NHS to premature babies is. I absolutely praise that, but suggest that perhaps in policy development in future, it might be useful to look at what support can be provided to the parents of premature babies.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He is absolutely right, and I will come on to that later. I, too, have had a lot of contact from my constituents on this issue. In fact, at my very first surgery—or advice centre—as a Member of Parliament back in 2010, a lady called Catherine Allcott came in, and it is through her that I got involved with the charity Bliss. I asked whether she would mind if I read out a couple of paragraphs about what happened to her and why this issue is so important to so many parents such as her and her husband, Nigel. She very kindly agreed, so to set the scene for Members, I will read out Catherine and Nigel's story.

Their twins, Luke and Grace, were born in the early hours of the morning of 4 May 2006, at 26 weeks' gestation. The twins' premature birth caused serious health problems, including brain bleeds, suspected meningitis, necrotising enterocolitis and heart problems. Although Grace is now a happy, healthy child, sadly, Luke died nearly four months after being born. Catherine tells me:

"One of the things we found hardest to deal with at that time was the fact that there was often only one nurse in the NICU"—the neonatal intensive care unit—"usually to three or four babies."

She was on the unit so much because of the issues she was experiencing and because she felt so uneasy about that situation, and that is why she has been involved ever since.

Catherine says:

"When I was there sometimes I would have to help the nurse on duty by running into the next room to fetch help. I often wondered what happened when I wasn't there. When the nurses would tell me not to spend so much time on the unit, what was I to do? Tell them I didn't trust them with so many babies to look after?"

She goes on to say:

"As a committed campaigner for high quality neonatal care I am saddened to think that in ten years very little has changed in terms of staffing units safely and effectively. How many babies have died or now endure life changing illnesses because there simply weren't enough nurses to care for them appropriately, and what cost is that to the NHS?"

Catherine's story is really significant. She took me on to the Gosset ward—the neonatal ward—in Northampton general hospital. I was told by a junior doctor who works there that it has all completely changed; it has been refitted and is a much nicer space. There is no doubting the passion and the care that the staff on the ward give, but equally, there is no doubting the pressure that they are under and the fact that we can help to improve the conditions for them.

World Prematurity Day takes place on 17 November every year—we have just missed it, but this was the closest time to World Prematurity Day that I could get for the debate. The day is aimed at raising awareness of the issues facing premature babies. It is co-ordinated by a global coalition of charities and groups, including Bliss, each year.

The global statistics are quite astonishing: 15 million babies are born prematurely worldwide each year—that is 29 babies every minute, and one in 10 of all babies born—and in the UK, that equates to nearly 60,000 babies born prematurely each year. Bliss estimates that 113 babies who need specialist care to help them survive and thrive are born every year to parents living in my constituency. About 61 of those babies are born prematurely, at under 37 weeks' gestation. Those born at under 32 weeks' gestation are considered very pre-term. Those babies are born before they are fully developed and often spend the longest time in neonatal care.

Obviously, most premature births have no clear cause, whereas others are induced due to medical necessity. There is evidence that risk factors for premature birth include smoking, drinking alcohol, substance abuse, low or high maternal age, infection, high blood pressure and multiple births. There is lots of research—although we could always do more on this subject—showing that socio-economic factors also have an impact.

I want to underline the fact that prematurity is a global issue, which is why we have World Prematurity Day. It is the world's biggest cause of death for young children. Of the 15 million babies that are born prematurely worldwide each year, more than 1 million do not survive. We are fortunate in the UK to have the resources to care for all babies born prematurely, but there is a long way to go before babies and their parents are given the best possible chance.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate and on his unstinting work for the families of those who are

[Julian Knight]

facing the challenges of a premature birth. Often, one of the most acute problems facing families in that situation is meeting the costs of constant hospital visits. Will he join me in calling on all hospital trusts across the country to follow the Government's guidelines on hospital parking charges, which would see concessions and even free parking for families of babies who often stay in hospital for months on end?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I concur with my hon. Friend on that matter. I have heard many a story about that. I have also visited the John Radcliffe hospital to see its neonatal unit and talked to parents. In Northampton general hospital's case, there is a way for someone to get their parking charge back, although actually, if they are the parent of a premature child who is not doing very well, the last thing they think about is where they are going to park and how they are going to pay for the ticket. The grandparent of a baby born prematurely who is not very well does not think about the parking charge when they go in, but it is one of their worries when they leave. We need to do better on that issue and spread some of the best practice that exists in the NHS when it comes to parking charges. Those charges seem like a minor element in the scheme of things, but they are such a big deal to parents, grandparents, friends and family—the support mechanism that builds around a family when a baby is born prematurely and especially when a baby is born unwell. My hon. Friend is completely correct to raise that issue.

As I said, we have a long way to go before all babies born too soon have the best possible chance of survival and of living a good-quality life. The UK mortality rate for babies is quite high for a western European country. I have previously raised in this place an article in *The Lancet*, going back probably five years now, saying that we ranked 33rd of the 35 top western countries in stillbirth mortality rates. We were in a very poor place, and I struggle with the massive regional variation across our country. I would like to think that we have best practice that spreads across the NHS, but there will always be somewhere that has a number of staff sick and where there is pressure on a unit. However, there should not be a massive regional variation. *The Lancet* article said that stillbirth was a third more likely in the east midlands than in the south-west, so there are significant issues to deal with. Surely that rate should be equal across the piece.

If the UK could match the mortality rates achieved in Sweden and Norway, for example, the lives of at least 1,000 babies could be saved every year. One thousand babies—that is such a significant statistic. I have met parents of stillborn children and know what they have gone through. Some 1,000 babies each year could be saved with best staffing and better equipment, although the issue is not so much about resources. It is about spreading throughout the whole NHS the best practice that I have seen in various hospitals up and down the country. Concerns about variation in care were highlighted in this year's Bliss baby report, which found that two thirds of neonatal units do not have enough nurses and two thirds do not have enough medical staff to meet Government standards for safe, high-quality care.

We must talk about this significant issue and raise awareness of it. I sat on the Public Accounts Committee

for five years and raised it there when we had the chief maternity officer in front of us, because we should talk about such issues whenever we get the opportunity. I know that those working in the NHS get it—I have spoken to all sorts of people from the top to the bottom of the NHS, and they obviously all care passionately for the parents and want the best outcome for their babies—but we have a long way to go to improve the care available to mothers, fathers and their babies. We need to raise the matter at every opportunity, and when I did so in the Public Accounts Committee the chief maternity officer took me to one side afterwards and said, “We are really working hard on this. This is an issue that we know we can do better on. The Government have announced a strategy to reduce infant mortality by, I believe, 50% by 2030. That is obviously welcome and recognises that we could and should be doing better.

I want to raise a few points about the 2015 baby report by Bliss, which has done so much work in this area. I know that plenty of other charities do fantastic work, but Bliss is one of the biggest, and I have worked closely with it through my constituents, the Allcotts. I very much respect its work. The report, entitled “Hanging in the balance”, found that funding shortfalls, national skills shortages and problems with training and recruitment are leaving many neonatal units without the staff they need to meet Government and NHS standards for safe, high-quality care. It states that 64% of neonatal units do not have enough nurses to meet national standards of safe staffing levels; two thirds do not have enough specialist nurses; two thirds do not have the medical staff they need to meet national standards; and 41% have no access to a trained mental health worker—one of my hon. Friends will raise that point, so I will not go into it in detail—leaving parents and staff without the vital support they need to help them cope.

I emphasise that it is not only parents who need help. When I went to the John Radcliffe hospital, I unfortunately went on a morning when three babies had died the night before. None could have been helped, but although the staff are professional people who know exactly what they are doing and the situation they are working in—they have a huge passion for their role, deliver a huge amount of care and become attached to families in a big way—it was palpable that the unit was feeling down that morning. In fact, I felt that I was getting in the way, so I left as soon as I could. It is not just parents who need trained mental health workers available to them; the staff also need them to help them cope in such situations.

There are insufficient funding accounts for three quarters of nursing shortfalls in neonatal units, and 72% of units struggle with at least one aspect of nurse training and development. From all the time I have been involved with the matter, especially when seen through the glasses that I have put on as Daventry's MP and from standing beside Catherine Allcott on Gosset ward at Northampton general hospital, I know that attracting people to go into this area of nursing is quite a job. Those who go into it find it remarkably rewarding, but it is also a remarkably tough role. That is one reason why vacancies in this field of nursing specialism have historically been high, and we must address that. The rewards are massive, but occasionally there are unbelievably bad days at work.

We should have a whole host of ambitions nationally. I want to be able to look my constituents, Catherine and Nigel, in the eye and say that I have done everything I possibly can to ensure that what happened to them does not happen to anyone else.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. He is talking about improvements nationally, and I hope that we all concur. Does he agree that the Government should ensure that international best practice and improving statistics in several countries are closely investigated and, where possible, replicated?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and he is absolutely right. Statistics regularly prove that we are not doing as well as our Scandinavian colleagues, and we should look at that. I know that we are doing so—a lot of work is going on in the Department of Health and elsewhere to see where we can improve.

I really want to be able to say to my friends who suffered from a full-term stillbirth that the care available to parents in similar situations is much better than it was for them. I said in my 2010 speech that the mother of the full-term stillborn baby was told at the beginning of a weekend that her baby had passed away, but she was sent away because an anaesthetist was not available, so she had to come back on the Monday to have the baby delivered.

I do not deny that there will always be stillborn and premature babies, but what matters is how we look after the parents and how neonatal units look after the babies. I am absolutely sure that in this Chamber and this Parliament, and across society, we all want to deliver the best possible care in those situations.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The format in Westminster Hall is that we have the Back-Bench speeches and then, no later than 10.30 am because we are due to finish at 11, we will have the first of the Front-Bench speeches, from the Scottish National party, and then hear from the official Opposition and from the Minister, but if we get to the Front-Bench speeches before that, so be it.

9.50 am

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab): I offer warm congratulations to the hon. Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) on securing the debate. This is a very important issue, but, as he made clear, it does not get the attention that it deserves. It is right and proper that it is being raised in Westminster Hall today, so close to World Prematurity Day.

I want to refer to a campaign that is based in Croydon North, the constituency that I represent, and that is calling for better support for the parents of premature babies. Called The Smallest Things, it was set up in 2014 by Catriona Ogilvy after her two gorgeous little boys, Samuel and Jack Smith, were born prematurely. She and her husband, Mike, were delighted to be parents. They were excited and full of joy as one would expect, but their lives were turned upside down because of the needs of their children and the fact that they did not feel that they were adequately prepared or supported to provide the care and love that their children needed.

The babies were cared for at the special care baby unit at Croydon university hospital. I had the opportunity to visit that unit with representatives from Bliss, about which the hon. Gentleman spoke. It is a fantastic unit, and I think that it is typical of many across the country. The quality of the care that is given at those special units is fantastic, but when someone walks into one even as a visitor, let alone as a parent, they are overwhelmed by an incredibly emotional feeling, because what they see is wires, tubes, boxes with portholes and beeping machines and then those tiny little babies, vulnerable and needy, with all that paraphernalia around them. When we talk to the parents there, they are so delighted and relieved to have that support, but also so terrified and traumatised by what their little newborn baby is having to go through. At a time when they are desperate to hold that child and give them the physical love that they need, they cannot touch the child because of the intensity of the care that is being provided. That is incredibly difficult for parents, but we should pay tribute to all the staff who work in those extraordinary and wonderful live-saving units.

However, although the medical care is fantastic, the support for parents is, frankly, inadequate. The Smallest Things campaign is calling for maternity leave to be extended for mothers of premature babies. That is the primary purpose of the campaign and the point to which I hope the Minister will respond. The campaign organised an online petition that secured 10,000 signatures. Many comments that were made, but I will read out just one, which was put on the petition by a mother talking about her experience. She said:

“We had a baby born 11 weeks early and it crippled us. I lost my job because of the time I had taken off. We racked up huge debts on credit cards and 9 months on”

are

“still struggling immensely to keep a roof over our heads.”

No parent should be put in that position when they have the stress of a little baby struggling for their life at the same time. As a society, we owe better care to parents in that situation.

There are five reasons why The Smallest Things campaign is calling for maternity leave to be extended and they are as follows: financial; bonding with the child; the child's development; the mother's mental health; and employment. I will quickly run through each of those issues. On average, the parents of a premature baby spend an additional £2,255 in the course of the hospital stay, but very little financial support is available to parents in those circumstances. They cannot, for instance, apply for disability living allowance, and there is little flexibility to take additional paid leave from work. Therefore, many parents of premature babies, particularly if they are not earning a great deal of money in any case, are pushed into very difficult financial circumstances and even into debt, which is not a problem that parents in that situation should be forced to live with.

The second reason is about bonding between parent and child. A child can spend months in a neonatal unit and, in those circumstances, it can be near impossible for the parent to spend as much time with the child as they would if they were able to take the child home, but the physical bonding between mother and child is critical to the future healthy development of that child and can continue having impacts even in later life. Extended maternity leave would allow mothers to make up for the

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loss of that very important physical bonding once the child is no longer enclosed in the way that is necessary in a neonatal unit.

The third point is about development. Premature babies have different development patterns from babies born on their due date, so parents returning to work, perhaps after six months' maternity leave, may well know that their child has reached the development stage only of a three-month-old. They go back to work worrying that their child has not had the support that they needed to reach the stage of development that they should have reached. Often, that can slow down the child's development for years afterwards. Added to that is the fact that the child's physical development is often slowed down. That can lead to much more frequent and regular visits to hospital during the first few years of a child's life. All of that places further demands on the parents and, if they are working, on the employers to give the parents time off. Where employers refuse to do that, we need more flexibility to be permitted under law. The Government need to make that change, as some employers will not or are not able to do that themselves.

The fourth point is about maternal mental health. There is a huge risk of depression for mothers of premature babies. That arises from the anxiety and stress that they experience in having a child who has to struggle for their life for such a long period in their very early and very formative years. The additional financial pressures to which I have referred can add to that stress. Many mothers, struggling in incredibly difficult circumstances to cope, experience mental ill health, but they may not have been alerted to the signs of that and therefore do not seek treatment early enough. That is damaging not only to the mother but to the whole family, and can be damaging to the child.

The fifth point to which the campaign refers is employment. A planned return to employment can be disrupted by a premature birth. Often, a mother who originally planned to return after six months cannot, which can put people in extremely difficult financial circumstances. We need greater flexibility around periods of paid maternity leave for parents of babies who are born too soon.

The name of the campaign, The Smallest Things, comes from a quote from "Winnie-the-Pooh" by A. A. Milne:

"'Sometimes,' said Pooh, 'the smallest things take up the most room in your heart.'"

It is time for these smallest things to take up more room in the Government's heart as well. Maternity and paternity support for parents of babies born too soon is currently inadequate. I hope that the Minister will address the need for greater financial support for parents in those circumstances, better provision for paid parental leave and better support for the mental health issues that arise among parents whose babies come into the world too soon.

9.58 am

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, although it is not a great pleasure to listen to the debate. The quality, of course, is excellent, but the subject matter

is so sad. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) for organising the debate.

It is fair to say that when our son died because he was born prematurely 15 years ago, the focus was, rightly, on the medical situation. I was extremely unwell with pre-eclampsia and HELLP syndrome, which is a leading cause of maternal death worldwide; I am now the patron of the charity in this country. Bliss has reported, and others will speak, about funding and skills shortages in neonatal units. My own experience is that skilled staff worked hard and did all they could for us medically. More could and probably should have been done to create memories. I have spoken and corresponded with my hon. Friend the Minister about that and hope that his excellent work on it will bear fruit. The Minister for family justice is also doing great work for the families of babies who die to ensure best practice during the cremation and burial process.

Today, I want to focus on the other medical services that can make such a difference to premature babies and their families in the long term. This is an issue of growing importance. Just as the elderly are living longer, the very young are surviving in cases where even a few years ago, they would not have done. That is, obviously, good news but, just as with the very old, prematurity presents its own challenges.

First, I turn to mental health, which my friend the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) has mentioned. According to Bliss, 40% of mothers of premature babies are affected by postnatal depression soon after birth, compared with 5% to 10% of mothers generally. For those whose babies die, I suggest that 100% need access to counselling, for both the father and the mother, and possibly for siblings and grandparents as well. It is not acceptable that on 41% of neonatal units, parents have no access to a trained mental health worker and on 30% of neonatal units, parents have no access to any psychological support at all. Not only is allowing mental health problems to go untreated needlessly cruel, but it has wider implications.

The Prime Minister made it clear how important family is to him in a speech last year, when he said that "for those of us who want to strengthen and improve society, there is no better way than strengthening families and strengthening the relationships on which families are built."

Sadly, however, a very large number—so large a number I am not even going to mention it—of marriages and relationships break up under the strain of a bereavement or the birth of a very sick baby, and more must be done to face that problem head-on.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I am on a Bill Committee upstairs, but I wanted to come down to this important debate. I raised some issues about summer-born children in a debate recently. Does my hon. Friend agree that in the long term, unless a family's wishes about delaying the start of education are recognised, and unless that is embedded in the code by the Department for Education, significant problems will be experienced not only by the premature child but by the family?

Victoria Prentis: I agree, not least because I am the mother of a daughter who was born on 28 August. Although she was not premature, I am very aware of the difficulties that prematurity carries with it throughout the lives of children who are born too early.

Julian Knight: My hon. Friend touched on the question of divorce following the sad death of an infant. I wonder whether she would like to reflect on the need for more marriage guidance and support structures for those who face that awful situation, and more widely on how working towards a seven-day NHS will help to alleviate many of the problems that come about with premature birth.

Victoria Prentis: Turning first to the difficulties in relationships, it is true, as I have found out personally and with great difficulty, that fathers and mothers grieve differently. The interface between two very unhappy people can be, as I know from personal experience, very difficult indeed to manage. I am fortunate that my husband and I had been married for a long time before our son died, and we were able to hold it together. We also come from very stable families who were able to provide us with a great deal of support, as was the Church. It is an enormously difficult area for people, however. On the seven-day NHS, yes, it is always terrifying to look at the units at weekends with lower numbers of staff on duty, and to wonder how those people are coping.

I return to poor mental health. It is important to focus not only on the parents but on the babies. From my work with the Parent-Infant Partnership UK, I know that long-term difficulties emerge from a lack of bonding between depressed parents and their children. The sad by-line “two is too late” is substantially true. If prematurity is not to have a multi-generational impact, early action must be taken quickly.

There are simple, practical solutions that would ease the strain on families. My hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti) has been working hard to ensure that more beds are provided in mental health mother and baby units nationwide. We heard, at an excellent lecture that my hon. Friend hosted last week in this place, from a psychiatrist who admits women from Cornwall to his unit in Birmingham. Travelling puts additional burdens on families under strain. Probably 50 or 60 more beds are needed nationwide to meet the commitments we have made to give mental health parity of esteem.

Other associated health professionals need to be in at the off, working with premature babies and their families. Professionals such as physiotherapists, occupational therapists, dieticians and speech and language therapists form a vital part of the care that premature babies need. Such care can have an enormous effect on development and quality of life. I will give the example of a child who is well known to me—a little boy born very prematurely to well-informed parents, who were not told about the importance of physiotherapy to his development. That must be seen in the context of the fact that 20% of premature babies have a cerebral palsy diagnosis. That little boy is now 10, and, rather than playing football with his friends, he has had a punishing sequence of operations and casts on his legs. His parents were told at their last appointment that physiotherapy from babyhood might have alleviated the need for all that. According to Bliss, 43% of neonatal units had no access to an occupational therapist, even via referral to another service, and 12% of units had no access to a speech and language therapist. As ever, early intervention saves trauma, time and money.

The Government have wisely seen the need for co-ordinated care for the elderly, with named GPs and someone in charge of the entire patient experience. So often, we speak of the need for a joined-up approach to end-of-life care. Only a few weeks ago, the Minister responded to a debate on palliative care and spoke of the importance of integration between sectors. We are making great progress on that front; the Economist Intelligence Unit recently reported that we have the best palliative care in terms of access to services and the quality of those services. Perhaps the time has come to look at the needs of premature babies and their families as a whole and to do some joined-up thinking to ensure our neonatal care is also the best in the world.

10.7 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to be involved in this debate. I commend the hon. Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) on bringing the matter to Westminster Hall for consideration and giving us all a chance to participate. Looking back, one of the greatest joys we have all had—I hope we have all had it—is the birth of our own children. Those special occasions are full of joy at the birth of a new child.

I was present when my three children were born, and I did not feel any pain at all; my wife experienced all the pain. The only pain I felt was when she grabbed my hand and would not let go, and the blood circulation got very tight. The births of the grandchildren were all great occasions as well. In this debate, we are hearing about those who did not have the same sort of experience, and I want to add some thoughts about that.

The World Health Organisation promotes World Prematurity Day to raise awareness of the one in 10 babies worldwide who are born prematurely. World Prematurity Day was just last week, so it is not too late to remember it. We are not just talking about babies who are born prematurely and die prematurely; I want to concentrate my remarks on those who are born prematurely and survive.

In addition to the risk they face to their lives, infants who are born early are prone to serious long-term health problems including heart defects, lung disorders and neurological conditions such as cerebral palsy, which the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) referred to. They may reach developmental milestones later than other children do, and they may struggle at school. Premature birth may lead to all those things, and it may mean that some people do not have the privilege of having children.

In 2013, there were 51,000 pre-term births—around 7% of live births—in England and Wales. We have had a couple of Adjournment debates in the Chamber in the last while. On both those occasions, very personal stories were told that resonated with all present. We have similar problems in Northern Ireland; the matter is devolved, but the figures are the same. We can be under no illusions—this issue is a problem not only in third-world countries, but in our country, and it remains an issue that needs to be addressed in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Of the 15 million babies born prematurely worldwide each year, around 1 million die from complications due to their prematurity. More than three quarters of those babies could be saved through better access to quality

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care and medicines for the mother and the baby, so something can be done. It is important that we try to address those issues.

Complications of pre-term births are the leading cause of death among children under five years of age. Earlier I made a point about the medical conditions sometimes present in those who are born prematurely. Without the appropriate treatment, those who survive often face lifelong disabilities including learning, visual and hearing problems, and their quality of life is greatly affected. Fortunately the United Kingdom has relatively world-class healthcare. Indeed, we are more prepared and more able than many to deal with such complications, but that does not mean that more cannot be done to address this important issue.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I praise the hon. Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) for securing this important debate. My first child was born more than six weeks premature as a result of an emergency caesarean in the Southern general hospital in Glasgow. Luckily, Emma is now a healthy nine-year-old—touch wood—but, as has been mentioned, not all parents are as lucky. I have friends who have experienced the horrendous strain of a stillbirth. Putting aside party politics, does the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) agree with me that special care baby units should be insulated from the cost pressures on NHS hospitals and trusts, no matter what those pressures are?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the personal story that he told us, as others have today. The Minister will address that issue and mention how best he can do that. I would like to see that measure in place; we probably all would. The Minister is the man with the responsibility, so let him earn his money and give us the answer that we need to hear.

