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**HOUSE OF COMMONS**  
**OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY**  
**DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

**Monday 30 November 2015**



# HER MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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(FORMED BY THE RT HON. DAVID CAMERON, MP, MAY 2015)

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# THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

## OFFICIAL REPORT

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

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

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 603

EIGHTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2015-2016

### House of Commons

*Monday 30 November 2015*

*The House met at half-past Two o'clock*

#### PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

**Mr Speaker:** As a guest of the Lawn Tennis Association, I had the pleasure and privilege of being present in Ghent to observe the Davis cup final over the weekend, and I feel sure that the whole House will wish to join me in expressing congratulations to the victorious British team. Captained by Leon Smith, it featured, legendarily, Andy Murray, Jamie Murray, James Ward, Kyle Edmund, Dan Evans and Dominic Inglot. It was a superb team effort to secure the cup, and to enable Britain to be the world champion of tennis for the first time since 1936. How fitting it was that the victory was sealed by a performance, both outstanding and majestic, by Andy Murray. We congratulate each and every one of those players.

### Oral Answers to Questions

#### EDUCATION

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### Autism Support

1. **Keir Starmer** (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): What support the Government provide to children with autism in the education system; and if she will make a statement. [902408]

**The Minister for Children and Families (Edward Timpson):** On behalf of Conservative Members and, I am sure, the whole House, let me echo the sentiments that have just been expressed about the Davis cup victory of the Great

British team. It was good to see the Scots leading the way in ensuring that we had our first Great British victory in about 70 years.

The Children and Families Act 2014 introduced significant reforms so that children and young people with autism could be better supported in education. The reforms have rightly focused on needs and aspirations, enabling all pupils, including those with autism, to achieve better outcomes in education and adult life. The Department is also funding the Autism Education Trust to deliver training to staff, the National Autistic Society to help to reduce exclusions, and Ambitious about Autism to support transition to college.

**Keir Starmer:** Netley primary school in my constituency has a fantastic resource base for 25 children with autistic spectrum disorders. Many of them are making excellent progress, but one of the concerns raised with me is that Ofsted's published data for the school, which includes children from the resource base along with other pupils, do not adequately reflect that. Does the Minister agree that Ofsted data should clearly take into account the specific needs and challenges of children with special educational needs such as autism, and will he agree to meet me to discuss the specific case of Netley primary school?

**Edward Timpson:** I should be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss what Netley primary school is doing, and some of the challenges it faces in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. We obviously want to ensure that every child, irrespective of his or her needs, is receiving the best possible education, and we are introducing progression measures throughout the school system so that every child's progress counts towards a school's overall performance. We shall also be introducing the first ever special educational needs inspection framework, along with both Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission. I am sure that that will help to deal with many of those issues, but I should be happy to discuss them further with the hon. Gentleman.

**Ben Howlett** (Bath) (Con): One of the key challenges for those with autism and Asperger's is the transition between leaving school and attending university, which is

a big step for young adults. Will the Minister join me in welcoming an initiative by Bath university, which hosts an annual autism summer school that gives young people with autism spectrum disorder a chance to experience all aspects of university and student life, and does he agree that it should be rolled out in the rest of the United Kingdom?

**Edward Timpson:** I am delighted to hear about the great work that is being done in my hon. Friend's constituency. I know that Bath university has a good and proud record of supporting all vulnerable children, but it is important for those who have autism to be given the same opportunities to move on to higher education. There are independent institutions, but, through the new code of practice and our special educational needs reforms, we have tried to bring forward the time when assessments take place to ensure that all children with a special educational needs background who have the potential to go on to higher education are given support as soon as they arrive at university, so that they can thrive and move on to better things.

**Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab):** I recently spent some time at Durants school, a secondary school for pupils with autism in my constituency. It does a fantastic job, but one of the big problems is that so little support is available to students who could leave and go into employment or training beyond secondary school. Will the Minister undertake to meet me, and the head teacher of Durants school, to discuss the problem?

**Edward Timpson:** My diary is filling up, and we are only on the first question. There is more that we can do, and the whole thrust of the special educational needs reforms is to move towards an ambitious birth-to-25 system so that those who have the potential to move on from secondary school into college, apprenticeships, university and the world of work have every chance to do so. In some areas of the country, the new supported internships have seen the number of young people moving into employment rising from around 15% to 70%. We know that there is more we can do through different routes, but we need to make them available to more young people. I am happy to discuss with the right hon. Lady how we can do that.

**Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con):** It is good to hear about the Government's support for children with autism. Will the Minister join me in welcoming proposals for additional resource in Rugby from MacIntyre Academies, who are setting up a new special free school specifically for children with learning difficulties?

**Edward Timpson:** I am very pleased to hear about the initiative in Rugby, which is one of many across the country that is using the new free schools programme to bring about a whole range of specialist schools for those with special educational needs. I think that that will include five in the next tranche of free schools that are specifically for children and young people with autism. This is a great step forward and it is good to see Rugby leading the way.

**Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab):** The Minister mentioned the importance of staff training in his initial answer, and I wonder whether he could comment further on the importance of building awareness and understanding

among teaching staff, so that children with autism and many other children with poor mental health and other additional needs really get an opportunity to develop and thrive in mainstream schools?

**Edward Timpson:** I have just come from a conference organised by the Nuffield Foundation, at which we heard that a new report on the educational attainment of children in care—the vast majority of whom have some form of special educational needs—was advocating exactly that. It proposed more training for the whole care workforce and all education staff. Through funding from the Department, the Autism Education Trust has trained more than 80,000 staff in schools, but we need to do more to ensure that there is consistency right across the country, so that all those children get their chance to thrive, irrespective of background.

**Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab):** To improve the provision of special educational needs and disability support for young people, including those with autism, it is vital that the best quality data are collated and the results shared to establish best practice. As the Minister knows, I was successful in bringing forward a private Member's Bill in 2008 to ensure that data on special educational needs were collated and published. However, that legislation has since been repealed by the Children and Families Act 2014, and many charities have told me that they now find it increasingly difficult to obtain that information. Will the Minister therefore give me an assurance that the data will continue to be published annually and to be made readily available to all bodies in the sector, including me, so that issues can be highlighted and improvements made?

**Edward Timpson:** I will look carefully at what the hon. Lady says. Another of my diary appointments is a meeting with her tomorrow to discuss this—and, I am sure, a whole range of other issues that cross my brief. I am conscious of the need to ensure, through the publication of the local offer that every local authority now has and through the increasingly rich data that are available on children with special educational needs, that we use those sources to inform our decision making on how we support children. I will use my meeting with the hon. Lady tomorrow to extrapolate the matter further and see what progress we can make.

### School Funding

2. **Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con):** What progress she has made on introducing a national funding formula for schools. [902409]

3. **Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con):** What plans the Government have to deliver fairer funding for schools. [902410]

7. **Andrew Bingham (High Peak) (Con):** What plans the Government have to deliver fairer funding for schools. [902414]

8. **Mr Alan Mak (Havant) (Con):** What plans the Government have to deliver fairer funding for schools. [902415]

10. **Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): What plans the Government have to deliver fairer funding for schools. [902418]

17. **Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): What plans the Government have to deliver fairer funding for schools. [902425]

**The Secretary of State for Education (Nicky Morgan):** The Government are firmly committed to implementing our manifesto pledge to make school funding fairer. In the spending review last week, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced our intention to introduce a national funding formula for schools, high needs and early years in 2017. This will mean that, for the first time ever, funding is transparently and fairly matched to pupils' and schools' needs, and we will set out our detailed plans in the new year.

**Mr Robertson:** I am grateful to the Secretary of State for that response; it is welcome that this is finally going to happen. May I urge her to introduce a full national funding formula for all schools as soon as possible? The longer we leave it, the worse the problem is going to get and the more difficult it will be to put it right. We need to ensure that children in Gloucestershire no longer lose out in the way they have been doing for far too long.

**Nicky Morgan:** My hon. Friend is right; we need to move as quickly as possible to ensure that low-funded areas such as his constituency of Tewkesbury are funded fairly and transparently. We have taken the first step by increasing Gloucestershire's schools budget by £12 million and protecting that amount, and we will now go further by introducing a national funding formula while ensuring that the pace of change provides security for schools and local authorities.

**Peter Aldous:** As Suffolk's schools have suffered from underfunding for many years, last week's announcement was extremely welcome. Time is of the essence in addressing this iniquity. The Secretary of State has said she will start work straight after Christmas, but I would be grateful if she went into a little more detail about the first steps she will be taking.

**Nicky Morgan:** I wish to thank my hon. Friend, who made a very valuable contribution to the recent petition to the Prime Minister calling for urgent action on fairer funding. I intend to consult in the new year, but I assure my hon. Friend that much work has been going on already, led by the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah), to unpick the funding formula so that all schools are funded fairly and all pupils have access to a good education.

**Andrew Bingham:** Schools in my constituency have suffered greatly under the current formula. For example, funding in Glossop is almost £300 per pupil less than in neighbouring Tameside, so for the sake of just a few miles the funding is about 6% less than it is elsewhere. Will the Secretary of State therefore ensure that the new funding formula she is going to work on—I am pleased to hear that she has started so quickly—will at last remedy this anomaly, which has been going on for far too long?

**Nicky Morgan:** My hon. Friend puts into words just one of the differentials between areas. It shows exactly why we need to tackle this unfairness in the funding formula—it is a matter of social justice that drives our determination to solve it—and why the Government are committed to introducing a funding formula to ensure that funding is transparently matched to need.

**Mr Mak:** Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Purbrook Park school, Havant academy and Crookhorn college, which have all recently received good ratings from Ofsted and all stand to benefit from this new fair funding formula?

**Nicky Morgan:** I, of course, take great pleasure in congratulating all the staff and pupils at Purbrook Park school, Havant academy and Crookhorn college on their hard work and their excellent Ofsted rating—I know how much hard work goes into getting that. As I said, we will consult in the new year and set out the schools benefiting in the detailed plans for a national funding formula.

**Pauline Latham:** I am glad the Chancellor announced that we would fulfil our manifesto commitment of creating a fairer funding system for schools during the spending review last week. Will the Secretary of State confirm when we will have a formula that is fair for all schools across the country? There are winners and losers now, as there have always been. Will it be any different in the future?

**Nicky Morgan:** My hon. Friend is right to say that there is patent unfairness in the system now. Some £16 million extra was allocated to schools in Derbyshire in 2015-16, and we will work with her and other stakeholders to make sure that the funding is based on the characteristics of pupils, rather than on unfair historical calculations.

**Andrew Bridgen:** As my right hon. Friend will be well aware, Leicestershire is second from bottom of the current funding formula league. Despite my constituency having some of the most deprived areas in the county, its children receive almost £500 per pupil less than those in the city of Leicester and a staggering £1,000 per year per pupil less than those in Birmingham, which is only 22 miles away. Will she assure the House that the new funding formula will correct this for our county of Leicestershire?

**Nicky Morgan:** I thank my hon. Friend very much for that. He will not be surprised to know that I am very well aware of the position of Leicestershire, having talked to parents, school governors and of course local councillors. In 2015-16, we made an additional £20 million available to Leicestershire and the county will continue to receive that funding in 2016-17, but he is absolutely right to say that we will be introducing a national funding formula to end the grossly unfair variations he highlighted in his question.

**Stephen Twigg** (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): The principle of fair funding is clearly right, but the devil will be in the detail. Will the right hon. Lady reassure the House that in areas of high poverty such as my constituency in Liverpool this will not result in significant cuts in spending on schools?



**Nicky Morgan:** I am pleased that we have got to questions from other Members of the House, and the hon. Gentleman rightly says that the principle is of course right. We will be looking in detail at the needs of the disadvantaged pupils. I should point out that we have also introduced the pupil premium—we did so after the funding formula was first introduced—at a cost of more than £2.5 billion a year. We want to make sure that there will be full consultation, and all Members and others will have an opportunity to have their say.

**Ian Austin** (Dudley North) (Lab): White working-class boys are three times less likely to go on to university than their counterparts from wealthier families, so should this review not be about closing that gap and addressing the social mobility crisis that exists in our country, instead of being about some sort of crude, one-size-fits-all, national standard, which is what the Members behind the Secretary of State are clearly urging her to introduce?

**Nicky Morgan:** As I have said, there will be a full consultation, but I think that the hon. Gentleman has got the wrong end of the stick. The funding formula to be consulted on will absolutely take into account the needs of disadvantaged pupils. If he wants to talk about working-class boys, let me say that it cannot be right that there are schools in Knowsley that are receiving hundreds of pounds less than schools in Wandsworth, and that is just one such example. We must end that inequity, and this Government have taken the difficult decision to do that.

**Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): I echo the concerns raised by the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous). Cambridgeshire schools, like Suffolk schools, have suffered historical underfunding. As 2017 is some way away, will the Secretary of State tell us what happens between now and then?

**Nicky Morgan:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. He will not be surprised to hear that I have also been lobbied by Cambridgeshire MPs, as well as by many other MPs from across the country. The £390 million extra that was announced for 2015-16 will continue to 2016-17. That amount of money will continue into the baseline for the rest of this Parliament. We must strike a balance between ensuring that we make swift progress on something that is demanded by MPs from across the House and getting it right, so that we do not end up having to untangle things again in a decade's time.

**Nigel Adams** (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): What assurances can the Secretary of State give the parents of pupils at Tadcaster grammar school, who were alarmed and surprised to receive a letter from the school recently consulting on potential financial contributions from them?

**Nicky Morgan:** Schools are able to ask for voluntary contributions, but they must make it clear to parents that the contributions are voluntary and that there is absolutely no obligation for them to pay. I understand that the Tadcaster grammar school consultation has been published on the website and that it does clearly state that children of parents who do not contribute will not be treated differently and that there is no obligation on parents to contribute. I am happy to clarify that message for my hon. Friend.

**Nic Dakin** (Scunthorpe) (Lab): We support moves towards fairer funding. Can the Secretary of State reassure head teachers who are worried about how the changed funding formula will impact on their schools that transition from the old to the new formula will be achieved in a way that ensures that no school will lose out in cash terms if their pupil numbers remain the same?

**Nicky Morgan:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I know that, in the past, he has been an influential member of the f40 group of local authorities. We will have a full consultation. We absolutely realise that we will not solve the problem by making schools' lives more difficult. Last week, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor confirmed that core schools funding is protected in real terms per pupil until the end of this Parliament.

### Education Funding: Scotland

4. **Dr Lisa Cameron** (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): What the effect of the spending review was on the amount her Department plans to spend on policies and services which in Scotland are devolved to the Scottish Government. [902411]

**The Secretary of State for Education (Nicky Morgan):** First, I wish the hon. Lady and all Members a happy St Andrew's day. As she will know, education is fully devolved in Scotland, so the Scottish Government will benefit from the Barnett consequential of the cash terms increase to my Department's budget that was announced last week. That includes real-terms protection for core schools funding, investing a record extra £1 billion a year by 2020 in free childcare and protecting core 16-to-19 funding, so that all young people gain the skills they need.

**Dr Cameron:** I wish all hon. Members a happy St Andrew's day. Gaelic medium education is available to children in 14 out of 32 Scottish local authorities. The benefits of that bilingual education are well documented. Does the Minister agree that cutting BBC Alba's funding as detailed in the spending review could impact on children learning in Gaelic? Will the Secretary of State join me in calling for that decision to be reversed?

**Nicky Morgan:** I am very happy to look further into the decision, which has not been raised with me before. I think we all agree—those of us who, presumably, are in this Chamber today because we care about education and the standards in our schools—that the most important thing in children learning is the quality of the teaching. As I have said, education is a devolved matter, and the Scottish Government will make decisions about how they are spending on languages.

**Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): My right hon. Friend has said that an additional £1 billion will be spent in Scotland. Notwithstanding devolution, which is all very good, cannot she be a little bit inventive and find some way of ring-fencing the money so that children can be taught that we are better off together?

**Nicky Morgan:** I admire my hon. Friend's bid to help the Scottish Government to write the curriculum, and I can see that SNP Members are ready to take him up on

that offer. I should clarify that I was talking about the extra £1 billion a year for free childcare, but he is absolutely right to say that we are spending more on education in this Parliament.

**Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I join my colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), in wishing the House staff and all Members latha Naomh Anndra sona dhuibh, or happy St Andrew's day.

I am glad that the Secretary of State has recognised the importance of BBC Alba, but of course it is more than just a TV channel in Scotland: it plays a crucial role in supporting parents of children in Gaelic medium education. Will she outline what she can do to support those parents as a result of this savage UK Government cut?

**Nicky Morgan:** The hon. Lady will be pleased to hear that I am not going to compete with her Gaelic.

Education funding, as I have already said, is devolved to Scotland and although BBC Alba might provide a valuable service I am sure that there is much more that the Scottish Government can do to support both parents and teachers in schools with the funding that they receive. I note that the attainment gap between the advantaged and disadvantaged in education in Scotland has not narrowed at all.

#### Sixth Form Colleges: VAT

5. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What discussions she has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the VAT treatment of sixth form colleges. [902412]

**The Minister for Skills (Nick Boles):** Following a sustained and effective campaign by my hon. Friend and others, in last week's autumn statement the Government announced that we will give sixth form colleges the opportunity to establish themselves as 16-to-19 academies as part of the area reviews of post-16 education and training. A sixth form college that becomes an academy will be eligible to recover its non-business VAT costs.

**Bob Blackman:** I thank my hon. Friend for all his efforts to lobby the Chancellor to ensure that that sensible decision was made. Will he update the House on the timescale for 16-to-19 colleges to transfer to the new regime? Most importantly, will those that are involved in mid-term reviews or area reviews at the moment or have not chosen to take this route be eligible for this new opportunity?

**Nick Boles:** Proposals for individual sixth form colleges to become academies will be considered alongside other recommendations from the relevant area reviews, which are taking place between now and March 2017. When a college's application is approved, it will be eligible for VAT reimbursement as soon as it has been re-established with 16-to-19 academy status. Once all the area reviews have been completed, we will of course review which sixth form colleges have not yet taken up the option and what course they want to take.

**Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): What justification is there for treating sixth form colleges differently from other schools for tax purposes?

**Nick Boles:** I assume that the hon. Gentleman will be able to tell me, not least because a Labour Government put up with it for 13 years.

**Neil Carmichael** (Stroud) (Con): Does the Minister agree that a great advantage of this change will be that it will enable sixth form colleges to become academies and therefore part of multi-academy trusts, which will stimulate them to even greater things?

**Nick Boles:** I entirely agree with the Chairman of the Select Committee on Education. One of the great opportunities that this proposal offers is for sixth form colleges to become part of academy groups, to become the sixth form for those academy groups and to thrive.

**Mr Gordon Marsden** (Blackpool South) (Lab): Does the Minister recognise that, although the Government finally allowed sixth form colleges welcome VAT relief through their becoming academies, it will not alter the cuts so far, which mean that three quarters of sixth form colleges have had to slash language and STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths—provision? Of course, they still face a real-term funding cut until 2020. Is it not critical that their excellence and innovation should not now be curbed by DFE micromanagement of them as academies?

**Nick Boles:** Last week—perhaps it was the week before—the hon. Gentleman was shroud waving, suggesting that there would be cuts of somewhere between 25% and 40% to the per pupil funding for 16-to-19 education. I did not hear him welcome the Chancellor's confirmation that it will remain flat cash throughout this Parliament. It is, of course, important that sixth form colleges can prosper, which is why we introduced this proposal.

#### Education Maintenance Allowance

6. **Natalie McGarry** (Glasgow East) (Ind): What recent assessment she has made of the effect of the abolition of the education maintenance allowance on educational participation and attainment inequality. [902413]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Mr Sam Gyimah):** The purpose of the education maintenance allowance was to raise educational participation. Our reforms, including targeted routes to employment for all 16 to 19-year-olds and the creation of 3 million apprenticeships, deliver far higher participation and attainment than EMA on its own ever did.

**Natalie McGarry:** In Scotland, EMA provides a lifeline of support for talented young people from a low-income background to give them access to decent opportunities. In England, EMA has been yet another casualty of the Government's austerity obsession. Why has the Minister not followed the lead of the Scottish Government, who have not only retained EMA support but from January will expand that key support to an additional 12,000 students in Scotland?

**Mr Gyimah:** I thank the hon. Lady for her question and congratulate her on her recent engagement to a Conservative councillor. I did not think such things were possible, but they are yet another reminder that there are ways in which we are better together.

I draw the hon. Lady's attention to the point made by the Scottish Education Minister on narrowing the gap: children from the 20% most deprived areas in Scotland are seven times less likely to attain three A grades in their highers than their most affluent peers. There are no lessons that we can take from Scotland on narrowing the gap.

**Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Of course in Scotland, when we put together our figures on further and higher education and compare them with figures put together on further and higher education in England, we see that Scotland is leading.

As a teacher, I am only too aware of how important EMA is for keeping talented young people not in apprenticeships but in education, so what steps has the Minister taken to ensure that youngsters from disadvantaged backgrounds can continue to access further and higher education?

**Mr Gyimah:** Education is a devolved matter in Scotland, but if we are talking about huge cuts, there were 141,726 fewer college places in 2013-14 than in 2008-09. As I said, we will take no lessons from the Scottish National party.

#### School Attendance

9. **Caroline Nokes** (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): What plans the Government has to improve attendance in schools. [902416]

**The Minister for Schools (Mr Nick Gibb):** Regular attendance at school is vital for academic success. Overall absence rates are down from 6% in 2009-10 to 4.4% in 2013-14, amounting to some 14.5 million fewer school days lost. We have supported head teachers to improve school behaviour, and we have addressed the misconception that pupils are entitled to time off for holidays in term time. Some 200,000 fewer pupils regularly miss school compared with 2010.

**Mr Speaker:** While we are on the subject of congratulations, I congratulate in public, as I have congratulated him in private, the Minister of State on his recent marriage. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

**Caroline Nokes:** I echo the Speaker's comments. Does my hon. Friend agree that improving attendance can sometimes come about as a result of a range of innovative and interesting measures? The all-girls breakfast club at Cantell school in Southampton is a brilliant example of how building a strong and cohesive school community can improve attendance.

**Mr Gibb:** I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, and to my hon. Friend for the congratulations. I echo the words of the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah): we are better together.

I am delighted to pay tribute to the work of the breakfast club at Cantell school in Southampton, which is an excellent example of the innovative approaches that many schools take to improve attendance. The Department funds the charity Magic Breakfast to provide free, sustainable breakfast clubs in 184 schools in disadvantaged areas. We are also giving parents new rights to request breakfast clubs and other wrap-around care, which should expand their availability.

**Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): Has the Minister considered the impact of the Government's welfare policies on school attendance by disabled pupils over 16 who are required to attend interviews for the personal independence payment? I have been dealing with the case of a constituent who has been summoned under threat of sanction for this stressful process in the middle of their exams. Will the Government take action to ensure that the timing of PIP assessments for those in full-time education works around the school year and the timetable?

**Mr Gibb:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising that matter with me. I will, of course, look at the case in detail and write to her.

#### Holiday and Wrap-around Care

11. **Mike Wood** (Dudley South) (Con): What steps the Government is taking to give parents a greater say in access to holiday and wrap-around care. [902419]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Mr Sam Gyimah):** Childcare is the key issue for many parents, not just for under-fives, but for all children. That is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced in October that parents will be granted a new right to request wrap-around or holiday childcare at their school. Childcare providers will also be given the right to request the use of school sites outside school hours to provide this care.

**Mike Wood:** Flexibility is key in the provision of childcare, for both school-age and pre-school children. Can the Minister assure my constituents that, as the Government extend childcare provision, they will allow for greater flexibility over things such as drop-off and pick-up times?

**Mr Gyimah:** The autumn statement set out the record levels of funding available to deliver our pledge of 30 hours of free childcare. As working fathers, my hon. Friend and I know that it is not just about the money; it is about flexible childcare available when it is needed. We will be consulting in the new year on ways to deliver that.

**Ms Karen Buck** (Westminster North) (Lab): Has anyone told Westminster City Council of the Government's intention to increase choice in school-age childcare? The council has just announced an end to all funding for the play service, which provides its after-school care for primary school-age children. It offered this to schools and, the last time I asked, only one school had agreed to take on the service because of the pressure on school budgets. Is it not the case that, in places such as Westminster, it is essential that working parents have the opportunity of decent after-school childcare, but that that is in retreat, not in advance?

**Mr Gyimah:** That is precisely the purpose behind the announcement that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made. Where schools cannot deliver wrap-around care themselves, they can work with private and voluntary providers to use their site to deliver that wrap-around care. This change will set a new expectation for schools to follow through on it.



**Pat Glass** (North West Durham) (Lab): Questions about childcare—wrap-around, flexible childcare and childcare during school holidays—are particularly opportune. Before the election in May, the Minister told us that Labour's 25 hours of free childcare would cost £1.2 billion. The independent Institute for Public Policy Research has said that the Government's 30 hours will cost £1.6 billion. Last week, the Chancellor told us that he was setting aside just over £600,000 for this, which leaves a shortfall of almost £1 billion annually. Will that come from quality, will it come from ratios or will it come from both?

**Mr Gyimah:** It was impossible for the IPPR to know how much the Government's policy would cost before it knew the eligibility criteria for the new entitlement. The Chancellor announced the eligibility criteria at the autumn statement and made it clear that there is record investment going into childcare—£1 billion in 2019-20. That is something we should all be proud of.

### Educational Provision: City Regions' Contribution

12. **John Mann** (Bassetlaw) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government on the potential contribution by city regions to developing educational provision. [902420]

**The Minister for Children and Families (Edward Timpson):** The hon. Gentleman will be pleased, I am sure, to learn that the Secretary of State regularly meets Cabinet colleagues to discuss a range of issues. City regions can certainly play a role, as seen from our work with Greater Manchester on a review of children's services, and we already have combined authorities in Sheffield and Manchester leading the area reviews of post-16 education provision. We expect new combined authorities and city regions to work closely with the eight regional school commissioners.

**John Mann:** That was a bit of waffle. Is it not a good idea formally to link secondary academies with city regions so that the economic development and education potential can be rolled together? Will the Minister take that forward to other Ministers and get it properly on the agenda?

**Edward Timpson:** The hon. Gentleman has a habit of calling anything that anyone else says waffle. I have described what is happening, which is devolution, which I am sure he will welcome, as the area in which his constituency is located is looking to create a combined authority. We have the regional school commissioners doing excellent work, holding each area to account and making sure that regions are raising the performance of schools and education across their area. I am sure that is something he would welcome in Bassetlaw and elsewhere.

**Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the bonus of city regions is that they are a way of bringing together public services, including those delivering skills and education to younger people, to create better outcomes that reflect the priorities of their areas, such as the heart of the south-west?

**Edward Timpson:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One of the advantages, of course, is that such regions bring together post-16 education and employers, which are parts of the system that we need to connect much more closely so that we deliver the opportunities that we know are out there for young people who have ambition about where their world of work will be, they have a greater understanding of what they can achieve and a much closer relationship with the businesses that want to employ them.

**Tristram Hunt** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab): Was the Minister as delighted as I was on Friday when the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), the Mayor of London, supported Labour policy by advocating a schools commissioner for London? When will the Government accept political reality, start devolving power, introduce some democratic accountability into our schools policy and raise standards at a local level?

**Edward Timpson:** Like the hon. Gentleman, I am always delighted to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), who speaks with a lot of wisdom on a range of subjects. On this issue, the most important thing is that we devolve power to where it is most needed—to teachers and head teachers, so that they can run their schools in the free way that I know deep down he really wants them to.

### Teacher Recruitment

13. **Sir Simon Burns** (Chelmsford) (Con): What steps she is taking to ensure adequate recruitment of teachers by primary and secondary schools; and if she will make a statement. [902421]

**The Minister for Schools (Mr Nick Gibb):** There are now more better qualified teachers in England's classrooms than ever before. We are attracting top graduates and career changers with generous incentives, including tax-free bursaries worth up to £30,000 and the opportunity to earn a salary while training. This year over 2,000 more post-graduate trainee teachers were recruited than in 2014-15. We exceeded our target for new primary teachers and finished ahead of last year in key secondary subjects such as maths and physics.

**Sir Simon Burns:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his response, but can he explain how schools that have historically struggled to attract great teachers can find the best and brightest teachers for their areas?

**Mr Gibb:** My right hon. Friend raises an important point. That is why we have established the new national teaching service, which by 2020 will place 1,500 outstanding teachers and middle leaders in underperforming schools in areas that, as he suggests, find it hardest to attract, recruit and retain good teachers.

**Valerie Vaz** (Walsall South) (Lab): UCAS has reported a shortfall in trainee teachers for chemistry and physics. What bold steps will the Minister take to ensure that young people are taught by qualified teachers in science, technology, engineering and maths?

**Mr Gibb:** We have introduced generous bursaries—up to £30,000—for top physics graduates coming into teaching. If we look at this year's teacher training recruitment, we see that in physics we recruited 746 graduates, compared with 637 last year, and in mathematics we recruited 2,407 graduates, compared with 2,170 last year. There is more to do, but we are heading in the right direction.

**James Berry** (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): Head teachers in my constituency tell me that the biggest block to the recruitment and retention of teachers is the cost of housing. Can my hon. Friend confirm that in the review of the funding formula the price of property in local areas where teachers have to rent or buy will be factored in?

**Mr Gibb:** As the Secretary of State has said, we are determined to tackle the historic unfairness of the funding formula. The Secretary of State and the Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah), will be consulting on that in the new year.

**John Pugh** (Southport) (LD): Recent Government figures show that there is a 50% recruitment shortfall in design and technology. Is not there a case for urgent and special attention?

**Mr Gibb:** We continue to offer bursaries for graduates coming into teaching design and technology. We have also revised the curriculum, which we believe has made it a more attractive and rigorous qualification. The number of students taking it at GCSE and A-level has been falling over a number of years, and to tackle that we have improved the qualifications in that subject. That should follow through into more people becoming graduates in those subjects and moving into teaching.

**Rob Marris** (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): Retention in teaching is a far bigger problem than recruitment. We are haemorrhaging teachers. That is caused largely by the adverse workload that teachers are placed under. What specific steps are the Government taking to lessen teacher workloads in England?

**Mr Gibb:** The doom-mongering notion that the hon. Gentleman is citing is wrong. Eighty-seven per cent. of teachers who qualified in 2013 were still teaching a year later, and 72% of those who qualified in 2009 are still teaching five years later. He should stop talking down what is a very popular profession in this country. We are tackling the excessive workload that teachers inherited from the previous Labour Government. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State introduced the workload challenge, and we have three working groups specifically tasked with tackling the issues that were identified in it.

#### EU Funding: Learning Outcomes

14. **Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): What steps her Department is taking to use EU funding to improve learning outcomes. [902422]

**The Minister for Schools (Mr Nick Gibb):** The main sources of EU funding for education are the European social funds and the Erasmus+ programme. Many schools take advantage of the Erasmus+ programme,

which supports partnerships among schools across the EU, including through the funding of foreign language assistance. The Department works to ensure effective use of the European social funds, which contribute to technical education, including apprenticeships and 16-to-19 training.

**Hannah Bardell:** I thank the Minister; I am glad we got someone to answer in the end. Has he considered the consequences that a vote to leave the EU would have for the funding channels for programmes such as Erasmus, with an outcome that would destroy the rich cultural and linguistic programmes that the EU offers, including Erasmus and school trips to visit key institutions such as the Commission and the European Parliament?

**Mr Gibb:** The Prime Minister is focused on a successful negotiation. The Government are clear that Britain's best future lies within a reformed European Union if the necessary changes can be agreed. He set out the United Kingdom's position in his recent letter to the President of the European Council, Mr Tusk.

24. **Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): [902432] Does the Minister agree that as the United Kingdom sends £350 million each and every week to Brussels, just a small amount of that spent on teachers and schools would be of great advantage? Is not that one of the reasons for coming out of the EU?

**Mr Gibb:** These are the issues that the Prime Minister is tackling, and we will debate them in due course.

**Mr David Nuttall** (Bury North) (Con): Further to that point, does my hon. Friend agree that if schools use propaganda provided by the European Union, teachers must make certain that both sides of the argument on our membership of the European Union are fairly and properly put to pupils?

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The question is about learning outcomes.

**Mr Gibb:** In the name of improving educational outcomes, Mr Speaker, the Education Act 1944 made it absolutely clear that any lessons involving political issues have to be balanced.

#### Topical Questions

T1. [902398] **John Pugh** (Southport) (LD): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Education (Nicky Morgan):** Last week my Department published a call for evidence to help broaden our understanding of out-of-school education settings and the potential scope of the system of oversight announced by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister last month. We are committed to safeguarding all children and protecting them from the risk of harm and extremism, including in out-of-school settings, many of which provide valuable learning opportunities. I would ask all interested parties to make a contribution before 11 January.



**John Pugh:** Local education authorities are Ofsted-inspected, which is a good and rigorous system. What plans are there to inspect academy chains, by Ofsted or any other means?

**Nicky Morgan:** It is very nice to hear the hon. Gentleman, who I believe is his party's education spokesman, although we have not heard much from him on education since he took up that position. He will be aware that these matters were explored fully by the Education Committee in the previous Parliament. We want Ofsted to inspect individual schools and the support they get. It is able to question multi-academy trusts and chains as part of those inspections.

**Mr Speaker:** We have heard from the hon. Gentleman twice today, and it is worth pointing out that he is a philosopher. That we know: it is on the record on his CV.

T2. [902400] **Chris Green** (Bolton West) (Con): What are the Government doing to encourage more young people to study maths and numeracy subjects in school?

**The Minister for Schools (Mr Nick Gibb):** Our ambition is that by 2020 the vast majority of young people will study maths to the age of 18. We have strengthened GCSE maths, to provide a more secure basis for studying the subject at A-level. We have increased mathematical content in science GCSEs and A-levels. We have introduced the new core maths qualifications so that all students have the opportunity to study the subject after the age of 16. We have also launched the Your Life campaign, to promote to young people the value of studying mathematics and science.

**Lucy Powell** (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing me to arrive a few moments late, as I had to attend a very high-profile meeting elsewhere on the estate. Members can read all about it in the papers later.

Does the Secretary of State now accept that there is a growing teacher shortage in our schools?

**Nicky Morgan:** I hope the hon. Lady might be able to tell us whether she is going to continue to be a member of the shadow Cabinet after this very exciting vote, but let us talk about the issue at hand. We have always been very clear that there is a challenge in teacher recruitment. Although the overall vacancy headline rates are low, we are aware that there are issues in certain subjects and in certain parts of the country, which is why I announced the creation of the national teaching service earlier this month.

**Lucy Powell:** I thank the Secretary of State for that reply. It is good to hear that she now accepts that there is a growing problem of teacher shortage. That stands in contrast to some of the earlier answers given by the Minister for Schools. Last week an important report showed that half of all schools had unfilled vacancies at the start of this academic year. To try to plug those gaps, one in four schools are increasingly using supply teachers; one in six are using non-specialist teachers to cover vacancies; and more than one in 10 schools are resorting to using unqualified staff to teach lessons.

Does the Secretary of State think that that is good for raising standards in schools, or does she think that that is not happening?

**Nicky Morgan:** What is needed is for all Members on both sides of the House to recognise the enormous contribution that teachers make. Those who try to talk down teaching at every opportunity by talking about the problems do not help our schools and education service at all. One of the subjects where recruitment is hardest is modern foreign languages, so the hon. Lady might like to reflect on the fact that in 13 years of her party being in power, the number of those teaching, studying and taking exams in modern foreign languages plummeted. That means it is now much harder to find students to teach modern foreign languages.

T4. [902402] **Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): What steps have been taken to encourage more schools outside London to work with charities such as Free the Children?

**The Minister for Children and Families (Edward Timpson):** I recall meeting my hon. Friend a few years ago to discuss the benefits derived from the work of Free the Children. It is good to hear that she remains a strong advocate of extracurricular activities that support academic attainment and employability skills and that help children to become active citizens. That is why this year we have invested more than £5 million in building children's character resilience, including £3.5 million in grants to help organisations across the country, not just in London, to deliver competitive sport, volunteering and social action projects.

T3. [902401] **Clive Lewis** (Norwich South) (Lab): A number of parents whose children attend the Hewett academy in my constituency have made complaints about the implementation of a new uniform policy. At short notice, parents are being told that they must buy a new, full and costly uniform. Children who do not do so have been forced to attend the learning support unit—what is, in effect, an exclusion room. With limited academy accountability, what can Ministers do better to protect parents who cannot afford such upfront costs from their children being punished?

**Nicky Morgan:** I am very happy to look into the individual case, but I am afraid to say that this is about the hon. Gentleman and others yet again putting more barriers in the way of that school dramatically improving. Since 2005—for more than 10 years—the school has been below the national average for five A\* to C English and maths GCSEs. It is now an academy and it is sponsored by a trust, which the hon. Gentleman knows has done extremely well for another school, Norwich primary academy, in his constituency. I am happy to look at the individual case, but the hon. Gentleman would do better as the local MP to work with the school to raise the educational attainment of all children.

T5. [902403] **Jake Berry** (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): The Government's ambition to make sure that every child, regardless of background and circumstances, receives a high-quality education extends to children with special educational needs, including those at the fantastic Tor View school in my constituency. One year on from the

special educational needs and disability reforms, will the Minister update the House on what progress is being made?

**Edward Timpson:** I am pleased to hear about the work that my hon. Friend is championing in his constituency. The reforms we have brought in represent the biggest change to and the biggest opportunity for special educational needs and disability support in a generation. Good progress is being made. This is a three-year transition, but to date all councils have published their local offer, setting out the support for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities in their area. Integrated education, health and care plans are also available for the more complex needs that have to be addressed. As I mentioned a few moments ago, we are now working, with Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission, towards the introduction of the first ever SEND inspection framework to ensure parents and young people know whether they are able to access the range and quality of services that they need.

T6. [902404] **Dr Lisa Cameron** (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): Following the Paris attacks, there is a real concern that intolerance towards ethnic minority pupils could intensify. How will the Secretary of State ensure that ethnic minority pupils continue to participate fully at school, and what plans does she have to prevent religious intolerance?

**Nicky Morgan:** The hon. Lady asks a very important question. Sadly, it is ever more becoming something that we are all having to think about. Religious intolerance in schools is unacceptable. All schools are required to promote the fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs. Schools should be places where we promote community cohesion—for example, through the national curriculum programme for citizenship, and the National Citizen Service—and, of course, such curriculum subjects teach about the importance of respecting others. I am pleased that many schools already do that in very diverse areas, but we will continue to focus on this important matter.

T7. [902405] **Sir Simon Burns** (Chelmsford) (Con): When considering the review of schools funding, will my hon. Friend ensure that it addresses the problem that has arisen in recent years with the underfunding of the two grammar schools in Chelmsford and other grammar schools in Essex? It seems particularly unfair that they should suffer in the way they have from the current funding formula.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Mr Sam Gyimah):** As my right hon. Friend is aware, we have protected the core schools budget in real terms, and we intend to make the school funding formula fairer. I can assure him that King Edward VI grammar school and Chelmsford County high school for girls will receive funding that reflects their pupils' needs transparently and fairly.

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): On Friday, I had a meeting with the Glasgow English for Speakers of Other Languages Forum, whose funding is under pressure at a time when demand is increasing. Will the Secretary of State tell us whether any funds from the refugee

resettlement programme will be made available for ESOL? Generally, what steps is she taking to promote ESOL as a means of cultural understanding?

**Nicky Morgan:** The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. The speaking of English is hugely important for integration. For anyone who comes to this country in need, we can support them if they want to become full members of our society, so English is very important. I am very happy to take this matter away and to talk to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development. There are strict rules about what overseas development aid money can be spent on, but I am happy to take that away and to write to the hon. Gentleman.

T8. [902406] **Dr Tania Mathias** (Twickenham) (Con): Constituencies such as mine have an increasing need for school places and for new schools, but a lack of suitable sites for new schools. Will the Minister visit Twickenham with me to see what more the Government can do to help local authorities find suitable sites for schools in places such as mine?

**Mr Gyimah:** As the Secretary of State said at last week's London education conference, we recognise just how challenging affordable sites and buildings are in our capital. We will work with local authorities to support our dedicated property team in the Education Funding Agency by identifying any potential sites. When it comes to school buildings and repairs, the Government are creating places and fixing the school roof while the sun is shining. I will of course be happy to meet my hon. Friend.

**Jess Phillips** (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): Following last week's devastating report from the Children's Commissioner about 450,000 children being sexually abused in the past two years, does the Secretary of State still disagree with me and, now, with the Children's Commissioner that healthy relationships education should be compulsory in all of our schools?

**Nicky Morgan:** I do not disagree with the hon. Lady that such education should be compulsory, but I think it should be age-appropriate. Just because something is in statute, which is what I think she is referring to, does not mean that it is always taught well. On these issues, I would rather see that there is a good curriculum, and that it is taught well by confident teachers or people coming in from outside who will inspire young people.

T9. [902407] **Neil Carmichael** (Stroud) (Con): Will the Secretary of State join me in saluting the work of STEM ambassadors and tell the House what further steps have been taken to ensure that more children do STEM subjects in schools?

**Mr Gibb:** I join my hon. Friend in saluting the work of STEM ambassadors. Since 2010, A-level entries into STEM subjects have increased significantly by 15% for chemistry, 15% for physics and 18% for maths. Maths is now the single most popular A-level choice, with 92,000 entries last year. We want to go further. The Your Life campaign, for example, is targeting year 11 pupils as they make their A-level choices, with the aim of increasing the uptake of the physics A-level by 50% in three years.

**Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): Will the Minister for Schools meet me to discuss funding for the new Ernesford Grange school in Coventry?

**Mr Gibb:** I am very happy to have such a meeting.

**Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): Prince William school in Oundle recently converted to an academy, but for many years it has suffered from a chronic lack of investment. I am grateful to Ministers for the interest that they have shown to date, but what reassurance can they give that such schools will be at the top of the Government's investment priorities?

**Mr Gibb:** We are planning to spend £23 billion on school buildings between 2016 and 2021. In February, we announced allocations of £4.2 billion for between 2015 and 2018 to improve the condition of existing schools. That includes the condition improvement fund, for which Prince William school is eligible to apply. The core priority of the CIF is to keep buildings at academies and sixth-form colleges safe and in good working order. I am happy to discuss the issue further with my hon. Friend.

**Steven Paterson** (Stirling) (SNP): In June, the Scottish Government launched the new children, young people and families early intervention fund, which is focused on reducing educational inequality and allowing young people to achieve their potential. Given that today is St Andrew's day, are the Government prepared to say that they will look at that fine example in Scotland and implement something similar down here in England?

**Nicky Morgan:** We have already had a lot of jokes today about being better off together and I am always happy to look at what is happening in Scotland. The hon. Gentleman and the Scottish Government might want to look at what we have done in England to narrow the attainment gap between the advantaged and disadvantaged. They might find that they can learn something from us.

**David T. C. Davies** (Monmouth) (Con): How many schools require pupils to wear a burqa or jilbab as part of their uniform?

**Mr Gibb:** We do not collect data on that, but it is an issue for the headteacher and governing body of a school. By law, they have to act reasonably and as a public body.

**Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): The Government's own findings show that the 26-week timescale that is applied in care proceedings is leading to rushed and unsuitable placements for children under special guardianship orders. In the light of that, will the Minister accept what the social work profession has known all along: that 26 weeks is not sufficient to plan properly for a vulnerable child's life?

**Edward Timpson:** From memory, the hon. Lady was on the Children and Families Public Bill Committee, so she will know that when we brought in the 26-week timescale for care cases, the average length was over 55 weeks. In anyone's view, that is well over what it should be for a decision about a child's long-term future. We have managed to bring the average down to close to 26 weeks. In relation to special guardianship orders, we need to ensure that the assessment of the potential carers for those children is as robust as it is in respect of any other decision about a child's long-term permanence. There is a concern that, in too many cases, that is not happening.

**James Morris** (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): Many headteachers in my constituency are reporting an increased prevalence of mental health problems among young people in schools. Does the Secretary of State agree that we need better integration between schools and child and adolescent mental health services to deal with that growing problem?

**Mr Gyimah:** My hon. Friend is a passionate campaigner on mental health issues. He will be aware that we have funded a £1.5 million joint pilot with the Department of Health on a single point of contact between schools and CAMHS, so that parents do not have to go through the aggravation of trying to work out how to access those vital services to support their children.



## High Speed 2

3.34 pm

**Tristram Hunt** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make a statement on his latest decision on the route and station choices for High Speed 2.

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Patrick McLoughlin)**: The Government are getting on with building HS2. Legislation to build the first phase to Birmingham is progressing well, and last week the Chancellor confirmed the funding. Today we are responding to the report published last year by Sir David Higgins, chairman of HS2. He recommended building the line to Crewe more quickly, so as to bring the benefits to the north sooner. I have therefore announced my decision on the section from Fradley in the west midlands to Crewe, now referred to as section 2a. We intend to accelerate the building of that section so that it opens in 2027, which is six years earlier than planned. That will bring faster journeys to Crewe, Manchester, and other cities in the north and Scotland, thereby supporting growth, jobs and the northern powerhouse. I have set out those plans in the Command Paper and supporting documents, copies of which have been placed in the Library.

The remainder of phase 2 will see the full Y-route built to Manchester and Leeds by 2033, and today I have set out my plans for the rest of the Y-route, ahead of a route decision next year. I am also asking HS2 to explore how we might best serve Stoke, including via a junction at Handsacre. Handsacre junction will be part of phase 1 and will allow trains to serve stations on the existing line through Staffordshire.

I want to ensure that those affected by the scheme are properly compensated. The Government are committed to assisting people along the HS2 route from the west midlands to Crewe. Today I am launching a consultation on a proposal to implement the same long-term property assistance schemes for phase 2a as we have for phase 1. As with phase 1, the Government propose to go above and beyond what is required by law, including discretionary measures to help more people. HS2 will deliver economic growth for this country, not just in the immediate future but for the long term, and that is why we continue to commit to this essential project.

**Tristram Hunt**: I thank the Secretary of State for his response. Today marks a sad day for Stoke-on-Trent as our campaign for “Stop in Stoke” as part of phase 2 of High Speed 2 hits the buffers. We have long argued that the rail line from London to Manchester could have been achieved more quickly and cheaply with a route through the potteries, and as we seek to mitigate the blow I have some questions for the Secretary of State.

The initial modelling for High Speed 2 suggested a downgrade of services to Stoke-on-Trent based on £7.7 billion of cuts to existing inner-city services to cities such as Stoke, Leicester and Wakefield. Will the Secretary of State confirm that that is no longer the plan? The Department for Transport document published today speaks of working to retain

“broadly comparable services to today”,

but my constituents are not interested in the expenditure of billions of pounds just for similar services. Will he confirm that the Government are committed to running

classic-compatible trains via the Handsacre junction, with equal regularity and faster speeds, so that Stoke-on-Trent maintains its vital connectivity?

Finally, with Crewe rather than Stoke benefiting from this massive investment, plans for a northern gateway partnership between Stoke-on-Trent and east Cheshire become even more important. In the previous Parliament, the city of Portsmouth had a dedicated Minister for regeneration. I am not saying that we necessarily want the right hon. Member for West Suffolk (Matthew Hancock), but it is right that we should have the same support to co-ordinate cross-departmental strategy in the region. High-speed train lines work for the country when they focus on growing the economies of regional and second-tier cities as much as major metropolises. In Britain, Stoke-on-Trent will be the litmus test for the success of such a strategy, and we will be watching it closely.

**Mr McLoughlin**: First, there has been a positive case made and a good dialogue between Stoke-on-Trent and Sir David Higgins about the way HS2 will serve the whole region. I was a member of Staffordshire County Council for seven years so I know Stoke-on-Trent incredibly well, and I fully accept the importance of the high-speed train link, which I think will come to the whole region. The hon. Gentleman talks as if Crewe is 100 miles from Stoke-on-Trent, but it is literally just up the road and on the other side of the M6, given where the station may well go. I very much look forward to the advantages of it serving not only Crewe but Stoke-on-Trent too.

The hon. Gentleman asks about classic-compatible trains, which are not dissimilar to those serving Kent. Handsacre junction is important in serving not only Stoke-on-Trent but Macclesfield and Stafford, so they will benefit sooner from faster services. I fully accept his point that nobody wants a diminution of services to Stoke-on-Trent, or to anywhere else for that matter. One reason for this huge investment is to have more services and more freight options. The west coast main line is one of the busiest lines anywhere in Europe, so it is right we focus on how to have the relief and extra capacity it needs. I am more than willing to continue conversations with Stoke-on-Trent about the best way for the whole region to move forward.

**Mrs Cheryl Gillan** (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): Despite the documents published today, in the past week alone we have seen the ombudsman find HS2 guilty of a maladministration over communications, the Standing Orders (Private Bills) Committee (Commons) describe its supply of information as an absolute shambles and a freedom of information request from the Chesham Society reveal a massive inaccuracy in basic track assessments in my constituency. What confidence can we have that today’s announcement of a speeded up timetable for phase 2a of HS2 will not lead to an increased catalogue of mismanagement, mistakes and more misery for people along the route?

**Mr McLoughlin**: The truth is that anything I say about HS2, as far as my right hon. Friend is concerned, will not be met with any kind of favour whatever. She has made her opposition perfectly clear. I believe HS2 is absolutely essential for the long-term economic interests of the United Kingdom, particularly our northern cities,

and that is why it is right to go ahead. I do not dismiss those people directly affected and who, as a result, have trouble with a major infrastructure project taking place, but I am aware of no major infrastructure project that has received universal support at the time of its construction. That support is usually found afterwards. In fact, plans for the very first railway line to be built between Birmingham and London were defeated in the House of Commons because the canals were considered to be perfectly adequate.

**Lilian Greenwood** (Nottingham South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Tristram Hunt) on securing the urgent question. He has campaigned constantly to secure benefits from HS2 for his constituency, and I echo his statements on the importance of Handsacre junction and the existing network.

Labour supports HS2, and we want to make sure that sections of the route can be delivered ahead of schedule, including to Crewe, especially after Ministers' delays have left the Bill running 18 months late. However, the paper published today raises new questions, alongside some belated answers. Will the Secretary of State explain why Manchester Airport station has still not been fully confirmed? Does he agree that it would be a body blow for the northern powerhouse if Manchester airport was not served by HS2? Why will HS2's exact route and station locations, including in the east midlands, not be finalised until late 2016? To put it another way, why will it have taken the Government over six years to confirm their plans for high-speed rail in the midlands and the north?

The Government previously said that they would consider accelerating construction of the Leeds to Sheffield part of the eastern leg. Is that still on the table, and what consideration, if any, has been given to accelerating the west midlands to east midlands section of phase 2?

On cost, an increase was announced in the comprehensive spending review from £50.1 billion to £55.7 billion. Will the Secretary of State confirm that this increase is simply a result of recasting HS2 from 2011 prices to 2015 prices, or are there other components to the cost rise?

Finally, Labour amended HS2's planning legislation to ensure that cost increases or underspends are reported. The Secretary of State's Department had said that the first such report was due in autumn 2015. Why has that report now been delayed? When will we see it? Does he agree that the Government must keep the costs of this vital project under constant scrutiny?

**Mr McLoughlin:** I shall answer the hon. Lady's last question first: I have published the documents today. She pointed out that HS2's cost has risen to £55.7 billion, which, she is absolutely right, is the costing at 2015 prices, whereas the other costing was at 2011 prices. That is the reason for the increase. During this spending review, HS2 will equate to 0.14% of GDP, so it is not over-burdensome on the Government's overall spending.

The hon. Lady asked about the other stations. I am pleased that there now seems to be a consensus, which was lacking until fairly recently, on where the east midlands station should go. I hope to say more about that next year, but points raised in the consultation have thrown up issues that need to be addressed, which is why I have said today that I hope to confirm the rest of the route for the east side by late 2016. Manchester

Airport station comes under the qualification I just made about the consultation, but these issues are discussed in the document I have published today.

The hon. Lady also said that the Bill was 18 months late. The people serving on the Bill are doing an exceptionally good job, and I do not regard it as 18 months late; I regard it as on time, according to the timetable set out by the former Secretary of State under the last Labour Government, who published their plans only nine months before the general election.

**Sir Simon Burns** (Chelmsford) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the most important thing about HS2 is not improved journey times per se, but creating the capacity we need on the west coast, where the conventional line will be full to capacity by 2024? Will he please tell the House whether phases 1 and 2 are still on time and confirm that his announcement about Crewe means that it will be built six years prior to the original deadline?

Mr Speaker, given that you have been so generous in congratulating people today, may I ask you to congratulate the Secretary of State on his birthday?

**Mr Speaker:** I am very happy to do so. If I had known to remember to congratulate the Secretary of State, I would have done, but I did not, and so I did not, but I do now, and I am very happy to do so. It is always helpful to have a bit of information, even if it is not put across quite as pithily as it might be.

**Mr McLoughlin:** I thought your birthday present, Mr Speaker, was your granting this urgent question, to give me an opportunity to speak at the Dispatch Box today.

My right hon. Friend is absolutely right that one of the key reasons for the whole HS2 project is not just to have faster journeys but to increase capacity. We have seen a huge increase in the number of people using our railways over the last 20 years—from 750 million to 1.6 billion—and we are seeing continuing growth in our railways, not just in passenger numbers, but in freight. I am pleased to say, therefore, that the project is on time. It is a huge project, and I understand that some people will be disrupted by it, but it is in the long-term economic interests of the UK.

**Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The Chancellor's announcement that high-speed rail will reach Crewe six years earlier than planned is to be welcomed, as it should lead to reduced journey times between Scotland and London, but the UK Government now have an opportunity also to accelerate planning to extend high-speed rail to Scotland. Will the Secretary of State reaffirm their aspiration for a three-hour journey time between the central belt in Scotland and London and turn this aspiration into a firm commitment?

