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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 9 December 2015

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

ELECTORAL COMMISSION

The VICE-CHAMBERLAIN OF HER MAJESTY'S HOUSEHOLD reported to the House, That the Address, praying that Her Majesty will appoint Anna Carragher to be an Electoral Commissioner, with effect from 1 January 2016, for the period ending on 31 December 2020, was presented to Her Majesty, who was graciously pleased to comply with the request.

The VICE-CHAMBERLAIN OF HER MAJESTY'S HOUSEHOLD reported to the House, That the Address, praying that Her Majesty will appoint Rob Vincent to be an Electoral Commissioner with effect from 1 January 2016, for the period ending on 31 December 2020, was presented to Her Majesty, who was graciously pleased to comply with the request.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT BOUNDARY COMMISSION FOR ENGLAND

The VICE-CHAMBERLAIN OF HER MAJESTY'S HOUSEHOLD reported to the House, That the Address, praying that Her Majesty will appoint Professor Colin Mellors as chair of the Local Government Boundary Commission for England, with effect from 1 January 2016 for the period ending on 31 December 2019, was presented to Her Majesty, who was graciously pleased to comply with the request.

INDEPENDENT PARLIAMENTARY STANDARDS AUTHORITY

The VICE-CHAMBERLAIN OF HER MAJESTY'S HOUSEHOLD reported to the House, That the Address, praying that Her Majesty will appoint Sir Robert Owen and John Thurso to the office of ordinary member of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, with effect from 1 January 2016, for the period ending on 31 December 2020, was presented to Her Majesty, who was graciously pleased to comply with the request.

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: I have to inform the House that, as required by section 144 of the Representation of the People Act 1983, I have received the certificate from the judges appointed to try the election petition relating to the Orkney and Shetland constituency election on 7 May 2015. The judges have determined that the petition be dismissed, and have certified that the right hon. Member for that constituency was duly returned at the said election.

I shall lay the certificate on the Table, together with the shorthand writer's notes, and will cause the full text of the certificate to be entered in the *Journal*. Members wishing to read the certificate for themselves will find it set out in the *Votes and Proceedings* for today, which will be circulated with the Order Paper in tomorrow's vote bundle, available online and from the Vote Office.

Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE

The Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—

Individual Electoral Registration

1. **Julie Elliott** (Sunderland Central) (Lab): If he will make an assessment of the effectiveness of the transition to individual electoral registration. [902468]

7. **Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): If he will make an assessment of the effectiveness of the transition to individual electoral registration. [902474]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (John Penrose): The Electoral Commission will publish its assessment of the first full registers under individual electoral registration next spring. In the meantime, I am delighted to inform the House that the transition to IER is now complete. Ghost entries of people who have died or moved house have been removed. We now have a register that is clean, more accurate and less vulnerable to fraud than ever before. This is a vital foundation stone as we move on to the next big challenge: finding people who are legally entitled to vote, but have never been on the register, such as expats, students and people in private rented accommodation, and persuading them to sign up.

Julie Elliott: I thank the Minister for his response. University towns and cities are some of the areas worst affected by the Government's rushed changes to IER. Will the Government allow universities to block-register their students this year?

John Penrose: I think the hon. Lady and I may mean slightly different things by block registration, but there is common ground, in that some very useful and effective new work is being done in places such as Sheffield, which is dramatically improving student registration rates. With any luck, we can take its example and persuade others to do the same.

Gerald Jones: The Electoral Commission states that 51% of 16 to 17-year-olds are registered, compared with 95% of those over 65. The Government have opposed votes for 16 and 17-year-olds in the upcoming EU referendum, and they will not even ensure that young people have a voice. Why are they so indifferent to a whole generation?

John Penrose: We addressed that issue at some length yesterday when discussing the European Union Referendum Bill. This is the third or fourth time that the House has addressed that idea, and each time it has returned pretty solid majorities against it. The vote yesterday was because we did not think it sensible to change such a fundamental piece of the franchise for just one vote. That would leave us open to the charge of trying to sway the franchise for the EU referendum to favour one side or the other—something that I am sure no one would support.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): May I encourage my hon. Friend to consider postal voting? Leaving aside what may or may not have happened at the recent by-election, is it the case that registering for a postal vote is far too easy these days, which renders the whole system open to serious abuse?

John Penrose: My hon. Friend is entirely right, and large numbers of people are concerned about that issue. I am happy to tell him that my right hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Sir Eric Pickles) is at this moment considering a report, and if my hon. Friend has any suggestions about what should be in it, he is welcome to make them.

Mr Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): I am glad the Minister noticed that there was a parliamentary by-election in Oldham last week. When he carefully studies the figures he will see that there are 1,814 fewer voters in Oldham West and Royton than there were at the general election. If those figures are extrapolated across the country, they show that more than 1 million fewer people are registered than were a year ago. That was predicted; it has happened intentionally. By design, this Minister is responsible for silencing the voices of more than 1 million voters in Britain. How does he feel about being the only Minister in British history to disfranchise 1 million people?

John Penrose: I see that the conspiracy theorists are out in force this morning. The entries that will have been crossed off the register as a result of the introduction of individual elector registration—a measure that was supported in principle by the Labour party—will be those for people who have died or moved house. Anybody who is a legitimate elector and who has a pulse will have been confirmed on the electoral register. If anybody is worried that they may not be registered, they can register online before May—it takes under three minutes, which is less than the time needed to boil an egg—and they will get their vote.

Government Digital Service (Welsh Language)

2. **Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC):** What steps the Government Digital Service is taking to ensure that Government Departments treat the Welsh and English languages equally on their websites when providing services in Wales. [902469]

The Minister without Portfolio (Robert Halfon): Mae'r fonheddiges anrhydeddys yn gofyn cwestiwn pwysig.

The Government Digital Service is committed to ensuring that the needs of Welsh language speakers are recognised and met. For example, the introduction of gov.uk now gives every Government organisation the ability to publish web content in Welsh. GDS has helped to produce exemplar Welsh language versions of the new digital services, such as the “register to vote” service, and it has put forward its digital design recommendations for Welsh language Government services.

Liz Saville Roberts: Diolch yn fawr iawn am y rhagymadrodd—roedd o'n arbennig o dda ac yn gynsail pwysig i'r Ty yma.

I thank the Minister very much for his introduction in Welsh. However, considering that not a single gov.uk departmental website states on its homepage that services are available in Welsh, people do not know that they can use Welsh. When will the digital service stop preventing Government Departments from fulfilling their legal duty to Welsh speakers?

Robert Halfon: I acknowledge that the hon. Lady's Welsh is more fluent than mine, and I look forward to her giving me a lesson or two at a future date. The Government are doing a huge amount to ensure support for Welsh digital services in Departments, and importantly, that is about quality, not quantity. She will know that every page of direct.gov.uk—the predecessor to gov.uk—was translated into Welsh. That ran to nearly 4,000 pages, but 95% of them were seen by fewer than 10 people per month, and half received no visits whatsoever. For gov.uk we are starting with user need, and working with Departments to ensure the best service for the user.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Diolch yn fawr iawn, Mr Llywydd. May I congratulate the Minister on the positive sentiments he is echoing, both literally and figuratively, with regard to the Welsh language? May I remind him that as we are the party that set up Sianel Pedwar Cymru and passed the Welsh Language Act 1993, there is absolutely no doubt about our commitment to the language of heaven?

Robert Halfon: I could not have put it better myself, especially in Welsh.

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP) rose—

Mr Speaker: On the subject of Welsh, rather than Gaelic, I call Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil.

Mr MacNeil: Tapadh leibh, Mgr Speaker, airson an cothrom seo a thoir dhomh. May I ask that the respect being shown to Welsh also be shown to Scottish Gaelic?

Robert Halfon: It is always a pleasure to answer the hon. Gentleman. He will be pleased to know that the Cabinet Office does the same for the whole UK.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Were the Minister to go to the Llyn peninsula and do a six-week Úlpan course, he would learn fluent Welsh, I can tell him. Having served in 1993 on the Welsh Language Bill,

of which our party can be very proud, I know how important it is that it be clearly laid out whether things are in English or Welsh. Sometimes they are in Welsh and then in English, and sometimes in English and then in Welsh. May we have a systematic approach across Government?

Robert Halfon: My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that we are doing a lot from the centre to encourage Departments to support better the needs of Welsh language speakers. Earlier this year, together with the Wales Office, we conducted user research into their needs, and as a result we are helping Departments to identify a set of Welsh language end-to-end user journeys, such as online self-assessment, that could be better supported by gov.uk.

Digital Technology

3. **Chloe Smith** (Norwich North) (Con): What plans he has to improve co-operation between Government Departments on the use of digital technology. [902470]

9. **Chris White** (Warwick and Leamington) (Con): What plans he has to improve co-operation between Government Departments on the use of digital technology. [902476]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Matthew Hancock): The UK has made great strides in digital government, but there is much more to do if we are to remain world beating. We set aside a total of almost £2 billion in the spending review for work to be led by the Government Digital Service to make this happen.

Chloe Smith: I agree that Departments must work together to enable people to use digital technology safely and efficiently, but will the Minister also give an example of how Government are working together to meet increased demand for cyber-security, including by engaging with citizens and businesses?

Matthew Hancock: Alongside digital transformation, it is vital that we have secure online activity, and our almost doubling of the budget for cyber-security over the Parliament will be a vital part of protecting not only Government services but the whole of the UK to ensure that people are safe online.

Chris White: The social value portal is an innovative way to provide advice and insight for communities, public bodies and business about the best way to achieve social value. Will the Minister outline how his Department is encouraging other Departments to take advantage of digital initiatives, such as the social value portal, to ensure greater implementation of the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012?

Matthew Hancock: Digital transformation can not only improve government and the economy but strengthen civil society, and the social value portal is a good example of working across Government to deliver some of the changes in the Public Services (Social Value) Act. There are eight funded projects, and I look forward to working with my hon. Friend and others to make them happen.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Many of us on the Opposition Benches applauded the Cabinet Office's innovative work in the last Government, but will the Minister comment on reports that the lack of resources and leadership in the Cabinet Office now means we are going backwards, rather than forwards, on digital innovation?

Matthew Hancock: The hon. Gentleman obviously missed the autumn statement, in which we doubled the funding for the Cabinet Office's world-beating Government Digital Service. We are providing £450 million over the Parliament to ensure not only digital transformation within Departments but strong leadership from the centre.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Given the recent media reports of cyber-security breaches in the private sector right across the United Kingdom, what steps are being taken ensure there will be no repeat of such breaches, particularly on data protection issues, in relation to Government Departments?

Matthew Hancock: Our country, both in government and the private sector, is under constant cyber-attack. We need to make sure we step up our game to respond to that. We are bringing in a national cyber centre, a single place of expertise under the GCHQ umbrella, which will clearly be able to co-ordinate and talk to wider society and business. This will ensure that the expertise is all in one place and properly funded to take this fight on.

Electoral Register

4. **Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of methods used to ensure the completeness and accuracy of the electoral register. [902471]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (John Penrose): The Electoral Commission will publish its assessment of the 2015 annual canvass in spring next year. In the meantime, there is a growing acceptance that while the annual canvass is an essential tool in maintaining complete and accurate registers, the processes and techniques we use to undertake it look increasingly out of date. They were developed from an analogue, not digital, world. As I said in my speech to the Policy Exchange in October, we will look to give electoral registration officers more discretion to adapt their canvass activities in order to make the canvass more efficient and effective in future.

Helen Hayes: Only 6.4% of homeowners are not on the electoral register, yet for those living in rented accommodation this figure is a massive 36.7%. The Government have made, and are making, it harder for generation rent to get on the property ladder, or obtain a secure tenancy. Is that why the Government do not want to hear the voices of private renters in our democracy?

John Penrose: We absolutely do want to hear everybody's voice in our democracy. One of the things we are aiming to do with the new approach, as I said in the speech I mentioned in my initial response, is look at other ways to make better contact with groups that are under-represented, and to make sure more of them use their voice and their democratic right.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): On the topic of using other ways to contact people to register to vote, has the Minister considered using credit reference agencies as a way to boost electoral registration?

John Penrose: That is an intriguing and, to me, new idea. I would be very interested to hear anything more the hon. Gentleman has to suggest on that.

Autumn Statement (Community and Voluntary Sector)

5. **Jo Cox** (Batley and Spen) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of changes announced in the spending review and autumn statement 2015 on local services provided by the community and voluntary sector. [902472]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Mr Oliver Letwin): I am glad to be able to tell the hon. Lady that the autumn statement significantly increased the funding for the voluntary and social sector in the Cabinet Office. That has enabled us to expand the National Citizen Service and our efforts on social impact bonds. I am delighted to see that in the hon. Lady's constituency, Kirklees Council has issued a very good compact with the voluntary and community sector, showing how the council can collaborate with them. I very much hope that the sector can take advantage of the extra funds now available.

Jo Cox: As the Minister will be aware, our country is in the grip of a growing social care crisis, with significant funding shortfalls projected by 2020. There are huge pressures on families, carers and the NHS in my constituency and nationwide. Will he say what specific plans he has to support those charities that are currently plugging the gap in terms of care, but are under enormous strain?

Mr Letwin: The charity sector as a whole has an income of about £40 billion a year, which is broadly stable. I have been looking at the council accounts for the hon. Lady's area. It turns out that Kirklees Council has £200 million in useable and unused reserves. The problems to which she refers are not real ones.

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): Tackling complex needs effectively has been something of a holy grail out of the reach of previous Governments, so I welcome the commitment in the autumn statement to £105 million in social impact bonds to tackle complex needs and perhaps get us closer to that holy grail.

Mr Letwin: I very much agree with my hon. Friend, who has been a passionate advocate, as I and others have been, of social impact bonds. This is a huge change in the way our country is organised. We can get to the point where we are actually paying for outcomes, not inputs. We lever up the amount the Government put in on behalf of the taxpayer, with huge contributions from the private sector and from those double bottom line investors. We can see a huge transformation in public services.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): Last week, the Minister said that the Government were committed to a flourishing civil society, but in the recent spending review it was exposed that the Office for Civil Society is to be hollowed out to just a handful of civil servants, and is now described by the sector as just a "name on a

door." Does the Minister agree that this is a clear admission that the big society agenda is now dead, was never anything but a cover for cuts to public services, has served its purpose, and is now to be wound down?

Mr Letwin: I am sorry that the hon. Lady did not take in what I said in my earlier answer. The funding for the voluntary and community sector increased significantly in the autumn statement. I pay tribute to officials in the Office for Civil Society, which answers to my hon. Friend the Minister for Civil Society. In my experience, those officials are among the finest in Whitehall. They will continue their work, and with that increased budget, they will be able to do more, not less.

Topical Questions

T1. [902498] **Chris White** (Warwick and Leamington) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Mr Oliver Letwin): The Cabinet Office is responsible for increasing the efficiency of government and for delivering the Government's agenda. I am happy to say that, with the help of the fine civil servants to whom I just referred, we are doing just that.

Chris White: Will the Minister outline the steps that the Government are taking to promote social enterprise, which is one of the fastest growing sectors in the economy?

Mr Letwin: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Government are totally committed to the social enterprise sector. That is partly about leading by example, which is why, in common with many of my hon. Friends, I serve in my village community shop—we all undertake these things. More than that, however, it is about creating the framework within which social enterprise can flourish. That comes back to the point made earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) that social impact bonds offer a whole new future for the social enterprise sector.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): Many volunteers in the emergency services, particularly the fire and rescue services, were again heroically leading the rescue efforts in the flooded north-west region this week. The service has been at the receiving end of some savage cuts on the frontline, resulting in untold pressures. In Cumbria alone, 87 jobs have been lost. Is it not time that as part of a modern civil contingency and emergency national strategic plan, the Government agreed that flood rescue should be made a fully resourced statutory duty of the fire and rescue service? Can he say whether this issue of national importance was discussed at the Cobra meetings last week?

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Matthew Hancock): I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place, and look forward to many exchanges with him on this and other matters. The fact of the matter is that we not only protected the budget for the police in the recent statement, but the fire service has done a fantastic job of reducing the amount of damaging fires over the last Parliament, improving its efficiency while all the time delivering its vital work to keep people safe.

T2. [902499] **Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): In the last year, there were 922 million visits to gov.uk websites. Is this in line with the Minister's expectations, and how can the service be further improved?

Matthew Hancock: Gov.uk is one of the first parts of the work that we have done to ensure that government is digitally enabled, making citizens' lives easier by making it easier for them to interact with government. The number of hits is far higher than anybody expected, which is a tribute to the work of the people who put it together. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Questions and answers must be heard.

T6. [902503] **Owen Thompson** (Midlothian) (SNP): According to a survey this month by Tungsten Network, 12% of the UK's 5.2 million small and medium-sized enterprises still have to wait more than 90 days to get paid by suppliers. Will the Minister update us on his Government's progress on meeting targets on prompt payments to suppliers?

Matthew Hancock: We changed the rules last year to ensure that when the Government buy from the private sector, payments must be made within 30 days—and that cascades all the way down the supply chain. I can also report that we have hit our target for a quarter of all Government procurement to go to small businesses, and we now want to increase that target from a quarter to a third.

T3. [902500] **Jeremy Quin** (Horsham) (Con): What plans does the Minister have to ensure that groups who are under-represented on the electoral roll register to vote?

Mr Letwin: We are fully committed to bringing more under-represented groups into electoral participation. That is why we are working with Operation Black Vote and other such groups to bring people in from the black and minority ethnic communities. I also draw my hon. Friend's attention to the very interesting experiment being tried at Sheffield University to nudge the student population to sign up for an automatic registration system. We are looking very carefully at that.

T7. [902504] **Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): If it does indeed transpire that there are fewer people on the new electoral register after the introduction of independent electoral registration, will the Government consider that to be a success or a failure?

Mr Letwin: I think what the hon. Gentleman is missing is the fact that, as a result of the measures that have been taken, people who were not at the addresses at which they had previously been registered will be eliminated. The creation of an accurate register is an aim of democracy, not a defect of democracy.

Mr Speaker: Last but not least, the voice of Filton and Bradley Stoke must be heard.

T4. [902501] **Jack Lopresti** (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): May I ask what the Government are doing to increase social mobility in the civil service?

Matthew Hancock: My hon. Friend has asked a very important question. If the civil service is to work to support the whole country, it needs to reflect the whole country, so we are taking steps across the board to increase social mobility as well as other kinds of diversity. One of the most exciting aspects of that is the huge apprenticeship scheme that now allows and encourages people from all backgrounds to pursue successful careers in the civil service.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [902483] **Richard Burden** (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 9 December.

The First Secretary of State and Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr George Osborne): The Prime Minister is visiting Poland and Romania, and I have been asked to reply.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Richard Burden: The Chancellor will know that, as Christmas draws closer, people who are having difficulty in making ends meet will not experience much good will in the season of good will if they fall into the clutches of loan sharks as they try to buy presents for their families, so why is he choosing now to cut the budget of the Birmingham-based England illegal money-lending team by a third, although it has helped 24,000 loan shark victims to get £63 million of illegal debts written off? Will he have a word with his friend the Business Secretary, who seems to be refusing to answer questions from the *Daily Mirror* on the subject?

Mr Osborne: Of course we take very seriously the issue of illegal loan sharks and, indeed, that of excessive interest charges on payday lending, which is why it was Conservatives who introduced the first ever cap on payday lending. As for the hon. Gentleman's specific question about funding for illegal money laundering and loan shark teams, we are considering the imposition of a levy on the industry to meet the requirements that he has identified.

Q2. [902484] **Mr David Burrowes** (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): Following last week's vote, can my right hon. Friend give us an update on action against the genocidal jihadists who not only attack Christians, Yazidis and Muslims, but pillage their churches, shrines and mosques? I welcome the announcement of £30 million to protect cultural heritage, but can we also ratify the Hague convention sooner rather than later?

Mr Osborne: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important issue. Let me briefly update the House on the military action that has taken place since we met last week. We have 16 aircraft conducting strikes, as well as

our Reaper drones. The Royal Air Force has flown 11 missions and conducted four strikes, principally against the oilfields, and we are also supporting Iraqi security forces. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will be in New York next week for talks on trying to bring an end to the horrendous conflict in Syria. As for the damage that is being done to the cultural artefacts in the area, we are providing £30 million as part of the cultural fund—I have discussed that with the director of the British Museum—and as for the Hague convention, that process is now moving apace.

Mr Speaker: I call Angela Eagle.

Hon. Members: Hurray!

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is nice to be given such a warm welcome.

Our hearts go out to all those who are suffering the consequences of the severe flooding in the north-west this week. Given that thousands of families are affected, the priority must be for the Government to give immediate help to all of them. Yet one year on from the 2013-14 floods, it emerged that only 15% of those affected had received payments from the Government's repair and renew scheme. Does the Chancellor agree that that cannot possibly be allowed to happen again? These people need urgent help now, so will he today give the House a guarantee that people will receive the help they need, and quickly?

Mr Osborne: First, let me welcome the hon. Lady to her place and the warm support she has on the other side. I join her in expressing the sympathy of the whole House to those who have been affected by these terrible floods. A record rainfall has hit Cumbria and Lancashire. The update is that we have just one severe flood warning still in place, power has been restored to 168,000 homes and the west coast main line is open, but we have to be there for the long term for these families.

We continue to support the immediate rescue efforts, and the military have deployed. On recovery and the question the hon. Lady asks, I can today announce a £50 million fund for families and businesses affected in the area. That will be administered by the local authorities to avoid some of the administrative problems to which she alluded in her question. When it comes to rebuilding the infrastructure of Cumbria, Lancashire and other areas affected, we are assessing now the damage to the flood defences and to the roads. Funds will be made available. One of the benefits of having a strong and resilient economy is that we can help people in need.

Ms Eagle: I thank the Chancellor for that answer but, from listening to him, you would not think that he has cut flood defence spending by £115 million this year. After visiting the floods in the Somerset levels in 2014, the Prime Minister told this House that

"money is no object in this relief effort"—[*Official Report*, 12 February 2014; Vol. 575, c. 840.]

and that whatever money was needed would be spent. I welcome the announcement that the Chancellor has just made, but will he confirm that the same will apply this time?

Mr Osborne: Absolutely. The money will be made available to those affected and to the communities who have seen their infrastructure damaged. Up to £5,000

will be made available to individual families to repair their homes and protect them against future flooding, and we will provide money to businesses that have seen their businesses ruined. There have been heartbreaking stories—we have all seen them on television—about businesses that have been affected. That money is available.

Because we have a strong and resilient economy, we are increasing the money we spend on our flood defences. It is just not the case that that has been reduced. The last Labour Government spent £1.5 billion on flood defences, and we will be spending £2 billion on flood defences and increasing maintenance spending. It is something we can do and we can help these communities precisely because we took the difficult decisions to fix our economy and public finances.

Ms Eagle: I thank the Chancellor for that, and we will hold him to account on the promises he has made today. However, I note that the Government's own figures show that their planned capital investment in flood defence will only protect one in eight of those households at risk.

I see that the Prime Minister cannot be with us to answer questions today because he is visiting Poland and Romania on the latest leg of his seemingly endless European "renegotiation tour." He has been jetting all over the place. No wonder we had to buy him his own aeroplane. So can the Chancellor tell us: how is it all going?

Mr Osborne: The good news is we have a party leader who is respected abroad. The Prime Minister is in central and eastern Europe because we are fighting for a better deal for Britain, something that never would have happened if there had been a Labour Government.

Ms Eagle: I have to tell the Chancellor that many of his own Back Benchers are pretty unimpressed with how it is going so far. The hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) has described the Prime Minister's renegotiation efforts as "pretty thin gruel", the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) has called them "lame" and "trivial", and yesterday the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) told the Press Gallery they were "not all that impressive". The Chancellor is well known for cultivating his Back Benchers, and there is absolutely nothing wrong with that, so may I ask him the question his own side want answering: given that the Prime Minister has pre-resigned, does he really aspire to be Britain's first post-EU Prime Minister?

Mr Osborne: I am not sure I would be quoting the views of Back Benchers if I was speaking for the Labour party at the moment. Most opposition parties are trying to get momentum; they are trying to get rid of it. We are fighting for a good deal for Britain in Europe, we are fighting to make the European economy more competitive for everyone and we are fighting to make sure that Britain, as a country that is not in the euro, gets a fair deal from the eurozone. That is what we are fighting for, but in the end this is something that we will put to the people of Britain in a referendum. The only reason that referendum is happening at all is that the Conservative party won the general election.

Ms Eagle: Instead of obsessing about issues in the Labour party, the Chancellor should be condemning the appalling activities in Conservative Future and attacking the Tory bullying scandal. I notice he did not answer the question about his own prime ministerial activities; I am not sure, but he might be worried about somebody a few places down from him on the Treasury Bench. *[Interruption.]* She knows who she is. If the Chancellor will not listen to the doubts of his own Back Benchers, perhaps he will listen to someone who has written in. I have got here a letter. It is from Donald of Brussels. He writes:

“Uncertainty about the future of the UK in the European Union is a destabilising factor.”

He’s right, isn’t he?

Mr Osborne: Since the Conservative party announced its policy on a referendum, we in this country have received the lion’s share of investment into Europe. That is because we have built a strong economy, we stand up for Britain’s interests abroad and we have made this a competitive place to grow and build a business. While we are quoting missives, let me tell the House that someone called Tony has been writing today. He happens to be the most successful Labour leader in history, and he describes the current Labour party as a complete tragedy. May I suggest that the hon. Lady asks some serious questions, about the health service, the economy, social care? She can ask any of these questions. She has got one more question; let’s hear it.

Ms Eagle: I prefer this quote from Tony:

“Just mouth the words ‘five more Tory years’ and you feel your senses and reason repulsed by what they have done to our country.”

We all know that the Chancellor is so preoccupied with his own leadership ambitions that he forgot about the day job, and that is why he ended up trying to slash working families tax credits in the Budget. Is it not about time that he focused on the national interest rather than his own interest? Three million UK jobs are linked to trade with the EU. Half our exports go there. That is what they are putting at risk by flirting with Brexit, and that is why we on this side of the House know that Britain is better off in.

Mr Osborne: I thought that the Labour party voted for the referendum when it came before the House of Commons. We are fighting for a better deal for Britain in Europe. The truth is that this week we have shown that we have an economic plan that is delivering for Britain. Whether it is well-funded flood defences, putting money into our national health service, backing teachers in our schools or introducing a national living wage, we are delivering security for the working people of Britain. Their economic and national security would be put at risk if the Labour party ever got back into office.

Q4. [902486] **Caroline Nokes** (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): I recently visited the apprentice workshop of David Wilson Homes and saw at first hand the work the construction industry is doing to support apprenticeships in Hampshire. What more can schools do to promote apprenticeships as a valuable alternative to post-16 academic study?

Mr Osborne: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Schools have a legal duty to provide pupils with information on the full range of training and education available. Schools in her constituency can tell their pupils about the increase in the number of apprenticeship places—3 million in this Parliament—we are funding. That is a huge commitment to young people in this country and a big commitment to the construction industry. We want homes to be built. One of the challenges is getting skilled people into that industry, and no doubt that was raised by the business she spoke to, but the 3 million apprentices will help.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): Occasionally, highly toxic and dangerous materials are transported around the country. Are not the public right to expect the highest safety standards and full co-operation between the responsible public agencies?

Mr Osborne: Absolutely—that co-operation is expected. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman is talking about the transportation of nuclear materials from the Faslane base on the Clyde. I have met the local teams and seen how they transport the nuclear materials. If he has something else he wants to ask me about, go ahead.

Angus Robertson: There are growing reports in the north of Scotland about plans to transport on public roads dangerous nuclear material, potentially including nuclear weapons-grade uranium, from the Dounreay nuclear facility to Wick airport. It is believed that from there it will be flown to the United States. What will that nuclear material be used for, and has the Chancellor or any of his colleagues spoken with a single Minister in the Scottish Government about this?

Mr Osborne: The transportation of nuclear materials across this country has happened over many decades. There are established procedures for that, and the Royal Marines and the police service in Scotland provide the security. If the right hon. Gentleman has specific concerns about the plans for that transportation, he can raise them with us. As I say, arrangements are in place to ensure that we protect the public.

Q5. [902487] **Steve Brine** (Winchester) (Con): The Chancellor will know that the Prime Minister said in his recent conference speech that we have to get away from the “lock ’em up or let ’em out” mentality in respect of prison reform. That has to be right because the prison system is costing our constituents a fortune. Does the Chancellor agree that the time for rehabilitation that works is now, and that we should not be afraid to look at other jurisdictions to find examples and new ideas to tackle this ongoing state failure?

Mr Osborne: My hon. Friend is right to raise prison reform. People who commit crimes should go to prison, but prisons should be suitable places to rehabilitate prisoners. Some of our Victorian prisons are not suitable, which is why we will close them, knock them down, build desperately needed housing in our cities, and build modern prisons on the outskirts of our cities. I am incredibly proud that a Conservative Government are taking on this progressive social reform.

Q3. [902485] **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): They are a great British institution and earn billions for our economy, so I am sure the Chancellor will share my concern that two curry houses a week are closing due to Government policies and the fact that the proposed specialist colleges have failed. As a fan himself, will he review the situation? He once likened the elements of a strong economy to those of a good curry, so will he take action to head off the coming curry crisis?

Mr Osborne: We all enjoy a great British curry, but we want the curry chefs to be trained in Britain so that we can provide jobs for people here in this country. That is what our immigration controls provide.

Q12. [902494] **Karl McCartney** (Lincoln) (Con): My right hon. Friend is well aware, from my repeated representations to him and his colleagues, of the need for a southern relief road and eastern bypass for Lincoln, which have been delayed by bureaucracy for nearly 100 years. He and his Government colleagues are well acquainted with the need to drive growth and local economic wellbeing by utilising appropriate infrastructure improvements to fuel the midlands engine. What would he say to my constituents, should he visit the beautiful city of Lincoln, other than to tell them that any new road is eventually better than no road?

Mr Osborne: I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing £50 million of extra funding for Lincoln and ensuring that a bypass will go ahead. I have spoken to him. I know he has concerns that the bypass will not be big enough and that it should be a dual-lane bypass. Let us continue to have those conversations. We both need to ensure that local authorities agree with his assessment, and I am happy to help him with that task.

Q6. [902488] **Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Since the Chancellor's Budget in July, I have asked time and again how he intends to make women prove, in order to qualify for tax credits, that they had their third child as a result of rape. Will he now admit that his abhorrent, vile policy is completely unworkable, and will he drop the rape clause?

Mr Osborne: It is perfectly reasonable to have a welfare system that is fair not just for those who need it but for those who pay for it. We have identified the specific cases that the hon. Lady refers to in her question, in which women have been victims of domestic abuse—or, indeed, rape—and that is why we are consulting and discussing changes to protect vulnerable women.

Q14. [902496] **Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): More than 4,000 apprenticeships have been created in my constituency since 2010, and I recently met representatives of In-Comm Training and a group of small local businesses to discuss skills and apprenticeships. What are the Government doing to help small businesses to help people into training and employment, thereby securing the economy of the midlands engine for future generations?

Mr Osborne: The great news is that jobs are being created in the midlands engine, including in my hon. Friend's constituency, and we are investing in infrastructure there as well. We are also investing in the skills of the

next generation through the apprenticeships she mentions, and we are backing small businesses by cutting the corporation tax they pay and by increasing employment allowance so that they can take on more people without paying the jobs tax.

Q7. [902489] **Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Médecins sans Frontières reports that despite giving GPS co-ordinates several of its hospitals have been bombed by coalition and, in particular, Assad forces in Syria, Yemen and Afghanistan, killing medics as well as patients. With so many forces involved in airstrikes, will the Chancellor explain how the Government propose to avoid this happening in future?

Mr Osborne: The hon. Lady mentions the tragic bombing of the hospital. A review is going on to ensure that the coalition has accurate information for its strikes. When it comes to Yemen, we are working with the Saudi Government to make sure that they can review this information and that it is accurate. I am afraid we have no control over the Syrian Government and Assad, which is one of the reasons we would like to see Assad go.

Q15. [902497] **Mr Alan Mak** (Havant) (Con): The regeneration of Dunsbury Hill Farm in my constituency will create up to 3,500 new jobs, which is good news for an area where unemployment has halved since 2010. Will the Chancellor commit to continuing investment in the Solent regional economy, an area that much prefers his big Red Book to any other type?

Mr Osborne: I am delighted to hear about the regeneration of Dunsbury Hill Farm. It is part of the good news in my hon. Friend's area, where, thanks to local businesses and to his work as a new MP in attracting infrastructure and investment into his constituency, the claimant count is down by 25% in the past year alone. I am glad he likes the Red Book of the Government and does not have so much time for the little red book brandished by Opposition Members.

Q8. [902490] **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): During the autumn statement, the Chancellor casually removed vital bursary support from student nurses. I have since spoken to a number of nurses and some of the 4,000 nursing students at my local university, all of whom say that they would not have been able to study nursing without vital bursary support from the Scottish Government. What will he say to the aspiring nurses across the rest of the UK who may be prevented from pursuing their dreams of becoming a nurse?

Mr Osborne: Currently, two thirds of people in England who apply for nurse training courses are turned down. That cannot be right, as it means hospitals increasingly rely on agency staff or overseas nurses. We are reforming the education of nurses so that those who apply for nursing places are much more likely to get them.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): Carlisle and Cumbria have experienced a traumatic few days, with the devastating floods. It was good that the Prime Minister saw at first hand the tremendous work of the emergency services, the issues relating to the flood defences and of course

the direct impact of those floods on local families. As part of the recovery, Cumbria Community Foundation, a highly respected, county-wide charitable organisation, has launched a flood appeal. I wrote to the Prime Minister asking for the Government's support for the appeal, as it would help many affected people right across the county. Would the Chancellor be able to offer such support from the Government towards this much-needed fund?

Mr Osborne: First, everyone here would pay tribute to the people of Carlisle, the extraordinary resilience they have shown and the acts of friendship that neighbours have shown to those affected by the terrible floods. Before the Prime Minister left for central Europe this morning, he asked me to make sure we would be able to help on the specific point my hon. Friend raises, and did raise with the Prime Minister, and I can say that we will support the work the Cumbria Community Foundation does and we will match, by up to £1 million, the money it is raising for its local flood appeal.

Q9. [902491] **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): When the Chancellor tripled student tuition fees, he set the repayment threshold at £21,000. He has now frozen the threshold, and the Institute for Fiscal Studies tells us that many students will bear many extra thousands of pounds in repayments. Given that he has broken his promise, will he send students an apology or just the bill?

Mr Osborne: There seems to be collective amnesia among Labour Members: they introduced tuition fees and the payment threshold was £15,000. We have increased it to £21,000, which enables us to fund the lifting of the cap and more people who are qualified to go to university. I would have thought, and I would have hoped, that on this day the hon. Gentleman welcomed the big investment we are making in Cambridge, not least with the renovation of the famous Cavendish laboratory.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): The Bexhill-Hastings link road will finally open this month, delivering a business park, new homes for a new labour market and a countryside park. The road has been talked about for decades but it has been commissioned and built in the past five. Will the Chancellor join me in welcoming new business to relocate to Bexhill and Hastings, and to expand?