I welcome the Health Secretary's announcement that his new ambition is to reduce the rate of stillbirths and neonatal and maternal deaths in England by 50% by 2030. He has set a goal to be achieved, which indicates a commitment to try to address those issues. Although the Minister will be the one to respond today, the man in charge at the top has indicated that he wants it to happen.

Worryingly, Christine Carson, the clinical practice programme director of the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, has said:

"Despite medical advances, rates of premature birth have remained constant over the last 10 years."

There is a clear issue to be addressed. The hon. Member for Daventry is right that although there seems to be a commitment to change and to doing it better, we have not seen much evidence of that—at least not through the statistics.

Christine Carson continued:

"An early labour—one that occurs before the pregnancy reaches 37 weeks—can pose numerous health risks to the baby, and these risks increase the earlier that child is born."

I commend, as others have, the work of many charities. I would say to the hon. Member for Banbury that, in the worst of circumstances, it is always good to have faith and the support of the Church. Perhaps the shadow Minister and the Minister will comment on the importance

of faith groups and churches, and of the availability of church ministers to offer emotional and perhaps even physical support at a time when families need it most. That is personally important to me, and I know that it is for others.

Christine Carson also said:

"Although more premature babies are surviving, rates of disability among these children remain largely unchanged. The way to tackle this is to provide consistent and high-quality care to prevent early labour".

If we can do that, we can prevent disabilities and long-term health conditions. We cannot take our eye off the ball when it comes to this issue. It is not good enough that for a decade premature birth rates have been stagnating, rather than improving with advancements in medical science. One of the best ways to promote equality is to give each and every child the best possible start in life with the most equal opportunities possible.

NICE and the World Health Organisation, among others, have produced guidelines on how best to address the problem. We have to recognise that we are short on funds at the moment but some of those recommendations provide good guidance on how best to move forward and how to make inexpensive, cost-effective changes to help to improve outcomes.

I think it was said in the news this morning that the Health Minister is going to raise some more money for the NHS—that is probably in England. Will the Minister give some indication of what that money will be focused on? Maybe it will be focused on A&E or on direct care. Is it possible that some of that funding could go towards this issue?

Some of the recommendations of NICE and the WHO include:

"When to offer progesterone...or a cervical 'stitch'...to prevent or delay the onset of preterm labour; How to diagnose if a woman's waters have broken prematurely before labour has begun and which antibiotics to offer to avoid infection; Which drugs will help to delay labour and to whom they should be offered; When to safely clamp and cut a premature baby's umbilical cord."

Those four recommendations and thoughts from NICE and the WHO are simple, yet effective measures that could make a real difference in addressing the issue.

I thank the hon. Member for Daventry again for bringing the issue to the House for consideration, and I thank all Members who have contributed. We can and should come together and get the right approaches to improve outcomes for prematurely born children in a way that is compatible with the current state of the Treasury. I look forward to the replies of the shadow Minister and the Minister, but I apologise in advance as I have to go to the Defence Committee at quarter to 11, so I have to be away at about 20 to 11.

10.16 am

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) on securing this incredibly important debate. I will start by picking up on some of the points made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) that focused on mortality, because our prematurity rates are a national scandal. He is absolutely right when he says that they have stagnated for about a decade. We have one of the worst records in the western world; I believe we are positioned 33 out of 35 countries. That is totally unacceptable considering we have one of the best health services in the world. It is a scandal.

When we talk about statistics and about being 33rd out of 35, we forget that we are actually talking about babies—more than 5,000 babies a year. More than 5,000 families go through the absolute tragedy of stillbirth or neonatal death. I very much welcome the fact that the Government now have a focus on the matter. Statistically, the third biggest cause of stillbirth and neonatal death is prematurity, and that is poignant to this debate.

The Government have recently made an announcement on stillbirth and neonatal death, as the hon. Member for Strangford rightly pointed out, with an ambition to reduce rates by 20% by the end of this Parliament and by half by 2030. That is a huge number—more than 2,000 babies who will be saved and 2,000 families who will not have to go through this most traumatic and awful experience. My wife and I have been through a full-term stillbirth, and it is a traumatic experience. As a Government, we should do anything we can to avoid those tragedies. I am glad that there is that renewed focus. That is key—it is the driver to ensure that we have the training and the best possible equipment.

Looking at the whole NHS, some of our hospitals have the best maternity units and are doing the best work anywhere in the world—second to none. Sadly, that is not consistent across the country. The situation is patchy. That is something that I very much hope the Minister will address as part of this programme. We must ensure that we have the later-pregnancy monitoring equipment that can save lives and, more importantly, the training so that midwives know what to spot and have the confidence to stand by what they believe in terms of diagnoses.

There is also the question of what we do when things do not go well; of course, as my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry suggested, we cannot avoid stillbirths or neonatal deaths. We can reduce the numbers, and the Government have measures in place to do so, but, sadly and tragically, there will always be stillbirths and neonatal deaths. I secured an Adjournment debate a few weeks ago in which I said that we must have the right procedures, processes and facilities to ensure that those who go through a stillbirth or neonatal death, particularly the parents, have a support network.

My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) talked about gynaecology counsellors and bereavement-trained midwives, and it is important that we have such facilities providing support in every maternity unit in the country. She rightly said that a huge number of marriages fail because of a stillbirth or neonatal death—I think the figure is a staggering 90%, which is enormous; I know the huge pressure that it put on my family and my relationship with my wife. I can entirely see how relationships can be broken up by that hugely traumatic experience. When I talk about the NHS, I know that we have the best facilities in the world, but we have to ensure that those facilities are available across the country. I am talking about specialist suites, bereavement-trained midwives, specialist nurses and psychological support, which is also important.

I am conscious of the time, but I will pick up on two other points. My hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) mentioned hospital car parking, which was almost flippantly talked about, but it is hugely important. We forget that not everyone can afford to pay the £20 or £30 a week that some hospitals are

charging. My hospital in Colchester has a reduced rate of £10 a week, I believe, but for some people even £10 a week is a huge amount of money. It is not only the parents but the families, the grandparents and the carers who are paying, so it is important that hospitals follow the guidance to ensure that hospital parking is affordable—or, even better, free so that families who are going through the most traumatic experience of their lives are not worrying about money. That is really important.

The hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) touched on an interesting point about the pressure on parents from prematurity and from having to go to the hospital. The mother is likely to be in hospital on an ongoing basis, but we forget about the importance of the father's role. A father gets only two weeks' paternity leave, after which he will be going back to work and either thinking all day about his premature child and then racing up to the hospital to try to squeeze in time with the baby in the morning and evening, or putting his job at risk by taking that time off, regardless of the consequences. Government guidance on the importance of employers understanding and recognising the pressures of prematurity on families is important.

I am conscious of the time, so I will conclude by saying that we have one chance to get this right. I welcome the steps that the Government are taking. When they announced their ambition to reduce by half the number of stillbirths and neonatal deaths the week before last, it was my proudest moment in the six months since I was elected to this place. I welcome those steps, but we need to go further and ensure that people have the facilities, the processes and the places to go to as they go through this incredibly traumatic experience. We must also make sure that stillbirths and neonatal deaths are as rare as possible. I welcome this debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry on securing it. This is an incredibly important issue that we can all get behind and support.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): If the Front Benchers can keep their speeches to 10 minutes, and if the Minister can conclude his remarks just after 10.55 am, Mr Heaton-Harris will have three minutes in which to offer us a pithy summary of the debate and I will have 30 seconds to put the motion to the House. We will then have achieved everything we set out to achieve today.

10.24 am

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) and congratulate him on securing the debate. I am delighted to make a small contribution on behalf of the Scottish National party.

The hon. Gentleman started by saying that the House does not give enough attention to this issue, so again I pay tribute to him for securing the debate and for his dedication to this issue over a number of years. He delivered an excellent speech, citing examples and stories to highlight the issue. I was incredibly touched by his personal example from Catherine and Nigel. I put on record my sympathy for the loss of Luke—what an incredibly touching and harrowing story. As a father, I find it impossible to comprehend how difficult that time must be, not only for Catherine and Nigel, or for any of

[Neil Gray]

the other parents we have heard about today, but for all those who have experienced pre-term birth, whether or not their child has survived. It is an incredibly traumatising time for all those parents.

The hon. Gentleman said that if we were to match the pre-term survival rate of Sweden, we would save 1,000 babies a year in the UK, which would save 1,000 families from tragedy, so I hope the Minister will look at that. I absolutely agree that we must ensure that stillbirths and pre-term babies are as few as possible and that parents are properly supported. On one of his visits to his local hospital, the hon. Gentleman learned that three babies had passed away the night before. We cannot imagine the pain felt by the families, but as he said, we must also recognise and pay tribute to the work of our NHS staff, who will share that pain and trauma. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to those staff, who do an incredible job for all of us. I sincerely congratulate the hon. Gentleman on doing a great service to his constituents and friends.

The hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed), in another good speech, cited the excellent unit at Croydon university hospital, which he visited with Bliss. He said that the families were delighted to receive excellent NHS support but were also terrified and traumatised by not being able to hold their babies—babies who had survived but required extra help—because they were so fragile. When a child is suffering, it is the most natural maternal and paternal thing for their parents to want to hold them. The difficulty experienced by those parents cannot be comprehended, and we must ensure that the necessary emotional and practical help and support is in place. The hon. Gentleman gave the example of the family of an 11-week pre-term baby being forced into debt, which is an absolute tragedy that must be sorted out. I hope the Minister will touch on that in his contribution.

The hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) brought her personal experiences to the debate in a very touching way. She cited some excellent but harrowing statistics that are difficult for us to understand. Some 40% of mothers of children born pre-term experience mental health problems, compared with 5% to 10% of mothers of children born at full term. That takes us back to the support required by parents of premature babies. It is absolutely right that extra support should be available for all parents if their baby passes away, but we must also consider the support that is available to parents whose children survive. She also mentioned the link between pre-term babies and cerebral palsy, which my family has experienced. She is right to draw attention to that, because it needs wider consideration. I thank her for her contribution.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made a typically reasoned and measured contribution, touching on the long-term health problems to which surviving pre-term babies are susceptible. That point was in tune with many of the other contributions made today. He mentioned one statistic that startled me: three quarters of the 1 million babies around the world who, tragically, die after pre-term birth could have survived with adequate care and support. We must address that not just here in the UK but internationally. Surely we could consider it in our aid budget.

My hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) made a passionate personal plea to the Minister in an intervention, and I hope that the Minister will respond. Finally, the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince) also brought his personal experience to the debate in a touching manner; he made a great speech. He is absolutely right: it is a national scandal that we have one of the worst pre-term mortality rates in the western world. He reminded us that when we talk about that mortality, we are talking about babies. Hopefully that brings the issue home to all of us. He also recognised the difficulties experienced by employees, and the fact that employers must take better cognisance of the fact that their employees in that situation will need extra support. I hope that the Minister will take note of that too, and refer back to it when he sums up.

The World Health Organisation promotes World Prematurity Day to raise awareness of the one in 10 babies worldwide who are born prematurely—that is, before the 37th week of pregnancy. It is the leading cause of death in newborn babies and the second most common cause of death in children under five. According to Bliss, a charity that supports families with premature babies and helps raise funds for adequate hospital equipment, 15 million babies worldwide are born prematurely every year, or 29 every minute, and 1 million of those will not survive. In the UK, 60,000 babies are born prematurely every year, which is one in 13.

A motion has been lodged in the Scottish Parliament commemorating world prematurity day and congratulating Sarah Brown on launching a new £1.5 million study on improving educational outcomes and life chances for premature babies. The study is called the Theirworld Edinburgh birth cohort. It was launched last week at the University of Edinburgh, and it will involve researchers at the university following 400 newborns from birth to adulthood, collecting biological samples and brain scans as well as information about socioeconomic status and educational attainment. There is a lot of work going on in Scotland at the moment that I would have loved to mention if there had been slightly more time.

From a local perspective, my constituency is served by the maternity and neonatal unit at Wishaw general hospital. In 2013, there were 5,988 births, 426 of them premature. Some 13% of those premature babies were born weighing less than 1,500 grams. Wishaw general hospital has had its problems in the past, but I am proud to say that NHS Lanarkshire is the only health board in Scotland to have received nominations for the Royal College of Midwives' annual midwifery awards, which are coming up in March. My local health board has been shortlisted in two categories: the better births award, for which Maureen McSherry and Carole Burns have been nominated for their post-delivery debriefing, and the Pregnacare award for maternity support worker of the year, for which my constituent Leigh-Ann Johnstone from Airdrie has been nominated.

Earlier this year, NHS Lanarkshire implemented Scotland's first heart rate observation system. Equipment has been installed in Wishaw general hospital to monitor the heart rate of premature and sick babies. It provides early warning of irregularities and can indicate the development of infection, a leading cause of death in vulnerable babies. I again pay tribute to the hon. Member for Daventry for securing this debate, and I thank everyone for their contributions.

10.34 am

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) on securing the debate and on how he introduced the subject, which, as he rightly said, does not receive enough attention in the House or in the media. Hon. Members from all parties have made excellent and sometimes very moving contributions to this debate; I am pleased to have the opportunity to respond on behalf of the Opposition.

World Prematurity Day on 17 November gives us the opportunity to raise awareness of premature birth and concerns involving pre-term babies and their families. The landscape is ever changing; advances in medicine mean that many more babies survive than ever before, and many survive at very young ages that even a few years ago would have seemed impossible. We should warmly welcome those advances, while acknowledging the extra demands that they bring. We should also use this debate as an opportunity to take stock of the progress that we have made in improving outcomes for premature babies and, more importantly, to focus on the challenges that we face and what more we can do to ensure that progress continues.

This issue is extremely significant, and I am pleased to see it receiving attention and a good turnout by Members. As the hon. Member for Daventry said in his opening remarks, an estimated 15 million babies around the world are born prematurely each year, and pre-term birth problems remain the leading cause of death among children under five, responsible for nearly 1 million deaths in 2013 alone. The World Health Organisation estimates that if everyone had access to the same kinds of intervention that we in the developed world enjoy, three quarters of those babies could be saved. This country has a proud cross-party tradition of supporting international development, and I hope that world prematurity day will provide a catalyst for us to redouble our efforts to support programmes to improve outcomes worldwide.

Turning to matters closer to home, in 2013 more than 50,000 babies were born prematurely in England and Wales, meaning that tens of thousands of families faced one of the most terrifying and physically and emotionally exhausting experiences imaginable. I recently spoke to one of my constituents about the issue, and I wanted to share her story with the House, as I am sure that it will be familiar to many who have, sadly, faced the same issues. She told me:

“My twins were born nine weeks prematurely, and seeing your tiny poorly babies hooked up to machines and wires, having to watch while your baby’s heart has stopped and seeing them helped back to life, praying the machine will pick up a rhythm again, isn’t something that I would wish on my worst enemy.”

I am sure that some Members will recognise the intensity of that statement. She goes on to say:

“All we want is for all premature babies to be looked after and given the best chance possible, with the best medical care available to help them to survive”.

Who can disagree with that? I am pleased to say that my constituent’s twins are now four years old, fit and healthy and attending a local primary school, which by coincidence I visited last Friday.

We have made significant progress on increasing the number of premature children who go on to live full lives. Mortality rates have improved year on year, falling

by 15.5% between 2006 and 2012. Thousands of people are alive now who would simply not have survived in previous decades. That is the impact of the progress that we have made in recent times, and particularly of advances in treating the most premature babies. We should be rightly proud of that.

However, there is no room for complacency. I am sure that hon. Members share my concern about the recent report by the charity Bliss, which has already been highlighted, particularly by the hon. Member for Daventry. The report, “Hanging in the balance”, argues that neonatal services are “stretched to breaking point” and states that two thirds of neonatal intensive care units do not have enough doctors and nurses, with 2,140 more nurses needed to fill the gap. It also identifies a shortage in junior doctors, a situation that could worsen if the Government do not reverse their current antagonistic stance toward the profession.

The Bliss report goes on to state that more than 850 babies were transferred between hospitals last year because there was not enough space or staff at the units where they were. More than 100 of those babies were ventilated. Such transfers are unnecessary and risky. Frankly, at such a time, the family has quite enough stress already, so I hope that we can work to reduce the number of transfers needed in future.

A report by the Royal College of Midwives states that more than 40% of wards became so busy last year that they were forced to close their doors. The average unit closed its doors on five occasions, with some closing more than 20 times. That situation cannot be allowed to continue. One key issue is training. Trusts currently face the Catch-22 situation of having insufficient qualified staff to cover for nurses on training, while the lack of training contributes to the shortage of qualified staff.

It is clear that a co-ordinated approach is required from the Government, the NHS and local managers to tackle the issue. We welcome the announcement by the Secretary of State on 13 November of extra investment in high-tech digital equipment and training, but we question just how far £4 million will go, particularly when we consider that the shortfall in nurses has almost doubled in the last five years, while during the same period the proportion of nurses with specialist qualifications has fallen by 19%. I would welcome any comments from the Minister about when we can expect that investment to come on stream, and what impact he expects it to have on the number of staff available in our overstretched neonatal units.

However, the biggest issue is without doubt a lack of adequate funding for neonatal services across the board. We welcome the work being done by NHS England and its partners to review the payment model for neonatal services and the priority being given to this area in next year’s NHS plans. I hope that the Minister will be able to reassure us that that will result in the increases in funding that are required to provide the right level of care for premature babies. I also hope that he can reassure us that we will be able to provide that care in the right place, with the number of transfers being minimised as far as possible.

As I set out earlier, there has been a huge amount of progress in reducing the rates of stillbirths and infant deaths. Sadly, however, we know that there is further work to do. The national confidential inquiry, which was led by the University of Leicester, found that more

[Justin Madders]

than 60% of stillbirths might have been avoided with better care. As the hon. Member for Daventry said, Britain is currently ranked 33rd out of 35 countries in the developed world for stillbirth rates. As the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince) said, that is a national scandal, and there is an urgent need for improvement. He also quite rightly pointed out the massive regional variations that exist. Those variations should be avoidable, and they inform us that best practice should be disseminated further so that improvements can be made across the board.

We welcome the Secretary of State's declaration of his ambition to reduce the rate of stillbirths and neonatal and maternal deaths in England by 50% by 2030. However, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) pointed out, the rate of stillbirths has remained stable for the last 10 years and 2030 is clearly a long way off, so we hope that some of the issues can be tackled in the much shorter term. I would welcome any comments from the Minister about what progress is expected within the next five years.

I will return to the experience of my constituent for a moment. In addition to telling me about the obvious pain that she experienced during the time that her babies were in hospital, she went on to express to me something that appears, sadly, to be common among mothers of premature children—a sense of guilt for not being able to carry their children until full term. My hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) quite rightly raised the issue of parental health, as did the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), and we have heard that up to 40% of mothers of premature babies are affected by postnatal depression soon after birth. So it is not just the premature babies who need the care; it is the parents as well. That is why it is so concerning that a third of neonatal units have no overnight accommodation, 41% have no access to a trained mental health worker and 30% are unable to offer psychological support.

My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) highlighted the challenges set out in the campaign *The Smallest Things*, including the financial, emotional and developmental challenges that premature births create, and the impact that those challenges can have on the mental health of parents. Interestingly, he also touched on the need for greater flexibility in maternity and paternity leave. Although we have legislation on such leave, it is a fact that working mothers still face considerable workplace discrimination, and from what my hon. Friend said it seems that those problems are exacerbated when a mother is dealing with a premature birth. I hope we will see some recognition of that issue by the Minister.

I also hope that the Minister can confirm to us what steps he will take to expand access to mental health services in neonatal units. We should also point out that services have been stretched, so a significant allocation of resources is required if progress is to continue to be made.

We will continue to hold the Government to account to ensure that the vision of England as one of the safest places in the world to have a baby becomes a reality, and while the Government continue to make progress they will have our support.

10.43 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ben Gummer): It is a great pleasure to answer another debate on neonatal care. It demonstrates that there is a real head of steam behind this important issue. I cannot comment with any experience on the number of debates on this issue that there were in the previous Parliament, but it is clear that there is now a critical mass of Members in this House, and interest in all parties, to try to do something to improve neonatal care, whether that is for babies who are born prematurely or at term.

First, I add my tribute and thanks to those given by the shadow Ministers and spokesmen, the hon. Members for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) and for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), for the personal stories told by Members, and I will state on the record that I think the whole House is grateful to them for their personal bravery in explaining what has happened to them, and to other Members who have told the stories of their constituents.

It was with such a story that my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) began his speech, discussing the account of Catherine and Nigel Allcott, and their son and daughter. He reminded us, as did many hon. Members later, that we can speak about statistics and percentages but what we are actually dealing with are newborn people, little ones and “the smallest things”, who deserve the greatest protection and care that we can possibly give, because they could not be more vulnerable.

In a 2014 study, *The Lancet* estimated that there were 5.5 million newborn deaths in the world every year and it is that stupefyingly large number that we are addressing today in discussing World Prematurity Day. I know that many speeches were addressed to the domestic situation, but I am very grateful to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston, for pointing out that we have an international obligation in this regard, and I will certainly talk to my counterpart in the Department for International Development about the areas that our aid spending are being focused on in terms of healthcare and neonatal support, to see if we are doing all we can to try to spread the best practice in this country and Europe to those parts of the world that are beginning their journey in creating a universal healthcare system for their populations.

With that in mind, I turn to the current situation in the United Kingdom. In this country we have some of the finest neonatal care in the world, but what has been apparent in the speeches given today—accurately reflecting the facts—is that we have far too much variability. That is the principal reason why we are at the bottom of the pack in terms of developed countries when measuring rates of stillbirth, which is by means of proxy for the way that we look after premature babies. So I will outline what the Government plan to do about that situation, because it significantly touches—indeed, it does not just touch but covers—the ground that those campaigning to improve care for premature babies have so rightly highlighted, and the Bliss report is an important contribution to that work.

My hon. Friend the Member for Daventry and many other hon. Members have pointed to the announcement a couple of weeks ago by the Secretary of State that we wish to see the rates of stillbirth, neonatal death and

maternal death reduce by 20% by 2020, and by 50%, or by half, by 2030. Within that target, we include a reduction in brain injury for babies.