**Mr McLoughlin:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for welcoming my statement. It is true that phase 2a will give Scotland even quicker journeys to London sooner than was originally planned. The journey time between London and Glasgow will be three hours and 42 minutes, when phase 2a opens, which is an improvement. The full Y-network will deliver London to Glasgow journey times of three hours and 38 minutes and London to Edinburgh journey times of three hours and 39 minutes.

[Mr McLoughlin]

Overall, HS2 will bring huge benefits to the Scottish economy. The UK and the Scottish Governments are working closely together to consider options to reduce journey times further, and HS2 is doing further work on that. I hope to make a statement on the next steps in the new year.

**Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): Handsacre 2, which has been mentioned a number of times, is in my constituency, and I am afraid that, once again, my constituents are faced with some anguish as they have already faced phase 1, and phase 2a starts in my constituency as well. I ask my right hon. Friend two specific questions. Will he give an indication of the timetable for the publication of the proposed route, so that my constituents can look at it and come up with suggestions, and when does he think the Committee stage and the petitions might begin? Is the Handsacre junction—the one that connects with the west coast main line, which also goes through my constituency—really necessary now, given that the connection to Crewe will happen six years earlier than planned?

**Mr McLoughlin:** The plans that I have announced and the maps that have been published today will enable my hon. Friend and his constituents to examine exactly where the proposed route will go. That was part of the announcement made in a written ministerial answer this morning. I appreciate that there will be disruption in certain parts of his constituency, but he will know from his experience with phase 1 that beneficial changes can be made if a case is argued and the engineering is possible, as indeed has happened in and around Lichfield.

**Mrs Louise Ellman** (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the announcement that the benefits of High Speed 2 will come to the north sooner than previously planned. However, I emphasise a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Tristram Hunt) that Stoke-on-Trent and indeed other areas not directly on the line should benefit through improved connectivity, and it is very important to arrange things so that that indeed happens. Is the 37% cut to the Secretary of State's departmental budget announced last week compatible with delivering this important project on time?

**Mr McLoughlin:** The hon. Lady, through her work as Chairman of the Transport Committee, has always been supportive of the overall objective of greater train capacity, and she has made the case for a more direct service to Liverpool, which is part of what I will be considering when I address the full route towards the end of next year. I have to say that my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Edward Timpson), who has joined me on the Front Bench, has also made the case as to why he believes that the announcement I have made today is the right decision. However, it is not just my decision. It is based on the overall structure reports produced by Sir David Higgins, the chairman of HS2. It is important how this feeds in to the rest of the question about national infrastructure, on which we have asked the National Infrastructure Commission to advise us, as far as the future of HS3 or indeed Crossrail 2 is concerned.

The hon. Lady asked whether this will be deliverable within the departmental spending changes announced last week, and the answer is yes.

**John Redwood** (Wokingham) (Con): What are the forecast revenues and losses on the Crewe to west midland section when it opens in the first couple of years, and what are the consequential on revenue and subsidies on the existing railway?

**Mr McLoughlin:** We believe that the benefit-cost ratios for the lines that I have announced today are positive and will bring a return for the country. I say to my right hon. Friend that it is not all about BCRs. If only BCRs had been taken into account, the Jubilee line would never have been built, Canary Wharf would never have been opened, and the Limehouse link tunnel, which had a BCR of 0.4 or 0.7, would never have been built, yet they have made huge differences. Infrastructure is sometimes expensive, but we should judge the BCRs not on the next 30 years, but on the next 100 years.

**Jonathan Edwards** (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Given that, unlike Network Rail, HS2 Ltd is not devolved to any part of the United Kingdom, will the Secretary of State explain why the statement of funding policy for the devolved institutions, which was published along with last week's comprehensive spending review, provides for a 100% Barnett consequential from HS2 to Scotland and Northern Ireland, and one of 0% to Wales?

**Mr McLoughlin:** I believe that Wales will benefit from what I have announced today, because it will be very important to the north Wales economy.

**Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): The Secretary of State is well aware of my views about HS2. Two weeks ago, when the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill)—who is responsible for HS2 phase 2—visited my constituency, I explained to him, and showed him, the devastating effect that the current route would have on the village of Measham. It will remove the major employer at the southern end of the constituency, halt a new housing development, and require the building of a new piece of the A42, which will cause huge disruption. When will we have a definite route for phase 2, and when will my constituents receive the compensation that they deserve?

**Mr McLoughlin:** As I have said to my hon. Friend before, and as I have just said to the House, I hope to be able to say more next year about the entire route, both the east and the west sections.

**Tulip Siddiq** (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): My opposition to HS2 will not come as a surprise to anyone. It will blight the lives of thousands of residents of Hampstead and Kilburn. Will the Secretary of State make clear whether what he has announced about the line to Crewe will affect the line of route into Euston station, the rest of Camden, and the vent shafts in Brent?

**Mr McLoughlin:** No. The announcements that I have made today will have no impact at all.



**Alec Shelbrooke** (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I note today that Leeds City Council has been successful in lobbying for the “T” station in the centre of the city, and also that the concerns expressed by my constituents in Woodlesford and—as my right hon. Friend knows, by me—have led to options being at least considered in regard to the route to Leeds. I hope that they will include the tunnel idea. May I urge my right hon. Friend to put pressure on HS2 Ltd to publish the route as soon as possible, in order to avoid circumstances such as those experienced by one of my constituents, who tried to remortgage his house last week and found that the mortgage company had given it a £0 rating?

**Mr McLoughlin:** I am incredibly sympathetic towards cases of that kind, and my Ministers and I are always willing to look into individual cases. This is a huge project. As I have said, I regret not being able to say more and confirm the rest of the route at this point, but that is still being studied, and all the options suggested by Members are being examined. Once we have announced the route, there will come a time for legislative changes to be made in the House of Commons. I am afraid, however, that part of the difficulty with planning long-term infrastructure projects is caused by the fact that they are long term, and they do take a long time.

**Robert Ffello** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): I echo everything that was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Tristram Hunt). The Secretary of State will also know—happy birthday to him, by the way—that, while Crewe may look as though it were next door to Stoke-on-Trent on a map, it takes a good hour for my constituents to drive there. I know that, because I have done it many a time. If they travel by train, once they have got into Stoke, the Crewe-Derby line is appalling, as the Secretary of State will know very well. I think that he needs to look carefully at the line, and bring that work forward by six years.

**Mr McLoughlin:** All these points need to be considered, but I think it essential for Stoke-on-Trent to benefit from HS2, along with the whole area of north Staffordshire and the southern part of Cheshire. It is a very important area, and we need to ensure that it has the necessary connectivity. Any other issues of connectivity that can be dealt with during the planning process should also be considered.

**Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): I entirely endorse the comments of the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Tristram Hunt). It is vital for Stoke-on-Trent—and, indeed, Stafford—to have that connectivity. I welcome the Secretary of State’s comments about a generous compensation scheme; it needs to be both generous and swift. May I ask him, however, whether there will be opportunities to look again at the alignment, or at least the elevation, of the route through my constituency, given that every single point that we have made has been disregarded?

**Mr McLoughlin:** What I have announced today is a line extension of 37 miles between Fradley in the west midlands and Crewe. Of those 37 miles, 1.1 miles consist of three tunnels, and there will also be 4 miles of viaduct. Of course I am always willing to listen to representations

from my hon. Friend and others who wish to make them, and once the Bill has been published, people will be able to petition as well.

**John Pugh** (Southport) (LD): If things are being accelerated, is there any chance of Liverpool being properly linked to HS2 before 2033, if ever?

**Mr McLoughlin:** As a result of the announcements I have made, Liverpool will get a faster journey time as far as the high-speed link is concerned, so it will see the benefits. Other people are making the case that we should go even further with the HS2 line.

**Nigel Mills** (Amber Valley) (Con): Will the Secretary of State reconfirm the Government’s full commitment to the whole of the Y-route and, in that regard, will he commit to bringing forward some of the work so that the east midlands gets the proposed connectivity a lot earlier than is planned?

**Mr McLoughlin:** I very much welcome the fact that there is now a common agreement between the east midlands councils as to where the site will be. On my hon. Friend’s request for a faster decision, I will do what I can, but I have outlined the routes that we are going to take and the process that we are going to go through.

**Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): I will hold back from wishing the Secretary of State a happy birthday unless he gives me good news. As he knows, I have raised this point many times before. I have constituents who live just outside the catchment area for compensation, but he has said that he intends to extend that area. Can he give me some good news on that now?

**Mr McLoughlin:** I am glad that the hon. Gentleman does not get a chance to come back with a further comment. The announcements that I have made today will make no difference to the route that is already before the House or to the scheme being investigated by the Committee that is dealing with the route from London to the west midlands. However, we have improved the compensation arrangements for the whole of the route.

**Maggie Throup** (Erewash) (Con): As my right hon. Friend will be aware, a number of my constituents and businesses in Long Eaton will be bitterly disappointed that, as of today, they still do not know what the route will be. Will he use his influence with HS2 Ltd to bring forward early compensation, so that those people can move on with their lives?

**Mr McLoughlin:** My hon. Friend should be pleased to note that the new consensus in the east midlands has removed from her constituents in the Breaston area the possibility of a station being located there. I will obviously listen carefully to what she says, however. We have the exceptional hardship payments for certain cases, and I am always willing to look at any individual cases.

**Ruth Smeeth** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): I endorse the comments made by my neighbours, my hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Tristram Hunt) and for Stoke-on-Trent South (Robert Ffello) and the

[Ruth Smeeth]

hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy). I share their dismay that we are not going to have a station at Stoke-on-Trent. Having said that, I welcome the announcement on Handsacre. Will the Secretary of State give me details of the timing of the consultation and of a final decision on Handsacre?

**Mr McLoughlin:** The provisions on Handsacre are partly covered by the Bill that is before the House, which is being studied by the special Committee that is looking into the first part of the route. On the hon. Lady's other point, I refer her to what I said to the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Tristram Hunt), which is that I am keen to see Stoke-on-Trent and Stafford benefiting from the new train services. As I said earlier, capacity is one of the most important reasons for this project.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I am sorry to disappoint remaining colleagues. We normally take the bulk of Members wishing to ask a question, but we must move on because there is heavy pressure on time today. I thank the Secretary of State and colleagues who have taken part.

## Junior Doctors Contract

4.3 pm

**The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt):** With permission, Mr. Speaker, I would like to update the House on the junior doctors' strike. Earlier this month, the union representing doctors, the British Medical Association, balloted for industrial action over contract reform. Because the first strike is tomorrow, I wish to update the House on the contingency plans being made.

Following last week's spending review, no one can be in any doubt about this Government's commitment to the NHS, but additional resources have to be matched with even safer services for patients. That is why, on the back of mounting academic evidence that mortality rates were higher at weekends than in the week, we made a manifesto commitment to deliver truly seven-day hospital services for urgent and emergency care. However, it is important to note that seven-day services are not just about junior doctor contract reform. The Academy of Medical Royal Colleges noted:

"The weekend effect is very likely attributable to deficiencies in care processes linked to the absence of skilled and empowered senior staff in a system which is not configured to provide full diagnostic and support services seven days a week."

So our plans will support the many junior doctors who already work weekends with better consultant cover at weekends, seven-day diagnostics and other support services, and the ability to discharge at weekends into other parts of the NHS and the social care system. But reforming both the consultants' and junior doctor contracts is a key part of the mix, because the current contracts have the unintended consequence of making it too hard for hospitals to roster urgent and emergency care evenly across seven days.

Our plans are deliberately intended to be good for doctors: they will see more generous rates for weekend work than those offered to police officers, fire officers and pilots; they protect pay for all junior doctors working within their legal, contracted hours, compensating for a reduction in antisocial hours with a basic pay rise averaging 11% and average pay maintained; they reduce the maximum hours a doctor can work in any one week from 91 to 72, and stop altogether the practice of asking doctors to work five nights in a row; and, most of all, they will improve the experience of doctors working over the weekend by making it easier for them to deliver the care they would like to be able to deliver to their patients.

Our preference has always been a negotiated solution, but the House knows that the BMA has refused to enter negotiations since June. However, last week I agreed for officials to meet it under the auspices of the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service—ACAS. I am pleased to report to the House that, after working through the weekend, discussions led to a potential agreement early this afternoon between the BMA leadership and the Government. This agreement would allow a time-limited period during which negotiations can take place, and during which the BMA agrees to suspend strike action and the Government agree not to proceed unilaterally with implementing a new contract. This agreement is now sitting with the BMA junior doctors executive committee, who will decide later today if it is able to support it.



However, it is important for the House to know that right now strikes are still planned to start at midnight, so I will now turn to the contingency planning we have undertaken. The Government's first responsibility is to keep their citizens safe. That particularly applies to those needing care in our hospitals, so we are making every effort to minimise any harm or risks caused by the strike. I have chaired three contingency planning meetings to date, and will continue to chair further such meetings for the duration of any strikes. NHS England is currently collating feedback from all trusts, but we estimate that the planned action will mean up to 20,000 patients may have vital operations cancelled—these include approximately 1,500 cataracts operations, 900 skin lesion removals, 630 hip and knee operations, 400 spine operations, 250 gall bladder removals and nearly 300 tonsil and grommets operations.

NHS England has also written to all trusts asking for detailed information on the impact of the strikes planned for the 8 and 16 December, which will involve the withdrawal of not just elective care but of urgent and emergency care as well. We are giving particular emphasis to the staffing at major trauma centres and are drawing up a list of trusts where we have concerns about patient safety. All trusts will have to cancel considerable quantities of elective care in order to free up consultant capacity and beds. So far the BMA has not been willing to provide assurances that it will ask its members to provide urgent and emergency cover in these areas where patients may be at risk, and we will continue to press for such assurances.

It is regrettable that this strike was called even before the BMA had seen the Government's offer, and the whole House will be hoping today that the strike is called off so that talks can resume. But whether or not there is a strike, providing safe services for patients will remain the priority of this Government as we work towards our long-term ambition to make NHS care the safest and highest quality in the world. I commend this statement to the House.

4.9 pm

**Heidi Alexander** (Lewisham East) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement, and for advance sight of it. When we last debated junior doctors contracts in this Chamber, the Health Secretary was too busy to attend, so I am glad that he has found time to be here today.

May I start by saying that I strongly welcome what the Health Secretary has announced? Nobody wants to see industrial action, not least the junior doctors. Hopefully, common sense will prevail. However, I have a number of issues on which I wish to press the Health Secretary, including how services tomorrow might still be affected, workforce morale, and what happens next.

A week and a half ago, I wrote to the Prime Minister suggesting independent ACAS talks to resolve this dispute. My proposal was immediately supported by the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges and accepted by the British Medical Association. It took the Government a further five days to agree to enter talks. The issue is this: given that a number of operations have already been cancelled, is it not the case that if the Health Secretary had agreed to this proposal when it was first put to him, he could have avoided, or at least mitigated, any disruption to patients tomorrow?

During my urgent question in this House on Friday 20 November, the Minister of State for Community and Social Care was asked 12 times about ACAS involvement, and 12 times he refused to agree to talks. Will the Health Secretary say very clearly why it took the Government so long to agree to talks, and why Ministers initially appeared to rule out the proposal?

Secondly, the Health Secretary will know that this dispute has been deeply damaging to workforce morale. Many junior doctors will have already voted with their feet, or would have been planning to do so over the coming months. Has the Department made any estimate of the effect of the dispute on staff recruitment and retention? What action is the Secretary of State taking to stop the brain drain of our brightest medics to countries such as Australia and New Zealand?

It was clear from my conversations with junior doctors that they felt that they were the first line of defence in a fight for the future of the NHS. Whether that is right or wrong, it is a remarkable situation in which our junior doctors find themselves. Will the Health Secretary now set out his approach to negotiations with other groups of staff about pay and conditions? Does he accept that we cannot keep asking our NHS workforce to do more for less?

Finally, I say gently to the Health Secretary that his handling of these negotiations has been a lesson in precisely how not to do it. I trust that today's announcement will mark a change in tone and approach on the part of the Government. With that in mind, let me say this to the Health Secretary: everyone in this House agrees that if someone goes to hospital in an emergency on a Sunday, they should get the same treatment as they would on a Tuesday. The Health Secretary has repeatedly failed to make the case for why reforming the junior doctor contract is essential to that aim.

I make a genuine offer to the Health Secretary today. I am prepared to work with him on a cross-party basis to do everything possible to eradicate the so-called "weekend effect" and we will support any necessary reforms to achieving that aim. In return, he needs to be absolutely clear about what needs to change in order to deliver that. As many studies have concluded, there needs to be much more research into why there is a weekend effect, so that we can ensure that we focus efforts on the actual problem. Will he today commit to commissioning new independent research into how reforming staffing arrangements at the weekend might help improve the quality of weekend services? Does he understand that part of the problem has been that he has implied that junior doctors are to blame for differential mortality among patients admitted at the weekend? What other steps will he take to ensure that we have consistent seven-day services, including ensuring that social care is available outside the working week? Will he update the House on the consultant contract negotiations, which are separate to the junior doctor negotiations and are more directly linked to seven-day services?

I welcome the fact that the Health Secretary finally agreed to ACAS talks last week and I welcome the news from those talks today. Nobody wants patients to suffer and I hope that now we can start to put this whole sorry saga behind us.

**Mr Hunt:** What an interesting response from someone who has never championed seven-day services and has never been prepared to stand up for patients and do the right thing, however difficult it might be.

The hon. Lady asked about ACAS, so let me respond to her comments. We did not respond immediately—incidentally, our response was not to rule it out but to say that we would consider it and that we did not rule it out—because I made a private approach to the head of the British Medical Association to see whether there was enough common ground to make an approach to ACAS worth while. I wanted to give time for that private approach to bear fruit.

The hon. Lady asked about the brain drain. I will tell her what we are doing to stop the brain drain: there will be £3.8 billion of extra resources for the NHS next year. That is £1.3 billion more than Labour promised at the last election. That is a commitment that we can make on the back of a strong economy, which all doctors know that the Labour party would never be able to deliver.

The hon. Lady has repeatedly called for the Government to remove the threat of contract imposition. Let me tell her why we cannot do that. It would give the BMA a veto over a manifesto commitment that has been endorsed by the British people—[*Interruption.*] She is making noises from her seat, but let me tell her what we have actually said. We will suspend proceeding to the new contracts during the period in which negotiations happen—a short, time-limited period—and in return the BMA will suspend the threat of strikes for that time-limited period. Removing the threat of imposition permanently has not been agreed in any other part of the NHS or any other part of the public sector. The Government must balance the needs of patients, doctors and taxpayers and giving one of those groups a veto over any new contract would make it impossible to make that judgment.

The hon. Lady talked about the way in which I have approached this. Being intemperate and unreasonable is a quality that I appear to share with every Minister of Health the BMA has met; those are not my words but those of Nye Bevan, the person who founded the NHS. Had he listened to the BMA, he would have not been able to set up the NHS; it would have had to be set up by the Conservative Government who followed that Labour Government.

This junior doctors contract is not the only thing we need to do to have seven-day services, but contract reform is what hospitals say is the most important thing of all. It is based on independent research. The 2013 report from the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges had 10 clinical standards, on which we have based our proposals. We have also based them on the seven studies we have now had over five years that talk about the problems of the weekend effect. We have also had the independent research by the pay review body on which we based the bulk of our proposals.

I gently want to say to the hon. Lady that when it came to the biggest issue of patient safety in the NHS in recent years she did not speak out against the strike. She did not support the Government's moves to seven-day services and when it came to avoidable mortality she preferred to pick holes in the data rather than make the moral case for action. The British public have noticed.

**Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con):** I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his steady and patient pursuit of a seven-day service for patients in the face of the extraordinarily militant tactics of the BMA. As one of his predecessors, I can reassure him that the tendency to personalise any dispute against the Secretary of State is a long-standing tradition of this trade union that goes back to Lloyd George, when it resisted panel doctors. It was ferocious in its opposition to Nye Bevan and the establishment of the NHS and every Secretary of State of every party since that time has had exactly the same experience in a dispute. If my right hon. Friend succeeds in getting the negotiations under way on a time-limited basis, as he rightly said, will he approach the BMA—of course, in a reasonable way—and insist that it make it clear that it supports a seven-day service, which would be of benefit to the country, and will not turn this into a demand for large amounts of extra pay? I think the British medical profession is among the best paid in Europe, if not the best paid. Everyone should concentrate on how to raise standards of service to ordinary patients up and down the country and how to get rid of higher mortality rates at weekends?

**Mr Hunt:** I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for his robust support. I seem to remember that when he was Health Secretary posters were put up all over the country saying, “What do you call a man who ignores doctors’ advice”, with a picture of my right hon. and learned Friend. He knows exactly what this is all about. It is not just Conservative Health Secretaries: Nye Bevan and Alan Milburn went through this.

My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right: we will all be delighted if the strike is postponed. Incidentally, it begins at 8 o'clock tomorrow morning, not midnight—I must correct that. He is right: the Government's focus is unremittingly on improving patient care. We have made it clear that any settlement has to be within the current pay envelope. The great sadness is that the vast majority of doctors are passionate about doing something about seven-day services. If only we had had the chance to negotiate from June, we could have avoided the situation we are in.

**Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP):** I, too, welcome the fact that the Secretary of State has been to ACAS and made the change to plain hours that would have resulted in hours between 7 o'clock to 10 o'clock on a Saturday being counted in the same way as the equivalent period during the week. That would particularly punish people who already work at weekends such as acute medical staff and doctors working in accident and emergency—the very people we need.

I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State has made that change. I should be grateful for clarification of whether the threat of imposition is there or not. The statement says that it has been removed, but in his reply to the shadow Secretary of State he implied that it has not been removed. It would be helpful if he clarified the position.

We keep talking about more people dying at the weekend. May I again stress that it is not excess deaths at weekends, implying that hospitals look like the Mary Celeste? It is excess deaths of people admitted at the weekend, who may die on any day of the week. Junior doctors already cover weekends. It is the additional services

to diagnose and get people on their journey that we are discussing. We need to focus on that. Unfortunately, the Secretary of State, in previous statements, has moved from talking about excess deaths to talking about the consultant opt-out clause, which applies only to routine work—I am sorry, a toenail clinic on a Sunday will not save lives—but he needs to focus on strengthening the seven-day service for urgent cases, in which people are ill and where existing provision leads to excess deaths. Hopefully, we can make progress. I join the Secretary of State and everyone in the House in hoping that there is not a strike tomorrow.

**Mr Hunt:** The hon. Lady is right that this is about the excess mortality rates of people admitted at the weekend—not of people who are already in hospital at the weekend. I am afraid that she is mistaken in her characterisation of the rest of the Government position. Clinical standards are clear: people admitted at the weekend, or at any time, should be seen by a consultant within 14 hours, but that is true in only one in eight hospitals across seven days of the week, which is why sorting out the consultant contract for urgent and emergency care matters. Although the opt-out in the consultant contract applies only to elective work, half as many consultants are available in A&E on Sunday as are available during the week, although Sunday is one of the busiest days of the week, so it is not just about junior doctors. However, if we are going to make life better for junior doctors, we need to make sure that they have more senior cover and do not feel clinically exposed, which is what independent studies have said they feel.

Governments of any party must have the right to set the terms and conditions of an employment contract. That is a right that no part of the public sector has moved away from, and it is a vital right for all employers. I have simply said that I will not move towards any new contract while negotiations are happening during this time-limited period. That was what my statement clearly said, and the BMA for its part has said that if this agreement is honoured, it will remove the threat to strike during that period.

**Mrs Cheryl Gillan** (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State on coming here today on this very important matter. All parts of the House support him in trying to find a negotiated solution to this knotty problem. However, if the strike goes ahead—although we very much hope that the BMA will see sense and agree to the terms so far put on the table—I understand that the BMA has not been willing to provide assurances that it will ask its members to provide urgent and emergency cover in areas where patients may be at risk. What more can the Secretary of State do to encourage the BMA to make that statement? That is what will be worrying patients out there.

**Mr Hunt:** On the overall picture, we must be clear that this is not about asking junior doctors to work a lot of extra hours for free. We expect that as we have increased take-up of seven-day services and more people working antisocial hours, particularly on Sundays, that might lead to a higher pay bill, but we need to make sure that the proposals for the workforce that we have at present protect average pay and mean that as we move to seven-day services, they are affordable by hospitals. To answer my right hon. Friend's question, we respect

the right of doctors to strike, even though it is very disappointing when they choose to do so, but they have said on this occasion, in a way that is quite unprecedented, that they will withdraw urgent and emergency care on 8 and 16 December. All we have said to them is that if there are areas where we are not able to make alternative arrangements for urgent and emergency care by, for example, using other front-line clinicians, we would like their support in those specific areas, not across the whole country, in asking junior doctors to step in on those cases in the interests of patient safety. We have not yet had those assurances, but we very much hope we will get them.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The Secretary of State is seeking to provide comprehensive and informative replies and that is appreciated. However, progress so far—and it is not entirely down to the Secretary of State, but to the length of questions—has been a bit slow. I am keen to get through everybody if possible, but I remind the House that the next debate is very heavily subscribed, so brief questions and brief answers are the order of the day. We will be led, as usual, in this matter by Gisela Stuart.

**Ms Gisela Stuart** (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): When the Secretary of State chaired his three contingency meetings, did he take account of the fact that last year we had about 43,900 excess winter deaths, which were avoidable and largely caused by almost toxic overcrowding of emergency departments? What provisions has he made to avoid the excess deaths that we had last year and to make sure that that is not made even worse by the present situation?

**Mr Hunt:** The hon. Lady is right to be concerned by the much higher than normal excess winter deaths that we had, but I would not characterise the reason for those excess deaths as she did. We think they were largely caused by the ineffectiveness of the flu vaccine that was recommended by the World Health Organisation last year but proved not to be as effective as it normally is. The early signs are that this year's flu vaccine will be more effective. Those excess deaths are deaths at home and throughout the system, not just in hospitals, but of course we are doing everything this winter, as we did last winter, to make sure that we minimise the possibility of excess deaths.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** I call Helen Whately—[*Interruption.*] Order. May I gently remind Members that it is a good idea to continue to stand? One should not stand once and assume thereafter that the Chair is psychic. I had a hunch that the hon. Lady wished to contribute, but keep standing—it helps the Chair and it is also helpful exercise.

**Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I welcome the fact that the BMA is returning to talks and that there is a potential agreement on the table. The dispute has focused on pay and hours, but I think that its roots might go deeper. For instance, juniors often do not feel valued or part of the team. Does my right hon.



[Helen Whately]

Friend agree that the best way to improve the situation for juniors is for them to engage in talking, rather than striking, and that talking, which they are doing, is the right choice by juniors, who are the future leaders of the NHS?

**Mr Hunt:** I agree with my hon. Friend, who has great knowledge of NHS matters. I simply say to junior doctors that this is not just about contracts and pay; it is also about training. Having consultants more available at weekends will help improve training for junior doctors. We will also need to look at continuity of training, which I think has been undermined in recent decades. If junior doctors are looking for a visible reflection of this Government's commitment to the NHS, they should look at last week's spending review statement and the extra resources we are putting into the NHS in very tight circumstances. This Government are backing the NHS, and we are doing everything we can to back junior doctors as part of that.

**Valerie Vaz** (Walsall South) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker—I was standing.

The Secretary of State referred in his statement—in the last line of page 1 of the copy we have been given—to a “time-limited period” during which negotiations will take place. Is that a day, a week or a month? Will the contract be imposed after that?

**Mr Hunt:** I hope that the hon. Lady will understand that, because I very much hope that the BMA's junior doctors executive committee will agree to go ahead with the agreement we have made with its negotiators, I do not want at this stage to go into further details about its contents. Obviously, the agreement will be published as soon as it is made, but I think that I would be pre-empting that decision by going into detail. It is a reasonable period of time for negotiations to take place.

**Ben Howlett** (Bath) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker—it appears that I need to bob more often.

I am pleased to hear that all parties might be back around the table. I join the Secretary of State in hoping that the strike action is called off. Following a meeting with Bath junior doctors this weekend, it was clear to me that they, too, will be delighted. Will he confirm that safeguards will be a central part of the renegotiation?

**Mr Hunt:** Absolutely. We want to reduce the number of doctors working unsafe hours and make sure that we have binding ways of ensuring that hospitals cannot ignore the intention of any agreement we make and ask doctors to work extra hours that they do not want to work and that might be unsafe, or indeed to trade on the good will that means many doctors work extra hours unpaid. That is an important part of the discussions that I hope we will now be able to enter into.

**Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I have received a number of emails from constituents about this matter. What impact does the Secretary of State believe this fiasco will have on the long-term morale of staff in the national health service?

**Mr Hunt:** I am afraid that I do not agree with the hon. Lady's characterisation of the situation as a “fiasco”. We are making really important changes that will save patients' lives by eliminating the weekend effect that we have seen in the NHS for some time, which I think any responsible Government need to deal with. The way to improve morale in the NHS is by making it easier for doctors to give their patients the care they want to give, and at the moment that is very difficult in many places at the weekend. We want to put that right.

**Craig Whittaker** (Calder Valley) (Con): We have heard about the 20,000 cancelled operations and the inconvenience caused to patients by the planned strikes, but I wonder whether my right hon. Friend could report to the House how serving the needs of patients features in the negotiations with junior doctors so that patients can get the same level of care seven days a week?

**Mr Hunt:** That is the reason we have had this whole dispute with the BMA, and it is disappointing that, rather than it negotiating with us on something that I think every doctor understands we need to address, it has come to the eleventh hour like this. In the end, my hon. Friend is absolutely right that doing the right thing for patients is also doing the right thing for doctors, because doctors go into medicine because they want to look after patients.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. None of us wants to see a new contract imposed on doctors; that would be the worst possible outcome. It is very important that we have the seven-day process in the NHS. The BMA represents many doctors in Northern Ireland, where health is a devolved matter, so what discussions has he had with the Health Minister in Northern Ireland to address the issue and find a solution?

**Mr Hunt:** We are keeping in regular contact with our counterparts in the devolved Assemblies and Parliaments. As this is a devolved matter, it is obviously up to them to decide what they do, but I hope they will be encouraged by the progress that I think we are beginning to make in the argument for seven-day services.

**Nigel Adams** (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): There are no winners on either side whenever there is a strike, so I wish the Secretary of State well with the negotiations. What answer does he have for the doctors I have met who believe that this contract change forces junior doctors to work even longer for less?

**Mr Hunt:** I would like to reassure categorically those doctors that that is not the intention of the changes we are making. We have made it clear that we will protect the pay of anyone working within the legal contracted hours, and in fact three quarters of junior doctors will see their pay rise as a result of these changes. We want to deliver safer care. If we are able to go ahead with the negotiations with the BMA that I hope we can in the coming weeks, I hope we will be able to put in place very strong safeguards that all sides agree will reassure my hon. Friend's constituents.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): The Secretary of State has to accept his responsibility in bringing about the cancellation of operations, because if he had been prepared

to go to ACAS at the outset, all this would have been avoided. Does he accept that he is going to have to change his attitude towards negotiating with these junior doctors if we are to get the satisfactory outcome that we all want?

**Mr Hunt:** My attitude is very straightforward: I need to do the things that will make patients in the NHS safer, and I want to negotiate reasonably with anyone where there is a contractual issue that needs to be resolved. I think that the Government's position has been reasonable. The vast majority of doctors will see their pay go up, and the pay for everyone else working legal contracted hours will be protected. This is a very reasonable offer that does a better job for patients, but it has been difficult to get through to the BMA. I urge the hon. Gentleman to talk to his friends at the BMA and to urge them to be reasonable and talk to the Government, whereby we could have avoided some of the problems.

**Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State and the BMA for their work over the past few days in bringing this matter—I hope—to a resolution, and encourage that spirit in moving forward. May I suggest that the main way in which morale can be restored is to see that both sides are acting in the interests of patients and, in particular, patient safety, which is so vital to doctors and to all of us?

**Mr Hunt:** No one knows more about campaigning for patients than my hon. Friend, as he has done in his constituency, and I congratulate him on that. He is right. There does not need to be an argument on a matter such as this, because it unites the Government in what we want to do to make the NHS the provider of the safest care in the world with what doctors themselves want to do. The best way forward is to put aside suspicion and for both sides to recognise that we are trying to do the right thing for patients, for doctors, and for the NHS.

**Dawn Butler** (Brent Central) (Lab): The Secretary of State has failed. He has failed patients, he has failed junior doctors, and he has failed his Government. He says that people should put aside suspicion. I suspect that the reason he did not agree to meet ACAS sooner was so that he could sneak in the announcement during the autumn statement.

**Mr Hunt:** Let me tell the hon. Lady what the failure was: it was setting up a contract for junior doctors in 2003 that has made it impossible for hospitals to roster proper care at weekends. The duty of a Secretary of State is to put right those historical wrongs so that patients are safe.

**Paul Scully** (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): Tomorrow I am due to go to St Helier hospital to meet some of the doctors on the picket line. I am sure that we all agree that it would be far better if tomorrow, instead, the doctors were there working and their representatives were talking to Government representatives. Does my right hon. Friend agree that in talking to the BMA, there is genuine room for negotiation and agreement on many of the details?

**Mr Hunt:** I have always believed that a negotiated agreement will be better for doctors, patients and the NHS, because I am sure that the BMA has value that it

can add in the negotiating process to make sure that we implement the spirit and not just the letter of what the Government want to do. I agree with my hon. Friend, and I hope that we can enter into constructive, serious negotiations.

**Alison McGovern** (Wirral South) (Lab): I have watched my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander) fight night and day, and for seven days a week, for services in her constituency, so I would counsel the Secretary of State against saying that she has not fought for seven-day-a-week services. May I help the Secretary of State? In order to restart the process with trust, will he confirm that he has heard from junior doctors—as I have heard from junior doctors who are constituents of mine—that their primary concern is for nothing but patient safety?

**Mr Hunt:** I do think that that is the primary concern of the vast majority of junior doctors, which is why I think it was wrong for the BMA to refuse even to sit down and discuss with the Government how we were going to implement a manifesto commitment. I now hope we can get past that, so I will not say any more other than that I think it is now possible to get a better agreement for the NHS, and I hope we will now be able to do that.

**Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Having been fortunate enough to hear both from junior doctors in my constituency and from the Secretary of State, it is clear to me that both parties are talking the same language but that the communication has not quite filtered through via the BMA. Once this matter is, I hope, resolved, will the Secretary of State think of ways in which dialogue can be improved directly between the Department of Health and junior doctors?

**Mr Hunt:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right: we have had some very unfortunate megaphone diplomacy over recent months, but I hope we can now put that behind us and that lessons will be learned. As he rightly says, we have never wanted to do anything other than what I think is good for doctors, as well as what is good for patients, and that is what the proposals were about.

**Greg Mulholland** (Leeds North West) (LD): It should not have come to this and, of course, there will be a cost implication as a result. I welcome the involvement of ACAS to get to this stage and I hope the strike will be averted. Could the Secretary of State assure me that the specific concerns of anaesthetists are taken into consideration, given that they are on site all the time and are essential in making sure that hospitals are safe?

**Mr Hunt:** Anaesthetists have an absolutely vital role to play in providing proper seven-day services. In the highest-risk operations it is obviously very important for consultant anaesthetists also to be present, to give their very important judgments. I absolutely give the hon. Gentleman that assurance.

**Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): If this disaster is avoided, we have an opportunity to move forward and the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander), who represents the Opposition, has offered her support. One of the crucial failings in seven-day care is social

[Mr Peter Bone]

care. Would it be possible for Members on both sides of the House to work together to find a solution to that real problem?

**Mr Hunt:** I hope we can do that. The Opposition have talked regularly about social care, and rightly so. The fact is that both Labour and Conservative-run councils are responsible for the social care system, and being able to discharge into the social care system is a very important part of seven-day services. We are now about to enter a period of important reform in NHS and social care integration, so I see no reason why that approach could not be bipartisan.

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): Last Friday, 321 consultants at Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust gave their full support to the junior doctors. That is just the latest indication that the Secretary of State has called this dispute wrong from the start. He now has an opportunity to rebuild trust. Does he accept that that is not helped by him coming to the House and denigrating junior doctors and their representatives again, as he has done today, and by continuing to conflate routine seven-day services with mortality rates? That just is not helpful.

**Mr Hunt:** I am afraid the hon. Gentleman is, as ever, completely wrong. First of all, I have not denigrated junior doctors. I have spent a lot of time praising their absolutely vital contribution as the backbone of the NHS. Secondly, I have not conflated routine services with mortality rates. In fact, I have done specifically the opposite. In answer to the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), I confirmed that we are talking about urgent and emergency care and making sure that services are consistently delivered for urgent and emergency care across the week. That is our priority and that does link to mortality rates.

**John Howell** (Henley) (Con): As the chairman of the alternative dispute resolution all-party group, may I confirm that it is always right to identify common ground before going into a negotiation at ACAS? I do not think that anyone should underestimate the amount of common ground that the Secretary of State has achieved in getting the ACAS talks going. What will it now take to get the BMA to call off the strike?

**Mr Hunt:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. What is the common ground between the Government and junior doctors? We want to make sure they are working safe hours; we do not want to cut their pay; we want safer services for patients; and we want to make sure that the many junior doctors who do work weekends get proper consultant support and training opportunities at weekends as well as during the week. I think that that is enough on which to come to a deal.

**Angela Smith** (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): In his approach, the Health Secretary has implied that the current junior doctors contract arrangements compromise patient safety, so will he tell us which hospital chief executives have confirmed to him that that is the case?

**Mr Hunt:** I can tell the hon. Lady that NHS Employers, which represents all NHS hospital trusts, has said:

“Trusts are clear that the current contracts for both consultants and junior doctors must be reformed to provide modernised and safe 7 day services in our hospitals.”

**Tom Purslove** (Corby) (Con): What assessment has the Secretary of State made of both the cost and the wasted NHS resources that will result from any strike action?

**Mr Hunt:** I cannot provide my hon. Friend with that information this afternoon, because we do not yet know whether the strike will go ahead tomorrow, and how many operations will end up being cancelled in advance of it because of the late notice, but I am happy to get that information for him when we have an estimate.

**Marie Rimmer** (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): This junior doctors dispute is not just about pay. We are very fortunate to have such marvellous junior doctors. My concern, and I know that it is their concern, is about the change to the training of junior doctors in the proposed imposed contract, which will have such a negative impact on the research and development that makes our national health service the greatest in the world. Will you comment on the impact that the change in the contract will have on training and research? Will that be altered, and if not, will you please look at it again, because that is absolutely essential?

**Mr Speaker:** I will do neither of those things, but we will soon discover whether the Secretary of State wishes to do either.

**Mr Hunt:** I hope that the hon. Lady will be reassured by the Government's November offer, which has specific protection for junior doctors doing research that the NHS needs them to do to ensure that they are not disadvantaged by doing any such research. I am happy to write to her about the plans we have outlined.

**Michael Tomlinson** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that, rather than treating this issue as a political football, which Labour Members appear to want to do, they should take the advice of my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), which is that both sides should sit down and treat the statement with a cautious welcome? Does the Secretary of State agree that my constituents in Mid Dorset and North Poole are more concerned about patient safety and ensuring adequate 24/7 care than playing politics with our NHS?

**Mr Hunt:** I do agree. I think that improving seven-day services across the NHS should unite both sides of the House and, indeed, should unite the Government and the medical profession. It is extremely unfortunate that we have got into this position, but there is now an opportunity to put things right and I hope that that happens.

**Chris Heaton-Harris** (Daventry) (Con): I welcome the statement, and I very much welcome the conversations that are going on. Many vulnerable and sick people have had letters from their local hospitals today saying that their operation tomorrow has been cancelled. Should we get good news later this evening, is it too late to allow those operations to take place, bearing in mind that in many rural constituencies—and city constituencies—transport has to be arranged for those patients?



**Mr Hunt:** My hon. Friend is right to bring this back to patients, which we should always do in health debates. Sadly, I fear—even if the strike is called off, as I hope it is—that in the majority of cases it will be too late to rebook people for tomorrow. We in the NHS will do everything we can to rebook people as quickly as we can. He is right that this is one of the very sad things that happens if people do not sit around the table and talk.

## Backbench Business

### Middle East

**Mr Speaker:** Before I call the hon. Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee) to move the motion, I should point out that there is a large number of would-be contributors to this debate, a rather disturbing proportion of whom are not yet in the Chamber. I hope that will be remedied before long. We do not want standards to slip. *[Interruption.]* Well, every Member has a responsibility to keep an eye on the annunciator. The hon. Member for Tamworth (Christopher Pincher) says that the debate started too soon. It may have started too soon for other Members, but not for him. He, typically, was in his place at the appropriate time. We are grateful to him, as indeed are a great many others.

4.50 pm

**Dr Phillip Lee (Bracknell) (Con):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered the UK's role in the Middle East.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate and the dozens of parliamentary colleagues from many political parties who supported me in securing the opportunity to discuss this most important of subjects at this most critical of times. In particular, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy), the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) and my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Stephen Phillips) for their support. The importance of this subject to the House can be seen by the fact that the Backbench Business Committee has seen fit to allocate a full day to the debate and by the number of Members who are present and who have indicated that they would like to contribute.

In opening this debate, it is incumbent on me to acknowledge Great Britain's historical ties with the middle east and state my belief that with that unique history comes a special responsibility to continue to engage with this difficult yet crucial area of the world. I am sure that the Minister will say more about Britain's historical links to the region later.

In the short time since I made my initial application to the Backbench Business Committee, there have been numerous developments that are relevant to the topic of this debate: a Russian passenger plane blown out of the sky over the Sinai peninsula, a suicide terrorist attack in Beirut, more lives lost in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the first full parliamentary elections in Egypt since the second revolution, the deadly bomb attack in Tunisia, the tragic events in Paris, the downing of a Russian jet on the Syrian-Turkish border by the Turkish air force, the unanimous passing of United Nations resolution 2249, an increase in anti-Semitic attacks across Europe and violent clashes with UK Muslim communities, including two attempts to torch Finsbury Park mosque this weekend alone. That is not an exhaustive list. Those events serve as a reminder of the challenges we and the international community face in understanding the issues and how to deal with them.

Before and during my time serving in this Chamber, I have travelled extensively in the region and worked as a doctor among Muslim communities in the UK, seeking to deepen my understanding. I lay no claim to the answers,

[Dr Phillip Lee]

but one thing has always struck me as essential: the need to take a coherent and comprehensive approach across the middle east as a whole, and to recognise the shoots and roots of the threats emanating from that region which are growing in our own society.

There are many such risks and threats to confront. They are linked across the whole region and are complex. Tribal and ethnic loyalties, cultural ties, religious differences and centuries-old conflicts, most of which transcend national borders, all bedevil the region. The consequent instability inevitably spills over into the mass displacement of people and the consequent humanitarian need. There is the Syrian civil war, the Yemeni civil war, the Libyan civil war, and the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Many global actors have been sucked in and continue to be sucked in. Proxy wars abound, such as Saudi Arabia versus Iran and the US against Russia. The huge range of actors involved in the Vienna process is evidence of that. There are also historical challenges. Changing borders have resulted in diverse communities within national borders. Colonial powers have been a malign influence via Sykes-Picot. The US and Russia have both been involved. Since 1979, there appears to have been a continuing battle between Shi'a and Sunni.

Within that complex situation the House is soon to be asked to decide whether UK air strikes should be extended into Syria. I do not find that a difficult question, but we must be clear about why we are proceeding in this way.

First, we must not declare war on ISIS; we must not legitimise those barbarians in that way because—unlike them—we are not medieval religious crusaders. Instead, we should help to eradicate groups of people anywhere who abuse authority in order to behead children, systematically rape women, kill people whose religious views or ways of life are not the same as their own, and whose extortion, terror and hatred make it impossible for people to live in the territory they control, and those who commit murder and spread terror in other parts of the world. Such people are not worthy of whichever god it is in whose name they claim to act.

That is why I support the Prime Minister's proposal to extend air strikes into the ungoverned space of eastern Syria. For the record, I would have supported military action to create safe havens for people in 2011, and I would have included Syria when air strikes against ISIS/Daesh began in 2014, as I regard the current circumstances—in which the RAF can find a foe but not destroy it—as nonsense. The threat from ISIS is clear and present, the legal justification for action is strong, and it is right that Britain should play a leading role with its allies in eradicating ISIS/Daesh from the face of the earth.

The difficult question is how we use military force to constructive and not destructive ends, and on that critical point I do not believe that we have yet got a sufficient answer. Military action never has reliable outcomes, and it spreads fear and chaos. Protracted air strikes will do more harm than good as civilian casualties rise and infrastructure is destroyed. Strikes are not a decisive game changer, but I believe they are an important part of a bigger effort.

Air strikes may be our only hope of getting, and then keeping, parties in the Syrian civil war around the table, but we must be clear about who we are fighting for and how military action ends. Our focus must be on building the 10 or 20-year stabilisation force needed to generate the space required for lasting solutions to be found. I suspect that we will have to contribute ground forces at some point, and we must rapidly evolve a new sort of international action capability if we are to face up to the immense task of social and physical reconstruction. That needs people who are capable of building the foundations that underpin stability: political reform, economic development, legal systems, education and the creation of opportunity for young people, and all peoples must be engaged, not just the political elites. The Government stabilisation unit is a start, but it must be built into the sort of capability that the King of Jordan once described as an army of “blue overalls”, not “blue helmets”.

The scope of this debate is deliberately broad, and I hope it will convey three messages to our country. First, every individual and community in the UK has a stake in the direction that the Government choose to take in the middle east, and towards the threats and risks that emanate from there. This is not just about immediate questions of foreign policy or military action; it is about our future way of life, how we educate our children, how we welcome and integrate immigrants and refugees, and how we teach respect and loyalty for our country, values, traditions and laws. All those things affect whether or not our generation will deal with the issues relevant to this debate.

It is also true that we are, and will remain, at high risk of attack. Broadening our bombing campaign against ISIS will, I fear, increase that risk, but that is not a reason not to act. I believe that the majority of the British public understand that the frontline against Islamic extremism is not just in Raqqa but also here on the streets of Britain. Gone are the days of wars being fought in distant lands. The Gallipoli of the past could be a provincial shopping centre of tomorrow, and until we stop our society breeding new generations of radicalised young people, until we stop sheltering those who wish our society ill, and until we achieve a fully integrated society in which values are shared, laws are respected, and loyalty to Queen and country is separate from loyalty to a religion, we will not be secure. The risk of atrocity will remain.

Secondly, we must act in the middle east. We must do so now, and we must act more decisively and comprehensively than ever before, recognising where we need to do more to achieve the long-term effects we want. Often in the past, we have been too narrow and reactive. In the west, we have tended to suffer from chronic short-termism. Those who have travelled in the region can attest to the different sense of time in our respective worlds. We have been blinkered to the interconnected nature of the risks and threats. Disengagement is just not an option.

Our approach must change. Above all, we must recognise the threat of Islamist extremism and the conditions allowing it to flourish. We must eliminate them all, not just its latest iteration ISIS. We must remain credible, consistent and reliable partners to our regional and international allies in this struggle. This must come with an understanding that our allies are often imperfect. We must distinguish carefully between regional



Governments battling extremism and its regional supporters. We must be aware of the ever-changing balance of power across the region and that power is shifting away from elites to people on the street. Arabic social media is an extraordinary force. We also need to assess the relative power of religion, tribal loyalties and national identities that in some countries are still quite strong. For example, some analysts have detected a reduction in religious adherence, especially among the young. If accurate, this phenomenon would be hugely significant.

We must accept that reform takes time, influence and patient engagement, not imposition and insistence. We must be pragmatic and treat the world as it is, not as we wish it to be. We must better recognise trends. We did not see the Arab spring or ISIS coming. For too long we have played the equivalent of a child's game of whack-a-mole, with threats and challenges emanating from the region. We deal, or half deal, with one symptom, only for another to pop up elsewhere. We are not yet on a path to defeat the causes of today's wars and instability, or to deal with challenges fast coming down the line. This can and must change. Our national and international machinery of government must be strengthened to bring about that change.

Our strategic focus must be a more stable region. The Vienna process is a welcome sign that necessary powers may wake up to the effort that a long-term solution in Syria will take. We must wake up in the same way to the whole region. Its neighbourhood, including the Gulf states Iran and Israel, has a vital role. It must become a bigger part of the solution and stop being part of the problem. That will not happen without much stronger institutional machinery and sustained international attention. We must acknowledge that our tools are inadequate. This is not an excuse for not acting, but it should determine our priorities.

Thirdly, Parliament—this Chamber—has an important and constructive role not just in holding successive Governments to account when it is too late, but in ensuring that they shape policies in the first place that are in our nation's and our constituents' long-term best interests. Our current range of interventions in the middle east are not yet on track to end well. In some cases, we are already seeing the effects in Libya and with the recent refugee crisis. Others will play out over the coming decades. We must set ourselves up to succeed as a nation and not to fail. We must consider our 10-year, 20-year and 30-year priorities, as well as any immediate threats. The education of the next generation and the emancipation of women are crucial. The British Council is doing good work on those areas, particularly in the refugee camps around the Syrian border. Such work must be better funded and expanded further throughout the region. I have long believed we need a middle east strategy similar to that rightly commissioned by the Prime Minister towards the Gulf states. Here, Madam Deputy Speaker, I must declare an interest, as my wife wrote the recently adopted UK strategy towards the Gulf. Developing such a comprehensive strategy towards the middle east would, of course, be a larger undertaking requiring proper funding, but it would certainly be worth our while.

Britain, of course, already contributes a great deal in terms of humanitarian aid, as well as militarily and diplomatically. We support our allies. We are a strong and steadfast partner. The proposed military intervention will not be a game changer, but our brainpower and

diplomatic clout, and the respect in which we are held throughout the region very well could be. Let me be clear: I believe that the most valuable role Britain can play in the middle east is to give the world a plan for peace and stability in the region.

In conclusion, I offer this word of caution from Winston Churchill:

“Want of foresight, unwillingness to act when action would be simple and effective, lack of clear thinking, confusion of counsel until the emergency comes, until self-preservation strikes its jarring gong—these are the features which constitute the endless repetition of history.”

At such a febrile moment in the region's history, it is important that we step back. There is huge scope for miscalculation. It would be easy to sleepwalk into a new type of global conflict for which, I fear, we are not prepared. We cannot afford to restrict our horizons. Above all, though, we must challenge ourselves. It is time we paid more attention to a way out of this chaos. The apocalypse that Daesh et al seek must be prevented. To this generation of political leaders falls the responsibility of delivering a comprehensive long-term strategy towards the middle east so as to achieve that noble goal. It will require patience, courage and determination. By applying ourselves properly, we can secure our children's futures and do the country and the wider world a great service.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** Order. It will be obvious to the House that a great many colleagues wish to take part in the debate, so I am restricting Back-Bench speeches to seven minutes.

5.6 pm

**Mrs Madeleine Moon** (Bridgend) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow that wide-ranging and comprehensive speech from the hon. Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee). It set out well the problems that we face and people's outrage at the horrific actions of the death cult of Daesh.

The cry is, “Something must be done”, and we are always being asked, “How can Britain intervene? What can we do to put it right?”. One of the best writers I have read on intervention says that intervention is unpredictable, chaotic, uncertain, often prevents local leaders from taking responsibility, does not put pressure on settlements between enemies and is often crippled by the frequently changing aims of intervening Governments. I think that sums up what happens when we intervene. It is from that reality base that we will have to decide, very soon, whether we as a country should extend our intervention from Iraq to Syria.

One thing that worries me about the proposed intervention is our capability—not whether our armed forces are determined or skilled enough, but whether we have the platforms. In the 1991 Gulf war, we had 36 fast jet squadrons; today, we have seven, only three of which are Tornado squadrons. We have eight Tornado GR4 aircraft in Cyprus that have flown 1,600 missions and carried out 360 airstrikes. No one has told us how often those aircraft have had to turn back at the Syrian border. I would like some facts on that. We are saying we have to intervene, yet we do not know the facts.

We have carried out one strike in four missions: a strikingly modest contribution. The Tornados are due to be decommissioned in 2018-19. Each plane has a pilot and a navigator, but we have a limited number of

[Mrs Madeleine Moon]

planes and pilots and a shortage of navigators for the GR4. We originally had six planes in Cyprus, but now we have eight. We need eight because they need considerable maintenance and spare parts from other planes to keep flying. We increased the number to eight, so let us be clear: we need eight planes in Cyprus to fly two.

The Tornado is an incredibly capable air-to-ground attack plane, capable of carrying 12 of the much talked-of Brimstone missiles. It is generally considered to be poor at air-to-air combat, which is where the Typhoon excels although it does not carry the Brimstones. We need to know how many Tornado pilots, navigators and ground crew would be needed to maintain and arm our planes to extend our mission into Syria. Is it going to be the same eight planes, or are we going to add to those planes? If so, where are those planes coming from? Where are the planes and the crews currently deployed? What missions will we need to cease or decrease to allow them to fly in Syria? Very importantly, will harmony guidelines be breached for those crews, because that is a vital question to which we need to know the answer?

The Prime Minister told us last week that 70% of the territory held by Daesh in Iraq is still to be recaptured. Our 360 strike missions have helped to regain only 30% of the territory over the last year.

**Derek Twigg** (Halton) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful speech. When we went to Iraq as a Defence Committee—my hon. Friend being a member at the time and she still is—what we heard when we met a number of the leaders of the Sunni tribes was that they wanted arming in order to take on ISIL, but that that was not happening because the Iraqi Government was not doing that. Does my hon. Friend believe that that is essential to bring about a proper solution here?

**Mrs Moon:** I thank my hon. Friend, who is absolutely right. The critical issue is how we engage the Sunni tribes in fighting for their own future, and how we ensure that the Sunni become an integral part of the change that is needed both in Iraq and in Syria. Without them, our intervention is nonsense and a complete waste of time.