Mr Osborne: I would certainly encourage businesses to relocate to my hon. Friend's area. He is right about the link road: for decades people called for it, and although for all those years there was a Conservative MP for Bexhill, there was a Labour MP for Hastings for many of those years and nothing happened. Now that we have Conservative MPs in both Bexhill and Hastings, we are getting the investment the local area needs.

Q10. [902492] **Alison McGovern** (Wirral South) (Lab): On 7 September, the Prime Minister told me that he could not remove refugees from the migration target because of the requirements of the Office for National Statistics, but I wrote to the ONS and it told me that in fact this would be possible. Can the Chancellor therefore demonstrate that Britain will do its bit and remove refugees from the migration target?

Mr Osborne rose—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us hear the Chancellor.

Mr Osborne: Let me say something surprising: we talk to each other in this Government! The Cabinet actually gets round the table and has meetings. We discuss things, we agree, and then we move forward—the Labour party should try it.

The Office for National Statistics is independent, but Britain is doing its bit by taking 20,000 refugees from the Syrian refugee camps. We have always provided a home for genuine asylum seekers.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): Under current toy regulations, small children can be engulfed in flames by 3 cm in one second. Will the Chancellor encourage my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to intervene to see whether the Business Secretary can introduce a statutory instrument to improve the flammability of children's play and dress-up costumes?

Mr Osborne: My hon. Friend is right to raise that case. We all saw the tragedy that befell the family of the "Strictly Come Dancing" presenter and the campaign that her family have undertaken to change the regulations. It is true that we do not have the same flame-retardant regulations for children's fancy dress costumes. That seems wrong. I know that my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary is looking at the matter and will ensure that that changes.

Q11. [902493] **Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): Will the Chancellor take this opportunity to correct the bizarre claim made yesterday by Donald Trump about parts of London being no-go areas for the Metropolitan police? Will he point out to Mr Trump that relationships between the Muslim communities of London and the police are in fact excellent?

Mr Osborne: The right hon. Gentleman speaks for everyone in this House. The Metropolitan police do a brilliant job, and they have fantastic relations with British Muslims. British Muslims have made a massive contribution to our country. Donald Trump's comments fly in the face of the founding principles of the United States, which have proved such an inspiration to so many people over the past 200 years. The best way to defeat such nonsense is to engage in robust, democratic debate and make it very clear that his views are not welcome.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): Cornwall Hospice Care, which has one hospice on the border of my constituency, is well appreciated and respected by my constituents, but it cannot run to capacity because it receives only 11% of its funding from the NHS. Will the Chancellor work with me and my other colleagues in Cornwall to see what more money can be put into our hospices, and Cornwall Hospice Care?

Mr Osborne: I know that my hon. Friend is a strong champion of his community and of the hospice he mentions. We have taken steps to help the hospice movement, not least by removing the VAT it paid in the previous Parliament. We want to get the right balance. It is good that our hospices are funded in part by local

charities and supported so strongly by the local community, but they also need the backing of the NHS. Of course, as we have a strong economy, we are now putting that money into the NHS so that it can help the hospice movement.

Q13. [902495] **Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab): If business rates are localised without equalisation, my own authority of Gateshead will lose £9.4 million a year on top of the proposed severe cuts to the revenue support grant. The seven north-east local enterprise partnership authorities will lose £186 million a year and the combined 12 authorities in the north-east £223 million a year. Meanwhile, the City of London will gain £222 million and Westminster £440 million. How does that help the Chancellor's vision of the northern powerhouse?

Mr Osborne: The top-up and tariff system will apply as we devolve business rates to reflect the discrepancies the hon. Gentleman identifies. I would have thought that the Labour party supported the devolution of business rates. It is a massive opportunity for local areas to grow and to see the benefits of that growth. When it comes to the northern powerhouse, we have the fantastic announcement today of the new train franchises, which mean more than £1 billion going into new trains, faster journeys, and better journey experiences for people in the north of England. He should get behind it.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): An important report was published today showing that the TV debates at the general election were a great success, engaging people who are not normally interested in politics, particularly young people. Will the acting Prime Minister—I know he might have a personal interest in this matter—encourage TV debates at the next general election?

Mr Osborne: The TV debates are decided in discussions between the political parties and the broadcasters. I think that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister did exceptionally well in them last time.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): I understand that the Home Secretary has banned 84 hate preachers from entering the UK. Will the Government lead by example and consider making Mr Donald Trump the 85th?

Mr Osborne: I think that the best way to confront the views of someone like Donald Trump is to engage in a robust, democratic argument about why he is profoundly wrong about the contribution of American Muslims, and indeed British Muslims. That is the best way to deal with Donald Trump and his views, rather than trying to ban presidential candidates.

Point of Order

12.36 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs was questioned on Monday about the availability of funds from the EU solidarity fund to help constituents, such as mine in Cumbria, who are suffering the after-effects of the floods. She was not aware of the fund at the time. Have you since received any representations from Ministers indicating that they wish to make a statement to the House on how the Government can claim funds from the EU solidarity fund to help those constituents?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, and I will remember the exchange to which he alludes. The short answer is that I have received no indication of any wish on the part of a Minister to make a statement on that matter. However, the hon. Gentleman's assiduity, and indeed his ingenuity, are as close to legendary as makes no difference. Therefore, if he is dissatisfied in days to come, I have a hunch that he will try to ensure that the matter can be aired, not with me, but with a Minister.

Armed Forces Covenant (Implementation) (United Kingdom)

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

12.37 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to establish an armed forces covenant scheme; to make provision about the requirements and obligations upon public authorities and agencies in relation to serving and former members of the United Kingdom's armed forces contained within that scheme; to establish a means of providing audit and accountability in relation to the performance of the scheme against its objective; to amend the Equality Act 2010 and section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1988; and for connected purposes.

Our armed forces are one of the institutions that bind the United Kingdom together. The sacrifices that they have made over generations are a common loss that presents us with an obligation towards those who have volunteered to put themselves in harm's way on our behalf. Memorials in every art and part of the United Kingdom stand as a sad testimony to their sacrifices. For these reasons, the fulfilment of the military covenant should be a cause that demands our wholehearted support.

The concept of the covenant is not a new one, but the legacy of the terrorist campaigns in Northern Ireland, the Iraq wars and the Afghanistan conflict have led to renewed focus on what it means and how it is to be delivered. The term "moral" is rarely used in these post-modernist times, but it is right to describe the covenant as a "moral obligation" to members of the armed forces and their families. That is exactly what it was, is, and forever will be. Therefore, it is an obligation that should be fulfilled in letter and in spirit across the United Kingdom. Sadly, it is not, and that is why I present this Bill today.

At this point, I pay tribute to Mrs Brenda Hale, a DUP Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly who lost her husband in Afghanistan and who has championed this cause on behalf of all servicemen and ex-servicemen and women in Northern Ireland.

In Northern Ireland, by the Government's own admission, the military covenant is not being fulfilled. The Northern Ireland Office has claimed that 93% of it is being fulfilled. That figure has not been independently assessed, and when I outline some of the problems, Members may wonder how the NIO reached it. However, for the moment, let us take its word and ask two simple questions. When in battle, does a member of the Royal Air Force, the Royal Navy or the Army risk 93% for their country and their comrades? Of course they do not: they risk everything; they risk all. When in battle, does a member of the Royal Air Force, the Royal Navy or the Army who comes from Northern Ireland or lives in Northern Ireland risk only 93% while those in Great Britain risk 100%? Of course they do not: they risk all, just the same as servicemen based in other parts of the United Kingdom.

So where are we failing in our moral obligation? There are four primary areas in which the covenant is not being fulfilled. The first area is priority of treatment in the national health service for wounded, injured and sick veterans. Subject to the clinical needs of others,

wounded, injured and sick veterans in Great Britain are entitled to priority national health service treatment for conditions that are attributable to their service in the armed forces. Priority treatment is not available in the same way for veterans in Northern Ireland, not only because they are often reluctant to declare previous armed forces service on security grounds, but as a result of restrictions contained in section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

The second area is priority for social housing. Local authorities in Great Britain are required to consider service leavers as having a local connection, and they are given points accordingly. In addition, further priority is often given to veterans on the waiting list for social housing in Great Britain. Again, this is not the case in Northern Ireland because of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act.

Thirdly, provision for in vitro fertilisation treatment is not available on the same grounds for veterans who require such treatment because of service-related injuries. There are three entitlement cycles in Scotland and England, but only one is available in Northern Ireland. Each cycle costs about £3,500, although the numbers involved are small.

The fourth area is the waiving of domestic rates or council tax for unoccupied property. In Great Britain, local authorities offer a 50% discount on council tax in respect of empty properties owned by service personnel who live in Ministry of Defence property elsewhere as a result of serving in the armed forces. This valuable concession is not available in Northern Ireland.

In looking at issues as important as health and housing, it is legitimate to question how a failure rate of only 7% is arrived at by the Northern Ireland Office. This failure of delivery is not simply due to a slow or disconnected bureaucracy, but to the particular circumstances in Northern Ireland, especially the section 75 provision which requires that key groups are entitled to protection and is now interpreted as a legal barrier to the implementation of the covenant in Northern Ireland.

Lord Ashcroft's review of the veterans policy, which was commissioned by the Prime Minister, recognised that barrier and proposed that Parliament amend section 75, "to enable Service Leavers and veterans to receive the recognition and provision they deserve."

Neither the Ministry of Defence nor the Northern Ireland Office has acted on that recommendation so far, despite the fact that section 75 was amended to include Travellers. It is hard to understand why members of the travelling community should be regarded by the Northern Ireland Office as being more worthy of preferential treatment than members of the armed forces. That is why I and my party have chosen, through this Bill, to highlight the inaction.

Lord Ashcroft's proposals would fit with the approach taken in the United States of America, where the landmark Civil Rights Act 1964 provided specific protection for Government action for veterans. Alternatively, my party's Westminster manifesto proposed that, rather than exempt action for veterans from section 75, they should be afforded the same protections as section 75 groups. That proposal is not universally accepted in Northern Ireland, and I have no doubt that that is one of the reasons for the NIO's reluctance to make changes to the 1998 Act.

Sinn Féin and the Social Democratic and Labour party have opposed the changes needed to enable the full implementation of the military covenant. Many find their attitude disappointing and disgraceful. Those signing up to join the armed forces are not exclusively from the Protestant and Unionist community. The services recruit from all areas, faiths and political allegiances in Northern Ireland, yet both Sinn Féin and the SDLP seem happy to abandon them.

In conclusion, a moral obligation is not met unless it is wholeheartedly and fully met. In Northern Ireland, it is not being met, and thus the moral obligation is not being fulfilled in the United Kingdom as a whole. Today I have shown the failures and offered this House solutions. This Parliament must now commit itself and act to fulfil the moral obligations to members of the armed forces and their families.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Sammy Wilson, Mr David Nuttall, Kate Hoey, Jim Shannon, Gordon Henderson, Mr Gregory Campbell, Mr Jeffrey M. Donaldson, Tom Tugendhat, Mr Nigel Dodds and Ian Paisley present the Bill.

Sammy Wilson accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on 29 January 2016, and to be printed (Bill 106).

Opposition Day

[12TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Mental Health

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

12.48 pm

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House believes that mental health should be treated with the same priority as physical health and recognises the importance of promoting good mental health from childhood through to adulthood; believes that not enough progress has been made in translating this House's commitment to parity of esteem between mental and physical health into practice; notes with concern that the King's Fund has reported widespread evidence of poor-quality care across mental health services, and the latest available figures show a rise in suicide rates and the number of detentions under the Mental Health Act 1983 increasing by 10 per cent in the past year alone; further notes the delay in the publication of NHS England's Mental Health Taskforce report; notes the concerns that have been raised with the Scottish Government regarding the rate of inappropriate admissions of young people to non-specialist facilities for mental health treatment which have increased by 38 per cent since 2011; is concerned by the absence of data on NHS spending on mental health services since 2011-12; opposes the Government's decision not to enshrine the right to psychological therapies in the NHS Constitution; and calls on the Government to urgently rectify this systemic inequity in entitlement to treatments, reinstate the annual survey of investment in mental health services and develop and implement in full a new strategy to improve the Government's cross-departmental response to mental health.

It is a privilege to open this debate as the first shadow Minister for mental health. The fact that we are having this debate is testament to just how seriously the Opposition consider mental health. The issue affects one in four of us every year, yet it has been neglected for far too long. Mental health has come out of the shadows in recent years, and I know that many Members on both sides of the House feel very strongly about this issue. There have been many important steps forward, but talk to anyone with a mental health condition and they will tell you that they still face stigma, prejudice and discrimination. Sadly, there remain many areas in which there has not been the progress for which we had hoped.

Labour Members have deep concerns about our nation's mental health and the services and support that are available. Three years ago, my Labour colleagues in the House of Lords won the fight to ensure that the Government wrote parity of esteem between mental health and physical health into law. However, the gap between the rhetoric we hear from this Government and the reality for patients on the ground is growing wider.

I am sure Members on both sides of the House have many constituency cases that echo such concerns. In my first few months in this position, I have been struck by the thousands of messages I have received from people up and down the country. They are desperate to see a change in how our society approaches mental health. This strength of feeling is not surprising. On this Government's watch, there has been an increase in the number of patients who report a poor experience of community mental health care. More patients have to travel hundreds of miles just to get a bed. The number

of children being treated on adult wards, which the Mental Health Act 1983 rightly says should not happen, has risen again this year. The number of people becoming so ill that they had to be detained under the Mental Health Acts leapt by 10% in the past year. The level of suicides, particularly among men under the age of 45, has been at its highest since 2001.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend share my concern about the scale of the stress—by common agreement, often inappropriate stress—on the police as a consequence of the pressure on emergency mental health services? My local police have advised me that they sometimes spend half a shift with severely mentally ill patients who are queuing for access to acute mental health hospitals. That is bad for the police and bad for the patients, and is a reflection of the terrible pressures on the acute mental health sector.

Luciana Berger: I thank my hon. Friend for making that very important intervention. There are too many stories of our blue light services—not just the police, but our ambulance and fire services—being under incredible pressure in contending with such issues. I believe that the Government must do more to address that issue.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I am pleased the hon. Lady has called this debate. Does she share my view that yesterday's report on perinatal mental health makes incredibly disturbing reading? Many women have lost their lives because of the absence of services. We must commit to making sure that every part of the country has good services to ensure people get through such difficult times.

Luciana Berger: I will come on to the very serious issue of perinatal mental health that the right hon. Gentleman raises. Again, we should all be very concerned about that issue.

I am very concerned that there has been a psychiatry recruitment crisis, with a 94% increase in vacant and unfilled consultant posts. The NHS constitution treats mental health and physical health differently. The Government claim to be increasing mental health budgets, but patients and professionals tell a different story. Ever since Ministers discontinued the annual survey of investment in mental health three years ago, we do not have an accurate picture of spending on mental health in our country.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an important point about the transparency of spending. Last June, I asked the then Health Minister, the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), who is in his place, when figures would be published, and he told me that the Government were working with NHS England to provide meaningful data. Last month, the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) tabled a question for written answer asking when the information would be available. It is still not available. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government should come clean?

Luciana Berger: I thank my hon. Friend for his very important intervention. One of the key points of my speech is that there is so much we should do to shine a spotlight on what is happening to mental health funding right across the country.

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): The hon. Lady is of course right that this subject is vital. The Government are working hard on it. Will she join me in welcoming the Government's promise and commitment to bringing in an extra £600 million for mental health services, as set out in the autumn statement?

Luciana Berger: My concern partly rests on the fact that, given the cuts we saw during the past five years, we are only returning to the levels of spending on mental health that we had back in 2010. I have asked a number of questions about how the £600 million might be presented, but I am waiting for the answers to see how the Government will allocate that money. I will come on to the pledges that the Government have made and what is actually happening in reality.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con) *rose*—

Luciana Berger: I will make a little progress, because I have my speech to get through and I am conscious that many Members on both sides of the House want to contribute to this debate.

We are calling for three things that we believe will make a difference. First and foremost—several interventions have referred to this—we are asking the Government to restore transparency to address the murky picture of mental health funding. Secondly, we are asking Ministers to address the fundamental inequality that currently exists in our NHS constitution. Finally, we are asking the Government to prioritise prevention and to implement a fully cross-departmental plan to prevent mental health problems from developing in the first place.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree that transparency is known to be a very effective lever for the Government to use to improve quality? Does she welcome the steps taken by the Government to increase transparency in the performance of mental health services?

Luciana Berger: I do not share the hon. Lady's view. Just in the last week, I have written down a list of 10 things about which I have asked the Government for figures, but about which I have been told that they do not hold information centrally. Many of the statistics that were available previously are no longer available. The central request we are making today is to restore the transparency, particularly on how much is spent on mental health, which the Government took away in 2011-12. Many Members on both sides of the House would like to know those figures.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful speech. On prevention, is she as concerned as I am that a recent report by the University of Liverpool has estimated that an additional 590 suicides were associated with the work capability assessment process, a Government policy, between 2010 and 2013?

Luciana Berger: I am fully aware of the research that my hon. Friend mentions. It was carried out by a number of academics from the University of Liverpool, including one of my constituents. I have studied the research very carefully. It highlights many areas of concern, particularly the changes and reforms made by

the Department for Work and Pensions that have had a negative impact. I will address the very point she raises later in my remarks.

Nowhere is this gap between Ministers' rhetoric and the reality more evident than when we look at investment in our mental health services. Only last year, funding for mental health trusts was cut by 20% more than that for other hospitals. In 2011-12, total investment in mental health dropped for the first time in a decade. Perhaps unsurprisingly, in the same year the Government stopped publishing how much they invest in mental health.

Last year, I had to use freedom of information requests to get to the bottom of how much clinical commissioning groups were allocating to mental health: 67% of those who responded spent less than 10% of their budget on mental health, despite the fact that mental health accounts for 23% of the total burden of disease. This year, the Minister for Community and Social Care promised to do something about this. He said he would ensure that investment in mental health by clinical commissioning groups increased in this financial year in line with the increase in their overall budgets. However, as the Government do not publish a central record of these data, I had to use the Freedom of Information Act to find out for myself. Over the past summer, I found that more than one in three CCGs were not meeting the Government's expectation. That is just one of many Government pledges on mental health that have not been translated into reality.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): The hon. Lady is making an important speech, but may I encourage her to be as bipartisan or as all-party in her approach as possible on this vital issue? It is very good to see the Leader of the Opposition and the Health Secretary in their places, both of whom have a long-standing interest in this issue. Will the hon. Lady at least accept that the all-party campaign led by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb)—very substantially assisted by Alastair Campbell, who has some considerable expertise in this area—was successful, beyond the scenes, in persuading the Chancellor to produce an extra £600 million for mental health? All of us will try to ensure that that money is spent well, but let us try to do so with an all-party or bipartisan approach.

Luciana Berger: I know that the right hon. Gentleman has worked hard on these issues, as have many Members across the House. My job is to hold the Government to account for the promises they have made, and that is what I am endeavouring to do. Where there are opportunities for us to work together we should be keen for that to happen, but the Government have not delivered on their previous pledges. I am keen to know the detail of how that £600 million will be allocated and over what period, and we look forward to that information coming forward.

The spend of clinical commissioning groups is just one pledge on mental health that has not translated into reality, and—unfortunately—another is the commitment to spending £250 million on child and adolescent mental health services this year. In response to a parliamentary question, the Government have admitted that there will be a £77 million shortfall on what they have pledged to spend this year. With those spending promises so far unfulfilled, Labour Members are concerned about the

lack of transparency on mental health spending. That is why we are calling on the Government to reinstate the annual survey of investment in mental health services.

It is not only in funding that equality for mental health has yet to be achieved, because a huge disparity remains at the heart of our NHS. The NHS constitution sets out the rights to which patients, the public and staff are entitled, and the pledges that the NHS is committed to achieving. The constitution enshrines our rights to access drugs and other treatments, but it does not extend that right to talking therapies. Recently, the Government consulted on adding a right to psychological therapies to the NHS constitution, but they decided not to include it in its latest version. That decision reinforces the existing bias in the system against mental health, and if the Government are serious about fair access to cost-effective mental health treatment, they must address that fundamental disparity.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I am disappointed with the tribal attacks on the Scottish health service in the motion, and it does not say much for the new politics promised by the Leader of the Opposition. Has the hon. Lady reflected on the situation in Wales—the only part of the UK where the Labour party is in charge—because the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges in Wales, which represents 16 colleges and facilities, said last month that mental health services in my country face significant inequalities? How will the hon. Lady respond to those concerns?

Luciana Berger: I have heard from my colleagues in Scotland about the challenges that they face with mental health services, and it is right that we should raise that issue during this debate. I have also had the opportunity to meet my colleagues in Wales and see the fantastic work that they are doing. Their pioneering piece of mental health legislation, which came into force in 2012, is the first for any developed country in terms of how it treats mental health, and it ensures that patients have a proper dedicated plan that considers not only their health needs, but their support, personal care, wellbeing, education and training. I look forward to working with my colleagues in Wales and to supporting them in the fantastic work that they are doing.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Lab): My hon. Friend made an important point about access to talking therapies. One of the biggest consequences of not having such access is the fact that the only option available to clinicians is medication—often in very inappropriate circumstances—which can lead to people becoming dependent, sometimes for a long period of time. This is not just a minor matter about whether this provision is in the constitution; that lack of access leads to inappropriate intervention that can have a lifelong effect on many people.

Luciana Berger: I thank my hon. Friend for his important intervention. I am sure that too many of us hear from our constituents about how that sort of experience has been replicated across the country. We know that the number of prescriptions issued for mental health issues has risen exponentially and is into the millions for people who have to access drugs. Sometimes that is because they cannot access talking therapies, which should be of serious concern to us all.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Does the hon. Lady welcome the Government's commitment to introducing waiting time standards so that patients do not have to wait a long time to get access to a talking therapy? This Government introduced that measure, but the Labour Government did not.

Luciana Berger: The Labour Government created the services in the first place. In order to introduce a waiting time standard those services have to exist, which was not the case previously. We had to address the chronic underfunding of mental health that existed pre-1997, and we introduced the improving access to psychological therapies programme, of which we are incredibly proud. As things develop, it is right that those waiting time standards come forward. The Labour party had waiting time standards in place for all consultant-led services, which included physical and mental health. I am proud of that fact but disappointed that in too many cases the same equality is not also applied to mental health. If the Government are serious about fair access to cost-effective mental health treatment, they must address that fundamental disparity. That is why we are calling on the Government to commit to ensuring that all patients, regardless of whether they need a drug, a physical health treatment or a psychological therapy, have the same rights.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con) *rose—*

Luciana Berger: I hope the hon. Gentleman will forgive me but I will make some progress as I am conscious of time.

Ensuring that people have access to help early on is critical to preventing people from becoming ill, but in recent years, short-sighted cuts to key prevention, early intervention, and community services have been having a devastating impact. When the number of children with a mental health problem who turn up at A and E has doubled in recent years, when one person in prison takes their own life every four days, when a young person who is self-harming is told that because they are not suicidal they do not meet the threshold for help, and when a woman with an eating disorder is turned away from specialist services because her body mass index is not low enough, it is clear that people are not getting the right help early enough.

Too often, mental health problems are ignored, and it is only when they reach crisis point that they receive attention. More and more I hear from mental health professionals across the country that their middle-tier community services, psychologists and counsellors are being stripped out. Apart from the obvious devastating human cost, which impacts on people's ability to hold down a job, keep a tenancy, pay the mortgage and maintain relationships with partners, friends and family, those decisions will cost our NHS and local authorities more as they struggle to deal with the consequences of serious ill health that could have been prevented. That cost is not insignificant. Recent studies have put the cost of mental ill health to our society at a staggering £105 billion a year. How can the Secretary of State and this Tory Government justify that? Ensuring that people can access support when they need it is an urgent priority, but if we are to ensure that our services are sustainable into the future, we must do much more to prevent people from becoming ill in the first place.

[Luciana Berger]

The right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) mentioned perinatal mental health problems, which affect up to 20% of women at some point during pregnancy and/or the year after the birth of their baby. Left untreated, perinatal mental health problems cost our economy £8 billion a year. Is it not appalling that even if those women seek help, they are not always guaranteed the specialist support they need? The number of mother and baby units has dropped since 2010. The Government's pledge to spend £15 million on perinatal mental health this year was welcome, but as of this month—according to an answer I received to a parliamentary question—the Government have spent just one fifteenth of what they promised. That is a bitter disappointment because intervening early in perinatal mental health does not just help to improve the health and wellbeing of the mothers affected, but it also improves that of their children.

James Morris: May I take the hon. Lady back to her point about the IAPT programme that was introduced by the previous Labour Government and is an illustration of where both parties have delivered success? It may be good to enshrine psychological therapies in the NHS constitution, but we need to build more capacity in the system to deliver on access standards. This is not something that we can just write into the constitution; we need to increase choice and access to psychological therapies across the country.

Luciana Berger: I do not think it is an either/or situation; it is about how we do both, and I will come on to that in the rest of my remarks.

We know that 75% of people who have mental health problems in working life first experienced symptoms in childhood or adolescence, yet only about 6% of the mental health budget is spent on child and adolescent mental health services. We need to do more to focus attention on children, young people and, crucially, prevention, and here we must look to our places of learning, our workplaces and our communities. We need schools and colleges that promote good mental health. We need to ensure that all children have access to high-quality social and emotional learning so that they acquire the skills to express how they feel and develop an understanding and awareness of good mental health. We were concerned to read the 2013 Ofsted report on personal, social, health and economic education, which stated that mental health education was often omitted from the curriculum owing to a lack of teacher training. The Government have funded the PSHE Association to publish guidance and lesson plans to support teaching about mental health, but how are the Government ensuring that schools are actually using it?

We need communities that promote good health and wellbeing. Poor housing, fuel poverty and neighbourhood factors, such as overcrowding, feeling unsafe and a lack of access to community facilities, can have a harmful impact on mental health. These, along with abuse, bullying, trauma, deprivation and isolation, are just some of the levers of mental distress in our communities that we must address.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on setting out such a strong case. Does she agree that the pressure on local government over the

last few years has had a negative impact on community cohesion in relation to mental health and led to a growth in loneliness and other such things that spawn mental health problems?

Luciana Berger: My hon. Friend's intervention brings me neatly on to my next remarks. I am enormously concerned about the impact of the Government's deep cuts to local authority budgets over the past five years, of the additional £200 million in-year cuts to public health and of the cuts coming further down the line. I am concerned about their impact on our communities and the services that serve them, such as our libraries, drop-in centres, leisure centres, befriending services—my hon. Friend talked about loneliness—children's centres, which support parents and young children, and citizens advice bureaux, which support people early on. They are the glue that support and keep our communities together, and I am concerned about what might happen over the next few years.

We need a social care system that is integrated with our physical and mental health services, and we will continue to push the Government to address the fragmentation across these systems. Billions have been slashed from social care budgets and the number of people receiving social care support for mental health has fallen by a quarter since 2009-10. This is seriously impacting on mental health trusts' ability to discharge their patients. I hear that time and again when I visit mental health trusts across the country. They have patients they cannot move out because the social care is not available for them to move into.

We need workplaces that promote a good work-life balance and where mental health is recognised, understood and supported. Some 70 million working days are lost every year owing to stress, depression and other mental health conditions. Mental health problems cost employers in the UK £30 billion a year through lost production, recruitment and absence. As the chief executive of NHS England has rightly pointed out, the NHS has to get its own House in order. Across the health service, staff tell me they are concerned about their wellbeing and that of their colleagues. Longer hours, fewer resources, greater demands and an incredible amount of goodwill are creating a perfect storm within the NHS. The figures from the NHS staff survey show that the proportion of staff reporting work-related stress has increased from 29% in 2010 to 38% in 2014.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): In the spirit of bipartisanship touched on by my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), will the hon. Lady accept the clear evidence showing a link between good mental health and employment and comment on the number of jobs created over the past five years, which, I have no doubt, has helped to promote good mental health?

Luciana Berger: I am interested in the hon. Gentleman's intervention as I am about to talk about employment and unemployment support. I am concerned by the number of constituents coming to see me about the increase in precarious employment and their ability to budget and sustain themselves from week to week.

For those who are unemployed or lose their job because of their condition, the hope of getting back into work under the Government is unjustifiably slim.

The latest statistics reveal that fewer than 9% of people with mental health conditions receiving employment and support allowance have been helped back into work by the Work programme. In fact, 83% of people surveyed by the charity Mind reported that the Work programme had made their mental health condition worse. How can it be right that programmes that are supposed to help people into work are doing the opposite?

These issues alone cover the work of at least five Departments, and it does not stop there: the arts have long played an important role in helping people with mental illness; the Ministry of Justice must do much more on mental health in our prisons; and all front-line professionals, especially those in our police and emergency services, need training and support in how to respond to mental health issues.

I come now to our third and final call: we urge the Government to implement a truly cross-departmental plan to improve their response to mental health issues within our society. “No Health Without Mental Health”, published in 2011, promised to be a cross-Government outcomes strategy for people of all ages, but we are fast approaching its fifth anniversary and progress has been limited. We need a new strategy with teeth that will co-ordinate work across all Departments and set priorities, measure progress and evaluate success. We have been eagerly awaiting NHS England’s taskforce report, which was due to be released this autumn, yet we heard the other week in the Chancellor’s autumn statement that it has been delayed until next year, when the NHS England planning guidance will already have been issued. What influence or impact do the Government hope the report can have if the NHS guidance for the coming year will not take it into account?

In conclusion, mental health matters—in our schools, our workplaces and our communities. It matters to our fulfilment as individuals and to the economic success of our society. There have been important strides forward, which we welcome, but we are also concerned that too much is at risk. We hear too often that our mental health system is in crisis. We are concerned that the right help and support is not there for people when they need it; we are worried that not enough is being done to prevent people from having to turn to these services in the first place; and we are anxious that, in some areas, changes taking effect across Departments are making things worse for our nation’s mental health. Much needs to change, and we are asking for three things that will make a difference. I commend the motion to the House.

1.17 pm

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): I congratulate the shadow Minister on securing this debate. She spoke powerfully about the shortcomings in mental health provision, and although she was reluctant to recognise the progress being made, she deserves credit for having secured her first debate on her new portfolio.

President Obama recently talked of the need to bring mental health out of the shadows, and I would like to start by congratulating hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber on their bravery in doing exactly that. I recognise the bravery of my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), who has spoken powerfully

about his obsessive compulsive disorder and its impact on his family life; of the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), who has talked about his treatment for depression; of the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), who has also spoken bravely about his battle with depression; and of my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), who is part of the new cross-party campaign, and who opened up about his mental health challenges during a difficult period in his life.

I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Gavin Barwell) for his private Member’s Bill, supported by the Government, that repealed the laws preventing people with mental health conditions from being Members of Parliament, jurors or company directors. I also thank my hon. Friends the Members for Vale of Clwyd (Dr Davies) and for Eastleigh (Mims Davies). I thank the hon. Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero) for her leadership of the all-party group, and I thank the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb)—no one has done more in the House to campaign for mental health. In particular, I would like to recognise the bravery of his son, Archie, who spoke about his mental health challenges. Anyone who saw the joint interview on ITV News will have been extremely moved. I would also like to recognise someone who is not a Member and is not usually praised by Conservative Members: Alastair Campbell is a very powerful advocate for mental health; his bravery and openness is a reminder to us all that depression affects people in all walks of life.

Hon. Members have sent a strong message to the public: when it comes to mental health conditions, you are not alone. One in four adults experiences mental health problems every year. They affect everyone, including our elected representatives. By speaking out, hon. Members send a message to other parliamentarians who may be suffering in silence. Despite the incredible privilege of working in this place, public life can be incredibly stressful. It can destroy not just people’s hopes but their marriages, relationships and families. Being an MP does not make us immune to the pressures that affect everyone. With the support of wonderful campaigning organisations such as Mind, Rethink, the Samaritans and Young Minds, this kind of courage has made a real difference.

In the past couple of years, we have seen huge determination from those on both sides of the House to improve mental health provision. One reason for that is that society’s understanding has improved a huge amount in the past decade. We should celebrate the fact that we know much more than we ever did before about the workings of the brain, the causes, treatment and prevention of mental ill health, and links to other societal issues, such as debt, unemployment and family breakdown. As a result, between 70% and 90% of those treated for serious mental illness see a reduction in their symptoms and an improved quality of life. That percentage is even higher if the illness is caught earlier. The best example is early intervention for psychosis, which can reduce suicide risk from 15% to just 1%.

We should also recognise the progress made on depression. The World Health Organisation describes depression as more disabling than angina, arthritis, asthma or diabetes, but we know it can be treated as successfully as any of them. The *BMJ*’s research, published today, mentions that talking therapies for moderate and

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severe depression can be as effective as drugs. Our own programmes of talking therapies have a 50% recovery rate, post-treatment.

Norman Lamb: I appreciate the way the Secretary of State is addressing this subject. We are all on a journey on this. He will remember that last October we published a document that painted a vision of achieving genuine equality by 2020; that was not rhetoric. Central to that was introducing comprehensive waiting times standards, so that there was a complete equilibrium of rights: the same right to access timely treatment for both physical and mental health problems. Does he remain committed to that absolutely critical principle?

Mr Hunt: I am committed to that principle. As the right hon. Gentleman knows—we have discussed this many times—access to treatment is vital, but so, too, is the quality of treatment at the start of the process. We need to make sure that we keep a close eye on both. I think it was right to ask Paul Farmer of Mind to lead an independent review of the best way to make progress towards parity of esteem during this new Parliament. I want to wait and see Paul Farmer's recommendations before we decide how to implement the vision that the right hon. Gentleman played such an important part in developing.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): We all know that one Department's policy can cause pressures on another area. I read today that the Secretary of State for Justice is announcing a reduction in prison sentences, with more people perhaps serving their sentences in the community. I would not necessarily disagree with that, but will there be discussions with the Department of Health about what pressure that would put on community mental health services? Mental health issues, as well as addiction issues, are often behind offenders' criminal behaviour. I implore him to look at how one Department's policy will have a knock-on effect on an already pressurised mental health service.

Mr Hunt: The right hon. Lady makes a very important point. I reassure her that there are very good and close ongoing discussions with the Ministry of Justice. The mental health of the prison population is another area in which we have failed to do as much as we need to. There are so many obvious things that we could do that would be of huge benefit, not just to the individuals concerned, but to the rest of society through reducing reoffending rates. We are absolutely committed to making real, tangible progress on that.

Set against improvements in the potential of mental health treatment are troubling societal changes that increase the demand and need for mental health support. Globally, there has been an 80% increase in those living alone since the turn of the century. In the UK, the percentage of households in which people live alone has risen to nearly a third. For children and young people, there is not just exam pressure and insecurities around body image, but the risks of social media. The Office for National Statistics found a clear association between more time spent on social networking sites and child mental health problems. Children who spend more than three hours a day on social media are twice as likely to suffer poor mental health.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): The Secretary of State talks about the pressures on children. One in five children is in need of treatment and is being turned away, including from A&E. There is a real crisis in service provision, with £200 million reduced from the mental health budget. As he reflects on how big a challenge this is, does he not think his Government's response is completely inadequate? That is not good enough, despite the good efforts being made. He needs to step up and improve the situation, particularly for young people.