It is worth pointing out that many of the contributory factors to stillbirth and to brain injury are the same for prematurity, which, in the round, are public health measures. They have not been covered much in this debate but I would like to raise them, because it is very important that we also understand the obligations of parents, to ensure that we can bring down the rates of prematurity and stillbirth.

We still have too many mothers in this country smoking. We know that smoking is a significant contribution to prematurity. If we were to improve the variability of smoking rates across the country, which is actually quite shocking, we would do much to reduce rates of stillbirth. In looking at the smoking rates across the country, it is quite interesting that there is not just a simple binary division between areas of affluence and areas of deprivation. There are some areas of significant deprivation where local public health partners have made considerable strides in reducing smoking rates compared with areas that are quite close by. Likewise, obese pregnant women are much more likely to experience miscarriage or pre-term birth than those women who are in the normal body mass index range.

Therefore, we have significant public health challenges ahead of us in reducing obesity, smoking, drinking and substance abuse, and if we are able to achieve those reductions in partnership with parents across the country we will have made the biggest stride that we can towards reducing rates of prematurity, ensuring that those babies that are born premature are as healthy as they can be and reducing rates of stillbirth, whether premature or term.

I wish to turn to the University of Leicester study and the “Mothers and Babies: Reducing Risk through Audits and Confidential Enquiries in the UK”—or MBRACE-UK—report that was published last week, which was touched on by the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston. The study highlights the challenge ahead regarding the care of neonates across the country. The figures are arresting. In half of all the cases highlighted, at least one aspect of antenatal care that could have had an impact on whether the baby was born alive could have been improved. In a third of cases, there were significant problems with bereavement care and in a quarter there were major issues with one or more aspects of intrapartum care.

For me, perhaps the most troubling statistic in the report is that in only a quarter of all the stillbirths it looked at was there an internal case review. We are not improving our position as quickly as we could because we are not reviewing cases in enough instances—we should be reviewing 100% of them—and we are not spreading the knowledge of the reviews across the system. That is one reason why the Secretary of State is so keen to turn the NHS into a learning organisation. Until we get the NHS to do well something that it currently does badly—spreading learning from places that have had a problem, a tragedy, and from those that have made significant strides—we will not make improvements. I refer hon. Members to the experience of St George’s hospital in Tooting, where they have undergone that journey in the past few years, just through dogged clinical persistence, and have been able to change the outcomes for children attending the maternity unit.

I was interested in the remarks made by the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) on support for parents, and I shall certainly take his valid point about maternity leave—to which my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) added comments about paternity leave—to my colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions. I would hope that all employers—not that they will know about or watch this debate—would have the consideration to behave properly with parents of a premature child. The hon. Gentleman’s point about the need to reflect the development of a baby who has been born prematurely in maternity pay arrangements is interesting and important. I shall certainly take his comments back to colleagues but I can make no promises about what we can do.

The hon. Gentleman also talked about mothers’ mental health, which is something that the Government put a lot of emphasis on in the previous Parliament. We know about the importance of investing in perinatal mental health and that it pays significant dividends if done successfully. That is why we announced in March that we will invest an additional £75 million in it over this Parliament. The services, as provided, are not sufficiently good and we need to do much to improve them.

I hope that many of the instances that hon. Members have mentioned of the lack of support for parents with a premature child who is either living or has died and the lack of counselling for both mother and father—along with the important points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry about marriage counselling and the powerful ones made by my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) about the difficulty of maintaining a marriage through a premature or stillbirth—can be addressed through the additional money. My hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter), who is now in his place, was critical in securing that funding in March.

Various hon. Members also made important points about parking charges and travelling. I hope that NHS England’s 2014 neonatal critical care services review and service specifications will lead, in the next few years, to ensuring that we have more comprehensive neonatal cover. There will be instances when that is not possible—we cannot predict every occasion on which there will be stress on a maternity service—but I hope that the services specifications will come to correct that in the next few years. Hospitals should follow the Department of Health guidance on parking, which contains specific recommendations to ensure that people who have to park for long periods are catered for.

I know that hon. Members raised additional issues that I have not been able to cover in this fascinating debate but I shall ensure that they are responded to afterwards. I thank all hon. Members for their interesting and personal accounts regarding this important subject.

10.55 am

Chris Heaton-Harris: May I thank, through you Mr Hollobone, the Backbench Business Committee for allowing me and the House the time to discuss this important issue. I thank the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed), my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) for their contributions, and also the Front-Bench spokespeople for the consensual

[Chris Heaton-Harris]

and cross-party basis on which they made their speeches, which is the basis from which we should attack issues about premature babies.

Many important issues have been raised, including mental health care and the acknowledgement of the Government's ambition to halve the rate of stillbirths and neonatal and maternal deaths by 2030. The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health issues an annual national neonatal audit programme report, and the 2014 report came forward with some interesting points, some of which we have talked about today. Sometimes, unfortunately, in Britain in 2014 we were still missing development checks for premature babies, and that is raised in the report. It also mentions something I find shocking, which is something we have all talked about in our speeches today. We are doing better, and we are focused on the ambition of doing the best we can for parents with a premature baby, but one in 10 families is still not recorded as having a consultation with a senior member of the neonatal team within 24 hours of their baby's admission. It is unbelievable that that can happen when the parents are at their most stressed and worried.

I thank the Minister for his reply and thank everyone who has taken part. I thank Bliss and other charities for their work in this area, and I especially thank my constituents Catherine and Nigel for their magnificent work in trying to ensure that no one else goes through what they had to go through.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered World Prematurity Day.

Children of Alcoholics

10.58 am

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered support for children of alcoholics.

It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am glad to see the Minister for Children and Families, the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Edward Timpson) in his place. The matter we are about to debate is something I know he will care deeply about, and I very much look forward to working with him over the months—and, I hope, years—to come, to implement many of the things that I will talk about. I think he will embrace wholeheartedly what I call for, and I look forward to turning some of the ideas that we will debate into action.

I have done some difficult jobs in politics with my right hon. and hon. Friends, but in many ways this is the hardest speech I will have made in my 11 years in the House: it will be the first time I have talked publicly about being the child of an alcoholic. My dad was an amazing individual. He was warm and charismatic. He was the son of Irish immigrants. He dragged himself into grammar school and into university. He was a great idealist who devoted his life to public service. His warmth, charisma and idealism inspired me to join the Labour party when I was 15, and it was his example that inspired me to get stuck into politics—to do my bit to try to make our country a bit better.

My dad battled with an addiction to alcohol for most of his adult life. When he lost the woman that he loved so passionately—my mother—at the age of 52 to pancreatic cancer, it knocked him over the edge. I know from first-hand experience the damage and harm that come to families living with an alcoholic. I know what that sense of guilt and shame feels like. I know about the kind of co-dependency that builds up in families as different members of the family do what they can to support each other. In my case, it was a co-dependency with my mum, who I talked to about my dad's drinking from the age of seven or eight. I know all too well the feeling that most children of alcoholics have as they wrestle with why they cannot fix things or make things better. I know what it feels like to worry constantly about whether your parent is okay. You worry about whether they are on a floor and whether they are eating. I know what it is like to be at a bedside in an intensive care unit, having been told that your parent has maybe a one in 10 chance of surviving. I know the agony of constantly asking yourself whether there was more you could have done to help stop that drinking. I know that there are no answers to those questions.

I know what it feels like to feel second best. "Second Best" was the title of a great book written by Calum Best, the son of George Best, the footballer. Calum has done a great deal over the past few years to highlight the plight of children of alcoholics and to explain what the emotional turmoil feels like. I also know that if anything, I had it easy. Ultimately, I had a loving home. So many children of alcoholics have it an awful lot worse than I did, and many of them are here with us today in the House.

Children of alcoholics are five times more likely to develop an eating disorder. They are something like three times more likely to attempt suicide. They are

three to four times more likely to become alcoholics themselves, and that is what happened to my dad. He, too, was the child of an alcoholic. In the months since my dad's death just before the election campaign started, it has been a struggle to decide whether to speak up and speak out. I have been inspired by such people as my right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) to take the plunge.

For me, the challenge was the programming that comes with the fourth commandment, which is for people to honour their mum and dad. I struggled with whether I would be dishonouring my dad's memory by bringing this issue into the public domain and talking about it. I suppose I concluded that I had to honour the boy who became a man who became my dad, because there was no help for him when he was growing up as the child of an alcoholic. If I want to change things for children in the future, I have to play my part by speaking up.

The final trigger for speaking up was the loss of a great friend to this House, Charles Kennedy. When I read a lot of the media coverage about his death, so much was riddled through with the old clichés about how Charles was a man who battled with demons. Charles was not battling with demons, he was battling with a disease—alcoholism. The sooner we start talking about alcoholism as a disease and the sooner we get rid of the taboos, the stigma and the shame, the easier we will make it for hazardous drinkers in this country to get the help they need to quit or to cut down.

The scale of alcohol harm is profound. It is estimated to cost our country something like £21 billion a year. It costs the national health service something like £3.5 billion a year, and there are something like 1 million accident and emergency admissions related to alcohol harm each year. I have accompanied people on a couple of those admissions myself in the past few years. When we look at different parts of the country, we can see how the problem is getting worse. Figures from the House of Commons Library that I am publishing today show that the number of A&E admissions due to alcohol harm is rising in two thirds of local authority areas. The problem is not going away; it is snowballing and getting worse. As a country, we have to decide not only how we will break the silence around the disease, but how we will break the cycle of alcoholism cascading down the generations.

I would like to offer a few thoughts today, based on my conversations with friends in the House. I thank in particular the host of organisations that have had the good grace to listen to me bleat on about this issue over the past few months. Some of the charities have helped me try to build an integrated picture of my path. In particular, I give enormous thanks to Hilary Henriques of the National Association for Children of Alcoholics. It was through her doors that I walked about a month and a half after my dad died. NACOA was magnificent. It helped me see clearly for the first time that I was not on my own and that my dad's drinking was not my fault, and that, frankly, there was little I could have done to change things for him. NACOA celebrates its 25th anniversary this year. It is a small group that is run on a shoestring, and it has helped more than 200,000 children in our country over the past few years with the same kind of advice that it gave me earlier this summer.

Additionally, I thank Sir Ian Gilmore at the Royal College of Surgeons; the British Medical Association; the Children's Commissioner, Anne Longfield; Alcohol Concern; Adfam; Turning Point; and the Institute of Alcohol Studies for the advice that they have given. I do not want to offer the Minister some kind of manifesto that is perfect in all its design; I want to start a conversation, which I hope he will engage with in the months and years to come. Last night, I asked Members of this House and the other place whether they would be interested in joining an all-party group for children of alcoholics, and I have been overwhelmed by the response and moved by the personal stories that colleagues have shared. I hope that the group can work together with a number of other all-party groups—we have the chair of one here this morning—that have done such a magnificent job to champion solutions to the curse of alcohol harm.

Let me offer the Minister a few points to get the debate going. Above all, I want the Government to do more to support extraordinary helplines such as NACOA, which make such an enormous difference. As a former Minister with responsibility for children's health, I know that there is a challenge when it comes to specialised commissioning for children's services. There is never enough of a problem in any one part of the country to create a critical mass of demand, so we have to find ways in which local authorities can work together to put in place specialised commissioning. Crucially, however, we need to support charities such as NACOA, which is making so much difference to so many people.

I want to ensure that we have a Minister with clear ownership of the problem. The responsibilities span not only the brief of the Minister here today but those of Department of Health Ministers, so I was glad that the Minister for Government Policy, the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr Letwin), told me that the Minister here today is in charge of co-ordinating the challenge. The Home Office took the lead on the alcohol strategy published in 2012. We need clear, visible ownership of who will provide and lead the support policy for children of alcoholics.

I want the Government to set out clearly a plan of action to support children of alcoholics. Having someone in charge of creating a solution is not good enough if we do not have a plan in place. As the Minister knows, the Government published their alcohol strategy in March 2012. It did not mention children, support for children or the challenge of children of alcoholics. Over the next few months we need the Minister to come up with a specific plan to provide support for the children of alcoholics. He might tell me that the forthcoming report, "Collateral Damage", to be published in 2016, will be the framework for that. I look forward to hearing what he has to say.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): I commend my right hon. Friend for the bravery he has shown this morning in his moving description of his own experiences and what happened to his dad. He is asking the Minister a list of things. As he mentioned, I chair the all-party group on foetal alcohol spectrum disorders. Will he include in his list of asks the children of alcoholic mothers who drink during pregnancy? We need the awareness and support that he has been talking about to be applied to that group as well.

Liam Byrne: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the leadership that he has shown on that. Mothers who drink during pregnancy are absolutely included in the asks. I hope that the Government will accelerate the publication of advice for pregnant mums about what it is safe and not safe for expectant mothers to drink.

I want every public health director in England to make an estimate of how many children of alcoholics live locally. I want a local plan to make sure that hospitals, GPs and school nurses and teachers know how to identify the children of alcoholics and how to put help within their reach. The challenge with alcoholism as it relates to children is that it often falls between stools—between the public health director, the commissioning groups for children's social care, the groups for adult social care, and primary care services. The children of alcoholics often sit in a hole in commissioning, which is why we need a specific plan of action locally.

I want the Government to publish a national league table of which councils are spending what on alcohol treatment, so that it becomes much easier for the public and parliamentarians to see where the problem is greatest. In that way we can challenge whether public health directors, councils and health and wellbeing boards have put in place the right provision for hazardous drinkers who are parents.

I want to make sure we have a public information campaign aimed at parents who are hazardous drinkers, so that they are clear about the damage they do to their children and how they can get help. What has been good about the way in which we talk about smoking is that we now aim our messaging at parents and help them understand the harm to children. Now that alcohol harm is the third biggest public health risk after obesity and smoking, it is time for a public health campaign on the same lines aimed at parents who are hazardous drinkers.

I want the Government to change the law, particularly the Children and Young Persons Act 1933, so that it would be illegal for under-16s to drink at home. Current legislation allows for drinking at home from the age of five, and I think that is the wrong message. I congratulate the coalition of alcohol charities that are preparing proposals on that front.

If the Scottish Government win their case for minimum alcohol pricing, I hope that the Government will look again at introducing that policy across the whole of England. Crucially, every charity and campaign group has said to me that we need far more research into the scale of the problem. The research that we have at the moment is patchy, and I think the Minister could do a great deal with a very small amount of money to make sure we have a good research base in place.

The 10 points that I have mentioned are a framework that parliamentarians can discuss over the weeks and months to come. I hope they are ideas that the Minister will be able to embrace wholeheartedly. If I were to pull out just my top three, however, the proposals would be as follows. First, we should equip front-line professionals to take proactive steps to identify the children of alcoholics and to make sure that they are equipped to advise and counsel children on where they can get help. For me it was absolutely crucial to understand that I was not alone as the child of an alcoholic, that my dad's drinking was not my fault and that there was not much I could do about it. I want

every child of an alcoholic in this country to know that they are not alone and that help, such as the NACOA helpline, is on hand.

My second priority would be the public information campaign. Many people have said to me that the Minister should take inspiration from the success of the public smoking campaigns, and we should gear up quite quickly a campaign aimed at hazardous drinkers who are parents.

Thirdly, we need to make sure that there is the right investment in treatment services up and down the land. We have made great progress over the past few years in putting in place the right budgets for drug treatment. By and large, we now know what works when it comes to alcohol treatment, but provision is patchy. The Minister will tell us that it is down to local authorities to ensure that the right treatment is in place, but right now, we as parliamentarians do not know whether the right treatment is in place. We need transparency so that we can get to grips with where budgets need to go up and where they need to go down.

What is shocking about some of the statistics that I am publishing this morning is that some local authority areas have seen 20%, 30% or 40% increases over the past few years in the number of A&E admissions due to alcohol harm. That tells us there are particular parts of the country where the problem is incredibly pronounced. Behind those statistics are children, which is why we need to know which local authorities are spending what so that we can campaign for better support.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): I am pleased that my right hon. Friend has secured the debate. Does he agree that, as was certainly the case with my mother, many alcoholics are functional? They often go to work and outwardly lead normal lives, so they do not present themselves at A&E and the problem is invisible to many people. We need to make sure that in the campaign, and in whatever the Minister responds with, we understand that this group of people is wider than the public perceive.

Liam Byrne: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Her intervention gives me the chance to say on the record how important her courage in speaking out some years ago was in persuading me that I could do it too. I very much follow in her footsteps.

Every child of an alcoholic has a different story. My right hon. Friend's story is different from mine. Each of us in our own way and on our own journey learned that we could not really change things for our parents, but we sure as hell can change things for our children. That is what we have to do now as parliamentarians. We have to try to break the silence on this issue so that we can break the cycle of alcohol harm cascading down the generations. To normalise this conversation, we have to organise this conversation. We must sweep aside the stigma and the taboos. We must treat alcoholism as the disease that it is and make sure that help is within reach of those who need it. That is the only way we can help to heal so many lives up and down this country. It is a difference that I think we can make with practical steps over the months and years to come. I look forward to working with the Minister on putting some practical action into place.

11.18 am

Dr Daniel Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I want to put on the record my congratulations to the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) on securing the debate and sharing some difficult personal experiences with the Chamber. That was not an easy thing to do—it is not an easy thing for anyone in public life. However, I hope that the conversation that he talked about opening will bring huge benefit to the lives of many children and improve the public health of our nation as a result.

In the brief time available to me, I want to outline and expand on a couple of the points that the right hon. Gentleman made. He is absolutely right that substance misuse—in this case, alcohol misuse—is an illness. Often there are links with anxiety, depression and people struggling with mental health problems. Yet our framework for tackling alcoholism in this country seems somewhat fragmented. I am sure that the Minister will want to pick up on that issue in his response. Local health services commission mental health services, and yet it is local authorities that have primary responsibility for tackling issues to do with substance misuse.

The two issues are so inherently intertwined that the support for both the people suffering from mental ill health and their families has to be co-ordinated and holistic, but it is difficult to understand how that can be achieved with a fragmented commissioning landscape. For me, that is at the heart of this dilemma—this challenge—and the right hon. Gentleman made the point very well. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response, particularly on how we can better unify the services available for people who are alcoholics and their families.

11.20 am

The Minister for Children and Families (Edward Timpson): As ever, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) on securing this important debate, and even more on the manner in which he introduced it and his courage in speaking out about his experience with his own family. It is a testament to him that his determination to give a voice to the many thousands of children who find themselves in a similar predicament has led to today's debate—and, I am sure, to many conversations in the coming weeks and months. I read about his dad, Dermot, this morning. I listened to the right hon. Gentleman talking about his dad's life and how he inspired him to enter the world of politics and make the world a better place. I also heard about the ongoing anguish that his father's battle with alcoholism caused him, which will inevitably still affect him today. But there is no shame in that whatever—absolutely none.

I am really pleased that the right hon. Gentleman made the decision to speak up today and put on the record his desire to ensure that, from here on in, those children out there will feel more able to deal with the consequences of living in such a family environment. Even more important is his desire to prevent the problem from even happening in the first place. To that end, I look forward to working with him and the organisations

that have helped him to prepare for this debate, so that we can take stock of both the progress that has been made and where there are shortcomings and a lack of understanding. There is sometimes a lack of encouragement to those out there who still feel very much unable to let others know of the suffering that they are having to deal with day after day.

Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): I salute the bravery of my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) in introducing this debate. On the Minister's point, will he ensure that all educational professionals have the appropriate training for when a child might disclose something to them? Many alcoholic parents are very concerned about losing their children, so will seek to involve them in the secret to try to prevent their child from being taken into care. The Minister is from the Department for Education, so will he look at whether all educational professionals are suitably trained for disclosure?

Edward Timpson: That is hugely important. It is not a surprise to me that one of the top three points that the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill wanted me to address was the fact that it is the professionals who interact with children daily who are best placed to try to spot the signs and act on them sooner rather than later. In that way, children who have nowhere else to turn will receive timely and sympathetic support, backed by the knowledge of that professional about what works and how they can help the child and their family to turn the corner—knowledge that has so often been lacking in the past.

I am conscious that I have only five minutes in which to address all the right hon. Gentleman's extremely well-made points. We must base any response on the premise that every child has a right to grow up in a safe and secure environment. Parents play a crucial role in how their children develop and behave. Of course, parents should act as role models for their children, but we recognise that parental alcohol dependency is a disease that affects many parents. It can limit their parenting capacity, which can have serious consequences for their children.

Rather than read out the response that a Government Minister might normally give to this sort of debate, I shall discuss how my own experience reflects what the right hon. Gentleman said and why I, too, am determined to join him in trying to do more and to do right by the children who still have to live in such circumstances.

I grew up in a family who fostered many children, of whom a large proportion, including one of my adopted brothers, came from a home in which alcohol misuse had been a regular feature. We cannot underestimate the lifelong impact on such a child, who, whether for a short time or a much longer period of their childhood, has been trapped in a cycle. They learn behaviour that they find difficult to avoid later in life, which creates that cycle between generations, and they often witness violence and conflict and feel a sense of isolation. To try to unravel all that is a huge task for anyone. If we superimpose on to that the scale of the problem, irrespective of the progress that has been made on the public health agenda and reducing alcohol dependency, we will see that huge problems further down the line are being stored up for future generations.

[Edward Timpson]

In both the private and public cases I dealt with in the family courts, alcohol was often a feature; as the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) rightly said, it was sometimes a feature in families of whom the overriding public impression was that alcohol would not be at the heart of their problems. On the surface, these are functional families, but underneath there are serious issues that need to be addressed. To that end, notwithstanding that this is a complex issue that transcends the work of many Departments, the Government have a role, because there is commonality: a shared ambition to ensure that no child should be left behind in our determined efforts to try to tackle the problem.

I will look very carefully at the 10 points raised by the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill and undertake to talk to ministerial colleagues, particularly in the Department of Health, about how we raise public awareness of parental alcohol dependency in a similar way to how we have raised awareness on smoking. I am happy to meet the right hon. Gentleman, along with representatives from many of the excellent organisations that have come together to help him in both a personal and professional capacity to prepare for this debate, so that we can pull together our collective understanding of what is being done and where we continue to fall short.

Much of the work that we are doing on the social work reform agenda, and on how we equip teachers and other educational staff to understand the presentation of children from a family in which alcoholism is a problem, is going to be key to unlocking this taboo that sometimes remains. If we are honest, we all know of someone in our own family or immediate circle of friends, or certainly in our social network, for whom this is a feature in their lives.