**Mr James Gray** (North Wiltshire) (Con): I, too, was on the same trip, but I visited the peshmerga in the north of Iraq whereas she and her hon. Friend visited Baghdad. Does she agree that one of the greatest forces we have in Iraq, and potentially in Syria, too, are the peshmerga?

**Mrs Moon:** I thank the hon. Gentleman, who serves valiantly on the Defence Select Committee with me. I know how much work he did on that visit, when we really delved deeply into what the capability and the success of the intervention were. Of course, the peshmerga are a tremendous asset and a great fighting force, but they are not going to fight everywhere in Iraq. They want to focus on their own area and on protecting Kurdish lands and Kurdish people. They are not the Iraqi armed forces; they are the Kurdish armed forces.

The Prime Minister told us last week that we are going to regain more territory. I do not want us to transfer our limited intervention capability from Iraq to Syria. In December 2015, our military presence in Iraq outside

of the Kurdish regions was three individuals—we met them—yet our missions there are critical to preventing Daesh from spreading across Iraq.

I urge Members to read the Defence Committee report produced in January this year, which outlined the problems we faced in Iraq and the capability we had to intervene there. The report states that we saw no evidence of the UK Government seeking to analyse, question or change the coalition strategy to which they are committed. Ministers, officials and officers failed to set out a clear military strategy for Iraq, or a clear definition of the UK's role in operations. We saw no evidence of an energised policy debate, reviewing or arguing options for deeper engagement.

**John Redwood** (Wokingham) (Con): Is it not also the case that if we are to launch air-to-ground attacks, we need to be able to collaborate with forces on the ground to report the targets and whether or not the attacks were successful?

**Mrs Moon:** That is exactly the information that we need. We know that 360 attacks have been made by our planes, but what we do not know is how valid they were. Were they successful? Are they making a difference? Here we are, talking about intervening somewhere else, when we do not even know how successful our intervention has been in Iraq.

The expensively trained and equipped Iraqi army fell apart when confronted by Daesh. The army has serious structural issues, poor-quality leadership, and a sectarian divide that must be addressed before any real progress in combating Daesh is possible. The brutality of the Shia militias often forces Sunni tribes into seeing Daesh as the safer alternative; let us never move away from that recognition. Sunni reconciliation and the taming of the Shia militia are impossibly difficult. If we cannot make that happen in Iraq, what chance have we in Syria? What is the basis of the sectarian divide? Is it simply religion, or is it also the age-old strategy of divide and rule? Is it a question of getting groups to fight among themselves, and allowing the corruption and the repression of the autocratic ruling regime to continue, allowing the poverty to grow, and allowing young men to turn to jihadism when there is no work and no hope for the future?

In Syria there is no compelling image for the future, and there are no leaders to rally behind. Syria is a state in the midst of civil war. In Syria there is nothing that will pull people together, but in Iraq we have potential. There is a Shia president, a Sunni defence Minister, and a wonderful Kurdish president.

5.16 pm

**Mr Peter Lilley** (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee) on securing the debate, and on his very thoughtful introduction to it.

I share the outrage that has been aroused by the atrocities in Paris, Tunisia, Beirut, Sinai and elsewhere. Any action that is necessary to protect Britain from similar horrors will have my full support, especially if we can simultaneously deliver fellow Christians and other minorities from the barbarity of the ISIL regime. However, I still need to be persuaded that the Government's

policy is likely to be effective and realistic, although I want to be persuaded. Let me spell out my concerns and doubts.

Above all, we must learn the lessons of experience from Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, all of which continue to haunt us. Albert Einstein said that the definition of insanity was to keep on doing the same thing and expect a different outcome. My colleagues are eminently sane, so I hope that they have learnt what I believe to be the three key lessons of recent history. First, it is comparatively easy to destroy a regime. Secondly, it is next to impossible to install a new regime or defeat an insurgency by air power alone, without boots on the ground: troops who are prepared to stay for the long term, preferably because they are in their own country. Thirdly, the only thing worse than a tyrannical regime is the chaos and anarchy that may replace it.

I need persuading first that if we join the bombing campaign, it will be in support of forces that are capable of retaining ground that air power may help to clear. In Iraq, we are supporting the Iraqi and Kurdish forces, and if it is militarily necessary to take action across border in their defence, that is fine by me. However, I must say this about Syria. The Prime Minister referred to “70,000 Syrian opposition fighters, principally of the Free Syrian Army, who do not belong to extremist groups”.—[*Official Report*, 26 November 2015; Vol. 602, c. 1491.]

**Mrs Moon:** Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that when the Select Committee was in Iraq, we were told that 1 million Shia fighters alone were willing to combat Daesh. Do we not have a greater chance in Iraq than in Syria?

**Mr Lilley:** The hon. Lady has made a very good point, and she made an extremely good speech.

I would like to believe that the Free Syrian Army is more than a label attached to a ragbag of tribal troops, factional militias and personal armies with no coherent command structure. I would like to believe that they are moderates. However, when I was carrying out a study of the conflict in Ulster many years ago, I examined similar situations, and concluded that

“it is nearly a law of human nature that where people fear the disintegration of the state they rally to the most forceful and extreme advocate of their group.”

In those circumstances there are no moderates, so at best we will have to rely on some pretty violent and unpleasant forces.

I would like to believe that there will be an effective fighting force. However, in October, the commander of the US central command, General Lloyd Austin, reported to the Senate that the programme to train some 5,400 moderate Syrians each year at a cost of \$500 million had so far produced only four or five fighters. The number could be counted on the fingers of one hand. I would also like to be convinced that, if those moderate fighting forces existed, they could be persuaded to fight the Islamists rather than Assad, whom they have mostly considered to be their main enemy up to now.

**John Redwood:** But is not the issue for any Government contemplating air strikes the question of who they would get in touch with and co-ordinate with on the ground?

**Mr Lilley:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have signally failed to train any forces, and it is far from clear that we could achieve our aim without any.

My second area of concern is whether this aerial bombardment in Syria will actually help to prevent terror on our streets in Britain. I should make it clear that I am not one of those who believe that we should hold back from bombing ISIL for fear of provoking more terrorism. Even if there were such a risk, to allow a handful of terrorists to determine British policy would be cowardly in the extreme. But in any case, the truth is that these extreme Islamists attack us not because of what we do but because of what we are.

The preamble to the Prime Minister’s memorandum to the Select Committee states that

“it is from Raqqa that some of the main threats against this country are planned and orchestrated.”

I would like to believe that this was a simple matter of taking out the command and control system to prevent the main threats of terrorism in this country, yet even in that document, when detailing the seven plots foiled by our security forces in the past 12 months, that claim is watered down to say the plots were merely “linked to ISIL” or “inspired by ISIL’s propaganda”.

The truth is that the atrocities we have seen in Britain and France were almost invariably carried out by home-grown terrorists. Many of them were probably inspired by ISIL propaganda or emulating previous suicide bombers and terrorists, but I have seen no evidence that any of them were controlled by, let alone dispatched from, Raqqa. Those plots were hatched in Brussels, not in Syria, and if the French and Belgian security forces on the ground could not identify and stop them, it is pretty unlikely that any plans being hatched in Syria could be prevented by precision bombing from 30,000 feet. In any case, the fact that one horrifying atrocity follows another does not mean that they are directed and controlled by a single organisation. We have seen horrifying school bombings in America, with one following another and one example leading to another, but that does not mean that there was a single controlling mind behind them.

My third concern is that we are led to believe that degrading and disrupting ISIL will reduce the flood of refugees. As I understand it—I am open to correction on this—scarcely any of the refugees coming to us or going over the border into Turkey are coming from the ISIL-controlled areas. My fear is that if we disrupt and reduce that area through bombing, we will add to the flow of migrants into Europe.

The real reason that the Government wish to join the operations in Syria is that we want to join our US allies. It is Britain’s default position that we should support America unless there is good reason not to, and that is a position that I hold to, but when there are doubts and reasons not to go ahead, we should reason and argue and try to persuade our colleagues to change their strategy before we join in.

We are celebrating this year the centenary of the birth of Harold Wilson, whose great achievement was to remain the closest ally of the United States while not being drawn into the Vietnam war. I believe we should learn from that example and, if my doubts cannot be cleared up, hold back rather than join in with our friends and allies in their endeavours, which possibly are doomed to failure unless they have boots on the ground to support the bombs from the air.



5.25 pm

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald** (Glasgow South) (SNP): I, too, begin by thanking the hon. Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee) for securing this debate. One of the first things I was able to do in this House was secure a debate on the case of Raif Badawi, and I know the Minister understands my interest in it. Since then, I have developed something of an insight into how the United Kingdom sees its relations with countries such as Saudi Arabia, which is cultivating a “second Syria” in Yemen. We are continually given assurances that Britain is working hard behind the scenes, in ways that may not be immediately apparent, to secure concrete and durable change—I do not doubt for a moment that that is the case. I stand here in what is possibly the most self-satisfied legislature in the world, the mother of all Parliaments. I have no doubt that the people on these Benches wish to see concepts of democracy, civil society and the rule of law—things they consider to be their own—exported to other countries in the middle east. The problem is a reality in which that idea has yet to arrive. There are too many in this House whose idea of intervention goes back to a previous time. When I asked the Prime Minister last week about the protection of minorities in this seemingly inevitable conflict, I prefaced the question by comparing the middle east to the Mitteleuropa of a century ago. I did so expressly, but the fact is that there has been a slow bleed of peoples from the wider region over that period: and I cannot help but see this country’s hand behind it.

David Lloyd George set the template for UK foreign Policy in the modern era, arming, financing, and encouraging a disastrous Greek invasion of Asia Minor, an action that ended in flames in Smyrna and with a Pontic Greek population that had predated Homer destroyed. Even the greatest leaders cannot seem to help but overstretch themselves; Churchill thought he had no choice but to install Nuri al-Said as regent in Iraq—a regent who was still in power when possibly the greatest Jewish city on earth, Baghdad, was cleansed of that Jewish population. More recently, less illustrious Prime Ministers have led us back to Mesopotamia; an often overlooked corollary of Blair’s war in Iraq was the setting to flight of one of the oldest Christian populations in the world.

I do not offer those examples as a reason why we should not intervene in Syria—if anything, they do not demonstrate the inefficacy of UK intervention, only that it more often than not has unintended consequences. I do not doubt that there is a robust military plan and that our military forces, which are surely the best in the world, will have the better of Daesh, be it from the air or on the ground. It is worth reiterating that the Scottish National party is not a pacifist party, and the Prime Minister would do well to remember that. Of course it goes without saying that something must be done, specifically to those who struck at the heart of Paris a fortnight ago, but the lesson we take from history is that it is simply not enough to say, “Something must be done.”

I beseech the Prime Minister to show that he understands our unease and that he is able to put the immediate problem at hand into the wider context in which it exists. For let us be in no doubt: there is a wider problem facing us that resembles the Europe of 1914. From west Africa to the Sahel, through the Maghreb and the Levant, and to the end of the Arabian peninsula, and from the Caucasus

to Kashmir, are a series of insurgencies, failed states and civil wars that we are often unable or unwilling to confront. My principal fear is that in chasing Daesh from Syria and Iraq, it will simply reappear elsewhere. The Government’s willingness to act in Syria must be used not as an end in itself, but as a means to seek solutions in the broadest context.

What we need now is a modern Marshall plan for the region, the participation of as many nations as possible and the determination to see it through. The most pernicious lie that too many have fallen for is that this is the clash of civilisations. What, under any other circumstance, would have been a series of local conflicts has been given greater resonance by the injection of jihadist and sectarian rhetoric; a black and white distinction drawn between the faithful and the Crusaders and the ability of many to bring the “near war” and the “far war” together. Let us not forget that that was Bin Laden’s strategic dream. Too often, the actions of our Governments have exacerbated these problems not from malign intentions, but from their inability to think adequately about what follows an initial military invasion.

Let there be no doubt about this: had the Prime Minister come to this place with a plan not just to bomb Syria, but to ensure that there were both funds and a willingness to rebuild afterwards, and to put in place the appropriate forces to occupy and pacify the country; and had he come here with a plan that placed our intentions in Syria into the context of plans for the wider region, and shown that he had the willingness to join, or build, a coalition of states that were willing to spend the time untangling the myriad regional disputes that have set this part of the world aflame—

**Crispin Blunt** (Reigate) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is getting to the heart of the issue. The Prime Minister was able to come pretty close to answering the seven points that the Foreign Affairs Committee raised. There is a limitation on what he can actually say, because creating this entire international coalition is active work in progress, which it was not back in September and October. That is the change. We need our Government to be fully committed to that process. Air strikes are a smokescreen for the more substantial question, which is this: how can our Government most effectively contribute to the international coalition that he is talking about, either as a full member of the coalition or as a non-belligerent in Syria?

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald**: I always listen to the hon. Gentleman with great respect, and he makes an important point. The Vienna talks provide the platform for the United Kingdom to show the leadership that we all want to see.

I would have been willing to support military action had the Government met the criteria that I have just outlined, but the reality is that they have not done so. Instead what we have is a political version of “virtue signalling”—a token effort that, while it may be appreciated by our allies, does nothing to address the deep misgivings in this House and among the wider public. The point is not to attack ISIS, but to defeat it, and to defeat it not just in Syria, but across the whole arc of insurgency.

While our military forces have learned from decades of involvement in the region, it seems that their political masters have not. I make this final plea: apply the lessons from history; show us what has been learned; and please give us a proper plan for reconstruction.

5.32 pm

**Mr Andrew Turner** (Isle of Wight) (Con): Four out of four of our speakers have been brilliant. My contribution will be a little more modest.

I have two problems with the proposed intervention in Syria, but that is not to say that the Government do not care, and that nothing has been done to engage the support of Members on both sides of the House. This is the result of careful thought over a number of years, not a conclusion that we have come to over the past two or three weeks. We recognise the appalling nature of the attacks in France, just as we recognise the attacks in the Lebanon the previous day, the earlier attacks on a Russian aeroplane, and, before that, the attack on the beach in Tunisia.

The question is not how we deal with these attacks today or tomorrow, but how we solve the problems of ISIL on a long-term basis. First, we must not find ourselves using boots on the ground. This matter is not something that can be solved by Britain, the United States, Russia or France. The Prime Minister has made it clear that our boots are not to be used in Syria, nor are those of any westerners, which, for the moment, include those of Russia.

**Bob Stewart** (Beckenham) (Con): I am always extremely worried when someone makes a definitive statement that says that we will not use our armed forces to defend our interests.

**Mr Turner:** I can well understand my hon. Friend fearing that, but the Prime Minister himself said that we shall not have boots on the ground.

Where are those supporters coming from? We are not speaking about one army under one general but several different factions, some of which are competing against each other. We cannot repeat what happened in Libya. It is not clear whether these factions, which the 70,000 Syrian fighters comprise, are organised and prepared to act, and whether they can move into ISIL ground quickly, because otherwise new criminals will arrive and appear as soon as the old ones are destroyed. The support needs to be reliable and sustainable. How can we be sure that these are forces to count on?

There is not one clear enemy to fight. The Russians appear to support Assad while we support rebel fighters declared as “moderate”. Russia’s support of Assad has resulted in strikes hitting the moderates. If there was an agreement with Russia, it would be much nearer what we are aiming for. If there was agreement from Syria—from the moderates and the Assadis—it would form a united front. I believe that a successful fight against ISIL is possible only when everyone on the allies’ side works together to defeat them.

5.36 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to speak on these issues, and this is an important and highly topical debate. We are all aware of the terrible events in Paris in the past couple of weeks, as the problems that developed in the middle east spilled over on to the streets of Paris. We are also aware of our key role in developments in the middle east, as well as the global problems that often arise.

The key debate on the middle east at this time is about how we tackle Daesh and how we can respond in a positive fashion. I want to note the strategic interests of four countries at the fringes of Europe, on the borders of the eastern Mediterranean: Greece, Turkey, Cyprus and Israel. They all face a similar strategic predicament. Although they are located near the west and are western in many ways, they are adjacent to a region of great turmoil. Regimes in several nearby countries are supporting terror, acquiring long-range missiles and developing weapons of mass destruction, which means that these four countries cannot fully enjoy the advantages of regional stability, as their fellow western states can, as they are susceptible to threats and other forms of aggressive behaviour. Other Members have mentioned the dispersal of Christians throughout the middle east, and we are all aware of the hundreds of thousands who have been dispersed from Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere.

The quartet of countries that I have mentioned can best address their common problem by enhancing strategic co-operation among themselves and perhaps even forging an eastern Mediterranean alliance. Such a step would have implications for western interests as well as for the middle east, and I believe that the UK Government should promote it. The main block to such co-operation or alliance is the tense relationship between Greece and Turkey that arises primarily from the division of Cyprus, which is the issue that most needs addressing.

We need to strike the right balance, of course, as we cannot be seen to be interfering in another nation’s sovereignty, but we must work more closely alongside those eastern European nations, particularly Cyprus. We are fortunate to have the RAF, Navy and Army bases in Cyprus, which former Foreign and Commonwealth Office Ministers and Governments had the foresight and vision to ensure that we had, and they have a key part to play in any NATO or UK operations against Daesh in the future.

Our role in the middle east should not be confined to the already destabilised regions. We should be working more closely with all our allies in the region so that our influence there is complemented by having such strong relationships. Since the crumbling of the Berlin wall in November 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet bloc two years later, the west has enlarged and moved its influence eastward in several ways. The European Union opened its doors to several countries that were once in the Soviet orbit. NATO accepted the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary as members, and the Bosnian and Kosovar crises have encouraged it to expand its security space to the south and intervene militarily in that region. Thus have the boundaries of the west moved eastwards and south-eastwards, with the expansion to the eastern Mediterranean running parallel to expansion in eastern Europe. That could further western security, including our own security in the United Kingdom. Let us look at the bigger picture: Cyprus, Greece and Israel all have a strategic part to play.

**Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil** (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Is there not a problem in the eastern Mediterranean, as the Greek Prime Minister has attacked his Turkish counterpart on Twitter after the downing of a Russian plane, and there are regular air incursions by each country into the other? There have even been descriptions of dog fights between the two. That is no way for anyone to behave when we are facing the likes of ISIS.

**Jim Shannon:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: that is not the way to behave. None the less, we have to work with westernised countries and see whether we can agree a strategy to move forward. The eastern Mediterranean is already the west's new outer limit. It is where the European attitude towards the use of force meets a very non-European attitude. It is where two strategic cultures meet, each entertaining different notions of behaviour during conflict. The eastern Mediterranean harbours various political entities, and is perhaps the only area in the world where western democracies live side by side, if I can use this terminology, with rogue states, with rich, authoritarian oil producers, and with some of the poorest countries in the world. Such gaps in wealth increase international tensions and nourish revisionist aspirations, as the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the Syrian military occupation of Lebanon dramatically showed.

In 2015, that wealthy region of the world is still in turmoil. We can no longer stand back, or isolate ourselves from a region that has produced truly global problems. Whether it is in a supportive or consultative role, or ultimately as the primary actor in the region, it is time for us in the United Kingdom to stand up and make sure that we take our obligations to the rest of mankind seriously, helping nations less fortunate than us to overcome the difficulties in the middle east so that they might enjoy the prosperity that we in the west too often take for granted.

The west's long-term strategic interest lies in strengthening western-oriented states in the eastern Mediterranean whose policies have potential to pacify countries in this zone of turmoil and helping to bring their people into the west's fold. Looking at other countries in the middle east, Jordan is an Arab country that could in effect join the west: certainly the sympathies are there. Other candidates include states of the former Soviet Union such as Georgia, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, all of which have developed rudimentary democratic institutions and naturally look towards the west. Most countries, however, would have difficulty extricating themselves from the whims of autocratic rulers.

Those are things we need to think about to create a real, long-term, sustainable and lasting solution to the plague of instability that seems to persist in the middle east. For now, we look to our allies in the region—the Mediterranean quartet of Greece, Turkey, Israel and Cyprus—as the key to unlocking influence once again. We need a positive and influential role in the region, and we need to maintain NATO's ability to operate effectively in the region if needed. It is imperative that we learn from all too recent mistakes when it comes to how we act in the region, to influence its direction in a way that is positive for it and for the world.

In the next few days, the House will make a truly monumental and historic decision on going to battle in the middle east, whether with air strikes or soldiers on the ground. That is a big decision for the House, and we look forward to that as well.

5.44 pm

**Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee) on securing this important debate. I agree that the United Kingdom has a peculiar

responsibility for the region. Indeed, it is unique, given the high standing that our country has throughout the middle east.

I pay tribute, too, to the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee for his leadership on our recent visit to the region and for the way in which he has put the Committee front and centre of the debate in the run-up to the important vote that we will shortly hold.

The impression that I took away from our visit to Tehran and Riyadh was one of the mutual hostility, suspicion and antagonism that exists between the two regional powers, Saudi Arabia and Iran. That tension is starting to spill over, not just in Yemen, but in Bahrain and now so tragically in Syria. Many other countries, including Kuwait, are caught up in the appalling tension between those two powers. I am pleased that in the Vienna talks Iran and Saudi Arabia are around the same table for the first time in a long time. As I said to the Prime Minister last week, it is vital that the United Kingdom uses its good offices in the United Nations to encourage and facilitate dialogue between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

**Bob Stewart:** On that point, we must fully understand that the United Kingdom still has an exceptionally good reputation in the middle east, despite the fact that we have lost so much of our military power. We are still regarded as friends.

**Daniel Kawczynski:** Very much so. When one travels throughout the middle east, time and again people highlight the fact that they see us as an impartial and honourable interlocutor and as people who can facilitate dialogue to try to dissipate some of the tension in the region.

We recently saw the extraordinary strength of British diplomacy, particularly over the nuclear agreement with Iran. If we cast our minds back to the extraordinary tensions with that country—by the way, during our visit we spent time at the British embassy, which had previously been trashed by students—we can see the great accomplishment of that painstaking British diplomacy. I pay tribute to our Foreign Secretary for playing a substantial role in the agreement. It shows what British diplomacy can achieve. I therefore do not believe that it is naive or unrealistic to expect that the United Kingdom could and ought to be trying to secure better dialogue between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

It is, however, essential that the Government are probed on strategy and planning in the run-up to a potential bombing of Syria. I spent quite a lot of time on that delegation to the middle east with my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron). He wrote an article in *The Mail on Sunday* yesterday outlining the case against bombing in Syria, and he is the only one among the entire Conservative parliamentary party who voted against the bombing campaign in Libya. That was an extremely courageous thing to do—to ignore the rest of the Conservative parliamentary party and go into the opposite Lobby. I pay tribute to him—he is a former soldier—for the tremendous courage that he displayed at that time.

I recall from those deliberations how the Opposition, the Liberal Democrats and the Government all rushed to support the bombing of Gaddafi. It was a highly emotional time for us. He promised to instigate a bloodbath in Benghazi and, as has been said, we wanted to do



something so we sanctioned the bombing of his military capability. Getting rid of a dictator is easy. What is more challenging is the planning that has to take place in order to ensure that the country is then administered properly, and that those important seeds of a democratic society are allowed to germinate before we pass on responsibility to local politicians.

**Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con):** I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and for making an exceedingly insightful point. Does he share my concern that when it comes to Syria and the bombing of ISIS within Syria, our relationship with Russia must be very carefully managed to ensure that we do not end up with a conflict that we are not looking for, particularly in the reconstruction?

**Daniel Kawczynski:** I very much agree, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that point. I will refer to Syria later in my speech, if I have time.

The lack of planning for boots on the ground in Libya has led so tragically to the continued instability in that country and the civil war that is raging there. The Minister will know about those difficulties, particularly the fact that ISIS has managed to take root in certain parts of the country. Indeed, some reports have identified ISIS in Libya as being the most radical and cruel in the region. One question that I want to pose is this: why at this moment do we want to bomb ISIS in Syria, but not in Libya?

The bar has to be raised that much higher, given the difficulties in Libya, to ensure that, for those of us who support the Government on the issue, adequate time is spent on the Floor of the House and some of the difficult questions that Ministers might not want to hear are asked, so that the Government are better prepared in Syria than they were in Libya.

Of all the interventions I heard at that time, the one made by my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), who now chairs the Defence Committee, was the most prescient. He challenged the figure of 70,000 moderates with whom we could work. It is extremely important that the Government listen to him and debate where that figure came from and of what those forces consist.

**Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con):** My hon. Friend talks about the Free Syrian Army and the figure of 70,000. It has been said that the Free Syrian Army hates Daesh, but it hates Assad even more. Our strategy is to deal with Daesh first. Therefore, by not addressing the other evil entity—Assad—can we really trust the Free Syrian Army to fight Daesh while knowing that it might get Assad?

**Daniel Kawczynski:** That is a point well made, and I hope that my hon. Friend will be able to build upon it in his contribution.

During our visit to the middle east, certain states in the region were unable to explain to us what resources they will be committing in Syria, either in the air or on the ground. There is the added complication of Saudi Arabia wanting the almost immediate removal of Assad and how that will play out. Of course, the regional allies, including Kuwait, the Emirates, Saudi Arabia and others, are involved in a complicated and difficult war in Yemen, which is stretching their resources. I very much hope that,

in advance of this vote, the Government will be able to explain to us what our regional allies will be contributing. It is very positive to hear that the Germans will be contributing 1,500 troops, on which I pressed their ambassador during our discussions in Iran.

My time is running out, so I would like to say that I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Windsor (Adam Afriyie) that it is extremely important that the Government work with Russia on the issue. I regularly attend events at the Russian embassy and speak on RT. I am afraid that at the moment it is fashionable to be anti-Russian and to see Russia through a cold war lens. I believe that we must come together at this time, despite all our differences, set aside some of the difficulties we have had with President Putin and work constructively with him and others to bring about stability for Syria. I echo the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell that unless there is a competent strategy, we will end up with a “bat the rat” situation: if we defeat them somewhere, they will pop up again elsewhere only too quickly.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr MacNeil:** On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. It has come to my attention, through BuzzFeed and Twitter, that the Prime Minister will make a statement on Syria after 7 pm. It seems that the statement will be on television, rather than in the House of Commons. Surely we are living in a parliamentary democracy, not a presidential system.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. Of course, I have no way of knowing whether anything that has gone out on social media is correct, so I have no idea whether what he says is true—although, I am quite sure that he would not have raised the point of order had he not seen something to that effect. All that I can say to him, and to the House, is that if the Prime Minister has something of importance to say to the nation about Syria, or indeed about any other vitally important issue, I have every confidence that he will come first to this House to say it. I am quite sure that he will do so in due course.

5.55 pm

**Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP):** Latha naomh Anndra sona dhuibh—I wish everyone a happy St Andrew’s day. That includes the 90% who claim direct Scottish descent and the 10% who actually have it. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Mr MacNeil) for coming to the Chamber just in time to give me the correct translation.

For a number of people, tomorrow marks the first day of Advent, which is seen as a time to guzzle chocolates out of an Advent calendar. For a billion or more people around the globe, however, Advent started yesterday. It is a time of reflection and preparation, to celebrate the birth of a convicted and executed criminal, a Palestinian Jewish refugee whose message of peace and good will to all is as desperately needed today as it ever has been at any time in the 2,000 years since he walked the very lands we are speaking about this evening.

I do not pretend to be an expert in any, or indeed all, of the complexities of the middle east, and perhaps it would be better if none of us did, because I suspect that

[Peter Grant]

many of the problems in that troubled region have their root cause in the fact that so many experts from other countries thought that they knew what was best for someone else's country. I approach this with the simple belief that there is right and wrong, morally defensible and morally indefensible, in foreign policy just as there is in everything else. I want to see the United Kingdom adopt a foreign policy that is morally right, rather than simply what is right in terms of political, economic or diplomatic expediency.

Against those measures, it has to be said that the United Kingdom's record has not been particularly impressive. We have heard talk about our ally Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is a ruthless and merciless abuser of the death penalty. We supply that country with weapons and then pretend not to know that those same weapons are being used to kill innocent civilians in Yemen. We honour the Israeli Prime Minister with a full state visit despite the fact that the UK Government's position is that the Israeli Government are acting against international law by occupying Palestinian territories. We allow weapons and military hardware to be sent to Israel and then pretend not to know that they could be contributing to the deaths of hundreds of innocent women and children in Palestine. We set a cap on the number of desperate refugees we are willing to accept from Syria, but we will set no cap whatsoever on the number of missiles and bombs we are prepared to send there, and we will set no cap on how long that military bombardment will last.

**Daniel Kawczynski:** I note the hon. Gentleman's comments about Saudi Arabia. As I am sure he is aware, his hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins), who sits on the Foreign Affairs Committee, was with us in Saudi Arabia last week and heard extensive briefings on the campaign in Yemen. I very much hope that the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) will spend time with his hon. Friend to find out about the Saudi perspective on this.

**Peter Grant:** I have no doubt that there is a Saudi story, but that story is not the only one that deserves to be told.

My point is that if we continue to operate a policy in the middle east that is based on the interests of UK citizens, businesses and investors, to the exclusion of all else, we will continue to get it wrong.

**Stephen Gethins** (North East Fife) (SNP): Today is St Andrew's day, and I note that he was another welcome middle eastern immigrant to Scotland. On the point made by the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski), I think that there are two sides to any story. Of course, if there have been any proven breaches of international humanitarian law, I am sure that all of us in this House would welcome an investigation. I think that would be best for everybody so that we have clarity.

**Peter Grant:** I would certainly welcome such an investigation, although perhaps it should have taken place before we started to supply the weapons in the first place. It is a bit late to discover afterwards that they have been used for the wrong purpose.

I fear that the international arms trade may have become so entrenched as part of the UK economy that an awful lot of people in the UK, whether they know it or not, or like it or not, have, in effect, a vested financial interest in not finding peaceful resolutions to conflicts the world over. That is not a good position to be in. I accept that we have to be prepared to defend ourselves. I have a problem not with the fact that a business in my constituency is involved in the military industry, but with what that technology is being used for. The willingness sometimes to provide technology without asking too many questions and without getting assurances about what it will and will not be used for has certainly not helped to bring peace to the middle east or to a number of other troubled spots around the world. This debate is clearly primarily about Syria, although it is badged as being about the whole of the middle east.

It is quite likely that within the next few days this Parliament will be asked to take the gravest and most serious decision that any body of people can be asked to take. I am greatly troubled by the idea that a key consideration for some Members might be the impact that that may or may not have on maintaining or undermining individual politicians in this Chamber. The very fact that the media believe that it will be a factor should give us all cause to stop and think. If we genuinely believe that this Parliament is seen as a beacon of integrity and democracy around the world, what kind of message does it send out if we allow for even the possibility that a decision to go to war could be influenced by domestic political considerations back home? I desperately hope that that will not be a consideration for any one of the 650 people who will be charged with making this decision, but I have a horrible feeling that my hopes may not entirely be realised.

**Mr James Gray** *rose*—

**Peter Grant:** I will give way once more.

**Mr Gray:** The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point about whether the twists and turns of political fortune in this Chamber should affect what we decide to do about going to war. Does he agree that with the sole exception of the occasion in 2003 when Mr Blair took us illegally to war in Iraq, there has never before been a vote on the matter in the Chamber, and that he is describing a very good reason for returning to the old system, which worked extremely well with regard to Libya, for example, whereby there was no vote at all until after the action had taken place?

**Peter Grant:** My comments are not about whether individual groups of MPs apply a whip or respect a whip that may be applied to them. It is up to the conscience of each and every one of us whether we follow a party whip. I take the view, although it has never been tested in 25 years in party politics, that if the whip contravened a direct instruction of my conscience I would follow my conscience. That is a decision for every Member to take. My concern is that there is a feeling throughout the United Kingdom and elsewhere that for some people—and the vote could be close enough that they are a decisive element—considerations about the impact on positions taken in this Chamber will be a factor. A decision to go to war should never, ever be affected by such factors.



In looking at the justification that has been given so far for involvement in an aerial bombardment in Syria, I continue to have very serious concerns. In order for a war to be just, for those who believe that there is such a thing as a just war, one of the absolute requirements is that it must have a reasonable prospect of success. Aerial bombardment cannot achieve its aims without troops on the ground. The hon. Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee) suggested that those troops will eventually have to come from the United Kingdom, despite the fact that the UK Government have said, "Not under any circumstances." Yet if they do not come from the UK, they have no idea of where they are going to come from. This will not work without a complete ceasefire between all the different warring factions in and around Syria, and there is no indication whatsoever of any ceasefire between any combination of those factions just now.

My fundamental concern about the idea of airborne military action in Syria is simply that it will not achieve its stated objective. To me, military action that has little chance of achieving its stated objective cannot be justified.

**Rehman Chishti:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Peter Grant:** I said that I would give way only once more, but since it is the hon. Gentleman, I will.

**Rehman Chishti:** I fully agree with the hon. Gentleman's remarks. Military action can degrade, control and contain Daesh, but it cannot defeat the evil ideology that this evil organisation pushes and panders to at every level, so our strategy has to look at dealing with that ideology as well as at taking military action.

**Peter Grant:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that comment. The question I asked of the Prime Minister last week was based on that very point. It is one thing to remove Daesh—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** I was going to let the hon. Gentleman finish his sentence, since it is St Andrew's day.

**Peter Grant:** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I finished at that point as I was expecting to be told that my time was up, but that did not seem to materialise.

It is one thing to remove Daesh; it is quite another to remove the circumstances where organisations such as Daesh, the Taliban and al-Qaeda can continue to flourish.

6.5 pm

**Dame Angela Watkinson (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con):** I intend to take a slightly different tack in not speaking, like most colleagues, about ISIL or Daesh. I want to focus my remarks on the value of our constructive relationship with Israel and the contribution that it makes to peace and stability.

The selective discrimination against Israel in UK university campuses contrasts with the huge benefits of BIRAX—the Britain Israel Research and Academic Exchange Partnership—which is an initiative of the British embassy in Israel and the British Council. Israel is a multiracial, multi-ethnic democracy where Arab, Druze and other minorities are guaranteed equal rights under law. Israel's declaration of independence grants "all Israel's inhabitants equality of social and political rights irrespective of religion, race or gender",

and it is currently the only functioning democracy in the middle east. In stark contrast to other middle eastern countries, there are no legal restrictions on movement, employment, or sexual or marital relations for any of Israel's citizens. All Israeli citizens from every minority vote in elections on an equal basis.

In the past two months, there have been over 90 terror attacks that have seen the deaths of 21 Israelis and many more injuries from stabbings, shootings and car rammings. Yet Israeli hospitals have treated both victims and terrorists regardless of their nationality.

**Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab):** If the hon. Lady is going to quote statistics, she should perhaps do so completely. Since the beginning of October, the violence on the west bank has resulted in 85 Palestinian deaths and 11 Israeli deaths, and 9,171 Palestinian injuries and 133 Israeli injuries. That is a ratio of 69:1.

**Dame Angela Watkinson:** The hon. Gentleman is quoting from his speech, and I will come to those matters as I continue with mine.

In addition, Israel has participated in disaster relief efforts worldwide, most recently providing assistance to Syrian refugees arriving in Greece and elsewhere.

Violence has been fomented by repeated inflammatory and false allegations from the Palestinian Authority, Fatah and Hamas accusing Israel of planning to destroy the al-Aqsa mosque and other Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem. Yet Hadassah medical centre, home to Jerusalem's largest emergency ward, treats the city's wounded regardless of whether they are victims or attackers, and co-operation between Palestinian and Israeli doctors has helped to save 607 Palestinian children since 2005. The hospital has mixed Jewish and Arab medical staff and routinely treats both attackers and victims, often in adjacent wards.

**John Howell (Henley) (Con):** I wonder whether my hon. Friend, like me, has been to Save a Child's Heart in Tel Aviv and acknowledges that the work that the doctors there do in the Palestinian territories, particularly in Gaza, is second to none in saving children's lives.

**Dame Angela Watkinson:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. When I continue my remarks, he will find that I cover that.

Israel's Teva Pharmaceutical Industries provides the NHS with one in six of its prescription medicines, making it the NHS's largest supplier of generic drugs. It is leading the world in the development of drugs to combat Alzheimer's disease, cancer, Parkinson's disease, and multiple sclerosis. Scientists have developed methods for producing human growth hormone and interferon, a group of proteins effective against viral infections. Copaxone, a medicine effective in the treatment of multiple sclerosis, was developed in Israel by Teva Pharmaceuticals from basic research to industrial production. It has also developed early diagnosis for mad cow disease and Creutzfeldt-Jakob genetic disease in humans, with a urine test instead of a brain biopsy, and identified the gene that causes muscular dystrophy and the gene linked to post-traumatic stress disorder.

In July 2015 the British embassy announced three new water research programmes between UK and Israeli scientists. The work of Israeli research institutions,

[*Dame Angela Watkinson*]

such as Tel Aviv University and the Weizmann Institute of Science, improves the lives of people in water-poor countries by sharing Israel's expertise in waste water treatment, purification and water reuse. The programmes will enable scientists from Britain, Israel and the region to work together to tackle water shortages.

Israel is one of the founding members of Digital 5, a group of leading digital Governments who met for the first time in London in December 2014. In March 2015 it was announced that three UK-Israel academic collaboration projects will receive £1.2 million of cyber-research funding from the UK Government.

The total value of trade and services between the UK and Israel is now more than £4.5 billion a year, and the UK is Israel's second biggest export market. British businesses such as HSBC, GlaxoSmithKline, Barclays and Rolls-Royce have invested more than £1 billion in Israel. The UK and Israel work closely together in technological and scientific research, including cyber-security.

In short, Israel is a tolerant, fair society. Creative and innovative, it produces and develops, and it advances knowledge. Britain's close relationship with Israel is a force for good in the middle east, and it is essential that we build and maintain that strong relationship.

6.11 pm

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): After much reflection and research, and after listening to the views of many people, including constituents, fellow Members on both sides of the House and the Government, I have decided that I cannot support British military action in Syria at present and I will vote against any motion in this House that sanctions it this week. It is my view that the eradication of Daesh from Syria, Iraq and around the world is a necessary process and one in which the UK should be engaged, including through effective military action. I am not currently persuaded that it would be lawful for the Royal Air Force to bomb Syria, but I agree that that is arguable and it is not the principal reason for my opposing the proposed military action. I wish I had more time to talk about the legality of it, but I highly recommend the excellent House of Commons Library briefing, which was published last Thursday.

There are three tests that I do not believe the Government have passed and that the Prime Minister failed to satisfy in his statement to the Commons last week. First, there is no tactical plan for taking control of the areas currently occupied by Daesh, should bombing be successful in dislodging them, which itself is questionable, given that the bombing of those areas by 11 other countries has continued over 15 months. There are insufficient numbers of competent, relevant or motivated ground troops who are sufficient to the task at present.

**Mrs Moon:** The Prime Minister has said that the head of the serpent is in Raqqa and that therefore we must attack Raqqa. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is not a serpent but a hydra, and that if we chop off one head, more heads will grow and they will do so in other areas of the middle east?

**Andy Slaughter:** With all due respect to the Prime Minister, my hon. Friend is quite right: his was a rather simplistic analogy.

Secondly, there is no functioning international alliance that can turn short-term military games into a programme for the peaceful governance of Syria. The Vienna talks are a start to such a process, but at present the aims of Turkey, Russia, Iran and the NATO countries are so disparate as to be chaotic.

**Ms Karen Buck** (Westminster North) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is essential to build an international alliance in order to take action against ISIL/Daesh in many ways other than air strikes? That includes stopping the flow of weapons into Syria and, above all, blocking the revenue, particularly the oil revenue, that is flowing in at a rate of \$1.5 million a day. We need to demonstrate that there is international co-operation on those things, alongside any measures that the Government may propose.

**Andy Slaughter:** I agree, and I will come in a moment to what I think we should be doing.

In addition to the lack of tactical and strategic bases, my third test is that the permanent defeat of Daesh in Syria requires the end of conflict, which is what allows it to thrive. Any short-term retrenchment will likely benefit the Assad regime, which is itself responsible for seven times as many civilian deaths as Daesh this year. That may mean a shift in the balance of forces, but it will bring us no nearer to resolution.

**Seema Kennedy** (South Ribble) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Andy Slaughter:** I will not.

I want Britain to engage in a concerted diplomatic effort to wean Russia and Iran away from their support for Assad, and Turkey and Saudi Arabia away from giving comfort, if not actual support, to Islamist extremism. I want a peace process that allows non-extremist opposition to talk to the acceptable parts of the Syrian Arab Army and Kurdish forces, and a concerted attempt, as my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) has just said, to cut off the funds to, and other international support for, Daesh. That is a very difficult, perhaps impossible, agenda, but to engage in bombing missions on the basis of, "Something must be done", or even on the basis of solidarity, and without clear objectives, does not show sound judgment.

There are other arguments for and against intervention, including that our contribution would be small, especially given the lack of military targets without the risk of civilian casualties; that we should support allies, whether they be the Iraqi or French Governments; and that we remain at risk from Daesh attacks on the UK, whether we take further military action against them or not. However, the three points I have mentioned are my red lines. They are also, I am pleased to say, reflected by a ratio of 100:1 in the letters and emails I have received from my constituents in the past few days and weeks. I will, of course, review my decision in the light of changing events, but given the UK's poor record of intervention in the middle east over the past decade, I think that further military incursion should be approved only if a high burden of proof can be established.

Having dealt with that matter, may I turn, albeit necessarily briefly, to two other issues in the middle east? The first is the current situation in Israel-Palestine. I am sorry that a few moments ago we listened to a

speech that gave a very one-sided view of that situation, which is at its most serious for many years. The issues are not new—we are familiar with them, including the growth of Israeli settlements, which now account for almost 600,000 people in the occupied territories; settler violence; a shoot-to-kill policy and increased use of live fire; increased use of home demolitions; child detention and administrative detention; pass laws, checkpoints and barriers; and restrictions of access to the Noble Sanctuary and other holy places. None of those things is new, but the intensification of their use by the occupying power is much more significant, and that is going on partly because of the extremism of the Israeli Government and partly because tragic events elsewhere in the middle east, including in Syria, give cover for it.

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

**Andy Slaughter:** I am sorry, but I will not, because of the time.

There are often distractions. Because the European Union has suddenly decided belatedly to impose labelling restrictions, Netanyahu said this morning that he was not going to talk to the EU. It is important that we do not import settlement goods, but, in the great scheme of the occupations, those are details. I can only quote from a recent article in *The Guardian* by Marwan Barghouti, who is a prisoner in Israel who wrote that

“the last day of occupation will be the first day of peace.”

That is what we should keep our eyes on—the fact that this is a country that has been occupied for many decades, and justice will never be achieved in Palestine until Israeli forces withdraw.

Finally, the Gulf is another issue that needs a whole debate in itself. The Government's policy on it is just wrong. We support Saudi Arabia, where many barbaric things occur within the regime, and, indeed, Bahrain, where we are building a naval base, and the United Arab Emirates, all of which have appalling human rights records. Such matters cannot be airbrushed and they ought to be reviewed. Nowhere is that clearer than in what is currently happening in Yemen.

I believe that the Foreign Secretary is on the record as saying that the UK will support the Saudi-led coalition “in every practical way short of engaging in combat.”

As Amnesty International has reported, that has meant a British-made Cruise missile being used in the coalition's destruction of a ceramics factory, a civilian object, on 23 September in an apparent violation of international humanitarian law. The head of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Peter Maurer, has said:

“Yemen after five months looks like Syria after five years.”

Yemen's is a forgotten war. It is a war in which the Saudi-led forces are creating havoc and committing humanitarian outrages daily. That is not to defend the Houthi and other forces, who are equally guilty of atrocities, but it is wrong that—for strategic, tactical or other reasons—the British Government are giving their unqualified support to what the coalition is doing. It is wrong that they are supporting a regime, such as the Bahraini regime in the Gulf, which oppresses the majority of its population and carries out torture and human rights abuses. While the Government are prepared to condemn such abuses in other countries, it appears they

are not prepared to do so in the case of Gulf countries for historical or, indeed, diplomatic reasons, but I believe they should do so.

6.21 pm

**Heather Wheeler** (South Derbyshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee) on securing this important and timely debate. I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I want to take this debate in a slightly different direction. Our role in the middle east must be to support countries that provide full rights to Christians and protect the rights of all minorities. We must challenge those who seek to persecute minorities for their religious beliefs and practices.

A century ago, Christians made up 20% of the population of the middle east, but this figure has dramatically fallen to 4%. Christians face prison sentences and executions for practising their religion in many countries across the middle east, where hatred of Christians is ignored or encouraged. Daesh is carrying out a campaign of persecution against minorities in the middle east. At least 5,000 Yazidis have been murdered in Iraq since August 2014, with the advance of Daesh forces who have declared Yazidis to be devil worshippers.

The rise of Daesh has intensified the persecution of Christians in the middle east. Countless Syrian and Iraqi Christians have been murdered with methods including crucifixions and beheadings. Daesh has evicted thousands of Chaldean and Assyrian Christians from their homes in Mosul, and in other areas they have demanded that Christians either convert or pay a tax for non-Muslims. They have destroyed countless churches and Christian shrines, and have carried out ethno-religious cleansing of Christian minorities.

Any Muslim who converts to Christianity is considered to have performed apostasy—the conscious abandonment of Islam. In certain parts of the middle east, this is a crime punishable by death. Christians live in a threatening atmosphere in many countries in the middle east, including Iran, where there were hopes that the treatment of minorities would improve under President Rouhani. Christians in Iran continue to be arbitrarily arrested and they face abuse in police custody.

Elsewhere in the middle east, Coptic churches have been burnt in Egypt in recent years. Hundreds of Christian Coptic girls have been kidnapped and forcibly converted to Islam, as well as being victims of rape and forced marriage to Muslim men. There are no churches left in Afghanistan. In 2012, the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia proclaimed that

“it is necessary to destroy all the churches of the region”.

**Tom Tugendhat:** I very much welcome my hon. Friend's comments on the state of Christianity in the region. It is, after all, the crucible of Christianity, and where Jesus Christ himself emerged from the Aramaic communities of Syria, which have tragically been destroyed. There is, however, one glimmer of light—the United Arab Emirates, whose sheikhs have recently been building Christian churches. Is she planning to come on to that point?

**Heather Wheeler:** My hon. Friend has made the point superbly well already.



**Mrs Moon:** During its visit to Iraq, the Defence Committee also went to Jordan. One of the things we were extremely pleased to hear from the King is that he has opened the Jordanian borders to all Christians. A large number of Christian refugees have been accepted there. That has caused him problems, but he is determined to accept them.

**Heather Wheeler:** I thank the hon. Lady very much for her intervention. Perhaps I should not call it a highlight of my first term in Parliament, but I had the great honour of meeting the King during my first five years in the House. He is the most amazing gentleman I have ever met, and I wish him God speed.

In stark contrast to such countries, the state of Israel remains committed to its declaration of independence pledge to

“ensure the complete equality of all its citizens irrespective of religion.”

Since Israel’s founding in 1948, its Christian population has increased a thousand-fold. Today, Christianity is practised by more than 160,000 Israeli citizens, and it is the largest religious community in Israel after those of the Jews and the Muslims. Israel is home to the holiest sites in Christianity, including the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, where Jesus was crucified and resurrected; the Room of the Last Supper and the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem; and the Sea of Galilee in northern Israel, where Jesus practised his ministry. Though Christians are exempt from military service, thousands have volunteered and have been sworn in on special New Testaments printed in Hebrew.

The level of freedom in Israel is remarkable when one considers the oppression and persecution faced by citizens in neighbouring countries, including those under the Palestinian Authority in the west bank and under the oppressive rule of Hamas in Gaza. In 1950, 15% of the population in the west bank was Christian; now, it is less than 2%. A generation ago, as many as 80% of Bethlehem’s population were Christian. This figure has now decreased to 10% owing, it is said, to land theft, intimidation and beatings.

We must continue to work with Israel, a country that upholds the rights of minorities in this turbulent region and the only country in the middle east that shares our democratic values. I call on the Government to draw attention to the devastating decline in the Christian population in the middle east and to dissociate themselves from any countries that sanction minorities for their religious beliefs or ethnic origin.

6.27 pm

**Dr Lisa Cameron** (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I wish you an excellent St Andrew’s day, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am aware of your very strong Gaelic connection.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for supporting this important debate, and the hon. Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee) for his very comprehensive speech and for encouraging us to hold the debate. I declare an interest in that my husband previously served as a member of the UK armed forces.

Due to recent events, there has been much debate about the issues in the middle east and about what the UK’s role and approach should be, particularly in relation

to extending air strikes to Syria. That was discussed at length on Thursday, when the Prime Minister delivered his statement. Although he is not pushing for a vote at this stage, he has indicated that he will do so and such a vote appears to be imminent. There is therefore an imperative need for continued debate, and this debate is extremely timeous. This is a serious and sensitive issue with significant and wide-ranging implications for our armed forces and their families, and for our response to the middle east. I do not want, during this serious debate or following its conclusion, to create more families, such as the Gentle family, who have gone through trauma.

There are concerns that extending air strikes to Syria may be ineffective, cost further human suffering and help to increase Daesh’s recruiting appeal. There appears to be consensus among many military experts of the area that there is likely to be little benefit from such action. It is recognised that a significant number of nations have already launched bombing campaigns in Syria, with the US’s campaign having gone on for approximately one year, so the suggestion that additional air strikes by the UK will make any significant difference appears unlikely.

**Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating our First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, on her invitation to host an international women’s summit for peace in Syria? Does she agree that it is such peace negotiations that world leaders should be engaged in, rather than further bombing, which only stokes the fires of war?

**Dr Cameron:** I do congratulate the First Minister and emphasise that diplomacy is important.

Nick Witney, a senior fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations, has highlighted the fact that:

“The year-long US air campaign against Islamic State...in Syria is now widely acknowledged to have had remarkably little impact—beyond strengthening that organisation’s narrative of oppression by ‘crusaders’, and therefore its recruiting appeal.”

That view is endorsed by Scottish Muslim groups, which highlight the fact that:

“As more innocent people die from the air strikes, the appeal of Daesh will strengthen.”

It is important to remember that many of the recent terrorist attacks that have triggered the consideration of air strikes have been carried out by individuals who were already living in the countries affected. Therefore, the domestic threat is unlikely to be addressed by air strikes.

The Foreign Affairs Committee report emphasised a number of key issues that required further explanation before the House was asked to approve a motion authorising military action. It highlighted important matters such as legality, ground troops and long-term strategies and consequences as being crucial to the success of any military action. The answers that have been provided by the Government to date have not been adequate in addressing those concerns.

**Mr James Gray:** The hon. Lady is making a very interesting point, but was she not here when the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee said that the seven points he had raised had been answered adequately by the Prime Minister in his statement and that he intended to support the Government’s call for strikes against Syria?



**Dr Cameron:** I was here for the statement and I heard the Chairman of the Select Committee state those views. However, I do not believe that his views are held commensurately by all members of the Committee.

Ordinary citizens do not live apart from ISIS terrorists. Youths of over 14 years of age are reportedly conscribed. Those who are unable to flee are, in effect, human shields. They are not able to hide in the tunnels that are dug by ISIS to shelter its commanders.

Bombing is generally a prelude to the use of ground forces. We do not intend to send ground forces, but are relying on about 70,000 local fighters from the Free Syrian Army. Where do the Russian forces stand? Is this an effective ground forces strategy?

Will we be hitting Syria for political reasons, such as to show our strength as part of a coalition? It may be a fallacy that bombing will hasten a political settlement and prevent terrorist attacks here.

There are few Members in this House, if any, who do not want to see action that would swiftly degrade Daesh, but widespread concern remains on a number of fronts. The danger to civilian casualties may inflame anti-western feelings. What is the overall strategic aim of such action? How much bombing will be enough? What is our position on the longer-term outcome in Syria? Will engaging in air strikes reduce the risks here in the short or long term?

Although much of the focus has been on Syria, I briefly want to highlight other areas in the middle east, such as Yemen, where civilians are suffering the effects of civil war. It is important that the people there receive appropriate attention and assistance. Oxfam highlights the fact that, prior to the conflict in Yemen, millions of people were already experiencing poverty and hunger. Since the escalation of the war in March 2015, those issues have intensified. There have been more than 32,000 casualties and 5,700 fatalities. It is reported that approximately 82% of the population is in need of humanitarian aid. Although some of the support that the UK has provided appears to have had a positive impact, much more aid is needed for the civilians who have been affected and more diplomatic pressure needs to be exerted by our Government.

In conclusion, the UK needs to take a coherent approach across the middle east that links humanitarian, economic and diplomatic means. That appears to be lacking, as does a strategic long-term approach to the difficulties faced by the middle east to encourage stability at this time. We hope to work constructively across the House to ensure that the UK takes a progressive role in the middle east by engaging civic society, developing progressive policy and ensuring the survival of society in Syria and beyond. Questions remain to be answered and the solutions will be complex. A clear, long-term military strategy must be developed and presented fully to this House.

6.35 pm

**Nadhim Zahawi** (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee) for bringing this important debate to the Chamber. I also commend the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood). I have just returned from a trip to Iraq and Turkey as part of my work on the Foreign Affairs Committee and the teams in both

places told me how engaged he was. I believe that he will be making his fourth visit to Iraq very soon. I want to put it on the record that our ambassadors in those places are doing a tremendous job. I hope to describe in detail some of the solutions in Iraq and Syria. I, too, highlight to the House my declarations in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Britain has been deeply involved in the middle east for centuries. The region has occupied our diplomatic and cultural attention for decades. Those close links are the reason I stand here today. Britain was the haven of choice for my family when we fled Saddam in the 1970s.