Mr Hunt: I accept that we need to improve the provision of mental health services for children, but I do not accept the hon. Lady's characterisation. She will know that in the final Budget before the general election, the previous coalition Government committed £1.25 billion over this Parliament to improving child mental health provision and perinatal mental health support. That has been honoured by this Government, and we are in the process of working out how to roll that out. It is something that the Minister for Community and Social Care, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), spends a lot of time thinking about.

Before we discuss precisely what things need to happen—I think they should be done in a bipartisan spirit—we should recognise that really important progress has been made in recent years. I want to start with some of the achievements made by the previous Labour Government, who increased funding for the NHS and, within that, for mental health services. They oversaw a significant expansion of the mental health workforce and big improvements in in-patient care, with 70% of mental health patients being seen in private rooms. They increased the use of new drugs and therapies, including psychotherapy. Those were important steps forward.

Under the coalition Government in the previous Parliament, we saw a record investment of £11.7 billion in mental health services at a time of huge pressure on public finances. We passed the parity of esteem clause in the Health and Social Care Act 2012, something we Conservative Members are incredibly proud of. The first access targets were set for talking therapies for psychosis. We are starting to end the distortion that the right hon. Member for North Norfolk talked about, which saw targets for physical health access sucking resources away from local mental health provision over a sustained period.

We have seen particular progress in two areas. It is important to mention them; it provides encouragement that when we decide to focus on improving specific areas of mental health provision, we can make real progress. First, on talking therapies, the NHS is now recognised as a world leader. The number of people getting help from talking therapies quadrupled from 182,000 people starting treatment in 2009-10, to 800,000 starting treatment last year. The total number of people helped in the previous Parliament was 3 million, compared with just 226,000 people helped in the Parliament before that—a thirteenfold increase.

We are hitting the new access target to reach 15% of those needing it, although we are not quite hitting the recovery target; I hope we can put that right soon. That model is being looked at very closely by Scandinavian

countries, and a pilot, based on what we have done here, is starting in Stockholm. We can be very proud of that important progress.

The last Parliament saw a 50% increase in dementia diagnosis rates, up from 41% at the start of the Parliament to 67% at the end of the Parliament—the highest dementia diagnosis rate in the world. We have 1.3 million dementia friends and 120 dementia-friendly communities. We have seen a doubling in funding for dementia research, with a new ambition to find a cure or disease-modifying therapy by 2025. In the spending round, the Prime Minister announced funding for a new dementia research institute; that will be another important step forward.

James Morris: The Secretary of State talks about the amount of money put into dementia research for very good reasons, but is there not a strong argument for building a research and evidence base around mental health? We need a commensurate investment in research on mental health, so that we can understand more about prevalence.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I commend him for the work he does on the all-party group. The truth is that it is still early days when it comes to a proper understanding of mental illness. According to the latest *Times Higher Education* league table, this country has five of the top 10 health research universities worldwide, so we have a huge contribution to make to that research; he is absolutely right to make that point.

Debbie Abrahams: I have already mentioned the 590 suicides associated with the work capability assessment. In addition, the Royal College of Psychiatrists has raised concerns about the cut to the employment and support allowance work-related activity group, given that many of those affected have mental health or behavioural disorders. According to the RCP, there is potential for exacerbating mental health issues and self-harming, and even for people to take their own lives. Will the right hon. Gentleman meet the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to deal with this matter?

Mr Hunt: We have close working relations with the Department for Work and Pensions, which I shall come on to explain. I would urge caution, however, on the issue of suicide rates. The *BMJ* study said that no conclusions could be drawn about cause and effect from it. When it comes to work, we need to remember the many studies that talk about the improved health and wellbeing that comes from being in work, and the tremendous progress made, with 2 million additional jobs created over the last Parliament.

Mr Ivan Lewis: I acknowledge the progress made, but let me tell the Secretary of State that what really winds up people outside this place is the rhetoric-reality gap. When they hear politicians on all sides making grand statements about access to treatment, but the reality is different, it damages the integrity of politics. There are two options for the Secretary of State. The first is using political will at a national level to say to local commissioners that they have to prioritise mental health and close the gap in terms of parity of esteem. The second is to address the fact that commissioners on the ground do

not have adequate resources; they have to make impossible choices because sufficient resources are not being made available.

Mr Hunt *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Before the Secretary of State answers the intervention, let me say that long interventions are not appropriate on a day when so many Members wish to speak. If Members wish to make a speech, they may do so, but an intervention has to be short.

Mr Hunt: If the hon. Gentleman has listened to what I have been saying, he will know that I have been very honest about the problems and about the gap between what we want to deliver and what we are delivering. I shall come on to talk about some solutions, but it is important that Opposition Members recognise that we have had a real and specific focus on mental health over the last five years, during which very important progress has been made. If we continue to broaden out our focus, we hope we can make progress in other areas as well.

Let me talk openly about where more progress needs to be made. First, we have far too much variation in the quality of services across the country, and opacity about where services are good and where they are unsatisfactory. It is wrong that I, as the person responsible for the health service, cannot tell people in simple terms the relative quality of mental health provision in North Shropshire versus South Shropshire or in Cirencester versus Sheffield. We need to know that. We know from other areas of the health service that once we can be transparent about the variations in care, people will measure themselves against their peers and huge improvement can be made.

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend deserves great praise for not only the content but the tone of his speech. Further to the point made by the hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis), does my right hon. Friend agree that while any gap between reality and rhetoric is to be regretted, what really irritates our constituents is the making of bogus party political points on the subject? I hope that he will ensure that his tone and his content are reflected by his Department. I wish him every success in working with the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger), who clearly cares deeply about this matter, to ensure that we have an all-party approach to it.

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend is, of course, absolutely right, and I think we do a great disservice to the many people suffering from mental health conditions if we allow this to become a partisan issue. Of course Oppositions must hold Governments to account for their promises, but we should never try to suggest that one side of the House cares more about this issue than the other or that the efforts on one side have somehow been compromised by a lack of interest in or commitment to the issue. It is clear from the number of Members of all parties speaking in today's debate that the determination to improve mental health provision is shared right across the House.

We urgently need to address other issues, including the increase in eating disorders such as anorexia, which can be a killer. Between 5% and 20% of anorexia sufferers tragically die, and we have to do something

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urgently about that. We need to deal, too, with the pressures on child and adolescent mental health services, with which all Members will be familiar through their constituency surgeries. Referrals were up 11% last year, and we need to make sure that CAMHS is able to deal with that extra demand, as well as looking at what can be done to improve early intervention so that we reduce the increase in those referrals.

Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Hunt: Let me make some progress, and I shall give way later.

We need to look at the use of police cells, which has often been spoken of here. We have seen a 55% reduction in the use of police cells over the last three years, but they were still used 4,000 times last year. Particularly for children, that is totally inappropriate, and it is often inappropriate for adults, too. Out-of-area placements for non-specialist care are another issue, and the Minister for Community and Social Care is working extremely hard and is committed to implementing a plan to turn this around by March next year.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): The Secretary of State talked about cross-party support for action to tackle suicide and related issues. In our debate on assisted dying, there was a lot of support for doing more to tackle the problems of anyone who suggested that they wished to commit suicide. Why, then, does the right hon. Gentleman refuse to acknowledge the impact of benefit cuts and changes in assessment processes, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams)?

Mr Hunt: The *BMJ* was very clear in saying that conclusions about cause and effect should not be drawn, but let me make a broader point about suicide. Suicide rates—under the last coalition Government and the previous Labour Government—have been above and below the 20-year long-term average, but I think they are an important bellwether of the effectiveness of mental health services. I think we should be bold and ask whether we could have a zero-suicide ambition. No country in the world has delivered that, and it would require a big rethink of the way we approach mental health services. Nevertheless, I think that we should be bold and ambitious and think in terms of that objective, and then think about all the factors that may contribute to people being in a highly distressed state and unable to get the support that they want.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP) *rose*—

Mr Hunt: I want to make some progress, but I have not yet taken any interventions from the Scottish National party, so I will give way to the hon. Gentleman before I move on.

Neil Gray: I thank the Secretary of State. What assessment has he made of the effect of the changes in employment and support allowance, particularly those relating to the work-related activity group, on those who suffer from mental ill health?

Mr Hunt: We are working very closely with the Department for Work and Pensions to improve mental health provision for people who are looking for work—not just those who are experiencing difficulty in finding work because of stigma and bias among employers, but those who are in work but may fall out of the workforce because of a mental health condition.

We cannot do everything, in this area of health provision as in others, but that does not mean that we should not make tangible and measurable progress towards the ambitions that are shared by Members in all parts of the House. The first important step involves funding. The Chancellor delivered a record settlement for the NHS in the recent spending review, confirming a £10 billion real-terms increase in its funding over the course of this Parliament. That is very significant for mental health, because not only will there be a rise in the baseline funding of the clinical commissioning groups that hold local health budgets, but those CCGs are committed to increasing the proportion of their funding that goes into mental health.

Marie Rimmer *rose*—

Mr Hunt: I will proceed with my speech for a little longer, if I may.

We are seeing the prospect of very real progress, and we as a Government need to give careful thought to which areas to prioritise. We do not have a monopoly of wisdom in this area, which is why we set up the independent mental health taskforce that is led by Paul Farmer, the chief executive of Mind. We will receive its report early in the new year. It will follow a successful independent report produced by the cancer taskforce, chaired by Harpal Kumar. I think that it is a good way of uniting the Government, Members in all parts of the House, and the mental health campaigning charities, so that we can decide together on the key areas that we want to transform in the coming years.

We are still working on the detailed planning, but we have already announced the provision of £2 billion of additional mental health funding over the course of this Parliament, which will benefit CAMHS, perinatal mental health treatment, the treatment of eating disorders, and talking therapy. Some of that funding is a result of promises made by the coalition Government which we have said we will honour, and some is a result of promises that we ourselves have made.

I agree with the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree that as we increase investment in mental health, we need greater transparency in respect of the way in which that money is spent. I am pleased to say that next June, following consultation with the King's Fund, there will for the first time be independently assured Ofsted-style ratings that will tell us very simply, CCG area by CCG area, whether mental health provision in the health economy as a whole is outstanding, is good, requires improvement, or is inadequate. As far as I know, ours is the first country in the world to do that. The hospital sector underwent the same process in the wake of Mid Staffs, and, on the basis of that experience, I believe that it will lead to a dramatic reduction in variation and an improvement in care as people are given independent information about how their services compare with those of their peers. That increased transparency will also mean the development of a new mental health data

set, which will enable us to collect more and better data and then share them with the House, debate them, and learn what needs to be learnt.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op) *rose*—

Mr Hunt: I will give way once more.

Jonathan Reynolds: I recognise the thoughtful case that the Secretary of State is making in saying that things are not good enough but they are getting better, but I must say to him—in a non-partisan way—that when it comes to funding, the stories about funding in my area do not match what we are hearing from him today. There is a story on the *Manchester Evening News* website about a £1.5 million cut in Greater Manchester.

Mr Hunt: We, as a Government, make commitments and choices in terms of where we want resources to go, and we then have a duty to ensure that they are followed up locally. As we know from our experience of the health service, sometimes—under all Governments—that advice is followed, and sometimes it is not. The introduction of proper independent ratings, area by area, will enable us to expose the areas that are not making the commitment to mental health that they should be making. As has been pointed out many times by Members in all parts of the House, failing to invest what is needed in mental health is a false economy. It stores up problems for accident and emergency departments and for the providers of mental health services, because late intervention means more expensive intervention, and it is of course a very real human tragedy for the individuals concerned.

Luciana Berger *rose*—

Mr Hunt: As the hon. Lady is the shadow Minister, I will give way, but for the last time.

Luciana Berger: I thank the Secretary of State. Will he clarify the commitment that he has just made? Does it extend to ensuring that we will be shown a clear picture of mental health spending in every area?

Mr Hunt: I believe that we will be able to do that, but I will write to the hon. Lady to clarify exactly what we think we are able to do. I am certainly committed to ensuring that the House is given information about the quality of provision throughout the service, and investment is a factor in determining whether the standard of that provision can be as high as we want it to be.

The hon. Lady rightly spoke of the importance of cross-Government work. We have established an innovative unit with the Department for Work and Pensions, and have set up a series of pilots to help people with mental health conditions to get back to work. We urgently need to do more to reduce the stigma perceived by employers. According to the findings of one survey, up to 40% of employers would avoid hiring someone with a mental health problem. We also want to help those who are at risk of leaving work because of mental health problems. We are working closely with the Department for Education as well. We have launched a pilot programme to create a single point of contact for schools that are concerned about pupils with mental health challenges. It now covers 22 areas and 27 CCGs.

If we are to tackle this issue, however, we need to achieve something that the Government alone—indeed, the House alone—cannot deliver. We need further progress throughout society in reducing that stigma. Bill Clinton once said:

“Mental illness is nothing to be ashamed of, but stigma and bias shame us all.”

Let me end by paying tribute to the Time to Change movement, founded by Mind and Rethink, and the Dementia Friends movement, led by the Alzheimer's Society. I also pay tribute to Members in all parts of the House who have participated in mental health campaigns, and reassure them that they have the Government's full support as we try to change attitudes on this vital mission. Someone once said that the greatest cruelty was our casual blindness to the despair of others. Let us resolve today that when it comes to mental health, no one can ever say that about the House of Commons.

1.48 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) on initiating such an important debate. It is a privilege to contribute to it.

I must begin by declaring a professional interest, having worked as a forensic and clinical psychologist for 20 years in the NHS and beyond, specialising in mental health, at consultant level for 10 of those years. I continue to maintain my skills and engagement in line with the professional requirements of my registration with the British Psychological Society and the Health Care Professions Council. Earlier in the year, I had the privilege of contributing to the evidence taken by the Youth Select Committee during its inquiry into child and adolescent mental health services.

I want to say a little about three topics: the adult mental health service and strategy, child and adolescent mental health services, and mental health services for veterans. Mental health is an extremely wide field, ranging from major mental illnesses such as psychosis and depression and anxiety disorders to trauma and eating and adjustment disorders. Developmental disorders such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and autistic spectrum disorder are also sometimes included in the sphere of mental health, and I would welcome future debates about those important conditions, because I fear that we shall not have time to do them justice today.

The British Psychological Society has reported that one in four people in the UK will experience a diagnosable mental health problem, with mental health problems accounting for up to 23% of all ill health in the UK and being the largest single cause of disability. In Scotland the figures are currently one in three. Mental disorders are strongly related to risk of suicide, and it should be known that high levels of comorbidity with substance disorder and physical ill health are prevalent.

Mental health services across the UK are not the finished article wherever you go. We are continually striving towards improvement, and that should always be guided by patient need and by research underpinning most effective clinical practice.

When I started practising in the 1990s in Scotland, the funding of mental health services severely lagged behind other areas of NHS funding. That resulted in

[Dr Lisa Cameron]

far too few practitioners and what seemed to be never-ending waiting lists for both patients and clinicians. At the start of my career, patients routinely waited to see psychologists in mental health specialties for six to 12 months, and in some areas for over a year. That was clearly ineffectual, often meaning that problems were exacerbated over time and that a mainly medical model persisted. That is not what patients wanted, nor did it fit with best practice; evidence indicates that patient recovery is improved with access to talking therapies alongside medical management. That is evidenced clearly in National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines.

In 2014, the HEATs—health improvement, efficiency, access targets—were adopted in Scotland and across the UK, meaning that patients should be seen from referral to assessment in 18 weeks. In Scotland in 2014, 81.6% of patients were seen in 18 weeks and the number of people seen was 27% higher than in the same quarter the previous year. Demand is increasing, which is a good thing: it means that we are starting to tackle stigma and that access is improving.

Matched stepped care involving psychological therapies and practitioners at differing levels, depending upon clinical effectiveness of therapy type for different disorders, was rolled out in all boards within NHS Scotland, and NHS Education for Scotland took a primary role in workforce capacity modelling and training. Use of self-guided help has also been developed. Technological advances are important in terms of access for patients in this modern world and in relation to early prevention. Suicide rates have been brought down and the target met of training high levels of front-line staff in suicide prevention and risk identification. Quality ambitions have also been developed as benchmarks in relation to person-centred, safe and effective care.

I fear, however, that demand on mental health services will continue to increase dramatically. Evidence suggests that recession increases mental health problems, including depression, suicidal behaviours and substance abuse. Unemployed individuals, particularly the long-term unemployed, have a higher risk of poor mental health compared with those in employment. Stress is now the most common cause of long-term sick leave in the UK and the more debt an individual has the more likely they are to suffer a mental health problem. A social and policy climate of austerity, affecting the most vulnerable to a greater degree, is a likely aggravator of mental ill health.

I welcome pledges from both the Westminster and Scottish Governments to increase spending on mental health significantly: the figure is £100 million in Scotland. Mental health services, however, have not achieved parity with physical health services over the decades since I started in the field and we need to be clear that much more is needed to fill the gap. I commend Ministers and MPs to visit mental health services and spend quality time with clinicians on the front line. Managerial statistics often occlude a multitude of issues and it is only with that front-line insight that the true patient journey and daily clinical barriers can be identified. Those often include excessive paperwork, repeated reviews and service changes that diminish morale.

Mental health problems in childhood are extremely serious. They can destroy educational potential at worst and impede it when problems are less severe. Difficulties

must be assessed and recognised at an early stage. HEATs for child and adolescent mental health services were set at 18 weeks as of December 2014. NHS Scotland data suggested a significant reduction from 1,200 waits of over 26 weeks in 2008. In the quarter ending June 2015, 76.6% of CAMHS patients were seen in 18 weeks and the average wait was nine weeks. In the past two years, there has been a 35% increase in demand due to productive work completed on stigma and in improving access, and since 2009 £16 million has been invested in the CAMHS workforce; it is at its highest ever level. To improve waiting times further, £15 million more has been pledged to CAMHS in Scotland. Widespread staff training has been undertaken in modalities such as cognitive behaviour therapy, family therapy, interpersonal therapy and specialist interventions such as for eating disorders, with a focus on seeing patients as close to home as possible. More progress is required across the UK and in Scotland to meet the 90% target.

I must say that in-patient treatment for children and adolescents should be a last resort. It takes children away from family and pathologises their difficulties. Best practice highlights intensive outreach approaches enabling children to be seen at home and treated in their natural environment, so maximising key family and peer supports. Children who need in-patient services suffer psychosis, intractable eating disorders, severe obsessive compulsive disorder and a variety of neurological conditions and neuro-developmental disorders. Currently there are 48 beds available in Scotland and this year £8 million was pledged to build a unit for children and adolescents with mental health problems in Dundee. My clinical experience suggests a lack of available beds in forensic and in learning disability child and adolescent mental health services. Constituents who have contacted me have also suggested that further work needs to be done to improve access to specialist eating disorder in-patient care outwith the private sector.

Increases in the number of children presenting with self-harm and receiving brief overnight admission have been high. Clinically, this is quite a difficult decision. Often, clinicians are faced with the issue of sending adolescents for a brief stay miles and miles from their home—which makes it difficult for carers and parents to visit them—or admitting them briefly overnight. Surely the optimum treatment would be to see and assess them and to ensure that children are safe and able to go home with the strongest possible package of care as quickly as possible.

Chloe Smith (Norwich North) (Con): I value greatly the contribution from the hon. Lady, who has huge expertise. I get the feeling that there is much medical expertise to come from the paper she may have been citing a lot in her speech. As the Front-Bench spokesman for her party, could she explain whether she thinks the points made in amendment (a) were valuable? In the absence of that, does she support the motion as it stands? How does she urge Members to vote today?

Dr Cameron: I do not support the motion and how it reflects Scottish Government care. As I have said, for children who have mental health difficulties, clinicians have to make a sensitive judgment regarding the length of potential stay, and whether the problems are intractable and the children should be admitted to a specialist unit,

which can often be some miles from their home. Many of cases of self-harm attempts require psychiatric assessment and monitoring, overnight care and monitoring, and then a package of intensive home care to try to reduce the chance of another such incident. I hope that answers the hon. Lady's question.

Recommendations, however, do have to be made in relation to CAMHS. They include having a wider appreciation of children's mental health beyond any problems, providing education and awareness in schools, and having access potentially to mental health clinicians in school settings and not just clinics. As with diet and exercise, good mental health should be normalised. Those are all fundamental living skills that impact on all aspects of functioning and deserve more of a health and well-being slant, rather than a pathologising label.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is invaluable to have these services in schools as that normalises the feelings of low self-esteem that many of these young people are experiencing, and does she also agree that to have counsellors based in the school is very important for young people's mental health?

Dr Cameron: Yes, access to such mental health services in schools is certainly merited, as well as mental health awareness and training, and particularly training for staff in schools so that they can pick up at a very early stage if someone is experiencing a mental health problem and then try to access services at that very early stage. Specialist training for teachers would be a positive step forward so that they recognise the signs of mental distress in children. We also need to modernise our approaches to mental health for children and adolescents and embrace the IT and social media method of communicating with young people, because that is the modern world and that is often where they communicate from.

There is a project in Scotland called SafeSpot, an application, website and school intervention to promote positive coping skills, safety planning and access to information about mental health services for young people. The project is going very well and the app is freely available on iTunes and in Android stores. The SafeSpot app and website will be used within Greater Glasgow and Clyde health board, and Dundee health board is also looking at access to it. It was designed by a clinician, Dr Fiona Mitchell, specialist registrar in child and adolescent psychiatry, and I commend her on her innovative work in that regard.

There remains a lack of empirical data regarding effective interventions for young people with comorbidity issues, by which I mean mental health coupled with learning difficulties or substance use, and that requires to be built upon. Looked-after and accommodated children are some of the most severely disadvantaged in terms of services and magnitude of difficulties, particularly those who also may have violence-risk needs or self-harm needs. Further service provision for specialist groups and underpinning research will be crucial.

Given that the weight of evidence for child and adolescent mental health services is in favour of psychological, rather than pharmacological, interventions for the majority of child mental health presentations,

clear structures should be in place to support the delivery of effective, evidence-based psychological therapies for children and adolescents. Those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds have always tended to have a poorer uptake of CAMHS. An assertive outreach may be required so that some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families do not slip through the net.

Specialist service delivery in areas of developmental disorder such as autism, children in the criminal justice system, and children with comorbidity requires to be thought through and planned, so that those children and their families are able to access facilities without feeling they are being passed from pillar to post. It is extremely difficult for families in particular to access early diagnosis of developmental disorders such as for those with autistic spectrum disorder, which means that their needs can go unmet for years and their attainment may diminish.

I continue to believe that the mental health of veterans is an area that is underfunded across the UK and that those who have been willing to lay down their lives for their country should have consequent health, including mental health, needs prioritised. The Minister agreed a few months ago during my Adjournment debate that much more would be done. I would like to have a statement on what more is being, and will be, done, particularly as we are now in a new conflict and the numbers of those in our armed services who witness or experience trauma will increase.

As a clinician in mental health, I make the following plea to the House. To me, mental health services are beyond party politics and it is crucial we tackle this meaningfully in a cross-party manner that brings about real continued progress on the ground for service users and staff, and that we share best practice across the UK and a "what works" philosophy.

I welcome the announcement of improved access to data, which is also crucial in terms of taking forward and ensuring best practice. I say in conclusion that I sense a real note of collegiality across the House and a will to take this important issue forward. I look forward to fully partaking in that, and my party wishes to see mental health services continue to improve in Scotland, the UK and beyond.

2.6 pm

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): One of the ways in which we can measure how civilised a society we are is how well we deal with our most vulnerable citizens, and there are few groups more vulnerable in our society than those who suffer from mental illness, yet from when I began working in the health service as a doctor back in the early 1980s to right through my time as a Member of Parliament, mental health services have been the Cinderella subject in the national health service. Let us be very frank: we would never accept the level of care in cardiac disease, orthopaedic disease or cancer for our constituents that we are forced to accept in the treatment for mental illness.

There can be few areas where our advocacy role as Members of Parliament is more important than mental health, because the people involved are very often among the least able and least willing to stand up for themselves in the debate about how the NHS cake is going to be divided.

[Dr Liam Fox]

We have a role, also, in dealing with what the Secretary of State and the Opposition Front Bencher, the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger), talked about as the last taboo. We do have to make societal changes and we can be instrumental in that, and I pay tribute, as the Secretary of State did, to our colleagues in this House who have used their often painful personal experiences to give colour to our debate and to take this issue forward. In all 23 years that I have been in the House of Commons, I cannot remember an attendance as high as that today for a mental health debate. That is indicative of how far we have come.

I very much welcome the Government changes both in terms of the funding they are proposing and the attitudes that have been fostered in recent years, not least, I have to say, during the coalition Government—it was one of the great achievements of that coalition Government that they put mental health much further up the agenda. I am particularly pleased at the announcement the Secretary of State has made about transparency on clinical commissioning group outcomes, because it is not the spending that we need to see, it is the outcomes. That is the crucial element, and I look forward to the details he will be bringing forward on that.

However many rights we give patients, it is the capacity-constraints that will ultimately determine what those outcomes are, and I want to deal with just two or three of them. The Government's IAPT—improving access to psychological therapies—programme is a great programme. Getting access to talking therapies is, as the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) said, extremely important, and I was asked to do a short piece for the “Victoria Derbyshire” programme on the BBC in which we looked at the difference between the best and the worst in the provision of talking therapies.

It is unacceptable, in a national health service that is funded from the single basis of taxation, that in some parts of the country 100% of patients are seen within the Government's target time, whereas at the other end of the scale, in East Cheshire, which is the worst area, only 4.6% of patients are seen within that time. We can accept something of a discrepancy between the best and the worst, but we cannot accept that level of discrepancy in a health service that is supposedly funded on an equal basis across the whole country.

As the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree and others have said, experience suggests that when there is better access to talking therapies, doctors are less likely to prescribe medication, including antidepressants. That is an extremely positive development, because one thing that has worried me about the lack of capacity in mental health services is what I would describe as the medicalisation of unhappiness. Because medical professionals simply do not have the time to talk to patients about the causes of their symptoms, they deal with the symptoms themselves. That is not good medical practice.

The second area that I am concerned about is child and adolescent mental health services. In the 23 years that I have been in the House of Commons, Government after Government of both political persuasions have told us that those services will improve, but I have seen

very little sign of it. That matters because about 70% of adult mental health problems will have presented by the age of 17. One would have thought that, knowing that, we would prioritise healthcare early on to minimise the damage that is caused by untreated illness, yet we are still not fulfilling our duty on that front.

The biggest problem we face is that of in-patient capacity. When we debated the closure of the old Victorian asylums, it was very personal for me because I worked in one of those old hospitals. It was genuinely a Dickensian nightmare. There was a great fashion, which was supported right across the House, to move towards care in the community. However, the consequence of not having adequate capacity in the community was that a lot of patients fell through the net. The point has already been made about the large population of those with mental illnesses in our criminal justice system. In effect, we closed one type of inappropriate institution and ended up with patients in a different type of inappropriate institution, and called it progress. That is simply not good enough and we need to do much more to prevent patients who are mentally ill from being incarcerated in our criminal justice system, when they should be treated appropriately for their illness.

We also see patients being put in police cells because there is inadequate capacity in in-patient care. How would we feel if women with breast cancer or diabetic patients were put in police cells because we could not find beds for them? It would be on the front page of every newspaper and lead every news bulletin in our country.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr Fox: No, I will not.

I would love the money that is being made available for mental health by the Treasury to be ring-fenced in CCGs. If that money is not ring-fenced, it will go elsewhere, for the very reasons I have set out. We need to ensure that the money that is rightly being made available for mental health treatment ends up there and is not siphoned off into areas where the voice for spending is stronger. I would love us to give more support to the wonderful mental health charities out there, such as Marjorie Wallace's SANE and Mind. All those charities are hugely important.

In closing, I ask the Secretary of State to look at one thing: the incipient crisis of suicide among men in the United Kingdom—a subject that is not hugely talked about. The culture of our society often makes it difficult for men to admit that they are unable to deal with the stresses of life, anxiety and depression. The statistics relating to the worst manifestation of that—suicide—are deeply worrying. British men are three times as likely to die by suicide as British women. Suicide remains the most common cause of death in men under the age of 35. More than a quarter of the 24 to 34-year-old males who die take their own lives, compared with 13% among women. That is a huge national scandal and we need to give priority to it.

Success or failure in dealing with mental illness in the 21st century in the world's fifth richest country is not just a judgment on the Government or the NHS, but on our society as a whole and on our basic humanity.

2.14 pm

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I am sorry to have to say, not for the first time in this House over the last few years, that in spite of all the warm reassurances from the Government that our mental health services are getting better, the experience of my constituents as users of the service, people who work in the service and those who manage the service is completely different.

It is extremely welcome that mental health has risen up the political agenda in recent years. I pay tribute to the many people outside and inside this House who, by speaking of their own experiences, have helped to achieve that. However, the higher public profile has not yet translated into delivery on the ground. In my area, the public are still experiencing services being cut and are still having to wait an unacceptably long time for talking therapies and other treatments.

In spite of the repeated warnings about the scandal of people being sent out of area in recent years and the assurances we have received, there was a 23% increase in the number of patients sent out of area last year, taking it up to more than 500. In Devon, which is one of the worst performing parts of the country, 45 patients were forced miles away from their friends and families.

I recently experienced that problem for myself, when the bright and previously happy teenage daughter of a close friend of the family had a crisis. While on the waiting list to receive treatment, her crisis escalated rapidly and she had to be admitted. There were no suitable beds at all in London, where she and her family live. She was first sent to Southampton, only for the unit there to be deemed unsuitable. She was then sent to Manchester.

Paula Sherriff: In my area of Kirklees, some children and adolescents wait up to two years for out-patient talking therapies. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that is appalling and completely unacceptable? Does he also agree that early intervention is very important to ensure that people do not suffer too much in later life?

Mr Bradshaw: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As she clearly articulates, the picture on the ground is very different from the one that is so often painted by the Government.

The House may remember a case that caused headlines a couple of years ago when I raised it in another debate. A 16-year-old girl in Devon was kept in a police cell for two nights because no bed could be found for her anywhere in the country. Her case is not unusual. As we have heard in this debate, more than 6,000 people with mental illnesses were held in police cells last year.

Marie Rimmer: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the provision of tier 4 CAMHS beds is a national commissioning issue? Those beds are commissioned by NHS England, not by the CCGs. I think that that is a problem. The Government need to focus on the nationally commissioned beds. Many young people who have eating disorders get to the stage where they need such beds.

Mr Bradshaw: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I hope that the Minister heard her intervention, because I will leave that bit out of my speech. I was going to raise the ongoing problem of the interface between

mental health services for young people and adolescents and those for adults. A lot of people are falling through the gap.

There has been a lot of talk, including from the Government, about parity of esteem, but there is scant evidence of it on the ground at a local level. I ask the Minister to explain when he responds to the debate why, if the Government are serious about parity of esteem, NHS England has removed it from this year's NHS mandate. That is the important document that the NHS publishes every year to tell local health services what they have to deliver. Why has parity of esteem been removed?

Why are the Government cutting so drastically the funding for public health, which delivers many preventive services, such as alcohol and drug treatments and psychological support for young people in schools, that stop people getting ill in the first place, saving money and lives?

As we have heard, after years of falling, the rate of male suicide is on the increase again. Suicide is the main cause of avoidable death among young males.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Would my right hon. Friend like to attend a meeting held by the all-party parliamentary group on suicide and self-harm prevention and the all-party mental health group, at which Dr Robert Colgate will address us on the subject of triaging? By that process, mental health nurses, social workers and GPs can triage a patient for whom they cannot get an immediate appointment and enable appropriate care plans to be put in place while they wait for the next-stage appointment. The meeting is on 29 January, and I hope that my right hon. Friend will join us.

Mr Bradshaw: I am sure that hon. Members will be grateful for that public invitation in spite of the pressure on their diaries from numerous all-party parliamentary groups.

Yesterday, the Health Select Committee was told that, whereas the vast majority of acute hospital trusts were expecting to run deficits this year—a big increase—the figure for mental health trusts was much lower. We might think that that is a good thing, but the reason that acute trusts are running such big deficits is that they are giving priority to ensuring safe care. So, if far fewer mental health trusts are running deficits, is that because they are simply cutting services? I should be grateful to hear the Minister's view on the difference between the deficits being run by mental health trusts and those run by general acute hospital trusts.

I shall close now, because many people want to speak in the debate. There is probably no one here or outside the House who has not been affected, or whose family has not been affected, by mental illness. We have been hearing warm words from the Government for several years about how things will improve. Indeed, we have heard today that they are improving, but that is not the experience of people on the ground. So I hope that, when the Minister responds, he will focus on action and delivery and not just on words.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The House will be aware that a great many Members wish to speak, so I will now have to impose a five-minute time limit on Back-Bench speeches.

2.21 pm

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw). Like him, I want to talk about concerns raised by my constituents. However, I also welcome the £2 billion of extra funding that the Government have put into mental health, and the fact that we have put parity of esteem into law. My right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) made a powerful case for the need to invest in in-patient capacity. In Worcestershire, I welcome the improvements made in the Holt ward in Newtown hospital, but there is clearly a need for more investment of that kind. It is also essential that we take on the remaining stigma around mental health, and I echo the words of support for brave colleagues who have spoken out on this issue.

Members of the Worcestershire Youth Cabinet have, over the last year, set themselves the challenge of raising awareness of mental health issues, combating stigma and providing better signposting and co-ordination for young people with mental health problems, and I commend their collective effort in this regard. In particular, I commend the passion with which my young constituent, Darian Murray, has spoken out on this issue, and the leadership he has shown in bringing together different groups from around the county.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that young people are probably more able than older generations to talk about mental health issues?

Mr Walker: I agree with my hon. Friend. The way in which young people have spoken out about these issues is very impressive. As in many other areas, perhaps they are showing us the way in relation to taking on that stigma.

In that vein, I also welcome the excellent work done for people with learning difficulties by members of the Worcestershire People's Parliament. In the hustings they organised during the general election, and in their subsequent campaigns on mental health, they have attracted cross-party support in Worcestershire. Attitudes towards mental illness have changed for the better in recent years, and I hope we will see further progress in the years to come.

I welcome the fact that the Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People, my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), has held a reverse jobs fair in his constituency to help people with disabilities of all kinds, but particularly with mental health issues, to find work. I am planning to copy his idea in the new year, and to work with local charities and businesses to promote opportunities for people with mental health and learning difficulties.

I have some concerns about a recent consultation carried out by the Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust on vocational centres for mental health. In Worcestershire, we have three such centres providing therapeutic support, re-enablement and support to people who might otherwise have difficulty getting back into

work. One of the centres is in my constituency at the Shrub Hill workshop. Another is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin) at Link Nurseries. The third is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Karen Lumley) at Orchard Place. Earlier this year, the trust launched a consultation on the future of those services, saying that the commissioners were reducing their budget by a third and implying that they were considering moving from three centres to two.