We should not pretend that there is an easy way of trying to make changes happen, but, on the back of the right hon. Gentleman's public push to galvanise the work already being done in many places around the country, we have a real opportunity to ensure that responses are more consistent and that we start to reduce some of the anomalies we see in different local authorities. As my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) said, there should be a much more joined up approach so that families who feel unsupported and children who feel lonely no longer have that as a central feature of their lives. We must use some of the innovation out there to ensure that the work we do in future really does make a difference.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered support for children of alcoholics.

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Community and Voluntary Sector Funding

[MRS MADELEINE MOON *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered funding for the community and voluntary sector.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I welcome the presence of the Minister, who will respond to this debate.

Given the value that the charity, community and voluntary sector adds to the communities we represent and the incredible services that it provides to our constituents, such as mine in Bradford West, it is fitting that we debate this important issue as the sector faces difficult and economically challenging times and increasing user need. We are on the verge of another round of Government spending cuts, and in many places the cuts have already done irreparable damage to the community and voluntary sector. There have been many changes over the past five years to grants, commissioning and procurement for small, medium and large charities. Many should have offered a lifeline to vital projects in our constituencies in the face of austerity, but the reality is that they could not.

The previous and current Governments committed to reforming the voluntary and charitable sector and helping it to be buoyant at a time when it was most needed. The big society project translated to commitments made in this House, but in reality little progress was made in communities that saw funding falling, grants drying up, short-term procurement opportunities, increasing costs and plateauing revenue streams. We have seen projects and charities that provide innovative services and important community projects close and others struggle to stay afloat. By and large, the charity sector has tried to adapt to the challenging economic environment, but we should create a culture in which it can thrive and serve, because there are intangible and immeasurable benefits to the services it provides. I believe that all parties recognise that fact, but are the Government giving it due consideration?

On procurement, a recent study by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations on the financial sustainability of the sector showed that since 2009 there has been a £2.3 billion reduction in Government contracts, and that the sector faces a £4.6 billion annual shortfall by 2018-19 in the funding it needs to maintain its current level of service. The simple fact is that the need for charitable services is increasing, as demonstrated by a report published by the Charity Finance Group in December 2014, which showed that more than 70% of charities expect demand to increase. We have to recognise that, if we are to maintain the same level of services, we must take action now to ensure the long-term sustainability of the community and voluntary sector.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. On the issue of sustainability and the need for charities, I want to mention two charities in my constituency. First, given that this will be the coldest and longest winter in 40 years, the services that Energy Solutions provides to the community are essential. Secondly, although World AIDS

Day is coming up on 1 December, the Community Health Action Trust has had its funding cut, which means that it can no longer serve the community and test people rapidly for HIV, which is on the increase among heterosexuals.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): Order. I ask that interventions are interventions, rather than mini-speeches.

Naz Shah: My hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) makes a valid point. We are seeing that theme across the country.

The £2.3 billion reduction in Government funding is interesting. It will come through a number of streams, because the third sector has a symbiotic relationship with many Government-funded organisations, not least local councils, whose budgets have been decimated by austerity. However, the wider point is that the Government have been unable to build the third sector's capacity to apply for more complicated contracts through increasingly complex and larger tendering processes.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this timely debate. The Government talked about a big society, but they really meant a smaller society. My hon. Friend touched on an important point. A lot of local authorities procure services from the voluntary sector—particularly from citizens advice bureaux, and I am sure from a lot of other organisations. In a time of austerity, people badly need those services. They cannot get legal aid any more for a whole range of issues. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is an injustice perpetrated on society?

Naz Shah: I absolutely agree. I will come on to talk more about the big society—or the failure to have a big society—and what should be done.

The coalition Government and this Government concretely demonstrated their commitment to tendering provisions for the VCS sector when they embraced the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012. They have attempted—I use the term loosely—to reform public sector procurement to benefit VCS and social enterprise groups through their open public services approach. However, the reality on the ground is quite different. According to the National Audit Office, income from the Government to deliver contracts decreased by £1 billion in 2012. Its report shows that the biggest private sector contractors' market share increased, and in 2012 charities lost almost £886 million in contracts, while the largest providers' income grew by £551 million. That is unacceptable.

Those are not new statistics, and the problems are not new. There has been a lack of solid progress since the 2012 Act was enacted. The Government backtracked and kicked their commitment to transparent tendering into the long grass. They tender contracts that are far too large for the majority of VCS organisations to bid for; they put unrealistic timescales on the bidding process, which works in the favour of the larger private companies; and the calculations of cost value per unit still fail to consider the social value added by VCS organisations. Those issues are magnified by the financial pressure that all VCS organisations are under. Many have adapted and risen to the challenge of maintaining a similar level of service by innovating and raising finance elsewhere.

The Government have failed to give due consideration to how charities can build the capacity that will give them the necessary skills to bid for contracts.

There has been a massive shift away from grant funding, which was more discretionary, to contract-based services, which are far more rigid. Without flexibility and financial stability, VCS organisations are unable to innovate—not in their front-line service, but in their capacity to bid for large contracts against private companies. I am extremely interested to hear how the Government will address that capacity shortfall to ensure that those who are doing the best, most valuable work are capable of applying for such contracts.

I used to issue health action zone grants. As a former NHS commissioner, I have seen at first hand how the voluntary and charitable sector developed, and how the Government strangled the ability of smaller organisations to thrive and meet the demand in their communities. Until recently I chaired a large mental health organisation, which, as a large organisation, was in a privileged position. We were able to ensure that we could survive. That is an example of the inequalities that are created by the Government's stance on voluntary sector funding.

A further issue that must be addressed today is the Government's longer-term strategy to devolve discretionary business rate exemptions for the VCS sector and charities. As the Minister is aware, there is currently an 80% mandatory business rate relief for charities, and the other 20% relief is provided at the discretion of local councils. Councils are already suffering incredible pressure on their budgets and are struggling to offer the full rate relief that is important to large and small VCS organisations. That 20% can be the difference between keeping services going and their having to close altogether. The situation made difficult by the uncertainty about the future of the rate relief and the expected full devolution of council tax control to councils.

It is essential that we give small charities all possible support so that they can continue to provide services to our constituents. It is imperative that the Government issue a long-term strategy on rate relief. Ideally, they should help councils to offer full rate relief to all charities for the foreseeable future. Given that more of the financial burden has fallen on councils in areas of higher deprivation, such as my constituency, it is not fair that yet again the Government are not supporting the communities that have the most need.

Recently, I was invited to address an event in my constituency organised by the Blenheim Project, which helped local women and their children who were made homeless and vulnerable due to domestic violence. I heard moving testimony and stories from those who had received invaluable support from the project and who, as a result of that help, managed to live not as victims but as active and productive citizens. Breaking the cycle of homelessness is the most cost-effective approach in the long term and has benefits for communities and for the economy as a whole. I heard from one woman who stayed in the project as a young child with her mother after they finally had to leave home. She continued to enjoy security at the project even though it had been taken away from her at home. That young woman went to university and is now working and contributing to society. She is just one example from thousands of similar stories about the importance of receiving that much-needed support.

[Naz Shah]

However, the event was not held to celebrate the Blenheim Project moving forward or developing; it was to celebrate the project's achievements upon its closure due to funding cuts. It was sad, because I know the value and appreciate the benefit that the project added to my constituency and community, reaching places and people that others could not. As someone whose life has been shaped immensely by the voluntary sector, both as a service user when facing difficulties in my own life and when I worked in it as an employee, I am devastated at the loss of the project's beds. Let me be clear: one bed space literally means the difference between life and death for some women. Where I come from, one death is one too many.

The charity had 37 long years of hard work, supporting hundreds of women and providing exceptionally high-quality support to prevent women and children from becoming permanently homeless. It had proved itself successful, but could not find a sustainable financial platform despite offering a service that others could not, and for a modest sum when all its intangible benefits are considered. If it was not the definition of a public good that we in this House should protect at all costs, what is?

The pressures of the funding cuts brought about by the coalition Government's austerity measures and increased by this Conservative Government cut to the heart of our communities. They disproportionately affect northern councils that have some of the poorest wards in the country. The funding cuts have propelled councils to rationalise and reconfigure services to meet demand and support vulnerable people, but the impact on service delivery continues to hit the most vulnerable indirectly, and initiatives such as the Blenheim Project are falling victim. The VCS is known to provide high-class services to people and communities who often get missed by mainstream services, but this Government believe that that does not carry a price tag, as we have seen from their so-called big society pronouncements in the past.

The changes in funding, which have required the development of new commissioning and VCS frameworks, have made it impossible for projects such as Blenheim to continue providing the quality support that they know women and children need. The new reality in funding and commissioning arrangements makes many successful small charities unsustainable. Small to medium-sized local charities face challenges due to the drive towards commissioning processes that seek to maximise outputs on the same resources. The tendency for bigger charities to drive down costs as loss leaders in the first instance makes the option of tendering for contracts unsustainable. Smaller charities do not have the resources to invest in future developments, never mind taking on projects as loss leaders as part of a wider strategy. In a statement, the Blenheim Project said:

"Due to pressures in funding Bradford Council can no longer support as many homeless people as before and have drastically reduced both the number of places they will fund and also the level of funding",

which would no longer be adequate for the services that the project offered. In addition, the council took away the project's ability

"to assess the needs and risks of the clients" for itself.

Only a few hundred yards up the road from the Blenheim Project used to be another project, the Manningham Mills Community Association, which has also bitten the dust. Another community has been robbed of a vital resource due to funding cuts and belt tightening. For me, however, there is belt tightening and there is just strangling a community. What the Government are doing is a shameful indictment of how out of touch they are with the communities they are supposed to protect.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a generalisation—it sounds as though the whole of the third sector had disappeared. I met the Powys Association of Voluntary Organisations, my local third sector governing body, just last week at its annual general meeting. Everyone would like more money, but such organisations are striving to succeed and still doing an extremely valuable job. I regret the fact that the hon. Lady is making it sound like the third sector has vanished.

Naz Shah: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that comment. Although I agree that the third sector is doing a valuable job and is working hard, if one considers the Tory Government's proposed £300 million-plus cuts to the Big Lottery Fund, which I will refer to later, that will put my comments in context.

In communities such as my constituency of Bradford West, where more than 26% of children are already living in poverty, the average weekly wage is more than £110 less than the national average. In another ward in my constituency is a specialist project catering for black and minority ethnic women fleeing violence, which would have soon closed due to pressures facing the local council were it not for the intervention of the Big Lottery Fund, the input of which in my community is literally life-changing. Across my great city there are many other examples of the axe falling heavily, and all of them have a few things in common. They are smaller VCS organisations, providing vital services and lifelines to those most in need of support and plugging the gaps where statutory services are not delivering strongly.

The Government are making it harder to secure grants and funding at a time when demand is increasing and capacity is already stretched to maintain current service levels. The top-heavy austerity measures and the slashing of Bradford council's budgets by almost half by 2020 have led to a short-termist view, wholly created by the Conservative Government. Whereas councils were previously able to take long-term views on VCS funding, the parameters of that work have now been narrowly defined. The money available has been restricted to reduce costs, there has been a drive for efficiency and to obtain ever-increasing best value, and a reduction in unit costs has led to the likes of the Blenheim Project being placed in vulnerable positions. The situation is set to get significantly worse and have an impact on other areas of the VCS and charitable economy.

The Government fail to realise that much of local government, the NHS and the third sector operate in a symbiotic relationship, helping to create a robust mechanism to meet needs across the board. Taking out the third sector or reducing its ability to operate under financial strain will have an impact on the drive to reduce admissions, promote self-care and increase community capacity for

home care and the promotion of health. We are only storing up problems for the future. Saving money in that way is a false economy.

Along with the provision that we have lost due to charities such as the Blenheim Project closing, the Bradford district has lost expertise and the ability to reach out to places and groups that need help. The project closed its doors at the end of September 2015 after 37 years of supporting hundreds of vulnerable, homeless women and children. As a result, Bradford has lost jobs and 17 rooms for vulnerable people, and wider community involvement and community development has ended. A successful church community project has closed, leading to the loss of valuable expertise that knew its community exceptionally well. There are many other such cases across Bradford, and the picture is repeated in constituencies across the country. It is not unique to Bradford West.

My final point is about potential cuts to the Big Lottery Fund. We have been hearing reports of a 30% reduction, with the money being used to cover a hole in the finances of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport equating to between £300 million and £320 million a year. If true, that will be devastating to VCS organisations across the entire country. I will use the example of my constituency to illustrate just how damaging the loss of 30% of grant money would be to small organisations, in particular small charitable projects. Since 2014, the fund has commissioned 466 projects in my constituency to the tune of £4.9 million, almost 90% of which were for under £10,000. It is an amazing array of projects, targeting some of the most vulnerable and the most in need. From that alone, we can see how a reduction in grant awards would decimate the small community projects that can have transformational impacts on people's lives as they often concentrate on specific, niche needs. The Anah Project in Bradford is only there because of the Big Lottery Fund. Furthermore, as I said, we have seen changes to the awarding of grants, a lack of capacity in the VCS to apply for more complex funding and the loss of funding from struggling local councils. In all, plainly, the big society appears to be even more hollow than first feared.

Unlike the Government in their approach to communities such as mine in the north, the Big Lottery Fund does not discriminate. It gives out funding to individual projects, based solely on the value they add and, most importantly, on need. We could face a betrayal not only of the great work that individuals and organisations do in the community with lottery funding, but of the members of the public who elected this Government. Many will feel that the Government are overstepping the mark if they backtrack on the principle of the additionality of lottery money, which has been reiterated time and time again by successive Governments. The money is there for the community, not for this Government or any Government to plug holes in their funding.

I want assurances from the Government that they are considering the long-term implications of their decisions and the pressure that they are putting on the VCS. More has to be done to tackle the inequality in procurement and the manner in which contracts are decided if we hope to be able to retain some of the most valuable and innovative community engagement work across all sectors in the foreseeable future. Charities and voluntary organisations need to be able to plan their funding and

projects on a longer-term basis. The Government not only have a responsibility to help build capacity in the third sector through investment, but they also need to give assurances on the unknown costs by making critical decisions, such as on council tax relief for charities. Ultimately, the Chancellor must not use the Big Lottery Fund to act as tape to cover up poor financial planning in central Government. As John Major said, lottery money is from the people for the people.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): Given the number of Members who have indicated their wish to speak in the debate, with the authority of the Chairman of Ways and Means I impose a time limit of six minutes on Back-Bench speeches.

2.51 pm

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): Thank you, Mrs Moon.

I commend the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) for the subject of the debate. I am extremely passionate about it because my constituency has some of the highest rates of volunteering in the country; more than 1,500 voluntary opportunities are being advertised there at the moment. Volunteering is deeply embedded in the fabric of the Wiltshire community. In fact, it is the very glue that binds it, filling the gaps left by the state. Voluntary organisations are essential for those two reasons and I welcome the Government's support for the sector, although I encourage them to protect and support its work further.

Given a ballooning state, a huge deficit and an ageing population, the truth is that we will not be able to sustain the existing model and will be unable to continue providing all the levels of service that we have now. We will need to look to the voluntary sector for more and more, so it is imperative that we support and strengthen the industry today. In addition, as the hon. Lady said, charities save the state money in the long term.

For example, Wiltshire Mind, which is based in my constituency, receives no Government funding, but even the Avon and Wiltshire Mental Health Partnership NHS Trust acknowledges the charity's vital work and how it reduces pressure on services. Alzheimers Support and the Alzheimer's Society are prime examples of charities that achieve better outcomes than many state-run organisations, because they are specialised in their sector. Volunteer centres act as pivotal hubs, promoting and filling roles, and they often excel at rehabilitation of ex-offenders and back-to-work programmes.

As we all know, the recession has hit the voluntary sector hard; its total income has fallen in real terms every year since 2009-10. That is because of not only the reduction in Government spending, but the reduction in giving—an obvious symptom of recession. The National Council for Voluntary Organisations estimates that the rate of giving fell by around 10% during the recession, and it has still not recovered. Individuals are the voluntary sector's single biggest source of income, hence the impact.

Funding is not the only issue, and that is the point that I want to labour. We also need to encourage volunteering, especially among the young and the elderly. In 2014-15 47% of adults in the country did some form of informal or formal volunteering. Informal volunteering is most prevalent among 26 to 34-year-olds and formal volunteering among the young—those of 25 and under. That means that a huge number of people in the retired

[Michelle Donelan]

sector with time and expertise who could get involved. Volunteering would also help some of them to ward off loneliness and other such attributes.

Martin John Docherty (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I recognise some of what the hon. Lady is saying, but does she recognise that such volunteering activity requires investment? It does not come for nothing.

Michelle Donelan: Exactly. I am trying to make that point and will continue to, but I am also saying that we can throw money at things, but it is not only a case of money—we must also promote the voluntary sector to ensure that we have the volunteers for tomorrow.

Dr Daniel Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I completely agree with my hon. Friend. Carers' organisations also recognise that the issue is not only about funding, but about the freely given caring provided day in, day out by carers to their families up and down the country.

Michelle Donelan: I agree. I am very much involved with the carers' organisation in my constituency and I completely understand that point.

We need to go further to encourage and enable more people in long-term unemployment to go into volunteering schemes. We already do that, but we need to work more closely with volunteer centres to ensure that it happens more. There is a lot of concern about the loss of benefits to volunteers, so there is much work to do there.

We need to invest to encourage more young people to volunteer as well. Some fantastic work has already been done, such as that of the National Citizen Service. It is important today to focus not only on the negatives, but on the positives. Seventy-five thousand young people have changed their lives and got involved in their communities through the NCS. We should take note of the things that are working as well.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): I share the hon. Lady's positive view of the NCS and its good work with young people. At the same time we are seeing huge cuts to youth services across local authorities and the NCS works with a fairly small number of young people compared with the great majority who can access mainstream services. Does she not think that the cuts to local authorities also impact on young people's preventive services?

Michelle Donelan: The cuts to youth services are for a totally different debate, because they are not purely about volunteering. There is a vast variety of youth services depending on the different areas and models involved. There is also the question of replacement: in many areas, including mine, the council has worked closely with the community to offer a replacement service that is the most cost-effective and efficient for the people using it.

In addition, the Government are providing funding for campaigns such as the national Step Up To Serve #iwill campaign, which aims to make social action part of the lives of as many 10 to 20-year-olds as possible. More remains to be done, however, and I am quite shocked that there is still no formal encouragement in

respect of the value of getting volunteering into schools, through things such as voluntary placements. We have always had a system of work placements, but there has never been a system of voluntary placements as a formal mechanism in the UK. I have approached my local volunteer centre about the issue, and we are trying to do something with willing schools in my constituency.

We need to change the ethos and encourage more businesses to allow voluntary days, which would build on the Government's initiative on that. There have been other great investments, which we should not fail to mention, such as Big Society Capital, tax relief for social investment, social impact bonds and £70 million for social investment in the investment and contract readiness fund.

Dawn Butler: In addition, business rate relief for charities is worth £1.7 billion. Does the hon. Lady not think that they should be excluded from the Government's plans for rate relief? Those plans will hinder charities' ability to provide services to the community.

Michelle Donelan: That is one thing we could look at, but it is not the only thing, as I shall get on to in the rest of my speech.

More needs to be done and it is time we looked at gift aid in particular. On average, the charity sector loses almost £1 billion a year from people not opting into gift aid. Perhaps we should not only promote it more as a mechanism, so that people understand it, but look at the logistics of having an opt-out instead for the working population. That might be one solution.

When compared with the state, charities are often far better placed to deliver services and value for money, as well as being far more knowledgeable about those services. The charities also provide specialised local knowledge and learning for volunteers. Young people can gain skills and a preparation for life and employment, while older volunteers can impart their own knowledge and reduce the training burden carried by charities. Charities may also reduce demand on the NHS as people stay active and healthier during volunteering. There are thousands of voluntary organisations in Wiltshire that bring in money from inside and outside the county in addition to Government funding.

While central Government may be able to replicate the functions of a local charity in part, that is not sustainable. That also does not take into account the unseen costs of not funding those charities, such as the loss of expert knowledge and the unquantifiable but large wider social benefit that community charities provide. I welcome the Government's recent initiatives, but I urge them to go further. The reality is that we will need to rely more and more on the voluntary sector in coming years, so it is imperative that we support and promote it today.

3 pm

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): It is a great privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I am not sure whether this requires a declaration, but I am co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on civil society and volunteering, which is administered by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations. I put that on the record; I might have got into trouble if I had not.

Six minutes is not a lot of time to talk about this. As it was in 1601 that the Charitable Uses Act came to this House, we have been discussing charities and their development for the past 414 years. In England and Wales, we have got about 180,000 registered charities and there are probably as many again that are not registered. Charities have a combined income of £40.5 billion a year, similar to the figure for 2006. Of that, £13.3 billion is from Government sources, down £1.7 billion since 2010-11, and 83% is from contracts. Many of those points were made most eloquently by my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah), who spoke magnificently at the start of the debate.

Wherever we stand on the ideological spectrum, we all know that the public sector cuts will hit hard, so I will put in a plea for the charities' old block grants. I know the history of contracts and the rest of it, but, as well as providing value in terms of simplicity for smaller charities, they also deal with capacity building. The core funding can and should be monitored. Indeed, when I was a manager of a small charity in London, I think I faced a lot more monitoring than Kids Company did for its multi-millions. That should be looked at, because it would enable those charities to develop and grow in funding and capacity.

It is right that controversies and indeed slightly dodgy fundraising practices are looked into, and it is right that we are considering those issues in the Charities (Protection and Social Investment) Bill. I, for one, will welcome the development of a fundraising preference service, but we know that charities need to raise money and always have needed to. We have seen that throughout our history, whether it was Dr Barnardo or those lesser known and less wealthy philanthropists such as those individuals and families who, in Victorian times, ensured that orphaned, destitute and illegitimate children became part of their family. They did not have the money or get the big plaques, but they were part of that bigger society.

To look to the new generation, I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) that we must look again at gift aid. I suspect that many of us make direct debits and the like and sign the little gift aid forms in the old-fashioned way. However, there is a new generation out there. Demos, in its "Introducing Generation Citizen" report in 2014, made the point that 13 to 19-year-olds have a real desire to help others through social action. Of course, many younger people do donations by text, so we need philanthropy for a modern age and a new generation of givers. Think, indeed, of Stephen Sutton and how crowdgiving led to more than £3 million for a charity in a year—that is a phenomenal legacy from a phenomenal life. Cancer Research UK's no make-up selfies raised £2 million for charity and received more than 800,000 donations by text.