Today, ISIL captures the news headlines, our nightmares and our imaginations, but it is just a symptom—a potentially fatal symptom—of a deep rift at the heart of the Muslim world. The rift has several parts at different layers and they all matter. For decades, a stricter, puritanical interpretation of Sunni Islam has proliferated across the region. Traditional and more enlightened forms have been rejected, leading to more aggression and intolerance. It has led to the spread of extremism when that interpretation has mixed with other social problems, such as unemployment, corruption and poverty, which are all too common in these countries.

The regional powers of Saudi Arabia and Iran are at a stand-off and undermine each other at every turn, their relationship poisoned by suspicion and fear. They risk tearing apart their neighbours by proxy. Syria and Iraq are vulnerable to that because of their origins as Ottoman provinces fitted together into new kingdoms by the victorious empires of the first world war.

**Tom Tugendhat:** Does my hon. Friend recognise that this is not the first time in the history of the middle east that countries have fought the genuine curse of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab's interpretation of Islam, and that when the Ismaili dynasty of Egypt launched one of its great attacks on the Nejd province of Saudi Arabia in the 1800s, it was very much part of that evolution?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He is a great scholar and I look forward to his contribution to this debate and, I hope, to the debate on Wednesday.

In Iraq, a Sunni king who was installed to allow the British to dominate was replaced by a Sunni dictator. In Syria, a Shi'a ruling class was created to enable the French to rule. In both instances, it resulted in bitter divisions, as political oppression added to sectarian divide. That settlement, which was maintained only by fear and force, has completely collapsed in the wars.

As we have watched Syria torn apart by the civil war and Iraq stuck in political deadlock and threatened by ISIL's invasion, it has become clear to us that a new settlement is needed. The one that the US began in 2003 is completely gone. The Iraqi Government that the coalition set up and the army it trained are hollowed out and militias provide much of the manpower against ISIL. Iran dominates politics in Iraq today. I commend the Foreign Secretary for the work that he has done to bring Iran in from the cold.

As we fight to end the war and restore peace, we must recognise that real peace—a peace that lasts and allows people to feel safe and get on with their lives—can only come from self-government, federalism and political reform. That is the aim and it is a noble one, but challenges

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stand in the way. Syrians and Iraqis may want strong representative Governments, but that may not be what Iran or Saudi Arabia want. That is not what all Shi'a, or indeed all Sunni, in Iraq want, and it is not what Assad and the Shi'a minority in Syria may want. Why? Because all they have ever known is rule by the strongest. Those who are not on top are under the thumb of whoever is on top. People see a protracted fight as preferable to letting down their guard in a compromise that they might not survive. That lesson has been scarred into the region by systematic killing right from the death throes of the Ottoman empire to the murderous regimes of Saddam Hussein and Hafiz and Bashar al-Assad. However, we are not passive on this matter, and it was made clear to me in Iraq last week that we can influence Baghdad—indeed, those who agree with us are crying out for more influence in Baghdad.

**Rehman Chishti:** My hon. Friend talks about influence in Baghdad, but does he agree that one of our failures was in supporting the Maliki Government who persecuted Sunnis and massacred Members of Parliament in Anbar province? That led to the creation of this monster—Daesh—which is now out of control.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** I thank my hon. Friend, and I am coming on to that point. He is right to point out the shortcomings of the Maliki Government. As I said, we are not passive, and right now the only game in town is Iran, whose Government may not want a strong Sunni region in Iraq, or a Sunni-dominated Syria. Prime Minister Abadi is an ally, and we must make it clear to him that if he can push back and convince Iran that there is a different way, and begin the project of rebuilding Iraq after the disastrous Maliki Government, we will be with him all the way. We can make it clear that we want devolution to Sunni regions of Iraq, and inclusion so that the Iraqi political project can become the vehicle for Sunni hope that it ought to be. If we give people that, ISIL is finished and none shall follow in its place; if we fail them, we have not seen the last of extremism and violence.

Syria is not different in needing that kind of settlement. Assad inherited a doomed regime from his father. He could have chosen dialogue in 2011, but instead he chose the cudgel. Rather than admit that he was finished, he lashed out at the protests, and bludgeoned his country into civil war. Assad's barrel bombs, torture chambers and nerve gas mean that he and his family cannot continue to rule in Syria, and they cannot be given a part in any future Government. To do so would guarantee that this is a war without end.

However, there is a difference between Assad and the regime, and a distinction between Assad and the Alawites. It is not a binary choice between Assad's regime and the terror of ISIL. The moderate rebels are vital to the future of the country, and any future Government with whom we can work. Russia will see that too, because President Putin does not want ISIL to control vast swathes of the country any more than we do. Russia's Caucasus has a large Muslim population that is vulnerable to radicalisation and terrorism. Putin wishes to keep his bases and a presence in Syria, and he worries about the transition between Assad and the next Government. On that, his views are legitimate, and we have no wish to dismantle

Syrian Government apparatus. We desperately want a secular Government in Damascus, and for minorities to be protected, and we do not wish to threaten Russia's interests, presence or bases in western Syria. There is very real room for agreement. The political settlement that we eventually reach can include all things, and Russia can become our partner in influencing such a deal.

The rift between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims has existed for almost as long as the religion of Islam and it is not going away. However, we do not need it to go away to achieve peace; we are not trying to achieve agreement on everything, and we do not need to. People will always disagree about what is important in their life and how society should be governed—that is pluralism. What is important is resolving and compromising on matters within democratic and legal apparatus. That is the real aim and it can achieve a new political system in time. There are also partners for us to work with in those countries, and I met the American, German and Dutch teams. Our Prime Minister is right to say that we must extend our campaign to Syria to fight Daesh, and I will be supporting him on that.

6.44 pm

**Roger Mullin** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): It is some years since I worked in the middle east, so what I am about to say is fashioned mainly from recent research that I have done, and that from the Commons Library. My short speech is not the one that I thought I would give. I had intended my speech to cover the broad sweep of the middle east, but given our debate thus far, perhaps it is better to leave that to another time and concentrate on the matter in hand, which is Syria.

For a long time I have had an interest—both professionally and in other ways—in the issue of capacity building in countries that have suffered from conflict, or that in some way need to rebuild their societies. I was particularly concerned the other day when I read this rather depressing comment from Manish Rai, who is editor of the geopolitical news agency, Viewsaround:

“Only time will tell who will win or lose this war. However, one thing is certain: Syria as a country has already lost the struggle for its survival. Perhaps in the future, coming generations will know through stories that a country once called Syria existed on the planet.”

Let us hope that his concerns and fears do not come to pass and that something can be done. The challenge facing any reconstruction is huge, and at times speakers in this debate have been rather glib in their expectations about what can readily and easily be done.

Let me recite a few of the facts that we know from United Nations agencies and others. The UN estimates that 8 million Syrians have been displaced from their homes, in addition to the 4 million who have fled their country—that is more than half of Syria's entire pre-war population. According to the UN, 250,000 people have been killed, and half of those were civilians.

**Stephen Gethins:** Given those numbers, does my hon. Friend agree that we should pay tribute to the people of Jordan, Turkey and elsewhere in the region who are taking in so many refugees, and that the UK needs to help those countries by taking in more refugees?

**Roger Mullin:** I agree entirely, and in a Westminster Hall debate some weeks ago I argued that we must do more for the thousands upon thousands of orphaned

children. It is estimated that 300 to 400 children have been captured by Daesh and put in camps to be trained as suicide bombers. Surely compassion compels us to do more for the most vulnerable in Syria at this time.

**Chris Green** (Bolton West) (Con): If ISIL is to remain in the middle east, and more and more people are purged from that putative state, surely by removing those people from the middle east whom ISIL does not want we will be serving its purposes.

**Roger Mullin:** My concern is about the most innocent and vulnerable people. Of course we want an end to terrorism in the middle east, and this House will have to address—perhaps in a couple of days—the best means of accomplishing that. I suspect that I will disagree with the hon. Gentleman, but in my short speech I hope to set out the scale of the challenge of rebuilding Syria, whenever that can start.

**Rehman Chishti:** In defeating this evil organisation, we must defeat its ideology, appeal and self-proclaimed legitimacy. We must join our ally France in using the correct terminology, and I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman and his party for doing that and for not linking this evil organisation to Islam, which has nothing to do with it. This organisation are evil scum and we must describe them as that.

**Roger Mullin:** They are indeed evil scum. I pay tribute to the many Members who call this scum by their proper name of Daesh. A few weeks ago, Members who did so were few in number, but now there are many more. All those who use the correct terminology in this debate deserve credit. The hon. Gentleman is correct: there are huge ideological and cultural challenges to overcome. I would like to say a few words, however, on the practical challenge relating to infrastructure.

It was estimated recently that the productive capacity of Syria has been so degraded that it is 80% less than it was before the war broke out four years ago. Some 37% of all hospitals in Syria have been completely destroyed and a further 20% are so degraded they are unable to provide anything like the kind of service they provided in the past. There has been a significant destruction of health, education, transport, water, sanitation and energy infrastructure. Indeed, it has reached the stage where some commentators estimate that if the war were to end today and Syria embarked immediately on 5% economic growth—that is highly unlikely—it would take 30 years to return to the economic situation it was in in 2010.

In addition to the destruction of infrastructure, there is the difficulty we will have in entering the area to start to rebuild it. I am the chairman of the all-party group on explosive weapons and I have carried out some investigations into that situation in Syria. As well as the degradation of infrastructure, the Syrian Government have been using both anti-personnel mines, manufactured in Russia, and cluster munitions. Both are deemed illegal under the Ottawa convention. Daesh uses both cluster munitions and improvised explosive devices as landmines. This build-up of the huge detritus of war will have to be cleared before any real development can take place. There is currently no mine action programme in Syria to remove any of it. This is understandable, given that the conflict is still under way. In fact, the situation is so unusual that non-state parties—terrorist groups—have been known

to dig up landmines from Israeli minefields along the Golan Heights and attempt to reuse them for their own purposes. The number of victims of explosive weapons, predominantly civilians, is already huge. The conflict in the Falklands 33 years ago was relatively small, yet the UK has still not fully cleared all the landmines from the Falkland Islands. I say that not to condemn the United Kingdom, but to think about the challenge facing Syria given the state of destruction that has already taken place.

**Mrs Moon:** I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but I have visited the Falkland Islands many times. The problem the Falkland islanders have is that the mines have sunk into peat. It would be more difficult and destructive to remove the mines than to leave them there.

**Roger Mullin:** I accept that that is true in some regards. However, a UK Government programme is still under way and money is still being spent to encourage further clearance, so it seems the UK Government do not accept that that is the situation in every case. In any case, I make the point to highlight the fact that we will face a huge challenge in Syria. It is one that this House would do well to address.

6.54 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood):** I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee) and my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Stephen Phillips) for securing this timely debate on the middle east and north Africa. It is my usual manner to try to respond to those who have spoken. I am aware, however, of the time constraints and the desire to have further Back-Bench contributions. If I may, I will write to colleagues on the questions they have raised.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell invited us to recognise Britain's historical relationship with this complex part of the world. That is wise advice. Seeking solutions to today's challenges must be done through the prism of understanding the peoples and their history. It is fair to say that the fertile lands found between the Nile, the Jordan and the Tigris-Euphrates rivers formed the umbilical cords of the area we now call the cradle of civilisation. Many of the foundation stones of modern humanity come from this part of the world: basic laws, agricultural techniques, the alphabet, the wheel, and, of course, the three monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

An impressive number of tribes, religious groupings and communities huddled around those sparse water resources and coastlines, subject to the waxing and waning of a series of empires and dynasties: the Sumerian empire and the Hittite, Assyrian, Egyptian, Babylonian, Phoenician and Persian dynasties. The region experienced 8,000 years of societal development, wars, culture and governance before the first stitch of the Bayeux tapestry was made.

**Tom Tugendhat:** The Minister is making some excellent points. We talk very often about cyber-terrorism. Al-Khwarizmi wrote his book on algebra, explaining the correlation of numbers, before the Bayeux tapestry even existed. Indeed, he wrote it before there was a King of England: Ethelbert was the King of Kent, and there was no Duncan and no kingdom of Scotland.



**Mr Ellwood:** My hon. Friend underlines my point about the history.

This is a proud and fragmented part of the world. Through the eventual expansion of our own empire, we have come to know it so well. It was through our treaties, alliances and, yes, our wars that we were able to trade and to develop an intricate knowledge of, and relationship with, much of the middle east, which is still evident today. From the 1820 Trucial States treaty with the Gulf kingdoms, the so-called veiled protectorate rule of Egypt, the San Remo conference and the Balfour declaration, Britain's history, for better or worse, is deeply intertwined and inextricably linked with the security, economy, governance and, in some cases, the very creation of states across the region.

Forgive the history lesson, but it is only through this backdrop that we can fully appreciate the complexity of the region and the expectation that, as one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, the world's leading soft power and with such strong ties to the region, we should be at the forefront of efforts to increase security and safeguard prosperity.

**Mrs Moon:** I know how diligent the Minister has been in getting to understand the region, and in visiting and talking to the people there. Does he not recognise, however, that one of the major problems our country faces is the hollowing out of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office? Increasingly, there is a lack of understanding of the history, culture, politics, alliances, aspirations and personalities in the region.

**Mr Ellwood:** One week ago, the hon. Lady could have made a powerful case for that, but I am pleased to say that the spending review confirmed Britain's and the Government's commitment to making sure that we have the money to continue our diplomatic contacts.

Our desire to be at the forefront in the middle east was reflected in last week's strategic defence and security review, where the commitment to building a more secure, stable and prosperous middle east and north Africa region was underlined. In an increasingly globalised world, and as a country open to international business, we understand that our economic security goes hand in hand with our national security. We therefore invest in protecting and projecting our influence and values.

Today, UK trade with the middle east and north Africa is worth £35 billion a year. For example, 4,000 UK companies are based in the Emirates; Britain is the largest direct foreign investor in Egypt; Qatar invests £30 billion of its sovereign wealth funds in the UK; in Oman, BP is building the largest onshore gas project in the world; our exports to Kuwait are up 12% on last year; and in Israel, the Prime Minister has launched a thriving bilateral active technology community hub. Such strong relationships create the trust that allows us to raise issues such as human rights, the rule of law and other aspects of justice, and to have these frank conversations.

**Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con):** I know that my hon. Friend is familiar with the case of my constituent's father, Mr Kamal Foroughi, who is imprisoned in Iran. Does he think that our improving relationship with Iran will allow us better to make the humanitarian case for his release?

**Mr Ellwood:** I think we are having a meeting about this next week. The fact that we now have a dialogue with Iran makes it easier for us to deal with these consular matters, and I look forward to doing my best to assist my hon. Friend and his constituent.

Sadly, although there are reasons to be positive, many countries in the region remain afflicted by violence and instability. Yemen was labelled as the forgotten war by the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter). In that country, the Houthi advance against President Hadi's legitimate Government has had catastrophic humanitarian consequences. Some 80% of the population are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance, and so far the UK has pledged £75 million of support. We welcome the crucial role that the Saudi Arabian-led coalition is playing, but these military gains must be translated into progress on a political track and a ceasefire agreement.

**Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab):** I am grateful to the Minister for mentioning Yemen, which should not be forgotten when discussing the middle east. What success has he had in persuading the Saudis to ease the bombing campaign, which is causing so many problems for local Yemenis?

**Mr Ellwood:** First, may I acknowledge the right hon. Gentleman's commitment to the country as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Yemen? We are aware of reports of breaches of international humanitarian law. We have raised them with the Saudi Government and received repeated assurances of compliance, but we will continue to engage on this issue.

In Libya, delays on both sides in confirming a government of national accord are allowing extremist groups to take advantage of the vacuum and to gain traction, as has been mentioned by hon. Members, but progress has been made. I recently met Prime Minister-designate Sarraj in Tunis, and we very much support UN envoy Martin Kobler as he calls on Libyan delegations to confirm their commitment to the implementation of the political agreement.

**Daniel Kawczynski:** My hon. Friend will share my tremendous frustration that a government of national unity in Libya has proved so allusive. In the interregnum, until we have secured that government, do we recognise the Tobruk government as the official government of that country?

**Mr Ellwood:** I was involved in speaking to members of delegations on both sides at the UN General Assembly, and we remain focused on securing that government of national accord. We are working hard with the UN envoy, and Jonathan Powell is also involved.

On the middle east peace process, we all know that there is an urgent need to create the conditions for a resumption of talks leading to a long-term peace agreement and a two-state solution. I condemn the appalling murders of innocent people in recent weeks, and the Foreign Secretary and I have called on all sides to restore calm and improve the situation on the ground.

The signing of the nuclear deal with Iran is welcome, but I share others' concerns about Iran's destabilising activity in the middle east. Many of our partners in the region share this view. There remain numerous issues on which we disagree with Iran, such as its support for the



Assad regime, but none the less it has influence in the region so we need to engage with it on these difficult issues.

**Stephen Gethins:** Can the Minister update us on when we might expect a vote on air strikes being extended to Syria and when we might see a copy of the motion, as called for by my right hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Angus Robertson)?

**Mr Ellwood:** I hear the words of the hon. Gentleman, who places his concerns on the record, but I seek your guidance, Madam Deputy Speaker. I want to take interventions, but I am conscious that I am eating up not only my time but that of Back Benchers. If I may, therefore, I will try to make some important progress.

I turn now to the substance of the debate: the Government's strategy to defeat ISIL. Last Thursday, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister comprehensively outlined the threat posed by ISIL—or Daesh, as it is known in the region—and what more Britain could do following UN Security Council resolution 2249, which calls on member states to use all necessary measures to prevent and suppress the terrorist acts of Daesh and other designated terrorist groups.

As colleagues make their own assessments, I thought it would be helpful to outline the strategy adopted by the 65-strong coalition against Daesh in Iraq. First, there is the military component. In September 2014, swift action by the coalition, in conjunction with the Iraqi forces, contained Daesh's advance and prevented the fall of Baghdad, Irbil and Kirkuk, and to date 30% of the territory Daesh once controlled in Iraq has been retaken, including the cities of Kirkuk, Baiji and, most recently, Sinjar. It is critical that indigenous forces liberate their own territory, so that they can take ownership of its long-term security. Training these forces will take time, but the cities of Mosul and Ramadi will eventually be liberated, which will be a significant milestone towards ridding Iraq of Daesh.

The second strand is humanitarian and stabilisation support. The coalition works closely with international organisations and Iraqi security forces to ensure that liberated communities are given the services they need as rapidly as possible. We also support the Iraqi Government on important developments, such as the long-awaited but sadly delayed de-Ba'athification and national guard laws, which will give the Sunni population a greater stake in their country.

The third strand is stemming the flow of foreign fighters. As we degrade Daesh on the battlefield, we must cut off the flow of new recruits, including foreign fighters. The fourth strand is cutting the financial support to Daesh. The coalition is working hard to squeeze Daesh's finances, and a counter-financing action plan has been put in place to identify and freeze donors' accounts, deny Daesh access to international financial systems and, through UN resolutions, prohibit the sale of oil and antiquities.

The final pillar of the coalition's strategy is strategic communications. We must debunk the ideology of Daesh and work in partnership with our allies and civil society in the region to counter the extremist doctrine. Critical to this is defeating the laptop terrorists by denying this poisonous ideology a global audience via social media and the dark net. Here, too, Britain is playing a leading role in co-chairing the strategic communications working group.

As the Prime Minister said on Thursday, military action and the extension of UK air strikes to Syria should be seen not in isolation but as part of a coherent strategy that includes our counter-extremism strategy, the diplomatic and political process under way, and a comprehensive humanitarian and stabilisation package for post-conflict reconstruction. I am delighted to tell the House that in February the UK will be hosting a senior-level summit to discuss how the international community can best assist the people of Syria in humanitarian support and stabilisation.

Extending UK air strikes will have a qualitative and quantitative impact on ISIL/Daesh. On a tactical level, they will allow full targeting of an adversary across a border that they themselves do not honour or recognise. Operationally, we will bring exceptional capability to the table in the form of the Brimstone missile system, which can accurately take out targets travelling at speed with low collateral damage. Strategically, it will make a material contribution to Daesh's defeat in Iraq by impeding supply lines and thereby hastening the fall of Mosul and Ramadi. It will also apply greater kinetic pressure to the headquarters from which Daesh co-ordinates its activities. It will give hope to the majority of people living in Raqqa who live under duress and constant fear, who want to be liberated but not by Assad. As the Prime Minister said, while air strikes will impede the ability of Daesh to operate freely in the short term, it will be destroyed only through the political process and the ability of all Syrians to have a say in their future.

The recent meetings of the international Syria support group in Vienna brought together for the first time the key international stakeholders, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, Russia, the United States, France and Turkey. There is now a common vision of what is needed to end the war, stabilise the region and help the Syrian people. Military chiefs, politicians and the public rightly ask what success looks like in order to avoid lengthy and costly campaigns. That is why the Prime Minister has articulated a wider strategy in which military action is just one element.

Let me make it clear that I am just as concerned by the mission creep of Daesh itself. No longer is it focused on its so-called caliphate, as it is extending its poisonous ideology in other ungoverned and fragile spaces such as Libya, the Sinai and north-eastern Nigeria. Its mission creep inspires extremists further afield, including those in Tunisia, who killed 30 innocent British holidaymakers on the beach.

**Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Mr Ellwood:** I will not, I am afraid.

That mission creep is the changing of tactics directly to attack western targets, as we saw in the recent tragedy in Paris and beyond with the bombing of the Russian holidaymakers flying home from Egypt. This cannot go unchecked. That is why Britain must act.

In conclusion, all MPs have a duty fully to scrutinise the merits of the Prime Minister's proposal. We must learn from the previous decisions taken by this House and place them in context, but I ask that we not be paralysed by them. We are dealing with an implacable enemy, with whom we cannot negotiate. We have already taken the decision to fight Daesh in Iraq, and it has

[Mr Ellwood]

extended the fight well beyond the so-called caliphate. The dangers this poses, not just in Iraq and Syria, but in Paris, Sharm el-Sheikh, Tunis, Kuwait City and Ankara, is understood by all members of the United Nations Security Council, who have called on all member states who are able to do so to tackle the scourge and eradicate its safe haven.

Let us be clear that the liberation of Raqqa is not just around the corner. It will take time, and progress on all strands of our strategy will be required, but degrading and placing pressure on Daesh alongside progress on the political track is the key. This strategy includes the 70,000 non-extremist opposition, who are already fighting both Daesh and Assad. Hon. Members have said a number of times, “Who are these people?”, so let me clarify. These are the hundreds of factions that, since the Arab spring, have defended their local communities against the tyranny of Assad, but want no truck with terrorism or indeed extremism. They have successfully kept supply routes to Aleppo open and defeated Jabhat al-Nusra in the south. As such, they are the ones that we need to support, and they are the ones who will play an important role in Syria’s future. They will be part of the political transition in the country, and they will shortly come together in the region to form a common position.

I ask colleagues to ensure that we continue to do all we can, as a leading P5 nation, to support our allies, with our soft and hard-power capabilities, to help advance an end to the Syrian civil war and to defeat Daesh for good.

7.14 pm

**Tommy Sheppard** (Edinburgh East) (SNP): On behalf of my party, I applaud the Back Benchers who have secured today’s debate. We now know from one of the Conservative contributions earlier that we will be asked on Wednesday to vote on whether or not to go to war in Syria. It is timely and appropriate that in a week in which such a proposition is being put, we should consider the wider historical and political perspectives in the region.

It was less than 100 years ago when the then colonial powers carved up the lands that were once controlled by the Ottoman empire and created the map of the middle east and the territories that we see today. I have to say, on reflection, that some of those decisions were arbitrary and that some did not take into account the territorial and ethnic identifications of the people who lived there. Most importantly, those powers certainly did not consult the people who were to be governed by these arrangements and nor did they have at their heart the democratic and secular principles to which I think we all aspire.

Those arrangements have not served us well in the last century. They have been the source, I believe, of much of the insecurity in that region. If we are to have a wider debate and a wider strategy, this country needs to be concerned not to repeat the mistakes of the past and to ensure that it sees a future in which people will be consulted on their own government. There is probably widespread agreement in this Chamber on the type of political arrangements we would like to see in that part of the world. We believe that they should be democratic and that people should be allowed to elect those who govern them. We would also agree that we want them to

be secular or, if not entirely secular, at least to be states that will tolerate religious freedom and allow religious expression.

In pursuing those objectives, I believe that we have to be both consistent and coherent in our foreign policy. It is fair to say that that consistency and coherence have been absent from the foreign policies of this country under successive Governments. I want to pick up on three examples in respect of which more work is required.

The first is the situation with the Kurds. Many have applauded the peshmerga, and we and other western countries are coming to their assistance and providing them with the resources they need in the current war that they are waging. We will need to consider and support demands for Kurdish autonomy in the north of Syria, and we will also need to consider, I think, whether the time has come to recognise that there should be a national state of Kurdistan, which would not just bring confidence to the Kurdish people but might end up providing more security in the region in the longer term.

**Tom Tugendhat:** The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point about the very policies that Her Majesty’s Government and our allies have pursued in the region. On the possibility of a Kurdistan, the hon. Gentleman has elucidated some interesting arguments. The only narrow point I would make is that the creation of a Kurdish state, if that were to happen, would cause such unrest in the region that it might be something best considered in due course rather than at a time when the region is already inflamed.

**Tommy Sheppard:** My point is that it must be on the agenda, and that we cannot have a situation whereby we appear to be allying with the Kurdish forces in Syria and Iraq, using them in many ways as a proxy, yet at the same time denying their aspirations.

That brings us, I am afraid, to the situation with Turkey. I regard the recent Turkish elections, in which President Erdogan strengthened his position in the country, to be a retrograde step. This country needs, I think, to have a serious dialogue with the Turkish Government and to bring our other allies into that dialogue as well—and we need to say that the way in which they regard the Kurds is not acceptable and will not lead to the longer-term peace we want to see in the region.

The second aspect of Saudi Arabia has been mentioned already. It is a state that, frankly, is barely beyond the medieval in how it treats many of its people. I, for one, am dumbfounded at the continuing closeness of the Foreign Office with the Government of Saudi Arabia and our continuing desire to arm them, even in a situation where there is now credible evidence that the Saudi royal air force is using British-supplied weapons against the civilian population in neighbouring Yemen—contrary to this country’s rules relating to arms supply. I think we have seriously to question what our attitude should be to the Saudi Government and what their role would be in preparing a lasting settlement in the area.

My third and final point, relating to the need for consistency and coherence, is the Israel-Palestine question, which has in many ways been overlooked in the last few years. The situation there is getting worse than it has ever been before. The violence is reaching very intense levels, and, as was pointed out earlier by, I think, the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), the disparity in that violence is really quite marked. The number of

casualties on the two sides is entirely unequal, and many aspects of the reaction of the Israeli defence forces are disproportionate and, indeed, could be considered unlawful. We cannot continue to ignore the situation in Palestine, in the occupied territories and the green zone.

**Tom Tugendhat:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Tommy Sheppard:** I am not sure whether I will be given extra time, but I will take the intervention anyway.

**Tom Tugendhat:** Will the hon. Gentleman forgive me if I make a very short comment on the Israel-Palestine question? He has raised some excellent points, and is advancing an extremely fluent argument encompassing most of the middle east. What has struck me over the past four or five years—and I wonder whether it has struck him as well—is that since the so-called Arab spring, the question of Israel has not been mentioned on the Arab streets. The question is not whether or not Israel is legitimate or illegitimate; it relates to the governance of the Arab countries themselves. Is it not incumbent on us to focus on that question of governance—of which the hon. Gentleman himself has just spoken so fluently—rather than sending ourselves down a rabbit hole and talking about the Israel-Palestine question, which is, let's face it, distinct from the question of governance in the region?

**Tommy Sheppard:** It is distinct, but it is not possible to consider a lasting peace in the middle east without addressing the situation there, which I think is being brushed under the carpet at the moment.

In the occupied territories, the Israeli Government are sponsoring and supporting both the development of new settlements and the demolition of Palestinian homes and properties, which is creating a situation that is close to the annexation of those occupied territories by the state of Israel. That may be Israel's intention, but if it pursues the same path, the viability of a separate Palestinian state will not be there, and hence the two-state solution will not be there. If the Israeli Government intend to continue their present policies, the Israeli Government should be challenged to say what they consider to be the longer-term conditions for a settlement of the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis in that part of the world. Meanwhile, millions of Palestinian refugees are still being held in the refugee camps in neighbouring countries, in a sort of holding pattern, and are being denied any hope or any prospect of a place that they can call home.

I must say in all seriousness that one of the things that this country could do—acting in concert with other western countries—is try to take a fresh initiative on the question of Israel-Palestine, and be seen to try to advocate the human rights of Palestinians and the requirement for a lasting and balanced peace in the area. I think that that would, single-handedly, do a great deal to undermine and counter much of the mythology that is being put about on the issue of Daesh, and the suggestion that this is a conflict between the west and Islam. We should be seen to take new action on Palestine, but at present no one is talking, and no talks are planned for the future. I know from correspondence with the Minister that he is sympathetic to much of what I have just said, but this seems to be the policy that dare not speak its name. The United Kingdom cannot continue to be silent on what is happening in that part of the world.

Let me now say something about Syria, which is the main event that we are discussing. I must make it clear that the Scottish National party understands the threat that Daesh poses to our way of life, and that we sympathise absolutely with the requirement for international action to undermine and eradicate that organisation. We are, however, anxious not to do something in the short term that would make things worse in the medium and the long term. That is why we remain unconvinced about the need for air strikes, which, it is proposed, should take place not with a ground strategy to follow, but in isolation.

Aerial bombardment in isolation means rearranging the piles of rubble, and it invariably results in some innocent casualties as collateral damage. It creates more refugees, and, above all, it plays into the narrative of Daesh that the crusaders are coming to deny the Muslim people their way of life. Unless there are forces on the ground, all that air strikes do is destroy territory rather than controlling it. Unless the air strikes are linked with a proper ground campaign, we think it irrelevant to make the Royal Air Force the 13th air force in the skies over Syria. For 15 months the Americans have been bombing these positions almost daily, yet the situation on the ground in Syria has not changed by one inch, and, if anything, Daesh is stronger than it was 15 months ago.

**Rehman Chishti:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Tommy Sheppard:** Again, I am not sure whether I have time, but I will take the intervention.

**Rehman Chishti:** The hon. Gentleman will know, in relation to numbers on the ground, that at the Vienna conference Jordan was tasked with identifying moderate groups that could work with the international community. I have not seen a list of moderate groups from Jordan. Has the hon. Gentleman seen such a list, and are those groups part of the 70,000 that we are told will come from the Free Syrian Army?

**Tommy Sheppard:** I share the hon. Gentleman's scepticism in this regard. Last Thursday I asked the Prime Minister whether he envisaged circumstances in which the Free Syrian Army and the Kurds would launch a successful ground offensive against Daesh, ignoring the presence of the Syrian army or pretending that it was not actually there. I did not receive a satisfactory answer.

It seems to me that a four-way civil war is taking place in Syria, and that some of those four sides are themselves quite complicated coalitions. If we are to develop a Daesh-first strategy, we shall need to persuade the other three sides to agree to co-ordinated action against Daesh. That is where the focus of diplomatic and political effort should be directed. I realise how difficult it will be. I realise that many of the groups that are associated with the Free Syrian Army, for example, would see Assad as more of an enemy than Daesh, and it will take a great deal of negotiation to bring all that together. It does not mean that all those groups must share a command structure, and it does not mean that they must share zones of operation—those can be separate—but any action must be co-ordinated. We cannot allow a situation in which some of them are simply trying to do what would be our bidding in a completely irrelevant and ineffective manner. That strikes me as a recipe for disaster.



[Tommy Sheppard]

The one hope in all this is the Vienna process, and the fact that a dialogue is under way. We believe that the time now should be spent in boosting that process, and in trying to secure the political and diplomatic agreements that we need for co-ordinated action that will be successful not just in bombing places into the stone age, but in taking control of land, starting with a military administration and then passing it over to civilian administrations month by month, year by year. Unless that framework is in place—and, unlike the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, for whom I have a great deal of respect, I remain to be convinced that it is—when the opportunity comes on Wednesday, the Scottish National party will not vote to go to war with Syria.

**Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Further to the point of order that was raised earlier in the debate about the Prime Minister making a statement to the media without coming to the House, it appears from social media that the media have already been informed that we will be having a debate and vote on the issue of Syria in the House on Wednesday, immediately after Prime Minister's Question Time. I wonder whether any Minister has had the courtesy to approach you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and explain that he or she would like to make an announcement to the House before briefing the press about when votes would take place.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel)**: I have not received any confirmation or otherwise from a Minister, but I have been in the Chair for the whole of this time. I think that the usual procedure would be for a Minister, or the Leader of the House, to make a supplementary business statement. We must wait to see whether that happens, but so far nothing has been confirmed or otherwise.

7.28 pm

**Mr David Jones** (Clwyd West) (Con): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee) on securing this important and timely debate. I must begin by declaring an interest, as a former member of the Council for the Advancement of Arab-British Understanding.

I greatly enjoyed and appreciated the contribution of the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard), which was thoughtful and with a great deal of which I agreed. The middle east has, of course, been a source of enormous tension for many years, as has been mentioned by many Members today, and Britain has an important role to play. Next year will mark the centenary of the Sykes-Picot agreement, which shaped much of the middle east as we know it now, and modern Syria dates back to that accord.

British middle east policy combines a number of approaches and positions. Some are influenced by direct national interest, some by the position of the European Union, and some by the United States and other regional powers. Given all the crises in the region, including Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya and Palestine, these policy positions might at times appear contradictory. I therefore believe that it is important for us to have this debate today.

Many hon. Members have focused on Syria today, for what are very clear reasons, and there will no doubt be further contributions on that subject in the next 48 hours. I, however, would like to focus on what is for many the kernel of the middle eastern problem—namely, the issue of Israel and Palestine. As the hon. Member for Edinburgh East pointed out, that issue seems to have been overlooked in recent years, but it is now bursting on to the international consciousness as a result of the increasingly violent tension in that country.

Since the beginning of October, the violence in Israel and the west bank has resulted in the deaths of 85 Palestinians and 11 Israelis, and more than 9,000 Palestinians and 133 Israelis have been injured. There is talk of this being the third intifada. The latest surge in violence began after a Palestinian stabbed two Israelis to death in the old city of Jerusalem, which all hon. Members would of course condemn. We have to wonder, however, whether the Israelis acted proportionately in their response. They have erected more walls to surround the west bank, and added to the 750 km of security fences that are rapidly caging in the west bank. They have fired at protesters on the Gaza border, and early in October, nine Palestinians were killed in what Israel claimed was an attempt to bridge the fence.

The causes of the conflict are many and various. They go back to the 1967 six-day war and beyond. However, it seems that the recent escalation was sparked, at least in part, by the Israelis placing restrictions on access to the al-Aqsa compound in Jerusalem's old city. The French Government have called for an international observer force to be deployed at the holy sites, and I strongly urge the Government to give consideration to that proposal. The al-Aqsa compound has been a source of tension for many, and if Britain could play a part in defusing that tension, it would be doing a wonderful thing.

Many people in this country—and, indeed, in this House—fully understand that Israel's history renders it unique and that it is concerned about its borders, but it has to remember that it is a democracy. Many of its actions in the region do it a huge disservice, particularly the increase in the number of settlements on the west bank. In fact, the settlement programme continues unabated. On 8 October, Israel's Defence Minister said that settlement building

“was not frozen for even a minute”,

and pledged that Israel would continue to “build in the future”. If Israel continues to deny the Palestinians any prospect of constituting themselves as a state and of living with the kind of dignity that they are entitled to, it will continue to experience the sort of violence that it is facing at the moment.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Dame Angela Watkinson) said, Israel has a great deal to commend it. Like her, I have visited the Hadassah hospital in East Jerusalem, which treats patients of Israeli and Palestinian extraction equally. However, continuing to deny the Palestinians a homeland of their own will result only in the continued escalation of the violence. It will, as the hon. Member for Edinburgh East put it, render the prospect of a two-state solution almost impossible.

In the climate talks in Paris today, the Israeli Prime Minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, and the President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, shared a



handshake. That could possibly be the start of a dialogue between the two sides, and it is dialogue that is needed, rather than what the Secretary-General of the United Nations has referred to as the continued enclosure of the Palestinians behind walls. We have to find our way towards a solution, and I believe that this country, with its long history in the middle east, could play its part in that. With goodwill on both sides, we may yet see a resolution of that most persistent of conflicts.

7.35 pm

**Keith Vaz** (Leicester East) (Lab): I know that the focus of the House has mainly been on Syria today, but now that we know we will be debating that subject on Wednesday, I hope that Members will forgive me for talking about another country in the middle east—namely, Yemen. It has already been mentioned by the Minister and one or two others.

The situation in Yemen has reached crisis point. Aid organisations believe that more than 21 million Yemenis—that is 80% of the population—are in urgent need of food, water and medical aid. This is the largest humanitarian crisis in the world. The Danish Refugee Council estimates that more than 4,628 people have died and that 28,598 people have been injured as a result of the fighting and bombing campaigns, and that 573 of those killed were children. On average, 30 people have been killed and 185 injured every day in Yemen since the end of March.

The damage to the country's already limited infrastructure makes aid delivery very challenging. This will also make post-conflict reconstruction extremely difficult. As a direct result of this damage, at least 160 healthcare facilities have been closed down completely across the country. To add to the problems, a lack of fuel has restricted the use of water pumps, which has left 13 million Yemenis—50% of the population—struggling to find an adequate amount of clean water to drink or to use to grow crops.

A report on the crisis published by the all-party parliamentary group on Yemen, which I have the privilege of chairing, has not yet received a response from the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), but I know that, as Minister with responsibility for the middle east, he has many pieces of paper to read and many visits to make. I hope, however, that he will respond to that report as soon as he can. I want to commend the efforts of the Prime Minister's envoy to Yemen, the right hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan), who works very hard on this matter and is always in dialogue with members of the local community.

The crisis is affecting people not only in or near Yemen but in Greece. There is evidence that a number of Yemenis seeking to come to the EU are making their way to Greece, because there are no visa restrictions between Yemen and Turkey. Over 1.4 million people in Yemen have also been internally displaced, raising the prospect of an unprecedented refugee crisis.

The situation in Yemen does not seem to have captured the imagination of the House or of the British people, despite the efforts of the vice-chair of the all-party group, the hon. Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), and others. This could be because we are always talking about the situation between Palestinian and Israel, as the right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) suggested, or because we are now talking about Syria and we were previously talking about Iraq and Afghanistan. However, the Yemeni people are suffering terribly.

**Mr Ellwood:** I pay tribute to the work that the right hon. Gentleman has done on this subject. I spoke to President Hadi last week and underlined Britain's commitment to seeking a solution in Yemen. Both sides are meeting in Switzerland in the near future, and we certainly wish the United Nations envoy, Ismail Ahmed, every success. I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that the situation is dire, and to make matters worse the port city of al-Mukalla on the south coast, with which he will be familiar, is now run by al-Qaeda. That illustrates the seriousness of the situation and we should not allow other concerns about what is happening in the middle east to overshadow what is happening in Yemen.

**Keith Vaz:** The Minister is right to say that we should not allow ourselves to be diverted from this. I welcome the news he has given the House today, but it would be helpful if President Hadi was able to come to the United Kingdom to address Members of this House and tell us about the situation in Yemen. We are grateful for the support of the Saudis, without which President Hadi would not have had safe haven, but I gently say to colleagues and allies, which is what the Saudis are, that it is time to stop the bombing, as the all-party group said, to allow humanitarian aid to come in and to help this country be reconstructed. There were reports that President Hadi had returned to Aden, and clearly he is there. That is good news and it will help us to re-establish him as the legitimate President of Yemen in Sana'a, whatever is left of that great world heritage site. I cannot bear to think of what has happened. When I left Yemen I was only nine and my sister was a different age—I cannot disclose her age, because she gets very upset—and I cannot bear to think of what has happened to it.

Finally, I wish to mention Tunisia, another country of interest. It is not quite the middle east, but we would include it as being part of the Arab world. I know that the Minister has been there recently and is very focused on its situation. We needed to take urgent action and the travel ban was necessary at that time, but it is now playing into the hands of those who wish to destabilise the Tunisian Government. When I went to Sousse recently—I do not know whether the Minister went there on his visit—I found that 90% of the hotels had closed down since the travel ban was brought into effect. That has meant thousands of Tunisians are now unemployed, as we Brits made up the largest number of tourists to Tunisia. With that unemployment goes poverty and the possibility of people being susceptible to the appeals of those who wish to destabilise the Tunisian Government, who are democratically elected. We have given huge support to Tunisia, doubling the number of people working at the Tunis embassy, but we need to do more.

**Mr Ellwood:** I understand that a number of people have dropped out of this debate because there is apparently to be a debate on Wednesday, which gives more time for me to intervene, which I will do cautiously. I can confirm that during my visit to Tunisia we went through a detailed plan of what is required to get Britons back there. Britons want to go back to holidaying in that country, but the first responsibility of any Prime Minister of any Government is the safety of those citizens. We are working very closely, progress is being made and I hope that we will be able to lift that travel ban very soon.

**Keith Vaz:** That is very good news. Every time the Minister gets to that Dispatch Box, he gives the House some good news—I hope he will jump up constantly to make these interventions. That move will help the Tunisian Government enormously. Of course the safety of British people is the paramount consideration, but when I went there the security had increased. We have a role to play; British policing is regarded abroad as the best in the world. Sometimes we do not say that here, because they are our police and we do not tend to praise them as much as we should. When we go abroad, people talk about the skills of the police and the security services, and we need to provide the Tunisians with that help. If that is the news he brings to the House about Tunisia, I am very pleased to hear it. The Tunisian Government should work with us to provide the greater security that is necessary.

In conclusion, I know that the Minister is focused on Yemen and that if he could get there, he would be there—I know he cannot go there because it is so dangerous. I ask him please to make sure that Yemen is in his thoughts and those of the British Government, because this is a crucial country and we should not let it fail.

7.44 pm

**Paul Maynard** (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): I have been sitting here racking my brains trying to remember which of Philip Larkin's poems contained the following lines:

"We are not suited to the long perspectives

Open at each instant of our lives."

That applies so very well to what occurs in this Chamber so often: we are so blinded by day-to-day events—by the proximity of Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya—that we find it far harder to take a step back and look at the long duration of our involvement in the region. That is why I congratulate the Backbench Business Committee on granting this debate and my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee), who is no longer in his place, on framing such a wide motion, which allows us to engage in a wider sense on the longer-term issues.

If we were to look back over the past century of our engagement with the middle east, we would see that every time there has been a major issue there have probably been those arguing for greater intervention, those arguing for less intervention and those arguing for no intervention at all, but the common point of all those debates has been one of diminishing engagement on the part of the United Kingdom. It is right to take a step back and ask why that might be and whether it is the right thing for the future. We should not blind ourselves by the decisions we will certainly have to take in the next day or two, but instead look at why we are there in the long term and how it has an impact on our national interest.

The hon. Members for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) and for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) were urging us to learn the lessons of history, look at individual events and draw a conclusion from them. I always find that the most frustrating aspect of debate in this Chamber, because history can be a fickle lover. Whatever our argument, we can find that event that will buttress our argument and somehow disprove our opponent's, and it is very dangerous indeed because history can mislead. It is far better not to focus on individual events but to try to look at some of the more

thematic issues that underpin our engagement with this region. Of course foreign policy will be affected on a day-to-day basis by what occurs in the news. When Turkey shoots down a Russian jet it will, of course, have geopolitical consequences to which Ministers must respond, but what really affects the region is not the day-to-day power struggles of those in authority, but what is occurring to ordinary people on the ground.

Across the middle east, we see a number of themes. We see great demographic change. We see a growing population of young people, without the economic growth to give them the jobs they need. That means they become discontented, and that social grievance can lead to changes in Government. Probably, with the benefit of hindsight, we would say that it is what underpinned the Arab spring, which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell said, nobody really predicted. In addition, we are seeing changes to the economic structure of these countries: agriculture is changing, food security is diminishing, food prices are rising in the cities and desertification is taking place, possibly as a result of climate change—who is to say? I am not expert enough to call it. That is certainly leading to greater urbanisation, which is accelerating some of those changes to the employment of young people and the social structures that lie within it.

All those things together are a common element in many of the countries we are focusing on, yet we often sit in this Chamber thinking that we in the UK have the sole answer to all these international problems and that only the UK can solve them. That of course is not the case, as the Minister will well know. These problems will be solved only by international coalitions, and the importance of our role will be diminished within these coalitions. What we tend to fall back on in any debate on foreign affairs are some of the more simple clichés, and they can be very dangerous. It is as though there is a binary alternative between intervention and no intervention, and there is no middle ground where we can start to say, "What sort of intervention is most helpful? What do we need to do to build a wider coalition of support in the UK?" The Prime Minister has been admirable in how he has tried to engage courteously with all Members from all parts of the House, whatever their views, to explain why this is not just a simple matter where the whole situation will be transformed if we bomb ISIS in Raqqa. It is far from that, and he has been candid in setting that out.

The other dangerous cliché beginning to circulate is a slightly isolationist one. It is that in some ways this is a religious war that we have no real part of, that we cannot decide between Shi'a or Sunni, and that it is not for Britain or any other western nation to get involved. It is an interesting and seductive argument, but it is also a dangerous one. Let me draw on a lesson from history with which others may disagree. If we go back to the Reformation in the late 16th and early 17th century, the destruction of Christendom and the wars of religion, we may think that that was all about religious differences and divisions, yet, it was not. It was the use of religion as a cloak to reinforce existing divisions of power structures, existing contests between states and between those who were governed and those who did not want to be governed in the way that they were being governed, all of which came to be sheltered under the identity of the person to whom the people owed their allegiance—whether it was a Calvinist, a Lutheran or a Pope.

When we look at the middle east, we need to be very careful that we do not repeat the same mistake of thinking that the various tensions that are there on the ground are all about religion. Often it is the control of religious observance that is the best way of exerting political control in a society where religious observance is one of the few communal activities that occur on a day-to-day basis, so I would very cautiously about saying that this is a religious conflict in which we have no part.

The other point I wish to make in the 26 seconds that I have left is that, I hope in his protection of the Foreign Office Library, the Minister can find some scholarly works on the French mandate of Syria between 1922 and 1945, because it has an awful lot to teach us about the potential solution in Syria, particularly in the establishment of a cantonal system that included a homeland for the Alawites, which the French set up after 1922.

7.51 pm

**Mark Durkan** (Foyle) (SDLP): I have not been able to sit through all of this debate, but it has been a pleasure none the less to hear so many Members speak up so strongly on both sides of the Chamber. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard). We all take his warnings about the dangers of being glib in our historical references, and about how we must go easier on some of the clichés. He also warned us against allowing a false dichotomy into this debate, by saying that there is only either a military intervention or no intervention at all. Some of us on the Opposition Benches feel that the argument increasingly coming from the Government is that, unless we are prepared to endorse the course that they seem to be on, we are somehow insensitive to the need to fight Daesh and all the evil that it represents and does, and that we are unsympathetic to the suffering of the people in Paris, Beirut, Ankara and elsewhere. But we are not; we know that terrorism must be confronted in all its evils, all its arguments and all its rationales, and that we have to do that in a way that is sustainable and credible.

Before I touch more deeply on the issue of Syria, I wish to welcome the fact that this wide-ranging debate, which was initiated by the Backbench Business Committee, has also allowed us, rightly, to touch on other situations as well, including that in Yemen. Last week, I, along with other hon. Members, heard from CAFOD about how it is treating that as one of the most serious humanitarian situations in the world. The right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) touched on some of the graphic statistics, but we need to understand what all that means.

We cannot go on talking about humanitarian crises—there is a queue of humanitarian crises not just in the greater middle east, but more widely as well—just as though they were some new statistical phenomenon. We need to remember the real pressures that they are causing and the real demands. When we respond to a situation, people will want to know why we are not responding meaningfully at all levels in other situations as well. If we send the level of aid that needs to go to Syria and surrounding countries to help in that humanitarian crisis, people suffering other humanitarian pressures will want to know why there is not the same urgency there. They will wonder whether there is more urgency when there is military intervention. If no military intervention is contemplated, does that crisis go down the league table for consideration and humanitarian concern?

It has also been important to hear about what many would regard as the most enduring middle east conflict—the situation in Israel and Palestine. The hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) and the right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) spoke compellingly about why that situation should not be losing attention as it appears to be relative to what is going on in Syria and elsewhere. Let us remember that that situation is one of the factors that is used in the wider radicalisation agenda that too many people seek to promote. If we are to confront the evil logic and the cynical rationale that are used by Daesh and others who come up with a perverted extremist Islamist view of the world, we need to remember that they cite the west's ineffectual position on Palestine as one of their main bits of evidence for our unsuited interest in the region. Let us remember that that conflict, which is being pursued with yet more demolitions and more settlements, has had a pretty ineffectual diplomatic response from the west—the same west that is talking about marshalling our best diplomatic efforts, military action and humanitarian aid into a comprehensive strategy in Syria.

Then people will ask, “What quality will this huge diplomatic effort have? Where do we see this huge diplomatic effort elsewhere? Do we see it in the middle east and Palestine?” Frankly, people do not see it there. People see the EU and its member states adopting essentially a screensaver approach to what is happening to the Palestinians. Shapes are thrown, images are projected and impressions are created, but nothing real is going on. When was the last time that the Israeli Government took seriously any strong diplomatic message from EU Governments or the UK Government about any of those ongoing violations?

On Syria itself, I listened to the Prime Minister's statement last week and to all of the other arguments since, and I know that he thinks that he has covered the basis of a comprehensive strategy, and has touched on a number of issues. Some of us do not believe that the elements are complete, or that they add up to the coherent, comprehensive strategy that will succeed in the way the Prime Minister claims they will. We do not pretend that the situation and the choice are exactly the same as those faced by this Parliament over Iraq, but that does not mean that there are no similarities and no questions that we have to ask of ourselves again. The Prime Minister has said that we should not outsource our defence to others, but nor should we outsource our judgment. Just because other people are engaging in military intervention does not mean that we should sign up to support it as well. We should not be doing something just because others are doing it.

The hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys talked about history being fickle. We should remember that we have a fairly fickle proposed alliance arrangement for this intervention. We have a somewhat shifting alliance, which includes some fairly shifty allies, and that is just when it comes to the other states. When we then look at forces, such as the Free Syrian Army, which are meant to be the ground forces, we have to recognise that the question of how many of them are truly reliably and sustainably moderate into the future could come to haunt some Members given the glib way in which they have talked about 70,000 forces being available.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—



**Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel):** Order. Before I call the next speaker, let me say that quite a large number of Members who have withdrawn their names from the Speaker's list, so I will raise the time limit to 10 minutes per Back-Bench contribution and we will see how we get on. I may have to drop the time again, but at the moment, I will leave it at 10 minutes.

7.58 pm

**John Howell (Henley) (Con):** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will try to fill the 10 minutes that you have now made available to me, although I have prepared a speech to last for seven minutes. We will see how it goes.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee), who is no longer in his place, on securing this debate. I draw Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

In recent years, we have witnessed the ascent of a brutal and destructive form of Islamic fundamentalism across the region. Mosul's nearly 2,000-year-old Christian population has been purged, the Yazidis have endured what is arguably a genocide, ancient cultural heritage has been destroyed and once stable countries have descended into chaos.

It is without question that the terrorist attacks in Paris were a direct assault on our way of life, just like, in their own way, the attacks on British citizens in Tunisia. Political leaders and the public alike are now coming to the realisation that this is not a problem in some far-flung region of the world that we can simply will away. Sadly, it has taken the tragedy of Paris to open our eyes to the fact that this is a problem that we cannot afford to ignore any longer. If ISIL is allowed to fester, we will see a continuation of the ethnic cleansing, the indoctrination of future generations in ISIL-held territory and thousands more displaced Syrians and Iraqis. I therefore welcome the fact that the Government will, I hope, put the question of British intervention in Syria to the vote in the House this week.

Let us note also that ISIL is but one manifestation of the evil of radical Islam. It would be unwise now to cast similarly reprehensible groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra, Hezbollah, Hamas and others in a different or, indeed, a better light. They have all actively participated in Islamist-driven violence, destroying lives across many communities in the middle east and beyond. It is important to recognise that there are democratic forces in many countries in the region and Britain should take the lead in supporting them wherever possible. The majority of citizens in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and elsewhere want to live their lives in normality without the daily interruption of car bombs and gun attacks. The Arab spring surely demonstrated a desire for change and for democracy.

In this conflict, we have the advantage of military superiority, but this alone is not enough to win and it is not what is being proposed. When ISIL is eventually defeated, unless we are careful and can also target the cause, which is the ideology, and not only the effect, which can be seen in the actions of ISIL, another group will re-emerge under a different name. Some, such as the Foreign Minister of Sweden, have relayed the misguided notion that the prolonged Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the root of the current turmoil in the middle east and

that once it is resolved the blight of Islamist radicalism will end. That is simply not the case. In fact, part of the reason we are in this current state is that too much focus rather than too little has been placed on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at the expense of other conflicts in the region.

I was at a dinner last week at which a somewhat left-wing Canadian journalist made a speech with which I happened completely to agree. He said that when he first went to Israel, he pointed out that in his news office there were a huge number of journalists concentrating on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at the expense of the whole of the region. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is at best a minor sideshow. The wars in Libya, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and elsewhere have raged on, yet just last week the UN decided to pass six resolutions against Israel, the only stable democracy in the region.

To suggest that the existence of Israel is at the root of the entire middle east's turbulence today is to overlook the sectarian divisions in the region that have existed for centuries. It also ignores the large part played by certain countries, most notably Saudi Arabia, that have spent billions to fund the toxic and destructive spread of Wahabist ideology across Muslim communities worldwide. It is imperative that Britain and the whole civilised world does whatever is necessary to combat that ideology and stop its spread.