Many of my constituents contacted me to express their strong support for Link Nurseries and the Shrub Hill workshop, and a number of people gave examples of how the services had helped them to turn their life around. I have no doubt that my hon. Friends in neighbouring constituencies will have heard similar stories from their constituents. It became apparent that it was not necessarily the best use of resource for the trust to run the centres itself, and that there were many charities doing excellent work in that space that it could commission to do that. My hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire has been working with staff and supporters of the very popular service at Link Nurseries to see whether the service could be taken over as a social enterprise by staff, who could continue to deliver the service that has been offered with such success.

That is an approach I would support, and I have written to the trust and spoken to local commissioners to encourage them to explore it. I was pleased to see in an update from the trust today that the matter is under active consideration. It is, however, a matter of great concern that although the initial consultation suggested a move from three centres to two and a greater focus on outreach, the trust's latest thinking appears to involve closing all three of the centres and replacing them with a single one as part of a hub-and-spoke model. It is small comfort that the proposed single hub would be in my constituency. We all recognise the benefit of having more outreach, but I have to question the whole approach of a consultation that appears to be cutting back on an important service, valued by service users, at a time when demand is apparent and the overall budgets of health commissioners are being increased. I urge the Minister to look into this matter and see whether he can do anything to encourage the commissioners to have another look.

Another aspect of mental health provision in Worcestershire that causes me concern is support for A&E. We piloted 24-hour mental health liaison for the A&E at the Worcestershire Royal hospital, and the acute trust and the health and care trust found it incredibly helpful. At the end of that pilot, both trusts asked for that support to continue. I note that the crisis care concordat calls for people to be given access to support 24 hours a day before crisis point, and to be given urgent and emergency access to mental health care. As the Secretary of State said, it is welcome that, since the concordat, the number of people going through mental health crises who are held in police cells has halved nationally. However, I am afraid that in south Worcestershire, the commissioners decided early in 2014 that the 24-hour cover was to be withdrawn, and replaced with a specialist nurse during the daytime and access to telephone support overnight. The Minister has given a helpful reply to written question on this matter.

Helen Whately: My hon. Friend mentions psychiatric liaison in A&E. Does he agree that it is incredibly important for hospitals to have a comprehensive psychiatric liaison service, so that when people go to A&E, there is a specialist capable of giving them the right help?

Mr Walker: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. The provision of specialist care in those situations is vital.

The Minister replied to my written question in July, saying that the Government's mandate to NHS England states that access to crisis services for an individual must be

“at all times as accessible, responsive and high quality as other health emergency services.”

Does this mean that he has the power to mandate that mental health support to A&E services be provided by practitioners, rather than merely through phone support? I urge Ministers to consider the case for all emergency departments, especially those as busy as the one at the Worcester Royal hospital, having 24-hour access to mental health experts.

I draw the Minister's attention to the case of a constituent who, as a result of the absence of this support early in 2014, went through an acute episode, having left A&E without receiving the help she needed. This involved the calling of multiple police cars and ambulances. That use of the emergency services incurred far greater cost than simply having the support in place would have done. Any savings made from the failure to commission overnight cover would, in my view, be a case of being penny wise and pound foolish. As the Secretary of State said, not investing in mental health can sometimes be a false economy.

Overall, however, I welcome the progress made. I welcome the additional investment, including in my constituency. I hope that the Minister can respond to my concerns.

2.28 pm

Simon Danczuk (Rochdale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker). I am very grateful for this debate, as the issue is very close to my heart. It is vital to ensure that everyone has access to the best mental health services. As the Secretary of State pointed out, one in four of us will face some form of mental illness over the next year, but figures from the mental health charity Mind suggest that 75% of those with anxiety or depression get no treatment at all. It is vital that we start taking mental health more seriously, starting with adequate funding and giving mental health the parity with physical health that it deserves.

I wholeheartedly support a protected NHS budget. The most effective treatment of mental health issues, however, is seen at local level in communities. A protected budget means little when funding to mental health services at local level is being slashed. Those in need reach first for their local services, yet the scale of cuts, particularly to local councils, is having a direct and detrimental effect on services that are crucial to helping many people deal with their mental health problems.

The Royal College of Psychiatrists states that a key part of mental health services is good public health funding, yet only 1% of public health spending is focused on mental health. That will be compounded by the fact

that the money given to councils for public health will fall by 3.9%, year on year; that will be an 18% fall by the end of this Parliament. If we are committed to ensuring parity of esteem between mental and physical health, that is simply not good enough.

Mrs Moon: My hon. Friend may be aware that last year the all-party group on suicide and self-harm prevention conducted a survey of local authorities to see how many had suicide prevention plans and suicide action groups in place. A large proportion did not have any action plan or any groups working on suicide prevention. Is that not something the Government must address if we are to move forward?

Simon Danczuk: My hon. Friend makes a really important intervention on an issue that I was not aware of. The Government should impress on local areas the need to ensure that those things are put in place.

I want to discuss suicide. I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), who is no longer in his place, for making an excellent speech, not least as regards suicide. It is a particularly important issue in Rochdale, where suicide rates continue to remain above the national average. In our town, the rate is 11.8 per 100,000 people per year; that compares with a rate of 8.9 per 100,000 for England as a whole. The male suicide rate in Rochdale is 18.6 per 100,000, which dwarfs the 14.1 per 100,000 for England as a whole. Those figures show a large rise from 2010, when they were 14.7 in Rochdale and 13.3 in England. Put simply, more people are killing themselves in Rochdale.

Our council, like many others up and down the country, is faced with daunting cuts to its budget. The result in Rochdale is that the council is considering removing funding to the tune of just £20,000 for the award-winning Growth Project. This project works to provide a safe and supportive haven to those with mental health issues on a number of allotments. The work done by the Growth Project has a proven track record of improving individuals' wellbeing. It promotes good mental and physical health through outdoor activity in a green environment, and participants can literally see the fruits of their labour. To date, the project has 88 beneficiaries, and it embodies the essence of equality for mental and physical health. Although the project is run by a voluntary organisation, fighting mental health issues must not be seen as an act of charity; it is about justice and necessity.

If we are truly to achieve parity of esteem for mental and physical health, it is exactly projects such as the Growth Project in my constituency that will need funding. They do not need to be cut because of pressure on council budgets.

2.33 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the thoughtful speech made by the hon. Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk). The issue of mental health is such an important one, and it cannot and should not be swept under the carpet any longer. I pay particular tribute to the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) for his work in this place during the last Parliament—he has definitely left a legacy.

[Maggie Throup]

How people talk about the issue of mental health is similar to how we spoke about cancer a few years ago. People did not talk about cancer because they hoped it would go away. Similarly, people have not been talking about mental health—they were hoping it would go away, but it has not done. Mental health, sadly, is not going away and the sooner that is recognised, the better. Putting mental health on a level playing field with physical health means that people are now talking about it. The issue of mental health and its impact has recently been recognised by an important group of young people. For the past seven years, Girlguiding UK has carried out a girls attitude survey, which canvasses the opinions of more than 1,500 girls and young women between the ages of seven and 21. As year-on-year surveys can be compared, it is interesting to note that five years ago the area of most concern to those surveyed was alcohol and drug abuse, whereas in the 2015 survey, published in early October, today's cohort of girls and young women has changed that to mental health. I stress that those surveyed were not just girl guides, but a much wider audience of young ladies and girls across the country. That gives the survey validity and it needs to be taken seriously. What was concerning was that the survey showed a mismatch between what concerns young people and what parents think concerns young people. The girls taking the survey feel that their parents are worried about what they perceive as traditional risks such as smoking, drug and alcohol use and unplanned pregnancy, whereas their own top concerns are mental health and cyber-bullying. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), those young people are definitely not sweeping the issue under the carpet.

Further information coming out of the survey indicated that fewer than half the girls surveyed have talked about mental health in lessons at school, despite the majority saying that that is where they would most like to get information about it. In my short time as a Member of Parliament, I have had a number of cases in my advice surgery relating to mental health issues in young people, and this problem is not going away. Headteachers at my local schools have also highlighted to me the problem of mental health issues starting at a very young age. That is why I am planning in the new year to convene a round-table meeting with headteachers, the police, the local clinical commissioning group, charities and other interested parties. I want to find out what more can be done locally and what more should be done to help prevent mental health issues from arising, and I want to see whether there are any grass-roots solutions to the existing problems.

As constituency MPs, we have our own role to play. People turn to us for help on a daily basis, often as a last resort. Their issues vary, with some easier to resolve than others, but these issues can all cause a great deal of stress and pressure, which in turn mounts up and can be, for want of a better phrase, the straw that breaks the camel's back. We may not have all the answers or be able to secure the right outcome for every constituent, but often we are the only people fighting their corner and we should do everything in our power to avoid situations deteriorating to such an extent that they could have a significant impact on a constituent's mental health. At this point, I wish to take the opportunity to

pay tribute to all our casework staff, who go above and beyond for local residents on our behalf, often with little recognition of their efforts.

Mental health is not exclusively a health issue. It crosses so many boundaries, including education, employability and family life—the list goes on, as we have heard from other hon. Members. Today's debate, yet again, has served to keep mental health high on the political agenda. But along with the words, we must continue to take action, and I commend the Government on the work they are doing to ensure that we do have that action.

2.38 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I welcome today's debate. We are doing a very simple thing today, but it is very effective: we are again talking about mental health in this Chamber. Both the Secretary of State and my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) talked about a change in attitudes and said that things are changing. I agree totally that things are changing for the better, not just in this place, but in the media and in society. Sadly, in my own party there are some parts that still need to go a bit further in understanding mental health, but we are making great strides and they should be recognised. That is down to the great work that is being done by Rethink, Time to Change and other charities, which are not only those individuals who work for those organisations, but the thousands of volunteers behind them.

Chloe Smith: I hope the hon. Gentleman will welcome this intervention, because I seek only to give him the due credit that he deserves for his place in that all-too-brief history of our actually talking about mental health.

Mr Jones: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I have a simple view on mental health, which is that we need to talk about it more, because that will change attitudes.

What do we do next? Well, we need to hardwire mental health and mental wellbeing into public policy and society. To those who ask why that is important, I say that not only is it the right thing to do, but, even in these times of austerity, it makes economic sense. It saves money as well as lives. We need a system in which every single Government policy is road-tested against mental health and mental wellbeing.

The Secretary of State accused my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree of being political on this matter. Well, I am sorry, but the Government cannot escape from some of the things that they are doing in this area. It is the Opposition's job not only to question the statements they make, but to look at the facts. The Chancellor announced an investment of £600 million in talking therapies, which I welcome, but that is set against a cut of almost 8.5% in the previous Parliament. The money will do nothing to replace the beds that have been lost in psychiatric wards. As the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) has said, there are people who have to travel ridiculous distances around the country to access those beds. What is the root cause of that? Is it a shortage of beds? Yes, it is in some areas, but another root cause, particularly in London, is the shortage of available housing. Our housing policy has a direct effect on the problem.

Another area of concern relates to the back-to-work interviews and the work capability assessments. My hon. Friends and I have raised that matter on numerous occasions, but the Department for Work and Pensions is not listening. People are still being put through that tortuous process, which is neither good for the taxpayer nor good for the individuals concerned. A 56% cut in the local government budget will have a direct effect on the delivery of mental health and support services. At the moment, a consultation exercise is out on the formula for allocation of public health funding. On that basis, County Durham will lose £20 million a year.

People might say that all those policies have nothing to do with mental health, but they do have a direct impact on the services that we deliver. We need to hardwire mental health and mental wellbeing into all those areas, whether it be schools, society, the family or the criminal justice system.

Many issues face people with mental illness. Personally, I have been to some very dark places, but the most tragic and darkest place is faced by those who commit suicide. We are talking about not just a life being cut short, and the opportunities that are missed in terms of the fulfilment that that person could give both to society and to their families, but families being left bereft and in a very emotional state. In this country, three times more people commit suicide every year than are killed on the roads. We had a great road safety campaign, which addressed the problem of people being killed on our roads. We need the same campaigning zeal to attack the suicide rates in this country.

My own region in the north-east has an unenviable suicide record. We have the highest rate of suicides in the country, with 13.8% per 100,000 individuals taking their lives. Such rates are related to the economic situation. People may try to gloss over that fact, but economic situations do affect people's lives. We must also address the fact that 78% of that figure are men. Men are terrible at talking about mental health. So, yes, progress is being made, but we do need to have mental health and mental wellbeing running through all Government policies.

I welcome the debate today, because it provides us with another opportunity to talk about mental health on the Floor of the House, which must be a good thing. Now is the time to change those words into action.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. We have less than an hour for Back-Bench contributions in this debate, so I will have to reduce the time limit to three minutes, which makes life a little difficult for Mr Julian Sturdy.

2.44 pm

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): I will focus my brief contribution on the mental health services in York and in my constituency.

The Minister is aware that Bootham Park hospital, a mental healthcare facility in York, closed on 30 September, after the Care Quality Commission declared the 18th-century grade 1 listed building unfit for purpose. In fact, it stated that patients were at "significant risk of harm" at the hospital.

The facility had been part of the Leeds and York Partnership NHS Trust, and concerns had been raised about it since 2013, when the CQC inspection declared that the hospital did not meet the required safety standards.

Although improvements were made at a cost of £1.7 million, the CQC visited again and expressed its continued concerns about the safety of some of the wards. As a consequence, significant improvements were called for in January, and the money was made available. However, when the inspectors returned nine months later, in September, no improvements had been delivered. No one denies that there were problems with the facility due to its structure and age. I visited the hospital and saw for myself the problems that were raised by the CQC.

The trust had nine months to rectify those well-known and well-documented problems, yet it did nothing, which led to this important facility being closed, with staff and patients being given just five days' notice, which is unprecedented and which caused an immense amount of stress and anxiety for patients, families and the hard-working staff.

Things were further complicated when the Vale of York clinical commissioning group chose to transfer York's mental health services from the Leeds and York NHS Trust to the Tees, Esk and Wear Valley NHS Trust. That was due to allegations that a disproportionate amount of funding was being allocated to Leeds, with York missing out. Was that because Leeds had been prioritised over York? Well, Leeds and York NHS Trust has many questions to answer, and I wish to know who will bring it to account over a situation that never should have arisen. There were plenty of opportunities to solve the problem and the trust had enough warnings. Sadly, action was not taken and the facility was closed.

Finally, in this very brief contribution, let me say that, in the long term, we hope to see a new purpose-built facility in York. From my meeting with the Minister, I know that he feels the same way, and I am confident that he will deliver it, but I want to hear him say it today. We also must deliver parity of esteem across the board, because, at the moment, York is not getting that parity of esteem.

2.47 pm

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): Let me say at the outset that I strongly support the motion and I think the whole House should unite behind it. Although Members may disagree with aspects of the motion, it is really important that we send out a united message that we are all agreed on the imperative of achieving equality for mental health. Self-evidently, we still have a long way to go, and we should be impatient for change.

The sentiments in the motion were at the heart of the cross-party campaign that I launched with Alastair Campbell and the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell). We managed to get more than 200 leaders from across society to come together to make the united case for equality for mental health and for extra investment. Why is it that so many leaders agreed to join that cause? Is it because there is now a growing recognition that we must end this absolute historic injustice and ensure equal access to treatment?

Mr Kevan Jones: I commend the right hon. Gentleman for his work. Does he agree that those leaders now need to translate that action into policy, both at a national and a local level?

Norman Lamb: I totally agree. We have to set the framework, put the funding in place and deliver services on a local basis. How can anyone in this Chamber possibly justify this: if someone has suspected cancer, they have a right to an appointment with a specialist within two weeks of referral by their GP, but a youngster with an eating disorder has no such right, yet we know that their condition can kill? That is a scandal and an outrage and it must change. There must be equality of access.

When someone does get access to treatment, too often it is a lottery. As we discussed last Friday, we have the continuing scandal—the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) referred to this earlier—of people being shunted around the country in search of a bed. That would never happen to someone suffering from a stroke or a heart condition. It is inequality of access to treatment, and it is a complete scandal.

Mr Jones: There is an issue with the number of beds, but does the right hon. Gentleman also accept that one of the problems is that people are in those beds for far too long? One of the crisis points in London is access to adequate housing so that people can be discharged into the community.

Norman Lamb: I was so pleased that the hon. Gentleman made that point in his speech, and I pay tribute to him for the work he has done. The answer is not simply to have more beds; we should also be reducing the length of stay, which often is not therapeutic for the individual. Getting them into secure housing is central to their health and wellbeing.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Norman Lamb: I am afraid that I cannot give way, as I have very limited time.

At the heart of that inequality is the stigma that still attaches to mental health. We have made real progress in combating that stigma, but we have a way to go. My message to the Government is that the inequality of access is morally wrong. We cannot begin to justify one person not getting access in the way that somebody else does in our publicly funded NHS. I am pleased that the Secretary of State has acknowledged that that is a scandal, but the Government now have to deliver that equality of access. We have to deliver by 2020 the vision that he and I set out last October.

That inequality of access is not only morally wrong, but economically stupid, as many Members have mentioned. The Centre for Mental Health reckons that neglecting mental ill health costs us about £105 billion a year, so continuing to neglect it is stupid and completely counterproductive. If we make the investment up front, we will achieve savings further down the track. I therefore welcome the £600 million that the Chancellor indicated in the spending review would be made available over this Parliament for mental health. That is real progress, but it is not enough. We have to keep arguing the case for genuine equality.

We need to do two things. First, we need to spend the money differently. Many hon. Members have made the point that we need to shift resources away from containing people, often in long-stay, secure settings, to early intervention, recovery and ensuring that there is proper crisis support in the community to stop hospital admissions, which can be so damaging to someone's wellbeing.

Secondly, up-front investment is needed to fund a programme for comprehensive maximum waiting time standards, including for children and young people, so that there is a complete equilibrium, with equal rights of access to treatment. We published that vision last year, and I hope that the Secretary of State will deliver it. If we give up on the right of equal access, if we give up on ending that discrimination at the heart of our NHS, and if we do not end this historic injustice, we will let down countless families across the country, and that would be an utter disgrace.

2.53 pm

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) for bringing forward this debate. I truly believe that mental health is the social challenge of our generation. Suicide is now the biggest killer of young men under 50 in Britain. Today, 17 of our fellow men and women in this country will take their own lives. This year, thus far, has seen the greatest number of male suicides ever. Suicide kills more young people than any physical illness.

I am currently trying to visit every school in my constituency before the end of the academic year, and the teachers I speak with have been genuinely struck by the dramatic increase in mental health problems in our young people, even since I left school some 15 years ago. With all those statistics, there is also the classic issue of underreporting of mental health conditions, given the stigma surrounding the whole issue, so the real extent may, if anything, be worse.

I believe that how we deal with this challenge will define the future of communities such as mine in Plymouth. I genuinely believe that our approach to mental health is that important. I am determined to win that battle for those in Plymouth who do not have the strength to fight for it themselves. What do we do? It requires a genuine shift in our attitudes—that most difficult of changes to achieve—and a cultural change in how we view and consequently deal with mental ill health.

As the Secretary of State suggested, interventions in mental health can produce the most brilliant results, whether it is the inspirational staff at Marine Academy Plymouth making talking about mental health a part of the school day; South West Trains employing staff specifically to look out for people on the network who are in that 10 to 15-second trance before they throw themselves in front of an oncoming train; or the Royal Marines in Plymouth taking responsibility to talk about mental health away from the medical chain and putting it with the main chain of command in order to totally de-stigmatise talking about post-traumatic stress and other prevalent mental health conditions in young men.

In any of those examples, early intervention and talking about mental health can have dramatic effects, but even that is not enough on its own, and that is the nub of the problem. The interventions that really work are early interventions, so last weekend I started an executive mental health group in Plymouth to determine

a way of producing a project similar to one running in Trieste in Italy. Now, city council chiefs, commissioning group heads, police chiefs and healthcare providers will get together every month in the local police station until we have a 24/7 mental health capability in Plymouth to match our 24/7 capability for dealing with physical healthcare.

Rehman Chishti: My hon. Friend is making a brilliant speech. Does he agree that local commissioning group spending should reflect commitments made at a national level on parity of esteem for mental and physical health?

Johnny Mercer: I completely agree, and I draw my hon. Friend's attention to the comment made by our right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) on how important it is to ensure that CCGs ring-fence the funding so that we get the parity of esteem that I am trying to establish in Plymouth, and which I know the Government are committed to establishing across the country. It might take five months or five years in Plymouth, but I and the others will keep going until we get there, because this problem is actually too big to fail at.

We must be the Government who turn the corner on this. If we are to be so—rightly—fixated on a healthy economy to deliver our manifesto pledges, we must be equally as committed to our less high-profile commitments to those who will not make as much noise if we fail but whose need is of equal, if not greater, importance.

2.56 pm

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I want to make some brief remarks in support of the motion and, just as importantly, to welcome the opportunity to talk about this issue. I do so as someone who, like many Members of this House, and many millions of people across the country, has had my life affected by mental ill health. I grew up in a home where a very close family member suffered from severe depression and had a number of breakdowns. I experienced how it affected the whole family over many years, and not just individual suffering, but the effect on everyday family life of regular hospitalisation and the need for other family members to be home carers. Like most of us probably, I have a number of friends who have been affected by mental ill health, and some years ago a close friend committed suicide as a result of her depression.

I have my own personal experience of mental ill health. Like other Members of the House—I think that there are probably a number of us—I have suffered from depression. As a result of these depressive episodes, I know how it feels to be unable to function normally, or to perform even the most basic everyday tasks, because the weight of the depression is so overwhelming. I know how debilitating depression and other mental ill health can be. It is quite difficult to explain to people who have not experienced that just how debilitating it can be.

I am really heartened that mental health is increasingly being not only recognised, but acknowledged and spoken about. People increasingly accept that it is an illness that should be without stigma or taboo. The more that mental health is discussed, the clearer it becomes that it is something that affects people in huge numbers from all walks of life, all backgrounds and all ages. More and more I think my experience is not unusual.

As a councillor for many years before coming to this House in May, I noticed an increase over the years in the number of people coming to advice surgeries with serious mental health problems. Most of us will have stories about how constituents with mental health problems have been failed by the system. We need to treat those people with more sensitivity and understanding. It is the right thing to do not only for the individual, but for society and the economy.

Rehman Chishti: With regard to addressing constituents' needs, the hon. Gentleman might have seen that I have a private Member's Bill on perinatal mental healthcare. The aim is that mothers should be able to get that healthcare at that most vulnerable time within a reasonable distance from home—75 miles—because at the moment we have a postcode lottery on where they can get it.

Jeff Smith: That is a very important issue, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing forward his private Member's Bill.

A person recently came to my surgery who had some very difficult personal circumstances that left them unable to work due to mental health issues. They were told by an official at the jobcentre that in order to maintain their benefits they were required to take part in telephone counselling, without reference to their GP. That turned out to be an extremely detrimental experience. It brought up episodes from the past that meant that my constituent was set back in their recovery and is now even further away from the ability to regain confidence and rejoin the workforce.

Because of my personal experience, I understand how depressive illness can blight the life of an individual, but it blights our society too. It is difficult to measure the cost of mental ill health to society, but it clearly runs into several billion pounds each year. That is why cuts to mental health services, particularly preventive services, are a false economy, as the Secretary of State acknowledged in his very good words earlier. We are all seeing the effects of the cuts to social care budgets, to wider council support budgets, and to mental health trust budgets. That is a bad thing at a time when demand is growing and we can finally acknowledge the need for concerted action to tackle this issue, and that is why I am supporting this motion.

I have experienced how medication and physical treatment can make a difference—medication worked for me—but I know that psychological therapy can also make a big difference. It is illogical that the right to one of those can be enshrined in the NHS constitution but not the other. We are making progress on parity of esteem, as I think we can all acknowledge across the House. We now need to go beyond that ambition and that rhetoric and match it with action.

3.1 pm

Dr Phillip Lee (Bracknell) (Con): I congratulate colleagues on their contributions and welcome familiar faces from past mental health debates.

This is obviously a massive subject, and it is impossible to cover it in three minutes. I am struck by the number of different specialties and different problems within mental health that have already been touched on, be it addiction, dementia, depression, stress-related illness, or eating disorders in the young—the list goes on and on. Sadly, all these things are increasing in frequency.

[Dr Phillip Lee]

Next week and over Christmas, I will be working as a doctor, and I can guarantee that I will be seeing people with mental health problems during that period. We have talked a lot about service provision; in fact, I think that every contribution so far has dealt with that.

We might want to reflect on our society and ask ourselves the difficult questions as to why we are seeing an increase in depression, stress-related illness, eating disorders and the like. I would say that it reflects what is sick in our society. There are the drivers towards excess consumption that we can afford neither financially nor physically. There is the breakdown of the family, with people not taking their parental responsibilities as seriously as they should on every occasion. There is the retreat of the Church, to be replaced by what, exactly? I am not sure that anything has come forward to replace the Church in providing from within communities, and not necessarily from Government, a community hub and support for people in distress. We should all reflect on that. We should spend a few weeks or a few months thinking about it, and ask ourselves how we can pass legislation here, how we can perhaps lead different lives as role models, and how we can encourage people to seek a life that is better in terms of the quality of life and also physical and mental health.

I want to mention something specifically with regard to forensic psychiatry. My constituency is proud to host the pre-eminent high-security hospital, Broadmoor. Broadmoor hospital is widely renowned internationally. It is being redeveloped over the next few years. This redevelopment was based on a Care Quality Commission report commissioned under the previous Labour Government, and the decision was made by the coalition Government. It provides £250 million for 210 to 220 new beds and is designed around new clinical models. Broadmoor is not a prison, but if its recidivism rate was replicated across the prison service, we would all be extremely happy. Its 420 nurses and 12 consultants do remarkably good work. It is challenging work dealing with some very difficult cases—the type of cases we see in our newspapers. I am very proud that that hospital is based in my constituency, and I am particularly proud of a society that places such emphasis on treating people as patients, not as criminals.

3.4 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I, too, want to talk about Bootham Park hospital, which closed suddenly, in just under four working days. We must remember the impact that that closure had on patients—the confusion, the fear and the anger, with some withdrawing and some wanting to die. We must also sing the praises of the professionalism of the staff in dealing with it. However, the closure was avoidable. There were too many people involved in decision making—commissioners; providers; Historic England; Prop Co, the owner of the buildings; and others. That is one of the failings in what happened at Bootham. With the change of provider, politics and blame ensued, and that must be investigated, because it had an impact. We must also look at the role of the CQC, which has acknowledged that its role in having to inspect the building before registering it with the new provider had an impact on patient safety.

It is therefore absolutely vital that we have an independent inquiry, as I, and 8,000 people in my constituency, have requested. I want the Minister to say that we can have that public inquiry, which is needed to ensure patient safety for the future. It might be an embarrassing situation, but we have to push on to make the service safe. Patients were scattered across our city for their out-patient appointments, and scattered across our region, travelling miles in a crisis. That is unacceptable.

It is not only essential that we have answers on what happened at Bootham Park hospital, but that we look back at the Health and Social Care Act 2012, which lies at the heart of the problem. Because of it, there is nobody with overarching responsibility for patient safety in the NHS. Different jurisdictions and different regulators have different responsibilities, and there are no mechanisms for responding to such situations. There is also the role of the Secretary of State in now having a duty to promote the NHS, and no longer to provide and secure it. That has an impact, because people can point a finger but do not have to lift a finger. We need to look at that, and also at the role of the CQC.

My second plea is that we have clarity about a replacement for Bootham Park hospital. When the Chancellor gave the autumn statement, he said that three new hospitals would come to fruition, but one for York was not mentioned. Was that because mental health is not getting parity of status, or because we are not getting a hospital? We need that clarity today. I trust that we will start to have some answers on those two points—the need for an independent inquiry and a new hospital.

3.7 pm

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): If I may, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to ask you to cast your mind back to the summer. As a new MP, I was sitting on the grass on a Sunday reading through my casework. There were many of the usual items of correspondence on housing, planning and so on, and then a letter, and a moment I will never forget. It was from a constituent, Steve Mallen, telling me about the tragic suicide of his 18-year-old son—a brilliant, gifted young man with grade 8 piano, straight A*s at A-level, and a place reserved at Cambridge University. Ten months ago today, Edward Mallen took his own life in front of a train. “Mental health”—they are not dirty words. We all have a state of mental health, just as we all have a state of physical health. We have good days and we have bad days. We all have them, every one of us. For most of us, the good days follow the bad days and overcome them, but tragically this did not happen for Edward.

Today I want to talk about what we in this Chamber can do to make sure that there are no more Edwards. Members will know that I want this House to work together to resolve problems, not to point fingers at failure. So I urge those in all parts of the House to recognise the good work that has been done so far and to commit, from this day, to working together to achieve more. I believe that we are building on the foundations laid by the tremendous work of Norman Lamb and the Health and Social Care Act 2012. We have seen investment of £1.25 billion to help deliver the Future in Mind Initiative, the appointment of Sam Gyimah, and the appointment of Natasha Devon as the Department for

Education's first schools mental health champion—and boy, what a fireball she is! Only this week, we had the announcement of a £3 million pilot programme to support mental health leaders in schools across the country. Given that 10% of children under 16 have a clinically diagnosable mental health problem, and 75% of all mental illness predates higher education, we are focusing on the right things.

Prevention is far better than a cure, because by the time a cure comes, families, communities and the wider economy have been devastated. Ask Steve Mallen, his family and the village of Meldreth, because they know. We could argue all day about whether the Government are spending enough on the cure, but I do not want us to do that.

Norman Lamb: The hon. Lady is making a passionate case, particularly in relation to the tragic case of her constituent. Does she agree that we need to get the whole of the NHS to sign up to a commitment to a zero suicide ambition? That is not about setting a target, but about changing the culture so that everyone focuses on saving lives.

Heidi Allen: That is fundamental and there should be no alternative. The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right.

Nobody doubts the need to improve mental health care or the fact that money does not grow on trees. Investment is increasing, but I fear that the scale of the problem is far greater than any Government cheque book. It is so much bigger than that, but the good news is that we are capable of being bigger than that, too. Let us cast aside party politics and make this our issue, not just the Government's issue.

In South Cambridgeshire, we are pooling together the resources of schools, world-leading academics, mental health charities, business, local authorities, politicians and parents—everyone—to do things differently. With Steve and the memory of his son, Edward, at the helm, we want to roll out a timetabled early intervention and prevention programme in every single one of our schools. We are trialling and developing it, and in March next year we will launch it at an international conference in Cambridge, which Alistair Burt has kindly committed to attend.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Lady must refer to Members by their constituency name. Twice now she has referred to people by their names. It is simply not done in this Chamber.

Heidi Allen: Forgive me, Madam Deputy Speaker—I was genuinely unaware of that.

I have no doubt of the personal dedication of our Ministers, for they have proved it to me and, more importantly, to Steve Mallen. If Members are undertaking similar work in their constituencies, or if they want to join our project, I urge them to talk to me. If we have learned one thing about mental health, it is that we need to talk about it. The answer is simply not about cash; it is about partnership working, and I urge every Member of this House to join in this fight together. Let us take the responsibility.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. If hon. Members wish to be kind to their fellow Members, they will now take three minutes or less and no interventions. If that does not happen, several people will not get to speak at all. It is up to Members how they wish to behave.

3.12 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): In Salford and Eccles, we know only too well about the urgent need to provide better mental health services, but I want to focus specifically on children's mental health services. As we have heard, a significant proportion of lifelong mental health problems start in the teenage years, yet only 6% of the mental health budget is spent on child and adolescent services. YoungMinds, a leading mental health charity, has confirmed that, due to local government cuts, 60% of local authorities have either cut or frozen their child and adolescent mental health services budget since 2010.

Research has shown that early intervention is of paramount importance, with one in 10 children encountering a mental health problem, which, without early intervention, is likely to become a more chronic problem in later life and thus a greater burden on the NHS. Early intervention is also key to ensuring that an issue does not escalate to the stage where hospitalisation is required. One in-patient bed costs a staggering £25,000 a month. It is perfectly clear that adequate investment in the lower tiers of CAMHS provision is not just a question of social conscience, but a matter of economic common sense.

I must also address the systems in place for ensuring that children who present with mental health issues receive the requisite help at the earliest opportunity. GPs play an incredibly important role in early intervention, as they are often the first point of contact for parents whose child is experiencing a mental health problem. GPs have, however, voiced the concern nationally that they are not sufficiently equipped to deal with children with mental health issues and their training does not prepare them adequately for such situations.

Time and again, I am made aware of cases in my constituency where a child did not present symptoms clearly enough to a GP, a referral was not made and the problem, which could have been dealt with relatively easily, escalated to the point where the child became seriously ill and required hospitalisation. Other barriers to referral include the body mass index limits in relation to eating disorders, which my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) highlighted earlier. What further support and guidance will the Government provide to GPs in order to address the issues?

The case for effective early intervention in Salford becomes even more convincing when we consider the shortage of in-patient beds in Greater Manchester. I have been working with a family in my constituency whose child desperately needed urgent treatment but who, due to the lack of available beds, was admitted to a general paediatric ward, where they waited for months until a child mental health bed became available. Although the staff on that ward were amazing and did all they could, the simple fact remained that this child was not on the correct ward and was therefore not receiving the psychiatric treatment that was immediately required.

[Rebecca Long Bailey]

Although I appreciate some of the measures that the Government have taken, I have serious concerns that they will barely begin to address the issues that I have raised today.

3.15 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I want to consider mental health in the justice system, and will draw my remarks quite widely to include the police. I am very pleased that we have made progress in this area. In my county at least, police cars are no longer used to transport mental health patients; ambulances are used instead.

NHS England has been charged with developing better healthcare services for people in the criminal justice system, and the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence has also been asked to develop guidelines on improving mental health for those in prison. The need is to identify those who have mental health problems and to support them, as the Government have recognised. The choice is for the prisoner either to have support for their mental health issues as they move along the criminal justice pathway, or to be diverted into treatment—or, indeed, social care. The integration of social care and the NHS can contribute a lot to that process.

The service provided to prisoners needs to be consistent across the UK, and I was pleased to hear the Secretary of State's remarks on the involvement of the King's Fund in that. There is a great need for prisoners to have the same access as non-prisoners to mental health services. It is also necessary to ensure continuity of treatment across the prison estate and through to the non-prison environment. That continuity is crucial to the provision of better facilities for those prisoners with mental health issues.

That takes us back to the crisis care concordat and the need for good access to support. Prisoners need to know that their problems are genuinely taken seriously, and that they can get help when they need it. That could help tackle the issue of the huge number of men who commit suicide, which my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) has mentioned. That has to be acknowledged.

I congratulate the Government on the progress they have made, and on recognising the need for parity between mental and physical health services. I am also extremely grateful for the £600 million of additional funding for mental health that the Chancellor put into the system in the recent autumn statement and spending review. The Royal College of Psychiatrists was also pleased with that commitment, and said that it was good news.

3.18 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I am proud of the work that the Labour campaign for mental health has done to highlight many of the issues that have been raised today. In particular, I congratulate my constituent, Victoria Desmond, on her work.