We know the history of gift aid and as a society we should be proud of how it has developed and increased, but surely it is time to look at making it automatic for text donation. The Government must look at that. We made the point in the Small Charitable Donations Act 2012—this is not for gift aid, but it is similar—that charities can automatically claim back on a gift from an unknown donor, so I hope that the Minister will look at that.

We are looking at our communities and discussing the charities and community organisations, which I think reflect the diverse aspects of Britain: the different

societies; the wealthy philanthropists; the miners' welfare organisations; the Churches and other faith groups; and a whole series of initiatives.

Let us not forget that the NHS did not start off as a national, state-sponsored health service; it actually began in small communities where people had ideas. When we talk about the divisions between voluntary sector and state and private sector, we forget that often a good idea is piloted in the voluntary sector and people think, "This is good. We will have a bit more of this and then we will do it locally or nationally." At the heart of the debate, we need to look at funding and where clear problems are caused by the funding cuts, but we need to be innovative and pluralistic and celebrate that work. It is not that we want a big state; what we challenge the Government for is a much bigger society.

3.5 pm

Dr Daniel Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon, and to contribute to the debate. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah)—that was something I would never have said in the previous Parliament, but I can happily say it now—for the thoughtful and welcome debate she has brought to Westminster Hall. This is something that we all care about, because in all of our constituencies we recognise voluntary organisations and charities, some of which are linked to national organisations such as Age UK, and there are also smaller groups that have recognised local need. For example, in my constituency the Debenham Project has come together to support people with dementia and their families. That project is now being used as a pioneer throughout the east of England to show just how communities that have recognised a need can come together and make a real difference for people with dementia.

Before I talk more broadly about the role of businesses in supporting volunteering and the charitable sector, which I do not think has happened to the extent we would like—and I will talk about the legal sector in particular—I want to pick up on some of the points raised in the debate that affect all of our constituencies. Much of the volunteering in Suffolk, and, I am sure, throughout the rest of the country, is freely given. I am sure that no one wants in any way to polarise the debate by saying that the voluntary sector should be a purely funded sector.

I am sure we all recognise the vital contribution in carers' organisations, village hall committees, scout groups and other groups in the community when time is freely given to support others in need, be they young people needing support with educational causes or the most vulnerable. None of us would want to undermine that ethos in any way. It is important that everyone considers the opportunities in their community to support vital projects and, in particular, to look after the most vulnerable people.

One such example in my constituency is the hour community project in Framlingham for which everyone in the community has given up one hour of their time—whether one hour a week, one hour a month or even less than that—to take an older person who may be living in social isolation shopping, for example, or to provide support to special educational needs children

[*Dr Daniel Poulter*]

or teachers in a school or to provide time to other people in the community with needs. We should value and cherish that.

That does not always require funding. Of course there is an argument for pump-priming some such projects, as outlined earlier, and providing seedcorn whether through local authorities, central Government or lottery funding to kick-start them, but we should never undermine the importance of encouraging people to volunteer in their communities and give up their time to help those in need and good community causes.

These times of economic austerity have, of course, had a clear impact on charities and voluntary organisations. There has been a reduction in central funding—of course that is the case—and there has been a 10% drop in charitable donations, according to figures from three or four years ago. However, voluntary organisations have opportunities they did not have before to find additional funding, and local commissioners now have greater opportunities to commission services from voluntary and charitable organisations, where appropriate. Has that happened, however, to the extent envisaged in the legislation? Perhaps it has not.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I agree with the hon. Gentleman that local charities do very good work. In my constituency, however, small charities have consistently reported problems with public service commissioning, including that contracts are becoming so large that only the largest organisations can bid for them. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Government must take steps to level the playing field so that the charities he is speaking so passionately about, and that I believe so passionately in, can compete?

Dr Poulter: That is an issue, particularly where local authorities look at having block contracts for aspects of social care. That is a real problem, particularly for more—I do not necessarily think this is the correct description—bespoke charities, which provide specialist services. For example, a charity looking after younger people who have had a brain injury may not fall easily within a block contract. The Department for Communities and Local Government could certainly look at providing guidance and support to those who put these contracts out, to make sure that block contracts do not inadvertently get in the way of providing the right services to people with quite specialised needs. That can be a very real problem, which can result from block contracts, because they are inherently larger. The result can be that people with more specialised needs can fall through the gaps. Some of the charities and voluntary organisations providing very good specialist care do not get a look-in on block contracts, because they are not geared up to provide the service required, although they do provide an important service for certain groups in the community. The DCLG may well want to look into what guidance it can offer. Indeed, the Local Government Association also has a role in supporting local authorities to make the right decisions in this area.

The more general point I wanted to get on to relates to the role of big businesses in supporting volunteering. They have done a lot to support links with the armed forces. They have rightly been part of a big drive, with

the Government, to support people in having time off to serve with the armed forces. There is also often a synergistic relationship with the voluntary sector, and local businesses can benefit and get good will from the community by allowing staff to have time off to contribute to charitable and other good causes. However, one area that needs attention is the legal sector—

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): Order. I call Gerald Jones.

3.13 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): May I say what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon? I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) on securing such an important debate.

I spent many years working in the voluntary sector and as a volunteer. I wish to state that at the start, although it is not a declarable interest. I am deeply concerned about the situation facing the community and voluntary sector—a situation the Government have created. Volunteers and voluntary groups do a truly outstanding job in many of our communities, and they deserve all our support and that of the Government.

Demand for charitable services is increasing. Given the hardship the Government's austerity agenda is creating, people in our communities will undoubtedly turn to charities and voluntary groups even more in the future for assistance.

In 2010, we heard much from the Prime Minister and the coalition Government about the big society and the role volunteers play in community life. Here we are just five years later, and the Government are pulling the rug out from under many of the charities, community groups and voluntary organisations that make such a valuable contribution to our country.

Recently, I spoke at the annual general meeting of the county voluntary council in my constituency. Voluntary Action Merthyr Tydfil does an outstanding job of supporting voluntary groups, as do many other county voluntary councils. The mood of many of the community groups I met was one of deep concern and worry. Historically, many voluntary organisations have received support—including, importantly, financial support—from local authorities and, in Wales, from the Welsh Government. Given the Tory Government's austerity agenda, as well as the huge cuts to local authority budgets and, in Wales, to the Welsh Government budget, devolved and local government are finding it increasingly hard to deliver key services, putting at risk their ability to support voluntary and community groups.

Clearly, it is impractical for many charities and voluntary organisations to make a realistic charge for many of the services they provide, because that would, in many cases, put those services out of the reach of the people who need them most. Charities are well used to fundraising and to looking at all opportunities to bring in extra resources, but many will always need some support.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West said, the indication that the Treasury may look to cut the Big Lottery Fund share of national lottery funding from 40% to 25%—a cut of some £300 million—is hugely worrying, and such a cut would have a catastrophic effect on hundreds of voluntary organisations. The Big Lottery Fund is the biggest single funder of voluntary

sector organisations, and given that charities are struggling financially, this is not the time for the Government to make matters worse.

Small grants of a few thousand pounds from the Big Lottery Fund are a lifeline to many community groups. Such funding is often the first step for fledgling community groups, such as senior citizens organisations and youth groups. I know of many instances where such grants have given volunteers and community groups a real boost, giving them an incentive to develop their work and to contemplate more ambitious projects, including attracting more volunteers.

Tulip Siddiq: Does my hon. Friend know that half of BLF awards go to organisations with a turnover of less than £25,000? The proposed move would be devastating for community spaces in my constituency, especially youth services, because of their small turnover.

Gerald Jones: I absolutely agree. As I said, that funding is an absolute lifeline for many small community groups that are on the road to developing more ambitious projects. It is unacceptable for the Government to contemplate such a cut to offset Government cuts in other areas. The Minister should confirm that the cut in lottery support will not be used as part of the Government's deficit reduction plan.

In view of the Government's apparent attack on the voluntary sector, I am bound to ask what they have against volunteers and voluntary groups. I urge them to acknowledge the role of the voluntary sector and the massive contribution the sector makes to society and to act accordingly. I therefore ask the Minister to advise us whether he will stand up for the sector and stand against this huge cut in the support to the Big Lottery Fund.

3.18 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): May I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah)? May I also say what a great pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon?

Charities play a vital role in society, and they make a significant economic contribution. The sector generates gross value added of £12 billion per year. The economic value of UK volunteering is estimated at nearly £24 billion. However, given that approximately half of all charities depend on central or local government funding, they expect to be hit particularly hard by any budget reductions over the next five years. Charities will be looking closely at the spending review for details of where funding may become even more challenging. It goes without saying that public service cuts will have a significant knock-on effect on charities.

We have heard a lot about the Big Lottery Fund. To shed some light on the issue, let me add that it is one of 12 distributors of the national lottery's good causes funding. However, there is a strong indication that Her Majesty's Treasury is planning to reduce the Big Lottery Fund's share of national lottery funding from 40% to about 25%. That, arguably, would mean the redirection of funding towards the arts and sports because of DCMS spending reductions. The reduction in the Big Lottery Fund would be £300 million a year. We all recognise the value of the arts, sport and heritage, but support for those causes should not be at the expense of community groups.

The move would hit smaller groups hardest, because 90% of BLF grants are smaller than £10,000. It would particularly affect community projects such as village halls, playgrounds and youth clubs, as well as targeted interventions where there are social problems. Examples are isolated older people, domestic violence and vulnerable children—I could go on, but I think I have made my point. As BLF funds are usually committed years in advance, an immediate reduction in the national lottery's contribution to it could cause it to close its books to new funding applications for several years.

In my constituency a total of 251 projects have been funded, with a total value of nearly £4 million. In the whole of Swansea 993 projects have received funding, with a total value of £20 million. One of those is an organisation called Hands Up For Down's, a parent-run group for children with Down's syndrome and their parents and carers. It is based in Swansea and has been running since May 2014. It simply offers a support network to the parents of children with Down's syndrome, as well as an opportunity for the youngsters to get together to play freely and socialise. Sian is the mum of Iolo, who uses the project, and she said:

"We are facing many challenges but with the support of Hands up for Downs and the Big Lottery Fund we don't feel we need to do it alone".

I hope that the Government will think about all the Iolos and Sians in the country, who benefit from the Big Lottery Fund, when they wield their axe and do whatever they intend to do that will affect voluntary sector funding.

3.23 pm

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mrs Moon. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) on securing the debate. We have heard excellent and wide-ranging contributions this afternoon, and I very much welcome the debate. It is important that we discuss the issue, since funding for the community and voluntary sector is at a critical juncture. With the Chancellor's spending review coming tomorrow, I am sure that everyone involved in the sector will wait with bated breath to see what further cuts he has lined up for local government budgets. The continuous budgetary pressure on local government makes it even harder for the voluntary sector to fund its important work. I have seen in my own constituency the tremendous impact that community organisations have and the growing funding challenge that they face because of cuts to Welsh Government budgets that have to be passed on to local authorities.

I spent some time a couple of weeks ago at Grassroots Cardiff, a small community organisation working with the most vulnerable young people in Cardiff Central. It provides advice, support, creative opportunities and training that help young people between the ages of 16 and 25. In a supportive environment, it promotes self-confidence and development to help vulnerable young people avoid homelessness and drug abuse. It also runs a fantastic weekly Asperger's support group for young people—the only one that is available in Cardiff and the wider region. I have seen the remarkable work that the organisation does and the positive difference it has made to the lives of young people with Asperger's.

[Jo Stevens]

Grassroots works very hard to function within its means, but owing to the cuts it is really struggling. It has lost local authority funding because of UK Government cuts and faces the prospect of being able to offer only a part-time service. That successful organisation, which has been serving the community in Cardiff Central for decades, is under threat. It is desperate for funds. If it asks for funds from local people, who are already stretched with low incomes and a lack of work opportunities, they will give what they can, but it is a struggle.

In the previous Parliament, under the coalition Government, there were tax cuts for the wealthiest in the country—a giveaway to the people who needed it the least. At the same time cuts were made to the local authority funding that supports and delivers voluntary and community sector provision in villages, towns and cities across the UK. The expectation was then, as it will be once again in tomorrow's spending review, that ordinary working people will have to foot the bill.

Part of the Conservative party manifesto in 2010 and again 2015 was the creation of the big society. One pillar of that was opening up public services and enabling voluntary organisations, charities and social enterprises to compete to offer public services combined with community empowerment, giving local councils and neighbourhoods more power to take decisions and shape their own area. However, under the coalition Government outsourcing took place on an unprecedented scale, and that is continuing under the current Government. The aim was to create a fairer playing field in which charities, social enterprises and private companies could bid for services, but as we have heard in many speeches today, the harsh reality has been private companies' share growing, while charities and voluntary organisations have lost out completely.

The other pillar of the big society was community empowerment. The idea of that, as I understand it, was for people to be able to select the community projects they wanted to launch. However, because of the swingeing cuts in public sector funding, people are now forced to choose which projects they want to save, rather than the ones they want to launch. I have seen that happen in my constituency. Several voluntary sector organisations, including Carers UK's Cardiff branch, ABCD Cymru, which works with the disabled black and minority ethnic community, and Cardiff's Disability Action group, have had to fold altogether, leaving people without the support they desperately needed.

Tulip Siddiq: My hon. Friend has been talking about the notion of the big society. In the more affluent bits of my constituency there is a lot of social capital and invisible capital. The big society has worked there, but does my hon. Friend agree that in the more deprived areas of our constituencies it will not work? We cannot expect people who are choosing between putting the heating on and eating, and whose tax credits are being cut, to volunteer as well and keep up the big society, while the Government crush the roots of local democracy and cut councils' funding.

Jo Stevens: I agree entirely. It always seems that the people who can least afford to give are the ones who are looked to for giving.

Several colleagues have mentioned the Big Lottery Fund. Since 2010 it has supported 74 projects in my constituency, including a deaf youth summer theatre school, the Somali Integration Society legal and welfare advice pilot project, and the Adamsdown day centre's "Young At Heart" project. The day centre provides an essential service for elderly people who would otherwise have little or no daily social interaction. Its lottery fund money made the difference this year between being able to stay open or closing its doors for good. Seventy-four projects in Cardiff Central have received more than £3.3 million in funding from the Big Lottery Fund. Not only is that funding worth discussing here; it is something that all of us need to protect. I am sure that all the hon. Members present share that view, and I hope the Government will take note of what has been said today and take action urgently to protect a fantastic, hard-working, critically important sector.

3.28 pm

Martin John Docherty (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Moon. I want to mention that I am vice-chair of the all-party group on civil society and volunteering, along with the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones), whom I am delighted to see here today. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) on securing the debate, and I am delighted to speak for the Scottish National party, which, for the record, I want to congratulate on its resounding victory at the general election.

The subject of the debate is a critical issue for communities across these islands. As my constituency is in Scotland, I am keen for Members from other parts of the UK to hear briefly about differing approaches to supporting the community and volunteering sector. I believe that the approach in Scotland is based on common values, as the voluntary sector seeks to play its part in the civic life of the communities in which it was founded and that it engages with and serves. The relationship between local government and the voluntary sector in Scotland is also extremely important, given the sector's role in Scotland's community planning partnerships and in developing all 32 single outcome agreements. If hon. Members do not know what those are, I advise them to look at those interesting documents, which place the sector in a critical and fundamental role in Scotland's public life.

The challenge we now face as we approach the comprehensive spending review, which has been put well by many Members, is a decision by the UK Government that will reduce the funding for the most local of organisations—critically, through funds such as the Awards for All programme and Investing in Ideas—through funding reductions to the Big Lottery Fund. That fund enables local volunteer-led organisations to deliver support to communities at the coalface of community cohesion.

In Scotland, the Big Lottery Fund awards more than 2,000 new grants every year to organisations ranging from grassroots volunteer-led community groups to major charities. Its work is funded through an average annual budget in Scotland of £70 million, and it has recently come to the end of a five-year strategy. The fund has existing financial commitments to more than 3,000 projects in Scotland. Last year, more than 116,000

people in Scotland took part in small grassroots projects funded by the fund. Nearly 2,500 jobs, mainly in registered charities and community organisations, are at least partly funded by grants from the Big Lottery Fund, almost 780 of which are full-time posts solely supported by those grants. As we approach the comprehensive spending review, our grave fear is of a possible reduction in that funding. I hope the Minister will take this opportunity to deny the possibility of a reduction of national lottery funding to the Big Lottery Fund from 50% of moneys raised to 25%.

Without doubt, the community and voluntary sector in Scotland and the rest of the UK makes a direct impact on the economy; in Scotland, that impact is worth nearly £2.5 billion. Our Government in Edinburgh are committed to working—I should add, with cross-party support—with sector groups to create a fairer and socially just Scotland. That is why they have created a new third sector forum this year, bringing together representatives to consider ideas about the sector's future. The Scottish Government are determined to work with the sector to remove the barriers that prevent people from reaching their full potential—critically, with regard to volunteering. The voluntary sector is crucial to achieving social justice, and its organisations are closing the gap in employment and health inequalities and addressing the significant problems of poverty in my own constituency of West Dunbartonshire and across the country. I will mention just a few specifically: the Independent Resource Centre, which is celebrating its 25th anniversary; West Dunbartonshire CAB; the Vale of Leven autism group; and the Ben View centre.

Importantly, in February this year, the Scottish Government announced £1.1 million of investment for a new volunteering support fund, which will, we hope, train and recruit 3,000 volunteers from disadvantaged backgrounds to work at 110 projects across Scotland, seeking to ensure equal access to civic participation. That is on top of an increase in investment in the community and volunteering sector in Scotland, from 2001 to at least 2011, from £2.1 billion to £4.5 billion.

In Scotland, 1.3 million volunteers undertake roles in every community and in all sectors, bringing significant individual and community benefit, as volunteering does across the rest of the UK. Volunteers have a critical role in leading change and empowering our communities. We now have the opportunity, throughout the UK, for growth in volunteering through a renewal that connects with the passions, interests and motivations of individuals and brings about public value.

Volunteering provides enormous value to society in general and significant benefits to the wellbeing of those who participate. In Scotland alone, it is estimated that volunteers contribute £2.6 billion to the economy. More recent findings about the direct impact of volunteering on individual wellbeing indicate exceptional benefits. Any cut to the Big Lottery Fund in the comprehensive spending review will undermine the very source of our community and voluntary sector—the volunteers by whom so much is delivered for so little.

As is the case in the rest of the UK, the majority of these organisations in Scotland are run by volunteers, in service delivery roles as well as management roles, with volunteer committee members and, on occasion, charitable trustees. The sector has considerable experience and understanding of working with individuals and communities in developing solutions, and thus

mobilising the skills and knowledge of communities. That co-production model for solutions is essential to successful prevention, and I am sure that hon. Members here today would like to see similar models in their own constituencies. While the UK Government are poised to cut funding, the Scottish Government are investing in the enterprise ready fund, which distributed nearly £6 million between 2013 and 2015 to help maintain, develop and grow the sector. I am sure other Members will also want to look at the model of the social entrepreneurs fund.

The Big Lottery Fund in Scotland currently supports more than 2,000 organisations. It uses the good causes funding it receives from national lottery ticket sales to provide £75 million of funding every year to projects that tackle a wide range of issues including poverty, loneliness and ill health. The jobs partly funded by the fund are also a critical issue. There has been speculation that cash will be taken from the lottery fund to mitigate cuts to arts and sports resulting from the departmental budget cuts to be announced in the comprehensive spending review. Similar tactics were used for the Olympics in 2012, with a massive £638 million “borrowed” by the Government, a sum that has yet to be paid back.

The national lottery is independent of the United Kingdom Government, and that Government should not be raiding the Big Lottery Fund to subsidise their departmental spending cuts. The UK Government's austerity agenda is focused on cutting public services and social security, no matter the cost to people. It is clear that any cuts to the Big Lottery Fund will have the greatest impact on the most vulnerable in our society and will exacerbate the impact of other cuts across our communities.

3.35 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon, and my privilege to respond as shadow Minister for Civil Society. It is also a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin John Docherty) who set out clearly and powerfully the role of the community and voluntary sector in Scottish civil society and its impact on the Scottish economy. He also talked about the Big Lottery Fund, which I will discuss in some detail. I share his deeply held concerns.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) for calling this extremely important and timely debate. She set out eloquently and passionately the challenges faced by the community and voluntary sector. She also gave a heartfelt example of how crucial services such as the Blenheim Project in her constituency are to people in need, in particular at times of crisis.

Tomorrow, the Chancellor will set out his departmental spending priorities. It is his chance to set out his vision for the kind of society and economy he wants to build. The question for us today is whether that vision will be one that recognises and values the role that the community and voluntary sector can play in building a safe, healthy, decent and prosperous society. Many Members have set out fantastic examples of great work done by civil society organisations in their local areas, as well as the challenges such organisations face.

The hon. Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) mentioned Mind. Many of us would want to pay tribute to the great work that Mind does, not least in my own

[Anna Turley]

constituency, where it has been dealing with some of the repercussions of the huge job losses we have faced. She made a really important point about the preventive role it plays in reducing pressure on our public services. That also made me think of the importance of investment to prevent costs further down the line in public services. She also mentioned gift aid. There is an important message for the Government on that: they should look again at whether they might loosen the eligibility criteria for the small donations scheme, which so far has generated only £21 million, not the £105 million expected. That might be something that they could explore further.

My hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones), who is chair of the all-party group on civil society and volunteering, spoke eloquently about the importance of core funding. Any of us who have had experience of working with the voluntary and community sector will know how important that funding is to enable voluntary organisations to keep the lights on and keep functioning, when often grant money for specific projects is more readily available. She also talked about the importance of new technology. There are some really interesting issues there that we can look to take forward.

The hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) made some important points about businesses giving up time for people to volunteer. It is important always to look at the contribution that everyone can make, not just the professionals within the community and voluntary sector. We recognise the importance of diversity of funding and of capacity within the sector; to my mind, however, we must not lessen the importance of the role of partnership with public services and the support of local authorities and central Government, as they are often absolutely critical to funding projects that would not necessarily get private sector support.

My hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) talked eloquently about the impact of cuts on the devolved Administrations and on local government, and the effect that had on local communities in his area. My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) paid tribute to Hands Up For Down's, which sounds like a really excellent organisation doing great work. She also mentioned the impact of cuts to the Big Lottery Fund.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) talked eloquently about Open Public Services, which ranks alongside the big society as a flawed philosophy, set out by the Government five years ago. It has seen many contracts gobbled up by the private sector and larger charities, to the detriment of smaller charities, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) also pointed out. I thank all my colleagues for their important contributions to the debate.