**Mr MacNeil:** I understand from the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee that the UK has eight planes in Iraq, of which two are active. If the UK is going to intervene in Syria, is it going to lessen its efforts against ISIS in Iraq or is it not? Or is it not bombing ISIS in Iraq intensely enough? We are only talking about one or two planes that will go in to Syria.

**John Howell:** That is a debate we can have on Wednesday, I am not going to answer that question now.

We need to put pressure on Saudi Arabia to stop exporting its radical ideology worldwide, despite our geopolitical alliances. I ask the Minister perhaps to write to me in reply to the question of what steps the Government will take to ensure that the Wahabist ideology does not spread further across the middle east.

Before I finish, I want to highlight another important country in the region that has been consumed by a less violent but equally destructive Islamist threat. The AKP Government in Turkey have increasingly eroded democracy by arresting dozens of prominent journalists, turning to authoritarianism and reigniting the conflict with the Kurdish PKK to seal their power. The same Government are a vocal supporter of the terrorist group Hamas, which has masterminded deadly attacks against Israelis from its Istanbul headquarters. In our approach to Turkey, as is too often the case, realpolitik has taken precedence over human values, ignoring the fact that democracy is not only about having an election.

In addition, despite their latent arrests of ISIL suspects, the AKP Government in Turkey have turned a blind eye to ISIL terrorists, instead prioritising fighting Kurdish forces in Syria, the very people making the largest territorial gains from ISIL. The erratic actions of Turkey, especially taking into consideration last week's developments with Russia, give us increasing cause for concern. I ask the Secretary of State to join me in condemning the Turkish Government's undermining of the freedom of



press in the country and to explain how we can expect ISIL and other jihadists to be dislodged from their territory in Syria when Turkey is bombing the Kurdish YPG.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): Turkey is still talking to the European Union about accession, so when the Government take such actions, as my hon. Friend rightly points out, what signals does that send out about potential entry to the EU?

**John Howell:** My hon. Friend raises an important point. At best, it sends a very confused signal and, at worst, it sends a signal that we do not care what Turkey does in the middle east. That is a signal that we do not wish to send to Turkey and we should not send it. We should say that we do not agree with what Turkey is doing and that it is supporting a form of Islamic fundamentalism in its actions.

I am not sure that I have fully used my extra allotted minutes, but let me conclude by going back to what I said at the beginning of my speech. The situation in the middle east is very confused, but it is not surprising, in my view, that the western press ignored totally the rise of ISIL, because they were not looking. All their action was focused on what was happening in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, not in the wider middle east.

**Edward Argar:** Does my hon. Friend agree that sadly the same is true of the press's attention to the conflict in Yemen in recent months and years? Again, they just were not looking.

**John Howell:** To a certain extent, the press are still not looking at Yemen. We have heard excellent contributions from Opposition Members about the situation in Yemen and I am very concerned about it. I know that my hon. Friend is, too. We all need to concentrate on that and to ensure that the press do not just focus on the one thing that it is easy for them to get a grip on, which is made easy by the openness of Israel in allowing the press in and allowing access to everything that there is to talk about in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

**David Rutley** (Macclesfield) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is not just the media? Too often, many of us looking on events in the middle east have done too much wishful thinking. Now is the time to take pragmatic action grounded in a much wider strategy to solve the challenges that we face.

**John Howell:** My hon. Friend makes a good point. It is time to look at the bigger picture, and I am sure that the Foreign Office is doing so. We need to encourage the press and the general population, as well as Members of Parliament, to take into account the fact that there are many conflicts in the region. Some of them are more serious than others. I would put the Yemen conflict in that category. In my book, it is probably the No. 1 conflict. My hon. Friend makes a good point about encouraging people to take a larger view of what is happening in the region. With that, I have almost taken my 10 minutes. It is kind of you to make that available, Madam Deputy Speaker.

**Mr Ellwood:** I am delighted to use up the last minute of my hon. Friend's time by responding to the two points that he made. He is right to be concerned about

the growth of Islamic extremism in Syria. We are focused on working with the 100 or so factions that have proved themselves by saying that they do not want to be part of Assad's regime. They want to look after their own communities, but they do not want to be part of terrorism.

Turkey is now part of the international coalition. It was struck by ISIL in a terrorist attack in Ankara not long ago, and it is participating in the Vienna talks, which is welcome news.

**John Howell:** I thank the Minister for that. We will probably have further discussions about Turkey.

8.11 pm

**Peter Dowd** (Bootle) (Lab): I, too, will not take up my allotted time. Nevertheless, thank you for your generosity, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The hon. Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee), who began the debate, set an excellent tone, which has continued, and I hope will continue further when we come to deal with the substantive issue of Syria in the coming days. The hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) gave an excellent analysis, which went to the heart of the issue and was pertinent and incisive.

There are 12 million displaced people, and 250,000 people have died in the nation of Syria—possibly more. That is the context of our debate. We must take the issue deeply seriously, and we must respect everyone's views. I have had a great deal of contact with people in my constituency and beyond who have expressed their views about the situation in Syria in general and the question of military intervention in particular. I therefore want to set out my position, having written to people in my constituency on the matter. It is the responsibility of every Member of Parliament to have their say and express their view in this important debate.

First, I acknowledge—and no doubt many will—that this matter is remarkably complex. In that regard, any decision made, whether to intervene militarily or not, must be made on the basis of as much relevant and pertinent information and evidence as possible. Moreover, it must stand up to scrutiny in the forum that will ultimately make the decision to authorise the bombing of ISIS—or ISIL, or Daesh; whatever it is called—which is here in the House. No one person or group reaching any decision on this sensitive issue has the right to claim the moral high ground or unassailable certainty. I definitely do not, especially in the context of the suffering inflicted on the innocent in Syria.

Secondly, in his recent statement to Parliament, the Prime Minister very reasonably and articulately set out his “four pillars” strategy in relation to the Syrian crisis: the counter-extremism strategy; the diplomatic and political process; military action to degrade and destroy ISIS; and immediate humanitarian aid and longer-term stabilisation.

Thirdly, I acknowledge that that is a reasonable framework for the debate and for making a decision. However, that must be done on the basis of four pillars with a comprehensive strategy, not by putting into effect just one or two pillars in isolation with the intention of the other pillars being constructed at some unspecified date. In effect, the current position and proposed action do not, in my view, constitute the required comprehensive approach. It is a partial approach, which is a real concern.

[Peter Dowd]

Fourthly, in my estimation the key pillar set out by the Prime Minister is the political and diplomatic process. However, it is not so much the aim itself that concerns me—who could disagree with that aim—as its practical implementation and outcomes. What would that entail? What is the timetable for implementation of any agreements arising from the process? What is the likely success of the process, given the multitude of interested and competing—and in certain cases, diametrically opposed—parties in what is widely recognised as a volatile mix? For example, at present there is no clear plan at all as to who will end up governing Syria, nor how we are going to involve neighbouring Arab states and countries.

**Seema Kennedy:** The hon. Gentleman said that there is no plan on who will govern Syria after any intervention. Surely, with a political settlement, that is in the hands of the Syrian people.

**Peter Dowd:** That is a fair point. At the end of the day, that is where we are. We have absolutely no idea: there is no road map whatsoever. Yes, it seems like jam tomorrow—eventually, we will get there—but now we have to set out the path in earnest. I accept the point that the hon. Lady is making, but we have to try to focus on the issue a bit more.

My concern is not about practical implementation. As I said, it is about what that would entail, the timetable, and the success issues.

Fifthly, I fear that other pillars of the strategy, while genuinely laudable—for example, the humanitarian aid and stabilisation plan—are unclear in their aims, extent and, crucially, the mechanisms for their delivery. In addition, it goes without saying that a systematic counter-extremism approach is crucial in any strategy, but that prompts the question of whether or not such a strategy depends on military intervention per se. The two things are not, so to speak, symbiotically linked or mutually dependent.

Sixthly, taking all those factors into account, to activate just one pillar—military action, evidently in the form of bombing—is inappropriate at this point, notwithstanding the interventions being undertaken by other nations.

**Mr Ellwood:** Perhaps I can clarify for the House the fact that bombing is already under way in Syria. Britain is participating by providing intelligence and reconnaissance for that bombing. We are already in that arena.

As for what is happening on the political front, the Vienna talks have made progress. For the first time, they have brought these groups together, including Iran and Russia, and people have spoken of a transitional period, and of a ceasefire and eventual elections. Those words are part of a lexicon that I have not heard in the past four years. These are incremental, small steps, but they are very, very important steps.

Finally, the opposition groups that I spoke about—the factions—will be brought together. Those are groups that have defended their communities. They do not want to work under Assad, but they do not want to be part of the terrorist organisation of ISIL either.

**Peter Dowd:** I welcome the Minister's clarification, but it does not go far enough. The process is incremental and we need to move further. One, two or three increments

are not sufficient; we need more. I do not want to misinterpret the Prime Minister's arguments for intervention, but they seem to be significantly, if not primarily, based on a flawed notion—that other nations are fighting our battles for us and protecting our national security by bombing ISIS, and that we should fight our own battles, albeit in alliance with others, otherwise it reflects on our national integrity. This argument appeals predominantly to pride rather than to reason, and we know that pride comes before a fall.

Seventhly, let me make it clear that I am in no position to criticise the decisions of others in this matter, nor would I. I can only speak for myself. Making challenges and assertions and asking questions is not criticism. Rather, it is the bread and butter of the parliamentary and democratic process, and that is why I was sent here.

I hope that I have set out my position as clearly and succinctly as possible, given the complexity of the issues facing us all and in the context of the long-term suffering of the people of Syria.

8.20 pm

**Richard Drax** (South Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in the debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee) on calling for it and the Backbench Business Committee on letting it happen.

The title of the debate on the Order Paper is the "UK's role in the middle east", which is a wide-ranging subject. My position is simple, which on a complicated subject may give the impression that I am being boring and arrogant. Let me explain. On the UK's role in the middle east, my answer is that we keep out militarily unless our way of life or the existence of our nation, or that of an ally, is directly threatened. If we had pursued that line, we would not have invaded Iraq or got involved in Libya, for example.

Hindsight is an invaluable ally when judging past actions, but it is history that we should use to guide us in deciding future actions. We react, sometimes violently, when others try to impose their will on us, so why do we keep trying to impose ours on them? If we learn nothing else, we must recognise that many countries in the middle east will always be run by unsavoury regimes. Iraq was a prime example. Under Saddam Hussein Iraq was stable and fairly secular. He pushed his luck in Kuwait and was rightly sent packing. Sensibly, in 1991 we did not pursue Saddam into Iraq, knowing that to do so would destabilise the region. Unfortunately, Mr Bush junior did not quite understand that simple philosophy and was determined to outperform his father. The consequent chaos is there for all to see.

ISIL, or Daesh—call it what you will—is a different matter altogether. How wonderful it would be if a political solution were possible. All options must be explored, but I doubt that jaw-jaw will win through on this occasion. ISIL is a repugnant organisation which now runs significant territory in both Iraq and Syria, imposing its twisted and hateful fundamentalism on innocent people, who have in effect been enslaved. The threat to us here in the UK is very real and, although the terrorist might be home-grown, he or she is likely to have been encouraged and radicalised by the evil spouted by so-called Islamic State, or to have fought there and returned to the UK.

As the saying goes—I love this saying, which I will paraphrase—if good men do nothing, evil thrives. That is so powerful. It is such a powerful moral guide for me personally, and I have no doubt that evil will thrive if we turn a blind eye to this most recent challenge to our security and way of life.

To take our country to war is always the most serious decision that any of us here have to make, but we are already at war. We are bombing ISIL in Iraq. I pay tribute to our brave pilots, crew and all those who service our aircraft for the fantastic and brave job that they are doing, as they always do. The moment those terrorist thugs cross an invisible line in the sand, they are safe from our aircraft. They are safe to kill, maim and torture for another day—unless our allies do the dirty work for us. Can that be right, when we all face a common enemy? Can that be right when citizens of one of our closest allies are butchered in their capital city? Can that be right when those same allies call for our help? Can that be right when an organisation as hateful as ISIL is allowed to operate unimpeded, enslaving, raping and killing perfectly innocent people in their own country for the sake of some twisted form of Islam? I do not think so.

There is no doubt in my view—and I am a former soldier—that bombing alone will not solve the problem, nor will it end fundamentalist Islam, but it will degrade ISIL's capabilities, kill and dispirit its operatives, and bring hope and relief to those fighting these terrorists on the ground. I am not as well briefed as the Prime Minister, unfortunately, but from what I have read and heard about the 70,000 members of the Free Syrian Army, they are not in a position to prosecute a meticulously planned ground campaign against Assad or ISIL; neither are they as moderate as we are led to believe. All sides in this horrific war behave as badly as one another, but that is not a reason for sitting on our hands.

Left to its own devices, ISIL will flourish and its apocalyptic vision of a new caliphate will only grow in the twisted minds of those who seek it. Following the Prime Minister's excellent statement last Thursday, I asked him how many further atrocities on the scale of those in New York, London and Paris the west could tolerate before the clamour—indeed, demand—for boots on the ground forced him and other western leaders to put them there. Ultimately, this is the only way that we can deal effectively with this scourge. I am not banging the drums for war. I do not want to see our men and women on the frontline again, but if we follow the logic of the process, that is probably the only solution. I believe that, working with the Russians, a large multinational force could sweep ISIL from Syria and Iraq.

From a military perspective, one destroys an enemy by taking and holding ground; one cannot do it just from the air. Understandably, there is no stomach for a ground war at the moment. We are told that that will be prosecuted by disparate groups already on the ground—an optimistic notion at best. Therefore, the question we need to ask is this: what happens if bombing does not succeed? The only logical answer is to send in ground troops of sufficient size and capability to crush ISIL once and for all. Yes, there is a risk that this fanged head could rear itself elsewhere but, again, that is not a reason to sit on our hands.

Even as I say this, I shudder with anticipation, not at the task in hand, but at whether voters would ever support another venture into that troubled part of the

world. They were duped over Iraq, led with all good intentions into Libya, and by revenge into Afghanistan. I wonder whether the will to fight has been knocked out of us, and what it will take to regain it. I pray and hope that it will not take another attack on the scale of that which brought down the twin towers finally to convince us that if we are truly to protect our way of life, we need to put our armed forces and those of our allies in harm's way one more time.

As I have said, I hope that does not occur, and I hope that all the diplomatic efforts being made will work, but let us face it: we are dealing with an organisation that does not do talk very well—it kills, tortures and crucifies extremely well. I doubt whether talk will solve the problem. I hope that our armed forces are not called, with those of our allies, to be put on the ground. However, if we follow this through logically and do some form of appreciation, as we were taught to do in the armed forces, we must conclude that the only solution, regrettably, is to put a massive armed force on the ground, to take ground and to crush ISIL once and for all.

8.30 pm

**Edward Argar** (Charnwood) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this timely and important debate and pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee) for securing it. The middle east is the crucible in which were forged three of the world's great religions—Christianity, Islam and Judaism—and it can credibly claim to be the cradle of ancient civilisations and empires, such as those of Babylon or Sasanian Persia, which rose and fell while our own country was still in its infancy. I say that because, as the Minister has already suggested, although it is a region whose past and present have been scarred by war and strife, we should never forget that proud and complex history when we reflect on today's middle east.

After the collapse of the Ottoman empire, crystallised in the treaty of Sèvres, the UK and other powers played a role in the creation of the modern middle east, but they did so in a way that sought to create nation states on the Westphalian model, which paid too little heed to tribal, religious and historical realities on the ground. Similarly, during the cold war, as geopolitical power play was played out in the region, the overriding desire was for stable nation states, which often took the form of government by nationalist, military strongmen, who governed and maintained their hold on power by seeing all diversity or civil society as dissent and by seeking to crush it. That has all meant the non-development, or at least the very slow development, in many countries of the institutions required for the functioning of a pluralistic and democratic state.

The middle east is a region I know well, having spent time in Yemen, Oman, Syria, Lebanon and Israel and Palestine, and for which I have a great deal of affection, both for the land and for its people. Although I hope to cover the UK's relationship with Yemen and Oman, I feel that I must touch on Syria, albeit briefly, as so many hon. Members have spoken about it so eloquently and at length, mostly recently my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax).

I fully appreciate and understand the concerns expressed by hon. Members and by our constituents, and I respect what are clearly sincerely held views. The evident care evinced by many of them for the people of Syria resonates



[Edward Argar]

with me. My knowledge of and affection for that country and its people makes it all the more saddening to see what has become of it through a brutal civil war and the evil that is ISIL—or Daesh, as it is perhaps more properly termed. The case for using that term has been compellingly made in this House by my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti).

What is clear to me is that to do nothing in the face of the threat to ordinary Syrians, to the wider region and to our own country posed by Daesh is the wrong approach. We must of course ensure that any action taken is proportionate and focused, as the Prime Minister has intimated it would be. I support extending the bombing of Daesh from Iraq to Syria and will vote in favour of that when the vote comes forward. The Iraq-Syria border in the desert is not respected by these terrorists, who move freely across it, so it makes no practical sense for us to be able to act to degrade their capability on one side of the border but not when they cross over to the other.

Such action should not stand alone. It requires a parallel, comprehensive strategy to tackle Daesh, and the setting out of a broader, long-term vision and plan to stabilise and bring peace to Syria and the wider region. I welcome the Prime Minister's commitment on this. Of course, alongside that there must be care and consideration for the humanitarian needs of the country, and moves to choke off Daesh's resources and funding.

A key part of that wider context is the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, which has long been a running sore, with its origins in the days of more direct British involvement in the region. While I have huge respect for my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell), with whom I agree on many things, I cannot agree with him that this is but a sideshow. For too long, the leaders of both sides have let down their people by not making greater progress in delivering peace, and it is the ordinary people on both sides who have suffered. It is more important than ever that we join with others who desire peace to work to achieve a long-term solution to the conflict, however distant that may appear at times.

**Seema Kennedy:** Does my hon. Friend agree that the main external actor in the Israel-Palestine situation is the United States, and that Britain can play a very important role in assisting the United States in understanding the regional dispute in Israel-Palestine and, we hope, bringing it to the two-state solution that we all desire?

**Edward Argar:** I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. The United Kingdom, with its historical links and understanding of the region, has the potential to play a positive role in helping to move us towards peace not only between Israel and Palestine but in the wider region more generally.

The basic ingredient of a long-term settlement must include an Israel secure within her borders, recognised fully by her neighbours, freed from all acts of aggression and threats of terrorism, and living peacefully alongside a viable, independent Palestine. Alongside these key elements, sharing Jerusalem must be part of any agreement, as would be compromise from the Palestinians on their claim to a right of return and the recognition by Israel

that settlements on Palestinian land are illegal and wrong and must be given up. Too often in this debate, people say that they are pro-Israel or pro-Palestinian. I believe that in order to be pro-peace, one must be pro-both. While the urgency of finding a solution can at times appear to be lesser, the importance of doing so has never been greater, and we must play our role in restarting stalled peace talks.

Reassuringly, I do not often agree with the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), but on this occasion I did when he referred to Yemen's as the unseen or hidden war: the "forgotten war", in his words. He is absolutely right. The right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) has spoken similarly eloquently about it.

**Chris Green:** Does my hon. Friend think that the media have a responsibility to highlight what is going on in Yemen far more than they are doing, and that in so doing they will show the British people more clearly the wider problems in the middle east?

**Edward Argar:** I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. Not only do the media have a responsibility to cover conflicts such as that in Yemen, but all of us in this House must take the opportunity to highlight the issue. I know that in the Minister we have an hon. Member of this House who cares passionately about that country.

I have visited Yemen on a number of occasions, though sadly not recently, and have grown to understand, just a little, this proud and complex country, of which I am also proud to declare myself a friend. The former President of Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh, described governing the country as being like "dancing on the heads of snakes",

so complex is its recent history and mix of tribal, religious, sectional, economic and political differences. It is currently in the throes of a war bringing untold humanitarian suffering to millions of people, and it faces many daunting challenges. It has a population of about 30 million with incredibly low incomes and a burgeoning young male population with limited economic prospects. It is a dangerous cocktail. This is coupled with genuine security threats from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and across the country a fractured polity and religious and tribal differences. Underpinning that are basic infrastructure challenges such as the dwindling supplies of water. And, of course, for many decades—possibly centuries—Yemen has often been used as the geopolitical playground of other powers playing out their own internal politics.

In the immediate term, we must do what we can to alleviate humanitarian suffering. I pay tribute to the UK Government and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development for their focus, and, of course, to non-governmental organisations such as UNICEF, Save the Children and Médecins Sans Frontières, which do so much in extremely challenging circumstances.

We must urgently find ways to reopen the shuttered Hodeidah port to deliveries of aid and, crucially, fuel, upon which so much of the country's economic prospects and life depend, and ensure that the security situation is such that the means are found to distribute it beyond those entry points. Central to that, of course, is a meaningful and real ceasefire. I welcome the peace talks in prospect, which offer the best chance for a lasting

settlement between President Hardi and the Houthi rebels. The UK has the potential to play a very important role in facilitating such peace talks, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Minister in that regard, and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan) for his work both as a DFID Minister and, to this day, as an envoy. We have done much, but there is much more to do.

Whatever emerges from those peace talks must emerge from the Yemenis themselves and not be imposed from outside. There is an old Arabian saying that goes, “Me and my brother against my cousin, but me and my cousin against a stranger.” We must be very conscious of the fact that, if it is going to stick, anything potentially successful that emerges must reflect not only the needs of the Yemeni people, but the diversity of opinion and interests across the whole of Yemeni society.

In the long term, we must invest in rebuilding Yemen, including modernising its creaking water infrastructure and, in particular, helping to give economic hope to millions. Yemen’s water infrastructure has been struggling for many years, with 60% of water that goes through its pipes lost to leaks. A large proportion of its water is used to grow khat, rather than other crops, and wells are being dug for industrial purposes, even though the law says they should be used only for domestic water purposes. All those issues need to be addressed. In the rebuilding of the country, I hope the Government will support desalination plants, which would genuinely give Yemen the long-term prospect of a secure water future.

Finally, in the context of regional players—Iran and Saudi Arabia included—everyone in the region needs to play their part in bringing peace. I want briefly to highlight one great success story in the region, in a country that has been a true and close friend of the UK, namely Oman. Our relationship with the Sultanate of Oman goes back decades, even centuries, and is based on mutual trust, respect and understanding. Under His Majesty Sultan Qaboos, Oman has trodden a measured and steady path to modernisation and change, while retaining all that makes Oman and its culture what it is. Regionally, Oman continues to play a vital role in advancing peace and acting as a bridge, particularly in the context of Yemen, between Iran and Saudi Arabia and the broader region. Oman has developed, grown and diversified its economy and brought representative democracy in a measured way, allowing each step forward to settle.

We must always remember that change that sticks must emerge from within and go with the grain of a country, not simply be imposed from outside. The democracy and civil society we enjoy took centuries to establish and we must beware of any quick fixes. I will conclude by highlighting that, with our unparalleled links and understanding in the region, the UK has a great role to play.

**Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab):** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Last Thursday I warmly commended the Prime Minister for the way in which he had treated the House in relation to the matter of Syria. He was forthright in coming to this House and giving a lengthy statement and then answering questions for two hours. I also said last Thursday that it would be a big mistake for the Prime Minister to attempt to bounce this House into a decision early and without proper debate.

I understand that the Prime Minister has just announced on television—not to this House—that the debate and vote on Syria are to take place this Wednesday. First, can you confirm, Mr Deputy Speaker, that there could perfectly easily be a business statement at 10 o’clock tonight—that would be perfectly in order—so that that could be made clear for the convenience of the whole House? Secondly, will you confirm that if the Government do not table their motion until tomorrow, which I understand will be the case, the only amendments that can be considered on Wednesday—if the debate is still on Wednesday—are manuscript amendments? In 2013, we could only consider manuscript amendments, but that was because the House had been summoned back from recess. In these circumstances, there is no excuse for us to be proceeding in this way when making such important decisions.

Will you also confirm, Mr Deputy Speaker, that there is no reason why the debate should not be a two-day debate, as we have been requesting for the past two weeks, so that we do not have two-minute, three-minute or four-minute limits to speeches, but can properly consider the very serious issues that many Members on both sides of the House want to raise with the Government?

Finally, I hope you can confirm that if the debate is to end at 10 pm on Wednesday, rather than at the moment of interruption at 7 pm, another motion also needs to be tabled. It would surely be for the convenience of the House if it was tabled today, again so that Members can table amendments to it that do not have to be manuscript amendments.

I just say to the Government that there are many Members on both sides of the House who want to listen to proper debate on a matter that is not straightforward and simple, and any shenanigans or attempts to bounce the House into a decision would be wholly regrettable.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. To run through his questions, he is absolutely right that the motion could be tabled tonight. He is correct that if it is tabled later any amendments would have to be manuscript amendments. It would also take a business of the House motion in order to change the hours of the sitting on Wednesday to take us through to 10 pm. As ever, the shadow Leader of the House is absolutely correct on everything he asked—because he knew the answers before he asked—but I confirm that he is correct. Of course, that is now on the record. Obviously, it is not for the Chair, but for the Government to decide the business of the House. I am sure the usual channels will be in discussions to try to come to an early agreement that will benefit all Members of the House.

8.46 pm

**Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con):** I thank the Backbench Business Committee. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee) on securing this debate on Britain’s role in the middle east.

Many questions have been asked and many concerns raised in this debate. I very much appreciate the concerns about Yemen and the views on Oman expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar). He gave a really interesting insight into what was not covered in much detail earlier in this debate. Tonight, the focus has been on Syria, particularly whether the

[Chris Green]

UK should participate further in the coalition to defeat ISIL. We have to consider the risk of inaction, and whether that outweighs the risks of action. Ultimately, however, any action—any intervention in Syria—must be decided on the basis of the British national interest.

Last year, ISIL declared itself an Islamic caliphate, which acts as a continuing draw to many radical Muslims. ISIL has dissolved the border between Iraq and Syria to create its so-called state. Although that is not a direct threat, the fact that it happened at all is an indication that ISIL has become a permanent presence in the middle east. Determining the national boundaries in the middle east is a clear indication of ISIL's strength and enduring ability to draw radical Muslims to its cause. That creates a permanent threat to many countries when nationals return home, no matter how well funded the security services are.

In 2014, there was a clear legal basis to join the international coalition of countries in air strikes in Iraq, acting in response to a direct appeal from the sovereign Government of Iraq to help them to deal with the terrorist threat and to join a coalition of countries against ISIL. But Syria is not Iraq. Syria has been engaged in a civil war since 2011, with tens of competing armed groups engaged in conflict, including Islamist groups such as ISIL and al-Nusra. Syria does not have the ground troops of Iraq. The Iraqi security forces, as inadequate as they have often demonstrated themselves to be, are better than nothing. Syria does not have an organisation as strong as the Kurdish peshmerga. When we consider any action in Syria, we must be aware that we do not know the strength of the forces that are available.

**Mr Ellwood:** My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. He is right to speak about the Iraqi forces. We have permission to be in that country. It is taking time to build that capability and they must be indigenous forces. Syria is a different case. The liberation of Raqqa will not happen overnight, as I made clear. It will take months, if not longer. We are still waiting for Mosul and Ramadi to be liberated, even though they are in Iraq and we have forces available. I hope he will concur that there is a political direction of travel that needs to be concluded. That will facilitate a number of opportunities for indigenous ground forces to liberate a city that the majority of people want to be liberated.

**Chris Green:** I agree with the Minister. He makes a strong point. The more united our front is, the more that ground troops will be able to gather behind reasonable leadership. That will bode increasingly well for the future of Syria.

Raqqa is being used as the headquarters of ISIL, which regards it as the capital of its state. That is where many of its military and terror schemes are made or inspired. We must ask ourselves whether the decision on action or inaction in Syria should be influenced by the now meaningless Syria-Iraq border. Although a difficult military decision needs to be made on Syria, we must remember that military strategy is only a fraction of the comprehensive solution.

A long-term solution in the middle east will be achieved only through political and democratic means when the Syrian Government represent all the Syrian people. The Minister spoke about a unifying force in the international

community—from Russia to the United States and including all players in between—that can create a space on which just government and democracy can be built. Our diplomatic efforts and humanitarian support must continue. Getting the politics right in both Iraq and Syria is the immediate and overriding priority.

Britain is committed to spending 0.7% of GDP on international development and has already given more than £1.1 billion in aid for those affected by the Syrian conflict—the highest amount of any European country and second only to the United States of America. I am pleased that the Prime Minister has committed to further support following any intervention. We must be clear that this is being done because it is in Britain's national interest. It is in our national interest to have peace in the middle east and for refugees to have a home to return to with functioning infrastructure, employment and education.

A point was made earlier about the United Kingdom and other countries taking refugees from the region. I believe that the Government's response is right. It is right to take 20,000 of the most needy and vulnerable from the region. We should not encourage the mass migration of people from the region to Europe, risking their lives as they come up against criminal gangs, the high seas and the terrible weather conditions in the deserts.

It is important to recognise ISIL's objectives. ISIL wants to purge what it regards as its state of Yazidis, Christians and what it regards as the wrong sort of Muslims. It wants those people out of the way. It will be far easier for ISIL to establish its state if there is no internal opposition. Once it has a more stable state, it will seek to expand from that position and to exploit regional problems and attack Saudi Arabia and further into Iraq. What if ISIL starts focusing more on Lebanon or Turkey? Israel has been mentioned a few times, but it has not yet become involved in this conflict. If ISIL becomes established in the middle east, at what point will it turn its eyes towards Israel? That is inevitable if we allow ISIL to continue.

Our thoughts remain with Paris and all those who are suffering after what happened at the hands of terrorists during that awful, recent attack. Some of the suicidal attackers in Paris had travelled to the region, and all had been inspired by ISIL. ISIL continues to use social media for its propaganda—my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) raised concerns about the wider media implications of that, because we need the media to be responsible when reporting what is going on regarding ISIL's activities.

We also need more coverage and a better understanding of what is going on in the wider middle east, by considering what is happening in Yemen. The media have a huge part to play in ensuring that tensions are not increased within Britain, and in fostering that better understanding with the British population. If people understand Britain as a nation, and all the circumstances in the region, perhaps fewer people will be inclined to join ISIL.

I pay tribute to our police and security services who have disrupted many terrorist plots to attack the United Kingdom. Like many, I was pleased that the Chancellor's autumn statement restated this Government's commitment to protect our national security at a time of increasing global instability, and to spend a minimum of 2% of



GDP on defence. The protection and defence of their people—both abroad and domestically—is the first priority of any Government.

That reminds us not only of the role played by our security services in protecting us, but also of the direct threat that ISIL poses to our lives in the UK and Europe, as well as in the middle east. The decision about whether or not to use military force is one of the most significant that Parliament will make this Session, and I hope that questions and concerns that are raised in this House will be taken into account before any decision is made.

8.58 pm

**Stephen Phillips** (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): It is a huge pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) after such a powerful speech. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee) on initiating this debate, and I join him in thanking the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. It was a huge honour to be asked to support my hon. Friend in his efforts, and I was pleased to do so.

For perfectly understandable reasons, the majority of contributions across the House have focused on the current situation in Syria, and on whether this country should extend to Syria those operations that are currently being conducted over the skies of Iraq. However, the motion before the House is more general and focuses on the middle east as a whole. There was a time when general debates on the middle east were more frequent and occurred in Government time—indeed, I made my maiden speech in such a debate. Issues that concern all countries across the middle east should be ventilated frequently, given the threats that this country faces. I therefore voice a plea—I know the Minister will hear and support it, but it should go to others who command the business in this House—for us to return frequently to these issues in debates of this sort, if necessary in Government time. It should not be necessary for me, my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell and others to go to the Backbench Business Committee to secure this time.

The reason for that is today, more than ever, the problems that the middle east faces and creates for us in this House are of such incredible complexity that a coherent strategy on the part of the United Kingdom too often appears beyond the wit of man to devise. A solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict is no nearer than it was when I entered the House. Indeed, it seems to me clear that the two-state solution is effectively dead. The Arab spring has failed to deliver the security on the promise we all believed it showed, both to the people of the region and for peace more generally. The emergence of power vacuums across the middle east has led to the rise of extremism and terrorism that affects us all. The situation in the entire region is beyond a mess and no immediate or clear solution to remedy it is apparent.

It is almost impossible to know where to begin. We believe that we all know a great deal more about Syria than we did before the terrible events in Paris, but in truth the situation is fluid and unclear. No one is really clear as to how the horror of ISIL/Daesh is to be addressed. In neighbouring Iraq, the rise of this appalling threat has been fuelled by the post-Saddam Governments

awash with corruption, who have pushed out moderate Sunni Muslims and given a voice to the extremists, particularly in areas that the Government cannot and do not control. Jordan is under huge pressure from the refugees created by the instability in the region, but even the Hashemite dynasty's claim to descend from the Prophet has not isolated King Abdullah from criticism in declaring war on Islamic extremism in a country where nine in 10 of the population are Sunni.

In Iran, President Rouhani, having reached an agreement with the west with regard to Iran's nuclear programme, has suffered a backlash that the Revolutionary Guard, which controls much of the economy, has sought to take full advantage. His country may well wish to sustain a moderate political leadership, but the Guardian Council may well block his allies from the forthcoming elections to the Majlis and the Assembly of Experts.

**Mr Ellwood:** My hon. and learned Friend is making a powerful speech. I thank him again for securing the debate and heed his words on having more opportunities to speak about the middle east and north Africa. He touches on the Iranian elections in February. Does he agree that that will be the first indication, after the signing of the nuclear deal, of Iran's direction of travel and whether it will engage with the region and take more responsibility, particularly with its proxy influence on neighbouring countries?

**Stephen Phillips:** I agree with the Minister on that. The difficulty will be which candidates are permitted by the Guardian Council to stand and which are not. We will see the results in due course.

Turning to Saudi Arabia, the succession of Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud to the throne has been accompanied by a welcome questioning in some areas, given the rise of ISIL/Daesh, of the ultra-conservative Wahabi ideology. However, an increased recognition of the benefits of avoiding too literal an adherence to a fiery Salafist doctrine cannot detract from a proxy war being fought between the Saudi-led coalition and Iran in Yemen, where a humanitarian crisis of such enormity is now apparent that Yemenis are fleeing to Somalia, of all places, in an attempt to reach safety. This is an issue to which my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar) and the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) both drew attention.

The other Gulf states are not immune. ISIL/Daesh bombed the Imam al-Sadeq mosque in Kuwait in June, killing 27 Shi'a worshippers, something which failed to attract the attention of the world's press. The aftermath, a series of new laws and a string of arrests, has failed to calm tensions and rendered one of the region's most tolerant states one in which the social fabric shows evidence of fraying. In Oman, where Sultan Qaboos has held the reins for 45 years, there is, so far as we are aware, no heir. Quite what is to happen next to this most stable of allies when the reins of power are assumed by others, no one knows.

And so too, the Maghreb. Peace and stability has not emerged in Libya following the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi; quite the contrary in fact, with conditions now emerging in which we know ISIL/Daesh flourishes. That, in turn, threatens Tunisia, possibly the only thing close to a success story following the Arab spring, but where a nascent democracy is fighting Islamist militants

[Stephen Phillips]

on the Algerian border, as well as those attacking its territory from Libya. Algeria remains a police state, but with more than 95% of its budget delivered by oil revenues, how long Abdelaziz Bouteflika can keep the lid on the local ISIL/Daesh franchise remains to be seen, particularly in the south, which remains a combustible mixture of violent Islamists and gangs of smugglers. Even in Morocco, the conditions are ripe for the enemies of peace: a lack of opportunity for the young, sluggish economic growth, persistent inequality between the cities and the countryside, and a muzzled press, something we find too frequently across the middle east.

**Edward Argar:** As ever, my hon. and learned Friend is as erudite as he is eloquent. Does he agree that, although lower oil prices are very welcome to many of us in this country, they pose a risk to the stability of countries such as Algeria, given their reliance on a particular oil price in their budgets?

**Stephen Phillips:** I do agree, and in fact it affects stability not just in the middle east but across other oil-producing regions of the world. We now have two Foreign Ministers on the Front Bench, although not the Minister with responsibility for South America, but he will know of the risk in Venezuela.

I have only touched the tip of the iceberg—I could go on and on, and would be quite willing to do so were the time limit a little longer—but the point is that the world is sitting on a powder keg, much of which borders Europe, and all the fuses across the region seem to have been lit. If ever there was a time for a coherent strategy and foreign policy designed to defuse tensions—from this country, the United States and all our other allies—frankly this is it.

Where though, I tentatively asked the Minister, is that foreign policy? Where is the 30-year strategy that both I and my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell think is necessary? The crisis of confidence caused by an ill-advised and unjustifiable adventure in Iraq in the last decade has led to what the London School of Economics diplomacy commission—possibly the most distinguished body of former diplomats in existence—has termed a crisis of confidence on the part of the United Kingdom. Nowhere is that more apparent than in relation to the middle east, where we have, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi) made clear, an historic role. Of course, there remains a great deal of respect and affection for this country, our values and our ability to help ensure stability in the region.

Three themes need to underpin British foreign policy. First, we and our allies need to speak with one voice. The United States is in a presidential election year, but the initial isolationism that characterised the early years of the Obama White House, even if not the State Department, has caused lasting damage to the security of the entire region. Today, we heard from the middle east Minister, but his colleagues in the Foreign Office have a broader remit, and the responsibility of the Government, bilaterally and within the United Nations, must be to ensure that we act in concert with our allies and that our message on all issues is clear. Without that clarity from the west—on Israel/Palestine, the rise of ISIL/Daesh and the issue of pervasive sectarianism—we risk creating divides that can be exploited by extremists.

Secondly, we need to make it clear to every regime in the middle east that minorities are to be respected and properly included as part of a political settlement. Excluding minorities from the political process serves only to create a breeding ground for extremist ideology of whatever nature, from the rise of ISIL/Daesh to the type of Shi'a militancy represented by Hezbollah or the various militias operating in the south of Iraq.

Thirdly, we need to be real and recognise realistic approaches and solutions, rather than merely mouthing platitudes about a perfection that cannot be achieved. In the immediate term, we might well have to recognise, if not embrace, the fact that the Vienna peace talks might recognise some of the more moderate Islamist parties as part of the immediate solution in Syria. We might not desire it, we might not like it, but we might have to live with it. The priority, at present, is dealing with ISIL/Daesh, and that cannot come without some compromise on what happens after its eventual defeat.

In the longer term, we might need to abjure our own misconceived notion that we can plant western-style democracies in a region with no history of secular democracy in the way we recognise it. What we want does not matter. The new imperialism of the past two decades has in part fuelled the situation we now face. It is time to recognise that and the fact that we do not know best what the peoples of the middle east want. That is a question for them, not for us.

No one would have foretold the chaos and threat posed by the situation in the middle east even two or three years ago, but that chaos is real, as is the threat it poses to us in this country. Strength in our beliefs and values is part of the answer, but the policy of this country and our allies must recognise that we are currently failing our own citizens as well as the peoples of the region. It is time for a change—a change that makes it clear that we are invested in a realistic future for the middle east. It is that message, which I know he recognises, that the Minister has to take away tonight and which needs to go out loud and clear from this House.

9.9 pm

**Dr Tania Mathias** (Twickenham) (Con): I, too, commend my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee) for securing this important debate, and I was pleased to hear what the Minister said, particularly concerning funding for diplomatic contacts.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi) spoke about the UK's role in the middle east over many centuries. I wish to focus particularly on the role that is nearly 100 years old—a role that started with a declaration from the UK Government that said:

“Her Majesty's Government views with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.”

The same declaration also said that it was

“clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of non-Jewish communities in Palestine”.

My point is that our role then decreased in 1948, and many people in that area—Arabs, Israelis and Palestinians—would say that the UK Government walked away and “left the key under the mat”.

Today, we have been involved in action in Libya and Iraq and we may have more action coming up in Syria. My plea is that our role and responsibility must be future-proofed—it must be long term. What this means

is that our role involves what some people talk of as jaw-jaw and not war-war—and I say that it is jaw-jaw that is continuous. I believe that the UK's role has been lacking in the Palestine-Israel area, and that the UK must continue to negotiate and have diplomacy. We must still be talking about the borders of Palestine-Israel. We must still be talking about the settlements. We must still be talking about security for Palestine and Israel.

We must talk about refugees' rights to return, which I have raised with the Minister with responsibility for Syrian refugees. I particularly asked what was happening for the Palestinian refugees who are in the Syrian camps. Can they go home; will there be homes built for them in Palestine? We must, of course, also still talk about Jerusalem. The UK's role and responsibility in the middle east must be long term and ongoing. Contrary to what was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell), this is not a sideshow. There can be no long-term peace and stability in the region until there is peace and stability for Palestine and Israel.

9.12 pm

**Seema Kennedy** (South Ribble) (Con): I begin by paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee) for securing this important debate, and by thanking the Backbench Business Committee for allowing it to take place.

We meet a time when Britain's role in the middle east is on the front pages for the reason of war, but the same could be said of almost any day in the last 100 years. If we want to have an effective role in the middle east, which I believe we can have, we need to learn from the past, consider the present and look to the future.

The majority of right hon. and hon. Members have understandably touched on Syria and our role in the coming days and months, but I would like to consider a broader theme. I want to speak directly to those in this place and outside it who say that we should insulate ourselves, turn away and "leave them to it." To them, I would say quite simply that the links between Britain—or, as it then was, England and Scotland—did not begin with the invasion of Iraq, with Sykes-Picot or the crusades. The Judaeo-Christian underpinnings of our nation were born between the Tigris and the Euphrates, and the fact that Indo-European languages are spoken as far east as Afghanistan shows our common and shared history. That is something we cannot ignore.

The debate is often framed in terms of trade, and how we can benefit from it, and war, but the links are deeper and more complex, to do with culture, religion and family. I am not the only Member of this place, or indeed of the other House, to have family links with the region.

Britain has centuries of diplomatic and scholarly understanding of the middle east. It needs to use that understanding to support stability, with the aim of eventually building a region in which democracy will thrive, and to help our most important ally, the United States, to understand the whole area. I would caution, however, that this will not be the work of one Parliament or of two. It will be the work of centuries.

The immediate threat, which is on all our minds this week, comes from the sadistic cult known as ISIL/Daesh. The origins of ISIL, al-Qaeda and al-Shabaab are complex, but I believe that one reason for the fact that they have survived and thrived is the existence of dysfunctional

economies in most of the middle east. Where there is corruption, where there are monopolies and raging youth unemployment, there is an ideal recruiting ground for jihadi fighters. I want to elaborate on that a little, particularly in relation to Iran, which is the country in the region that I know best.

After the war, the Ba'athist, socialist command economies of Syria and Iraq, much of the Levant, and north Africa were unable to compete with the far east, which had much nimbler markets, and growth and per capita income declined in relative terms. The petroleum-rich nations of the region are only now reaching the conclusion that they must diversify their economies in order to become more resilient, and to build a wider base for employment.

People often forget that the 1979 revolution in Iran was as much socialist as it was Islamic. My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Stephen Phillips) referred to central control by the conservative leadership, and, indeed, many of the cronies of the conservative leaders of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps now hold much of the country's economic power. In 1979, there were 105 rials to the dollar. Now there are 30,000. In 1976, Iran's growth rate was 16.9%, but, according to the International Monetary Fund, it is likely to fall to 0.6%. I am not suggesting that the picture was uniformly rosy under the Shah, because by the end he had definitely become too dependent on oil revenues, but at least there was a thriving private sector.

During the revolution, 80% of all industry was nationalised, including the spinning mill that my father built from scratch and ran between 1971 and 1980. During that period, 380 men worked at the mill, and every day they produced 14.5 tonnes of top-quality yarn. It was sequestered by the Islamic regime in 1980, after which it employed twice as many people and produced half as much yarn, which was of such low quality that it could not be sold on the domestic market, let alone exported. The mill closed in 1992, and every single job was lost.

As we know, unemployment in Iran and, indeed, all over the region is sky-high, particularly among young people. Ahmadinejad propped up the companies of his cronies with \$26 billion of cheap debts, which will never be paid off because they were given to flabby, uncompetitive firms. It was the youth of Iran who took to the streets in 1999 and 2009. Rouhani was elected on a mandate of providing sound finances, but the IMF estimates that it will take \$10 billion of investment to achieve the 10% growth that is needed to lower the country's chronic unemployment.

I think that we may be betting a little bit too much on the success of the nuclear deal, and on its inevitably improving the economy. The picture is not so simple. Countries throughout the middle east need fundamental internal economic reform.

**Chris Green:** We often hear about modernisation in Iran. Does my hon. Friend believe that it is making good progress in that regard, or does she think that that is more of a front, and that the Supreme Leader is not quite the moderniser that people would hope?

**Seema Kennedy:** I do not think anyone would say that the Supreme Leader was a moderniser. The President is, but the problem is that, under the constitution of Iran, there are different pools of influence and they are pulling at each other all the time.



[Seema Kennedy]

The role for Britain is to nurture these nations and to encourage them to build competitive economies in which pluralism can thrive and in which Islamism will naturally fade away. We need to look at our own history, in which the free market and, eventually, freedom and democracy prospered. The primary building block in this edifice is property rights. Nations prosper when private property rights are well defined and enforced. Britain has an important role to play through its international aid budget, and I am glad to see the renewed focus on supporting fragile states to build strong property institutions.

Touching briefly on our interaction with the US—I have made this point in interventions—we need to use our knowledge to influence the date and to push it forward. Our role is to support our ally and to foster in the middle east the evolution that has led to freedom and democracy in the UK. It is a job of work that will continue into the lives of our children and grandchildren, but it is a job of work that is worth doing.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** Order. I suggest that hon. Members now speak for six minutes, as I want to bring the shadow Minister in at quarter to 10.

9.21 pm

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): It is an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy). She made a good speech on Iran and the circumstances from which she originally came. She knows the subject extremely well. I also commend my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee) for securing this debate. I well remember when he presented his proposal for it to the Backbench Business Committee. His key point was that we should be looking for a strategy for the middle east, and that we should debate the role of the British Government internationally rather than concentrating only on one area in the region. I believe that many Members share my concern that for far too long we have made interventions in individual countries rather than looking at a broad range of strategic views across the region and deciding what the British role should be.

We are on the cusp of a decision on whether we should intervene in Syria. I am grateful to the Prime Minister for setting out a clear strategy and explaining what we want to achieve from an intervention against ISIL. However, the question remains: what would happen after ISIL was defeated? Where would the replacement Government come from? Where is the alternative view? For far too long, we have looked at countries right across the middle east simply as lines on a map that were drawn after the great war and the second world war, instead of seeing them as groups of tribes and villages that have come together in some form of amalgam or through being dominated by a dictator and his or her forces who required the people to follow a particular line.

Let us look at what we did during the 1980s. At that time, Britain had a settled policy. We balanced Iraq and Iran in the region. We should remember that more people died in the war between those two countries than

in the entire great war. Under that policy, we armed Iraq in order to combat Iran. Then, however, we intervened in Iraq, took away its Government and unbalanced the region. We are now experiencing the consequences of that intervention, in Iraq, in Iran and across the wider middle east.

Then we had the Arab spring, which had a great swath of democracy at its heart. Everyone dreamed that it would be the beginning of a great movement for change. Sadly, wherever we got democracy, we have now seen dictatorship, war, civil war and further interventions right across the region, and we need to look at that. We have seen the refugee crisis that has erupted as a result of the civil war in Syria, but that is as nothing to the refugee crisis that will be generated unless we address climate change. The region will become uninhabitable, water will be non-existent and food will be impossible to obtain, and we will then bear enormous consequences as a result. It is therefore appropriate to examine that as a particular issue.

Other Members have alluded to the ongoing problems between Israel and Palestine, the area that has failed to be addressed. I speak as someone who has been on visits to Israel and the west bank with both the Conservative Friends of Israel and the Palestinian Return Centre to see both sides of the argument. One depressing thing about the Palestinian representation is how badly they have been let down by their leadership and by their legal advisers, and how they have failed to see any progress towards achieving what they all want to achieve, which is an outright country—a state that is independent and secure.

Israel has to take steps to maintain security. In 2014, Israel, whose territory was subjected to more than 5,000 rockets and bombs sent from Gaza, had to take action against Hamas and the Hamas dictatorship that is misleading Gaza. The reality is that even now Hamas is diverting the international aid that Britain and other countries are putting in to rebuild the terror tunnels it began. Hamas is also utilising the money to fuel hate-filled lessons in ideology in that region, and is preventing the international aid from coming in. It has even prevented the setting up of a water desalination plant that would enable all the people of Gaza to enjoy clean drinking water at first hand. That is extremely regrettable.

**Dr Mathias:** I agree that the rebuilding in Gaza is crucial. Will my hon. Friend join me in asking the Minister whether there is a way we can monitor it, through our staff or UN staff on the ground?

**Bob Blackman:** It is key that we monitor what is done. Clearly, Hamas is still using its power to divert aid and prevent ordinary Palestinians from receiving the aid that they so desperately need. It is a scandal that, more than a year after the conflict, people who were made homeless as a result of that conflict are still homeless in Gaza. Hamas and its distorted ideology prevent progress from happening.

We see a series of other potential conflicts to come. In Lebanon, Hezbollah has reinforced its forces as a result of being a proxy for Iran, and many hundreds of thousands of rockets are now aimed at Israel, in order to destabilise the region. In Syria, Assad's regime directly assists Hamas and Hezbollah in rearming. We cannot deal with these countries in isolation.

I end as I began by saying that what we need in our country is a clear strategy for our policy in the middle east. I congratulate our Government on bringing forward additional resources to target that strategy, on creating a Foreign and Commonwealth Office with more Ministers in it than was the case under the last Government and on putting in place a proper strategy.

9.29 pm

**David Rutley** (Macclesfield) (Con): It is an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), who, as always, gave a passionate and knowledgeable speech. I also warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee) on securing this debate, with the support of my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Stephen Phillips), with both giving insightful speeches at a particularly important time. This was always going to be a timely debate, but it is even more so now, given the events of not only recent weeks, but today. Recent events in, and relating to, Syria can only be described as shocking. The civil war and the emergence of so-called Islamic State in parts of Syria and Iraq have produced sickening scenes that simply beggar belief. The sheer scale of the movement in mass migration that we have seen in recent months has been staggering.

Like many, I have been impressed by the words of Antoine Leiris after the tragic events in Paris. In response to the loss of his wife, H el ene, he courageously said of ISIS:

“I will not give you the gift of hating you.”

Like many in this House, I agree with that view. Clearly, that is the right moral response. Today, and over the days ahead, our focus must be on the pragmatic action that needs to be taken to address the two greatest challenges in the middle east: ISIL and the Assad regime.

The attacks in Paris underlined the fact that action must be taken. I am talking about not a knee-jerk response, but a considered, comprehensive approach. The Prime Minister made further important steps in setting out that case last Thursday.

The Syrian civil war and ISIL’s atrocities as it seeks to expand its hoped for caliphate are clearly root causes in driving hundreds of thousands of civilians away from their country and displacing millions from their homes. They are linked and we need to address both, but there is now no doubt that the clear and present danger for us in the UK is from ISIL, which is why tackling ISIL must be at the heart of our comprehensive strategy.

The Syrian civil war has created a power vacuum in the east. The lessons from Iraq, Eritrea and Yemen are that such vacuums need to be filled positively to create a safe environment for citizens and stability in a vital region in the global community.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that over the past decade or more, wishful thinking has been too prevalent in foreign policy, not just our own but that of the west. The Arab spring seemed to point to great promise. Despite advances in Tunisia, our hopes have fallen far short of reality. Our world view hoped for more than the weight of history was ever likely to deliver. Now we have to contend with ISIL and its deep hatred of everything we are and everything that we stand for.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, we hoped that western boots on the ground would win the war and we wished that the inconvenience of winning the peace would go away. Not enough was done to engage Arab states in the battle, and, sadly, the post-conflict reconstruction plans did not stand up to scrutiny. Wishful thinking and idealistic hoping are not enough. We need a pragmatic approach, one that is grounded in the geopolitical realities and the terrorist threats that we face today. We will need to draw on traditional diplomatic skills, that put the UK’s national interest as our central objective. The Minister, who has made many strong contributions, has set out the comprehensive approach that we are taking and, with the Prime Minister, has taken a lead on this matter, and I am grateful to him for that.

Our response must be well grounded. Paris reminds us that ISIL’s response not only is grounded in its hoped for caliphate but extends far too close to home. If ever there was a time to act, it is now, and we should not forget that indecision and inaction both have consequences as well. This is not like the summer of 2013 and this is not about entering the Syrian civil war. Indeed, the Prime Minister has ruled out that course of action. Instead our approach needs to be about containing and defeating the menace that ISIL represents because it is in our national interests to do so, and that requires a fully worked-up strategy.

Time does not permit me to talk at length about that strategy, but it is clear that we have certain key elements in place to improve not only our intelligence services and counter-terrorism capabilities but our approach to humanitarian aid as well. That is well documented, because we have given more than  1.1 billion to provide aid to millions of Syrian refugees. We are also taking forward important work to achieve a political settlement. Discussions in Vienna, as the Minister has said, have brought the relevant parties around the table. This is an unprecedented moment in time and, despite the gaps in our interests with Russia, it is the moment when we need to build on that momentum and secure a political resolution in Syria that the many residents in Macclesfield and across the country want to see. Of course, we have also put forward another  1 billion to help with post-conflict reconstruction, and that is another important part of that plan.

It is because those elements of the comprehensive approach are being taken forward in parallel that I feel that I can give my support to the Prime Minister’s military plans. Given the circumstances we face, for the other elements of the strategy to gain traction we need to defeat ISIL. To do that, I have, with a heavy heart, come to the conclusion, along with many in this House, that we must add our weight to the coalition’s air strikes in Syria. It is for that reason that I support the Prime Minister’s response to the Foreign Affairs Committee’s report and will support the Government in the vote on Wednesday.