I want to raise the case of one of my constituents. I have briefly outlined it before in this House. Kane was only 18 years old—the same age as my eldest son—when he took his own life. Kane had grown up in care, in foster homes and in institutions, and he had a history of

mental health problems, but those difficulties were compounded by the problems that society threw at him. Already extremely vulnerable, his unemployment benefits were suddenly stopped after he missed a doctor's appointment. He was one of many people with mental health issues who are increasingly being sanctioned through no fault of their own. Then Kane was hit again when the moneylender Wonga, from which he had taken out a payday loan, cleared out his bank account in one fell swoop as part-payment of his debt. Kane was left absolutely destitute, literally without a penny to his name. Hours later, Kane hanged himself.

That is a shocking story about a young boy who had already had more than his fair share of problems in life being left penniless by a payday loan company. After being penalised by the state, which withdrew his benefits, it must have seemed like he had nowhere to turn to for help, support or a little human understanding.

Of course Kane is not alone. He is one of 16 men, on average, who commit suicide every year in my constituency. Many more attempt to take their own life. It is a miserable fact that men are three times more likely than women to take their own life. It would be wrong to speculate on the reasons, but it seems irrefutable that economic circumstances play some part. I try to be non-partisan, but that is difficult after my experience and that of my mum, who suffered from bipolar disorder for many years. The Government shout about their long-term economic plan, cut taxes for the richest in the nation, and then tell my mum, "You've got to move because of the bedroom tax. You're having your benefits cut, and we'll cut funding to local authorities and charities." Charities such as Mind that look after people like my mum can no longer offer the support that she once had.

Economics plays a huge part in the treatment of people with mental health problems. The number of mental health beds in Greater Manchester has been cut by 5.9% in the past five years, despite increasing demand. My hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) mentioned that the regional press in my area today reported the start of a consultation on cutting £1.5 million from Manchester Mental Health and Social Care Trust. More than 600 patients are set to be hit by these proposed cuts.

If people listening to this debate need support, I commend the services out there run by the voluntary sector and charities, including the Samaritans, of which I used to be a member.

3.21 pm

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): It is important to reflect on whom this debate is about. It is about the thousands of people across the country who may have woken up this morning feeling that they might not be able to get through the day. It is for the young boy, perhaps aged 14, feeling confused and depressed at school and not knowing where to get help, and the young girl prepared to starve herself potentially to death because of issues to do with body image. This debate is for the middle-aged man of 40 who may be contemplating suicide because of a sense of a loss of his identity. It is about the older person, perhaps the 75-year-old woman who has just suffered a bereavement and feels isolated and depressed, not knowing where to go for help. Those are the people whom we are speaking about today.

In my role as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on mental health, I am aware that the public debate about mental health has changed radically over the past decade. Celebrities and Members of Parliament talk about their mental health. That has created a unique context in which we can talk about mental health policy. This Government have an historic opportunity to make a genuine difference to the direction of mental health policy in Britain.

As part of the £14 billion that we spend on mental health services in Britain, it makes sense to move resources to tackle the issue at its source, whether through the Government's commitment in respect of perinatal mental health, or by radically transforming our child and adolescent mental health services so that we get rid of the tiering system that is more suited to the commissioners than to service users. We need radical change in that area. We need a crisis care system in which, if an individual rings up and says, "I am having a crisis", they get compassionate help. Overall, we need a vision for mental health policy that achieves a situation in which talking about mental health—about an individual's mind and their place in their family and in their community—is thought to be entirely normal in society. We have that opportunity and we as a Government need to take it.

3.24 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) on securing the debate, in which it is a great privilege to speak.

On 11 April 2002 football fans in England held their breath after David Beckham famously broke the second metatarsal bone on his left foot and was ruled out of the World cup, a mere 50 days before it was due to kick off. Over the following days and weeks the good footballing fans and folk of England watched with trepidation as Beckham recovered and eventually scored the winning goal against Argentina to take England to the quarter-finals. Most Members in the Chamber will be wondering what on earth this tale has to do with the matter of mental health. A great deal, because at the heart of this issue and the debate is parity of esteem for mental and physical health and ultimately how we frame our vision and views of mental health. In Scotland we have parity of esteem in Scottish legislation.

If David Beckham had suffered mental health issues which prevented him from training or playing, would we have tracked his progress and wellbeing with such careful attention? Would he even have admitted to having had a mental illness? I am speaking hypothetically, but for a variety of reasons we often treat mental health completely differently from physical health, and there is no good reason or explanation for that. How we frame the debate is hugely important. According to the charity Mind, which surveyed almost 6,000 people in January 2015, over a third of people—40%—come up against stigma and discrimination on a monthly and weekly basis, and over half the people surveyed said that stigma and discrimination were as bad as or worse than the illness itself.

In Scotland we are proud that the early introduction of targets for child and adolescent mental health services has supported substantial increases in the CAMHS workforce. The Scottish Government are investing over

£100 million over the next five years to ensure that our health service is equipped to train the workforce that offer these vital services. I pay tribute to the great work of organisations such as the Scottish Association for Mental Health, which recently launched its "Give mental health a sporting chance" campaign. In partnership with Chris Hoy, SAMH is building on the success of sport in Scotland, such as the 2014 Commonwealth games. Its chief executive says:

"The time is right for sport to use its collective power to tackle the stigma and discrimination around mental ill health."

It is important in a debate such as this to recognise the root causes of mental ill health and how we can ensure that every child and young person gets the very best start in life. That is why I find it incredible that the UK Government are choosing to continue with their austerity agenda, when a recent report by Psychologists Against Austerity called "The Psychological Impact of Austerity" states:

"It's now well established that austerity has hit the poor much harder than the wealthy: we have indeed, been 'balancing the books on the backs of the poor'".

The report goes on to say:

"What has not been sufficiently highlighted is the psychological price people have paid."

In closing, I would like to read the last two verses of a poem that a constituent who has suffered mental illness sent me:

"I know we've had this conversation before
But this time I'm throwing you out of the door
I tried in the past but I didn't want to be rude
For after all you've done me such good.
I appreciate that you've been my friend
But now I'm afraid it has to end
I cannot keep you by my side
There were times you almost let me die."

3.27 pm

Chloe Smith (Norwich North) (Con): People deserve better service. For too long some constituents have battled to get the care they need. Many do get excellent care, and I pay tribute to the staff of the Norfolk and Suffolk mental health foundation trust, who dedicate their lives to caring for thousands of patients successfully. I am pleased to see the hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) and the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) here. I hope they will work with me and meet the trust here next week.

What we should be debating today is how to complete the job of bringing mental health into the light, into equality with physical health and into an era where the norm is of a better service, with every patient getting the treatment they need. I am currently helping constituents who have lived with seeing someone they love go down in a spiral—fast, sudden, out of control and finding it too hard to know what to do. I am concerned about continuity of care, the role of GPs and out-of-county beds. Poor provision of services is not acceptable or just: people deserve a better service.

I want to say three things: first, funding matters; secondly, equality matters; and thirdly, good management matters. On funding, I welcome the steps that the

[Chloe Smith]

Government are taking to increase investment. The Norfolk and Suffolk mental health foundation trust has been open about the funding shortfall it can see in its books compared, for example, with the Norfolk and Norwich hospital down the road. The chief executive has called for the same system of funding for mental health compared with physical health.

Of the seven CCGs in the region, Norwich devotes the highest proportion of its budget to mental health. Although the overall budget for this year rose by just over 6%, spend on mental health increased by just over 4%.

Rehman Chishti: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Chloe Smith: I am afraid that I cannot take an intervention.

Norwich CCG notes that its

“spend on mental health has increased significantly in real terms, by almost £2m.”

It believes that

“access to mental health care is consistent across the county in line with demand.”

I welcome the announcement today of transparency measures, which will help us to understand such a statement.

On equality, we need proper parity of esteem between mental and physical health to be made a reality through funding. It is welcome that, in the planning requirements, commissioners are required to invest additionally in mental health.

Finally, good management is also needed, as the Minister for Community and Social Care recently argued in the *Eastern Daily Press*. By the way, I pay tribute to its campaign on mental health. My trust is in special measures and subject to an improvement plan. We must work with the trust to help it to get better. The staff have made very clear the pressures that they perceive; I also pay tribute to them. The CCG found that the trust was good at caring, but inadequately led. Monitor found that its financial management was lacking. Patients deserve better and other trusts are doing better: Norwich deserves better.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. If every speaker is to get in and we are to finish the debate on time, we must now have a limit of two minutes.

3.30 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

“There they stand, isolated, majestic, imperious, brooded over by the gigantic water-tower and chimney combined, rising unmistakable and daunting out of the countryside—the asylums which our forefathers built with such immense solidity to express the notions of their day.”

Who would want to go back to that description of the old county asylums by Enoch Powell, the then Minister of Health, in a speech in 1961?

The proposals will set the country on a path of integrated community services for people with mental health issues, with an emphasis on the hospital as the

place of last resort. No one doubts the complexity of the issue, but there is a real danger we will have a system that does not do one thing or the other. On the one hand, mental health hospitals are struggling to cope with demand for in-patient beds; on the other hand, community services are also straining to cope. There is a symbiotic relationship that feeds off the gradual inability of the other to cope with demand, despite the best efforts of the staff in those services, such as my colleagues in the 5 Boroughs Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, the staff of Mersey Care NHS Trust in my area, and charity and local authority workers.

What would happen if we did not have carers? We need to give them more support—concrete support—not warm words. I am not pointing the finger at the Government. We have gone beyond that. We genuinely have to get down to the issue. However, they are the Government, and they have a significant responsibility to get to grips with this burgeoning and growing crisis. I hope that the Minister has the vision to do so.

3.32 pm

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): May I join many other hon. Members in what they have said about the courage and bravery of Members standing up in this Chamber to speak about their own mental health issues? They are no longer in their places, but I refer in particular to my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) and my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker). Listening to their speeches has given me enough confidence to think about my own mental health issues. I have to admit that trying to confront those issues was difficult in my first couple of months as a new Member of Parliament, but with the help and support of people in this place and in my constituency, I am managing to get through this period.

When someone comes to my constituency surgery to talk about their mental health issues, I completely understand the difficulties they face in finding the correct signposting. I completely agree with hon. Members who have said that we have a responsibility as MPs to be advocates for our constituents and to speak about mental health in this place. I have decided to hold a regular constituency surgery to work on mental health with Sirona Care and Health in my constituency. I will also hold hearsay information hubs, as I have done recently. I must admit that I have been pretty startled by the number of people coming forward to my surgeries with mental health issues during the past six months. I am at the very end of the journey on mental health: they should have been picked up well before they come to my office.

I have, however, seen a radical improvement during the past five years, having worked alongside the NHS for the past seven years. Avon and Wiltshire Mental Health Partnership NHS Trust in my constituency has Hillview, which is an excellent facility. It is increasing the number of psychiatric beds, which is definitely a benefit. We also have a range of community organisations and charities such as Bath Mind, which the Secretary of State visited just before the general election. I will never forget some of the work that it is doing, and I am currently helping it out. We play a vital role in this debate, and hopefully we will be able to signpost more of our constituents to the right place.

3.35 pm

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): I want to focus on attitudes towards, and the prevalence of, mental health problems among young black men, which I believe is important. Although the prevalence of mental health conditions among young people is often discussed in Parliament, it is less often discussed in the House in terms of race. Black men in Britain are 17 times more likely than their white counterparts to be diagnosed with a psychotic illness. Studies carried out in 2014 in Lambeth, an area with a black population of 26%—the largest in the country—found that 70% of the borough's residents in secure psychiatric settings are of African or Caribbean origin.

The majority of people enter the mental health services via primary care, but young black African people are more likely to enter via the court or the police. According to a report by Mind in 2013, in a survey of black people's experiences of the mental health services, 46% had been restrained by mental health staff. Of those, 79% thought that restraint was aggressive, and 34% had been physically injured.

We must listen to and act on reports such as that of Healthwatch Enfield, which surveyed 77 people in the community. The majority of those were young people and their parents, and they found—among many conclusions—that there were cultural, language and access barriers to services for black and minority ethnic communities. That needs to be considered by the Government. We need a comprehensive investment in mental health that takes racial differences into account. That will be one step forward to ensuring that we have an adequate service that helps all those in this country who suffer with mental health issues.

3.36 pm

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) who made some important points.

I will focus my brief remarks on young people with mental health issues. Every year I am privileged to bring about 10 young people into Parliament for a parliamentary induction day, and during a question and answer session I asked what were the biggest challenges facing them and their generation and peers. I thought that the answer would be about how to get into, and fund, a place at a decent university, but all 10 of them said in unison that mental health was the biggest challenge they faced.

I found that staggering, and given the various cases that I have had to deal with as an MP, I have taken a much closer interest in the subject and worked hard to find out more about the issues relating to young people. Clearly, the challenge is increasing. In the Cheshire and Wirral Partnership NHS Foundation Trust alone, referrals have gone up by 25% over the past couple of years. There is growing awareness of the issue, which in many ways is a good thing.

It is also clear that social media amplifies those challenges, and I ask those who have brought the likes of "Assassin's Creed", and other weird-sounding computer games, to the young people we work with, to please use that creativity and ability to communicate with young people to develop digital approaches that will help them

to feel more comfortable about who they are, and about their place in the real world and the digital space. There is a responsibility there.

I am pleased that we will hear from the Minister for Community and Social Care, who takes a keen interest in this area. Extra funding is being used to tackle issues on the ground, and we are seeing best practice with young advisers in our area helping to youth-proof local services. Our Emotionally Healthy schools programme is bringing together an integrated approach to that vital part of our community.

3.39 pm

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): The Norfolk and Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust was the first mental health trust in England to be placed in special measures, where I am afraid it still languishes. Let me praise the staff who have held that trust together, and kept it going throughout this tough time. Despite that, throughout the coalition years, we heard—and still do—much about parity of esteem between mental and physical health. Unfortunately, the reality is very different. Unison members in my constituency worked out that if my local mental health trust were funded using the same formula as my local acute trust, it would have an additional annual income of about £69 million. Instead, however, it was cut by £30 million. Ultimately, were parity of esteem a reality rather than empty rhetoric, those cuts would not have been made.

In the face of severe financial constraints, my trust has been forced to cut services such as early intervention in psychosis, assertive outreach and the specialist homeless teams that were once in place. Each and every cut was a false economy. The impact has been catastrophic. People in crisis in my constituency have been left without access to a local NHS bed. Instead, they have been sent hundreds of miles from Norwich, separated from their families and care teams, to places as far away as Harrogate, Bradford, London and Brighton.

Forgive me, therefore, if I do not sound too excited by the announcement in the Chancellor's recent autumn statement of an additional investment of £600 million for mental health services. An investigation by the BBC and the *Community Care* magazine in March found that £600 million had been cut from mental health services since 2010. It is therefore an affront to call this £600 million an investment. In reality, it is barely a replacement. Unfortunately, it is too late for those in my constituency who have lost their lives or suffered life-changing injuries because help was not there when they needed it. The Government have failed patients, failed their families, failed staff and ultimately failed my community.

3.41 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I want to highlight the importance of preventive work in dealing with mental health issues. I am not saying that my constituency does not need more funding or resources for preventive work or the acute mental health setting, but I want to highlight some good work happening locally already.

In my constituency, Sussex police were, until recently, at the forefront of dealing with those in mental health crisis. For those who do not know my constituency, it is on the beautiful Sussex coast, and I have the picturesque spot of Birling Gap lying right next door to Beachy

[*Maria Caulfield*]

Head, both of which are suicide hotspots. Until recently, the police, along with the Beachy Head chaplaincy team, had to deal with people standing or sitting on those cliffs contemplating suicide. Since last year, mental health nurses have been out with Sussex police on these and other calls to ensure that people suffering acute mental health crises get the help they need when they need it. Previously, Sussex police were detaining more people under the mental health legislation than any other police force. They had no other way of looking after those people. That was far from ideal, because a prison cell, rather than a hospital bed, is not conducive to supporting vulnerable adults.

I ask Opposition Members, therefore, to look at some of the great work being done. I am not saying we do not need more funding and resources, but there is some great work being done in the field of mental health.

3.43 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): We have heard in this important debate from an astonishing 27 speakers, in addition to many interventions during the opening speeches. I welcome the involvement of all those who have taken part. In particular, I would like to thank the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk), the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup), my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), the hon. Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy), the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith), the hon. Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee), my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen), my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), my hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), the hon. Members for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris), for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) and for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd), the hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett), my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor), the hon. Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley), my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) and the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield). It is a remarkable number.

The Secretary of State was right to thank the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) and my hon. Friends the Members for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) and for North Durham for talking about their personal experiences. My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington also spoke about his experiences today. We should always thank hon. Members who speak from their own personal experience. I also want to mention the leadership of the all-party group on mental health and the commitment of the right hon. Members for North Norfolk and for Sutton Coldfield

(Mr Mitchell) and Alastair Campbell, who have formed a group arguing for equality for mental health and an increase in funding.

I want to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for her persistence in raising issues relating to suicide and the work capability assessment, and on the impact that changes to social security programmes can have on people with mental health problems. If we are to have a zero suicide ambition, as the Secretary of State mentioned, we must do more work on that particular issue, and on the crisis of male suicide, which was raised by the right hon. Member for North Somerset and my hon. Friends the Members for Rochdale and for Ashton-under-Lyne.

Right hon. and hon. Members have spoken with knowledge about mental health services around the country and about the excellent work being done in their own constituencies, often by charities and voluntary projects. Many speeches illustrated the fact that our mental health services are under intense pressure and in urgent need of improvement. In the previous Parliament, we heard much from Ministers on parity of esteem, but we saw little progress. I think all the speeches today have shown us that things have got worse. The independent King's Fund commented recently that parity of esteem for mental health "remains a long way off." The hon. Member for York Outer said exactly the same thing and the right hon. Member for North Norfolk called the current situation "morally wrong and economically stupid".

Mental health services have faced cuts and Government promises on spending have not been kept. We focused on that in this debate. In 2012, the annual national survey of investment in mental health services found that spending on mental health had been cut for the first time in a decade, but rather than take action to put it right Ministers discontinued the survey. As my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) said earlier, since then it has been very difficult to make an accurate assessment of the level of investment in mental health services. Indeed, we have to rely on freedom of information requests and on expert analysis by charities and independent bodies. The King's Fund found that about 40% of mental health trusts experienced reductions in income in both 2013-14 and 2014-15. The charity Mind reports a real-terms reduction of 8.25%, or almost £600 million, in the funding of mental health services at the same time that referrals to community mental health teams have risen by nearly 20%. Labour's own analysis by my hon. Friend the shadow Minister found that one in three clinical commissioning groups was not increasing its spending on mental health in line with the growth in their budget allocations, despite an explicit promise from Ministers that that would be the case. If Ministers have the determination to change that, we would welcome it.

The suggestion made by the right hon. Member for North Somerset of ring-fencing extra funding for mental health was very welcome and was supported by a number of hon. Members. The Secretary of State admitted earlier that he just did not know by how much standards and investment varied across the country. The lack of information is simply not good enough. I urge the Minister to reinstate the national survey of investment in mental health. That is the way to go.

One area on which we have accurate information is funding for social care. Social care services play an important role in supporting people with mental health problems. Cuts to social care services have a serious impact on people with mental health needs, as do other issues raised in this debate such as housing. A report on mental health care from the Health Foundation found that the number of people receiving social care support for mental health problems has fallen by 25% since 2009-10. A recent survey of NHS mental health trusts found that cuts to social care budgets were having an adverse impact on their services. Indeed, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham said, we need to road-test policies from other Departments for their impact on mental health.

The recent spending review will surely go down as a missed opportunity to do something about the desperate funding crisis in social care, which does affect people with mental health problems. The Chancellor's proposals on social care funding are woefully inadequate. They will leave a black hole in care services for older people and for people with mental health problems. To cite a local example, Government cuts to Salford City Council's budget have caused budgets for adult social care to fall from £76 million in 2010 to £61 million this year—a cut of £15 million. However, the 2% council tax precept will raise only £1.6 million. The King's Fund warned this week that the decision to use council tax rises to offset cuts in social care will widen the gap between richer and poorer areas but will raise less than half the £2 billion the Chancellor predicted.

Older people are not just being hit by cuts to social care; they are also being hit by cuts to mental health services. The Secretary of State said that depression was more debilitating than angina, asthma and diabetes, but depression affects 22% of men and 28% of women aged 65 or over—some 2 million people in England. In the UK, mental health problems present in 40% of older people attending their GPs, 50% of older people in general hospitals and 60% of older people in care homes.

The Secretary of State also said that talking therapies are more effective than drugs, but Age UK tells us that older people are six times as likely as young people to be on tranquillisers or equivalent medication, but only a fifth as likely to have access to talking therapies. While 50% of younger people with depression are referred to mental health services, only 6% of older people are. The Royal College of Psychiatrists estimates that 85% of older people with depression receive no help at all from the NHS. The Government are letting older people down by reducing their access to the services they need.

There is also a need for better emotional and psychological support for carers. Caring for a spouse or family member is more common in older age, and there are nearly 1.2 million carers aged 65 plus. Levels of stress and psychological distress are higher in carers who look after people living with dementia, and studies show that rates of depression can range up to 85% for carers of people living with dementia and up to 45% for carers of people living with anxiety.

The motion before us makes three clear calls, and I hope Members of all parties will join us in voting for the motion today. Good mental health is an issue for our schools, our workplaces and for our care homes, as well as for all our health services. I hope that Members on both sides of the House will join us in voting for the motion, which I commend to the House.

3.51 pm

The Minister for Community and Social Care (Alistair Burt): I thank the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) for her remarks. I thank colleagues for a remarkable debate, to which I shall return in a few moments.

Less than a week after being appointed, I made a visit to the Maudsley hospital in south London. I met a parent who had an eight-year-old little girl and told me of her two-year struggle in her home county some 200 miles away to find information on what would be best for her daughter—until, by her own efforts and through the internet, she had hit upon the Maudsley. On the same visit, however, I met a team working in primary schools to introduce children to mental health difficulties, giving them the understanding that just as they would look after one of their classmates who took a tumble in the playground and grazed their knee, they would look after a friend with a hurt mind.

I went to Derby and sat round a table for a meeting organised by my hon. Friend the Member for Derby North (Amanda Solloway). I met and was inspired by Sarah Eley, who had set up Borderline Arts to promote awareness and combat stigma against borderline personality disorder, from which she suffers and about which she is up front with great bravery. At the same time, I heard once again a familiar refrain from those around the table and from mental health sufferers in too many places, especially at crisis times—that “no one listened to me”. That is how it is with mental health issues in this country—a pattern of light and shade, good news and bad.

So I welcome this debate, which has given us such an opportunity to raise a number of the issues that reflect that light and shade—issues raised in powerful and personal speeches that reveal the depth of pain that mental ill health can cause. Through those expressions we can provide a sense of the urgency and purpose with which Parliament as a whole now addresses and will continue to address such matters. There is a sense that progress is being made—and I mean real progress, not “political-speak” progress—in areas ranging from therapy to crisis care. There is, however, still too much variation in the delivery of services; there are areas of unmet need; there is much more to do. More than ever before, though, there is a belief that those of us here are listening and acting on what we are hearing.

I cannot cover everything in the time available, and I will answer by letter colleagues who raised specific questions. Let me say that we heard powerful speeches, often about local issues, from my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), the hon. Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk), the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup), the hon. Members for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) and for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith) and the hon. Members for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) and for Bootle (Peter Dowd).

I am grateful to the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), who represents the Scottish National party, for offering her support for a consensual process. I look forward to visiting Scotland to see what is going on there, as I think there is much that we can share. I greatly valued the hon. Lady's contribution.

[Alistair Burt]

Strong personal statements were made by colleagues who know about these things, and I particularly thank the hon. Members for North Durham (Mr Jones) and for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith), as well as my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Ben Howlett). The hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) bravely raised the issue of recent ethnic minority issues in mental health. That needed to be raised, and I am very pleased that she did so. We do not concentrate nearly enough on that issue, and I am sure I will come back to her on that.

The right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), who grappled with these difficulties himself so well and is so well regarded, spoke of the matters that he wanted to be dealt with more urgently than had been the case since he left office. I assure him again that we will do that.

I can tell the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) and my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) that a letter is on the way to them. It will not give the hon. Lady quite the assurance that she wants in regard to the inquiry that she requested, but it will move matters on a little further. She knows that my door is open, and, indeed, I shall be happy to see both Members whenever they wish.

My hon. Friends the Members for Bracknell (Dr Lee) and for Henley (John Howell) raised the issue of mental health in the law and justice system. That is sometimes another less regarded area, but, as my hon. Friends pointed out, mental health issues matter there as well.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), my hon. Friends the Members for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) and for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen), the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) and my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) raised the important issue of suicide. I take that issue extremely seriously, and I think that we have not done nearly enough to deal with it. I shall say something about my ambition in that regard towards the end of my speech.

The concept of parity of esteem was also mentioned, and Members wanted to know where it was in the mandate. The new NHS England mandate will be published shortly, and it will refer to that concept.

This is an Opposition day debate, involving a motion and a vote. Just as it is the right of the Opposition to press the Government to do more, and to level criticism where it is due—and occasionally where it is not due—it is the duty of the Government to explain what they are doing, and, in this instance, to ask for the House's support for our response to the mental health needs that were set out earlier by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. However, I do not want the message of today's debate to be in our procedure and our vote. I want it to be in the speeches that we have heard, in the words that have been quoted from our constituents and others, in the recognition that our Parliament and its Members have “got it” in terms of mental health, and in our assurance that the progress that has been made by successive Governments over a number of years will not stop, but will be accelerated.

We will point to our world-leading IAPT programme, and to the work of Richard Layard and David Clark in that connection. We will point to the inspiration in our

local areas for our crisis care concordat work, to the appointment of the first Minister for Education whose remit includes tackling mental health issues in schools, to the improvement in the diagnosis and treatment of dementia, and to our determination to see the £1.25 billion investment in children and young people's services deliver a sea change in what were previously undervalued services.

However, I want more. I want our ambition and our vision, building on all that has been done so far, to be recognised as providing the world's best mental health services, and I want us to be really close to that by 2020. I want to see the inevitability of suicide to be challenged and rejected as we do more to combat the scourge of too many suicides. I want a national campaign against loneliness and isolation, and the mobilisation of the millions in clubs, faith groups and associations around the country, to bring more people in, and to let no one go.

I want to see a step change in perinatal mental health recognition, and urgent work to improve the services involved. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley), I want our children's mental health—which is now at the mercy of a social media whose effects are as yet not fully calculated—to be protected by young people themselves through their own use of new technology and ingenuity, with the assistance of teachers and mentors everywhere. I want the mother whom I mentioned at the beginning of my speech to be reassured that others like her will know who to turn to quickly. I do not want anyone suffering from mental ill health ever again to feel that no one is listening.

Whether or not Members join my right hon. Friend and me in the Lobby this afternoon, I know that each and every one of us in the Chamber shares that vision and ambition, and I look forward to working with colleagues on both sides of the House to pursue it relentlessly.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 209, Noes 290.

Division No. 146]

[3.58 pm

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane	Butler, Dawn
Abrahams, Debbie	Cadbury, Ruth
Alexander, Heidi	Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Ali, Rushanara	Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Allen, Mr Graham	Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Ashworth, Jonathan	Champion, Sarah
Bailey, Mr Adrian	Chapman, Jenny
Barron, rh Kevin	Coaker, Vernon
Beckett, rh Margaret	Coffey, Ann
Berger, Luciana	Cooper, Julie
Betts, Mr Clive	Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta	Cox, Jo
Blenkinsop, Tom	Coyle, Neil
Blomfield, Paul	Crausby, Mr David
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Creagh, Mary
Brake, rh Tom	Creasy, Stella
Brennan, Kevin	Cryer, John
Brown, Lyn	Cummins, Judith
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Cunningham, Alex
Bryant, Chris	Cunningham, Mr Jim
Buck, Ms Karen	Dakin, Nic
Burden, Richard	Danczuk, Simon
Burgon, Richard	David, Wayne
Burnham, rh Andy	Davies, Geraint

De Piero, Gloria
 Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
 Donaldson, rh Mr Jeffrey M.
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Jim
 Dowd, Peter
 Durkan, Mark
 Eagle, Ms Angela
 Eagle, Maria
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Ellman, Mrs Louise
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Field, rh Frank
 Fitzpatrick, Jim
 Fello, Robert
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Flint, rh Caroline
 Flynn, Paul
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Glass, Pat
 Glindon, Mary
 Godsiff, Mr Roger
 Goodman, Helen
 Green, Kate
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hanson, rh Mr David
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Mr Mark
 Hermon, Lady
 Hillier, Meg
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Kelvin
 Howarth, rh Mr George
 Hunt, Tristram
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Irranca-Davies, Huw
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, Diana
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Graham
 Jones, Helen
 Jones, Mr Kevan
 Jones, Susan Elan
 Kane, Mike
 Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Lamb, rh Norman
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Leslie, Chris
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lewis, Mr Ivan
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline

Lucas, Ian C.
 Mactaggart, rh Fiona
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Marris, Rob
 Marsden, Mr Gordon
 Maskell, Rachael
 Matheson, Christian
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonnell, John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McInnes, Liz
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 Meale, Sir Alan
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Moon, Mrs Madeleine
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame M.
 Mulholland, Greg
 Murray, Ian
 Nandy, Lisa
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Osamor, Kate
 Owen, Albert
 Pearce, Teresa
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Pound, Stephen
 Powell, Lucy
 Pugh, John
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rayner, Angela
 Reed, Mr Jamie
 Reed, Mr Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reynolds, Emma
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Rimmer, Marie
 Ritchie, Ms Margaret
 Rotheram, Steve
 Ryan, rh Joan
 Shannon, Jim
 Sherriff, Paula
 Shuker, Mr Gavin
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smeeth, Ruth
 Smith, rh Mr Andrew
 Smith, Angela
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Spellar, rh Mr John
 Stevens, Jo
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
 Thomas, Mr Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick
 Thornberry, Emily

Timms, rh Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turley, Anna
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Umunna, Mr Chuka
 Vaz, rh Keith
 Vaz, Valerie
 Watson, Mr Tom
 West, Catherine

 Adams, Nigel
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy
 Allen, Heidi
 Amess, Sir David
 Andrew, Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, Edward
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Baron, Mr John
 Barwell, Gavin
 Bebb, Guto
 Bellingham, Mr Henry
 Benyon, Richard
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, Jake
 Berry, James
 Bingham, Andrew
 Blackman, Bob
 Blackwood, Nicola
 Boles, Nick
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Borwick, Victoria
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bradley, Karen
 Brady, Mr Graham
 Brazier, Mr Julian
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Brokenshire, rh James
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buckland, Robert
 Burns, Conor
 Burns, rh Sir Simon
 Burrowes, Mr David
 Burt, rh Alistair
 Carmichael, Neil
 Cartledge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishtii, Rehman
 Chope, Mr Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
 Cleverly, James
 Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse
 Collins, Damian
 Colvile, Oliver
 Costa, Alberto
 Cox, Mr Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crouch, Tracey
 Davies, Byron

Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Williams, Mr Mark
 Wilson, Phil
 Winnick, Mr David
 Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
 Wright, Mr Iain
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Holly Lynch and
Jeff Smith

NOES

Davies, Chris
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Glyn
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Dinenage, Caroline
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Donelan, Michelle
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, Oliver
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, James
 Duncan, rh Sir Alan
 Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
 Dunne, Mr Philip
 Ellis, Michael
 Ellison, Jane
 Elphicke, Charlie
 Eustice, George
 Evans, Graham
 Evans, Mr Nigel
 Evennett, rh Mr David
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fallon, rh Michael
 Fernandes, Suella
 Field, rh Mark
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Frazer, Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Fuller, Richard
 Garnier, rh Sir Edward
 Garnier, Mark
 Gauke, Mr David
 Ghani, Nusrat
 Gibb, Mr Nick
 Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
 Glen, John
 Goodwill, Mr Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, Mr James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
 Griffiths, Andrew
 Gummer, Ben
 Gyimah, Mr Sam
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harrington, Richard

Harris, Rebecca
 Hart, Simon
 Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
 Hayes, rh Mr John
 Heald, Sir Oliver
 Heapey, James
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Heaton-Jones, Peter
 Henderson, Gordon
 Herbert, rh Nick
 Hinds, Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hollingbery, George
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Mr Adam
 Hopkins, Kris
 Howarth, Sir Gerald
 Howell, John
 Howlett, Ben
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
 Hurd, Mr Nick
 Jackson, Mr Stewart
 James, Margot
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, Robert
 Johnson, Boris
 Johnson, Gareth
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kennedy, Seema
 Kirby, Simon
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Latham, Pauline
 Leadsom, Andrea
 Lee, Dr Phillip
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leigh, Sir Edward
 Leslie, Charlotte
 Letwin, rh Mr Oliver
 Lewis, Brandon

Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Lidington, rh Mr David
 Lilley, rh Mr Peter
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Lumley, Karen
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackintosh, David
 Main, Mrs Anne
 Mak, Mr Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mann, Scott
 Mathias, Dr Tania
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McLoughlin, rh Mr Patrick
 McPartland, Stephen
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Milling, Amanda
 Milton, rh Anne
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mordaunt, Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, James
 Morton, Wendy
 Mowat, David
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, Dr Andrew
 Neill, Robert
 Newton, Sarah
 Nokes, Caroline
 Norman, Jesse
 Nuttall, Mr David
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Perry, Claire

Phillips, Stephen
 Philp, Chris
 Pickles, rh Sir
 Eric
 Pincher, Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Daniel
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, Mr Dominic
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Rutley, David
 Sandbach, Antoinette
 Scully, Paul
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, Alok
 Shelbrooke, Alec
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stewart, Rory
 Streeter, Mr Gary
 Stride, Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian

Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Mr Desmond
 Swire, rh Mr Hugo
 Syms, Mr Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Tredinnick, David
 Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Turner, Mr Andrew
 Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, Mr Ben
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watkinson, Dame Angela
 Wharton, James
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Heather
 White, Chris
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, Mr Rob
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, William
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Jackie Doyle-Price and
Guy Opperman

Question accordingly negated.

Women and the Economy

4.11 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes with concern the disproportionate impact of this Government's policies on women; further notes that, according to the Library's data, measures in the Summer Budget and Autumn Statement have hit women three times harder by tax and benefit changes than men; notes that proposals for infrastructure investment outlined in the Autumn Statement are predominantly focused in sectors that typically employ more men than women; notes with concern that the UK gender pay gap stands at 19.2 per cent, higher than the EU average, and that the Government's introduction of tribunal fees means that women have to pay £1,200 in order to bring forward an equal pay claim, preventing many from pursuing legitimate claims; notes concerns raised by the Scottish Trades Union Congress and the Scottish Older Women's Commission regarding the proliferation of low-paid part-time work among women; notes that levels of maternity discrimination have almost doubled in recent years; notes the alarming rate of closures of services supporting victims of domestic violence, particularly services for BME women; and calls on the Government to affirm its commitment to ensuring that women and protected groups do not bear the brunt of Government measures, to conduct an urgent cumulative assessment of the impact of its policies on women since 2010, to take the necessary remedial steps to mitigate any disproportionate burden on women and to develop and publish a gender equality strategy to improve the position of women over the remainder of this Parliament.