The worry for many of our hard-working community and voluntary sector volunteers and professionals, as well as those who rely on their vital services, is whether the Chancellor will tomorrow hasten his assault on the sector, which has already seen the big society agenda disappear like a mirage, wiped out by a wave of cuts over the past five years. Figures I have received from the NCVO show the sector is already receiving £1.7 billion less of its income from Government than it was in 2010-11, and the number of grants to the sector from Government has halved since 2002. The charity sector

faces a shortfall of £4.6 billion by 2018-19 on current spending trajectories. Charities and community groups have been hit by a triple whammy of cuts to their grants and income; a reduction in local government support, with partnering public services facing their own drastic cuts, leading many of them to cut preventive services; and having to deal with a large rise in demand.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West mentioned, according to the Charity Finance Group, 70% of charities expect demand for their services to continue to rise in the next 12 months. In 2009, the figure was half that, with only 36% of charities thinking demand would rise. Charities know they are picking up the consequences of this Government's economic and social policy failures. They are often catching the people who have fallen through the gaps and are too often failed by the state. Charity and community groups are fearful of tomorrow's statement. They are asking whether tomorrow will see a spending review that puts the final nail in the big society coffin and shows that, like the Tories of the past, this is a Government who believe in neither the state nor society.

Nowhere is that threat more clearly exposed than in the expected cuts to the Big Lottery Fund, as many of my colleagues have rightly set out. The Big Lottery Fund has been a vital ingredient in helping many community organisations to deliver vital services in the local community and transform lives, particularly in our most deprived areas. The rigour that the Big Lottery Fund applies to its funding process ensures that charities can prove they work to change people's lives—a rigour that has been sadly lacking from the Government's own direct distribution of money to charities, as highlighted by the Kids Company saga.

If it is true that the Chancellor intends to take around £320 million from the Big Lottery Fund and redirect it to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to spend on arts and sports, it is a shameful act of misappropriation. The Chancellor should not be raiding the people's lottery to plug gaps in his departmental spending, to try to compensate for the total failure of his long-term economic plan. The British people donate these funds when they buy lottery tickets in good faith that the money will go to good causes—village halls, youth clubs, playgrounds, domestic violence support, care for older people and those with disabilities, and the many groups we have heard about this afternoon. Ninety per cent of Big Lottery Fund grants are less than £10,000, and they are a lifeline to small local groups, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West set out, so this act will hit the smallest charities doing the most important work in the most deprived areas.

As the former Conservative Prime Minister John Major recently said, lottery money was to be from the people, for the people. The guiding principle has always been that lottery money adds to, rather than replaces, public funding. Is the Minister going to allow that principle to be shredded to compensate for his Government's failure to protect and support our public services? Is he aware that some 3,800 charities are still waiting for the repayment of £425 million that was taken from the Big Lottery Fund to help pay for the 2012 Olympics? Depriving vulnerable people and communities of support during this difficult time is outrageous and is contrary to the very nature of what players of the lottery expect will happen with their contributions. I urge the Minister to ask his right hon. Friend the Chancellor to think again.

In conclusion, I hope the Minister will give some reassurance to the community and voluntary sector ahead of tomorrow that the Government still value the contributions it makes to our society. In 2009, David Cameron said he wanted to

“set free the voluntary sector and social enterprises to deal with the...problems that blight so many of our communities”.

Far from setting them free, this Government are starving them of funds and forcing many of them, as we have heard today, out of operation. I urge the Minister to fight for the future of a sector that is vital to the strength, health and dignity of our society.

3.44 pm

The Minister without Portfolio (Robert Halfon): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) on securing the debate and on her election; there are not many Labour MPs I raise a glass for when they get elected. I know that in her maiden speech she spoke about social action in terms of food banks. Although, of course, I disagree with her on some points, she spoke thoughtfully and with passion, and I will try to answer some of her points.

The hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) said she was worried about mentioning that she chairs the all-party group on civil society and volunteering; I think that is a badge of pride. She made some thoughtful remarks about gift aid, which she will know was worth £1.2 billion to charities last year. The Government have launched Charities Online, an online system that makes it simpler and faster to claim gift aid. The innovation in giving fund has provided around £10 million to develop ideas that have the potential to create a step change in the giving of time and money, including, as she suggested, crowdfunding platforms and other innovative forms of technology.

The hon. Member for Bradford West spoke about procurement, an issue that has come up not only recently but over many years. I have spoken on the record in the past, when I was on the Back Benches, about the Tesco charities—in other words, the bigger charities that get the bigger slices of the pie. She will know that the private Member’s Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Chris White), the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012, supported by the Government and passed by Parliament, requires public service commissioners to consider social value whenever considering procurements in their area. The Cabinet Office has led the successful Commissioning Academy to instil best practice across the public sector, as well as delivering special commercial masterclasses to charities to support them to bid. There is also a local sustainability fund of £20 million that supports grassroots charities, to ensure they have a secure future.

The hon. Member for Bradford West is right that charities currently get business rates relief of up to 80% if a property is used for charitable purposes. Many local councils top up certain reliefs, offering 100% relief in order to give businesses and charities extra help, and business rates relief helps charities up and down the country. With the Government’s tax changes, employers, including charities, will have their national insurance bills cut by £1,000 from April next year.

The Big Lottery Fund has come up on a number of occasions. I have to confess that I have not seen inside the Chancellor’s lunchbox, but I urge hon. Members to wait 24 hours and hold their horses, so that we can see what happens. I cannot comment on funding, particularly because of the spending review, but I want to talk about three things—funding we have provided for civil society, what we have done to improve civil society, and our ongoing work.

It was a pleasure to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan). I cannot get away from her Facebook page, because it has one post after another of her community activism, looking after her local community and doing exactly the kinds of thing we have talked about today. I know that her work is acknowledged by her constituents. My hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) talked about volunteering, which I hope to come on to later.

I am a passionate believer in big society and always have been. I have always believed that social capital is as important as economic capital, that social entrepreneurs are as important as economic entrepreneurs and that people power is as important as state power. That is what big society means to me, and that is what big society means to the Government.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): Does the Minister recognise that people capital and social capital, which he rightly points to, will not provide a rape crisis counselling service for children, no matter how much he wishes they might? The state once provided that. The Big Lottery Fund then went on to provide it, and the Chancellor is potentially about to take it away.

Robert Halfon: As I said, I suggest the hon. Lady holds her horses and waits to see what happens in 24 hours. I will talk about what we have already done to fund civil society and big society in a moment.

The Government recognise that individuals are looking beyond the state and want to help friends, family, their community and their local services. People are becoming far more community-minded and are asking not what their community can do for them, but what they can do for their community. Millions give their time, energy and expertise to help others, and they put service above self. I am wearing a Heart 4 Harlow badge, which is from a social action project created by faith communities in my constituency. They work together to do social action and to help our town. This social action—this people power—is the foundation of the bigger and stronger society that we all desire.

It is no surprise that the Charities Aid Foundation found that the UK is the most generous nation in Europe. That means that the public are giving twice, which it is important to note, both in their taxes and personal donations. With all the talk of funding, it is also worth noting that taxpayers are giving about £13 billion a year to charities up and down our country—remember, that is not Government money, but taxpayers’ money.

We should also note that five years ago, our country was broken. We had experienced the deepest recession in living memory and the deficit between public spending and the Government’s revenue was unsustainable. Unemployment had risen to record levels and household debt was higher than many of us would agree is sensible.

[Robert Halfon]

The societal issues that stemmed from those circumstances meant that public services and civil society both faced an incredible challenge—one of increasing demand, but without the ability easily to invest increased resources to meet it.

Anna Turley: If the Minister is setting out the challenges and saying that there is a consequence for public services and the big society, we are now five years on and the crisis is even greater for the community and voluntary sector. Is that not a consequence of the last five years of economic policy as well?

Robert Halfon: As I said, the taxpayer is spending £13 billion a year, which is a sizeable chunk of money, on charities.

I turn to the Government's achievement over the last years in pursuit of this vision. There is, for example, the community organisers programme, which is training more than 6,500 organisers to work in hundreds of cities, towns and villages. Community organisers are not about replacing existing jobs or services; they are about people power, giving social entrepreneurs, charity workers and volunteers the real tools to help themselves. One example is the work of community organiser, Tania Swanson, in Clacton in Essex. She works with the Rural Community Council of Essex to assist with projects on affordable housing, energy efficiency and community farming, as well as on many other community initiatives.

The big society has meant the establishment of the Centre for Social Action, too, which has seen an investment of around £70 million of real money from the Cabinet Office, commissioners, local authorities, philanthropists and other partners into 215 social action projects in England, working alongside and helping public services. Just as the Government have liberated business entrepreneurs from red tape and regulation, so the big society has worked to free charities, voluntary groups and social entrepreneurs from red tape. There has been £200 million of investment to help charities transform themselves to be more effective. We have seen the creation of the world's first social investment bank, Big Society Capital. A prime example of that, and one I know about, is the £825,000 invested into the Essex social impact bond to help vulnerable young people avoid care or custody and stay at home with their families.

To me, perhaps one of the most exciting and forward-looking of the big society projects is the National Citizen Service, which was highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham. It gives young people a real chance in life and a real experience of community ethos, social action and important skills that they will have for life. Over 5 million hours of volunteering has been given by NCS participants to their local communities; that is a whole generation for whom social action has become the norm, not the exception. Ensuring that future generations are more socially minded is key to the work of the National Citizen Service. A lot of work has been done to help young people. In my constituency of Harlow, we have the Young Concern Trust, which does an enormous amount to support disadvantaged young people.

I said earlier that the big society was about social capital, social entrepreneurship and people power, and that that is the continued mission of the Government over the next five years.

Dr Poulter: Will the Minister give way?

Robert Halfon: I will not—I am very sorry, but I have to get on.

So what does this mean in practice? It means a continued investment in our charities, continued support for social action, and continued backing for giving and philanthropy. My hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich talked about volunteering. We believe that the planned entitlement will help build stronger communities and a stronger economy by creating a more motivated and productive workforce. It has been shown that people who volunteer also have significantly higher levels of life satisfaction. Many businesses across the country already run great volunteering programmes that empower their staff and help build stronger communities. During this Parliament, the Government plan to make that an entitlement for those working in the public sector and large companies.

We are also working to make social investment an integral part of the investment landscape. Earlier this year, Access—the new £100 million social investment foundation—was launched. By helping organisations to become investment-ready, Access will be critical to our continued efforts to ensure social investment is working for more organisations and is accessible by more people. We, as a Government, can use social investment to deliver a more just society.

Alongside social investment, Government are rapidly extending the scope and reach of social impact bonds to tackle youth unemployment, mental health, homelessness and children in care. Through funding for initiatives such as the Centre for Social Impact Bonds and the Social Outcomes Fund, we can help to build a strong, resilient sector.

So what do we plan for this Parliament? What do we want to see over the next five years? We want to see increased levels of social action and volunteering, creating stronger, more resilient and empowered communities, and increased resources going into the civil society sector through more giving and philanthropy, as well as more social investment enabling investors who want to use their money to have a profound social impact. We want more businesses actively building social capital as well as economic capital—helping to build a more compassionate economy—and, of course, better and more responsive public services, ensuring that they work hand in hand with the expertise, humanity, and dignity of the big society of community and volunteers.

Dr Poulter: On volunteering, I wonder whether the Minister may be able to look at—and perhaps do some work with the Law Society on—pro bono work from solicitors. A lot of big law firms do not give their lawyers time off to perform pro bono work. The only way we can change that is not through dealing with firms, but by putting a requirement on lawyers through the Law Society which then, in turn, would put pressure on firms to act. Will he look at working with the Law Society to encourage more pro bono work?

Robert Halfon: My hon. Friend raises a very interesting point. I am lucky in my constituency, because I have a pro bono lawyer who very kindly helps us with difficult legal cases with my constituents. I am sure that the Minister for Civil Society will look at that issue.

I firmly believe that we are on the brink of something special in our country: where we continue to create millions of jobs and apprenticeships, where public services offer more choice and are focused on the security that everybody needs, but most importantly, where the big society flourishes like never before, so that even in difficult economic circumstances, with the strong backing of this Government, millions of social entrepreneurs, community-minded individuals, charity workers and others give all they can to make our country a better place to live.

3.58 pm

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered funding for the community and voluntary sector.

African Lion Numbers

[FABIAN HAMILTON *in the Chair*]

3.59 pm

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the decline in African lion numbers.

It is a pleasure, Mr Hamilton, to serve under your chairmanship. It is good to have the opportunity to draw attention to the continuing and worrying decline in the number of African lions. This is by no means the first such debate in this Chamber. Almost precisely five years ago, my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Turner) secured one during which he identified the pressures on the species that have accumulated over several decades.

In his debate, my hon. Friend pointed out that in the 1960s it was estimated that some 200,000 lions roamed the African continent. At the time of his debate, the numbers had declined to some 20,000. However, more recent estimates indicate that the number of lions has now declined to fewer than 15,000—by any standards, that is worrying. In central and western Africa, only a few scattered groups remain. It is estimated that in all Africa only six significant populations are left: in Tanzania, northern Botswana and the Kruger national park in South Africa. Data released in June by the International Union for Conservation of Nature revealed that the African lion population has undergone a reduction of approximately 43% over the past 21 years. The IUCN has accordingly classified the species overall as vulnerable.

The more detailed picture is mixed. In South Africa, the lion is categorised as of least concern on the IUCN's red list, although that assessment is a matter of some dispute. In west Africa, the lion meets the criteria for "critically endangered". The IUCN reports that lions have been extirpated in 12 African countries and it is suspected that there has been recent extirpation in another four.

A recent paper in the proceedings of the US National Academy of Sciences comments that the

"rapid disappearance of lions suggests a major trophic downgrading of African ecosystems with the lion no longer playing a pivotal role as apex predator."

There are various reasons for the decline in African lion numbers. The IUCN reports that the most important is indiscriminate killing in defence of human life and livestock, habitat loss and prey-based depletion. As my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight pointed out five years ago, lion habitat is increasingly being given over to agriculture to feed rapidly growing human populations. He said:

"Where lions come into contact with humans, history has long shown that lions must make way."—[*Official Report*, 17 November 2010; Vol. 518, c. 315WH.]

The change in land use means that the lion is being progressively excluded from its ancient habitats. A paper published in the proceedings of the US National Academy of Sciences suggests that intensively managed locations "in southern Africa may soon supersede the savannah landscapes in east Africa as the most successful sites for lion conservation".

Certainly in southern Africa, lion population numbers are under less threat, but that is due in part to the reintroduction of lions not into the wild as we would

[Mr David Jones]

know it, but into small, intensively-managed and funded reserves. I suggest that it is a matter of the utmost sadness that so important a creature as the African lion should be consigned to a future life behind fences.

The word “iconic” is one of the most over-used but it can be justly applied to the lion. It is indeed the noblest of creatures, featuring prominently in the iconography of many nations over many centuries; nowhere is that more the case than here in the Palace of Westminster, where carved stone lions are among the most prominent decorative features of this great building. Indeed, all of us in this Chamber today passed a stone lion seated at the foot of the stairs just outside the Jubilee Room.

In no country on earth is the lion more revered than here in Britain. Indeed, it is our national symbol, featuring everywhere from our royal arms to the door knocker of No. 10 Downing Street. Our national rugby side is named after it. Three lions appear on the English football shirt and, going one better, four lions appear on the standard of the Prince of Wales. The red lion is featured on the Scottish standard and perhaps best known of all are the four Landseer lions that guard the monument to our national hero, Nelson, in Trafalgar Square.

The lion is important to us in Britain and I believe that we as a nation can and should do more to safeguard its future. For example, given the declining trend in lion numbers, it is astonishing that the despicable sport of hunting lions for trophies is still allowed. No other species in such worrying decline has been allowed to suffer additional mortality for commercial purposes. A particular concern is that trophy hunting targets male lions, a very small part of the lion population.

4.5 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

4.14 pm

On resuming—

Mr Jones: I was saying that a particular concern is that trophy hunting targets male lions—a very small part of the lion population. Targeting male lions has had significant consequences for lion populations, because lions are social animals. In addition, new males that take over the pride of a dead lion will resort to infanticide—killing the cubs of the former dominant male. The rapid replacement of male lions in prides, caused by excessive trophy hunting, will therefore result in negative reproductive rates among lion populations, hastening the process of decline.

Of course, the trophy hunting of lions is a practice that continues overseas, beyond the reach even of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. However, Britain is in a pivotal position internationally. It is an important member of the European Union, the Commonwealth and international conservation bodies such as the convention on international trade in endangered species—CITES. I believe that Britain should be exerting its influence to help to reduce the level of sport hunting that goes on in Africa.

Sport hunting achieved international attention, not to mention notoriety, earlier this year with the shooting in Zimbabwe of Cecil the lion. Cecil was one of the best known lions in Africa. He had been studied by Oxford

University scientists as part of a project that had run since 1999. He had an ugly and distressing death: he was lured out of the reserve in which he lived, shot with a bow and arrow, stalked for a further 40 hours and then killed by a dentist from Minnesota who was armed with a rifle. Cecil was then skinned and his head was removed as a trophy. The dentist in question has been on the receiving end of much international opprobrium since that incident. I mention it now not to add to his already considerable discomfiture, but to draw attention to what can only be described as a sordid industry that is affecting the viability of the species, while causing huge individual distress to these beautiful creatures.

The Cecil episode illuminated the dark side of trophy hunting. It also gave the lie to the often repeated suggestion that trophy hunting somehow contributes to sustaining the species. If trophy hunting is indeed sustainable, why do the operators of trophy hunts resort to illegal activities such as luring a lion out of a game reserve? If their activities are indeed sustainable, the organisers’ concessions should be brimming with lions, but the fact is that they are not.

The truth is that trophy hunting is a nasty, despicable business that contributes to the depletion of lion numbers. I believe that ideally it should be stopped and that our Government could do much more to help to stop it. I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to call on the British representative on CITES to help to end the promotion of the concept of “sustainable” trophy hunting. That concept has been promoted for more than two decades, but there is nothing to show for it in terms of lion conservation.

I also urge the Government to engage more actively in preventing the further decline of African lions and to help to put in place strictly scientifically based conservation programmes. An early step should be the funding of an independent and impartial census that will for the first time establish precisely what lion populations remain, so that we can assess more accurately the true scale of the problem.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing the debate. The World Wide Fund for Nature predicts that between 30% and 50% of all species will be heading towards extinction by 2050. Does my right hon. Friend agree with me and the other members of the all-party group on endangered species that the international community urgently needs to take steps to safeguard wildlife and push for greater co-operation to secure habitats, stop poachers and end the illegal wildlife trade?

Mr Jones: I agree entirely. This is an international issue and it requires international co-ordination. While I am referring to my hon. Friend, I should congratulate him on being the chair of the newly formed all-party group on endangered species. That group was long overdue for establishment, and I am glad to see him as its chair.

Wildlife tourism accounts for more than 10% of GDP in some African lion range states that still allow trophy hunting. The Government should be explaining that a lion can be shot only once with a rifle, but many thousands of times with a camera. In

the long term, photographic tourism is much more beneficial both to the economies of those African states and to lion numbers.

We should also bear down on the import of lion trophies by banning it. Australia recently imposed such a ban, the first in the world, and I am delighted to say that last week France followed suit. We in Britain should not lag behind.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for drawing our attention to a very serious issue. He has painted a necessarily bleak picture. I agree with him that conservation is very important, and trophy hunting should be banned. Does he agree that organisations such as AfriCat, which has worked for 25 years in Namibia with the local population to sustain and grow the lion population, show us the way we should be going? Does he agree that we need to see more such organisations and fewer attempts to reduce the lion population through hunting?

Mr Jones: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. There are a number of effective charities, many of them British-based, and I shall refer to another one later.

I would like to mention the loathsome practice of the so-called canned hunting of lions, which is practised mainly in South Africa. Lions are reared from tiny cubs by paying volunteers who are recruited by agencies, some of which are based here in the United Kingdom. The volunteers believe that they are contributing to the conservation of the species.

As the cubs grow, they are made available to be petted by visitors and even rented out as accessories at wedding ceremonies. As they grow further, they are used for lion-walking safaris, which are priced at about \$200 per participant. When they become too large and dangerous, they are placed in enclosures to be visited by the paying public as though in a properly managed zoo. When they attain the right size, they are offered to trophy hunters to be shot in enclosures at a price of up to \$50,000. Finally in this chain of profitable exploitation, their bones are exported to the far east where they are used in traditional Chinese medicine. That is the most disgraceful and revolting abuse of an important and beautiful creature, and it was extensively revealed in a recent film, “Blood Lions”. British trophy hunters participate in that disgusting practice, and I believe that the Government should at least ensure that they are prevented from returning to this country with the spoils of their activities.

Finally, may I commend the activities of the British charity LionAid, which has done much to help focus international attention on the crisis that threatens to wipe out this important species? Christine MacSween and Dr Pieter Kat of LionAid are both here today, and I thank them both for the help that they have given me in preparing for this debate. I am also pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena) has been able to attend the debate, and I again wish him well in his new role as chair of the all-party group on endangered species.

I am grateful for the opportunity to raise this matter, and I look forward to hearing from the Minister about what the British Government propose to do to help to conserve this important species, which is so dear to the hearts of the British people.

4.22 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rory Stewart): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hamilton. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) for raising this incredibly important issue. Lions matter to us, both in themselves and as a symbol of natural and ecological challenges throughout Africa. They matter in themselves because they are probably the most dramatic, charismatic, impressive and splendid animals that we have inherited in the world. They matter in terms of conservation more generally because the issues that affect them are very similar to those that affect elephants, rhinos and other wildlife across Africa. I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend for raising the issue as a way of getting us to think about it, and because, to some extent, lions have been underrated in comparison with other animals in recent studies on conservation and extinction.

The central question regarding lions recently has been about the decline in their numbers. Conducting scientific analyses of lion numbers is challenging and there has been a lot of controversy about how many lions we have, but there is absolutely no doubt among members of the scientific community that the number of lions has declined. Whether we have 37,000 or 23,000 lions, and whether or not the decline has been exactly 43%, there is absolutely no doubt that we had far more lions 20 years ago and 50 years ago than we have today.

The primary reason for the decline in lion numbers, as my right hon. Friend pointed out, is the loss of habitat. Lions’ habitat, above all, has to accommodate the large range that these predators require and the prey on which they feed. The expansion of human activities has had a major impact on lions’ habitat. Since humans emerged in the very centre of lion territory, they have found ways to live alongside lions. Central to Maasai culture is the way in which people think about living alongside lions. Over the past 50 to 60 years, however, communities that plant crops and try to keep stock in those areas have found it increasingly challenging to live alongside lions.