9.35 pm

**Graham Evans** (Weaver Vale) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley), and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee) on securing this important and timely debate.

Following the 9/11 attacks, the change in America’s foreign policy was rapid. The first page of the Bush Administration’s 2002 national security strategy said:

“America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones.”

[Graham Evans]

Weak and failing states have arguably become the single biggest global threat to international order, and a disproportionate number are located in and around the middle east. In the wake of the horrific attacks on Paris—Friday 13 November will be a date that lives in infamy for the French people—and the destruction of the Russian passenger airliner in Egypt, Islamic State now universally threatens former cold war enemies, Russia and NATO countries alike.

It might sound surprising now, but before the Arab spring uprising in 2011, neither Syria nor Yemen were areas of concern on the Fund for Peace's fragile state index. That illustrates both how rapidly states can deteriorate and the extent to which brutal insurgency can embed itself in the power vacuum that remains when states such as Syria fail, as we have seen with the rise of ISIL. Terror groups such as ISIL and al-Qaeda thrive in areas where weak or failed states lack either the will or the ability to confront and defeat them.

The Government have rightly chosen to focus more work on helping fragile and failing states, tackling instability and helping people affected by conflict. That is not just the right thing to do for those people in their countries, but is a way of keeping our country safe, secure and prosperous. That is why our commitment to spend 0.7% of GDP on international aid is so vital. It is directly in the international community's interest and in our own interest to prevent these states from failing and to prevent the breeding grounds for such terror groups from forming in the first instance. If achievable, prevention is better, easier and cheaper than cure.

Equally, it would be entirely wrong and short-sighted to assume that established states in the middle east and conventional warfare are now in some way irrelevant and must be dismissed in the face of combating ISIL. About a fifth of the world's petroleum supply passes through the strait of Hormuz, a 34-mile wide naval choke point between Iran and the United Arab Emirates. Few locations in the world rivalled the strait's strategic importance for international trade and prosperity or its tactical vulnerability. As recently as 2011, Iran threatened to close the strait, embarking on military exercises in international waters in the region. It was only through the timely joint intervention of the Royal Navy, the US navy and the French navy, as well as the sheer amount of naval hardware in the area, that the situation was prevented from escalating further, preventing a global oil crisis.

This year, and in clear violation of a United Nations Security Council ban on ballistic missile tests, Iran tested a medium-range ballistic missile. Such missiles are inherently capable of carrying nuclear warheads. Iran and the P5+1 have been participating in intensive talks about the Islamic Republic's nuclear programme for the past few years to reach a negotiated and permanent nuclear agreement. The joint comprehensive plan of action, signed in Vienna on 14 July, was built on a foundation of verification. For that foundation of verification to be successful, access for International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors monitoring nuclear and military sites in Iran must be automatic. Iran cannot be allowed to stonewall requests for access to suspect sites.

The world we face today is inherently more dangerous and uncertain than even five years ago. To combat the growing level and number of threats, as a country we

must utilise and leverage our extensive network of soft power to prevent fragile states from failing. The UK is second only to the United States in the amount of money provided to international development and we should at every opportunity encourage our international allies to meet their commitment to spend 0.7% of GDP on international development. I have no doubt that that will make the world a safer place.

Ultimately, the potency of soft power is contingent on the existence, ability and will to deploy hard power when necessary. Had we not intervened in Iraq or taken action against ISIL's advance at the request of the democratically elected Government of Iraq, it is possible that the Iraqi Government would have failed in their efforts to push back ISIL, and the situation in the region would now be significantly worse, with more people subject to ISIL's brutality.

Let us not forget that ISIL burns prisoners of war alive, pushes gay people off buildings, and makes sexual slaves of 12-year-old girls. It beheads aid workers, and publicly tortures religious prisoners and journalists. It is ideologically committed to religious and ethnic genocide, and glories in death, violence and barbarity. If we who can do not stand up to them for those who cannot, what do we stand for?

9.40 pm

**Bob Stewart** (Beckenham) (Con): I want to concentrate on the possible effectiveness of air strikes against Daesh in Syria.

Let me begin by looking at Daesh as a military force. The current Daesh order of battle was set up by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who established the so-called worldwide caliphate on 29 June 2014. I understand from my friends that Daesh terrorists are extremely well trained. My contacts say that training courses are sophisticated and last at least three months. Weapons training ranges from pistols to anti-aircraft weapons, and some people can drive tanks and fire them. Daesh has further strengthened its military capability by capturing large quantities and varieties of weapons in places such as Mosul. It has improved its capacity to carry out subsequent operations and obtain even more equipment. Its weaponry includes T-54 tanks—I know how potent they are because I was struck by one in my own armoured vehicle—T-72s and M1 Abrams. It includes armoured cars and Humvees, surface-to-air missiles, BM-21s, which used to be called Stalin's organ, howitzers and guns, as well as anti-tank missiles such as Stinger.

Daesh is no pushover, which explains why some of the ground forces ranged against it have not made better progress. We are about to consider extending Royal Air Force combat operations to include Syria as well as Iraq. To me, that makes military sense. From Daesh's point of view, there is no Sykes-Picot line between Iraq and Syria.

Military orthodoxy states that wars cannot be won from the air, and that the enemy must be beaten on the ground. I agree, but let me ponder that for a moment. We won the air campaign in the battle of Britain in 1940, and saved our country from invasion by Nazi Germany. We should remember that Churchill then made a pact with Stalin against Hitler. Today, should we not consider opening a dialogue with President Assad's regime to defeat the huge threat of Daesh, which is enemy to Syria, the United Kingdom and, indeed, the whole world?



In 1999, in the Kosovo campaign, air power was crucial, but we needed ground troops too. Air power won it. In 2011, colleagues will remember that it was from the air that the inhabitants of Benghazi in Libya were saved from having their throats cut, as promised by Colonel Gaddafi. Obviously, it went wrong from there. In 2014, Daesh forces were prevented from advancing and taking Baghdad in Iraq, mainly by US air power. Troops were needed then. And today Daesh is severely constrained within its territory because any force that it concentrates could easily be identified and destroyed by our air power. Remember, the Royal Air Force now contributes 30% of the intelligence above Syria.

Military campaigns are fought in phases. I accept that the first military phase in beating Daesh may well be to destroy or severely restrict its activities from the air, then soldiers with rifles need to exploit that advantage. I hope that such forces come from middle east countries, but I would not bet on it. Finally, I believe that to destroy Daesh in Syria and in Iraq, we need to work with the Governments of Syria and Iraq. We may also, at some stage, need to use our own armed forces too, because they may be needed to protect our country by operating in the middle east yet again.

9.46 pm

**Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee) and other Members who secured this timely debate. We know that we will be facing decisions on extending airstrikes into Syria in the coming days. At the start of our debate, the hon. Gentleman set out eloquently the complexities of the region and the many factors and issues that need to be considered when discussing the middle east. He also made a compelling case for the Government to draw up a comprehensive strategy on the middle east.

We have had a good debate and a long one, with 29 contributions and many more interventions, all of them making important points. I shall try to do justice to a few of those points in the short time available to me. Before I do so, I want to mention an hon. Member who is not here tonight—my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes), an esteemed former Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, who was unfortunately taken ill in the past few days and is in hospital. I am sure all of us want to send our best wishes to him. I know he would very much like to have been here, taking part in the debate.

Understandably, the focus of the debate today has been mainly on Syria and the prospect of military action. I shall return to the subject of Syria, but first I want to mention the other important issues raised in the debate, which, as we recall, is on the “UK’s role in the Middle East”. It is unusual to have a debate on the middle east where Israel and Palestine are not the main focus, but we have had important contributions from the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Hornchurch and Upminster (Dame Angela Watkinson), my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), the right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones), my hon. Friend the Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) and the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) who all talked about how important Israel and Palestine are to the region.

We all know that there are no peace talks at present and there seems to be little prospect of a return to negotiations in the short term. I agree with the view expressed by the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard), who speaks for the SNP: the Government need to do all they can to urge a return to the negotiating table. It falls on all politicians in all parts of the House to reach out to the leaders in both Israel and Palestine and ask them not to take steps that will make a return to negotiations harder to achieve. This means an end to blockade and occupation, and an end to rocket and terror attacks.

Yemen was mentioned in the contributions of my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith, the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), the hon. Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), who chairs the all-party parliamentary group on Yemen. He reminded the House that Syria is not the only ongoing civil war in the region, nor is it the only conflict with an enormous humanitarian cost. The situation in Yemen is desperate, the death toll is rising and hundreds of thousands of people rely on humanitarian aid, which, as we heard, is becoming increasingly hard to get to those in need. I reiterate the Opposition’s call for an immediate return to the negotiations and for the UK Government to do all they can to encourage both sides to participate in the peace talks in Oman in good faith. It is also important that we have a full and impartial investigation into allegations that coalition forces broke international law during their operations in Yemen. The Secretary of State originally supported that proposal, but the Government appear to have U-turned, and I am still seeking an explanation for why.

We also heard contributions on Saudi Arabia from the hon. Members for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) and for Glenrothes (Peter Grant). They all pointed out that Saudi Arabia is a key player in the region and highlighted the important role it is playing in Yemen and Syria. My right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition has repeatedly and rightly raised the issue of human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia. It is of great concern to us all that there have already been 153 executions this year. We also need to work with the Saudis to ensure that we stop the flow of funding and support to ISIL/Daesh. Closing down the funding stream can be as important as military action, and we need the co-operation of the Saudis in that.

Iran was mentioned as another crucial regional player, particularly in the speeches of the hon. Members for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi) and for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy). As a key backer of Assad, Iran will be crucial in enabling a political solution to the civil war in Syria, which is a prerequisite for any defeat of ISIL/Daesh. It was notable last week that the Prime Minister highlighted improved relations with Iran as a key reason for optimism on the prospects of a diplomatic breakthrough at the Vienna talks. Of course, that follows the vital nuclear deal agreed last year. Last week the House discussed the deal and the plans to lift sanctions. I would like to reiterate the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), the shadow Europe Minister, in welcoming that agreement and congratulating all those who have strived to make it possible, including Baroness Ashton and Jack Straw, the former Member of this House.

[Diana Johnson]

We also heard an important contribution from the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Heather Wheeler) about the persecution of Christians and other minorities in the region.

In the few minutes I have left I will turn to Syria. We heard many excellent contributions on the topic, and they all showed how Members of this House are reflecting on the very difficult and complex situation in Syria. We started with the great expertise of my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), who speaks with great knowledge as a member of the Defence Committee and as chair of the all-party group on the Royal Air Force. I do not have time to acknowledge all the important points that have been made, but it is clear that many Members on both sides of the House are still actively considering the Government's case for extending bombing. It is also clear that Members are doing this in good faith and that we have the right to expect more information from the Government before being asked to vote on action.

I know that the Minister was limited in time when he spoke earlier, but he did respond to several of the points that were made. Unfortunately, he spoke half-way through the debate and other issues arose in the second half, and I know that he had to make many interventions to deal with those points. The Prime Minister waited several months to bring his case for extending action against ISIL/Daesh to the House, and I welcome the statement that he made last week, and the excellent Foreign Affairs Committee report that he responded to. However, I do not think that this is the end of the debate. There are several areas where the Government need to provide more detail, and a number of those points were raised again tonight.

For example, let us take the issue of ground troops, which was raised by the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr Lilley), the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Turner), my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and the hon. Members for South Dorset (Richard Drax) and for Bolton West (Chris Green). Last week the Prime Minister gave a figure of 70,000 moderate opposition fighters, but he did not elaborate in detail on which groups those fighters represented, where they were located and what contact, if any, had been made with them. A Syria expert at the Brookings Institute, Charles Lister, supported the Government's estimate of 70,000 fighters but disputed how moderate some of those groups really are. He also argued that to reach 70,000 fighters we would need to combine at least 10 groups that currently have different agendas and are dispersed across the country. Many are currently focusing their efforts on the battle with Assad. The Government need to explain in much greater detail how these forces are going to be used to defeat ISIL/Daesh and how their efforts will be co-ordinated with air strikes.

If the Prime Minister is serious about gaining consensus, as he has said repeatedly, he needs to ensure that there is an opportunity for a proper debate where all these points can be addressed. As now seems to have been announced on the BBC, we are likely to have a debate after Prime Minister's Question Time on Wednesday and to be asked to vote on that day, despite the Leader of the Opposition having asked for two days so that everyone who wants to contribute and ask questions

can be accommodated. As the Minister said, there is a duty to scrutinise, but there is also a duty on the Government to allow that scrutiny to take place. If they are serious about allowing a proper debate on a serious strategy to beat ISIL/Daesh in order to promote our own security and a peaceful future for the middle east, then we need that full and thorough scrutiny in this House before we vote. On that question, I hope that the Minister and the Prime Minister might think again and allow the extended debate that we need.

9.55 pm

**Dr Lee:** We have heard many outstanding speeches from Members in all parts of the House. I particularly thank the Minister and the shadow Minister for their contributions. The hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) made a very thoughtful speech. My hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Heather Wheeler), who referred to the need to protect all the minorities in the middle east, also made some telling remarks. My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Stephen Phillips) made an important contribution on the need to think about all the challenges that we face: all the ongoing civil wars and all the difficulties and complexities that I alluded to in my opening speech. He made a powerful speech, and I hope that the Government were listening.

I am sure you would agree, Mr Speaker, that this debate has been timely. I do not know whether you have this power, or where else it resides, but I think that a minimum of a monthly debate on a foreign policy issue would be welcomed by the great majority of people in this Chamber. It is long overdue that we have addressed the question of our approach to the middle east, and one could argue that the same could be said for our approaches to China, to India, or to South America: the list goes on. I encourage the people who hold the power to make a decision to allocate one day per month for us to discuss these things and to bring that about as soon as possible.

If you will allow me, Mr Speaker, I want to close this debate somewhat differently. I do not have enough time to pass comment on every single speech—I think there have been upwards of 30—so I hope that colleagues will forgive me for not mentioning them individually.

Over the weekend, a friend of mine sent me a photograph of Gustav Klimt's "The Kiss" superimposed, rather impressively, on a devastated, bullet-ridden building somewhere in Syria. The man behind it, a Syrian-born artist called Tammam Hazzam, said that his intention had been to draw a parallel between

"the greatest achievements of humanity with the destruction it is also capable of inflicting."

I encourage all hon. Members to find that picture online.

If we are looking for a goal at the end of the difficult foreign policy path that we now appear to be walking down, I think it should be this: in future, art galleries should be open across the middle east, in all places and all cities, in which the original Klimt can hang beside equivalent middle-eastern art, with everyone in the region, men and women, visiting, admiring and enjoying those works of art. If we could achieve that, it would demonstrate success on so many levels. It is a welcome coincidence that a copy of an Austrian artist's work evocatively

reproduced in a war-torn location within Syria helps to demonstrate what the Vienna process should ultimately be about.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the UK's role in the Middle East.

## Business without Debate

### NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY (JOINT COMMITTEE)

*Ordered,*

That Margaret Beckett, Crispin Blunt, Damian Green, Mr Dominic Grieve, Sir Gerald Howarth, Dr Julian Lewis, Angus Brendan MacNeil, Dr Andrew Murrison, Robert Neill, Stephen Twigg, Keith Vaz and Mr Iain Wright be members of the Select Committee appointed to join with a Committee of the Lords as the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

### ENERGY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

*Ordered,*

That Dr Alan Whitehead be discharged from the Energy and Climate Change Committee and Mr Jamie Reed be added.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

## Scotland and Malawi Relations

*Motion made, and Question proposed,* That this House do now adjourn.—(*Stephen Barclay.*)

10 pm

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker, or zikomo kwambiri and yewo chomene, as we would say in Chichewa and Tumbuka. I am very glad to have the opportunity to mark Scotland's national day—the feast of St Andrew—with this debate on the enduring relationship between my country and the country known as the warm heart of Africa, the Republic of Malawi.

A number of distinguished guests are watching these proceedings, either from the Gallery or via the broadcast, including representatives from the Malawi high commission to the UK and the UK high commission to Malawi. You will be aware, Mr Speaker, that His Excellency the President Professor Peter Mutharika is also visiting the UK today, and I had the honour and pleasure of meeting him at a cross-party group meeting earlier. To all of them, I say: Kwa inu nonse a Malawi anzanga omwe mwabwera kuno, tikulandirani ndi manja awiri. You are all most welcome on this special occasion.

Earlier this month we marked the 10th anniversary of the formal co-operation agreement signed by the Governments of Malawi and Scotland in 2005, and in October the civil society network, the Scotland Malawi Partnership, held its 10th annual general meeting. Ten years of formal co-operation between the countries build on a legacy stretching back more than 150 years, to the time of Dr David Livingstone, who is rightly remembered for his opposition to the slave trade. His impact on Malawi is commemorated in the naming of its major commercial city, Blantyre, after his home town in Lanarkshire, the home of my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier). Indeed, it is difficult to go anywhere in either Scotland or Malawi and not meet people, communities or organisations that have connections to the two countries.

My own connections also began slightly more than 10 years ago, when I travelled with the now sadly missed Scottish Churches World Exchange programme to the northern capital of Mzuzu. As a boy from Scotland's highland capital, Inverness, I thought that was very fitting. I made my home there for the next 12 months, along with some fellow volunteers, and we were warmly welcomed by the community of St Peter's cathedral parish and the school where we were to teach.

As is often the experience of teachers, I probably learned far more from my students than they learned from me. Perhaps the most important thing I learned—or at least the experience confirmed this for me—is that no matter where in the world we go, people are the same. I taught kids who were eager to learn, and I taught kids who just wanted to be outside playing football. I met mothers and fathers who wanted nothing but the best for their children. I met priests and sisters of great faith, and I met others who had left their ministry. I met locals propping up bars late at night, drinking the local Kuche Kuche brew and putting the world to rights, and I met farmers, bakers, shopkeepers, starting their early morning shifts—although I hasten to add that they were not all walking together.



[Patrick Grady]

What was different was the context. Malawi is one of the poorest countries on earth: it ranks 174th out of 187 countries in the United Nations human development index. Life expectancy at birth is just 55 years, and half of the population live below the national poverty line, but all of those statistics represent improvements on the situation 10 years ago.

The difference between Scotland and Malawi lies not in the desire or the ability of the people to build a better life for themselves, but in the opportunities they have to do so. What stands in the way of those opportunities for people in Malawi is rarely the result of decisions taken in Malawi, but, rather, deep-rooted, structural causes that we in the west must take responsibility both for bringing about and for helping to bring to an end.

As we hold this debate today, world leaders are meeting in Paris for the climate change summit. Climate change is one of the biggest challenges facing people and the planet. It exacerbates the existing challenges of poverty, conflict, disease, resource depletion and population displacement.

**Oliver Colville** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on successfully securing this debate, and on his attendance when we met the President earlier today. Does he think that we in England also have a responsibility to make sure we are investing in Malawi? I know that part of the world incredibly well, and it is time we took a serious interest in it.

**Patrick Grady:** Yes, of course: the debate is on Scotland's relations with Malawi, but we recognise that there are bonds of friendship across the UK. The President expressed a number of useful comments and insights to the cross-party group, including on the importance of investment and, indeed, on the need for an agreement at the Paris summit. Malawi has been affected by climate changes, as have so many countries in that part of the world.

**Stephen Gethins** (North East Fife) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this timely debate. Does he agree that the Scottish Government's work on climate justice is particularly timely, especially with today's opening of the Paris climate talks, and that they are making good progress on it?

**Patrick Grady:** Yes. If I have time, I may say something about the climate justice fund towards the end of my remarks.

Other structures and factors exacerbate the challenge of global poverty. Tomorrow, we mark world AIDS day. HIV/AIDS is one of several totally preventable diseases that are still far too prevalent in countries such as Malawi. If developing countries are truly to control their own destiny, we must improve governance, strengthen civil society and, in particular, ensure that resources and capital generated in-country are allowed to stay in-country. His Excellency the President raised the issue of domestic resource mobilisation at today's meeting. We on the SNP Benches will pay particular attention to the forthcoming renegotiation of the Malawi UK tax treaty.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Just this year, one of the top Government officials in Malawi, Charles Msosa, principal secretary to the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, issued a very stern warning against abuse of the latest aid package. Does the hon. Gentleman feel, as he does, that there should be a zero-tolerance approach to abuse of the aid package?

**Patrick Grady:** I absolutely agree. I have spoken of the need to enhance and strengthen the role of civil society in Malawi to help its people to hold the Government to account and to strengthen the structures of Malawi democracy itself. Indeed, those points were made at the cross-party group this morning.

His Excellency also spoke of the need to tackle gender inequality in his country. Of course, his immediate predecessor is one of only a handful of females ever to be a Head of State in Africa. There is no single silver bullet to end global poverty, but the empowerment and education of women and girls comes pretty close.

Many of my SNP colleagues have constituents who have a connection with Malawi. The Scotland Malawi Partnership, a network of nearly 700 organisations and key stakeholders, reckons that about 94,000 Scots are involved in partnership activities, while its sister organisation, the Malawi Scotland Partnership, estimates that 198,000 Malawians co-operate with friends and counterparts in Scotland.

**Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that what particularly distinguishes the Malawi Scotland Partnership is the dynamic and reciprocal nature of the relationship? That is particularly evident in the more than 150 school-to-school connections, which are creating firm links of friendship and understanding between schools in Malawi and schools in my own constituency, such as Broughton high and Stockbridge primary schools.

**Patrick Grady:** I totally agree. Many constituents elsewhere will have similar stories to tell. The development of school partnerships has been a particular characteristic of the Scotland-Malawi relationship over the past 10 years. Indeed, the school I taught at in Mzuzu was one of the very first to establish such a relationship with what is now St Matthew's Academy in Saltcoats, which is ably represented by my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson).

It would be particularly interesting to carry out some research into the long-term impact of these partnerships. How have they benefited young people from Scotland and Malawi who have visited each other's countries? What impact have these exchanges had on their career and life choices? It would be interesting to know whether the Minister might consider funding that kind of study.

Cultural links built on person-to-person connections are a hallmark of the relationship between Scotland and Malawi, but these are not always straightforward. The Minister will be aware that Malawians wishing to visit the UK—even, on some occasions, those sponsored by the British Council—can find it difficult to obtain a visa. Again, I would be interested to hear how the Government plan to respond to the concerns about that raised by civil society organisations.

Civil society connections are strengthened and enhanced by the formal co-operation agreement between the Governments of Scotland and Malawi. Signed in the

aftermath of the Gleneagles summit in 2005, it commits the Governments to working together in the key areas of civic governance, sustainable economic development, health and education.

It is an agreement that has lived on through three First Ministers of Scotland and three Presidents of Malawi. I pay tribute to the work of Jack McConnell, who established the agreement as First Minister and who is now one of Malawi's strongest advocates in the House of Lords. Scotland's longest-serving—because he is the only one so far—International Development Minister, Humza Yousaf, has also championed the relationship. I know that his visit to Malawi in 2014 left a deep impression on him.

Over the years, the Scottish Government have invested more than £55 million in Malawi. That is in addition to Department for International Development investment and other UK investment, although I note that the Government like to count it towards the 0.7% official development assistance target. That funding has helped to quadruple the number of medical graduates in Malawi, ensured that 140,000 children have been prioritised for emergency treatment through a meningitis treatment programme, and brought new energy access to almost 80,000 people in the most rural parts of the country through a £2.3 million renewable energy programme.

I declare an interest because, before the election, I worked for the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund, which benefited from the Scottish Government's innovative climate justice fund, to which my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) referred. The climate justice fund puts into reality the principle that we have done the most to cause climate change and people in developing countries such as Malawi have done the least but are being impacted first and hardest, by helping people to adapt and overcome the impacts of climate change. Last year, I saw at first hand the impact of that funding, which is helping communities in rural Malawi to overcome the effects of climate change through irrigation and sustainable agriculture projects.

I want briefly to pay tribute to two projects with which I have a personal connection. The first is the Eva Demaya centre, which was established by Jacqueline Kouwenhoven, who was initially from the Netherlands, and her husband, Mr John Fox, who hails from Dumbarton. The centre provides a valuable and innovative mix of conventional western medicine alongside more traditional and complementary therapies in a remote area of the Rumphu district. Such is the esteem in which Jacqueline is held that the local community elected her as an independent member of the Malawian Parliament last year—the only woman in that august House. I hope that I can find a way to make a connection with her in my capacity as a member of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association.

The inter-cultural exchanges and innovative approaches that such small projects engender are hallmarks of the interventions that have happened in Malawi, especially over the past 10 years under the formal Scotland Malawi Partnership. It has allowed a thousand flowers to bloom, as it were, and there are many lessons to be learned.

The second project is the Chesney Trust, which was founded by one of my fellow volunteers, Janet Chesney, who travelled out to Malawi with me in 2004 but has never found the will to leave for a significant length of time. She has dedicated herself to improving access to

education in northern Malawi through the establishment of a girl's secondary school. Earlier today, she sent me a video of the pupils of that school singing Scotland's national anthem, just in time for St Andrew's day. I will endeavour to share that on social media so that you, Mr Speaker, and other Members can enjoy a clip that sums up the special relationship between Scotland and Malawi. I am grateful that you have chosen to remain in the Chair for this Adjournment debate, Mr Speaker. I know that you take a particular interest in matters of international development, as a former spokesperson on the subject.

In recognition of the girls learning the words to "Flower of Scotland", let me finish with the words of Malawi's national anthem. In Chichewa, it starts, "Mlungu dalitsani Malawi". In Tumbuka, it is, "Chiuta m'tumbike Malawi". In English, that is, "God bless Malawi". As I have time, the first verse is:

"O God bless our land of Malawi,  
Keep it a land of peace.  
Put down each and every enemy,  
Hunger, disease, envy.  
Join together all our hearts as one,  
That we be free from fear.  
Bless our leader, each and every one,  
And Mother Malawi."

10.14 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (James Duddridge):** What a veritable challenge for *Hansard* some of those quotes will be. I hope that I will not be as challenging, although I wish I had had the foresight to prepare to be so.

This debate on Scotland-Malawi relations is timely. As has been mentioned, President Mutharika started an official visit to the UK this morning and will join the global African investment summit of the Daily Mail group later this week. I join the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) in offering a warm welcome to the President and his team, and I also wish him, and the vast array of Members who have come to support him, a happy St Andrew's day. No doubt they are reflecting the importance of the Malawi-Scotland relationship, as well as the high esteem in which he is held in his party and the House more generally.

I am delighted that today my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland met the Minister responsible for foreign affairs to reinforce the close relationship between Scotland and Malawi. I know that he has a long-standing interest in Malawi. I met the Malawian high commissioner to London and had a wide-ranging discussion.

Indeed, Malawi is a country close to my heart. My wife went to school in Malawi, and her father worked there. My brother-in-law, Patrick Thompson, was born in Lilongwe hospital. When I finally married my long-suffering wife, we decided to honeymoon in part in Lilongwe while travelling anti-clockwise around Zimbabwe. When I was on the Back Benches, I volunteered with a charity called the Grow Movement, which seeks to unlock the potential of entrepreneurs in Uganda, Rwanda and Malawi by matching them with business consultants who offer structured advice over the phone. Over 12 phone sessions, I helped a lady called Evelyn who was running a wonderful business in Malawi called Body Hugging Fashions—I felt I should get that into *Hansard*.

[James Duddridge]

I was also temporarily vice-chair of the all-party group on Zambia and Malawi, and I know from the Malawian high commissioner and our high commissioner to Malawi, who I am sure is listening to this debate somewhere, that the President very much enjoyed meeting members of the group, and was pleased with the hospitality he was offered. It was much appreciated.

I am delighted that this debate is taking place. The UK has an historic and deep bilateral relationship with Malawi, and although the UK has overall responsibility for foreign affairs, within that broader framework there is a special relationship between Scotland and Malawi that we in this House should cherish. The debate in the Scottish Parliament on 11 November to mark the 10th anniversary of the Scotland and Malawi co-operation agreement set out the breadth of the links and relationship that Scotland has with Malawi, and the cross-party support that it enjoys.

In my mind there are three key components to the relationship between Scotland and Malawi. The first is the history. Scotland's part in the Malawi story is there for all to see. It is not just about the lives of explorers, missionaries, traders and doctors—and indeed teachers—from the past and present; it is built into the very fabric of Malawi. From the largest Malawian Protestant church with its Scottish roots, to some of the nation's most historic and impressive buildings, and the name of its largest city, Scotland's links with Malawi are very evident today.

Secondly, the links to people are still strong, and I pay tribute to the work of the Scotland Malawi Partnership and all it does to invigorate and build on historical links. I note that the hon. Gentleman lived and worked in Malawi. Indeed, I believe that we were in Malawi at the same time while I was honeymooning, although I did not get to the country's further reaches—that was my own failing, as I was keen to complete the circumference of Zimbabwe. Many others have also worked there. The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) referred to the connecting classrooms programme, and I am sure that the British Council would welcome her thoughts on research into the impact that that had and on how such projects could be taken forward.

**Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): On the connecting classrooms programme, will the Minister join me in applauding the enterprise and enthusiasm of senior pupils from schools across East Renfrewshire who have just returned from Malawi where they spent a week painting schools and working in local communities, and cementing the bonds of friendship between our countries?

**James Duddridge:** I have no hesitation in congratulating those pupils on their excellent work, and I would love to find out more if the hon. Lady has some time to tell me about that programme and the work done by that school.

**Oliver Colville:** Is my hon. Friend also aware that Plymouth St Andrew's has a very close relationship with Medic Malawi in Kasungu, and does an enormous amount to send people out to help them to develop their healthcare?

**James Duddridge:** A timely intervention. As my hon. Friend knows, my father-in-law is in his constituency, the same father-in-law who worked in Malawi. My hon. Friend is a governor of one school in Malawi. I do not know whether his intervention was a circuitous pitch for his involvement in another, but I am sure I would welcome schools in Plymouth, East Renfrewshire and other places across the United Kingdom getting involved. It is important to develop links between people, so that the relationship will be as strong in the future as it has been in the past.

Our third link is governance. We are, of course, celebrating the 10th anniversary of the co-operation agreement set up by that great friend of Malawi, Lord Jack McConnell. I thank him for all the work he has put into the relationship over the years. The Scottish Parliament has an active partnership with the Malawian Parliament, and the Scottish Government have a respected development programme backed up with high-level visits in both directions—a very important point that was made earlier.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North mentioned climate change. The impact of climate change on the poorest Malawians is a problem of great magnitude that calls for efforts from all of us. DFID's £21 million enhancing community resilience programme supports individuals and communities in Malawi to mitigate the effects of climate change through small-scale irrigation, conservation, agricultural practices, and village savings and loans schemes, developing resilience so that when problems strike communities are ready to help themselves.

**Stephen Phillips** (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): My hon. Friend will know about the disastrous floods in Malawi in January last year. We do not know what caused the floods, but it is probably because of climate change that they are becoming more frequent in that region. Does he therefore agree that for nations such as Malawi it is imperative we reach an agreement in Paris that will lead to a solution that will see less of this type of weather across Africa?

**James Duddridge:** As ever, my hon. and learned Friend hits the nail on the head. It is absolutely essential for any Paris agreement to acknowledge the changing situation that is having an impact on and adversely affecting countries such as Malawi. Early indications of progress in Paris are good, but there is still a long way to go.

Her Majesty's Government actively encourage the special bond that exists between Malawi and Scotland. The British high commission in Lilongwe brings together FCO and DFID staff who work with many Scots, Governments, individuals and other organisations who keep that bond alive. I am sure that our high commissioner will be open to further suggestions on how we can work together. The UK Government have supported visits to Malawi this year from the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned problems with visas. He will appreciate that I cannot go into too much detail, and certainly not on individual cases, but I am open to suggestions on how the system can be improved. UK Visas and Immigration is responsible for making decisions each year on who has the right to stay. It is a difficult job that requires balance. Our immigration rules apply globally to every visa applicant. Statistics show that 85% of Malawian applications for visit visas



made in the past year were issued. That is well above the global and regional average. Malawi is well placed in relation to visas being processed and accepted. Statistics on the time taken bear similar comparison to our targets, and to global and regional averages.

We recognise the important work still to be done. DFID in Scotland, in particular, is working incredibly hard. That work, driven not only from Malawi and London but from East Kilbride, makes the UK one of Malawi's largest development partners, in terms of the global impact of DFID's work. They are an excellent team, and one I have visited in the past.

The UK Government are committed to ensuring that every pound of UK aid money achieves its intended results, and we maintain a zero-tolerance approach to corruption. We are concerned, therefore, at the weaknesses in Malawi's financial management systems uncovered by the "cashgate" scandal, which saw the theft by politicians and civil servants of funds intended for the people of Malawi. That is why, in concert with other donors, we decided to stop providing financial aid directly to the Malawian Government in November 2013.

It is important to note, however, that although we cannot work through the governance system, the UK continues to work with the Government and the Malawian people, and our support is significant. We operate an £80 million bilateral aid programme—up from £64 million in 2014-15—with significant other UK support benefiting Malawi, including, for example, through civil society, research, the global funds and multilateral channels.

Scotland's, and indeed the UK's, relationship with Malawi involves being there when Malawi faces difficult times. Unfortunately, difficult times have been all too common. DFID recently mobilised to provide £4.1 million to help address the devastating floods, which my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Stephen Phillips) mentioned, in January and released a further £10 million in October to alleviate the desperate food shortages facing nearly 3 million people. In addition, contingency planning is in place for this year's likely El Niño.

Malawi's future needs to move beyond a heavy reliance on aid. Malawi must stimulate the creation of growth, markets, jobs and incomes for all its citizens. To this end, the Government are working with the Malawian Government to improve the business environment and the diversification and development of its export market. We strongly support the President's attempts to reform

the economy and public services to bring about the change necessary to rebalance the Malawian economy—from one heavily supported by donors and reliant on the state to one more driven by private sector investment and entrepreneurship, as I saw from Evelyn and others in the country.

**Dr Lisa Cameron** (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I congratulate the Minister on paying tribute to my constituency and DFID's work there, and I, too, congratulate them. Does he agree on the importance of champions for women's small business enterprises in Malawi and across the developing world and of investment in opportunities for business ventures for women?

**James Duddridge:** I do agree. It has been my experience, particularly in Malawi, that women within families can be the most entrepreneurial of individuals. Sometimes, however, it is not recognised even within their own communities that they are the underlying business drivers and income producers. We need to provide more support to smaller businesses as they get bigger. Transitioning from that micro-entrepreneurship to larger, more formalised, tax-paying and employment-generating activity is exactly the right way forward, and I am sure that Malawian women, as African women, will be at the forefront of that, leaving the men sadly behind.

Finally, it is important to reiterate that this is a partnership, not a one-way relationship. Malawi is a vibrant country with a warm heart in the middle of Africa, renowned throughout the region as a land of peace in a sometimes troubled neighbourhood. A democracy with a staunchly free press, Malawi has been a good friend to Scotland and the UK, and we are keen to support it in the years to come. Malawian soldiers, for example, play a valuable and respected role as peacekeepers in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, having been trained by our armed forces. The Malawian diaspora contributes enormously to many areas of life in the UK, including in Scotland. Let us remember that, for all its challenges, Malawi inspires many people in Scotland and throughout the UK, and, thanks to the hon. Member for Glasgow North, we rightly celebrate that relationship today.

*Question put and agreed to.*

10.29 pm

*House adjourned.*



# Westminster Hall

Monday 30 November 2015

[MR FABIAN HAMILTON *in the Chair*]

## Sugary Drinks Tax

[*Relevant document: First Report from the Health Committee, Childhood obesity—brave and bold action, HC 465.*]

4.30 pm

**Helen Jones** (Warrington North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 106651 relating to a tax on sugary drinks.

The Petitions Committee has scheduled the debate to coincide with the publication of the report by the Select Committee on Health about childhood obesity. I did not have the advantage of seeing that report when I drafted my speech, but I am sure that the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) will enlighten us further if she catches your eye later, Mr Hamilton. It is a great pleasure to see many members of that Committee here.

The petition was prompted by real concern about the health problems that are being caused by rising levels of obesity, particularly among children. Having looked at the matter, there is no doubt in my mind that we face a very serious situation. I am lucky to be one of a fortunate generation that saw advances in housing and sanitation, and mass vaccination programmes that eradicated or reduced the incidence of many diseases from which children used to suffer. However, we are now in danger of raising a generation who will have a lower life expectancy than that of their parents. The reason for that is down to diet, with too much fat and too much sugar—combined with too little exercise, yes, but it is mostly about diet.

**Mark Field** (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Helen Jones:** If the right hon. Gentleman is so eager to get in, I will give way.

**Mark Field:** I am eager to get in on that point, because I think it is rather facilely simplistic to suggest that any reduction in life expectancy is just down to diet. I accept that that could be one of the factors, but, in looking at this report and others like it, it is important that we take an evidence-based approach. Diet is a factor in reduced life expectancy in some parts of the country, but it is by no means the only factor.

**Helen Jones:** The right hon. Gentleman will learn that diet is actually the major factor. I will go on to say a little more about that later. He is right that it is difficult to talk about the subject without seeming like a killjoy, so I will fess up right at the beginning: I enjoy a glass of wine with my meals, although I try to restrict it to weekends; I am martyr to my cravings for chocolate; and, like many of us in this House, I could do with

losing a bit of weight. However, we should not let our own frailties put us off tackling what I believe to be a real health emergency.

I have seen a huge change in diet, particularly in children's diets, over my lifetime. When I was growing up, pop was a treat that we got occasionally, and we usually got a bottle of it between several of us. Sweets were bought by our dads on payday. If we were out playing—most children did play out in those days—and we came in hungry, we got bread and butter and a drink of water. Now, thanks to a huge change in lifestyle, the wider availability of products and some heavy marketing to children, the situation has changed. Many adults and most of our children are not meeting the proper dietary requirements. We eat too much saturated fat and too much sugar—both added sugar, and sugar in fruit juices, honey and similar products.

**Mark Field:** As the father of two young children aged seven and four, I entirely endorse what the hon. Lady has to say about the prevalence of treats for today's youngsters compared with that which our generation grew up with. Does she accept, however, that the issues here are the responsibility of parents and of the companies who produce such goods? Many of those companies have shown a level of responsibility, and the average size of confectionery such as the Mars bar has fallen as time has gone by. There is more information on all such products about the amount of fat and sugar that they contain. In many ways, we are living in an age of more responsible and more informed consumers, both young and old. That is where the responsibility lies, and that responsibility has been put into place to a large extent—

**Fabian Hamilton (in the Chair):** Order. I remind hon. Members that interventions should be kept brief, and that they should be questions.

**Helen Jones:** The right hon. Gentleman flatters me by saying that we are of the same generation; I think he is quite a bit younger than me. As I will come on to say, I do not think that the public health responsibility deal has delivered, and although it is true that there are responsibilities on parents and all of us, we have to look at the environment in which people operate. In this country, I think we face a real health emergency that is equivalent to an epidemic, and sugar is one of the worst culprits. Sugar is added to processed food, and that changes our tastes over time. A small can of drink can contain up to nine teaspoons of sugar. The result of that is that we are all growing bigger, particularly our children. Thirty per cent. of our children are overweight or obese. Many adults are too, and they often live in the poorest communities.

**Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Does the hon. Lady share my concerns about the new trend for having soft drink vending machines in schools? Schools may benefit from a slight increase in their budget, but the impact on children's health and learning is significant.

**Helen Jones:** The hon. Lady makes a fair point, and I will come to what is happening in schools later in my speech.



**Emma Reynolds** (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the voluntary approach to the food and drink industry is not working? Contrary to what the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mark Field) has suggested, the industry is not taking responsibility for reformulating sugary drinks, some of which contain as much as 14 teaspoons of sugar—double the daily recommended amount. That is why we need a regulatory approach.

**Helen Jones:** That is a reasonable approach, and I will come to that in a minute. The right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mark Field) mentioned the shrinking size of Mars bars, but I think that has more to do with maximising profits than with concern for people's health.

As a result of all that I have outlined, our risk of serious diseases is increasing. We are much more at risk than we used to be of cardiovascular disease, certain types of cancers and type 2 diabetes, which is increasing rapidly in this country. In fact, the British Medical Association has estimated that problems with our diet lead to 70,000 premature deaths a year. I put it to the right hon. Gentleman that if the Government were seeing 70,000 deaths a year from something such as a flu epidemic, they would act. This is just as serious.

Serious diseases are not the only problem. The biggest cause of childhood admissions to hospital is dental decay. If we talk to people who operate on those children, we hear horrific stories of young children having all their teeth removed because of decay.

**Jonathan Edwards** (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): A tax on sugary drinks has been Plaid Cymru policy for a number of years in Wales. The Labour party in Wales has responded in the media that such a policy

“is a not sensible way forward”,

and has called it “ill-thought” out, “economically illiterate gibberish”, “a disgraceful con trick” and “fantasy politics”. It has described the policy as “vacuous” and said that it has

“no chance of seeing the light of day”.

What is the hon. Lady's message to her colleagues in Wales, especially as we are about to gain the powers to introduce a sugary drinks tax in our country?

**Helen Jones:** I never take what Plaid Cymru says about the Labour party in Wales at face value; I am used to its selective quotes.

Dealing with problems caused by poor diet is costing the NHS about £6 billion a year, which is more than the cost of dealing with problems that arise from smoking and alcohol combined. That figure is predicted to rise to £10 billion or £12 billion by 2020. The Government's response to that, as has been said, was the public health responsibility deal. They have rejected direct intervention, which they refer to as “Whitehall diktat and nannyism”. I think that is a profoundly mistaken approach, for this reason. Individuals do not make decisions in a vacuum, and they are making decisions about their diet in a situation where unhealthy foods are often heavily discounted or priced very low, where hundreds of millions is spent on marketing—particularly on marketing to children—and, in some cases, where there is a lack of availability of

healthy alternatives. It is true that we need to take responsibility for our own health, but the Government also have a role in ensuring that we have the skills and facilities that we need.

**James Berry** (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con) *rose*—

**John Glen** (Salisbury) (Con) *rose*—

**Helen Jones:** I am not sure which of these defenders of the Government to take first. I will take the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry).

**James Berry:** I am probably not the best qualified person to speak about this, having judged a cake competition in my constituency on Friday night. Does the hon. Lady agree that much clearer labelling would be an alternative to a tax—I do not form a view on whether that is right—in ensuring that people are not making decisions in a vacuum? For example, if a drink contains 14 teaspoons of sugar, 14 teaspoons should be clearly marked on the side of that drink so that people know exactly what is in it.

**Helen Jones:** Yes, the hon. Gentleman is right that we need much clearer labelling. As I will come on to say, the proposal in the petition is one avenue for tackling the problem, but not the only one and not a silver bullet.

I will take the intervention of the hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen), but then I will make some progress.

**John Glen:** I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady. She is making a powerful case, of which I am somewhat persuaded. However, does she not feel that it would be best if the Government were given an opportunity to develop the responsibility deal and to do a lot more to change public attitudes and consumption patterns before a sugar tax, the effects of which are not yet fully known, is implemented?

**Helen Jones:** The public health responsibility deal has had a fair trial over the past five years. The House of Lords Science and Technology Committee said of it that

“the current Public Health Responsibility Deal pledge on obesity is not a proportionate response to the scale of the problem.”

The reason for that, as the British Medical Association has pointed out, is that the deal does not set targets for individual food and drink products, or a timescale in which changes have to be made. That is why I have come to believe that there is a great deal of merit in what the petitioners are asking for, as one method among a whole lot of ways to tackle the problem.

A tax on sugary drinks would probably have to be at the level of 10% to 20% to make a change in behaviour, apparently—Public Health England suggests that range. There is evidence from Mexico and France that at that level, people's behaviour starts to change and they start to choose sugar-free alternatives. However, that has to be part of a whole-Government effort to reduce obesity, which has to begin in schools.

Much work has been done on improving school meals, setting better nutritional standards for them and removing vending machines from schools. The problem is that those things do not apply to academies and free

schools, and as more schools become academies we are putting more children at risk of poor nutrition. We should not tolerate that. It is good that food and nutritional education is compulsory at key stage 3, but we need to look at how that operates. Much more investment in equipment is needed. Schools need to be outward-facing and need to encourage local people to visit them to talk to children about food and how it is grown. The best schools do that, but often the curriculum is not appropriate for all children.

In my entire school career I did a term and a half of cookery, because it was considered that those who were academically inclined did not need to learn how to cook. The only thing I can remember being taught is how to make rock buns, something that I have not indulged in before or since. Another example is that my son specialised in Indian cooking. It was supposed to be brought home for the evening meal, but anyone who suggests that has never met a teenage boy. That was interesting, but expensive. What most of us need to know when we first set out in the world is how to eat healthily on a restricted budget. That is the sort of thing that we need to look at with our children.

In fact, all public institutions should be promoting healthy eating. Dare I suggest that we start with some of the vending machines in this place, so that I do not walk down the corridors thinking, “Get thee behind me, Satan”, every time I pass machines full of chocolate and fizzy drinks? That needs to be done in hospitals as well—there have been a number of articles about that recently.

I challenge people to walk into the foyer of many hospitals. There are machines selling chocolate and fizzy drinks, and the outlets often sell cake and biscuits quite cheaply but overcharge for a piece of fruit. If someone wanders in to buy a paper, they will be offered a big, discounted chocolate bar at the till. That makes it much harder for people to resist temptation. Of course, that is difficult to do, but the message that hospitals are giving their patients, staff and visitors is, “Don’t do as we say; do as we do.” The Government urgently need to negotiate with trusts and with NHS England to see how the issue can be remedied. It is nonsense to take an income from those sorts of outlets in one part of the hospital and then to deal with the effects of poor diet in another.

**Andrea Jenkyns** (Morley and Outwood) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree that it is also down to personal responsibility and choice, and that it should not be down to the state to tell people how to live their lives? Childhood obesity is more prevalent in deprived areas, so a sugary drinks tax will hit the poorest. Surely education, better labelling and personal responsibility are key.

**Helen Jones:** If we were dealing with a level playing field, the hon. Lady might be right, but we are not. We are dealing with goods that are heavily marketed, especially to children. I am sure she cannot really be arguing that it is great for hospitals to profit from unhealthy food and then for the other end of the hospital to deal with the consequences of that.

**Geraint Davies** (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Helen Jones:** I will take one more intervention, then I am going to make some progress, because other Members need to speak.

**Geraint Davies:** On the issue of personal responsibility and consumer choice, as my hon. Friend will know, the World Health Organisation says that men should have up to nine teaspoons of sugar a day and that women should have up to six. Would it not be helpful if, in addition to the poison of sugar being taxed, all products were labelled in teaspoonfuls so that everybody knew what they were eating and could make empowered choices?

**Helen Jones:** That is right. I have already said that clearer labelling has a role to play, but the Government need to understand and recognise the link between obesity and food poverty, which is not—before anyone misquotes me—to say that all poor people are obese or that all obese people are poor. The children who are most at risk are concentrated in the most deprived areas of the country. The same is true of adults. Figures provided to me by the Library show that there is a stark division. For instance, 32.7% of adults in Hartlepool are obese; in the Chilterns, it is 17.7%. In Barnsley, 35% of people are obese; in Cambridge, it is 14.7%.

The noble Lord Prior recently said in the other place that he found it puzzling that obesity is growing while people are using food banks. Let me try to explain it simply to him. If people live in an area where shops do not sell reasonably priced food, fruit and veg, and they cannot afford the bus fare into town, they are more likely to buy cheap, fatty products. If people are fuel-poor, it is difficult to cook healthy meals, as it is if they are time-poor. I have just said at a public engagement event that there are women in my constituency who are working two or three part-time jobs, trying to make ends meet. Most poor families are good at managing their budgets, but if they do not have time to cook and are worried about waste, they are more likely to buy easy things that can be cooked quickly—we need to recognise that. I would do the same in that situation, and it is why we need to invest more in preventive measures and to subsidise healthy foods, rather than unhealthy foods.

If we look at the detail of the Chancellor’s autumn statement, however, the public health grant will continue to fall. Some 25% of the grant goes on sexual health services, and 30% goes on drug and alcohol services, which are demand-led statutory services that cannot be cut. If we add the child measurement programme, child medical examinations and health protection, there is not much left over. That is why the Local Government Association has said

“councils don’t have enough...to do the preventive work needed to tackle one of the biggest challenges we face.”

The Government also need to look carefully at what has happened to their obesity strategy. The strategy was launched with great fanfare in 2011, but since then, as the National Obesity Forum has said,

“little has been heard of the strategy”.

The National Obesity Forum has asked for a “much more determined approach”. Even the Change4Life programme, which does not address obesity but helps to prevent people from becoming obese in the first place, has found its budget cut. We have heard much about the public health responsibility deal, which is currently

[Helen Jones]

under review. I hope the Government will seriously look at the deal, because all the indications are that, as presently constituted, it is not working.

Simon Capewell, professor of public health and policy at Liverpool University, called the public health responsibility deal a “predictable failure” and

“a successful strategy for food companies who wanted to maximise profits.”

It is right to work with the industry as one strand of our approach, but it is not right to give industry the final say on what happens because, as the Health Committee said in the last Parliament,

“those with a financial interest must not be allowed to set the agenda for health improvement.”

We need a much tougher responsibility deal.

**Mark Field:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Helen Jones:** No, I will finish now if the right hon. Gentleman will forgive me. He has made several interventions, and he can make a speech later.

**Mark Field:** Do you want a debate?

**Fabian Hamilton (in the Chair):** Order.

**Helen Jones:** I have said to the right hon. Gentleman that I will not give way again.

The Government need to introduce a much tougher responsibility deal, with targets for improvements in individual products. A cross-Government strategy is also needed. As well as looking at schools, the health service and other public services, Ministers need to come out of their silos—after a time, all Ministers get into silos in their Departments—and look at what is happening overall. We do not want to see a repeat of what happened in the previous Parliament, when the Department of Health urged us to take more exercise while the Department for Education was cutting funding for school sports partnerships.

We need to consider that seriously, because what the petition asks for has to be part of an overall strategy to ensure that we promote healthier diets and get people more active, and not just by playing sport—sport is important, but I speak as someone who spent more time avoiding games at school than I ever spent playing them. There are other ways of getting people active. We need to encourage more walking and cycling, which is a role not just for the Department for Transport but for the Department for Communities and Local Government and for local councils, too. There is no reason why we cannot design new developments better to encourage more walking and cycling. There is no reason why we cannot ensure that new developments have children’s play facilities, communal gardens or even allotments, which are in very short supply, to encourage people to take exercise out in the open air.

We cannot continue with the current hands-off attitude. The problems are too great for that. The Government need to accept that the things they have done so far are—[*Interruption.*] The Minister will have a chance to

speak when she winds up; she need not chunter from a sedentary position. Ministers ought to be above that sort of thing.

We need to have a full look at the situation and to encourage a proper national conversation, because the only way that such initiatives can be successful is if we take people with us.

**Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con):** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Helen Jones:** No, I have said several times that I will not give way again. I will now wind up my speech. The hon. Gentleman can make a speech later.

We must take people with us. We must get people to understand the need for a healthy diet, we must get people to understand the risks that many of us are currently taking with our diets and, most of all, we must get people to understand the future risks to their children. As I have said, a sugar tax is one of the things that we need to have, but the Government need to go much further and introduce a proper, co-ordinated national strategy to ensure that, in future, our people are healthier than they are now.

**Fabian Hamilton (in the Chair):** Owing to the number of Members who have requested to speak, I may have to impose a time limit on Back-Bench speeches after the Chair of the Health Committee has spoken.

4.56 pm

**Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con):** I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones), Jamie Oliver and Sustain for giving us an opportunity to discuss the issue raised by the petition. I also thank all the members of the Health Committee and the Committee team, particularly Huw Yardley and Laura Daniels, for their contribution to today’s report, “Childhood obesity—brave and bold action”. Brave and bold action is what we need.

The first question is: how important is this issue? The answer is starkly set out in the first few pages of our report. There is a graph showing that a quarter of children leave primary school not just overweight but obese, and that an enormous and entirely unacceptable health inequality gap is opening up, and getting ever wider, between the most advantaged and the disadvantaged children in our society. Overall, a third of children are either obese or overweight by the time they leave school, which has enormous implications for them as individuals—it will blight their future life chances, and it exposes them to bullying when they are at school—and for the NHS.

As we heard, the estimated cost of obesity to the NHS is £5.1 billion. Obesity is one of the major contributing factors to developing type 2 diabetes. Diabetes now accounts for 9% of the entire NHS budget. If we are looking to make the NHS live within its means by preventing illness, we have to do something about childhood obesity. Most of all, we need to do it for the sake of the children. We need to be clear that no single measure will be the answer. We need a package of measures, and we have considered the issues in our report.

The Committee did not focus on the role of exercise in our report, primarily because we looked into physical activity and health just before the last election and we



wanted to endorse the findings of that report. The message is clear: whatever someone's weight or age, exercise is enormously beneficial, but we must not be distracted into thinking that increasing exercise alone will be the answer to childhood obesity. We often hear that view from industry—that all we need is a bit more education and a bit more exercise—but we will be disappointed if we go down that route. Of course those things are important, but ultimately, unless we address the food environment in which we live, we will not make a meaningful difference to childhood obesity. Yes, let us put exercise and education firmly within the obesity strategy—I am sure that the Minister will do just that—but we need to go further.

We made recommendations in a number of areas, for example on promotions. We considered marketing and the pervasive advertising to which children are now exposed wherever they go. We considered the role of reformulation and of clearer labelling, endorsing the powerful point made about teaspoon labelling in particular. We considered improving information about food and education in schools, and school food standards. We also touched on the powerful role that local authorities can play and how we can support that.