At his party's annual conference this year, the Prime Minister nailed his colours to the mast of gender equality. He said:

"I'm a dad of two daughters...you can't have true opportunity without real equality."

That is right. That is why Labour has called this debate to put his party's record under the microscope, and to assess the extent to which his words are matched by the actions of his Government and his Chancellor. It is a record that is found wanting.

Whether we are talking about fiscal measures such as taxes and benefits; the labour market and women's employment rights and chances; public spending on services and infrastructure; women's safety; or women's voice and influence, women of all ages and backgrounds face an insecure and worrying future as a result of Government policy. That is far from the security that the Chancellor promised would be at the heart of his spending decisions.

I suppose that we should not be surprised. After all, this is the Prime Minister who regards equality impact assessments as "tick-box stuff" and "bureaucratic nonsense". We all know, all too well, what happens when the Government do not carry out full and proper equality impact assessments. Just two weeks ago, the Chancellor rose to deliver his autumn statement. His track record in power has been shameful. Since 2010, more than 80% of tax and benefit savings have been taken from the purses of women.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware that, according to the United Nations, on the current rate of progress, it will take Britain another 70 years to close the gender pay gap? Sadly, the Prime Minister's daughters may be disappointed. Does she agree that that is totally unacceptable?

Kate Green: My right hon. Friend is right. I suspect that neither of us has 70 years to wait for the gap to be equalised. I shall return to that point later.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Why did not the last Labour Government solve this problem?

Kate Green: We did an awful lot better than the coalition Government and this Government. *[Interruption.]* Yes, we did! The speed of reduction under the Labour Government in the past decade meant that the gender pay gap came down by around a third, but that progress has sadly not been maintained under Conservative-led Governments.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Kate Green: I will give way to the hon. and learned Lady later, if she will forgive me. I want to make a little progress.

We knew that the Chancellor had been forced to listen, and that he would have to back down on the tax credit cuts he announced in the summer, which would have hit women disproportionately hard. We have to wonder why on earth he thought they were a good idea in the first place, knowing that 70% of the savings to the Treasury from that policy would have come from women.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): Women have borne the brunt of more than 82% of all the Chancellor's cuts. Does my hon. Friend agree that he is every woman's worst nightmare?

Kate Green: I shall not presume to speak for every woman's attitude towards the Chancellor, but his policies have certainly been damaging for a substantial number of women.

Mr Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): Figures show that around 60% of women will benefit from the new national living wage. Does the hon. Lady accept that it was wrong of her party to oppose it in the summer Budget?

Kate Green: The hon. Gentleman is wrong to say that my party opposed it; we did not. We did say that it would not be sufficient to compensate for the cuts to tax credits and benefits. He might also like to know that analysis has shown that the people who will benefit from the national living wage are not the same ones who will lose out from the cuts to tax credits and benefits. This nonsense, this sleight of hand, about the figures does Conservative Members no credit. They should be prepared to come clean about who will benefit from their policies and who will not.

In the autumn statement, under pressure from Opposition Members, the Chancellor was forced to make changes to his plans. The cuts to tax credits have not been abandoned, however; they have merely been delayed. The same savings will still be made elsewhere in the system, and women will still lose out. According to a Library analysis commissioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), women will be hit three times as hard as men by the cuts in this year's summer Budget and in the autumn statement. That is three times as hard in six

[Kate Green]

short months, and in just two spending announcements. Many of the Chancellor's policies that are inimical to the interests of women remain firmly in place.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does the hon. Lady recognise that the Government's proposal to force companies to publish details of salaries and bonuses is a welcome step towards reducing the gender pay gap? Does she also acknowledge that it is a measure that this Government are introducing and that hers did not?

Kate Green: I must correct the hon. Gentleman: it was a Labour Government who left that measure on the statute book. It took Conservative-led Governments another five and a half years to put that into action. Even now, what is being put into action is insufficient. It does not, for example, provide for a full breakdown of grades and job roles, so there is more to do. Of course it is a welcome measure, and we are proud to have brought it forward, but I hope the Government will not rest on their laurels and will be prepared to go further.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the issue of the impact on women of the Government's policies. She will be aware that there have been huge reductions in public services, and that women constitute 75% of the local government workforce, 77% of the NHS workforce and 80% of the workforce in social care. Does she agree that these reductions are having a huge impact on the employment prospects of women in the public services?

Kate Green: My hon. Friend is right about that. Of course the public services, too, traditionally have had a better record in many respects on promotion for women and other groups with protected characteristics, such as black and minority ethnic workers. There is certainly a concern that cuts to public sector spending will have an impact on women's employment, and on their employment prospects, and that those cuts are part of the reason why unemployment has remained higher among women than men.

As I say, many of the Chancellor's policies that are harmful to the interests of women are still, sadly, in place: the freeze and cuts to child benefit, universal credit, local housing allowance and tax credits; the cuts to the family element of tax credits; the changes to disregards, tapers and thresholds; the disincentive for second earners, often women, in universal credit; the benefit cap; the two-child policy in child tax credits; increased parent conditionality; and an alarming rise in lone parent sanctions. Even the free childcare offer is shrouded in complexity and uncertainty, is delayed and is apparently more limited in scope than had previously been planned for.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): As ever, my hon. Friend is making a persuasive case; very few people know about family incomes like she does. May I draw her back to local government—not just the local government workforce, but those who work in services commissioned by local government? I am referring to care, where women work and are low paid.

Kate Green: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that care is one of the sectors in which low-paid women's jobs are concentrated, whether we are talking about

direct employment through our public services, or commissioned services for local government. It will of course be helpful over time to see the national minimum wage—the so-called living wage—increased for those workers, but if local authorities are not funded to meet the costs of that welcome pay increase, we can expect to see pressures elsewhere in the system and, most likely, on the quality of care provided. That, too, will have an impact on women, because they typically provide that family care.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab) *rose*—

Kate Green: I give way to my hon. Friend, who knows a great deal about this.

Debbie Abrahams: Was my hon. Friend as concerned as I was to hear the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions state on the BBC on Sunday that people on universal credit would not lose a penny, given that we know that a lone parent with one child, working 20 hours per week on the lowest pay, will lose about £2,800 a year from next April?

Kate Green: Yes, my hon. Friend is right about that, and I believe that even the Work and Pensions Secretary has now acknowledged that what he said at the weekend was not entirely correct.

As we have been discussing lone parents, the House will be interested to know that the Library says that a lone parent with two children, working 20 hours per week on the so-called national living wage, will lose £2,800 by the end of this Parliament. That is a substantial amount for a family who, by definition, can have only one earner—and often a part-time earner, working part time to enable care to be combined with employment responsibilities. The introduction of the so-called national living wage and free childcare places simply cannot compensate wholly for these benefit cuts; the Institute for Fiscal Studies has said that that is arithmetically impossible. In any event, as I pointed out to the hon. Member for Havant (Mr Mak), the people who gain from the increased minimum wage are not the same people who are losing out.

Lucy Frazer: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Kate Green: Yes, of course. I beg the hon. and learned Lady's pardon; I had promised to give way to her.

Lucy Frazer: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. What does she say about the fact that 53% of apprenticeship starts in 2014-15 were for women? That is a policy that the Government are very much pushing.

Kate Green: I will return to that point in my speech. The hon. and learned Lady is right in what she says, but we will be looking shortly—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman) may wish to wait for this part of my speech, as I know he is looking forward to it: we will look at how those apprenticeships are distributed between women and men; the sectors in which they work; how their employment destinations are not equal; and, sadly, at how those apprenticeships contribute, in both the short term and the long run, to the inequality that women still experience in the labour market. I think the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) is acknowledging that

point. It is a concern, and I hope that the Minister can say something about the Government strategy for addressing it.

It is not just women of working age who are losing out as a result of Government policies; older women face a situation that is equally serious. Single female pensioners lose most, according to the Women's Budget Group, while the Fawcett Society points out that in 2017, the full £155-a-week state pension will be paid to only 22% of older women. The difficulty that women face because of working part-time, or because of not being able to fulfil the requirement for an increased 35 years of contributions, puts them at further disadvantage. Women are also less likely to have access to a good occupational pension.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Just a short time ago, in Prime Minister's Question Time, the Prime Minister declared himself a feminist, but that does not seem to correspond with his party's policies. Just as he once forgot his daughter in a pub, his party seems to have forgotten about equality for women.

Kate Green: Certainly, I am unable to describe the policies of the Government as pro-female, or indeed feminist. Perhaps the Minister will seek to defend the Prime Minister's record.

Those women who saw their pension age increase as a result of the Pensions Act 2011, particularly those born between April 1951 and April 1953, have been hit especially hard. Not only do they have to wait longer for their pension, but unlike a man of exactly the same age, they are not eligible for a single-tier pension.

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend will know the work that my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) and I have done in raising this issue. On Saturday, I was at Denton Morrison's with the Women Against State Pension Inequality—WASPI—campaign group. It made that point to many of my constituents who were completely unaware of the changes and the acceleration in the state pension age, so those women who were expecting to get their state pension will be sorely disappointed. They said that the Government's communications on this have been absolutely abysmal.

Kate Green: My hon. Friend is right. I, too, have met the WASPI women. Just the other day, my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) held a Westminster Hall debate on this very subject in which she pointed out the lack of notice to these women. That point was also made by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) and others when the legislation was passed by this House in 2011.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): Since that debate, the former Pensions Minister, Steve Webb, has admitted that the Government made a bad decision over these increases in state pension age equalisation. He made the excuse that his Department had not been properly briefed, and he went into crisis talks with the Prime Minister and the Chancellor to try to claw back billions. Those women are suffering because of that mistake and that departmental failure.

Kate Green: We heard the then Pensions Minister, and other Ministers, assure us that there would be transitional protection for those women. We have seen no sign of that protection, and women are suffering as a result.

We already know that women are twice as likely as men to live in poverty, yet this Chancellor has a blind spot when it comes to gender. He is either unaware or disinterested in the gendered nature of poverty. It is not just the short-term injustice of this policy that is of real concern, but the long-term impact on our country's future.

Women are more likely to manage household budgets. They are more likely to be the main carers of children, and poor mothers have poor children. Women's continued economic disadvantage means more children growing up in poverty, which means long-term damaging effects on those children and on our future economic potential.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Does the hon. Lady accept that debt does not discriminate, and that it is in the interests of every member of society, whether male or female, that we run sound public finances, which is the reason behind many of the measures that she was describing earlier? Unless we reduce our deficit and get back into the black, we will leave every member of this society in massive debt.

Kate Green: We on the Opposition side of the House of course agree about the importance of prudent management of the public finances. I would just point out that the Chancellor promised to eliminate the deficit by the end of the last Parliament. What he actually achieved was to halve it, which is exactly what the previous Labour Chancellor, Alistair Darling, had suggested. This Chancellor has presided over a rise in public debt, and he is substituting once again—one might have thought that he was learning—private debt for public debt. The Office for Budget Responsibility is now forecasting that by the end of this Parliament private household debt will be back at recession levels, which should alarm all of us.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): My memory is failing me. I wonder whether the hon. Lady could remind me which Chancellor ended boom and bust.

Kate Green: I will remind the hon. Gentleman of two things. First, the 2008 crash was a global crash that began in the United States of America; it was not caused by the spending plans and policies of the then Labour Government. Secondly, it was the action taken by the then Prime Minister and Chancellor that rescued the economy when we could have seen the entire financial system crash, which would have left families with no salaries, no incomes, no ability to pay their mortgages—

Simon Hoare *rose*—

Kate Green: I have not finished giving the hon. Gentleman his history lesson, since he says his memory is faulty. It was the Labour Government who steered the economy through a desperately dangerous period. At the time the current Prime Minister and Chancellor said that the best thing was to do nothing and not to rescue the banks, which would have caused absolute financial disaster for families across this country. While I am reminding the hon. Gentleman about the track records of the previous

[Kate Green]

Labour Government and the previous Conservative Opposition, of course I regret that we did not regulate the banking system more tightly, as I think everybody accepts, but let me remind Government Members once again that it was the current Prime Minister and the current Chancellor of the Exchequer who said that Labour was being too restrictive in our regulation of the financial services sector. The history lesson does not entirely favour the hon. Gentleman's party, but I will give way to him again.

Simon Hoare: Hearing the hon. Lady talk about the Labour party and financial regulation is like hearing that Herod should have been a bit kinder to the first-born. Perhaps I will give her another go. Does she not accept that her right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) failed back at the election? Did not the Labour party borrow too much and spend too much, and as a result Britain, when faced with that international financial difficulty, was in a very precarious place?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. Before the hon. Lady answers, I remind Members of the topic of the debate, because we seem to be wandering a million miles from it. The shadow Minister might wish to answer the hon. Gentleman's question, but she is perfectly entitled to choose not to do so.

Kate Green: I am certainly not frit, Madam Deputy Speaker, because what I know from my constituency, as I think hon. Members across the House know from theirs, is that the investment we made in housing, hospitals, policing and schools benefited families and women. It grew the economy, created jobs and lifted 1 million children out of poverty, and I am proud of that record.

The Chancellor's gender blindness is not confined to his fiscal decisions. The investment in infrastructure announced in the summer Budget and the autumn statement is of course welcome, but the investment in the social infrastructure that supports women to work, learn and care is sadly lacking. Where was the labour market strategy to help women prosper and progress in the workplace? I recognise—before hon. Members jump up to tell me—that there are more women in work, not least because the increase in the state pension age and inward migration means that there are more women of working age who must work, but women's unemployment remains higher than pre-recession levels. For women over the age of 50 unemployment is 7% above the 2008 rate, and the Young Women's Trust says that twice as many young women as young men are considered to be economically inactive.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making the case—this is ironic when we hear the contributions from Conservative Members—that inequality is hitting our economy, and that far from Britain not being able to afford gender equality, we cannot afford not to get this right.

Kate Green: That is absolutely right. Our economy is losing out through women's under-participation in the labour market. They are underperforming in earnings and therefore in their ability to provide the financial

means to support themselves and their families and to contribute to the local economy. That leads to a drain on our public spending.

For women in work, low pay remains a significant issue. Since 2010, over half the jobs growth for women has been in low-paid sectors. In Scotland, six out of 10 jobs have been created in low-paid, more insecure sectors over the period of the majority Scottish National party Government. Seventy-eight per cent. of women work in low-paid social care, but 86% of workers in the STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths—industries, which pay much better, are men. According to the Young Women's Trust, 20% of young women have been offered jobs paying less than the minimum wage. Meanwhile, as has been noted, the overall gender pay gap stands at 19.2%—considerably higher than the European Union average—and has been falling more slowly than under the previous Labour Governments. That reflects a downward convergence between women's and men's wages, not women's earnings rising to close the gap.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): On women being paid less than the minimum wage, another factor is that the Government are making cuts to Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, which will stop the enforcement of the minimum wage in many sectors of the economy.

Kate Green: The hon. Gentleman is right. These cuts are false economies. "Penny wise and pound foolish" underlies the Government's whole economic strategy, and that is a very good example of it.

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that we need to invest in our young women going through school so that they study STEM subjects, and that is exactly what the Chancellor is doing. Through investment in STEM, a record number of girls are taking A-levels in science and maths, with 10,000 more STEM A-level entries for girls. We must be ambitious and aspirational for our next generation.

Kate Green: The hon. and learned Lady is right. Perhaps we can open up some of that when we look at what is happening to young people's career destinations.

Part-time and temporary work is exacerbating the gender pay gap. Seventy-four per cent. of those working part-time are women. One in five young women have been offered zero-hours contracts. The disproportionately high number of women in low-paid, part-time work means that in-work poverty remains a real issue. Cutting in-work benefits makes life worse, not better, for those women. I can discern no Government strategy to address areas of the economy such as cleaning, retail, care and hospitality where there is chronic and persistent low pay and where women typically work.

In 2013, to follow the point made by the hon. and learned Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer), the Government published their action plan on women and the economy. Indeed, I think that the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) was responsible for it. That action plan set out Ministers' ambitions for women's increased participation. It contained welcome words about increasing girls' participation in STEM subjects, as noted by the hon. and learned Member for South East Cambridgeshire; encouraging women

into higher-paid careers; and supporting women as entrepreneurs. In practice, however, we have fallen very far short of those ambitions. The CBI reports that 93% of young people are not getting access to adequate careers advice, and girls are still too often pigeonholed into traditionally female career routes.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): In 2013, the percentage of women in senior management roles in the private sector was 19%, ranking the UK in the bottom 10 countries globally, behind Botswana, Lithuania and the Philippines. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is completely unacceptable?

Kate Green: It is certainly not a record to be proud of.

Worryingly, the Young Women's Trust says that young women are considerably more likely than women over the age of 31 to think that many traditionally male roles are out of their reach. Just 15% of university places for computer science and engineering are taken by women students. Although, as the hon. and learned Member for South East Cambridgeshire noted, the majority of apprenticeships are taken up by women, two thirds of women apprentices are in the five lowest paid industry sectors, and after completing an apprenticeship, 16% of women are out of work, compared with only 6% of male apprentices.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities and Family Justice (Caroline Dinenage): Does the hon. Lady agree that those ladies who are today starting apprenticeships and completing university are the women who were educated or who started their education when her party was in government, and that it is actually Labour's lack of careers advice and lack of engendering ambition and aspiration that has resulted in some of the statistics she has cited?

Kate Green: No, I do not accept that at all. The CBI did not ask about the careers advice offered under the Labour Government, who had a proper careers system in schools. The CBI asked about the careers advice that is on offer now, at a time when the Government have scrapped a decent careers service and are leaving it to the discretion of schools and asking people to go online to get it.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I am sure my hon. Friend is aware of the Education Committee report that pointed to the complete collapse of the careers service because of short-term cuts made by the coalition Government.

Kate Green: Exactly. I hope the Minister will take a little more time in her speech to explain which part of the present Government's apprenticeship strategy addresses gender inequality.

In 2013, the Government also said that they wanted to encourage more women to become business owners or entrepreneurs. There has been a significant increase in the number of self-employed women—between 2008 and 2011, more than 80% of the newly self-employed were women—but that may not always be by choice. Increased conditionality and lack of suitable employment mean that self-employment is an economic necessity for some, and yet the average income of a self-employed woman is just £9,800 per annum, according to the

Women's Budget Group, compared with £17,000 for a self-employed man. Self-employment is not a route out of poverty for those women.

Alison McGovern: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Kate Green: I will make some progress, if my hon. Friend will forgive me, but I hope that she will speak in the debate, because her contributions are always useful.

Overall, the Government's strategy for women at work is simply insufficient. That is not just bad for women; as my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) noted, it is bad for our economy. The Government's own consultation report, "Closing the Gender Pay Gap", which was published this year, states that equalising the level of women's productivity and employment with men's could add almost £600 billion to our economy, while equalising participation rates could add 10% to the size of the economy by 2030. Action is urgently needed.

Meanwhile, women are also seeing their rights in the workplace attacked and eroded. The introduction of tribunal fees means that few can now afford the £1,200 to pursue an equal pay claim. The number of maternity discrimination cases has nearly doubled, while the number of cases going to tribunal has fallen by 80%. So much for the Government's commitment to economic equality.

Cuts to spending on public services also hit women hardest. There are 763 fewer Sure Start centres than in 2010. The care sector has been affected badly by the 31% cut in local council budgets. The additional £3.5 billion earmarked in the autumn statement fails to compensate for the drastic cuts that have already taken place, let alone adequately meeting future need.

Chris Stephens *rose*—

Kate Green: I will make some progress, if the hon. Gentleman will forgive me.

It is women who will lose out from the lack of paid-for care, as they so often have to step in to fill the gap.

Terrifyingly for women at risk of or fleeing sexual or domestic violence and abuse, there have also been substantial cuts to services and access to justice that protect women's safety. Research for Women's Aid in 2014 showed that a third of women were being turned away from refuges because there was no room for them. Thirty-two specialist services closed between 2010 and 2014 due to lack of funds. The Chancellor's short-term proposal to fund domestic violence services from the unfair tampon tax makes their funding symbolically and literally the responsibility only of women. Two women a week are killed as a result of domestic violence, and that must be the responsibility of everyone in society.

Why does all this happen? Why are women hit the hardest? It happens because we are not present where decisions are taken. Our voices are not heard. The Fawcett Society has shown that 80% of stories in the media about the economy are about men or quote men. Although there has been a welcome improvement in the number of women on company boards following the Davies report, the proportion of women in executive positions on FTSE 100 boards remains lamentably low.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Kate Green: I will make some progress, if my hon. Friend will forgive me.

As for the Government's own track record, the Women and Equalities Minister's own Department for Education's management board contains just two women out of 12 members. It is clear from such circumstances and recent announcements that the Government have a blind spot when it comes to gender. Ministers are ignorant, indifferent, or deliberately targeting women for the worst effects of their cuts. That makes a mockery of the Prime Minister's words about his commitment to gender equality.

In conclusion, let me make a few suggestions about what Ministers could start to do to address the inherent gender inequality that runs right through this Government's agenda: carry out a full cumulative impact assessment of all Government policy since 2010 to analyse the impact on women; act now to address any disproportionately damaging effects; commit to introducing—and publishing immediately—cumulative equality impact assessments across Government and remedial action wherever policy is found to be inimical to equality, as the Labour Government in Wales are already committed to doing; and ensure that women are at the heart of decision making at every level. And is it not time the Government published a full, comprehensive, cross-Government gender equality strategy that addresses the economic and social discrimination and disadvantage that have become the hallmark of this Government? That is what the Opposition are calling for this afternoon and I commend our motion to the House.

4.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities and Family Justice (Caroline Dinéage): It is an enormous pleasure to respond to this debate on an incredibly important subject. I start with a note of sadness, which I direct to the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green). Nothing that she said this afternoon, not a word that came out of her mouth, championed or celebrated the achievements of women every day throughout the country. Even those who start their own businesses, create jobs and generate the economic recovery that we are seeing, she could not celebrate. She sees that as a negative, which underlines how Labour sees small businesses up and down the country.

Kate Green *rose*—

Caroline Dinéage: I will make progress, if I may.

A vibrant economy, where everyone can fulfil their potential and play their part, is at the heart of this Government's mission to govern as one nation. As the Prime Minister said,

“you can't have true opportunity without equality”.

That message goes to the heart of what the Government want to achieve for women.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the Sex Discrimination Act and I am very pleased to say that we have seen significant economic progress for women during those 40 years. Over the past five years in particular, we have made huge strides. We have more women in work than ever before. Female employment has increased, with 14.6 million women now working. There are over a million small businesses with women at the helm. We have

helped to achieve the lowest ever gender pay gap on record, and we have more than doubled women's representation on FTSE 100 boards since 2011.

Debbie Abrahams: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way so early. She mentioned women running their own businesses. Does she consider it a success that women are likely to have an average income of £9,800, compared with self-employed men, who earn an average of £17,000?

Caroline Dinéage: I like to champion everyone who goes out there and starts her own business, pursues her passion and creates employment. There are many obstacles that prevent women from starting and growing their own businesses, and as a Government we are seeking to overcome those obstacles. I shall come to that later in my comments. [*Interruption.*] We do have a long way to go. We are by no means complacent. There is so much more we can do to make sure women can play their full part in this economy, and the Government want to make sure that all women can fulfil their potential.

Over 1.5 million women already in work say that they would like to do more hours if they could. If they each worked just one extra hour each week, that would contribute 80 million more hours a year in productivity. As a country, we cannot afford to waste the talents of a single person, let alone those of half of our population. Although such economic arguments are of course very important and very powerful, frankly, gender equality is also just the right thing to do.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): In the previous Government, I—along with the Minister's predecessor as Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities, Jo Swinson—commissioned a report on womenomics, which was produced by Professor Lesley Sawers of Glasgow Caledonian University. What are the Government doing about that report?

Caroline Dinéage: I will come on to that a little later in my speech, but I join the right hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to Jo Swinson, my predecessor in this role, who did an excellent job.

This commitment to gender equality informs the difficult decisions that we have had to make to return the country to surplus and ensure that we no longer depend on debt. We must not forget, despite the mass amnesia that seems to have broken out on the Opposition side of the House, that we are in this position because of Labour's financial mismanagement, which meant that we have had to take very difficult and unpleasant decisions to balance the books and live within our means. We know that women still earn less, own less and retire with less than their male counterparts.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con) *rose*—

Alison McGovern *rose*—

Caroline Dinéage: Where do I start with the motion before us? I will have a little sit down while I think about it.

Mrs Drummond: Is the Minister appalled, as I am, by the fact that the number of women claimants for jobseeker's allowance went up by 740,000 during the last two years of the Labour Government, between 2008 and 2010?

That nearly doubled the previous number of claimants, but the number has now been reduced by 746,000 under our Government.

Caroline Dinagen: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We will not take any lessons about female employment from the Labour party.

Alison McGovern: In our house, when I was growing up, if it rained, we used to say, “We blame the Tories”, so I am no stranger to the Minister’s political strategy. She commenced her speech with remarks about celebrating the contribution of women. Does she think that it pays tribute to the hard work of women in our economy to bang on in the way she is about what happened under the previous Labour Government?

Caroline Dinagen: I am sure the hon. Lady feels it is very convenient to forget about what happened under the previous Labour Government. When it rains, we talk about fixing the roof before that happens—when the sun is shining—

Debbie Abrahams *rose*—

Barbara Keeley *rose*—

Caroline Dinagen: Give me a couple of minutes to make a little progress.

I want to talk about the motion. Where do I start? The evidence is deeply flawed. Unfortunately—I am sad about this—it is the typical back-of-a-fag-packet stuff we have come to expect from Labour Members. Frankly, they have made bizarre and outdated assumptions about how households divide their money. There is even an implication that lower fuel prices somehow do not help women. The pink battle bus may have run on something other than petrol, but the rest of us fill up in the normal way.

Kate Green: Will the Minister give way?

Caroline Dinagen: I will make a little more progress. *[Interruption.]* I will give way in a moment.

Labour Members assume that any savings will immediately mean a poorer service, which we know is not true. They have made bizarre and outdated assumptions about how households divide their money, and we know it is not true that savings will immediately mean a poorer service. What they do not understand is that the British public know that too.

Kate Green: The Minister is making assertions, but I am sorry to tell her that the academic research belies what she is saying. It is true that women manage the household budget in many households, but increasingly, it is not their income to manage. With the married couple’s tax break, more money is being put into the wallets of men, and women are dependent on men to fund them. Moreover—this point relates to what she said about fuel—the number of women who own and drive cars is significantly lower than the number of men. That is why it matters that benefits and tax policies should address what actually happens and the way in which families live their lives.

Caroline Dinagen: The hon. Lady makes a number of sweeping assumptions. The fact is that child tax credits and child benefit all go into the pockets of

women. Her assumptions are very outdated. Families work as a unit: they work together and pool their income. Frankly, it is quite a sexist allegation.

Simon Hoare: Does my hon. Friend agree that although the Labour party may spend its time reading or commissioning academic studies, the Government are getting on with delivering policies for strengthening our economy to the betterment of all?

Caroline Dinagen: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Inheriting an economy that was riddled with debt did nothing for women in this country, and not tackling the deficit would have been the real crime and created an unacceptable risk for our economy and people’s lives and futures. Not tackling the deficit would have put at risk the very jobs and services that women depend on. It would have risked their children’s education and security, and for those of us who want to ensure that everyone is able to fulfil their potential, such risks are unacceptable.

Barbara Keeley: The Minister is talking about competence, and I have already quoted from a former Pensions Minister who admitted to a bad decision that cost millions of women who were born in this country in the 1950s £30 billion. That was a mistake. The Pensions Minister now admits that he was not properly briefed, and he added two years to the pension age of millions of women without even realising what he was doing. Does the Minister really claim competence for a Government who do things like that?

Caroline Dinagen: The hon. Lady fails to recognise that in the new pension changes, women who have taken time out to raise children will now not be penalised by the system. She is being a little unfair. Thanks to the Government, we are able to increase support for childcare costs, and protect key Government services.

The commitment to supporting women in work is a priority for the Government, which is why the Prime Minister pledged earlier this year to end the gender pay gap within a generation. Let me be clear: there is no place for a pay gap in today’s society. That is why we committed to requiring employers to publish information on the difference between men and women’s pay and bonuses. We will shortly be consulting on the regulations needed for gender pay reporting, and I urge all employers to consider those carefully.

Jo Stevens: One way that the gender gap could be closed is by addressing public procurement and requiring anyone tendering for a Government contract to have made an equal pay audit. Why not take that step?

Caroline Dinagen: We have had that conversation many times in recent months, and I say gently that the Labour Government had 13 years to introduce such a measure. We are not asking employers to do this on their own; we are trying to bring them with us because that is the right thing to do. We will provide extensive guidance, case studies and toolkits. By working in partnership with businesses and employees, we will see results. We will also extend those reporting requirements to the public sector. Labour had 13 years to do that, and it failed.

Jo Stevens: Equal pay audits are not difficult to do—I ran them in the firm that I was part of before I came to this House. Why will the Government not take steps now?

Caroline Dinanage: Our work requiring companies to publish gender pay information will go a long way—much further than the Labour party did in government. The Government are working with businesses to make that a reality.

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): I have been following the debate, and I am sure the Minister knows that the gender pay gap has almost been eliminated for women under 40. The hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) mentioned audits and public procurement, but we want more small and medium-sized enterprises to bid for public contracts, and they do not have the scale to do such things. We would therefore be eliminating such businesses from bidding for any Government contracts.

Caroline Dinanage: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, and record numbers of small and medium-sized enterprises are gaining public contracts. We cannot have our young women growing up in a country where they get paid less because of their gender, rather than how good they are at their job. One of the most important ways to ensure long-term economic security is to break down the barriers that still hold too many women back, which is why we have given working parents greater choice by enabling more than 20 million employees to request flexible working; why we have introduced shared parental leave; and why we will extend shared parental leave and pay to working grandparents. This will support parents with the cost of childcare and help the 2 million grandparents—unsung heroes such as my mum—who give up work, reduce their hours or take time off to help with childcare.

At the same time, nearly one quarter of women between the ages of 50 and 64 provide unpaid care for a relative or friend. We have invested £1.6 million to help carers who wish to stay in work to balance their different roles. We are doing this using flexible working and innovative technology, and there are now nine pilots around the country exploring ways to help carers manage their paid work while looking after their loved ones.

One of the most important issues affecting parents—both men and women—is childcare, which is why we are investing more than £1 billion more each year in free childcare places, including by doubling the free childcare entitlement from 15 hours to 30 hours a week for working families with three and four-year-olds in 2017. In addition, from early 2017, we will offer tax-free childcare to provide up to £2,000 of childcare support per child per year for working families with children up to 12 years old. This will take the total Government spend on childcare from £5 billion in 2015 to more than £6 billion by 2020.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Is the Minister aware that the Government's funding offer for the additional 15 hours is inadequate and at best confusing, and that there is a risk that most childcare places will be underfunded and that many might be lost as a result, thus reducing the availability of suitable childcare?

Caroline Dinanage: Of course, we are raising the funding, but I will not take any lessons from Labour. I might be slightly older than many here, but I was a mum putting two children through childcare under the Labour Government, and I watched childcare prices become the most expensive in Europe. I was one of those women working to pay my childcare bill.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): The Government have a fine record on supporting women at work. Will the Minister welcome meetings I have had with the Department for Work and Pensions and other Departments about supporting carers with responsibilities beyond children? Will the Government ensure that people can stay in work by working more flexibly and continue to support local communities and local government with the work they do alongside their employment?

Caroline Dinanage: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. These people make an incredible contribution to our economy and need to be supported in everything they do.

Not only are more women in work than ever before, but we are taking steps to ensure that work always pays. The national living wage, beginning next April and reaching more than £9 by 2020, will disproportionately benefit women. We expect that 65% of the beneficiaries made financially better off will be women. Further increases in the personal allowance will lift 660,000 people out of income tax by 2018, and 60% of them will be women. This reform, too, will make women financially better off.

We also have more women than ever right at the top of business. These fantastic role models are inspiring others to follow in their footsteps. Thanks to the business-led, Government-backed approach and the passion of business leaders such as Lord Davies, we have doubled the number of women on FTSE 100 boards since 2011.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): The Minister trumpets the fact that women will disproportionately benefit from the higher so-called living wage that the Government are bringing in. Does she not recognise that the reason more women will benefit from an increase in the minimum wage is that there are more low-paid women?

Caroline Dinanage: The hon. Gentleman could not have put it better. These are the women who, as I have said, were educated under the last Labour Government. Under our education reforms, these are the women who will be aspiring to higher paid work in the future. When Labour left power, there were more than 20 all-male boards in our FTSE 100 companies. Now, there are none.

Jo Stevens: On that point, the women on boards are in non-executive director roles. Anyone who has sat on a board of directors knows that decisions are made by executive directors, not non-executive directors.

Caroline Dinanage: The women are not all in non-executive director roles. Again, we are criticising women, which is negative. The hon. Lady is right that we would like to see more women coming up through the executive pipeline. We would like to see women who have worked their way up without quotas or token gestures, which is why we are making the changes we are making.

Women are playing their part and businesses are benefiting from their immense skills. Every single woman on those boards knows she is there on merit as the best person for the job, regardless of gender, and the men know it too. We want to go further, however. We are building on this through a new target of 33% female

representation on FTSE 350 boards by 2020 and a review supporting more women into executive positions so that we develop that pipeline of female talent. We have also called for an end to all-male boards in the FTSE 350.

We want to inspire women everywhere, from the classroom to the boardroom and every stage in between. We know that education is one of the most fundamental ways of driving lasting change and raising aspirations. If we are to ensure women's economic equality, we must start with the youngest generation. This is an area where having a Secretary of State for Education who is also Minister for Women and Equalities is especially valuable. No child should ever feel that a career is off limits because of their gender, race or background. There is no place in our society for stereotypes about some jobs being suitable for girls and some for boys. In this, we have made important strides. There are now more girls than ever taking physics and maths A-level, with 12,000 more entries in maths and science in England since 2010.

The Opposition spokesman asked me about the difference between men and women entering apprenticeships in different sectors. Since 2009, the number of women starting engineering and manufacturing apprenticeships has increased threefold. This is not a new problem, of course, and I would be very keen to know, in a different conversation, what Labour did about it. The Government will go further. The science, technology, engineering and maths workforce is vital to the growth of the economy. The UK needs to recruit 83,000 engineers a year and they cannot all be blokes. That is why the Government have set up the new Careers & Enterprise Company. We have heard Members complaining about careers advice. The company will inspire and inform young people about the opportunities available to them, in parallel with business.

I welcome the one-year anniversary of the independent Your Life campaign, which aims to ensure that young people have the maths and science skills the economy needs. It was great for me to visit the Ford motor company in Dagenham, the spiritual home of the fight for gender pay equality, to see Your Life in action. A group of local schoolgirls had been invited to race cars around the car test track, and to experience how varied and exciting STEM careers can be.