As a result, lions live predominantly in protected areas, where there are severe restrictions on what humans can do. Such areas fall into two categories. The first category is national parks, which are the ideal place to locate lions. The Serengeti contains incredible examples of the combination of an ideal habitat for lions with one of the great migratory spectacles of the world—with, of course, a serious income from eco-tourism and photography. The second category is protected hunting areas, which account for about 650,000 sq km of territory. In other words, an area about three times the size of England is devoted to hunting areas for lions.

My right hon. Friend is pushing, quite rightly, for what seems to be the ideal solution, which is to convert those hunting areas into national parks. If that happened, the income in those areas would come from tourism and they would not experience the significant problems of conservation and animal welfare that have been associated with hunting. That would seem to be the ideal situation.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I speak as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Tanzania. I pay

[*Jeremy Lefroy*]

tribute to the Tanzanian Government for categorising and gazetting so many additional thousands of square kilometres as national parks over many years.

Rory Stewart: I will pick up on that issue, because it relates exactly to our current position. The Tanzanian Government are a good example. Just under half the lions in the world live in Tanzania, in areas that are many times the size of Wales. The Tanzanian Government face a series of serious challenges. Approximately 15% of the population have access to any form of electricity, fewer than that have access to sewerage, and many are living on incomes of \$1.50 a day. During my lifetime, the population of Tanzania is likely to increase from 10 million when I was born to 160 million by the time I am 70, if I am lucky enough to live that long. Such an increase imposes huge pressures on the protected areas that we depend on for lion habitats.

To return to my argument, the main challenge is not what will happen to the national parks, although there are challenges facing the national parks, such as fragmentation, incursion, poaching and disease—particularly canine-born disease, which has been mapped by Craig Packer in the Serengeti. The question we need to ask is what should be done with the hunting areas. The ideal solution would be to convert them into national parks, and there have been experiments in that direction—a famous ecologist recently took over a hunting licence, established a lodge and tried to run it as an eco-tourism area. The question is whether that is what African Governments would be likely to do with those areas if hunting were removed.

We have two case studies to look at. The first, which has been much discussed, is Kenya, where hunting was banned in the 1970s. It is very difficult to get a good scientific base on Kenya, because the Kenyan population and the pressure on land are so high that it is difficult to get reliable indications. The big case study that we need to look at is Botswana. Botswana has now banned lion hunting and will be the litmus test of whether the previous hunting areas will now be protected—indeed, the President and the Minister for Environment, Wildlife and Tourism are heavily committed to protecting those areas—or whether, with a change in Government, the pressure, particularly from the cattle industry, will mean that in three, five, seven or ten years' time, that land is given over to farmland instead of being protected as national parks. That is relevant because it is predominantly because of farming practices and human population pressure that lions are now largely constrained to areas such as Tanzania and southern Kenya, and have been lost across a great deal of west Africa. That has been the major reason for the decline in African lion populations across the continent. Botswana will be a key litmus test.

Andy Slaughter: The Minister mentions the obvious conflict between farming and lion habitats. The AfriCat project, to which I referred, is about indigenous populations accommodating lions—learning to live alongside them and learning which livestock can be protected—so that the two can live together in one world. The project, which I recommend, is called “Conservation Through Education”. I also say, as a plug, that AfriCat is being sponsored as part of “Giving Tuesday”, which the Government support very much.

Rory Stewart: That is an important point. This is not a black and white issue, nor an either/or. There are very good projects of exactly that sort. In addition to the project to which the hon. Gentleman refers, DEFRA has worked with the University of Oxford's Wildlife Conservation Research Unit—WildCRU. It has recently done an extraordinary project, which has seen a decline of nearly 50% in predation of lions by communities using some of the measures that the hon. Gentleman mentioned. Such measures include radio collaring of lions so that communities can be alerted to the proximity of lions; the use of donkeys and dogs to alert people; better stock management techniques; and compensation for the loss of stock to lions. All those need to be part of the panoply of measures taken to ensure that human populations and lion populations continue to live happily together. They must absolutely be taken on board, and that will be one of the challenges. It is one of the things that people have been looking closely at in Kenya, and on which we can make more improvements across the board.

In the end, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) implied, and indeed as my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West stated, these are issues predominantly for African countries. The challenge for the United Kingdom, Europe and the United States is, above all, to conserve lion populations. What we should be doing—the end for all of us to bear in mind—is trying to ensure that we end up with a stable, serious, resilient lion population in 25, 50, 100 and 500 years' time. The question of the means to that end is a massive scientific controversy. George Schaller and Craig Packer have weighed in, and Andrew Loveridge and David Macdonald from Oxford University have contributed a great deal on the subject.

For DEFRA, trophy hunting is a serious issue. We have to ensure that when hunting takes place, at the very least it does not involve the kind of activities that my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West mentioned. Therefore, I use this opportunity to state that the Government will ban the importation of trophies into Britain unless we see very significant improvements in what is happening in Africa. We will look closely at key indicators, including the age of the lions involved—the latest scientific research pushes for that to be over six. As an interim measure, we will look closely at quotas and at international verification.

The Government have already moved to take Benin and Ethiopia off the list of countries from which we are prepared to import lion trophies, and we will be moving against Zambia and Mozambique. We are working with our European Union and American partners to make it very clear that, unless there is a significant improvement in the performance of the hunting industry and of those countries, this Government will move to ban lion trophies.

Mr David Jones: I am pleased to hear that announcement. Will the Minister go a little further and give some indication as to over how long a period this assessment will take place?

Rory Stewart: As the Minister, I would like this to happen in a short timeframe. I am looking at something in the order of two years, but we need to pin that down. I want to ensure that we work closely with the academic experts and the African countries. The only way in

which conservation will work is by bringing African countries with us. It will not work by me pontificating, or by alienating populations including a Tanzanian population that has many problems. However, I am talking about something of that level. We need to set a deadline, have clear indicators and to say, “If we haven’t achieved our objectives by that date, we will ban the importation of trophies.” The key is not only the United Kingdom and Europe but the United States. We have to bring the United States with us. The number of licensed trophies that came into Britain last year was two. The difference will happen at an international level, and we have to work with Europe and the United States.

In the meantime, I am proud that DEFRA continues to fund serious projects through the Darwin initiative and the illegal wildlife trade challenge fund in order to provide for the protection of lions. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West for securing the debate, and I thank LionAid for its work in raising the issue in our consciousness. I look forward to continuing this serious, scientific discussion to achieve what we all want—the preservation of lions.

Question put and agreed to.

Fuel Poverty

Fabian Hamilton (in the Chair): Before we start the debate, I have a brief announcement. A digital debate has taken place ahead of today’s debate on fuel poverty. Mr Speaker has granted a derogation to allow the use of electronic devices in the Public Gallery for the duration of the debate—although there do not seem to be many people in the Public Gallery. Devices should be silent and photos must not be taken.

4.38 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered fuel poverty.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hamilton. The independent charity National Energy Action estimates that two thirds of working parents will not meet their energy costs. Alarming, it has discovered that 67% of people with disabilities are already signalling struggles. Tomorrow, the Chancellor will set out Government proposals for spending and there is an opportunity to take action on poverty. There are large opportunities—big things that can be done—and other straightforward measures that the UK Government can take forward to support those under pressure and to reduce costs.

Fuel poverty is a thief. It creeps into homes virtually unnoticed. It steals into people’s lives, begins taking people’s health, starts stripping them of their dignity and forces them to make choices that none of us would want to face. It makes its mark over years and months, often with the victim unaware of its progress in the first instance until the bills start hitting the mat.

People expect to be able to switch on the lights. If we find our house is getting cold, we want that cold vanquished. People should not be living in uncomfortable houses but, at first, they try to get by. They see whether they can cope. They make do. They make changes to the way they run things, and they make choices. They might turn the heating down or use it a little less; they might put on some more clothes. They will do more with their household budget to try to do what they can. They basically try to manage the impossible, but that becomes harder as next month rolls around and they have to go again, so they make choices about what groceries they buy, what they get for their children and what clothes they wear. Another bill hits the mat, and the worry starts to bed in and the sleepless nights take effect, and then the dreaded red bills start arriving and dignity starts to be stripped away.

The cycle of mental and physical deterioration caused by fuel poverty starts to work on people’s health. Children in the cold have issues with concentration; it affects their homework and, of course, their future chances in life. Children are also at risk of respiratory problems. Many hon. Members present will have knocked on doors during the election campaign to speak to people who are fighting fuel poverty in damp houses and who complain about their children being unwell, but it affects adolescents, too. Many mental health problems, once the contributing factors are stripped out, can be accounted for by fuel poverty. I was surprised by a statistic from National Energy Action that fuel poverty is a bigger killer than road accidents, alcohol and drug misuse combined.

[Drew Hendry]

The nations of the UK are split into 14 electricity regions, but in the highlands in my constituency of Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey, and across other nearby constituencies, our consumers are having to face electricity tariff charges of 2p to 6p a unit more than people elsewhere. There are parts of the highlands where fuel poverty has hit 70%. Electricity is charged at a premium in the coldest and darkest places. We are told that the cost of transmitting power makes electricity more expensive for people in the highlands, which is a terrible irony in a place with great renewable energy resource and a history of energy expertise. Of course, there is enormous renewable energy potential not only throughout Scotland but throughout the UK and Europe.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a valid point. Would it not be better to address fuel poverty by having a strategic overview of the electricity system? That would mean a fairer transmission charging system in the national grid that allows further renewable energy in the area about which he is talking. Does he share my concern that electricity poverty can only get worse following the deal to sign the Hinkley Point C agreement with a £92.50 per megawatt-hour strike rate, which is twice the market rate, with Government plans for more nuclear power stations to come?

Drew Hendry: I agree with my hon. Friend that that is a clear problem. Later, I will outline more measures that I believe could be taken in addition to the ones he rightly points out.

The highlands and islands pay more to produce electricity because of the way in which the system is currently set up, and residents pay more to use electricity, which is hardly a great story; it is definitely not a plan for people. The UK Government have spoken warm words about fuel poverty, yet families still sit freezing at home. The inaction is cold comfort to those facing such difficulties. As my hon. Friend mentioned, we need a new national pricing structure that is fair to people across those areas where the hardest conditions are faced. That solution must be based not on robbing Peter to pay Paul but on something that is fair across the piece. We need to consider something that does not just shift the problem from one place to another. The issue should be addressed.

Fuel poverty is not unique to the highlands and islands, and the constituents of many hon. Members in Scotland and across the rest of the UK face similar issues. National Energy Action, which I quoted earlier, estimates that 4.5 million people are facing fuel poverty. The austerity agenda being pushed forward by the UK Government will further hit people on low incomes, which will have the combined effect of ensuring that those struggling the most with poverty and fuel poverty face the coldest cuts. The proposed cuts to tax credits and the changes to social security have the potential to drive fuel poverty to catastrophic levels. Of the people who are already struggling, nearly half have been struggling for more than a year, only 12%—there is a big communication job to be done—have told their energy supplier and only 5% have sought advice from a supporting organisation.

Stuart Blair Donaldson (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government's policy of encouraging customers to switch is completely useless for many of my constituents, as it is for many of his constituents? In some parts of my constituency 80% of local tenants are on dynamically teleswitched all-electric systems, which can be provided by only one fuel supplier. That, coupled with the 2p per kilowatt-hour surcharge, demonstrates that we need a real and practical solution for those in fuel poverty in rural areas of Scotland.

Drew Hendry: I completely agree with my hon. Friend that we need a more equitable solution that takes people out of situations in which they have limited choice, or no choice at all. Later, I hope to propose at least a partial solution for the future, but we need action now, too. That must be taken on board. As I said, fuel poverty is not unique to people in the highlands and islands. In the past year, a third of those who are already struggling have skipped a meal to try to afford their bills; 20% are suffering from stress or mental health issues because of fuel poverty; and 40% are struggling with other essential bills.

As the Chair mentioned, I took part in an openDemocracy forum yesterday with MoneySavingExpert.com. The issues raised in that forum, and in subsequent emails to me, were common with those of my constituents in many cases. Highlanders are mostly off the gas grid, which they have in common with some 4 million households across the UK. If people are unable to gain access to the grid, they have to rely on alternative energy sources, including heating oil, liquefied petroleum gas, electricity and solid fuels. The average cost of heating a three-bedroom house with heating oil is circa 50% higher than the UK average; those using LPG pay 100% more on average than those with mains gas. There is limited opportunity to switch to other alternatives. In Scotland, people living off the gas grid are more than twice as likely to be living in fuel poverty as those with mains gas.

The Scottish Government have put in £0.5 billion since 2009 to introduce a raft of fuel poverty and energy efficiency programmes. Uniquely, they have brought into being the Scottish rural taskforce, with which I recently had the pleasure to interact, to find ways of making it easier and more affordable for people in rural and remote areas of Scotland to heat their homes. In 2015-16, an unprecedented £119 million has been allocated to fuel poverty and energy efficiency measures, split between advice and support services for householders through the "home energy Scotland" network and a variety of home energy efficiency programmes—HEEPs. Since 2008, nearly one in three of all households has had energy efficiency measures put in place. The Scottish Government have done more to help than the UK Government and other devolved Administrations, with Energy Action Scotland's report from 2013-14 showing that the average energy savings are £36.48 in Scotland, £31.31 in Wales, £27.55 in Northern Ireland, and £3.52 in England.

There are some issues that could be addressed. For a start, the off-grid energy sector is not covered by Ofgem or the energy ombudsman, which is a deficit that could very easily be rectified. As my hon. Friends have mentioned, there should be a fairer pricing structure across the UK that removes the inequality and prevents people from being charged more in the coldest and darkest areas.

Measures could be taken on prepayment meters, which routinely charge people more than other billing methods. The forthcoming roll-out of smart meters offers an opportunity to give homeowners and constituents meaningful advice about how to use them, and the UK Government should also consider ensuring people can switch seamlessly from one supplier to another through the smart meter, without having to make an application. It should happen automatically to give people the lowest possible tariff. Wholesale prices should be passed on immediately by the energy companies to consumers as fuel savings. There should not be a delay.

A ComRes poll to be published tomorrow for the No Cold Homes campaign showed that 81% of people think that the UK Government should do more on fuel poverty, and 82% of people surveyed believe that the energy sector should do more. Tomorrow, the Chancellor will have an opportunity to take measures to increase household incomes by abandoning tax credit cuts. Austerity is not working for people. The cost of poverty through austerity is more misery. The solution to poverty is not to push those closest to the edge into further crisis. It is time to dump the failed dogma of austerity and turn to a path that focuses on the outcome of a fairer and healthier society.

4.51 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, Mr Hamilton. I congratulate the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) on securing it. He has four places to represent; I just have the one.

I apologise for having to leave. I have something else to go to, so I will not be here to hear the Minister, the hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), reply. She and I have a strong relationship in the House; she spoke at a party meeting and dinner of mine back home when she was a lowly Back Bencher. We have participated in many debates in this House, and it is always good to come along to another. I would love to hear her reply, but I will read it in *Hansard* tomorrow. I know that it will be positive and responsive to what we are saying and asking for.

I am concerned that in this day and age, people across our United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the fifth largest economy in the world, are unable to heat their homes, as the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey said in his introduction. I hope that all hon. Members present—and those who wanted to attend but could not, or have had to go and could not share their concerns—look forward to identifying the best way forward. The hon. Gentleman concluded his introduction with some ideas about how we can do that better. It is important that we have not just complaints but solutions; it is always good, and much more constructive, to have a solution when bringing forward a problem.

Despite the fact that it has been an issue for a number of years now, fuel poverty continues to grow across our nation. The population in my constituency, and indeed across the whole United Kingdom, is ageing. Inaction on this issue will only allow the negative trend to continue. The time for action is now. We can all talk about protecting the most vulnerable in our society—and we should, because it is important—but we need action as well as words. The proof of any pudding is in

the eating. Clearly, given that fuel poverty is rising across this country, it has been all talk and not enough action.

The time for action is now, and I hope that it starts today. Average electricity costs in Northern Ireland are 15% higher than on the mainland, so we know only too well the consequences of fuel poverty. We have the highest levels of fuel poverty in the United Kingdom; the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister estimates that up to 42% of Northern Irish households—believe it or not, those are the figures—experience fuel poverty. It is a massive issue. No matter how hard we try, this debate will not adequately reflect that 42%, a rate 13% higher than in Wales and a further 27% than in England.

Of course, regional circumstances go some way towards explaining the disparity, such as the electricity prices that I mentioned earlier and a higher dependence on oil for heating due to an underdeveloped natural gas network. There have been some good steps forward on the natural gas network. I supported the announcement in the summertime by one of the gas companies that there would be gas in Ballygowan, Saintfield and Ballynahinch in my constituency. That is good news. It has not been for want of asking—people have been asking for it for five, six and even seven years—but it is good that the gas network is at least advancing through my constituency, to give people another option. As the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey said in his speech, options are not available, because there is no competition. We need that as well.

As I have said, regional circumstances across the country will dictate people's fuel situation. That is just one. Measures such as the winter fuel allowance and payments to alleviate fuel poverty are well and good—we have used such methods in Northern Ireland to help those in need, and it has been a positive factor—but the fact remains that although they might help people get through the winter, they do not address the problem. We must address it in the long term.

Competition in electricity supplies has brought the price down for some who are able to switch, but for some people it is not as simple as having an alternative. Changing sometimes involves a cost factor that many cannot make. They cannot absorb that financial cost to move over to a different rate. I would be interested to hear, if not directly then by reading it tomorrow, what the Minister thinks can be done to enable those on low incomes to transfer from one energy source to another.

We need investment in the appropriate infrastructure so that regional disparities are reduced and the costs for those in more expensive regions are reduced. Action in Northern Ireland on fuel poverty has focused primarily on improving energy efficiency in homes and enhancing the quality of insulation and heating systems. Just last Thursday, I had the opportunity to ask the Minister during questions what was being done to help those in park homes, for instance, who need help on efficiency. She answered my question, and was helpful in her response, but many people in park homes are in the 55 to 80 age bracket. They are people who need heat more.

Maybe something could be targeted specifically at those in park homes, so they could take advantage of it to improve their energy efficiency. Quality insulation could be installed in many homes, and heating systems upgraded. Boiler systems have been done in Northern

[*Jim Shannon*]

Ireland, and I am sure they could be done elsewhere. I know that similar approaches have been used here on the mainland. We should continue to pursue such approaches where they work, but fuel poverty is still increasing across the country, even after the drop in oil prices, and the population is ageing. Those are the factors that we must consider.

We need to step up more than we have in the past. I am not being critical of anyone, Mr Hamilton; you know that that is not my way of doing things. However, I am keen to hear how the Minister and her Department can help the people who most need it right now. I thank the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey for giving me the chance to participate in this debate and to highlight the issues in Northern Ireland.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Fabian Hamilton (in the Chair): Order. Before I call the next speaker, let me repeat an announcement that I made before those in the Public Gallery arrived; it is directed towards them. A digital debate has taken place ahead of this debate, and Mr Speaker has granted a derogation to allow the use of electronic devices in the Public Gallery for the duration of this debate. Devices should be silent, and photos must not be taken.

4.58 pm

Dr Daniel Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hamilton, and to take part in this debate. I commend the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry)—I think that I have pronounced his constituency correctly—on securing it and on bringing a human element to the discussion. That is what we are all interested in: making a positive difference and improving the human condition. That is, I hope, the primary objective of Members on all sides of this Chamber. It is also very much at the heart, and in the spirit, of what the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey said in his opening remarks. It is a pleasure, as always, to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who picked up on that theme and focused the debate firmly on the need to look after our most vulnerable constituents.

In the last Parliament, we had debates on fuel poverty but we often got bogged down in definitions, which was sometimes helpful but sometimes unhelpful. There has been some difference historically across the United Kingdom, between the devolved Administrations and the UK Government, on how fuel poverty is defined. Generally, it is when more than 10% of someone's income is spent on an adequate heating regime, but there has been some concern about how to define a "heating regime". I believe that has led to a more complex formula, based on the Hills review, which will now be put in place generally to define what is meant by fuel poverty.

So far in this debate, we have not got bogged down in the exact definition of fuel poverty—if we had been, it would have detracted from the point because we are talking about the living conditions and the social circumstances of some of our most vulnerable constituents: people with mental illness, pensioners on fixed incomes

and, very often, people who are unemployed. We are also talking about people who live in what is often some of the most challenging housing, in that it lacks good insulation and good home energy efficiency measures. Much of that is in the private rented sector; the housing of many people living in fuel poverty is from the private rented sector. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will address that issue in her remarks.

However, it is worth highlighting that we have made some progress in addressing fuel poverty. The figures that I will cite are for England. As of 2013, the huge number of 2.35 million households in England were regarded as being in fuel poverty. Nevertheless, that is a fall from the number for 2010, which was 2.49 million. So progress has been made in reducing the number of households in fuel poverty, and that progress is welcome.

Commendable improvements have been put in place thanks to Government initiatives to improve energy efficiency across the country, with 3.8 million lofts and 2.1 million cavities being insulated through Government schemes since March 2010. The Government have a right to be proud of that record, but clearly there is still a lot more to do. In that context, we should recognise that there are 6 million households with a low income that have an energy efficiency of band D or lower, but as of July 2015 only 1.6 million energy efficiency measures had been installed in about 1.3 million of those homes. There are still many more homes in fuel poverty that we need to help, and many more people in those homes who need help to reduce their energy bills and to ensure that they can make ends meet.

I will touch briefly on the green deal, because the concept was a good one. However, the green deal was difficult to understand and often difficult to communicate. In helping people to tackle high energy bills, perhaps one of the issues—there may be lessons to be learned from Scotland in this regard—was that local authorities were not as proactively engaged in the process of delivering the green deal as they were in the delivery of more successful schemes, nor as proactive as local authorities in Scotland were in the delivery of the green deal. Perhaps we should reflect on that when we consider how we can support measures for households in fuel poverty in the future. Nevertheless, the concept behind the green deal was good.

Where are we now? A commendable initiative has been put in place. I believe that by 2018 rented homes will need to have energy performance certificates of band E or better, which will place a strong requirement on landlords to improve the energy efficiency of their properties and help to improve some of the least well insulated homes. Of course, that will also help the people living in those homes to reduce their home energy bills.

There is clearly a requirement on Ministers in the Department for Communities and Local Government to work collaboratively with the Minister who is here today and support her in ensuring that this important initiative, which will help to better insulate some of the worst insulated homes, is enforced, and so that DCLG puts pressure on local councils, which I believe can keep the income from any fines imposed as a result of the initiative, to enforce fines on landlords who do not comply with this requirement. This initiative can make a real difference to some of the most fuel-poor homes in the country.