However, as I said, we also considered whether we should introduce a sugary drinks tax, and that is what I will discuss in this debate, because the Government have indicated that they will not take action in that area. I would like to make the case to the Minister for why we felt that that should be an important part of an overall strategy.

**Mark Pawsey** *rose—*

**Mark Field** *rose—*

**Dr Wollaston:** In tandem! I am spoiled for choice.

**Mark Pawsey:** Does my hon. Friend acknowledge that there is already a tax on sugary drinks, in that VAT is levied on them at 20%?

**Dr Wollaston:** Of course, but let me be clear that the point of a sugary drinks tax is to introduce a price differential between the full-sugar product and alternatives, which would then be cheaper. We know that we can nudge people into making healthier choices with a differential. That differential would have to be 10% at a minimum; in our report, we recommend 20%. The beauty of levying such a tax on sugary drinks is that there will always be an equivalent product that is not packed full of sugar. Let me be clear that a relatively small bottle of sugary drink can contain 14 teaspoons of sugar. That is more than twice the recommended daily allowance.

To those who say that such a tax is regressive and would hit the poor, I say: look at who is already hit by the problem. The burden of childhood obesity falls on the poorest children in our community. We know from the experience in Mexico that a 10% levy on sugary drinks has led to a 6% reduction in consumption. Perhaps more importantly, it has led to a 9% reduction in consumption among the heaviest users. That is the point. The heaviest users are not being denied a product that they enjoy; they are switching to a non-sugary alternative.

**Mark Field:** Does my hon. Friend recognise that one concern that some of us have about a tax on sugary drinks is that although it seems an attractive idea as a one-off, it would set a precedent? There would then be moves to outlaw discounting, impose portion sizes and implement similar rules. *[Interruption.]* Many of us believe in the idea of freedom and the responsibility of the consumer, and do not like the idea of the Government imposing that sort of change.

**Dr Wollaston:** In an ideal world, I agree, it would be nice not to have to do any of that, but I return to the point about whether the Government also have a responsibility for the health of the nation's children. Should the Government step back? Should any of us feel that it is acceptable to condemn one in four—a quarter—of the most disadvantaged children in Britain to a lifetime of ill health? If we can do something simply to nudge people a different way, should we not consider the possibilities, and ask how different those children's life chances could be? As I said, such a tax would not be regressive because there is always an easier, untaxed alternative. We are talking not about telling people that they cannot have a product that they enjoy but about nudging them to choose a healthier one.

There is an interesting phenomenon whereby education, for example, is sometimes taken up by the people in society who are already healthier, which can inadvertently end up widening the health inequality gap. We should target measures to help those who are suffering the most harm. As for this being regressive, look at who is suffering the most harm. Is my right hon. Friend happy with the situation as it stands?

**John Glen:** Does not that point also suggest that the distribution of education interventions is not being focused in the right way? The Government could do significantly more to improve support, advice and education to allow that group of people who consume too much to make informed choices before going down the route of a tax.

**Dr Wollaston:** I ask my hon. Friend to look later in our report, where we set out some of the evidence on delivering education and advice. I am afraid that it does not provide the solution that he imagines it will, but I encourage him to read the report. I wish education alone could solve the problem, but it will not, and it tends to be short-lived. The scale of the problem demands our attention.

A tax would not be regressive because there would always be an alternative. No one is thinking of introducing a sugar tax of the type that sometimes people imagine when they hear "sugar tax", which is one that would apply to the bag of sugar that they buy off the shelf or to biscuits, cakes and sweets. We are not suggesting that, because it is difficult to reformulate those products as entirely sugar-free alternatives. We are considering only products with an easy alternative. Why did we choose sugary drinks? Look at the data in our report, particularly on teenagers' diets. A third of their entire sugar intake comes from sugar-sweetened drinks. In other words, there is an easy win here, through which we can help to take calories out of children's diets, but no one is suggesting that that is the entire answer.

**Maggie Throup** (Erewash) (Con): Sugary drinks are not just about obesity; dental decay is also an important issue, and it affects self-esteem.

**Dr Wollaston:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. In our report, we highlight that the single biggest cause of admission to hospital for five to nine-year-olds is the need to have rotten teeth removed. Are any of us happy with that situation? It is absolutely woeful that we are not doing more to tackle it.

As I said, the primary purpose of the tax is not to be a pointlessly punitive measure; it is to nudge people towards healthier choices. However, if the Government went down that route, I think it would be more acceptable to the public if every penny from the levy was directed to helping the most disadvantaged children, who suffer the most harm. That would also answer the point about whether the tax is regressive. We must be able to demonstrate what can be achieved with it. At a time when public health budgets are being squeezed and we are possibly looking at a 3.9% reduction in the public health grant, we must not cut back on the very measures that could make the greatest long-term difference.

**Emma Reynolds:** Does the hon. Lady agree that efforts to improve the education of parents tend to reach middle-class parents, not working-class ones, nor the parents of deprived children, whom we really need to reach? A tax on sugary drinks would send out a clear signal to those parents that they are doing their children harm by buying too many of these products for their children.

**Dr Wollaston:** Yes. As I pointed out, we could end up inadvertently widening health inequalities. The hon. Lady is absolutely right that a tax would send a clear message—right in front of people, on the shelf—that certain products are cheaper because they are not as harmful. That is the clear beauty of it.

I ask Members to consider what could be achieved with such a levy. If it might raise between £300 million and even £1 billion a year, the possibilities are extraordinary in terms of what we could do to improve the health and wellbeing of the nation's children. We should not miss that opportunity. I hope that the Government will accept all the points and concerns raised by hon. Members and reconsider their policy, giving serious consideration to how much could be achieved for the benefit of our nation's children and their health.

**Geraint Davies:** I support a sugar tax. In Mexico, the average person has half a litre of Coke every day. Did the hon. Lady consider the possibility of a tax on sugar as an input into other products? After all, if I was making Hobnobs and the tax was at 10%, and 50% of a Hobnob was sugar, I would only have to make a slight change to the price, the formulation, or the number of biscuits. Would it not be better instead to have a tax on all sugar inputs, to give the right incentives to both consumers and producers?

**Dr Wollaston:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but the point is that we wanted to respond to the issue about whether a sugar tax is regressive. It is much more challenging to use a direct replacement for the sugar, which would mean zero sugar for those kinds of products. That was partly why we took that view.

However, the approach that we recommend for the kind of products that the hon. Gentleman has mentioned is one of reformulation. During the last decade, there has been a successful programme of reformulating salt within our processed foods, but such a change takes time, because we have to adjust the nation's palate gradually. Yes, we can make bigger step changes if we replace part of the sugar in one go, but there is sometimes something about the chemistry of sugar within cookery that means a sugar substitute does not do the same job. We wanted a tax where a sugar substitute did the same job as sugar, in effect.

I am confident that reformulation will be part of the Government's response, because there is clear evidence that it works. Having said that, we know that it works better when there is some teeth to it, so I urge the Minister to go further than the responsibility deal and have something with real teeth. Things worked better when we had the Food Standards Agency and a bit of a stick in the background to make such changes happen, and industry wants a level playing field.

**Mark Field:** It is only fair that we give some credit to the industry, as my hon. Friend has done, particularly for the changes that have been made in relation to salt products. However, it seems to me somewhat insidious that, as we heard in an earlier contribution, the financial interests are being questioned, as though health professionals, who are often well funded by public funding, did not have a financial interest in this particular debate, as well as—[*Interruption.*]

**Fabian Hamilton (in the Chair):** Order.

**Mark Field:** A significant number of health charities also have a big financial interest in this debate, and it is right that that interest should be balanced against those with clear financial interests in the industry.

**Fabian Hamilton (in the Chair):** Order.

**Dr Wollaston:** I thank my right hon. Friend, and I should say for the record that I have no financial interest in any of this whatsoever. However, he is right that the industry has a role to play, and there is no point just beating industry over the head, because we would like to bring it with us. I was rather encouraged to see that, during our inquiry, the British Retail Consortium was very helpful in a lot of what it said, but it told us that it would like a level playing field. A very important strand of our recommendations was around price promotions and the kind of deep discounting that goes on in relation to the most unhealthy junk food and drink. It is very difficult if only one section of industry takes action on discounting. An extraordinary point that came out in our inquiry was that 40% of all the food and drink that we have in our homes tends to come through very deep discounted routes, and discounting is absolutely key to retailers' marketing strategy in the retail environment, so we need a level playing field as far as industry is concerned.

**Mark Pawsey** *rose*—

**Dr Wollaston:** I can feel another point coming on here.

**Mark Pawsey:** I declare an interest, because I have a Britvic plant in my constituency. My hon. Friend is talking about the industry. Does she accept that the industry has done a great deal to promote low-calorie variants of its products and to reduce the calorie content of the full-strength products?

**Dr Wollaston:** I am sure that will be part of it, but as I have said, I am not here to beat industry over the head. I want to bring industry with us. I celebrate what it has done, but it needs to go further. What we heard on our Committee was that industry needs a level playing field, and that a bit of regulation helps, because then everybody goes together. For example, take the chicanes of sugar that we have at checkout aisles, and the fact that we are being flogged a kilogram of chocolate when we go to buy a newspaper. With those types of things, we need a level playing field, so that we do not have any industry going down that route.

My view is not that we should not have discount promotions; we need those discounts and promotions to happen for healthier foods. The argument is often made that we will hit people in their wallets if we take these promotions away, but what we want is for people to be able to afford healthier, quality food. I would love that type of food to be the focus of deep discounting and promotions.

We then come on to the issue of clearer labelling. Jamie Oliver, in his presentation to us, made a compelling case about labelling. Let us put the number of teaspoons of sugar on drinks. This morning, I was trying to look at drinks labels, and I found them confusing. We need clear information that says whether the product contains 12, 13, or six teaspoons of sugar. To answer the point that my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mark Field) made about industry, it helps industry if people can clearly see that companies have made an effort to make a lower-sugar product. Let us allow that within clear labelling.

Let me come on to improved education. I would love to see more education about food in school, including proper cookery lessons, and for schools to have the resources to be able to do so much more in that regard. That is where I see one of the benefits of this levy going; it could go to support those kinds of lessons, not only in schools but in the wider community, and school sport. All those things are important. If we are to have school food standards, they should apply to all schools. Do we not care about every child in school?

**Geraint Davies:** The hon. Lady will know that I put forward a sugar Bill supporting sugar being denominated in spoonfuls. Does she accept that if there were two pasta sauces that were clearly labelled—one with six teaspoonfuls and one with three—there would clearly be an incentive for consumers to pick the lower-sugar one and that manufacturers would compete to get sugar content down, rather than up, in order to get people to buy their products?

**Dr Wollaston:** I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman. We have seen that where companies want products to be marketed as “healthier”, there is an incentive for them to reformulate, although we need honesty about that; sometimes, products can be marketed as “healthy” because they are low-fat, when they are packed full of sugar. We need to be clear about that.

Also, look at advertising: some products are allowed to be marketed to children, including breakfast cereals whose contents are 22.5% sugar; that was the rather shocking evidence that we heard. We need clearer guidance as to what constitutes a “healthy” product.

On that point about advertising, we felt that there was a clear case to have the watershed of 9 pm apply, so that we do not see junk food being marketed to children when they are watching very popular programmes. We were also very concerned about the pervasive nature of advergames on the internet: children think they are playing a game but, in fact, the games are the product of marketing companies, and the children are being sold particular items.

We are absolutely clear that all these things are very important and, as I said at the beginning, there is no one single piece of the jigsaw that will complete the picture. Indeed, the more pieces of the jigsaw that are put in place, the more effective a strategy there will be around childhood obesity.

I return to the point I made at the start: this issue matters and we cannot continue as we are. Also, although we did not go into this in great depth in our report, I urge the Minister to consider what interventions can be put in place for those children who are already affected by obesity. We were very supportive of the child measurement programme, but we were told by local authorities that funds are tight. As for extending the programme to bring in children from earlier years and pick them up before they get to primary school and run into difficulties, authorities do not have the resources to both put in place another year of monitoring and do what we need to in order to help those children who are already affected by obesity. Resources matter. I again urge the Minister, when she discusses this issue with colleagues, to consider what we can achieve, because we should not take the view that that nothing can be done about childhood obesity. We can do extraordinary good for the health of our children, and I really hope that when the Government bring forward their obesity strategy, they will be bold and brave, and recognise the urgency of this health emergency.

5.19 pm

**Paul Flynn** (Newport West) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to speak in this debate and to follow the two marvellous opening speeches. It is a shame that the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mark Field) has now gone after intervening so often—I think he intervened seven times—and then complaining that there was no debate. Now he has deserted us to spend more time with his prejudices.

This is a debate of great importance. I will not go into detail about what generation I was part of, but there were certainly no sugary drinks when I was a child. There was a lot of water—we had that in abundance—but, being a child of the war, I had the benefit of a system of rationing whereby the amount of food was carefully controlled. We were probably the healthiest generation there has ever been, because we were quite rightly denied the damaging drinks that children often have now.

I want to make just one point, which is about who comes first in the Government’s thinking. Where does public opinion come? Where does the health of children come? We all know the misery that is felt by overweight children, and how they suffer mockery at school. It is



[Paul Flynn]

extremely damaging for them. There is no question but that we have to do all we can to avoid obesity as far as possible. We can do something about it, but a number of decisions taken by the Government have been extremely worrying, and one of them is this—turning down the idea of a sugar tax.

Recently we had a debate in the House on a sensible Bill, which was supported by the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), a Scottish National party Member. She is a breast cancer surgeon, and she made a splendid, well-informed speech in support of the Off-patent Drugs Bill, which would have been greatly beneficial to people in need of drugs, as it would have made them cheaper, and also to the health service. Members of all parties spoke in the debate, but the only voice for the party of Government was the Minister's, and we know that the pharmaceutical industry—big pharma—has the Government in a throat hold. It is big pharma that decides what happens.

I believe it is the same with “big sugar”—that the Government are excessively influenced by the commercial interests of the sugar industry. They are also influenced by other industries—the alcohol industry is very powerful. We recall that at the time of the 2010 election there was an impassioned plea by the future Prime Minister. He said he knew what the next scandal in Britain was going to be: it was going to be a lobbying scandal. He knew about lobbying, of course, because he was a lobbyist himself. He knew about the influence of lobbyists—the odd word here, the invitation to a reception there, getting someone on side by inviting them to a seminar in the Alps, or in Bermuda. That is the way they work. Are the Government listening to the financial concerns of the greedy lobbyists, or to the pleas for a more rational, healthy policy?

**John Glen:** Would the hon. Gentleman like to reflect on the comment made earlier, about the record of his party in government in Wales? If the sugar tax is such a priority, why has there not been more progress in Wales?

**Paul Flynn:** We have had a—[*Interruption.*] Exactly, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) for saying so. I respect my hon. Friend. We had a little exchange in Welsh about who made the remark in question. I find the story most unlikely, and I would like to check on it.

The Conservative Government have abused their position repeatedly to attack the achievements of the health service in Wales. In one week, the *Daily Mail* had the Welsh health service as its No. 1 story for four days running. There is no way, by news standards or by the value of the stories, that that was justified. I am proud of the achievements of the health service in Wales, and I am glad that today is the day when the presumed organ consent system begins. Wales is leading Britain on that matter, and there is much other pioneering work being done by the Labour party and the Labour Government in Wales.

Unfortunately, the Tory Government like to use the Welsh health service as a stick with which to beat the Labour party. That is irresponsible and dangerous, because one of the most important things is that people should have faith in their own health service. It is an

important part of therapy and confidence: when people go into hospital, they are of course nervous and concerned, and when they read these lying stories about political—

**Fabian Hamilton (in the Chair):** Order. May I remind the hon. Gentleman that the subject of the debate is a tax on sugar and sugary drinks?

**Paul Flynn:** Yes, Sir. Thank you, Mr Chairman. I was unfortunately—inadvertently—diverted from the point involved, but I shall return to it.

**Geraint Davies:** Is my hon. Friend aware that last night on Welsh television the Welsh Minister for Health and Social Services, Mark Drakeford, said that there should be much greater control over the advertising of sugary drinks to children until after 9 pm? The Minister would, I am sure, welcome the devolved power that is implicitly being called for to be able to tax sugar in Wales and do the other things we are talking about.

**Paul Flynn:** I did see the programme; it was the Welsh segment of the “Politics Show”. That is why I find the account-giving of the view in Wales to be not plausible—Mark Drakeford is a splendid Health Minister.

Last year, a *Daily Mail* investigation revealed that the food industry lobby had been given unprecedented access to the Government. The Prime Minister hosted Coca-Cola, Mars, Nestlé, McDonald's, Pepsi, Nando's and Tesco. They were all welcomed to No. 10 Downing Street, and given big hugs no doubt—they are great pals. Those are the ones the Government are listening to, not the needs and the health of young children.

**Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con):** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Paul Flynn:** I will, but I am taking rather a long time.

**Julian Knight:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Will he recognise that all the companies he just mentioned are major employers in this country and that it is perfectly right for Ministers, the Prime Minister and other Members of Parliament to meet with those companies so that they can put forward their views?

**Paul Flynn:** I am sure that there was a great outcry from the municipal and general torturers union in the South American countries when those countries were taken over by democratic states and the crafts of back-breaking and the pulling-out of fingernails were no longer in demand and people lost their jobs. But there was a benefit involved, and we cannot give this excuse about people being in employment.

**Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con):** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Paul Flynn:** I will not give way again; I am taking up other people's time.

We cannot use the excuse of jobs at all costs. Of course jobs are important, but keeping them is not justified when we see the result of such action on the health of the nation.

It is fascinating to look at Government bodies because we recently found that the World Health Organisation is in trouble because so many members of its committees are in the pay of pharmaceutical companies—you might declare me out of order, Mr Hamilton, but I hope I am not going too far off topic. The flu pandemic that never was in 2009 was because the organisation sold a huge amount of pharmaceutical products—a billion in this country—while in Poland, where antivirals cost 7 zloty, they had no antivirals and they had half the number of flu deaths that we had.

**Steve Double** *rose*—

**Paul Flynn:** I will give way, but for the last time.

**Steve Double:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I am reflecting on his comments about the Government and his proposition that they are in bed with big business in the sugar industry. Would he say, then, that the previous Labour Government did not introduce a sugar tax in 13 years for the very same reason?

**Paul Flynn:** The hon. Gentleman has not been here long. I have been here for 28 years, and I think he will find that the previous Labour Government would not say that they enjoyed my entire approval for the entire time. I can assure him that I am critical of all Governments. They all have their imperfections, but none quite as many as the present one.

If we look at the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition, five of its eight members receive funding from large confectionary companies. I am sure they are not influenced in any way by that, but it is interesting that Professor Ian Macdonald receives money from Unilever—the world's biggest ice cream maker—Coca-Cola and Mars. Also, Professor Sanders, a Government scientist working on diet, sugar and heart disease, was given £4.5 million towards his research by Tate and Lyle. I am sure that does not affect his scientific judgment and impartiality in any way, but I question whether such behaviour is wise, because unkind people might conclude that the one who pays the piper calls the tune. We see these revelations and then find that the working group recommends that people slash their daily sugar intake, but not by a large amount.

In conclusion, we are in a dangerous position in Parliament because many of us, I think, felt upset when the Off-patent Drugs Bill did not progress. There is a universal view coming both from the public—we see the numbers of concerned people who signed the petition—and from every party that spoke in the House during that debate. We are here today thanks to the Petitions Committee, but who is speaking against the sugar business? Big sugar has its hand on the throat of the Government and it is big sugar that determines policy.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Fabian Hamilton (in the Chair):** Order. I am hopeful that it will not be necessary to impose a time limit on Back-Bench speeches, but that will be the case only if Members exercise restraint and endeavour to keep their speeches to around 10 minutes.

5.30 pm

**Maggie Throup** (Erewash) (Con): I rise to outline why changing our habits when it comes to sugar in our diet is so vital. It is not just the fact that high sugar intake is

likely to result in obesity; what is important is the likely impact of obesity on our health. Those who are obese have a higher risk of heart attack or stroke, of cancer, of suffering from tooth decay and of developing type 2 diabetes. The long-term consequences of those diseases are what we need to worry about. For example, too many people are diagnosed with type 2 diabetes when it is too late—when their condition has already caused damage to their kidneys, their heart, their eyes and their blood circulation, which can lead to amputation. Those things have a life-changing and life-limiting impact on a diabetic patient. A secondary consideration is the huge cost to the NHS and social services. It is estimated that type 2 diabetes costs the NHS some £9 billion a year, which is 9% of its budget, as my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) mentioned. More devastating is the effect on the sufferer's everyday life, and that is what leads me to believe that we need to do whatever is in our power to lower the incidence of obesity.

Those are the reasons why I was delighted when the Health Committee decided to hold its first inquiry of the Session on the subject of childhood obesity, and why I agreed to reform the all-party group on adult and childhood obesity, with its first meeting planned for the new year. During the Select Committee's inquiry, we heard some compelling evidence calling for brave and bold action on obesity. I am sure that the majority of Members here today will have read the report. A sugary drinks tax is just one of the measures that we highlighted.

A few months ago I was against a sugary drinks tax, because I am against extra taxation, but the compelling evidence that we heard changed my mind. As a nation we are facing a massive obesity problem, and we need to be bold and brave in what we do as a result. I was originally against the tax also because I believe in choice, but consumers will still have choice. They will be able to choose between buying a sugary drink and paying the levy, and buying a drink with artificial sweeteners and not paying the levy.

The evidence that we heard dealt with both reasons why I was against a tax. According to the report by the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition, "Carbohydrates and Health", which was published in July, soft drinks as a single source represent 30% of added sugar intake for 11 to 18-year-olds. That is a huge amount. For four to 10-year-olds, soft drinks make up 16% of added sugar intake. Such data cannot be ignored or swept under the carpet. A sugary drinks tax would surely serve to change habits, reduce sugar intake and therefore play a part in reducing obesity. That would have a huge long-term impact on health.

**Julian Knight:** My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. I do not wish to be accused of being in the pay of "Big Sugar", which sounds vaguely like a '70s wrestler, but does she agree that public awareness and better labelling of products are more important than anything to do with a sugar tax? Through them we can help to reduce sugar intake and change attitudes.

**Maggie Throup:** I think the wrestler that my hon. Friend is referring to is called "Sugar Daddy", not "Big Sugar". The Health Committee's report said that it is not one measure that will make a difference but a whole range of measures, and education is one of those measures. I agree with him on that, for sure.

[Maggie Throup]

Some manufacturers are already reformulating their sugary drinks and their food items. I hope that the measures laid out in the Health Committee's report and other recent reports will speed up the process for every food manufacturer. We want to have that nudge effect. As our report clearly states, the tax should not be for ever. It is a speedy response to a growing problem, and it can work as other measures kick in. When the time is right, the tax can then be dropped. It is vital that the money raised through such a tax is ring-fenced to tackle the obesity crisis in children.

**Mark Pawsey:** Is there evidence that if price is increased, consumption will reduce? Was that part of the evidence that the Select Committee took?

**Maggie Throup:** I recommend that my hon. Friend reads the report. The evidence from other countries is that the implementation of a sugary drinks tax has reduced consumption considerably. It is important that we ring-fence the money from such a tax for education. As my hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns) said, education is extremely important. My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes, who chairs the Health Committee, also made that point. The money should not go into the general Treasury pot of money.

Just because we are focusing on sugary drinks in this debate, that does not mean that they are all we need to consider. In fact, if a sugary drinks tax was the only measure implemented, it would not be effective in tackling obesity and its long-term consequences, because sugar is not the only cause of obesity. Fats and other carbohydrates also play their part, as do lifestyles.

We have already talked about exercise. I recommend the Sky Ride project to everyone. It is about getting more people on bikes and caters for anyone, from the men in Lycra who want to cycle 100 miles a day to families. If we can get children on their bikes, getting more exercise, we can start to tackle the obesity problem in a fun way, which is a good way of doing it.

**Julian Knight:** My hon. Friend mentions cycling, and I concur; it is fantastic exercise, and its health benefits mean that regular cyclists live many years longer. Does she agree that one area we can improve is competitive sport in schools? Having more of that would bring about better health outcomes and better health among our young people.

**Maggie Throup:** I completely agree. I always enjoyed my competitive sports at school. I was a sprinter, and I played netball and rounders.

**Paul Flynn:** Wrestling?

**Maggie Throup:** Not wrestling, no.

The issue is partly about exercise, but it is also about food. There is more reliance on ready meals, takeaway meals and meals consumed in restaurants than ever there was in the past 30 years. However delicious the food is, as consumers we do not have control over what goes into it. The hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) talked about her domestic science lessons. I had a term and a half of those lessons, and I still use

my pastry recipe to make my mince pies at Christmas. I know they have sugar in them, but at least I know what is going into them. The recipe book that I created in my domestic science lessons is well thumbed indeed.

We need to tackle every cause of obesity: price promotions; the deep discounting we have heard about; reformulations; the locations of takeaways, which seem to crop up near schools; marketing and advertising; and celebrity endorsements. We need to have clear and understandable labelling. I commend the idea of having the number of spoons of sugar on packaging. It is straightforward, simple and anyone can understand it. We also need more information from takeaway outlets and restaurants as to what we are eating. The list goes on and on.

Obesity is a problem that is not going away. As politicians, we can no longer ignore it. As the Health Committee's report states, we need to take brave and bold action.

5.39 pm

**Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hamilton, and a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) and four outstanding speeches. I could easily say I agree with everything I have heard and sit down, but this would not be Parliament if we said so few words, so I will add a couple of words.

Normally, I think Home Affairs Committee reports are stunning. However, the report that the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) has published today is an absolutely stunning report, which I hope will be a turning point in how the public and the Government look at the issue. I congratulate her and the members of her Committee on the work that they have done.

I also want to congratulate Jamie Oliver on the work that he has done and this amazing petition, which has managed to attract 151,782 signatures. This debate is an example of how Parliament can reflect the needs and wishes of the public. It was opened eloquently by my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones), with whom I spend many hours in the Tea Room, where we discuss food and other things of that kind. She spoke well, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn).

I want to speak about various issues. I declare my interest as a type 2 diabetic. Mr Hamilton, you are also a type 2 diabetic, but you are better at taking the advice of the hon. Member for Erewash than I have been. She encourages people to cycle, and you went on a cycle ride from Leeds to Paris in support of diabetes; I walk to the tube. It is very bad. I keep saying to my wife that I want to buy an electric bicycle, and she keeps saying that I will never use it, but I use you as an example, Mr Hamilton—a paragon of what we should all follow.

**Maggie Throup:** Sky Ride is open to anybody of any age. I encourage the right hon. Gentleman to find his local Sky Ride starting point, buy a bike and go and enjoy it.

**Keith Vaz:** I will, but for me it will not be Sky Ride; it will probably be Skyfall. However, I will look up what the hon. Lady has suggested.



On the point made by hon. Members about Mexico, I met the Mexican ambassador and his amazing dog, Pepe, on Thursday last week at the Mexican embassy. The ambassador is also a diabetes campaigner, and he told me that the example of Mexico is a good one. The chair of the Health Committee, the hon. Member for Totnes, gave us the figures: consumption is down in Mexico, and the price differential provides an important nudge. The ambassador told me that Mexico is the biggest consumer of Coca-Cola in the world. That is why Mexico introduced the sugar tax, which is working, and it is important that our Government consider that tax.

However, we need to move further. I gave up sugar when my local GP diagnosed me with type 2 diabetes on an awareness day. He said, "Come along and be tested." I was tested and he rang me the next day and said, "The good news is you're on the front page of the *Leicester Mercury*, but the bad news is you've got type 2 diabetes." I did not really know what it was, but I gave up sugar, which is a killer, immediately.

Whenever we talk about the sugar industry, it gets very worked up. I think we should go further and have a no sugar day. The last time I questioned the Prime Minister on the subject, about the time of World Diabetes Day last year, I suggested that the consumption of sugar should be stopped in No. 10 just for one day. Imagine if the Administration Committee, or the commissioners of this House, decided that just for one day, perhaps World Diabetes Day, there would be no sugar available in the Tea Room. When you got to the counter—I know you would resist it, Mr Hamilton—there would be no Club biscuits, no Jaffa Cakes, no Victoria sponge; just fruit and other types of food we can consume without increasing our sugar intake. There are a lot of examples of that happening. We need to take a proper course of action, apart from simply putting up taxes.

I commend the companies that have tried to do something about the issue. I went to a Waitrose store in Wolverhampton to look at what the manager had done. I am sorry, I did not tell my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) about that—I was driving past and I had no time to text. The manager had taken all the no-sugar products and put them in a kiosk in the middle of the store. Rather than being shoved on the last possible shelf, they were in one kiosk with the words "no sugar", so all the no-sugar stock was in one place. It is so much better when companies encourage their consumers to be responsible.

My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North mentioned the responsibility deal, but I think it has failed. Voluntary codes do not work. The Government were right to introduce the deal under the previous Secretary of State for Health, but unfortunately it has not made much difference. We should get the companies in—perhaps invite them to No. 10—and get them round the table with the Health Secretary and tell them that they need to do much more to control the amount of sugar in their products.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West on introducing his ten-minute rule Bill on labelling. On the point made by various hon. and right hon. Members—and Mr Jamie Oliver—if we simply put the number of teaspoons of sugar on the front of a product, that will be sufficient to allow consumers to make a proper choice. Rather than having tiny lettering on

the back of a product, which we do not always see. I would also like to see more products with the words "suitable for diabetics" on them. To give Marks & Spencer—and corporate Britain—credit, it has no-sugar chocolate. It tastes pretty awful compared with real chocolate, but at least it is there, and when you are desperate, you can reach for the drawer that says "no sugar".

I want to ask those who produce sugary drinks to be a little less touchy and more touchy-feely. I was recently asked whether I supported the arrival of the Coca-Cola van in Leicester. I said I was against it because it would encourage young people to drink more Coca-Cola, which has seven teaspoons of sugar in each can, and there was a huge outcry. When I went to a football match two weeks ago at the King Power stadium—before Jamie Vardy scored his 11th goal—a man came up to me and said, "You are like the Grinch. You have ruined our Christmas, because you do not want the Coca-Cola van to come." I thought Christmas was about the birth of Christ and the message of Christianity, but I now realise it is about not depriving people of their beloved Coca-Cola van, which they can go and worship on 17 December in Leicester.

We then discovered, thanks to the *Mirror* and the *Daily Mail*, that the Coca-Cola van is visiting some of the most obese cities in the country. It actually visits Coca-Cola's best consumers. I had a very nice letter from Coca-Cola inviting me to come and meet the chairman in Atlanta, Georgia—I think I will go to the local headquarters in Reading—and I said, "All you have to do is put on the van the words 'no-sugar Coca-Cola', 'Diet Coca-Cola' or 'Coca-Cola Lite', and you can help change the habits of consumers." That needs to be done, and I have an open invitation to Mr Oliver to come to Leicester on 17 December, not in an anti-Coca-Cola van, but in a van from which he can give out his good food and perhaps water instead of Coca-Cola. Perhaps he can follow the van around the country making sure we have good products given to young people.

The Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Battersea (Jane Ellison), the Minister with responsibility for diabetes, must feel a little alone given all the speeches that we have heard so far. I think she is committed to doing a great deal of work on diabetes. I had the pleasure of being with her in Asda on World Diabetes Day—not shopping, but raising awareness of diabetes in her constituency—along with Silver Star, a charity that I founded a few years ago. However, I think the Government as a whole are reluctant to take on the big companies. I hope that they will be bold in order to save lives and help the health of our nation, and that they will take an initiative that will encourage Health Ministers and Governments all over the world to do the same.

5.49 pm

**Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hamilton. I, too, speak as a member of the Petitions Committee, which granted this debate, and I am delighted to do so. I congratulate the Health Committee on its report. I must confess to not having read it all since I got my hands on it today, but I have certainly read the part about the sugar tax, which I found very helpful and good.

[*Steve Double*]

I speak as a Conservative who is a passionate believer in keeping taxes as low as possible; I am reluctant to support the introduction of any new taxes. I also speak as a 17 and a half stone—on a good day—hulk of Cornish indulgence. Those present can tell from my physique that I enjoy the good things in life, including the food we eat and the liquids we drink. I am passionately opposed to the nanny state and to the Government interfering in people's lives any more than they absolutely need to, particularly in an area that often worries me: the Government undermining or usurping the role of parents in their children's lives.

Given that I have said those three things, Members might be surprised to learn that I support the introduction of a sugar tax. Shortly after I was elected in May, I was approached indirectly by Jamie Oliver. I am privileged to have his restaurant, Fifteen Cornwall, in my constituency. The restaurant does incredible work by providing not only excellent food but apprenticeships for some of the most disadvantaged young people in Cornwall. It also engages with the wider community to promote good, healthy food throughout Cornwall.

Fifteen Cornwall approached me to ask whether I would support the campaign to introduce a sugar tax. I have to say that my initial reaction was less than enthusiastic, for the reasons I have outlined. It was not my natural inclination to say, "Yes, that's a really great idea and I'm 100% behind it," but having been approached, I went away and looked at the issue carefully. As I have looked at the evidence and examined the issue more deeply, I have shifted my position, despite my initial and natural inclination not to support such a tax. The reason is quite simple: it is clear to me that we have an immediate and growing childhood obesity crisis in our country.

As has already been said, a third of children leave primary school overweight, and a quarter of the most disadvantaged children leave primary school obese. One of the most shocking statistics I have read is that the most frequent reason for children—particularly five-year-olds—having to go to hospital is for tooth extraction because of decay. It is shocking that we accept that in modern Britain. As I have looked into the issue more and more, I have reached the position where I find the evidence compelling: something needs to be done.

It has already been said that a sugar tax on its own is not going to be the silver bullet that solves all our problems, but I am persuaded that it needs to be part of the solution. I do not believe the Government can any longer sit back and say, "This is a matter of personal choice," or, "This is just down to parents," because that is clearly not working. Something needs to be done to send the clear message to the country, and indeed the industry, that the current situation is not acceptable and that action must be taken.

Looking back over my lifetime, it is clear that the sugary fizzy drinks market has grown out of all proportion. I remember when I was a seven or eight-year-old and we used to have a weekly delivery of pop to our house. My brothers and sisters and I would look forward to the day when my mother would pick two or three bottles of pop from the delivery van for us to have in the house as a treat. We knew that once we had drunk those two or three bottles—there were five children in our house, so

do not think I drank it all—that was it for the week. Once we had finished our fizzy drinks for the week, they were gone until the van came back the next week. A good thing was that the van used to take away the empty bottles to recycle them—that is another issue altogether with fizzy drinks, but we will not go there today.

Those drinks were very much a treat. Although we looked forward to them, we knew that their availability was limited and controlled. Sadly, those days are gone and fizzy and sugary drinks are now so readily available and so heavily marketed, particularly at children, that a problem has arisen that we have to address. It is a crazy world we live in when a can of pop is cheaper than a bottle of water in most shops. Again, as has already been said, a third of an average child's sugar intake is now derived from sugary drinks. We have to take notice of that.

[*STEVE McCABE in the Chair*]

Addressing this issue has to be a team effort. It is a shame that the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) has left the Chamber, because I felt that the tone of his speech was somewhat unfortunate, and I am not sure that he did the cause much good. I very much believe that there needs to be a team effort. Having spoken to Members, I have discovered that there is an awful lot of cross-party agreement on sugary drinks. We all need to work together to make a compelling case to the Government that they take action.

It is clear that parents have ultimate responsibility for what they allow their children to partake of, but we need to help them and educate society as a whole about the dangers of continuing to consume, and allowing children to continue to consume, sugary drinks at the current level, because it is literally killing our country. We need to enable, educate and help parents more. Some suggestions have been made about labelling, which I believe has an important part to play. People should be able to make an educated decision about what they allow their children to have, rather than having to deal with the current situation, where labelling is incredibly vague.

We have reached the point where the Government have a role to play. They need to send the clear message that the current state of play is not acceptable or right, take some leadership and demonstrate that this issue must be addressed. Of course, we have to work with producers and retailers, and I take on board some of the comments made by other Members. Perhaps the industry does want to resist the imposition of a sugar tax. My view is simple: if it steps up to the plate and starts to take action now, perhaps we will not need to introduce a tax, but in the absence of that—it does not seem to be forthcoming at the moment—the Government should seriously consider taking action and introducing one.

We often talk about investing to save; I see a sugar tax as taxing to save. If we introduced one and used the income from it wisely, we would save the health of our children while also saving the NHS an awful lot of money over the years to come. We have heard that the costs to the taxpayer of the related health issues are measured in many billions of pounds. By introducing a sugary drinks tax and spending the money carefully, we can save money for the taxpayer in the long run.

Quite simply, I am persuaded that a sugary drinks tax would be the right step, and the Government should take the idea very seriously. I came to that position reluctantly, but it is the position I have come to. I ask the Minister and the Government to listen to the voices of many Members from throughout the House and the clear message from the public, who are now waking up to this issue and saying, "Something needs to be done." They should look seriously at whether this tax can be introduced to send the clear message that the current state of play is not acceptable.

5.59 pm

**John Mc Nally** (Falkirk) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for securing this debate. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate on St Andrew's day. Earlier today, I had a plate of cullen skink soup, followed by haggis, neeps and tatties, washed down with a tin of Irn Bru. *[Interruption.]* It was very enjoyable, and it was a delight to come in and smell it. By way of a disclaimer, I should inform hon. Members that my constituency is the birthplace of the wonderful Irn Bru, Scotland's second national drink—I suspect hon. Members have an idea what the first is. To digress a wee bit, I am a supporter of a campaign, led by my constituents Paul Gilligan and David Reid and *The Falkirk Herald*, to reinstate an Irn Bru advertising mural outside the Howgate centre, as we now consider it a piece of social and civic art, such is the popularity of our drink.

I agree an awful lot with the hon. Members for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) and for Warrington North. I am a founder member of Central Rio FC, a football club in my area, and I had the privilege and pleasure of being its first coach. It has grown, and now about 400 to 500 children participate locally. It is a wonderful example of how our community works together. One of the first things that rang alarms in my head is that some of the children who came along would not drink water. Their parents said that they would drink only sugary drinks—Irn Bru, Coca Cola or whatever. We had to overcome that huge problem, so, again, I am delighted that we are having this debate.

**Maggie Throup:** On the point about sugary drinks and sports, does the hon. Gentleman think that a lot of confusion is created by the fact that sports drinks, which are supposedly good for people, are so loaded with sugar that they probably do as much harm as good, when balanced with the exercise that people are doing?

**John Mc Nally:** I could not agree more. That is one of the biggest problems. People drink lots of sugar, which gets them high quickly, but they then come down and go into a never-ending cycle of having to drink it again. It is an extremely worrying state of affairs for everybody, so I totally agree with the hon. Lady.

I believe that raising tax on sugary drinks would be an effective means of reducing childhood obesity. I thank all the MPs here, and I hope they all agree that Jamie Oliver should be applauded for setting up this petition and making use of his profile and that of the charity Sustain. I, for one, echo his concerns about the health and welfare of our future generations, and I share his belief that

"we can shift the dial on the epidemic of childhood obesity."

I thank the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), who is no longer in his place, for his diligent work in pursuing better public health awareness for the people of this country.

It is commonly known that sugar-sweetened drinks are associated with a higher risk of weight gain than similarly calorific solid food. Evidence indicates that there is a link between the habitual excess consumption of sugar, type 2 diabetes, and weight gain. A large study of European adults showed that there is a 22% increase in diabetes incidence associated with the habitual consumption of one daily serving of sugar-sweetened drinks. Sugar-sweetened drinks contribute a significant amount of sugar to children's diets. A reduction in their consumption would, in my view, significantly lower the intake of sugar and therefore reduce obesity and the associated detrimental effects on personal health.

According to statistics released in 2014, 64% of adults in the UK are overweight or obese, which cannot be good for anybody. I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) will talk about that fact later. International comparisons indicate that the UK has above-average levels of overweight and obese adults. The cost of our obese population is not just felt in the increased risk of a range of serious diseases, including type 2 diabetes, hypertension, heart disease and some cancers; there is also an economic cost. It is estimated that obesity costs the NHS up to £600 million in Scotland alone, and the McKinsey Global Institute estimates that the cost to the UK is equivalent to 3% of gross domestic product. The Scottish Government await the outcome of the Cochrane review on that issue.

Worryingly, for the majority of adults, obesity starts in childhood. Evidence shows that being obese in childhood increases the risk of becoming an obese adult. If we do not encourage adults and children to reduce their sugar intake, the economic costs and the cost to the NHS will continue to be a significant burden. Perhaps that is where a bit of libertarian paternalism is needed. As was said earlier, it is possible and legitimate to nudge people.

**John Glen:** Will the hon. Gentleman reflect on the fact that, sadly, a massive proportion of those who are obese are the poorest in our society? No Government of any party can ignore that fact. The poorest do not have a free choice when they buy sugary items.

**John Mc Nally:** The hon. Gentleman is right. Once again, it is the poorest who do not know how to make such choices. I hope to come on to that point later.

Although I welcome the proposal to increase tax on sugary drinks and agree with the rationale behind it, I am slightly cautious about it, simply because the body of evidence on this subject does not robustly demonstrate the effect it would have in isolation on rates of obesity and type 2 diabetes. I feel strongly that a raft of measures should be developed to reduce sugar intake and obesity. Taxation of this kind is an important tool in shifting the population's dietary patterns. Educational messages alone simply will not achieve the reduction that we need, so fiscal and reformulation measures need to be introduced. We MPs can help to nudge that decision. We should improve the decision-making process to allow the choosers whom the hon. Gentleman mentioned to make better choices for their own welfare.



[John Mc Nally]

In conjunction with a sugar tax, we require legislation on the reformulation of foods to reduce overall calorie intake. If that is not possible, the industry should be compelled to reduce portion sizes—although not of Mars bars. We also need to introduce marketing restrictions on unhealthy foods to restrict the marketing of foods that are high in salt, sugar and fat to children. Restrictions should be applied most stringently to TV and online advertising, as evidence suggests that under-16s are strongly affected by advertising through those mediums.

We must improve our confused labelling system. We should continue to support a consistent front-of-pack labelling system and should extend caloric labelling, such as the traffic-light system, to all food and drink. Arguably, it is most crucial for the Government to invest more heavily in active travel by dedicating a national budget to walking and cycling; I am absolutely with the hon. Member for Warrington North on that.

The obesity epidemic is not going away. If anything, it will get worse for successive generations unless the Government take action. Implementing and evaluating a sugar tax as part of a childhood obesity strategy would be one step towards improving the health of our nation. I urge the Government to take heed of the petition and implement such a tax.

Finally, I holidayed in Cornwall this year, so I appreciate what the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) said about weight—such is the quality of the food in Cornwall.

6.9 pm

**Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for securing this debate. I strongly identify with her comments about being brought up in the north and the change we have seen in children's diets. When I was growing up in Oldham, fizzy drinks were a rarity for our family—the pop van did not come to our house. If we were thirsty, my mother's response was always, "There's plenty of corporation pop," corporation pop being the stuff that comes out of the taps. That was normal in my family, and many people of a certain age will be able to relate to that, but our children's diets have really changed. While I am talking about my mum, it is her 85th birthday tomorrow. She is a living testament to the benefits of a strict diet and lots of corporation pop, and I want to pay tribute to her.

I thank the Select Committee on Health for its report on childhood obesity. I was briefly a member of the Health Committee and enjoyed my time on it; I wish that I could have stayed there. I am looking forward to reading the report properly, and I applaud the Committee for its brave and bold moves.

I respect the opinions of several health bodies that support a sugar tax. I am far more persuaded by the views of the British Medical Association, Diabetes UK and the British Heart Foundation than those of the Food and Drink Federation. There has been some debate as to whether health research has been influenced by such bodies. I am unaware that any money has changed hands, but I am sure that, ethically, health researchers must declare it if they have worked in partnership with charities.

The BMA totally approves of the Government imposing a tax on sugary drinks, specifically to reduce the amount of drinks that people consume. It produced a report called "Food for thought: promoting healthy diets among children and young people", which justifies the tax, noting that

"the strongest evidence of effectiveness of taxation approaches is for sugar-sweetened beverages; that these products are typically high in calories and low in essential vitamins and minerals (often referred to as 'empty calories'); that the intake of added sugars by many children and adults in the UK far exceeds recommended levels; and that a high intake of added sugars is a risk factor for a range of health conditions."

That neatly sums up the argument for considering a sugary drinks tax. As the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) pointed out, most manufacturers will produce a low-sugar alternative to their high-sugar drinks, which shows that they are aware of the problem. Most hon. Members have had access to the same data, so I will not repeat the things that everyone else has said.

The British Heart Foundation fully recognises that we cannot reduce obesity simply through a sugar tax—a point that many Members made—and says:

"a sugar tax alone will not solve the problem of obesity. It needs to be combined with other measures".

I support that. The measures that it suggests include

"a reduction in the amount of sugar added to the foods"

that we buy. That sugar is often hidden. As other hon. Members have suggested, we need to look at convenience foods, because they contain an awful lot of hidden sugar. Someone's first thought when choosing a savoury dish might not be that it is laced with sugar, but they often are, so we need to be careful when buying convenience and microwaveable food. The BHF also wants to restrict "the marketing of unhealthy food and drink products to children and young people both online and on TV."

Tracy Parker, a BHF heart health dietician, says:

"Cutting down on sugary drinks and replacing them with sugar-free options is a simple swap".

That is why I am supporting the e-petition. It is a simple thing that we can do. We would end up not collecting any tax at all if everyone switched to a low-sugar alternative, and I believe that that, rather than penalising poor families through their food bills, is the tax's intention.

We have already heard the statistic that poor diets cause 70,000 premature deaths each year, but it is worth bearing that in mind when discussing our nation's health. Reference has been made to the sugary drinks tax introduced in Mexico, which has been shown to have cut consumption. Following the introduction of the tax on sugar-sweetened drinks, purchases were reduced by 6% in 2014. We need to be aware of the evidence showing that a tax will actually reduce the purchases of sugary drinks.

Diabetes UK also supports a sugar tax for the avoidance of type 2 diabetes, while stating that it needs to be part of a larger package of interventions, including marketing restrictions on unhealthy food, restricting advertising to children, supporting clear labelling and, interestingly, investing more heavily in active travel by dedicating a budget to walking and cycling nationally. My right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) is no longer present, but I am unsure whether that proposal includes electric bikes. I imagine that the intention is that people put in a little more physical effort—but hey, we have to start somewhere.

Today's e-petition was initiated by Jamie Oliver, and many people have paid tribute to his activities in raising awareness of the campaign, which has really caught people's attention. Many Members mentioned the teaspoons-of-sugar labelling system, which has drawn particular attention and which everyone can understand. When someone picks up a bottle and reads, "This half-litre bottle of Coke contains 13 teaspoons of sugar," they can relate more to that than to grams per millilitre. Jamie Oliver has recommended that that labelling system be taken up, and we should really consider it as a simple way of getting people to visualise what they are about to drink or give their children.

Many hon. Members mentioned tooth decay. Unfortunately, tooth decay caused by sugar is the most common reason why children aged five to nine are admitted to hospital. We really need to do something about that. If we do not encourage good dental hygiene in our children's younger years, we are just storing up a load of problems for their teenage and adult years.

I want to wind up by saying that I recently saw a film called "That Sugar Film", which explores the problem of hidden sugars in our food. Among other things, the film highlighted a drink that I had previously never heard of called Mountain Dew, a half-litre bottle of which contains an astounding 17 teaspoons of sugar. The film referred to a condition in America known as "Mountain Dew teeth" and showed a young man of about 20 whose teeth were completely rotten as a result of his Mountain Dew habit. Sadly, now that I am aware of the drink and its lurid green bottle, I have actually seen it for sale in my local supermarkets. We really should be imposing some kind of tax on these high-sugar drinks to hopefully make them far less desirable and affordable. We need a clear, effective, easy-to-understand labelling system, and the teaspoons-of-sugar measurement is the right way to go. As many Members have said, there is no silver bullet for reducing childhood obesity, but the sugar tax would be a start, and I heartily recommend it.

6.19 pm

**Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I am a late contributor to a long debate, so some of what I say will have been touched on, but I hope it is not all déjà vu.

Apparently today is the first day of Sugar Awareness Week, after "black Friday" and "cyber weekend", or whatever—it is all good to know. According to Mick Armstrong, chair of the British Dental Association:

"Britain is addicted to sugar, and inaction can no longer be justified, either morally or financially."

The debate, which to some extent reflects Britain's love affair with sugar, is not the result of an intellectual curiosity, as subjects discussed in this Chamber often are, but arises from a petition. We have heard the figures—150,000 people have signed it—and we see it reflected in the number of people in the Public Gallery today.

One in four children leave primary school clinically obese—the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) said it is one in three—so we have to do something about the ticking health time bomb. The cost to the NHS runs into billions—my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) mentioned £6 billion. Some people argue that the state should not interfere in such things, but it would not be the first time, because it

is something that Governments of both complexions have done before, and as a result we have seen a reduction in the number of adult smokers in this country.

The clamour for action on sugary drinks and the arguments in favour of the funds raised going to tackle public health problems have received not inconsiderable public attention, at a time when health budgets are being squeezed. There is also the weight of expert opinion, not only the much mentioned one-time "naked chef" Jamie Oliver, but the Health Committee, chaired by the hon. Member for Totnes, who spoke movingly and powerfully earlier—she was a doctor first and an MP second—the British Medical Association, the British Heart Foundation, Diabetes UK and the British Dental Association. Hitherto, however, all appeals have fallen on deaf ears in the Government. The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health conducted a poll that revealed that 53% of the public support a tax measure.

Public Health England, in its sugar reduction action plan, states that the recommended proportion of added sugar in people's diets should be 5%, but at the moment it is more like 12% for adults in this country. Added sugar accounts for 14.7% of calorie intake for children and 15.6% for teenagers. I am a mum myself and understand pester power and the attraction of sugary drinks. For under-threes, 27% of added sugar intake comes from soft drinks; for 11 to 18-year-olds, the category that I am a mum of, that figure rises to 40%. Furthermore, it is the 11 to 18-year-olds with the least amount of money who are attracted by cheaper alternatives to drinks such as water. Why is it that in any sweet shop water is more expensive than fizzy drinks?

Sugary drinks give a short fix of energy and have no nutritional value, while at the other end of the process the NHS is treating people for preventable illness. We have heard how most children in this country who go under general anaesthetic are doing so for tooth decay. Many hon. Members have also mentioned the figures for type 2 diabetes; 22,000 people in my constituency live with it, and it is responsible for a death every seven seconds in the G20 member states, which is a higher rate than HIV and malaria combined. At a meeting of the all-party group on diabetes, chaired by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), who is no longer in his place, we heard an impassioned speech from "St Jamie", as one of my constituents called him at the weekend. I believe that in Jamie Oliver's own restaurants there is a 10p levy on fizzy drinks.

On the one hand we have campaign groups and medical professionals, but on the other hand there is the argument about the nanny state. Many hon. Members have said that the solution is severalfold. The food and drink industries need to act more responsibly—they are the main lobbyists against the sugar tax—instead of arguing that any tax would be passed on to consumers and end up being a tax on the poor. They have also warned of sinister factory inspections and claimed that the tax would be unworkable, but they are acting in their own interests and not with the NHS health bill at heart. In Mexico, as we have discussed, a reduction in sales took place when a tax was introduced. I am almost reminded of that television programme set in the 1950s or '60s, "Mad Men", which is about the advertising industry. The advertisers in it say, "It's not bad for you", when they know it is.

[*Dr Rupa Huq*]

There are good commercial operators. In my constituency is the UK headquarters of the French dairy company, Danone, which has its “Eat Like a Champ” programme, which 35 children will go through this year. It is unbranded, so no one knows it is a Danone programme, but it introduces healthy eating, diet and so on throughout the London boroughs. The programme has been developed with the British Nutrition Foundation. Such initiatives should be encouraged. The programme is also supported by Diversity—the pop group, not the concept—as its ambassadors. Danone is doing that as part of its corporate social responsibility. The hon. Member for Britvic—the hon. Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey)—has gone now, but—

**Barbara Keeley** (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): Says the hon. Member for Danone.

**Dr Huq:** Yes, sorry. I am a secret lemonade drinker—no, I’m not.

I want to be brief, but we are discussing something important. Voluntary agreements do not seem to be moving fast enough. As everyone has said, we need a range of different approaches, and hiking up sugary drink prices by pennies is part of that. As for the industry’s worry that the cost would have to be passed on to consumers, the industry itself could absorb or partly absorb the cost.

Eleven to 18-year-olds will choose drinks based on price, because they are short on cash, although other factors could come into play—peer pressure, habit, availability and so on. We need to think smartly about things such as advertising bans, which have been mentioned, encouraging physical activity, curbing “buy one, get one free” types of promotions, discounting fruit and veg, and considering portion sizes. In New York the authorities have banned the largest size of soda cups.

I want to ask the Minister what happened to the ban on fried chicken shops at school gates, because I still seem to have them in my constituency. Such a ban was talked about, and it would be good if its implementation could be accelerated. Also, what about minimum unit prices for alcohol? If sugary drink prices go up but alcohol prices are low, there could be some awful, cataclysmic thing going on as a result, possibly—

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jane Ellison):** Hopefully not at primary schools.

**Dr Huq:** No, but alcopops and such things have always been popular with young people, because they look harmless, but some of them have a high alcohol content. We have a golden opportunity, because the Government are working on a childhood obesity strategy, and we must not waste that opportunity. We must think long-term and heed the BDA chief’s words:

“Public health policy must be guided by evidence, not by personal prejudice or commercial interests.”

So happy Sugar Awareness Week, one and all. I will be interested to hear the summing-up speeches.