A strong economy, where women are encouraged to fulfil their potential, also means that we are able to deliver the services society needs. We must make sure that everyone is given the support they need. In this year's spending review, the Chancellor announced that the Government would provide £40 million for domestic abuse services, including refuges, between 2016 and 2020. Prosecutions and convictions for domestic violence have also risen to their highest levels ever. Last weekend, we launched a consultation on new measures to better protect victims of "stranger stalking" and to help to deter perpetrators. We also announced an additional £3.85 million to develop a new phase of the campaign to tackle teenage abuse within relationships. Since 2010, the "This is Abuse" campaign has encouraged teenagers to rethink their views of violence, controlling behaviour and what consent means within their relationships. This is helping to change attitudes that can underpin violence against women and girls. Our updated violence against

women and girls strategy will be published shortly, and will set out how we will continue to support all victims of this abhorrent abuse.

Debbie Abrahams: Disabled women are twice as likely as non-disabled women to be victims of domestic abuse, so how is the Welfare Reform and Work Bill, with its cuts to the employment and support allowance work-related activity group, going to help disabled women?

Caroline Dinenage: If we are talking about the autumn statement, the Chancellor pledged even more money for refuges and charities that support victims of domestic violence. Ukrefugesonline data show that bed spaces rose from 3,216 in 2013 to 3,472 in 2015. All these things are important.

The Government are committed to making sure that everyone, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, age or background, is able to fulfil their potential, and this approach to equality spans right across Government. In helping women to fulfil their potential, we must thank and acknowledge the efforts of stakeholders, charities and businesses who are leading the charge and working with the Government to finish the fight for equality in our country.

The facts speak for themselves. Since 2010, there are more women in work; more women-led businesses; more women on boards; and our reforms to support the lowest paid will disproportionately benefit women. A commitment to equality runs right through this Government, as the Prime Minister has made clear. Plans are being made across every Department to continue the excellent progress already made. As I say, the facts speak for themselves. We will continue to drive this agenda forward, so that we finish the fight for equality.

At the same time, it is important to take a moment to recognise the great things women have achieved. Every day in my job I meet amazing women from every walk of life: scientists, teachers, chief executive officers, mums, writers—all great role models. These women are our mothers, our daughters, our friends and our colleagues. It is they who have made this huge progress to date; it is they who are breaking down the barriers and achieving greater heights all the time and every day.

My message today is this: can we stop depicting women as victims, as people who are "done to" rather than "doing"? For Government and Opposition alike, it is our job to support them and it is our job to encourage them. Above all, today and every day, we should also celebrate them.

5.12 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): Equal pay day was marked this year on 9 November. On that day, women across the United Kingdom started working for free, while men continued earning. It should be a day talked about in the history books, not a 21st-century reality. Forty-five years after the passing of the Equal Pay Act 1970, men still earn two months more wages a year than women.

I welcome the Prime Minister's comments and his ambition to end the gender pay gap in a generation, but that must be followed by action. The reality is that unlawful maternity and pregnancy discrimination is more common in Britain's workplaces than ever before,

[Angela Crawley]

with 54,000 pregnant women and new mothers forced out of their job each year. Hundreds of thousands of women are employed on zero-hours contracts and in other precarious forms of employment that offer little in the way of guaranteed hours or job security. The introduction of employment tribunal fees is acting as nothing more than a barrier to female justice and a charter for rogue employers. I welcome the Government's review of this measure and hope that they will take serious action on employment tribunal fees.

Chris Stephens: It was curious that the Minister did not mention tribunal fees in her contribution, even though they are clearly mentioned in the motion. Does my hon. Friend agree that asking women to pay £1,200 for a discrimination case is an outrage, and it explains why there has been a 91% drop in sex discrimination cases in this country?

Angela Crawley: I agree with my hon. Friend. As I said, I hope the Government will take serious action on tribunal fees, because they are acting as a barrier to women taking serious action against rogue employers in the workplace.

Jo Stevens: On the review of employment tribunal fees that is under way—I understand that the report is with the Minister at the moment—nothing in the terms of reference allows for consideration of the abolition of those fees. I questioned the Minister on that in a Westminster Hall debate last week. Does the hon. Lady agree that this is a gaping hole in the review's terms of reference?

Angela Crawley: I agree, and I hope that the Government will take serious action and seriously consider the impact that tribunal fees have on women in the workplace. It is important for the House to acknowledge that, given the state of the economy. According to the Women's Budget Group, women stand to lose more and gain less, especially women in low-paid work, women with children and other caring responsibilities, and women who access services that have been successively eroded in the name of austerity.

In considering the effects of the economy on women, the Scottish National party—the effective Opposition in the House—calls on the Government to recognise that their spending cuts adversely affect women more deeply than men; to understand that measures to remove services can and will drive women into a poverty trap; and to accept that the signs of economic recovery hailed by the Chancellor have in fact disproportionately benefited male workers.

The SNP welcomes the Chancellor's decision to reverse the tax credit cuts. It must have been a tough decision for him, but it means that the constituents of Members on both sides of the House will not have to make even tougher decisions, choosing between the basic necessities of life. That is especially important to those in low-paid employment and on zero-hours contracts, who, more often than not, are women. The immediate result of the Chancellor's reversal of his tax credit plans is that working families have far less to worry about, but there are still £12 billion of cuts in the spending review,

and, ultimately, they will disproportionately affect women. The tax credit reversal means that women can worry less, but they will continue to worry as they struggle with rent and bills and are unable to keep up payments. Single mothers, raising children on their own, should not have to worry about such matters. However, I applaud the Chancellor for listening to his opponents here and in the other place, and reversing the tax credits decision.

In analysing the effects of the economy on women, we must consider the differences in employment trends according to gender. We must bear in mind that in the UK, 69% of women are employed, compared with 78.5% of men. While that difference is not overwhelming, there is a gender-related difference. Of those women in work, 8.4 million are in full-time employment and 6.2 million are in part-time work. The comparable figures for men show that the vast majority are in full-time employment. That means that 42% of the female workforce are in part-time employment, compared with 13% of men. Those figures expose massive gender inequality in the workplace. If we look more closely at the composition of women's employment, we see that women are more likely than men to work as employees rather than employers, and are less likely to be self-employed. In fact, only 32% of all self-employed people are women.

Research carried out recently by the International Monetary Fund found that when women work, economies grow, and that economic growth is even more dramatic when the gap between women's and men's participation in the labour force is reduced. Given the current figures and in the absence of any increased effort to close the gender gap, we are putting our economy at a disadvantage. In 2014, figures showed that 1.1 million small and medium-sized enterprises in the UK were led by women—only 20% of the total. In October this year, it was reported that only 26% of FTSE 100 directors were female. That simply is not good enough. Women's participation in the workforce should be safeguarded and encouraged. In short, the gender pay gap must be addressed.

The autumn statement confirmed the Chancellor's acknowledgement that removing tax credits would not automatically correct the problem. I urge the Government to change tack and recognise that the right way to bring about economic recovery is to stimulate our workforce. In particular, they should ensure that our female workforce are protected, rather than forcing people into deeper poverty and decimating social welfare.

The £12 billion that will be cut from the welfare budget includes cuts in carer's allowance, disability benefits and employment and support allowance. Given that child benefit is to apply only to a woman's first two children, that will mean hardship for families, not to mention the absolutely abhorrent rape clause, which the Government have repeatedly failed to justify. The benefits to which I have referred are most frequently accessed by women. For example, 58% of carers in the UK are women; the figure rises to 60% when those who care for more than 50 hours per week are taken into account. Women make up 73% of those who receive carer's allowance for caring for more than 35 hours per week.

In Scotland alone, there are an estimated 759,000 unpaid carers: a huge section of society. The work done by carers—people prepared to put aside their own needs to look after an ill or disabled loved one—must be recognised

by all Governments. It is vital to our society, and can take up the time most people commit to full-time employment, which carers could otherwise be in.

Carers UK has found that, on top of caring for loved ones, carers are twice as likely to suffer ill health. These are certainly not the people who should be punished by the cuts to the welfare budget. In fact, we should be championing the efforts of carers in this country. When we consider the billions of pounds the NHS saves, year on year, due to the contribution and diligence of unpaid carers, it is time that the Government stood up and recognised the hard-working carers across our society. They contribute massively to our economy, a contribution that amounts to a net saving in the healthcare budget. Is this not exactly the sort of practice promoted by the Prime Minister under the concept of the big society? If so, it is unjust for the Government even to consider the removal of the carer's allowance lifeline.

The Chancellor has again made a great deal of the economic recovery. However, the benefits of the recovery have been exclusively for men. I have spoken repeatedly in the House against the gender pay gap. At present, a woman takes home 85p for every pound earned by a man. That has a serious economic impact on working women and on our economy. Perhaps we are supposed to be pacified by the introduction of the new living wage, but it is by no means a living wage at all. As I have said, women are more often on zero-hours contracts and in part-time work, so a slight increase to the hourly wage will not help women who cannot work as many hours as men, perhaps due to caring or childcare responsibilities.

If we look at the people the Government are aiming to help, they are almost exclusively those on higher incomes. The Conservatives have cut income tax for all workers, most of whom are men, and increased the individual savings account allowance benefit for those with high savings, who, incidentally, tend to be men. The beneficiaries of the transferable tax allowance are 84% male. We have allowances for tax cuts largely for men. Where have such allowances come from? The welfare budget—in other words, services accessed mostly by women. These neo-liberal policies consistently deliver more for men than women. As the International Monetary Fund suggests, an increased gender gap restricts economic growth.

I want to highlight the fact that women are most harmed by the welfare cuts, and that the impact of austerity can be measured mostly in the loss of money in women's purses and family budgets, and in their decreased spending power relative to men's. I will leave the House with this thought: the report by the Women's Budget Group stated that by equalising men's and women's participation rates, we could add more than 10% to the size of the economy. Let us not simply pay lip service. Let us deliver on that promise.

5.23 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow a fellow member of the Women and Equalities Committee, and I commend the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) for her measured tone, but I should point out that the recovery cannot be said to have exclusively benefited men, as there can be nothing worse for women than the

situation that the Conservative-led Government faced five short years ago, when our country faced economic crisis. Spending more money than we could afford does no one any good. Women do not benefit from that and nor do men. First and foremost, we need that strong economy so that we can have a strong system of education, welfare and all the services that she talked about and that women disproportionately rely on.

It is regrettable that the debate started in a tone that I do not usually associate with the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), who I have always found to be an incredibly collaborative player in this place. On issues related to women and equality, it is important that we look for long-term change, which, by definition, can be developed only over the lifetimes of many different Governments, of many different complexions. The economic turnaround will clearly benefit women, and the continued measures in the autumn statement are as important to women as they are to men. Without that strong economy the autumn statement could not have put in place some of the biggest real-terms rises in the basic state pension for 15 years, the largest ever investment in free childcare and an extra £6 billion for the NHS—the very service that many Members have already mentioned. The biggest house-building programme since the 1970s will benefit all of us, too. All those measures are put in place because we have a stronger economy, enabling us to invest for our long-term future. The national living wage, cuts in income tax and increases in childcare have clearly benefited women, but I want to focus on two issues on which where we might find common ground across the Chamber.

First, women in Britain are still disproportionately dependent on benefits to supplement their income. The prevalence of low-wage, part-time jobs among women results in their receiving more of their income through state benefit and support than men do. They are more likely to be in low-income jobs, to be reliant on state-funded housing, and to be in receipt of income-related benefits.

I hope Members will agree that it is good that the economy is strong enough that the Government can put in place measures to start to alleviate the problems that women face. More childcare means more women can get more work. New options around parental leave and the right for all to request flexible working for the first time can give more women access to higher-quality jobs, and the economic opportunities that might give them for the first time an equal right to economic independence—a right that men have had for many, many years.

Alison McGovern: I agree with the tone of the right hon. Lady's contribution. We respect the massive role that she played in developing policies for women in the last Government, but does she not worry about women who are lone parents and the significant drop in income that they face without much protection?

Mrs Miller: I understand the hon. Lady's point. What I am saying is that we must give opportunities to women in this country to forge their own economic independence. What I was hearing from the Opposition Front Bench was how we could continue state dependence, which is not something that I will ever endorse. Many of the single parents I meet, not only in my constituency but around the country, have embraced the voluntary

[Mrs Miller]

programmes the Department for Work and Pensions has put in place to help them get back into work, because they understand the importance of financial independence not only for themselves, but also for them as role models for their children.

The second area on which I hope there might be some consensus across the House is the importance of addressing the educational performance of girls and young women. It is an issue that the Equality and Human Rights Commission brought up in its "Is Britain Fairer?" report. It said:

"The strong educational performance of girls and young women did not translate into rewards in the workplace."

To put it simply, more girls get good GCSEs and good degrees than boys, yet women only make up 34% of managers, as has already been said. In construction the figure is as low as 12%. I applaud Ministers for their focus on some STEM subjects, as it is important that more women are involved in maths and science, but a lack of progress into more senior positions runs deeper than that and deeper than the choices they make at 14.

Let us consider the law. Studying STEM subjects may benefit in some way, but not directly, yet 60% of undergraduate law students are women, as are more than 50% of trainee lawyers. However, just one in four partners in City firms are women. Those leading one of the most important services in our country are leaving out some of the most highly qualified individuals to do the job. It cannot be in the best interests of the country to let that continue.

There are more women in work than ever before, but what more can we do to turn that presence in the workplace into an opportunity for their long-term economic independence, not only by reducing dependence on welfare, but by making sure that the school qualifications that they clearly have are recognised and acted on?

I welcome this debate because I believe that women have a huge amount to contribute to our society. The public sector equality duty requires every Minister to advance equality of opportunity for women not only in the development of policy, but in the work that they do. I therefore have five brief closing points that I ask the Minister to respond to.

First, changing the law is simply not enough if we are to force a culture change in society. If we are to get more women to contribute to the workplace, we have to ensure that more men take up parental leave and flexible working practices, to ensure that women can stay closer to the labour market for longer. At the moment, only 19% of women are able to vary their hours in the workplace. I know that the Minister has looked at that point closely. I look forward to hearing a few words in the response on what more is being done to ensure that businesses change their practices. At the moment, 40% of men choose not to take any time off at the birth of a child. That needs to change.

Secondly, on increasing female representation in management, we are not seeing sufficient women coming through into the most senior management positions in the country. Just 9% of FTSE 100 executive directors are women and there are just five female CEOs out of 100. Perhaps we should adopt the approach of Lord Davies

of Abersoch for executive positions and double the number in three years—purely on a voluntary basis, of course.

My third point relates to childcare and elder care. My hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) spoke of the importance of elder care. One in four women over 50 cares for an older or disabled relative. Surely it is time for the Government to give as much support to those who care for older relatives as they give to those who support younger members of the family.

Fourthly, on access to training, women who return to the workplace after extended career breaks can face a skills crisis. We need to make sure that we are reskilling the over-40s. Programmes need to be put in place to do that.

Finally, the Government are rightly proud of the work they have done. We are undergoing something of a silent revolution in the participation of women in the workplace, but the work is far from complete. There has been a somewhat piecemeal approach to the programmes that have been undertaken. They are good programmes, but do they all fit together? Is there room for a systemic review of how the policies are working to effect change in the workplace? If we need one or two more sticks, rather than carrots, they ought to be brought out of the cupboard and used sooner rather than later.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. Before I call the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott), I am going to impose a six-minute limit on Back-Bench contributions. We will start at six minutes and see how we get on.

5.33 pm

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): Why is this debate necessary? Why, in 2015, is it relevant to be discussing women and the economy, rather than simply the economy? What is it about the interaction between women, the economy and the labour market that is worthy of exploration? This debate is necessary because of the gender pay gap, which has been widely talked about; because of the proportion of women who are in low-paid and part-time work, and the proportion who are underemployed; because of workplace discrimination; because more women are reliant on childcare; and because of the greater number of women who work in the public sector.

Issues across the economy and the labour market affect women in different ways to men, and that is why this debate is so important. If it takes 70 years to equalise the gender pay gap, as is estimated on the current rate of progress, my four-year-old granddaughters will be pensioners by the time this issue is resolved. Our aim is to resolve these issues so that debates like this no longer appear on the Order Paper.

Given that we know there are issues that affect women more than men, we must move on to the yawning gap between what must be done and what the Government are doing. The gender pay gap, which fell by one third under the last Labour Government, stubbornly remains under this Government. Last year, the UK fell out of the top 20 in the global gender gap index for the first time, with the higher gender pay gap cited as the significant reason.

We know that, for a variety of reasons, women are more affected than men by changes in taxation and changes to social security spending, yet despite that knowledge, 81% of the £82 billion of tax increases and benefit cuts since 2010 have fallen on women. We also know that women are three times more likely to be in part-time work and therefore more exposed to changes in social security. I welcome the Government's partial U-turn on tax credits, but women will still face cuts to universal credit. Knowing that women are disproportionately affected by changes to tax credits, and knowing that 80% of the savings would have come from women, the Government still pushed ahead.

We know that women make up around two thirds of the public sector workforce, and that cuts to the public sector and pay freezes disproportionately hit women, yet there seems to have been no acknowledgement of this by the Government, and no coherent plan to support women to find new jobs in the private sector. It should be a prerequisite for any change to tax and spending to have an assessment of the impact it will have on women. It is simply not good enough for this Government to make these changes and not even consider, let alone have a strategy to combat, the disproportionate effects they have on women in the workforce.

I am proud of Labour's record on equality, from the Equal Pay Act 1970 to the Equality Act 2010, with many great strides in between. There is no silver bullet to combat discrimination against women in the workforce, but we know that there are specific things we could do now. We need to fully implement the pay transparency rules in the 2010 Equality Act, which required employers of more than 250 people to publish details of the average pay of men and women. This Government have made that voluntary. That small change would have a big impact, and we would be joining world leaders in pay equality such as Sweden, Denmark and Finland, which all score above the UK in the global gender equality index.

We need to get more young women into the science, technology, engineering and maths—STEM—sectors, either through university education or apprenticeships. Currently, just 15% of university places for computer science and engineering degrees are filled by women, and 88% of the STEM workforce is male. Yet, according to the attainment of A* to C grades at GCSE, girls continue to outperform boys in all but three of the 16 STEM subjects. This is a cultural problem, not an academic one.

The CBI suggests that 93% of young people are not getting the careers information they need, and what advice they do get tends to be pigeonholed. We need compulsory face-to-face careers advice from the age of 11, in partnership with business, to encourage young women to consider those crucial STEM subjects and science and engineering careers. It should come as no surprise that greater gender equality in the economy is good not just for women but for the economy itself. The Royal Bank of Scotland has calculated that boosting female entrepreneurship could deliver approximately £60 billion extra to the UK economy. If the gender pay gap were abolished tomorrow, women would earn more and spend more, and the Treasury would receive more in taxation. There is a long way to go on a lot of these issues, but until this subject is consigned to the history books and no longer debated in Parliament, we need to act. The Government need to act now.

5.38 pm

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott). I have listened carefully to the contributions to the debate, and particularly to that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller). The motion is very wide and covers a lot of matters, but I shall focus on a couple of them. The first relates to infrastructure investment. Labour Members have spent a lot of time in this Parliament and the previous one talking about productivity, and they often use examples such as France. We could have a debate about whether the productivity figures they cite reflect the fact that we now have record numbers of people in work and those other countries have more unemployed people, but productivity is a challenge of our time, and I am glad that the Government and my right hon. Friends the Business Secretary and the Chancellor have recognised that in their productivity agenda. Labour Members talk about the proposals for infrastructure investment, saying that they are predominantly focused on sectors that typically employ more men than women.

If we look at the autumn statement, we see that we are talking about building roads, railways and flood defences. We are investing in the arteries of the country, but unfortunately at the moment these areas are still dominated by men—roads still tend to be built predominantly by men. I have met more and more women apprentices. I have employed them, in my former life, in the building trade and we want to see more of them. We are setting off down a wrong track if we say that investing in infrastructure will not benefit the whole country. Surely the whole premise of this debate, and of what the Government and all of us here are doing, is that we should be building a stronger country for not only our daughters, but our sons—unfortunately, I do not have any daughters but I do have sons. That should be for all of us.

I was slightly puzzled that the Labour party spent a long time attacking us on productivity, because when we try to do something about it, Labour Members say we are discriminating against—

Ian Blackford: The hon. Lady is right to reflect on the fact that between 2008 and 2014 productivity did not increase in the UK. What policies does she think will improve productivity over the next five years?

Seema Kennedy: I suggest that the hon. Gentleman reads the productivity agenda that was written in July, as he will see some good activity there. Productivity is the challenge, and if we want to compete in the global economy, we have got to be investing in this area. For his benefit, I should say that the report was called “Fixing the foundations”.

Another part of the same bit of the autumn statement deals with investing in education and in childcare, sectors where a lot of women are employed; childcare does not just benefit those women who can go out to work. We have got more childcare promised in the autumn statement. Those industries predominantly employ women, but again we need to be thinking about men working in them as well. We need to stop this divisive conversation that says, “Only men can be builders and women can

[Seema Kennedy]

look after children.” All of us, particularly those of us who are mothers, know how much we rely on our husbands and partners.

Mrs Miller: My hon. Friend is making an important point about de-gendering some of these stereotypical role models that we tend to have in British society today. I rather welcomed the international men’s day debate, which was secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), because it gave us an opportunity to recognise that these gender stereotypes can be as divisive for men as they can be for women.

Seema Kennedy: As always, my right hon. Friend makes an excellent point.

There are historical reasons for the gender pay gap, but some of the statistics can lead us down the wrong track. The motion says that our pay gap is “higher than the EU average”

That may be so, but in many of these countries fewer women are actually working. We want more women in work rather than on benefits. I want the gender pay gap to be eliminated not only for women under 40, where we know the gap is closing, but for women over 40. We cannot explain the gap by discrimination, because the Equal Pay Act 1970 has been in force for the whole of my lifetime. When there are instances of discrimination, they should be pounced on. I am looking forward to hearing the Minister’s responses as to how the Government are going to act on that and on maternity discrimination—

Jo Stevens *rose*—

Seema Kennedy: I am sorry but I am not going to give way again, as I do not have much time left.

Our manifesto promised a consultation on closing the gender pay gap: it is due to report shortly, and I look forward to seeing the results. I also welcome the proposal to require businesses with more than 250 employees to publish their salaries in order to eliminate that gap—transparency will work there.

The whole thrust of the Government’s productivity agenda is to make our economy more competitive globally. We need to get everybody—women and men—into more highly skilled, productive jobs. We can do that only through proper, long-term investment in jobs that make us competitive on a global level. Investing in education and infrastructure is absolutely key; it is what all of us should be aiming for. Yes, we need a stronger economy for our daughters—or, in my case, for my niece—but we also need it for our sons.

I endorse the words of my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke and the hon. Member for Sunderland Central. I do not want to see these motions on the Order Paper. I do not want to be seen as a passive recipient of the Government’s largesse. I am an autonomous person, and an economic actor in my own right. What I want is a stronger economy from which we can all benefit.

5.45 pm

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): We have heard multiple times throughout this debate how the Government have achieved record high employment rates, especially for women. However, that assertion

only scratches the surface, because hidden beneath it is the existence of entrenched gender inequality. It is a problem that exists throughout the whole of the UK. Although employment may have gone up, the quality of work has not. We know that women still take up the majority of low-wage, part-time, temporary work, which is why the welfare reforms and the cuts announced in the Budget are so concerning.

The Budget announced £12 billion of cuts to social security. One fifth of women’s average income includes social security payments. Quite rightly, the Chancellor did a U-turn on tax credits. He abandoned that particular cut once he realised how damaging it would be. However, he did not abandon his pledge to make £12 billion of cuts. Although those cuts might not be coming through tax credits, they are still coming, and they will be off the backs of single parents, unpaid carers and low-wage part-time workers, most of whom are women.

The Fawcett Society has raised particular concerns about sanctions on lone parents, 92% of whom are women. I am aware that safeguards are in place that supposedly allow some flexibility for lone parents who are looking for suitable jobs. Such safeguards used to be written into regulation, which made them very clear for advisers and claimants, but the Government have decided to replace that advice with guidance. There is a very important distinction there. Whereas advice is legally bound and someone can be held legally responsible if the wrong advice is given, guidance completely removes that safeguard as nobody is accountable for incorrect information being given to claimants and the subsequent false sanctions that may arise from that. The very fact that 40% of decisions to sanction lone parents are overturned suggests that women are being sanctioned incorrectly in the first place. Sanctions are meant to act as a deterrent, but that seems impossible to achieve if people are unaware or unclear about how they qualify for a sanction in the first place.

My final concern relates to the rhetoric that is being used and the direction in which the Government are travelling when they speak about issues relating specifically to women. The cuts to women’s services have been substantial, and the use of the revenue raised from the tampon tax to fund charities is

“a drop in the pan compared to the cuts these services have suffered since 2010.”

I know that I am not the only one who shares a deep discomfort and concern over the use of that money simply to fund women’s charities, especially charities that deal with domestic violence and rape. Although I will always welcome any money that goes to such charities, the discomfort comes from the fact that, symbolically, this proposal implies that tackling domestic violence and rape is the responsibility of women, and not the responsibility of all.

The lowest and most disturbing proposal of this Government is the demeaning idea that they will only pay for a third child so long as it is the product of rape. Is that really where we are now? How dare we ask a woman who has been through such a horrific ordeal to stand in front of some cold ministerial body to discuss that rape and prove that crime?

The other point is that we have still not heard how that policy will be implemented. Will there have to be a conviction for rape, or just a claim? Will a medical

certificate be needed? Nothing has been made clear on that. It is even more worrying given that only on Monday my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) asked the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how the policy would be implemented and received a vague and concerning reply. I am sure that nothing untoward was intended, but the fact remains that the use of the word “choice” in a vague answer to a question specifically about rape could raise concern. I genuinely urge the Secretary of State to clarify exactly the point he was making and prevent anything untoward from being suggested.

My final point is that although the Government will argue that these savings and reforms are necessary and that the cuts will play a massive role in cutting the £1.5 trillion of public debt, they have completely ignored the incredible rise in personal household debt, which, at £1.5 trillion, is almost exactly the same amount. It is not that people have more money in their pockets or that their quality of life is dramatically improving. The problem of the debt is still there; it has just been shifted from the public purse to the private purses of individuals. People are being forced to turn to loans and private debt companies because this Government are failing them. The Government are being deliberately and strategically quiet on the looming catastrophe of personal and household debt, which will come crashing down at some point, and it will crash on the backs of the most vulnerable people in society and the people who are already struggling most, most of whom are women.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. The time limit is dropping to five minutes, starting immediately.

5.51 pm

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): I am pleased to have an opportunity to speak in this important debate. The representation of women and women’s issues in this House has not been very good historically. It is appalling that I am only the 380th woman ever to be elected to this House. I am very proud to have been elected, of course, but there is clearly a lot of work to do to improve women’s representation and bring these issues to the House. I am delighted to be a member of the brand-new Women and Equalities Committee, which will strain every sinew to ensure that we have fair representation in this House and across the work we do here.

It is seven months since the general election, and I believe that this Government recognise the importance of women in the economy and that they are focused on the issues we all share, as families and members of the community, such as childcare, flexible working, better schools, opportunities for apprenticeships and a focus on science, technology, engineering and maths.

Progress on women’s issues has too often been seen as niche, or the concern of local or representative bodies. If we want real and clear change and equality of opportunity for all, women’s campaigns must not continue to be seen as niche. Progress is needed urgently on many fronts. Full equality is needed in the areas of taxation, better action on domestic violence, fairness for all carers, whether they are looking after young people or older

people, and a firm understanding that the gender pay gap is wrong and must be ended, and in a much shorter timescale than the one we are seeing.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the things that limit pay in the care sector, particularly for women, is that in old people’s care, in homes and other places, there is no structure to allow people to move up? More thought needs to be given to having a proper career in caring, which would allow people to be paid more as they gain more qualifications.

Mims Davies: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend, and I am standing beside a nurse—my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield)—who is nodding her head. We absolutely need to value carers, from mothers to people who look after older members of our society. We need to make that a proper career structure and to value the people who look after vulnerable people day in, day out.

Over the past few months I have been contacted several times about the perverse taxation arrangements for sanitary items. Let me make something extremely clear: anyone who believes that tampons are a luxury is ignorant and wrong. I am delighted that the Government will give this revenue to women’s charities while they negotiate with the European Union to sort out these outdated rules. Women’s charities tell me that they see this Government as a great reforming force standing alongside women. They are delighted to see Conservative women taking every opportunity to tackle, get involved in and highlight matters that have long been ignored by Labour.

An example of inequality that I have found and that we, as a Government, have seen being corrected, is domestic violence. Too often, our family courts system is outdated and does not take into account the unique requirements in domestic violence cases. For instance, it is far too rare for judges to impose protection orders to stop perpetrators following victims out of court. This Government are putting £40 million into services for victims of domestic abuse. I welcome that. I hope that the Government will continue to take on the challenge of supporting women through the courts system so that perpetrators cannot continue to pursue their victims. Negatively affecting their confidence because that takes place can mean that those women continue to be trapped in a system where they cannot play their part in the community or the economy.

Mrs Miller: Does my hon. Friend and neighbour from Hampshire join me in applauding the work of the Government in starting to outlaw the violence that women experience online as well? A case in point is the new law on revenge pornography that I was delighted to be involved in putting in place. There is also a helpline associated with it to make sure that help is there for women who need it.

Mims Davies: I thank my right hon. Friend. I am delighted that this Government are working to make sure that there is confidence and support for women in every arena where they find themselves again struggling against the odds.

[Mims Davies]

There is much concern among women about state pensions for people born after 1953. I congratulate the WASPI—Women Against State Pension Inequality—women and recently supported them in the Westminster Hall debate. These women have done the right thing. They have planned for their future and discovered that perhaps their trust has not been repaid. The communication has not been fairly done. I continue to support those people in my community.

The continuing gender pay gap is unacceptable. It is not right that women are paid less than men. We must continue to point out that paying a man more than a woman is unlawful and unacceptable. In the society that we want to continue to build, someone's gender must not hold them back from achievement. I am pleased that the pay gap is coming down for full-time employees and almost eradicated for the under-40s.

The next step will be a revolution in flexible working. Carers need flexible working as well as people looking after youngsters. I am delighted about the 30 hours of childcare, which will really take care of this. We should be supporting mothers in whatever choice they make, whether they stay at home, work 15 hours a week, or work in the community. Many of these mothers help in parent-teacher associations—they are part of our local communities—and we should be supporting them. They often become “mumpreneurs” who create new jobs locally and help the community to thrive and innovate.

I am a member of the all-party group on women in Parliament, which gives us another vehicle to raise issues of women and inequality. I am delighted to see women across the spectrum coming to meetings and taking soundings from across all industries. We need more women in public life, as councillors and in local government, so that female-focused issues are discussed at that level as well.

Parliament must focus on mentoring, supporting and helping women into work and into better-paid jobs. Full equality will mean fair play, with men on the school run and at the nativity plays, women on boards, and of course a 50:50 Parliament. Let us, women and men, work together for a stronger and better economy.

5.59 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): A few weeks ago, the Chancellor claimed to be putting security first in his spending review, but it is obvious that he was not talking about women's security. At the heart of this debate is the fact that the Government simply do not see women as a priority. It is assumed that women's interests, health and security will naturally rise along with a flourishing economy, but the truth is that the Government's economic decisions are gendered. Time and again, they benefit men more than women, and that is the result of the Government's fundamental disregard of the importance of addressing the needs and problems of half the population.

By contrast, the Labour Government placed equality at the heart of all they did. That is why the gender pay gap reduced by a third under our watch, while maternity leave was extended and paternity leave introduced. However, since entering government in 2010, the Conservatives have undone our work. They have downgraded the

importance of the Treasury's gender impact assessment, which had been used to evaluate the impact of tax and benefit changes on both men and women. Their aim was clear—to play down the importance of women, and the importance of equality as an aim in itself in society.

The Government risk an unstable economic future if they continue to ignore us. They market apprenticeships as a way of building a high-skilled economy, but women are being short-changed. Striking gender occupational segregation means that women are under-represented in some of the better-paid sectors of technology and construction, and over-represented in the typical “female” roles of health and social care. The outcome is a gender pay gap in apprenticeships that is actually higher than the national average.

The Government have also celebrated their apparent success in getting more women into work. In truth, however, this employment does not offer many women routes out of poverty and towards financial security. For instance, women make up three quarters of those in part-time work and dominate some of the lowest-paid sectors: 62% of workers paid below the living wage are women.

Take nursing, for example. Women make up more than 90% of those studying for nursing degrees, but they will earn a relatively low wage. Cuts to student nurses' grants will sharply reduce the incentive to study nursing, particularly as Unison has reported that 90% of nurses, including my constituent, Gemma Morris—I promised her that I would bring this up—have said that they would not have studied nursing without the grant. The Government have issued yet another blow to low-paid women in undervalued and underpaid employment.

The very worst consequences of the Government's gendered economic choices are fatal. It is distressing to have to report in this day and age that two women each week die at the hands of domestic violence in this country. Yet instead of protecting funding for women's refuges and domestic violence charities, the Government have allowed those services to wither away via cuts to local government. Cuts to local councils from central Government have already resulted in the closure of 30 refuges across the country, and a staggering 42% of rape crisis services do not have funding beyond March 2016. What does that all amount to? More women turned away; more women returning to their dangerous homes; more women facing a death sentence at the hands of a violent partner.

Using the revenue of the tampon tax to fund the upkeep of women's voluntary services is not good enough. The policy is totally inadequate. It will do little to redress the terrible cuts those services have faced, and it is patronising to suggest that women's taxes should fund women's services. Central Government should be ensuring that the safety of women who are victims of domestic, physical and emotional violence is non-negotiable.

I suggest that the Government take a lead from this Opposition day debate and present an alternative plan of large-scale investment in social infrastructure, secure employment for women and generous provision for crucial services. Women should not be trapped in cycles of poverty and low-paid work on account of their gender. Our so-called economic recovery cannot and should not determine the success of only half our country. It must provide opportunities for all, equally.

On behalf of all those women who are cared for and cared by women, I say that next year's cuts to local authority care services will be devastating. As the carer of a 92-year-old woman who came here in 1947 to train as a nurse, I think that is disgraceful, and we need to do something about it.

6.4 pm

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): I am father to two beautiful children: my seven-year-old daughter Rebecca, and my four-year-old son Ben. To them, there is no such thing as a boy's job or a girl's job; maths and science are not off the radar for either of them. I want them to grow up in a society where girls of all ages have choices and opportunities every bit as much as boys. That is why I am so pleased that the Government are committed to eliminating inequality at every stage of life. For women in work, this must mean earning an equal wage. I welcome the progress that has been made so far in addressing the gender pay gap. The gap for full-time workers in my constituency has fallen from 30% in 2009 to 18% last year. I am proud of that progress, but there clearly remains far, far more to do if we are to eliminate the gender pay gap altogether and build the equal society that we all want.

As has been said, we now have zero all-male boards, and the number of female directors has doubled since 2011. The national living wage will mean higher wages for employees in the lowest-paid jobs—jobs that are disproportionately done by women. From April, 3.5 million women will benefit; that is almost a third of Britain's female workforce. There are now nearly 30% fewer women unemployed in Dudley South than there were at the end of the Labour Government.