We also have to encourage a more active engagement, perhaps through citizens advice bureaux and other organisations, from energy consumers who live in poorer homes. Notwithstanding the good point of information made about some of the challenges in highland and island homes, we know that the consumers who are more engaged with energy switching on the internet, often more affluent than other consumers, have often benefited from the energy market. However, there has been a challenge in ensuring that market competition reaches and benefits some of the people in fuel-poor homes and some of the most vulnerable consumers.

I wonder what the Minister's thoughts are about addressing that issue, and whether there may be some initiatives that her Department is considering to support and work with the CAB or other organisations to take this process forward. The energy market can work and deliver lower bills for consumers, but we know that it has not worked effectively and efficiently for the most vulnerable consumers. I am sure that we would all like to see that situation change and that there are mechanisms to achieve that change. Partnership with local authorities, as well as with the CAB and other voluntary organisations, may well be a way of better engaging consumers and helping to deliver the benefits of the energy market to the most vulnerable in our society.

Finally, I will speak briefly on the issue of rural communities, which was outlined very articulately in earlier contributions about highland and island communities—some of the most rural communities in the United Kingdom. However, there are also many constituencies from Cornwall to Suffolk to Lincolnshire—indeed, throughout the United Kingdom—that have remote rural energy consumers. Those consumers are often off the gas grid and reliant on other mechanisms to heat their homes.

In particular, there is a challenge for those consumers who rely on oil; I believe that 8% of consumers in rural areas use oil to heat their homes. The price of kerosene has dropped recently, which has been beneficial for those consumers, but we know that there are huge fluctuations in the cost of heating homes through oil and kerosene. I would be grateful to hear my hon. Friend the Minister's comments about how we can support those consumers who rely on oil and off-grid consumers in general. Perhaps we could examine the issue of biofuels and consider how its use can be better supported in the years ahead.

There are some positive things: fewer households in England were suffering fuel poverty in 2013 compared with 2010. However, there are still a number of issues to consider, which are related to how we can better engage and better support vulnerable consumers, particularly in rural and remote areas. I look forward to hearing my hon. Friend the Minister's response to the debate.

5.8 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hamilton.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), which is the neighbouring constituency to mine, for securing this important debate. It is important, as other hon. Members have said, with millions of households around the United Kingdom being affected by fuel poverty. As I look around Westminster Hall on the day when the

Scottish National party has its Supply day and a number of SNP Members are heavily engaged in the main Chamber, I am glad to say that there are seven SNP MPs here out of a total of 12 MPs. One has to ask the question, "Where is the Labour party?" It is missing from the debate in Scotland, having let the people of Scotland down, and its MPs cannot even be bothered to discuss this important subject, which affects constituents throughout the rest of the UK. It is no wonder that the people of Scotland have fallen out of love with the Labour party in our country.

I will deal specifically with fuel poverty in the highlands and islands. I am grateful to Changeworks, which has estimated the percentage of households in fuel poverty in that region. It bands each locality in the highlands into groups, and by its calculations there is no district in my constituency that has less than 47.9% of households in fuel poverty. In a number of districts, fuel poverty is evident in at least 73.5% of households. The Highland Council states that the context is that

"the Highlands and Islands of Scotland experience the harshest climatic conditions in the UK and record levels of fuel poverty"—

levels that are unprecedented. It goes on to say that

"there is far greater, area-wide dependence on the use of electricity for heating as well as lighting but the standard unit price charged is 2p a kw/hr more than in most other parts of the UK and 6p and more for the various 'economy' tariffs on offer"—

a point that my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey made earlier. The council continues:

"On top of all this there is also a far greater reliance in off-gas areas on using domestic heating oil and solid fuel which pushes up household heating costs further still."

As someone who lives in a rural area, I can say that it is one thing to rely on electricity coming through the grid, but having to check the oil tank frequently and ensure that there are adequate supplies of solid fuel is a different matter. According to the council:

"As a result, domestic energy bills in off-gas areas are, on average, around £1000 more per annum than the £1369 pa dual fuel national average (2014)"—

that is the cost of living in many of our rural areas, and wage levels in rural areas are often considerably lower than in more affluent parts of the country. It continues:

"To cap it all, customers on prepayment meters (often the least well off) not only have to pay additional standing charges but also discover that their notional right to change to a cheaper electricity supplier has become impracticable."

Those statistics should shame us all.

Let us put the highlands and islands in context with the rest of Scotland. The fuel poverty level in Scotland in 2013 was 39% of households. A key driver for the rate of fuel poverty has been the rise in fuel prices. The fuel poverty rate for 2013 would have been only about 11% if fuel prices had risen in line with inflation between 2002 and 2013.

One of the most fundamental questions that we must ask the Minister is: why do we have to accept that there are 14 regional energy markets in the UK, with consumers in the highlands and islands, who are some of the greatest users of energy in this country, paying that premium of 2p per kilowatt-hour? We must have a universal market throughout the UK. If it is good enough for postage stamps, we should have one for electricity distribution too, and that is in the gift of the current Government. I asked the Secretary of State a

[*Ian Blackford*]

written question to that effect not so long ago, and I was amazed that the response was that consumers in other parts of the country would have to pay more. The point that that answer seems to ignore is that such a market would introduce fairness, and no more would consumers in the highlands and islands be discriminated against by a Government who want to penalise them for living there.

That is not acceptable, and it must end—it should end tomorrow. Why do folk in my constituency have to accept higher rates of fuel poverty? The Government can act, must act and should act, and they should do it now. Why do the Government not invest in greater measures to deliver effective insulation and ensure that we can cut energy bills and fuel poverty? We can find the money for Trident, but not to allow folk to live in properly insulated, warm, fuel-efficient homes.

Alan Brown: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We all came out of the Trident debate this afternoon disappointed by the vote. Home efficiency is a serious matter. Home efficiency measures bring people out of fuel poverty, but they have the added effect of wider benefits, because less energy usage drives down the market cost. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government should rethink their strategy regarding the £12 billion subsidy they are creating for the right to buy? That money would be better invested directly in new build housing and home efficiency schemes for existing owners, which would also help our constituents by driving down market costs, and the Barnett consequential would allow the Scottish Government to continue their excellent work.

Ian Blackford: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I must contrast the Government's performance and behaviour with that of the Scottish Government on house building and home insulation over the past few years. It really is about time that the Government in Westminster stepped up to the plate. In light of the upcoming climate change talks, we have a responsibility to cut our energy consumption as far as possible, and we can do that if we invest more in insulation.

Research by Turn2us graphically shows the kind of challenges that those in fuel poverty face. The research found that one in two low-income households struggle to afford their energy costs, despite being in work. Those are people who will be disadvantaged by the cuts to tax credits that my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey mentioned. Turn2us states:

“Amongst the hardest hit are people with disabilities, with over two in three (67%) reporting their struggles, and families, with almost two-thirds of working parents (65%) unable to meet these costs. Worryingly, of those households who are struggling with energy costs, nearly half (48%) have done so for more than a year”—

this is a long-term, not a short-term, problem. Turn2us continues:

“The knock-on effect is severe, with a third (33%) forced to skip meals and over a fifth (21%) experiencing stress and other mental health problems.”

Is it a price that we as a civilised society are prepared to pay, that people in this country have to make the choice between food and fuel? There is something wrong with our country if that is the case.

Some of the comments made by people who participated in the Turn2us survey are stark. They include, “The bills are killing me, sometimes I have to contemplate paying all the rent or heating my home”; “There are many pensioners like myself who don't qualify for any help but still have to decide whether to eat or heat”; “We have stress, debt, arguments and a low mood at home”; “Starve or freeze? Either way you get ill and can't work, eat or pay any bills”; “No lights, only candles, only Hoover once a week, only use washing machine once a week, no heating, meals that cook quickly.” Those are the consequences of the high levels of fuel poverty we suffer from in this country.

The Scottish Government have used their powers to intervene to mitigate some of the effects of rising energy costs, but it has been the failure of Westminster, and of the regulator, to properly protect consumers that has led to marked deterioration in the level of fuel poverty. The Scottish Government are committed to tackling fuel poverty head on and ensuring that everyone in Scotland lives in a home that is warm and affordable to heat. However, those measures are undermined by austerity made in Westminster and delivered by a Conservative Government who are having such a huge impact on low and medium-income earners. That goes to the heart of the issue. There is evidence that families have to make the choice between heating and feeding.

There is not just a moral and ethical impact of that but a cost to society, with increased health costs as a consequence of the mental health issues that arise. Also, children are being sent to school in less than ideal circumstances because of family pressures, and our young people are not flourishing to the extent they should, which increases the burden to close the attainment gap. That is the social cost of fuel poverty, and the Government in Westminster have to accept responsibility for it. The proposed cuts to tax credits and other welfare cuts have caused concern that low-income, hard-working households' finances could be harder hit. The Government must change tack in the autumn statement tomorrow.

Fabian Hamilton (in the Chair): I am afraid that we have no time for other contributions from Back Benchers. May I ask the Scottish National party spokesperson and the Opposition spokesperson to keep their remarks to about five minutes, so that the Minister can have the remaining 10 minutes?

5.18 pm

Philip Boswell (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): On behalf of all the speakers, I thank you, Mr Hamilton, for your excellent chairmanship.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) for securing this debate on such a critical issue. I also thank other hon. Members for their excellent contributions. My hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) reminded us about the long-term high strike price of nuclear for Hinkley Point—twice the current price of electricity—and its impact on those in and on the cusp of fuel poverty. My hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Stuart Blair Donaldson) highlighted particular issues for rural communities.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is no longer in his place, talked about finding fuel poverty solutions. I completely agree with his call for less talk and more action on this critical issue, especially in relation to competition. I thank the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter), particularly for his reminder of our humanitarian obligations to address the issue. He urged us not to get bogged down in the associated definitions and technicalities. He focused on England and the green deal, which is an excellent initiative. He reminded us that high rural charges apply in England as well as in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) for his excellent contribution. He reminded us of the importance of this debate and commended the attendance of all, especially the high number of SNP Members who are here. Shockingly, there is no community in his constituency where fewer than 50% of people are affected by fuel poverty. I pause to let that point strike home. He also made key points about the smaller supplier choice in the remotest areas of Britain, on the blatant discrimination that exists and on the stark choice between eating and heat.

As I have stated in other debates, recent stats show that about 40% of households in Scotland are considered to be living in fuel poverty. I am sure all Members agree that that is unacceptable. The statistics for the highlands are shocking, and I thank my hon. Friend for bringing them to my attention. The statistics for Lochaber in particular are dreadful. We have also seen the impact of fuel poverty across the rest of the UK. That is nothing to be proud of, and in this decade of austerity, it will only get worse.

Fuel poverty means more than simply not being able to keep the heating on. Adolescents living in cold homes are five times more likely to have multiple mental health problems than adolescents living in warm homes. In addition, children living in cold homes are more than twice as likely to have respiratory problems as those living in warm homes. Critically, fuel poverty has a negative impact on the educational attainment and emotional wellbeing of children. It means that household income, which could otherwise be used to purchase healthy, nutritious food, goes on energy bills. The combination of mental and physical health problems, poor diet, emotional turmoil and diminished educational attainment caused by fuel poverty is a recipe for condemning people to the dreadful cycle of poverty. In essence, they are poor and paying for it. Some 40% of households in Scotland face the consequences of fuel poverty every winter, and winters are particularly harsh in Scotland.

Fuel poverty is the result of a combination of low household income, fuel costs and the poor energy efficiency of homes. Several of my colleagues and other Members have mentioned that. The contributing factors can be addressed in a number of practical ways, and that in turn will help to prevent fuel poverty. Low household income can be tackled through a number of measures. A living wage for everyone in work, not those just over the age of 25, would allow young individuals and families to afford the rising costs of fuel. Unfortunately, the cuts to working tax credit and child tax credit recently announced by the Conservative Government—so many households rely upon those credits to be able to pay for basic necessities—will only further punish lower-income households and put even more at risk of fuel poverty.

We must provide a fair deal for hard-working individuals and families and not force them to bear the cost of letting large corporations and the financial sector skip taxes. Notably, the tariffs for pay-as-you-go phones, which are used most by those in fuel poverty, are some of the highest on the market. We need to address that, because the market certainly is not and has no intention of doing so.

The energy market is dominated by the big six, and the days of standing by while they address their needs over those of consumers and make massive profits while so many suffer from fuel poverty must be brought to an end. As the hon. Member for Strangford said, it is about less talk and more action. The Competition and Markets Authority recently found that energy consumers were collectively being overcharged by £1.2 billion a year. Following that finding, I asked the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change what steps would be taken to amend policy in response to the overpayment. The Government's response was that no action would be taken until December 2015, well into winter and months after the finding was published. Meanwhile, ScottishPower quadrupled its profits last year—

Fabian Hamilton (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but we have only 15 minutes left for two more contributions.

Philip Boswell: I thank you for the reminder, Mr Hamilton. I will bring my remarks swiftly to a close.

Finally, there is huge scope for the Government to assist in making homes more energy-efficient, but we have yet to see that come to fruition. The green deal has already been stopped, and the reduction in the budget of the Department of Energy and Climate Change means that programmes such as the green deal home improvement fund, solar power subsidies and feed-in tariffs will be cut.

I welcome all the contributions made in today's debate. The need to tackle fuel poverty robustly is self-evident and compelling to everyone in the Chamber. I am delighted to hear Members from all parts of the House agreeing with that. There are real people behind the fuel poverty statistics, and that must not be forgotten. They have to make the difficult decision between buying food and heating their homes, and in a modern, developed society, the fact that 40% of Scots face that dilemma every winter is a disgrace. Swift, meaningful action must be taken.

5.26 pm

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to make my debut appearance as a Front Bencher in a Westminster Hall debate under your enlightened chairmanship, Mr Hamilton. I congratulate the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) on securing this important debate. I am sure this will be the first of many such debates with the Minister, and I look forward to the many more to come.

Today's discussion has been detailed, impassioned and generally of an excellent standard. Going through some of the points made by Members, someone—I cannot remember who—mentioned that fuel poverty is like a thief in the night, which is dramatic, but spot on. Another Member mentioned that fuel poverty is a bigger killer than all road traffic accidents and drug abuse combined, which is a startling fact. The hon. Member

[Clive Lewis]

for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) talked about the human component, which is something I want to come on to in my brief speech. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is no longer in his place, spoke of how his constituents are struggling in Northern Ireland. The hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) made some good points. He spoke about how 73% of households in some communities are experiencing some form of fuel poverty. He also touched on some things that I will not have a chance to talk about in my speech, such as the impact that energy companies across the UK are having on fuel poverty and how we begin to tackle that. I will press on, because time is brief.

In preparing for today's debate and listening to the detail of Members' contributions, I have been struck by just how easy it is to get sucked into the statistics and detail of fuel poverty. Other Members have touched on that. The detail is an essential component of understanding not only the scale of the problem, and ultimately the sheer depth of Government failure on the issue, but critically the resources required to turn the problem around. Before we get into the stats, however, I remind the Chamber that behind every percentile, every missed target figure and every set of depressingly high numbers, there is a fellow human being. Perhaps they are one of the 25,000 people expected to die this winter as a result of living in a cold home. Perhaps they are one of the over-65s, an age group from which one person is expected to die every seven minutes this winter because of fuel poverty. Perhaps they are someone who is disabled and unable to get out of the house, reduced to living in one or perhaps two rooms for the duration of the winter because of the fear of racking up excessively high heating bills. Perhaps they are one of the 1.5 million children across the UK living in fuel poverty. Maybe they are one of David Cameron's strivers, working as hard as they can but still struggling to heat their home. We know that more than half of the 2 million households living in fuel poverty have someone in work. This is the reality behind the statistics, and they are the people who this winter will pay a heavy price for the Government's failure to tackle the issue in any meaningful way.

Let us look at these statistics that are a badge of shame for any Government who claim to look out for the interests of all our citizens, poor or affluent. We know that up to a third of excess winter mortality, the figures for which come out tomorrow, are the result of people living in fuel poverty. Last year's rates saw excess winter mortality at 31,000 in England and Wales, up 29% from the previous year. We should absorb that figure—up 29%. Figures for Scotland are up by 4.1% to 19,908. In Northern Ireland the raw numbers were low, but the increase was large: a rise of 12.7%. That equates to 559 people who are no longer here with us because of fuel poverty.

Yet after five years of being in government, can the Minister tell us, hand on heart, that tomorrow's figures will go down and not up, and that their fuel poverty strategy is at last beginning to make progress? I look forward to hearing the Minister's response when she addresses the debate shortly. However, I am afraid that, whatever is said, the statistics and the facts speak for themselves.

In the Department of Energy and Climate Change annual statistics report, the number of households in fuel poverty in England was estimated in 2013 at 2.35 million, or—in other words—one in 10 homes where there was a choice between heating or eating. And it is not set to improve any time soon. In fact, by DECC's own measure, the next set of figures is expected to show an increase in fuel-poor households. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in the abject failure to get to grips with the plight of those in private sector rented accommodation. Compared with other housing sectors, the private rented sector has the highest proportion, at 9.1%, of the most energy inefficient homes—those in bands F and G.

We know the Government's stated goal in tackling this was that as many private rented homes as is "reasonably practicable" will be rated band C for energy efficiency by 2030. But between 2010 and 2013, this was achieved for only 70,000 fuel-poor households, leaving 95% still to be improved. It does not take a genius to work out that, at that rate of progress, the Department will miss its target by some 100 years.

Fabian Hamilton (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but we need the Minister to have enough time to respond to all the points that have been made, so I would be grateful if he could curtail his remarks.

Clive Lewis: I will. You have just destroyed my punchline, but it is fine, Mr Hamilton.

The Department will miss its target by some 100 years, which is not quite in the territory of Buck Rogers, who I believe woke up in the 23rd century, but, alas, not that far off either—sometime in the 22nd century.

So why such dramatic Government failure? Why the lack of vision and ambition in tackling this critical issue? Why are 6 million low-income families still living in badly insulated homes? Why has funding for energy efficiency for the fuel poor been cut in real terms by 20% and the installation of energy efficiency measures dropped by 65%? Perhaps some of those answers can be found in the debris and wreckage of the Government's sorry excuse for a fuel poverty strategy: one that has shifted, chopped, changed and staggered on like a weary foot soldier in Napoleon's winter retreat from Moscow.

First, there was the Warm Front—or, as it later became known, hot air—a Government-funded scheme that ended in 2013. Then came the green deal, hailed as "transformational", but which was scrapped with nothing to replace it. The zero-carbon homes plan, introduced by the previous Labour Government in 2006, was scrapped with nothing to replace it. The warm home discount, providing automatic electricity bill support to low-income households, is due to expire next year with no sign of renewal. The energy company obligation or ECO—a Government scheme to encourage and obligate larger suppliers to deliver energy efficiency measures—will finish next year with nothing to replace it.

Here is the irony: not content with scrapping any semblance of a coherent fuel poverty policy, the Government have also lowered the bar and reduced the ambition of their schemes. Dithering, inconsistency, U-turns and failure are the trademarks of this Government. I look forward to hearing the Minister tackle this issue.

5.34 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): I congratulate the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) on securing a debate on such an important topic. I can absolutely assure him that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) explained, we are all here to try to make a positive difference, and my heart is absolutely in this debate.

As we all appreciate in this Chamber, the fight against fuel poverty is a significant challenge. Some 2.35 million households in England were fuel poor according to the latest statistics. In Scotland, as so many Members have mentioned, fuel poverty affects nearly 40% of the population. In Wales, 400,000 households are affected. In Northern Ireland, the figure is nearly 300,000. We all use different measures of poverty, but it is a very serious issue, and the Government are determined to make sure that the price people pay for energy is as low as possible, which is why we have been acting to ensure that the impact on bills of paying for clean energy is controlled, limited and, where we can, lowered. We are also committed to making sure the market works effectively for consumers, including through our commitment to implementing as fast as possible the final recommendations of the Competition and Markets Authority, once those are achieved.

As the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey knows, action on fuel poverty is devolved. I am sure he and his hon. Friends will be raising their suggestions for action on fuel poverty with the SNP Government in Scotland, as well as with me. I am absolutely committed to the responsibility that we have in the UK to tackle fuel poverty, but I note that alongside different measures of fuel poverty, different approaches are being taken by our nations to tackling the issue.

So there are GB-wide schemes that are designed to tackle the underlying causes of fuel poverty: inefficient housing through the energy companies obligation, and low household income through the warm home discount. We are working with both the Scottish and Welsh Governments on how these policies can be effectively amended to tackle the root causes of fuel poverty in all nations.

The devolved nature of fuel poverty enables different nations to take the action that is appropriate for them. Each of our nations has policies tailored to address fuel poverty at the local level, such as Nest and Arbed in Wales, the central heating fund in England or the home energy efficiency programmes for Scotland.

Ian Blackford: Will the Minister give way?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry; I cannot give way.

I can assure hon. Members that we are working closely with the Scottish Government to set up a process and methodology for evaluating the impacts of schemes implemented in Scotland, on their own and in conjunction with schemes implemented in England and Wales, on the GB energy market, alongside other relevant UK obligations.

Hon. Members have mentioned energy prices for their constituents, particularly in Scotland. Our top priority is to keep bills down. This year, £57 million has been spent to protect bill payers in the north of Scotland from the high costs of distributing electricity. This represents a benefit of around £40 a year for each household in the north of Scotland.

Any move towards a single national network charge would produce winners and losers, a point highlighted in Ofgem's recent report. For Scotland specifically, 1.8 million households would face higher bills and 700,000 would see reductions. It is not a simple question, but I can assure hon. Members that I am committed to launching a public consultation around the end of the year to review the most appropriate level of support for electricity distribution charges in the north of the country.

I want to turn briefly to the action this Government have taken to tackle fuel poverty. More than 1.2 million households are seeing lower bills due to energy efficiency improvements through the ECO. We are committed to ensuring that a million more get the same benefits by the end of this Parliament. But as the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd), said last week, we are determined that the support available will be focused on those who need it most.

Our policies are having an impact. Since April 2010, Government policies have supported the insulation of 3.8 million lofts and 2.1 million cavities, and in 2013 we saw a fall in both the absolute number of households in fuel poverty, and in the fuel poverty gap. We are also determined to help households that, as hon. Members have mentioned, are off the mains gas grid and more likely to face higher energy costs, as well as more than twice as likely to be in fuel poverty. Off-gas-grid homes will have a focus in the central heating fund, specifically on dealing with the off-gas grid.

Finally, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich—

5.39 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

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