**Steve McCabe (in the Chair):** We have just over an hour, but I remind Members that we do not have to fill the entire time. I would, however, like enough time to be left for Helen Jones to reply to the debate. I call Philippa Whiteford.

6.28 pm

**Dr Philippa Whiteford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Thank you, Mr McCabe. I am actually Dr Whiteford; Eilidh Whiteford—my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford)—is the other one, whom I always get mixed up with.

Like the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), I am clearly not skinny. I was not overweight as a child; it was the usual comfort eating later on, middle age, lack of exercise and all the rest of it. I know what it is like to move through a world where everything shouts “eat me” all the time. We live in a totally obesogenic environment. The idea that it is easy to resist things is simply not true. Everything is geared towards making people eat unhealthily. We spend a little more than £600 million on obesity prevention, but £256 billion is spent on advertising unhealthy foods. It is David and Goliath. It is difficult for people to make the right choices.

Obviously the debate is about the sugar tax, but as Members have said, the issue goes much wider than that. The hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), who is the chair of the Health Committee, talked about the sheer scale of the problem. One third of children leaving school are obese or overweight and a quarter are obese—that is the reason for the differing figures mentioned earlier. It is predicted that 70% of the population will be overweight or obese by the mid-2030s. That is an astronomical number. Our health service will not cope with all the directly obesity-related problems such as type 2 diabetes, cancers and heart disease. We have heard figures about the cost of that from other members of the Health Committee, but it is estimated that the societal costs are £27 billion. We all know someone who was overweight or obese as a child, and we know about the bullying, exclusion and self-contempt that occurs and the impact that that has on schooling, and therefore on jobs, which leads to another generation of deprivation. People say that a tax might be regressive, but it would be no more so than duty on cigarettes or alcohol. It is important to see it in that light.

We have discussed evidence from Mexico, which we heard in the Committee, but other countries such as Norway, Hungary and Finland have taken the same approach. Although not all the evidence has been peer-reviewed, published and assessed, all the details of the national experiments point in the same direction. Cochrane reviews coming up in the next year to 18 months will be able to put that information in a solid position based on experiments and data. At that point it will not be possible to ignore the issue, but we need to be thinking now about our options and what we will do.

Although this is a debate about sugar tax, the Health Committee made nine recommendations. Sugar tax is the one that the media are interested in, because it catches the light, but it is part of a whole package and a sugar tax is not even in our top three recommendations. The first is about promotions, because 40% of food bought in our shops is on promotion, and that is heavily weighted towards unhealthy foods. We need to look to rebalance that. One Member who has scuttled off said that we would come up with other rules such as getting rid of discounting, or we would suggest portion control—darn tootin’ we will!



We need to realise what we are fighting, because we are talking about something deeply shocking and very dangerous. The argument is that people who are less well off save money if they can buy one for £1 or two for £1.50. However, the evidence we heard is that, if that means they buy two packets of biscuits, one will not be put in the cupboard for next week; both will get eaten this week, and the same mum or dad will be back the following week to shop for another packet of biscuits. Therefore they have not only eaten far more unhealthy food and sugar but spent more money. Promotions of unhealthy foods in multi-buys are not helping anyone.

We also see a change in portion sizes. Packets are getting bigger, and there is the bottomless cup at McDonald's or wherever. There is the end of the aisle, the pester power and the stuff at the till. Every mum and dad out shopping at the supermarket with their wain—that is Scottish for child—will know what it is like: they can see the light at the end of the tunnel, then their child hangs out of the trolley and grabs something. They may put it in their mouth, which means the mum or dad is obliged to pay for it. Some supermarkets have been good at taking that opportunity away, but not all of them. My local supermarket still has sweets right at the till.

Promotions have a big impact and should be tackled. So should marketing, because of the sheer scale of the budgets for and against obesity. It is not just about asking for advertising to be put after 9 o'clock; it is particularly about what is emerging on the internet in social media and advergames, as the hon. Member for Totnes mentioned. Things keep wriggling around, so we need a strategy broad enough to cover that.

Reformulation is almost the holy grail. We have seen its success with salt, but it took a long time. We have taken about 40% of the salt out of the British diet, and by and large people have not noticed. However, we do not have 10 years to do that. Reformulation is also much harder to do with sugar, because it has an impact on the structure and texture of food, but we need to get on with it. The reason why we are spending so much time talking about sugary drinks is because, as the hon. Lady said, they are one product where reformulation is easy: we can replace sugar with sweeteners.

We also need to reformulate to drive down sweeteners. We need to reset our sweet tooth—we have all seen someone washing down a big slab of sticky cake with a diet soft drink—because the craving remains. Even those who choose diet soft drinks will find that their craving for sugar remains, so when they cook they will add more sugar and they will eat more cake and biscuits. Sweeteners can really help us to speed up the removal of sugar, but we still need them to be on a downward journey. That must be done with industry, which has done a lot. Many soft drink manufacturers provide a choice, so if a sugar tax is introduced, hopefully that should nudge people across to less sugary drinks, as the hon. Member for Totnes said. It would be ideal if there was no tax collected at all, because that would suggest that the policy was working. At the moment, however, the traditional product is still absolutely packed with sugar.

**John Glen:** The hon. Lady is speaking with her customary authority on the subject. Does she agree that the industry has the potential to go a lot further so that we can make more progress before a sugar tax, which has attracted

all the attention, is instituted? It is a matter of providing choices, and a lot of consumer power could be harnessed to help us make that progress.

**Dr Whitford:** As the hon. Member for Totnes mentioned, the people who make such choices tend to be those who are more oriented towards a healthy diet anyway. It is about trying to teach people in the mire of deprivation, and often in the mire of despair, who smoke more, use more alcohol and take more sugar. They are the very people who are hit by all our measures to try to bring about health improvement.

All the industries are making efforts, but they are afraid of being out there on their own and seeing their competitors mopping up their business. That is why we need regulation. In our inquiry, that came out from the retailers in particular, who said they wanted a level playing field. Whether it is through a sugar tax or regulation, they want to feel that everyone has to move forward.

We also need leadership. The Food Standards Agency was important in leading on salt reformulation, so we need to work out who will be the leader on this, because we need a focused project to get not just sugar but fat and calorific intake out of our diet. As has been mentioned, there are also hidden sugars, particularly in tomato products such as baked beans, tomato sauces and bolognese sauces in which it is easy to hide sugar. When we start to look at that, we see that it is quite scary.

That is where labelling and education comes in. The traffic light system has been helpful for a broad range of foods. When we are looking for a sandwich in a rush, we can spot the green and amber on the label as opposed to the red and red. However, that will not help with sugary drinks, which get a red light and two green lights because they do not contain salt and fat. Therefore, someone who picks that up might think, "Two greens—that must be quite good." That is why the labelling of teaspoons of sugar is important. The industry could be applauded as it took every single teaspoon of sugar out of a drink.

We have heard talk about the nanny state and people having the freedom to do what they like, but as a doctor for 33 years I heard that about seatbelts and crash helmets. People want to feel the wind in their hair, but they do not look so good if they have come off their bike. We talk about the challenge of cigarettes and alcohol, and sugar is the same. All Governments have a responsibility to look at the report and all the measures it suggests, and to bring them in as a full package, because we need to tackle this, and we need to start now.

6.39 pm

**Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to speak in the debate with you in the Chair, Mr McCabe. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for the excellent way in which she opened the debate. In fact, we have had some excellent speeches. There was a bit of discord in some of the interventions and speeches, but broadly we have settled on a similar set of views. I want to emphasise that the causes of obesity are complex and that a number of factors can be involved.

We need to tackle the problem at both ends. We have talked extensively about the supply side and the drink companies, but we also need to talk about the demand

[Barbara Keeley]

side. We need far better education about how we can look after ourselves. We also need to give people the means of eating better food. In addition, we need to encourage them to take more exercise—we have touched on that, but I will talk about it a bit more later.

To tackle obesity—I am sure that this is the consensus that is developing—we need a comprehensive and broad approach that helps families, schools and children to make the right decisions. That might include people seeking medical help—I have had constituents in this situation—to get them started on the path away from obesity. That might include a programme or a summer camp—some way of starting to have a different diet and lots of exercise.

Many Members have referred to the statistics on obesity. The Health and Social Care Information Centre statistics are quite frightening: one in five children leaving primary school is classified as obese, and one in every three children is obese or overweight. There has been a significant move towards healthier, more nutritious meals in schools, and that is vital. However, I have concerns about how children and their families manage in the school holidays, when those healthier school meals are not available.

**Geraint Davies:** On a point of order, Mr McCabe. Like you, I sit on the Panel of Chairs. I was here for the first one and a half hours of the debate, and I had to leave the room for 20 minutes. I have introduced a Bill on sugar, and I was wondering whether I could crave your indulgence and make a small contribution, given that the debate is meant to go on until 7.30 pm.

**Steve McCabe (in the Chair):** You are welcome to intervene in the debate, Mr Davies, but we have moved on to the winding-up speeches.

**Geraint Davies:** I appreciate that, but I was wondering whether you might exercise some discretion.

**Steve McCabe (in the Chair):** No, we are going to continue with the winding-up speeches.

**Barbara Keeley:** I was saying that I have concerns about how children and their families manage in the school holidays. For anyone who has not heard about it, I want to commend the Feeding Birkenhead project, and the work done on it by my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field). The project makes sure that children have healthy food in the school holidays. It is sad that we need to think about that issue, but we do.

Between April and September 2015, Trussell Trust food banks in Greater Manchester gave more than 22,000 lots of three-day emergency food supplies to people in crisis. Of those, nearly 9,000 were directed to children. We have talked about choice, but if we think this through, we realise that, if families rely on food banks to feed their children, that will limit the number of healthy meals they can make with fresh food. Clearly, for people in the upsetting circumstances of not managing financially, feeding their child with something is better than seeing them go hungry.

At the start of the debate, we heard about people who do not have local shops that sell healthy food, and we have to take that into account, too. Some people are also fuel-poor, while others work a number of jobs, which leaves them with little time to cook. We must not, therefore, jump to conclusions about why people are in this situation.

We should look at the wider issues around poverty, which must be addressed to ensure that people can access a good-quality diet. There is an awful lot more to achieving a good-quality diet than just wanting to do that. How, therefore, does the Minister plan to help families that have to rely on food banks? Next weekend, I will be helping the Trussell Trust food bank to collect food in my local supermarkets. On a previous occasion, one donor gave me lots of vegetables—onions and things like that. I thought they were part of her shopping, so I ran after her to give them back. However, she said, “That is just to liven the donations up. All the packet food seems a bit dull.” However, that is not the way Trussell Trust food banks operate—they have to have packet and tinned food. We have to think through what is happening in families where there is a reliance on donated food, which will not always contribute to a good enough diet.

Education must play a significant role. We want to provide children and adults with information about how they can achieve a healthy diet. One of the most interesting things Jamie Oliver has done—it was not his recent interventions here in the House—was his programme showing people how to cook. There were families that existed entirely on one or two sorts of takeaway.

**Geraint Davies:** Does my hon. Friend accept that, if one wanted to make money out of a potato, the easiest way to do that would be not to sell it, but to smash it up, mix it with salt, sugar and fat, reshape it into something called “Dennis’s Dinosaurs”, freeze them, give them a jingle and sell them cheaper than a potato to get addicts of sugar and other additives for manufacturers? Should we not, therefore, focus on providing lower-priced fresh food, and on increasing the price of sugar-impregnated food?

**Barbara Keeley:** As I was saying, we should look at the whole range of options. I want to talk about health campaigns. The Public Health England campaign Change4Life is an excellent example of providing families with information about small changes they can make to improve their health, as well as with advice on healthy recipes, diet and exercise. However, I fear that the announcement of a 25% cut to the non-NHS part of the Department of Health’s budget will have a significant impact on Public Health England. I want public health bodies to be able to continue campaigns to tackle obesity, but I am worried that their ability to do so will be damaged by these significant cuts. I am concerned that we will not in future be able to fund campaigns such as Change4Life, and that they may just not happen.

We must also be careful that the huge cuts to the public health grant given to local authorities do not reduce the advice and support available to those wanting to lose weight. At many community events in Salford, I have seen health improvement staff working with community groups and running all kinds of sessions. I fear that we will not have that in future.

Although the debate is about a sugar tax, I want to mention the importance of increasing physical activity among adults and children. I was a member of the all-party commission on physical activity, which published its report “Tackling Physical Inactivity—A Coordinated Approach” in 2014. We have discussed various aspects of our children’s health, but inactivity is a key factor, which is why a number of Members have referred to it. It is important that we encourage children to maintain active lifestyles from an early age.

**Dr Whitford:** May I draw the hon. Lady’s attention to a novel approach that has come out of St Ninians primary school in Stirling, called the daily mile? A teacher got the children to go out and run round the field. That seems to have made a huge difference at the school. Obviously, it costs absolutely nothing, and it seems to help the kids to concentrate, because they have been outdoors in the fresh air and—in our neck of the woods—probably in the rain as well.

**Barbara Keeley:** That type of initiative is wonderful, but fewer and fewer children are walking to school, and an awful lot more are being taken there by bus or by their parents. The Health Committee report reminds us that the latest figures show a fall in physical activity. In 2012, only 21% of boys and 16% of girls did enough exercise to meet the Government’s physical activity guidelines. That is a fall from four years earlier, when the figures were 28% for boys and 19% for girls. We are therefore going in the wrong direction, and we are all becoming couch potatoes. We might worry about this for ourselves, but it is a great concern when children are involved.

I am a former member of the Health Committee, and it is a pity that little emerges from the report, which simply reiterates and endorses the findings of its predecessor Committee’s inquiry, in which I was involved.

**Dr Wollaston:** I absolutely recognise that physical activity is important and that it should be for everyone, irrespective of their weight or age. Like me, the hon. Lady will remember Julie Creffield, who spoke so powerfully before our Committee in the last Parliament. However, the current Committee felt that it did not want to be distracted by something we had already produced some work on. We therefore wanted to endorse everything that was said by our predecessor Committee, rather than to go over that ground again.

**Barbara Keeley:** I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention, but I think it is a bit too easy to lose sight of physical activity, and that is why I have raised the issue. I hope we can be brave and bold about these issues too—it is good to be brave and bold about children’s health, but let us cover all the issues.

It has been said that treating obesity and its consequences alone costs the NHS more than £5 billion a year. It is great that we are having this debate, because we are past the point where we can just let things trundle along. Let me come to the crucial point in the debate. Public figures such as Jamie Oliver have come out in support of a tax on sugar, and he has added stardust to the debate. However, this is a complex issue, and the solutions must deal with that complexity. We know that something must be done, but what is that something?

The problem goes deeper than the demand side. The food and drink industry has not been dealing with the real problems. A number of hon. Members have talked about the Government’s responsibility deal, which has not worked. Firms have made promises and then failed to carry out their pledges. We have talked about labelling, which I will come on to. Many of the suggested interventions involve better labelling of products, but research by a team at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine suggests that interventions that improve information about and awareness of the risks do not necessarily translate into positive behavioural change.

As has been touched on, the responsibility deal focused mostly on salt, which was perhaps welcome. There have been real moves in that area, although every time I have a bowl of tomato soup these days, I regret that it does not taste like it used to. It is clear that salt is being taken out of our diets, but not sugar, which is the focus of our debate. The research team also found that although responsibility deal partners claim there has been “considerable sugar reduction” under their calorie reduction pledge,

“the current progress reports do not substantiate these claims.”

In fact, responsibility deal partners say they have reduced sugar levels under the calorie reduction pledge, but they have not.

**Geraint Davies:** On the relationship between sugar and calories, is my hon. Friend aware of emerging science showing that if two people both eat, for argument’s sake, 2,000 calories a day, and one has a history of eating a lot of sugar, that person will be predisposed to convert more of the sugar to fat than the other person, irrespective of the amount of exercise they do? That is a particular reason we should target sugar.

**Barbara Keeley:** I did not know that; my hon. Friend clearly has background knowledge and experience that I do not.

I want to come back to the responsibility deal, which is important in terms of the Government’s approach. That deal is seen as flawed because firms were allowed to decide what pledges they signed up to, and there were no penalties for those that did not honour their promises or, indeed, take part at all. At the time of the responsibility deal’s introduction, organisations such as the BMA, the Royal College of Physicians and Alcohol Concern complained that the pledges were not specific or measurable and that, in fact, the food and drink industry had simply dictated the Government’s policy. We have to get away from that.

The Minister will tell us more about a sugar tax, but it seems that the Prime Minister has ruled out action on sugar, despite the independent report commissioned by the Department of Health. That leaves me wondering whether the Government are listening to vested interests, instead of the experts whom they commissioned to write the report. The corporations that make the bulk of sales of sugary drinks in the United Kingdom want to maximise profits for their shareholders. They will not voluntarily lower the amount of sugar in their drinks unless there is something in it for them, or unless they are required to do so by law. Likewise, they will not reduce the amount or nature of advertising of sugary drinks—not voluntarily, anyway.



[Barbara Keeley]

We must look back to what happened with the tobacco industry, which consistently pushed for a voluntary approach to avoid legislation. The industry trundled along, smoking continued unabated and profits were left alone. In my local authority, Salford, smoking was increasing at levels that really concerned me, particularly among young people. However, once specific regulations were introduced, such as warnings on cigarette packets and the blanket ban on smoking in enclosed spaces, smoking levels started to decline. I am therefore inclined to think that one of the most effective remedies would be a modest but compulsory reduction in the amount of sugar in soft drinks. A fiscal solution such as a sugar tax could well form part of the solution, but the Opposition retain a concern about the impact that extra taxes will have on the pockets of parents, as has been mentioned, particularly in low-income families. If we have learned any lessons from what happened with the tobacco industry, it is that intervention will need to involve legislation.

The report produced by Public Health England makes a number of recommendations, which Opposition Members will study in full. We believe a fiscal solution such as a sugar tax may be necessary, but we are not yet fully convinced. As a number of Members have said, we should not focus on one thing as a silver bullet. The Opposition will consider all the evidence on what can be done to tackle childhood obesity as we review our policy over the coming weeks and months.

This has been a high-quality debate. I hope that the petition and the debate will ensure that the Government do not repeat past mistakes with voluntary approaches such as the responsibility deal, which has generally been seen to have failed. I urge the Minister to look at a wide range of activities to tackle childhood obesity, including doing much more on physical inactivity.

6.54 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jane Ellison):** What an excellent debate we have had. It has been a real pleasure to listen to so many extremely well-informed contributions. Let me start by acknowledging the strength of public feeling about the issue. We are responding today to an e-petition with a great many signatories, and I thank everyone who signed it. I also praise the passion and commitment shown by Jamie Oliver, as other Members have, in raising the profile of healthy eating and, in particular, the impact of sugar on our diets and health. I will attempt to respond to most of the specific points made, but I am a little constrained by the timing of the debate.

Let me reflect on where we start from. A number of Members have cited the current obesity statistics. The most recent figures, published only last Thursday, show that there has been a relatively small overall change in overweight and obesity prevalence in the past five years. In that sense, levels remain unacceptably high, but there is a degree of stability. We saw some slight encouragement in the figures for children in reception, but we then see obesity prevalence more than double between reception and year 6. As the Chair of the Health Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), and others have rightly underlined, there is a very wide gap in obesity prevalence between the most deprived and the least deprived areas. I share the deep concerns expressed in all parts of the Chamber about that.

We have seen some good progress made on school food in recent times, so there are reasons to think this is a good moment to move forward, as there are areas in which we have encouraging building blocks. This debate, alongside the Health Select Committee report published today, is a valuable and timely opportunity for Members to make their views known at a critical juncture in the development of our comprehensive cross-Government childhood obesity strategy. That is a perfectly sensible reason for the timing of this debate and the publication of the Committee's report; it is extremely helpful to have them.

Earlier in the debate, one Member wondered whether I was feeling isolated. Far from it: it has been wonderful to spend the past few hours with Members from across the House who feel as passionately as I do about tackling this issue and, in particular, to hear the challenge of tackling childhood obesity framed in the context of improving the life chances of so many children, particularly those from the most deprived communities. That is certainly a strong strand of my thinking as I look at this issue. I have listened carefully to the comments made and will look in greater detail at the Select Committee's report, to further inform our ongoing policy development.

It is no secret that the Government have no plans to introduce a tax on sugar, although all taxes are kept under review. Such decisions are a matter for the Chancellor, as part of the Budget process. That being said, driving sustained behaviour change will require broad-ranging and concerted action of the kind we have discussed. It is extremely welcome that, whatever Members' views on a sugar tax, there is consensus across the House on the fact that there are no silver bullets in this debate. That is a really important point.

**Geraint Davies:** I happen to have introduced econometric modelling to Unilever. Would the Minister accept that if a sugar tax is introduced, less sugar will be consumed, and the Government will make money and save money on the health service? Is it not a no-brainer? What is the justification for her resistance to this obviously sensible measure?

**Jane Ellison:** I will touch on some of those points, but I want to take this opportunity to update the House on what we are already doing, to give some sense of our direction of travel and, in particular, to reassure people who have been urging us to look widely at a whole range of things beyond the silver bullet arguments. I hope to give some reassurance in the course of my remarks that we are, indeed, doing that.

**Geraint Davies:** What is the Minister's justification for not introducing this measure?

**Jane Ellison:** Unless the hon. Gentleman continues to chunter at me from a sedentary position, I will come to the vital issue of teaspoons, about which he and I have spoken before, and upon which a number of Members have remarked.

Today, I will principally talk about some of the steps the Government are already taking to improve children's health, particularly in relation to food and diet. I fear my response is rather limited in its scope by the proximity to the publication of our strategy, but I want to reassure Members that this is a major priority and a manifesto

commitment of the Government. There is no argument from us about the scale of the challenge, which has been outlined well in a number of speeches today. As I said, I passionately agree with the Chairman of the Health Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes, about the impact on health inequalities of childhood obesity, so there is no argument there either.

We can all agree, and have all agreed, that as a society we are eating too much sugar. It is bad for our health and can lead to excess weight gain. That, in turn, increases the risk of heart disease, as other have said, as well as type 2 diabetes—my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) gave a very good speech about that—stroke and some cancers. The link to tooth decay has also been brought out in a number of very good speeches.

I was interested to hear the, as ever, extremely well informed contribution from the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford). As a very distinguished clinician, she will be aware of the links between obesity and many of the big health challenges of our age, but I think that is less well understood more generally in the population. We need to talk more about that—I have challenged a lot of our major charities to talk about it more—so that people become as understanding of that as they have of the link between tobacco and some of the very significant disease groups.

However, public awareness is increasing. In recent evidence, 92% of people said that they were trying to manage or reduce the amount of sugar in the foods that they buy, while 26% of households were very concerned about sugar in food and 30% reported being more concerned than they were a year ago. Concern was higher for sugar than for fat or salt.

Before I talk about the report by the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition, I would just say that I regret the comments made by the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn), who is not in his place. He spoke about some extremely respected clinicians—members of that committee—who have done great service not just to the committee, but to the nation's nutrition more generally. The point was made very well by the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) about transparency and the need for people to declare their interest. That is all done by the members of that committee, and I want to thank them, on behalf of the Government again, for the work they have done for the committee's report on carbohydrates and health, which it published in July. I accepted, on the Government's behalf, the report's recommendations, which were that no more than 5% of energy in our daily diet should be from sugar. That is the equivalent of about seven sugar cubes or five or six teaspoons and there are wider implications for the general dietary advice from the Government from that policy shift. We are working through those with Public Health England.

As the House knows, and as many speeches have touched on, we are currently consuming more than double the recommended limit for sugar, and teenagers' consumption is nearly three times the recommended level. Again, we are under no illusion that we need to take action in this area. Earlier in the year, I requested that Public Health England prepare evidence for the Government on effective approaches for reducing sugar consumption. That is the report that the Health Committee has had chance to respond to.

**Geraint Davies:** As the Minister would accept, there is an elasticity of demand for any product—namely a relationship between the price and the demand. Will she focus a few comments on why precisely she is resisting simply putting up the price of sugar through a tax? I appreciate what she said about my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn), but if no reasons are being given, he probably cannot understand why. If there is no rational reason for doing so, he is assuming it is because of the lobbyists.

**Jane Ellison:** That is not right. Again, I come back to the point stressed in the report by Public Health England—indeed, the Health Committee's excellent report underlines it—that there is no silver bullet. It is really important that we address the fact that a number of wide-ranging issues need to be tackled and that several options are available to us in policy terms. PHE concluded that no single action on its own will be effective in reducing the nation's sugar intakes. Its report shows evidence to suggest that higher prices in targeted high-sugar products, such as sugar-sweetened drinks, tend to reduce the purchases of such products in the short term.

Mention was made of the possibility of Cochrane reviews in coming years. An interesting article in the current issue of *The Economist* notes that the longer-term effect on public health is as yet unknown. Obviously that is because in most cases these measures have not been in place long enough, but it is an important concern—and the hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) will have noted a degree of reticence on the part of those on his own Front Bench about the evidence, but anyway. We are, of course, well aware of what Public Health England said in its report about the evidence on higher prices. However, its report also argued strongly for implementing a broad, structured programme of parallel measures across all sectors, if we are likely to achieve meaningful reductions in sugar intakes across the population. As we have heard, it identified areas for action that include restrictions on marketing, advertising and price promotion, and work to reduce levels of sugar in food and drinks—I welcome the focus of a number of speeches on reformulation of product, as we think it has a significant role to play. Areas for action also included improving public food procurement and improving knowledge about diet and nutrition. We are considering all the evidence and working closely with Public Health England to develop our policies.

A number of Members have talked about education. This debate provides the opportunity for me to talk in more detail than I generally can in such debates about the Change4Life programme, in which we continue to invest significant sums. The Change4Life campaign has provided motivation and support for families to make small but significant improvements to their diets and activity levels. Last January, Change4Life's Sugar Swaps campaign encouraged families to cut back on sugar through two TV advertisements focusing on sugary drinks and after-school snacks. That campaign also included radio, digital and outdoor advertising.

**Barbara Keeley:** I expressed concern about budget cuts for Public Health England. Will the Minister address that? I, too, admire the work it has done, but it is not helpful to cut the budget, is it?

**Jane Ellison:** As the hon. Lady will see, the campaign is going to be very significant again this coming January, so as I say, we continue to invest significant sums. It is a very important campaign and a very important brand that is being developed, and we see it as something we want to build on.

**Geraint Davies:** Will the Minister give way?

**Jane Ellison:** I am going to make some progress and develop my point about Change4Life, because Members have asked questions about that.

The campaign included radio, digital and outdoor advertising; public relations and media partnerships; work with 25 national food retailers and manufacturing partners; community events and schools programmes; and, importantly, work with all 152 local authorities. More than 410,000 families registered with the last campaign. Families who signed up purchased 6% less sugary snacks by volume and 6% less sugary puddings by volume, while increasing consumption of lower-sugar snacks and puddings. For each person who signed up, another two in the general population said they had also made a food swap.

The Change4Life team is developing the next Sugar Smart campaign, to launch in early January 2016. The campaign will alert families to the problems of consuming too much sugar, reveal the amount of sugar in the most popular food and drink and tell them about the new guideline daily amounts. It will encourage people to download the Sugar Smart app, which I have seen being used and is very impressive—hidden sugars no more, I can assure the House. People will be able to see for themselves how much sugar is in the products they are buying. The campaign will include advertising on TV and online and posters, in addition to social media activity and PR. Five million information packs will be given to families through schools, commercial partners and local authorities, and there will be digital support to help families who want to cut back on sugar.

However, obesity is a complex issue, which the Government cannot tackle alone.

**Geraint Davies:** Will the Minister give way?

**Jane Ellison:** I am going to come on to teaspoons, and I do not want to run out of time before I do so. I will make a bit more progress and then see how we are getting on for interventions.

The Government cannot tackle obesity alone. I welcome the fact that we have consensus across the House on that, and the Committee draws that point out in its report. Businesses, health professionals, schools, local authorities, families and individuals have a role to play, as my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) brought out.

I want to talk about some of the industry action that has been taken. There has been progress in recent years on reducing sugar consumption. The focus under the voluntary partnership arrangements, which have been discussed, has been on overall calorie reduction, of which sugar can form a part. Billions of calories and tonnes of sugar have been removed from products and portion sizes have been reduced in some areas. Some major confectionery manufacturers have committed to a cap on single-serving confectionery at 250 calories, which is an important step.

We have to be realistic about consumer relations, which are important. Before I was an MP, I worked for the John Lewis Partnership—John Lewis and Waitrose—and I know only too well the important role that retail relationships play in an average family's life. We need to involve those partners. Some retailers have played a part, for example by removing sweets from checkouts. Interestingly, they did so after asking their customers in surveys what support they wanted, as family shoppers, from industry to help them to make healthier choices. Much of the action that retailers have taken was in response to that.

I was very interested in the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) made in an intervention about consumer power. There is much greater consumer power to be unleashed, but the challenge to the industry to make further substantial progress remains. Like the Chair of the Health Committee, I have had some encouraging conversations in that regard, but we need to make more progress.

Providing clear information to consumers to help them make healthier choices is important, as a number of hon. Members have set out. The voluntary front-of-pack nutrition labelling scheme, introduced in 2013, plays a vital part in our work to encourage healthier eating and to reduce levels of obesity and other conditions. The scheme enables consumers to make healthier and more balanced choices by helping them better to understand the nutrient content of foods and drinks.

I turn to the issue of teaspoons of sugar, which has come up a lot in the debate. It is more complicated than something so simple should be; “teaspoons” sounds straightforward, but labelling is an EU competence, so member states cannot mandate additional forms of expression, such as spoonfuls of sugar, for pre-packed food. Under EU legislation, it would be possible for companies to represent sugar content in the form of spoons of sugar or sugar cubes on a voluntary basis, as long that met a number of EU criteria—I will outline what some of them are. It would sit alongside front-of-pack nutrition information, which I remind the House is voluntary, not mandated, in order to meet the same criteria.

**Dr Philippa Whitford:** For the public nowadays, “teaspoons of sugar” is more helpful than “sugar cubes”, because very few people use sugar cubes.

**Jane Ellison:** I am aware of that; the point has been made to me a number of times.

Let me mention a few of the criteria that would apply if we were to move in that direction. There would be a requirement to consult, and we would have to ensure that any measure was supported by scientific evidence and did not constitute a barrier to trade. Any such form of labelling would need to be agreed with the Commission before it was implemented, to avoid future infraction proceedings.

I have heard the strength of feeling in the House and I understand the point being made, but references to sugar cubes are quite powerful; last year's Sugar Swaps campaign proved that they can be made meaningful. However, I will ask my officials to look carefully at the issue, because I have heard a great deal of interest in it being expressed today, and I know that the Health Committee took evidence on it. I wanted to underline



the point that it is not as straightforward as it might seem, but we will look closely at it again in the light of the interest in it.

**Dr Whitford:** Did the same apply to cigarettes? Were we not allowed independently to add the warnings and so on that we put on cigarettes in this country? Did that have to be EU-wide?

**Jane Ellison:** As we approach the transposition of the new EU tobacco directive, the hon. Lady will see that the measures being taken are EU-wide, but those are two slightly different things. I am happy to come back to her in more detail after the debate, but generally speaking, packaging and labelling are EU competences.

I was delighted to hear so many hon. Members say that front-of-pack labelling was important. The scheme is popular with consumers. It provides information on calories and levels of specific nutrients in an easy-to-read, intuitive format. Businesses that have adopted the scheme account for two thirds of the market for pre-packed foods and drinks. Within the Change4Life programme, front-of-pack colour-coded nutrition labelling will continue to be included as a key message whenever there is a campaign focused on healthy eating. We use that in all the Change4Life materials, across a wide range of formats.

I want to reassure the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), who spoke from the Opposition Front Bench, that there will indeed be a physical activity strand in our childhood obesity strategy. I agree with the balance that the Health Committee struck on tackling childhood obesity, which is an important strand of the work. The great news about physical activity, as the Committee's report underlined, is that it is good for everyone, whatever their weight. There is no downside to being more physically active, so of course we will want to reflect that.

This has not been touched on much this afternoon, but there is also a significant role for the family of health professionals in giving advice and supporting families to make changes to their lives. That relates particularly to families in more deprived communities. Only this morning I was talking about the role of health visitors, for example, in family education and family support. Again, a strand of our strategy will develop that.

**Geraint Davies:** Will the Minister give way?

**Jane Ellison:** Yes, but this will be the last intervention I take, because I want to leave time for the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) to respond at the end of the debate.

**Geraint Davies:** I simply want to ask whether there will be any space for views to be heard on restricting advertising, whether that relates to high-sugar products being described as low-fat products, to watersheds or whatever. In the same way as we imposed restrictions on the advertising and pricing of cigarettes, will the Minister come forward with any suggestion on restricting advertising in this case?

**Jane Ellison:** We have already said that the childhood obesity strategy will be a comprehensive, cross-Government strategy. I commissioned advice from Public Health

England, and of course I have been working closely with that organisation on policy development for many months now. I am paying close regard to the advice that it has provided us with, and I welcome the fact that the Health Committee found it so useful in producing its report.

I welcome the debate as an opportunity to respond to the important campaign on the e-petition and the important new Select Committee report. It is a timely opportunity. I want to reassure the House that the Government are considering a wide range of options for tackling obesity, and particularly for reducing sugar consumption among children and the wider population. I hope the House agrees that all of us—central Government, local government, the industry, schools, families, communities and individuals—have a part to play. I will reflect carefully on the speeches that I have heard today, on the Committee's recommendations and on its overarching challenge to us to be "brave and bold"—a message that I have heard loud and clear this afternoon. I look forward to making progress, and I very much look forward to publishing our childhood obesity strategy in the new year and making progress throughout this Parliament, and indeed well beyond it, on one of the greatest health challenges of our age.

7.16 pm

**Helen Jones:** This has been an interesting debate, and I thank all who have spoken in it. We have heard the message clearly from all parts of the House that action on the matter is imperative. We have heard about the health problems, dental decay and loss of life that result from poor diet. The message has been clear today—even from those, such as the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), who started off as sceptics, as I confess I did—that the evidence all points to the need for serious action. That action should include the taxation of sugary drinks, not as a silver bullet, as we have all made clear, but as part of the overall strategy. I urge the Government to look again at the matter, because it is an area where gains can be made relatively quickly to improve people's health.

There is plenty of evidence from the past that Government action can change people's behaviour. It used to be the norm for people to go to the pub and have several pints before driving home, but it is not now. There used to be lots of smoking in public places, but there is not now, and smoking is reducing as a result of the action that has been taken. We now face a new emergency, which has to do with diet. Nearly everyone who has spoken in the debate—probably not the hon. Members for Nestlé and Britvic, who are no longer present—agreed that that was an urgent problem.

When the Government publish their strategy, I hope that we will see a concerted plan to tackle our poor diet and particularly our intake of sugar. I hope that plan will go across the public sector and involve local authorities and our health professionals, as well as tackling the food poverty and deprivation that lead to poor diet. It is not by accident that some foodbanks are now giving out packs of cold food only, because they know that some people cannot afford fuel or have had their fuel cut off.

I hope that the Government will also tackle the advertising industry. We like to think that children watch only children's programmes, but peak viewing

[Helen Jones]

time for children is between 8 and 9 o'clock. We have also heard about the amount of advertising that is now online, which is impacting on our children.

I hope that we will soon hear a clear strategy from the Government to tackle the obesogenic environment in which people find themselves, to help people to make healthier choices in their lives. In particular, as far as the petition is concerned, I hope that the Government will revisit the idea of a tax on sugary drinks. The fact that it is only part of the overall strategy, as has been said, does not mean that it is not important. The strategy as a whole, in its many guises, is important. The Minister is constrained in what she can say today, but I know that she understands a lot of the issues. I say to her that the health of our children and adults demands action.

**Geraint Davies:** Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Helen Jones:** No, I am winding up; I am sorry. The health of our children demands action now. If we do not take such action, we will see much more illness in our society, much more drain on the NHS and a poorer life for all of us in the future.

*Question put and agreed to,*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered e-petition 106651 relating to a tax on sugary drinks.

7.21 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*

# Written Statements

Monday 30 November 2015

## EDUCATION

### National Reference Test Consultation

**The Minister for Schools (Mr Nick Gibb):** The statement is as follows:

*Consultation on arrangements to implement the National Reference Test*

Today, 30 November 2015, I am launching a public consultation on the introduction of secondary legislation to require selected schools to take part in the National Reference Test (NRT). The legislation will come into force on 1 September 2016 and the first full NRT will take place in March 2017.

The NRT is the next step in the Government's reform agenda, which will deliver robust and rigorous qualifications for England's students. Before 2010, pupils received successively higher grades at GCSE each year, but in international league tables England's performance stagnated. Ofqual has halted this grade inflation through the use of comparable outcomes.<sup>1</sup>

Ofqual is now introducing the NRT which will indicate if GCSE results should change from year to year. Over time, this will provide an additional method of measuring real changes in national performance at GCSE which is distinct from the use of international comparisons such as the PISA study.

This consultation is an opportunity for teachers, parents, pupils, and all those with an interest to provide their views, which will be taken into account when preparing the final legislation.

*The National Reference Test*

Each year, a different sample of 300 secondary schools, both in the state and independent sectors, will be selected to take part. Random samples of pupils from each selected school will take a test lasting about an hour. About 30 pupils will take the English language test and another 30 will take the mathematics test. Ofqual will publish information about overall test performance each summer when GCSE results are announced. The results will not be used for school accountability purposes and results will not be given to individual pupils. Instead, the NRT will provide Ofqual with additional evidence on year-on-year changes in performance.

Participation in the test will benefit both schools and pupils, as it will help to provide more direct evidence of improving school performance at the national level which can be reflected in the grades that are awarded at GCSE, ensuring higher-attaining cohorts are rewarded.

The proposed legislation would apply to maintained schools. It would also apply to most academies and free schools through an existing provision in their funding agreement that requires them to comply with guidance issued by the Secretary of State in relation to assessments. It would not apply to independent schools although

pupils at independent schools will also be asked to take the test to ensure that the sample of pupils that take the test is nationally representative.

<sup>1</sup> For further information, see <https://ofqual.blog.gov.uk/2015/08/05/gcse-marking-and-grading/>

[HCWS342]

## HOME DEPARTMENT

### Security Industry Authority

**The Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice (Mike Penning):** The 2014-15 annual report and accounts for the Security Industry Authority are being laid before the House today and published on <https://www.gov.uk/>.

Copies will be available in the Vote Office.

[HCWS340]

## PRIME MINISTER

### Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting: Malta

**The Prime Minister (Mr David Cameron):** I attended the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Valletta, Malta, between 27 and 28 November. The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Mr Swire), who has responsibility for the Commonwealth, Lord Maude, the Minister for Trade and Investment, and Baroness Verma, the Under-Secretary of State for International Development also attended.

Her Majesty the Queen opened the meeting in her role as Head of the Commonwealth. Her Majesty was accompanied by His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh, and Their Royal Highnesses the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall.

The Government took office this May with a manifesto commitment to strengthen the Commonwealth's focus on promoting democratic values and development. I believe firmly that the Commonwealth has unique strengths rooted in its global reach, its diversity and its shared legal systems, language and values. Combined with the 60% of the Commonwealth's population under 30, these are foundations on which the Commonwealth can build as it takes on the challenges of a modern world.

The challenges have never been greater. This meeting provided an opportunity for leaders to discuss in particular extremism, climate change, the challenges faced by small states and sustainable development. Leaders were united in condemning the recent terrorist atrocities in Paris and elsewhere. They agreed that the Commonwealth has an important role to play in broadening international efforts to counter extremism, including by working through its civil society, youth and education networks to reduce the appeal of poisonous ideologies. To help the Commonwealth to take practical action, I announced that the Government would be committing £1 million each year for five years to establish and run a new Commonwealth unit dedicated to supporting efforts to counter the causes of radicalisation. A number of Commonwealth states face significant challenges and the unit will co-ordinate the sharing of expertise.



I also announced £200,000 of seed funding to expand a recently established European counter-radicalisation youth network to the countries of the Commonwealth. The initiative will support moderate youth voices in their efforts to counter violent extremist messaging.

Heads also met in a special session to discuss climate action. This was timely, coming just ahead of the UN climate conference in Paris. President Hollande, as host to the climate negotiations, and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon addressed Heads, as did His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales. I spoke to encourage unity and ambition ahead of Paris and to set out UK priorities for a climate deal. Heads adopted a climate action statement setting out what they wanted the Paris climate negotiations to achieve.

I also announced a number of practical initiatives demonstrating UK support for the Commonwealth's small island developing states, many of which are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and have a major stake in the Paris conference. The initiatives I announced include £20 million to allow more small island states to access disaster risk insurance and to aid disaster risk contingency planning. I also pledged £5.6 million of technical assistance to help small island states develop their maritime economies, and a further £1 million for expert assistance to access development finance. I also highlighted: up to £400,000 from existing budgetary contributions to support a new Commonwealth climate finance access hub; UK support for a new working group within the Commonwealth to identify ways to lever private sector investment for green projects; and £50,000 to the Commonwealth small states offices in New York and Geneva.

Heads also observed, in line with the 2030 agenda for sustainable development, that good governance and respect for the rule of law are vital for stable and prosperous societies, as well as for efficient, effective and accountable public institutions. At the Foreign Ministers' meeting, the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs encouraged the Commonwealth, with its record of support for judicial independence, legislative capacity building and election monitoring, to make a strong contribution to goal 16. I also chaired a side meeting on anti-corruption, which provided welcome momentum ahead of the UK's anti-corruption summit in 2016. Heads agreed to strengthen efforts to tackle corruption including through increased transparency and co-ordination between law enforcement agencies.

On the wider values agenda, Heads resolved, through the communiqué, to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms and to support the empowerment of women and girls. I spoke about the importance of the Commonwealth seeking to narrow its divisions on LGB&T issues and announced UK support for reconciliation and human rights in Sri Lanka, as part of a £6.6 million wider programme of support. I was also pleased, in this regard, to note that Northern Ireland will take on chairmanship of the Commonwealth Forum on National Human Rights Institutions, with our support. I welcomed the report of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) and the decision to put the Maldives under formal consideration, and to visit there in early 2016. The Commonwealth has an important role to play in helping its members adhere to its values. It is vital for the organisation's integrity that it acts to uphold the values and principles of its charter.

I am grateful to Baroness Verma for attending the first ever Commonwealth Women's Forum and for chairing a session on LGB&T issues at the pre-CHOGM People's Forum, where she urged the Commonwealth to do more to defend LGB&T rights.

On business and trade, Heads agreed to advance global trade negotiations and in particular ratify the WTO trade facilitation agreement. Lord Maude and Mr Swire both spoke at the Commonwealth Business Forum. Mr Swire also spoke at an event to mark the Magna Carta's presence in Malta, as well as an event to highlight the progress made to eradicate polio—where he drew attention to the UK's £300 million contribution to the global polio eradication initiative since 2013. He also attended an event with Commonwealth scholarships alumni.

I congratulate Baroness Scotland on her appointment as Secretary-General. The UK wanted the strongest possible candidate to steer the Commonwealth through reform, to ensure that it has a voice on the most pressing global challenges and to unite its members behind the values of human rights, democracy and the rule of law. I believe Baroness Scotland is the right person to do that and look forward to working with her in the years ahead.

Finally, leaders agreed the UK's offer to host the next CHOGM in 2018, and welcomed Malaysia's offer to host in 2020. In hosting CHOGM, I believe that we can build on the excellent progress made in Malta to continue to increase the Commonwealth's stock and standing in the world.

Attachments can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2015-11-30/HCWS341/>.

[HCWS341]

## TRANSPORT

### Fuel Tank Compliance

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones):** Further to the written statement given by the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Deves (Claire Perry), 18 December 2014, *Official Report*, column 139, the Department for Transport has continued to work with the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), Department for Energy and Climate Change (DECC) and industry to resolve an issue with fuel tankers manufactured and incorrectly certified in South Africa. Following a detailed investigation these tankers were found not to be in full compliance with internationally agreed regulations—the European Agreement Concerning the International Carriage of Dangerous Goods by Road or the ADR.

Since the previous statement, around 60 new replacement tankers have entered into service, reducing the number that are not in full compliance to about 70 tankers, all built after the middle of 2010.

During this time the Department for Transport commissioned further research of around £0.5 million, the outcome of which, published today on the Department's website <https://www.gov.uk/dft>, found no reason to extend further the use of the 70 tankers, which are to be withdrawn by 31 December 2015 as planned.

The research has also shown that improvements could be made to the international regulations and the standards referred to therein to enhance the safety of fuel tankers in the event of a collision or rollover incident. The Department is already developing proposals with other European countries, and working with HSE and the industry to prevent any similar issues of non-compliance.

In addition, the research, in going beyond the scope of the normal inspections required by legislation, found a fuel tanker properly certified in the UK to contain defects of a lesser significance than those in the tankers found not to be in full compliance with regulations. A full scale test of the tanker undertaken during the research found that the safety of the tanker was not compromised by these defects, which due to the research are being addressed by the manufacturer.

[HCWS338]

### HS2 and the Northern Powerhouse

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Patrick McLoughlin):** The statement is as follows.

#### *HS2 and the northern powerhouse*

Good strategic transport links are central to the success of our country. This Government, more than any before, committed to making sure we have the infrastructure we need to deliver economic growth and rebalance the country's economy, not just in the immediate future, but for the long term.

I am therefore making announcements today on how transport is continuing to deliver the northern powerhouse through HS2 and the northern transport strategy.

#### *HS2*

HS2 is a key part of the future of our country's railways. Last week's spending review announcement confirmed the Government's commitment to the scheme. This is a big step forward for HS2 and the creation of a northern powerhouse. This gives funding certainty to HS2. It also gives more certainty to the towns and cities that would be served by HS2 that they can plan for its arrival, and to the private sector that there will be future investment opportunities.

HS2 will not be a separate, standalone railway. It will be the new backbone of our national rail network, with HS2 services running from London and Birmingham to cities in the north of England including Manchester, Leeds, Liverpool, Newcastle and on to Scotland. It will not only deliver significant journey time savings, but also much needed additional capacity and increased connectivity. Private sector companies will be able to bid to run HS2 services, and will also be able to use this capacity to offer a wider range of services.

We are making good progress with HS2 phase 1, from London to Birmingham. The hybrid Bill for this part of the railway is proceeding through Parliament and we are aiming to achieve Royal Assent by the end of 2016, so that construction can begin in 2017.

In his reports, "HS2 Plus" (March 2014) and "Rebalancing Britain" (October 2014), Sir David Higgins recommended that we seek to build the section of the route to Crewe more quickly to deliver further benefits to the North sooner. We agree that we should realise the benefits of HS2 as soon as possible. I am therefore

announcing today my decision on the section of the route from Fradley in the West Midlands to Crewe, now referred to as "phase 2a". We intend to accelerate phase 2a so that it opens six years earlier than planned, in 2027. This will bring more capacity and faster HS2 services to the north west of England, including Crewe, Liverpool, Manchester and Scotland much sooner than originally planned. Our plans will help to support growth and deliver jobs more quickly.

Powers to build this section of the route will be sought through a separate hybrid Bill which I intend to introduce to Parliament in 2017. HS2 Ltd has now procured professional services consultants (PSCs), for the purposes of supporting the hybrid Bill development.

In the light of my decision on the HS2 route from the West Midlands to Crewe, I am also today issuing safeguarding directions for that part of the route, having considered responses to the November 2014 consultation on this. The directions will ensure that new developments in this corridor do not affect the ability to build or operate phase 2a or lead to excessive additional costs. Safeguarding also triggers the statutory blight regime. Qualifying owner occupiers whose property is within the safeguarded zone will have the right to ask the Government to buy their property by serving a blight notice. We are committed to assisting people affected by HS2. All those living within the safeguarding zone will receive a letter informing them about potential entitlements. I am also today launching a consultation on a wider package of assistance measures for owner occupiers, which go well beyond what we are required to do by law, for those living along this section of the route, as we have already done for phase 1.

We set out our initial preferred route for phase 2 of HS2 in January 2013 and later that year conducted a public consultation exercise seeking the public's views on the route. Today, we have published the independent analysis by Ipsos MORI of all the responses to the 2013 phase 2 route consultation. My route decision on Phase 2a takes account of the consultation responses regarding that section of the route; and the Command Paper also responds to the cross-cutting issues raised.

We continue to progress plans for the rest of the HS2 Phase Two route. I welcome the way local authorities, most recently those in Leeds, the Northern Gateway Partnership and the East Midlands, have come together to support HS2 plans in their areas. Further work is needed on the remainder of the Phase Two route before a decision can be taken. I intend to make a decision in autumn 2016, but today I can update the House on my thinking as follows:

**Leeds:** We have now received Sir David Higgins' report on Leeds station, which is also published today. It recommends an integrated design for the HS2 station, while maintaining a southerly route into the city. I am minded to agree with Sir David's proposal.

**South Yorkshire:** Sheffield Meadowhall was the Government's preferred station location in the phase 2 route consultation. The evidence continues to suggest that this is likely to be the best way of serving the wider South Yorkshire region and we are working with the National Infrastructure Commission and Transport for the North on the possible interfaces with northern powerhouse rail. However, we acknowledge there are arguments in favour of a city centre location and continue to examine relevant analysis.

East Midlands: Sir David Higgins has confirmed that HS2 Ltd recommends a hub station should be located at Toton. Toton is also supported by the East Midlands local authorities who are united behind this proposed location. The Government therefore continues to support Toton as the best location for an East Midlands hub. Last week the Chancellor announced growth funding to allow the area to start its planning for HS2. Part of this will be released this year, and the remainder would be released when a decision is made.

Manchester: Manchester Piccadilly continues to look like the right location for HS2's Manchester terminus. To maximise its potential to support economic growth in the region, it will be important to ensure effective co-ordination with the development of northern powerhouse rail to transform east-west links across the north of England. We are continuing our work through Transport for the North, and with the National Infrastructure Commission, to explore synergies and integration between the schemes, in order to develop the right rail infrastructure that delivers growth across the whole of the north of England.

We also remain of the view that a Manchester Airport station is likely to be the right option, subject to agreeing an appropriate third party funding contribution to the costs.

In 2014, Sir David Higgins recommended that HS2 serve a north-west hub station at Crewe. While I am not taking decisions on Crewe hub today, I do support the vision for a Crewe hub. Work is ongoing. I intend to make further announcements in 2016, and any Crewe hub scheme will be subject to consultation. To support the work that the Northern Gateway Partnership is doing to develop growth and regeneration plans ahead of a decision I am releasing part of this funding this year.

I have asked HS2 Ltd to explore options for how we might best serve Stoke and Macclesfield, including through classic compatible trains via Handsacre Junction. Handsacre Junction is part of phase 1 and will allow HS2 trains to serve Stafford.

Scotland will benefit from reduced journey times as soon as phase 1 opens, 3 hours 56 minutes from London to Glasgow, compared with a typical journey time of 4 hours 31 minutes at present. Accelerating delivery of phase 2a between the West Midlands and Crewe will further reduce the journey time from London to Glasgow to 3 hours 43 minutes. The full "Y" network will provide faster services from London to both Glasgow, 3 hours 38 minutes and Edinburgh, 3 hours 39 minutes. The UK Government and the Scottish Government are working closely together to consider options to further reduce journey times. We hope to make a statement on the next steps in the new year.

I have not taken any decision on the remainder of the phase 2 route. We will respond in full to consultation responses relating to the rest of the phase 2 route when a route decision is taken in 2016.

Copies of the Command Paper: "High Speed Two: East and West - The next steps to Crewe and beyond" and other accompanying documents have been made available in the libraries of both Houses and can be found on the Department's website at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/hs2-phase-two-from-the-west-midlands-to-leeds-and-manchester>

The cost of HS2 has not changed since the spending review 2013. The spending review 2015 confirmed an overall budget of £55.7 billion in 2015 prices. This is consistent with the £50.1 billion, in 2011 prices, set in 2013, but has been updated to take account of inflation. *Transport for the North and the Northern Transport Strategy*

Today, jointly with Transport for the North, we are publishing a progress report on the northern transport strategy, which includes updates on our progress across the full range of the strategy, including international connectivity, freight, smart and integrated ticketing, strategic roads and northern powerhouse rail. The fast, frequent, reliable and comfortable rail service we plan will underpin the northern powerhouse economy. Copies of the report "The Northern Transport Strategy: Autumn Report" have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses and can be found on the Department's website at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/departement-for-transport>

The Government have also taken steps to support the development of Transport for the North as an organisation that represents the whole of the north of England and can speak to Government with one voice on the region's transport priorities.

Last week's spending review committed £50 million of funding over this Parliament to help Transport for the North drive forward plans to transform the north's transport links and build a single regional economy.

Today, I am delighted to announce, jointly with Transport for the North, the appointment of John Cridland as the new independent Chair of the Transport for the North Partnership Board. Together with his Chief Executive, David Brown, John Cridland will have the responsibility for delivering the northern transport strategy, working closely in partnership with Lord Adonis and the National Infrastructure Commission.

Following advice from the National Infrastructure Commission in March 2016, schemes such as northern powerhouse rail will have access to a brand new £300 million national transport development fund.

[HCWS339]



# Petition

*Monday 30 November 2015*

## **PRESENTED PETITION**

*Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor*

### **School Funding Model**

*The petition of residents of Rutland and Melton,*

Declares that the petitioners believe the existing school funding model in England is arbitrary and unfair; further

declares that the ten best funded areas of England have on average received grants of £6,300 per pupil this year, compared to an average of £4,200 per pupil in the ten most poorly funded areas of England; and further declares that the petitioners welcome the Government's commitment to introduce fairer school funding.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons supports the earliest possible introduction of a new National Funding Formula for schools in England.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P001650]



# ORAL ANSWERS

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# PETITION

Monday 30 November 2015

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Monday 7 December 2015**

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