When looking at costs, we cannot ignore one of the biggest strains on working families' budgets—the cost of childcare. That is why I welcome the increase in free childcare. Not only can families save up to £5,000 a year, but it means that we are finally returning choice to more families. More than 500,000 families will benefit, with many more parents and primary carers being able to afford the childcare that allows them to return to work and resume their career. This measure will finally give parents peace of mind when it comes to supporting their family, at the point of transition between being full-time parents and going to work.

Mrs Miller: My hon. Friend makes an important point about childcare. He is right about choice, but does he agree that for many women, staying out of the labour market can be detrimental to their future career, so the availability of childcare allows them not only choice, but the right balance between being able to look after their children and continuing with their work to ensure that they maximise their future earnings for the benefit of their family?

Mike Wood: My right hon. Friend is right. One of the major contributors to the gender pay gap has been the impact on a career when a mother—it is almost always mothers—take a prolonged break from it. That break has an impact on mothers' earnings when they resume their careers.

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): On the reduction in the gender pay gap for people under 40, in a large number of firms a greater proportion of fathers are

now taking on a greater burden of the childcare, which will hopefully begin to ameliorate any differences in pay in the long term, leading to a much more balanced approach to both gender pay and family care.

Mike Wood: I could not agree more. The work that the Government have done on flexible parental leave will be of enormous value to many families not only in my constituency, but around the country.

If there is one thing by which we measure society, it is surely how it treats those who have contributed all their lives—those who have worked hard and paid into the system. That includes those who, as has been said, have spent many years raising children. We recognise that contribution in society, and it is right that we should do the same through the state pension system. It is fair that the years that parents—again, disproportionately mothers—spend outside the full-time workforce raising children will go towards their pension pot. Sixty-one per cent. of our women will see their pension rise as a result of this reform. That is equality in action.

Women in Dudley South and throughout the country will certainly be better off as the economy continues to grow, as wages continue to rise, and as more and more people continue to find work. It does not matter where they are on their journey in life—this Government are working hard to transform our country so that whether people are starting their first job, bringing up their first child or enjoying their retirement, there is no longer any disparity between the genders. Sadly, it is not a transformation that will happen overnight. It is not a simple task, but it is a vital moral mission, and one that I am proud to support.

6.9 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Before I start my speech, I want to mention two fantastic women from the Wirral. My hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) made us all proud deputising for the leader of the Labour party at Prime Minister's questions. She, more than most, has done great things for women's role in the economy. I am absolutely proud to be a Wirral woman today, not least in speaking in this debate on my daughter's birthday—I hope she will be a future fantastic woman from the Wirral.

I want to say three things: about younger women, mums and older women. First, one of the most important measures for the future of younger women has been the apprenticeship levy. Although it is good that there is support for apprenticeships across the House, unfortunately, the reality of life for young women going into apprenticeships is that they will have less chance than their male counterparts of getting one that will pay them well. As has been said on several occasions, young women work in sectors that pay less. That is just a fact.

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Harriett Baldwin): The hon. Lady is making a very important speech about apprenticeships. Will she join me in welcoming the fact that more than half of apprenticeships in this country are now being taken by women?

Alison McGovern: I would welcome that wholeheartedly if those apprenticeships paid women equally to men, but the fact is that they do not. We ought not to rest until they do, because women face a dual problem:

[Alison McGovern]

the work they have traditionally done is valued less; and they are barred from better-paid sectors. We need both to get women into highly paid parts of our industry and to ask ourselves why highly skilled women end up with low pay in areas such as social care. Over the past week or so, I have had quite a bit of grief on social media. Lots of people are campaigning about this sort of thing, which is fine, but I would argue that the primary feminist cause in Britain today is the position of women working in social care. They are paid far too little for the important work they do, including younger women who want to make their career in social care.

Secondly, I want to turn to the place of mums. In interventions, I have already raised the problem that lone parents will face with universal credit. I am afraid I take issue with the Tory view of the world which says that any state support for the cost of children is somehow undignified, that it is somehow welfare and that people cannot feel proud of themselves and their ability to look after their family if they in any way receive a cash transfer from the state.

Beveridge himself recognised that the cost of having children increases the amount people have to pay out. Our social security system should smooth people's income across the period of their lives when they have children and their costs are higher, and they will pay into the system when they are in work without children and their costs are lower. That is how our system has always worked. It is an absolute myth to think that we have ever had a perfect situation when there was no poverty, people could just earn their wages and that was enough to pay for the cost of bringing up children. Basically, the Beveridge system was introduced precisely because people get poor at two points in their lives—with the cost of their kids, and with the cost of old age. We must accept that tax credits are an important part of the system and settlement we have had in our country for a long time. As I have already said, wages have an important role to play in the financial fortunes of women, but they will never fully resolve such problems.

Simon Hoare: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Alison McGovern: I have already given way once, and I do not want to try the patience of the House. This is an issue not just for mums, but for dads and even nans, who more than ever are covering for women who are in work.

Simon Hoare: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Alison McGovern: I have said that I will not.

Thirdly, women who were born in the 1950s fought for everything in our country, and they built the political platform that I and many Labour Members have stood on. They fought not just for the Equal Pay Act 1970 and the reforms of the 1970s, but for all-women shortlists in the Labour party that meant that people like me had a much greater chance. Today, women in their 50s, and others, are having to fight yet again through the WASPI campaign for what they should have had. That is not fair, and for young women in my constituency, and those later in life, I do not feel that the picture described by Conservative Members is right. Those women are

deeply unsatisfied with the measures that the Chancellor has handed out in recent months, and they would not expect me to stop asking him to do more.

6.15 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): As a female MP I welcome this debate, but I struggle with the sentiments and the way it is being brought forward, and I agree with the Minister's opening remarks. I am a strong supporter of women's issues, and a member of the Women and Equalities Committee, but I am frustrated that the motives behind this debate are political rather than dealing with key and important issues faced by women. [Laughter.] Labour Members are reinforcing my point as I speak.

The Women and Equalities Committee, which is excellently chaired by my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), is currently at the start of an inquiry into the gender pay gap. It will tackle that important issue in a cross-party way, and I am sure that its findings will make a real difference. Over this Parliament the Committee will investigate a number of issues, and its members will have no hesitation in holding Ministers' feet to the fire regarding how the Government support and promote women in this country. However, to say that the spending review has not supported women in this country is plain wrong. Women make up 50% of the population, and any benefit that affects the general population will improve the lot of women.

Simon Hoare: My hon. Friend is making a powerful point on an important issue. Did she share my confusion about the remarks of the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern), who seemed to be suggesting that the best way to help women in the workplace was to subsidise their salary through tax credits and let men get on with it? What incentive would that be for an equal pay balance and for low subsidies, which is certainly what Conservative Members want?

Maria Caulfield: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I have worked in the care sector all my life, and I am frustrated with the lack of campaigning for better wages, as that would mean that women would not need to rely on tax credits.

Key decisions in the spending review will benefit men and women alike. The increase in free childcare will help mums and dads, and the introduction of a national living wage will help men and women on low incomes. The funding that we discussed in the previous debate on mental health services will also benefit men and women.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Maria Caulfield: I will not because many other Members still want to speak. I am thankful that women still outlive men, and therefore the increase in the basic state pension will benefit women more than men—long may that continue. On women-only issues in the spending review, it cannot be denied that the investment of £1 billion to provide 15 to 30 hours of free childcare a week will benefit women. The introduction of tax-free childcare by 2017—that is up to £2,000 of childcare support per child per year for working families—will benefit women. Female employment is at a record high, and the gender

pay gap has fallen to 9.4%—the lowest level since records began. We should be celebrating that, not criticising Members for achieving it.

The tampon tax has been much debated today. I am pleased that while the Chancellor negotiates with EU member states for the ability to zero-rate sanitary products, as he has pledged to do, the £5 million generated by the tax will be ring-fenced for women. The national living wage will benefit women—as we have heard, women in the care sector are disproportionately affected by low incomes—while 60% of the 660,000 individuals taken out of tax by the increase in the personal tax allowance will be women. I also welcome the £1.1 million investment from the superfast broadband roll-out programme that is helping to deliver the Swift project. I have been to sessions in my constituency where women just starting out in business are benefiting from that investment.

I could go on, but I will not, which will please Labour Members. If they want to be political, I am quite happy to be as well. I will not take any lectures from the Labour party, whose leader suggested that violence against women on the railways can be resolved with women-only carriages; from a party whose leader condones the segregation of women at public meetings; from a party whose leader was shamed into appointing women to the shadow Cabinet, and even then was selective in the positions he handed out; and from a party that uses all-women shortlists to force women into Parliament.

Talk is cheap. Labour Members should be supporting women, but this has been a wasted opportunity. The effective Opposition, the SNP, have really shamed Labour Members by raising important issues that we could have debated properly today. Talk is cheap, and the actions of Labour Members speak louder than words.

6.21 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): The motion asks the Government to conduct an urgent cumulative assessment of the impact of their policies on women since 2010 and to take the necessary remedial steps to mitigate any disproportionate burden on women. Nowhere can this be seen as strongly as in the impact of state pension age equalisation on women born in the 1950s. In 1995, the then Conservative Government set out a timetable to equalise the pension age for men and women at 65 so that, from April 2020, women born in April 1955 or later would get their pension at 65.

In May 2010, the coalition agreement stated that a review of the default retirement age would take place “to set the date at which the state pension age starts to rise to 66, although it will not be sooner than 2016 for men and 2020 for women”.

This pledge was broken when the coalition Government decided to accelerate the planned changes—a move that particularly hit women born in the 1950s. The changes brought about by the Pensions Act 2011 affect the lives of millions of women. It is not the niche issue that the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) talked about. Women born in the 1950s are unfairly bearing the burden and the personal cost of the increase in the state pension age, and I feel unashamedly political about standing up for them.

Speaking to “Channel 4 News” in May 2011 about the unfair consequences of the legislation, the director general of Saga said:

“We accept that the pension age will have to rise but it is the timing and the broken promise that we feel is unfair.”

She said that women

“may have made careful plans for retirement, only to have the Government pull the rug from under their feet.”

Ironically, she is now the Conservative Minister for Pensions. Earlier this year, she told me:

“I tried hard in 2011 but there is nothing more I can do I’m afraid. It is not in my power.”

Well, it is. As Minister for Pensions, she must recognise the injustice in the state pension age changes, which she well understood as a campaigner in 2011, particularly now that the former Pensions Minister has admitted that the Government made a bad decision.

During Second Reading of the Pensions Bill in 2011, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions repeatedly referred to “transitional arrangements”, but he never put in place any fair transitional arrangements. The financial journalist Paul Lewis has looked into this and other issues, including the question of when the women were notified. He has said:

“Millions of women had their state pension age delayed—in some cases twice and by up to six years in total—without proper notice. The Government did not write to any woman affected by the rise in pension ages for nearly 14 years after the law was passed in 1995”.

The former Pensions Minister now admits it was not made clear to him that some people would have to wait an extra two years for their pension.

Jess Phillips: My hon. Friend is making a very powerful speech. My mother-in-law is in this category—she was not told. She left her job at what she expected to be a pensionable age, but has been left waiting a further three years before she can receive her pension. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government have put nothing in place to support those older women back into work?

Barbara Keeley: Indeed and I will come on to talk about their plight. It is amazing to me that the Pensions Minister realised what a bad decision he had made—he admitted that quite recently—but still more than 1.5 million women aged between 57 and 59 were not told until then that their state pension age would be rising. In the worst cases, women were told at 57 and a half that their pension age would rise from 60 to 66.

The Government have since said that anyone affected by a rising state pension age must have 10 years’ notice, while the Pensions Commission suggests 15 years’ notice. The journalist Paul Lewis concludes, however, that none of the 1950s-born women had even 10 years’ notice. Women who have planned for their retirement suddenly find, as my hon. Friend says, that they have to wait many more years—up to six years—before they can retire. They find themselves without a job, without a pension or pensioner benefits, and without money to live on.

Members have referred in the debate to the campaign group Women Against State Pension Inequality. They are not campaigning against equalisation, but they are opposed to the way the changes have been enacted and the lack of transitional protection for women born in the 1950s. My constituents have told me about how the changes are having a significant impact on their lives. Case after case that I have been told about shows how many women in their early 60s have health problems

[Barbara Keeley]

that stop them working, or that they need to give up work in order to care—we have talked a lot about care in this debate. I have a constituent forced to live off her savings after working and paying national insurance for 44 years; another is unemployed at age 61 and trying to live off £75 a week. I have spoken to women in their early 60s who have been forced on to the Work programme. They find this demeaning after 40 to 44 years of work. A WASPI campaigner called Marian contacted me. She told me she gave up work at age 62 to care for her mother and brother, both of whom have dementia. Her only source of income is a small private pension of £2,500. Her husband will now have to support her until she is 65.

The women I speak about today have worked hard and contributed to the system. Throughout their lives, this generation of women have been disadvantaged in the workplace in terms of pay because of their gender. Even now, women in their 60s earn 14% less than men. Now, they are once again being treated unfairly because of the way changes to the state pension have been enacted. Ministers must look at ways to provide adequate transitional protection. A number of Conservative Members have said that they support—I hope they do—the transitional protection that Ministers' colleagues repeatedly mentioned in the debates on the Pensions Act in 2011.

6.28 pm

Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con): As we near the end of the debate, I will be a bit more positive about the role of women. Last week, we celebrated Small Business Saturday and I met up with several women running businesses in Portsmouth. In Portsmouth, we have a really strong entrepreneurial culture and women are playing a full part in it. We know that nationally one of the areas where women are still catching up with men in the world of business is in self-employment and running our own businesses, so Portsmouth's women are leading the way.

We know from figures supplied by Barclays bank that 40% of small businesses in Portsmouth South have been set up in the past three years. This is a reflection of a recovering and growing economy, and greater confidence. We also know from the same data that small businesses in Portsmouth are more likely to survive and grow beyond that crucial three-year start-up period.

Mrs Miller: Like my hon. Friend, I was out on Small Business Saturday and I met local business people in Basingstoke. I would just like to commend Mitch Lloyd at the Viabes craft centre for the excellent business she runs, leading the way in that area for women in business.

Mrs Drummond: I would love to mention all the great women in Portsmouth setting up businesses. I do not have the time, however, as I have to move on to quite a few subjects. I always support our business community, and if someone wants to start a business, that community will support them.

Nationally, we had a steady growth in self-employment among women even during the most difficult phases of recovery from the recession. Self-employment among women has grown by over 300,000 nationally since 2008. Overall, the level of women in employment has

already overtaken the level it stood at pre-recession, with 69% of women of working age now in work—the highest level since records began.

Almost 12% of our families in Portsmouth are single-parent families—a higher than average figure—so the economic wellbeing of women is vitally important to the welfare of our families. I am pleased that we are committed to expanding free childcare for two, three, and four-year-olds with an extra £1 billion. It is important when we look at the figures for these services that we do not just assume that “more” of anything automatically means “better”. I am thus pleased to report that in Portsmouth we have a higher than average percentage—85%—of childcare providers deemed “good or better” by Ofsted. Improved childcare will play a big part in closing the productivity and earnings gap between men and women.

The wage gap for women under 40 is narrowing—something we would expect to see as inequality is wiped out through generational changes in attitudes and education. Women aged between 22 and 39 in full-time work actually enjoy a pay gap over men, while women over 40 still face a big gap in full-time earnings—typically over 10%. I am therefore delighted that the Committee on Women and Equalities will inquire into the problem of the wage gap for women over 40. I shall enjoy contributing to that Committee alongside my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller). I hope to set up an all-party parliamentary group on women and work, and hope that some Opposition Members will play a big part in it, too.

The motion mentions violence against women, which is naturally a topic that is important to all of us. The Government are committed to reviewing safeguards against stalking and harassment, and to bringing in a unified strategy on fighting violence against women and girls. It is an area in which local authorities play a major role, too, and I am pleased to learn from Portsmouth City Council that it is protecting domestic violence services in next year's city budget. The council is doing more than that—it is looking at how to move on local authority involvement from being just a funder of services to being a facilitator and an educator. I welcome that initiative, led by councillors across the parties, which is going out into the community and aims to help victims and witnesses of domestic violence to challenge this behaviour. The processes of social change that fight racism, sexism and other behavioural problems are never driven purely by spending Government money.

The situation of women in prison is relevant to domestic violence. We know that a huge contributory factor to the number of women in prison is abuse and violence earlier in their lives. Often the misery and disruption brought on by violence is a factor that drives women directly into the criminal justice process. Just as it is important that we prevent violence in the home, so it is important that we do not perpetuate the cycle in our prisons or condemn women and their families to a life scarred by their involvement with the criminal justice system. The plans to close Holloway prison, which were announced as part of the comprehensive spending review, are very welcome, and I am sure that the future shape of women's prisons will be informed by the reformist and positive language we heard from the Prime Minister at the Conservative party conference and from the Secretary of State for Justice. If more can be done through the use

of non-custodial sentences, it will have a big effect on the welfare of families and children.

We know that the strongest positive agent of change in social policy is the growing affluence that a strong economy supports. It drives greater cohesion in our communities, improves public health outcomes, reduces crime and does much to level out inequalities and challenge discriminatory attitudes in our society. There will always be more that the Government can do to encourage businesses and individuals towards positive attitudes and outcomes, but it is clear that the best thing they can do—for men and women—is enable the strong economic growth outlined in the comprehensive spending review.

6.33 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) for opening today's debate. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond), as I hope to work with her on the new all-party parliamentary group on women and work.

Women form over half the UK population, yet their contribution to the economy is sadly not equal, and I fear that, thanks to the decisions of this Government, they will form an even smaller contribution to the economy. The right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), under whom I have the honour to serve on the Women and Equalities Select Committee, said that we cannot address many of the issues raised in this debate without a stronger economy. My question is, how will the Government ensure that women benefit equally from the economic growth that they predict? Far too many women feel that they are not benefiting from whatever growth may be taking place now.

According to the Women's Budget Group, pursuing deficit reduction on the back of women—particularly lone mothers and single female pensioners, who are the most affected—is just plain wrong. If the Government had the slightest interest in fairness, they would conduct a detailed impact assessment and a review, and, if they were prepared to do so, they would revise some of their decisions as a consequence.

Why does there need to be a women's perspective on the economy? Let us look at pay. My hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston once told us about a meeting that she had had with a group of women in Camden who had recently been granted the living wage—the true living wage. One of the women had said that those extra few pounds an hour enabled her to save a bit of money each month, and that she hoped eventually to save enough to go on holiday with her family. Those extra few pounds meant a great deal to her, because she had never had a holiday before.

Moreover, the little impact of the payment of a living wage by that woman's employer was not only good for her and for her colleagues, but good for the company for which they worked, because the resulting increase in staff satisfaction led to higher retention rates. The company had generally found that 40 vacancies needed to be filled, but this year they needed to fill only two. Moreover, the change benefited not just that woman, her colleagues and their families, but the local economy where she lived, and the economy of whatever area she visited

when she went on holiday, which may have been a part of the United Kingdom that depends on the pounds that are spent by holidaymakers.

The fact that a large section of our workforce are on low incomes that the Chancellor's changes will not address is not only bad for women, but bad for children, bad for business and bad for the economy, both local and national. As the economy is the underpinning element of the debate, I shall now quote from an important document. It states:

“Ensuring that women achieve their full potential will have a significant impact on our economy:

Equalising women's productivity and employment to the same levels as men's could add almost £600 billion to our economy. This could clear a third of our national debt.”

Who said that? In fact, it was in the foreword to the Government's consultation paper on the gender pay gap, which was written by the Minister for Women and Equalities, the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan).

I am pleased to note that the Government have taken some lessons from the last Labour Government, including the lesson that, for most women—especially women on low pay—childcare is a barrier to labour market participation. However, if Members want to hark back to the awful days of previous Governments—as some did earlier—I am happy to oblige. My children were under-fives under the last Conservative Government, in the mid-1990s, and we had to pay our childminder out of our after-tax income. At that time, many women, especially lone parents, were effectively excluded from the job market. The Labour Government introduced tax credit, childcare vouchers and the Sure Start initiative.

We welcome the spirit of the current Government's Childcare Bill, which offers five hours a week more childcare than the Labour manifesto, but, unlike the Labour offer, the Conservative offer was initially underfunded, and there are still a great many questions to which the Government must respond if they are to persuade us that that childcare will be flexible and affordable.

Ian Blackford *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. The shadow Chief Secretary must begin her speech at 6.40, but the hon. Gentleman can speak briefly now.

6.38 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I want to raise, very briefly, the issue of unfairness to women and pensioners. Today, at the Institute for Government, the former Pensions Minister said, “we made a bad decision”,

referring to state pension age rises. I think that many of us would agree with that statement, especially in the light of previous pension age changes which allowed a transition period of 15 years. Women are being penalised by the fact that the period is only five years for the current changes. Will the Government urgently recognise that this is a wrong that must be righted? Women must be protected. The Government must act now.

Mr Speaker: Splendid succinctness by the hon. Gentleman, upon which he is to be congratulated.

6.39 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I thank all hon. Members who have made thoughtful contributions in this important debate. They include the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley), the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) my hon. Friend Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott), the hon. Members for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy), for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black), and for Eastleigh (Mims Davies), my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), the hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood), my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern)—we extend happy birthday wishes to her daughter—the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond), my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), and the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford). I acknowledge the important issues that they have raised: equal pay, the impact of the tribunal fees, the cost to the economy of women's unequal participation, degendering, stereotyping and the impact of the unequal changes to the state pension age. We are having this debate because the Chancellor's economic choices are hurting, not helping, women. It is a small step in the historic fight for women's progress. Yes, we have made great progress over the years and we are proud of what women in previous generations and today have achieved, but the Government now threaten that progress, particularly for the women in our society who have the least.

We still face huge inequalities. Women participate in the labour market on an unequal basis. Forty-two per cent. of women in employment work part time compared with 13% of men. Almost 800,000 women are unemployed and in all UK nations and regions the women's employment rate is lower than that for men. Although we know that overall employment has risen, over half that growth has been in jobs where there is low pay.

In STEM subjects, the inequalities are stark. According to the latest labour force survey quoted by the WISE campaign, women make up only 14% of people working in STEM occupations. Things are getting worse, not better, under this Government, with women paying the price for the Chancellor's failure. Eighty-one per cent. of the burden of his tax and benefit changes have been borne by women. Women have seen cuts to their personal and household income, impacting their ability to make ends meet and to save. The gender pay gap is over 19%, well above the EU average, and we now know that the gap is closing more slowly than in the last decade. Over 1.5 million women already in part-time work would like to work more hours but cannot get them.

Instead of women being supported in work, under the Government maternity discrimination has doubled and one in nine pregnant women and new mothers are forced out of work. The Government's helping hand in the form of employment tribunal fees means that those mums need to pay £1,200 to bring a claim.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission "Is Britain Fairer?" report shows that women are far more likely to have no qualifications than men. We know that women are far less likely to be in senior positions in our

professions. That is bad for business. As new research shows this week, companies with more women on their board have shown a 36% better return on equity since 2010. What about the entrepreneurship gender gap? It is two and a half times bigger than that of France or Germany. That is a huge price that we all pay for this inequality.

The Government's own research states that equalising women's productivity and employment could add almost £600 billion to our economy, providing the growth and tax receipts that we need to get the deficit down. The "Closing the Gender Pay Gap" report states that our economy is losing out because women's academic achievements, experience and talents are not being fully utilised, and all this when we have the lowest productivity in the G7. Last year saw the productivity gap with our G7 competitors widen to 20 points, the worst on record.

Hitting women three times as hard as men is yet another false economy. When we should be seeing a Government on the side of women in our national economic interest, we see the opposite. The Women's Budget Group has shown that lone mothers and single female pensioners are set to lose most from the spending review decisions over this Parliament. Rather than wanting to know the impact of their policies on women, the Tories have scrapped Labour's equality impact assessments, calling them pointless. The autumn statement did not come with the impact assessment we would expect, showing the impact of the Chancellor's changes on women.

We should also mention how much impact the Government's Trade Union Bill will have on working women. Unionised workplaces have better flexible working and support for women returning to work after maternity leave. I am pleased, but surprised, that the Minister mentioned Dagenham given what the Government have chosen to do to trade unions. The Trade Union Bill puts these hard-won rights at risk and we on this side stand shoulder to shoulder with the first female TUC general secretary, Frances O'Grady, and other trade unions in fighting this pernicious bill.

This is a Government who do not want to know the truth, or want people to know the truth, about their choices. Just as with tax credits, the Government tried to hide the impact of their changes. Over 3.2 million working families were set to lose an average of £1,300 from next April. We now see history repeating itself. These cuts to working tax credits are merely being delayed and disguised.

Here is the assessment from the House of Commons Library: a lone parent with two children on the enhanced minimum wage for over-25-year-olds will lose £2,800 as a result of the Chancellor's changes to universal credit, and we know that 92% of lone parents are women. So let us be clear: this Government's economic policies are hurting, not helping, women.

The uncertainties around funding for the social care sector and the social infrastructure are also set to hit women harder than men. This will result in women bearing an unfair burden for ever-increasing unpaid or underpaid care work. To quote the United Nations:

"When more women work, economies grow."

And when women do well, children do well. Evidence from a range of countries quoted by UN Women shows that increasing the share of household income controlled

by women, either through their own earnings or cash transfers, changes spending in ways that benefit children. This is even more poignant at a time when we know that as a result of this Government's choices over 500,000 more children are growing up in absolute poverty.

So what do we need? We need to see an economy with far more equal opportunities for women and support for them to progress in the job market. We need women to have access to the jobs of the future and the support they need to help them stay there. To balance the books, we need to balance the economy, and to balance the economy, we need to see a renewed focus on women's economic equality.

We need a Government who are on the side of women. Instead, we have a Government who are turning the clock back. The Chancellor may not care, but he should care, as he is managing the country's economy. If he wants to make a start in addressing his failures, he should take up Labour's call that he carry out a full cumulative assessment of all Government policy since 2010 to analyse the impact on women, and he should commit to publishing a full, comprehensive, meaningful gender equality strategy that addresses the economic and social discrimination and disadvantage experienced by women. Women need it, and our country needs it. That is why I hope all Members of this House will join us in the Aye Lobby tonight.

6.48 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Harriett Baldwin): This has been an historic debate, because it has been a debate with women at the Dispatch Box, by women in the Chamber, chaired for most of the time by a woman—and we also had some contributions from men.

The first duty of a Government is certainty to protect economic and national security, extending opportunity and aspiration to every girl and boy, allowing every woman and man to fulfil their potential, and giving older people dignity in retirement. The Government are managing the economy and the public finances properly, and as a result, we are enabling job creation, increasing wages, increasing job security, cutting income tax and helping parents with more free childcare in an economy that is 12% larger than when we took office in 2010.

Do women have economic equality yet? They do not. Women in our country still earn less, own less and retire with less than men. We can agree that all political parties seek to make progress on those issues.

Barbara Keeley: The Minister recognises that women retire with less. That really affects the women we have heard about in this debate who were born in the 1950s, who had to wait six more years to retire and are now living on very little. Has she heard what has been said in this debate? Will she take it away and talk to colleagues about it?

Harriett Baldwin: I will, of course, come on to address some of the points raised in the debate. Although there is political consensus that we must make progress on women's economic issues, our parties will approach that progress differently. My party will stress more equal opportunity, more aspiration, higher skills and higher standards in education, while the Labour party will

seek to tax women more, borrow more debt on behalf of women, their children and their grandchildren, and create more welfare poverty traps for women.

Today's Opposition motion shows why the Labour party can never again be trusted to run our economy. In their motion on the Order Paper, the Opposition assume that mixed-gender households do not share incomes. That is quite an assumption. They assume that spending less on public services invariably leads to poorer services—something that we have comprehensively disproved over the past five years. They even imply that the billions and billions of pounds of tax cuts that have led to lower petrol prices at the pump do not help women. I have heard it said before that Labour wants to take us back to the 1970s, but this is more like the Harry Enfield sketch about the 1930s. I will try to imitate him: "Women, know your limits and, for pity's sake, don't drive!"

At best, the motion shows unconscious bias. At worst, it shows the latent sexism of a sexist Labour leadership. The motion says, "Don't invest in infrastructure, because it's not women who build things." Where do I start with that?

Kate Green: Of course women drive cars and of course income is shared in many households, but we know that when income is in the hands of women, they make different choices in the interests of their families and their children. The Minister must recognise that fact. It is asserted by the United Nations and has been understood by social policy research going back many decades. I wish she would acknowledge it.

Harriett Baldwin: I wish the hon. Lady would acknowledge a few of the facts that I am about to share about women in the economy. The calculations that she has been citing all afternoon do not include these basic facts. There are more women in work than ever before in this country. We have the highest female employment rate ever. We also have the lowest gender pay gap since records began.

Seema Malhotra *rose*—

Ruth Cadbury *rose*—

Harriett Baldwin: I will make some progress. We want to make sure that the pay gap narrows further and faster. From next year, we will require large companies to publish differences in pay.

Ian Blackford *rose*—

Harriett Baldwin: I do not have much time, so I will make a bit of progress. Some 56% of the people who have been taken out of income tax altogether—in other words, who have had a 100% reduction in their income tax—through our increases to the personal allowance are women. Some 58% of those who receive the state pension are women—I will address the point made by the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) in a moment—and we have protected that under the triple lock. Almost two thirds of the people who will benefit from our introduction of the national living wage are women. Since 2010, women's employment has increased faster than in the three previous Parliaments combined.

[Harriett Baldwin]

Let us compare and contrast that with the record of the previous Labour Government, under which the number of unemployed women rose by more than 200,000, or 25%. The fastest way to damage the livelihoods of hard-working women and families is to lose control of the public finances. That is the damage that we have had to fix, and we are making sure that that catastrophic situation does not happen again.

I want to address some of the important points raised today in a range of speeches—speeches from the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley), my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott), my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy), the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black), my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies), the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood), the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern), my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond), the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) and the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford).

A number of people have mentioned part-time work. It is worth remembering that 80% of the people who work part time do so because they want to. However, I agree wholeheartedly with the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke, who said that she wanted greater equality in the form of more men working part time. There is evidence that that is beginning to happen, enabling parental leave opportunities to be shared more equally.

Seema Malhotra *rose*—

Harriett Baldwin: I want to address the points raised in the debate. A number of people mentioned the importance of women choosing STEM subjects at school. I am sure that Members on both sides of the House will welcome the sharp increase in the number of young women taking physics and chemistry at A-level. Careers advice was also mentioned, and it is certainly important to explain to women that a range of opportunities exist for them, and that everything should be open to them.

The women's state pension age was mentioned a number of times, but no one pointed out that all the women affected by the change in the state pension age will benefit from the new higher state pension, or that the simplified state pension will enable women to take into account many more years that they may have spent engaged in caring responsibilities.

I would not want the Members who talked about the incredibly important issue of domestic violence to create the perception that there has not been an increase in domestic violence refuge provision, because there has. There are 13 new domestic violence refuges in this country, and the number of beds that refuges have available has increased from 3,216 in 2013 to 3,472 in 2015. [Interruption.]

Seema Malhotra: Would the Minister like to comment on the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) has just made from a sedentary position on those refuge figures, which was that the Minister was making them up?

Harriett Baldwin: I can give the hon. Lady the source, which is the online system, and I will write to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) about this.

I am proud to serve in a Government who have done so much to help women of working age, and who have improved the state pension for women in retirement. The foundations of this improvement are, of course, our sound management of the economy, which is delivering growth, jobs, security and a higher standard of living. The previous Labour Government failed to provide women with greater financial security, and Labour Members have opposed our economic reforms at every stage. They failed to support giving girls the best possible education. They failed to support women in work. They failed to address the lack of women at the top in business, just as they have failed to address the lack of women in top jobs in their party today.

The Labour party is determined to fight the 1983 general election all over again. A woman won that election, and thanks to the result of that election we are once again winning economic security, economic opportunity and real economic aspiration for women. I urge my colleagues—

Mr Alan Campbell (Tynemouth) (Lab) *claimed to move the closure* (Standing Order No.36).

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.

Main Question accordingly put.

The House divided: Ayes 243, Noes 290.

Division No. 147]

[6.59 pm

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane	Brown, Lyn
Abrahams, Debbie	Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina	Buck, Ms Karen
Alexander, Heidi	Burden, Richard
Ali, Rushanara	Burgon, Richard
Allen, Mr Graham	Burnham, rh Andy
Arkless, Richard	Butler, Dawn
Ashworth, Jonathan	Cadbury, Ruth
Bailey, Mr Adrian	Cameron, Dr Lisa
Bardell, Hannah	Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Barron, rh Kevin	Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Beckett, rh Margaret	Champion, Sarah
Berger, Luciana	Chapman, Douglas
Betts, Mr Clive	Chapman, Jenny
Black, Mhairi	Coaker, Vernon
Blackford, Ian	Coffey, Ann
Blackman, Kirsty	Cooper, Julie
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta	Cooper, rh Yvette
Blenkinsop, Tom	Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Blomfield, Paul	Cowan, Ronnie
Boswell, Philip	Cox, Jo
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Coyle, Neil
Brennan, Kevin	Crausby, Mr David
Brock, Deidre	Crawley, Angela
Brown, Alan	Creagh, Mary

Creasy, Stella
 Cryer, John
 Cunningham, Alex
 Cunningham, Mr Jim
 Dakin, Nic
 Danczuk, Simon
 David, Wayne
 Davies, Geraint
 Day, Martyn
 De Piero, Gloria
 Docherty, Martin John
 Donaldson, Stuart Blair
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Jim
 Dowd, Peter
 Durkan, Mark
 Eagle, Maria
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Ellman, Mrs Louise
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Farrelly, Paul
 Fellows, Marion
 Ferrier, Margaret
 Field, rh Frank
 Fitzpatrick, Jim
 Ffello, Robert
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Flint, rh Caroline
 Flynn, Paul
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Gethins, Stephen
 Gibson, Patricia
 Glass, Pat
 Glindon, Mary
 Godsiff, Mr Roger
 Goodman, Helen
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Gray, Neil
 Green, Kate
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hanson, rh Mr David
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Mr Mark
 Hendry, Drew
 Hillier, Meg
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hoey, Kate
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Kelvin
 Howarth, rh Mr George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Irranca-Davies, Huw
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Graham
 Jones, Mr Kevan
 Jones, Susan Elan
 Kane, Mike

Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Kerevan, George
 Kerr, Calum
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Leslie, Chris
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lewis, Mr Ivan
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Ian C.
 Mactaggart, rh Fiona
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Marris, Rob
 Marsden, Mr Gordon
 Maskell, Rachael
 Matheson, Christian
 Mc Nally, John
 McCabe, Steve
 McCaig, Callum
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, John
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McInnes, Liz
 McLaughlin, Anne
 McMahan, Jim
 Meale, Sir Alan
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Monaghan, Carol
 Monaghan, Dr Paul
 Moon, Mrs Madeleine
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame M.
 Mullin, Roger
 Murray, Ian
 Nandy, Lisa
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nicolson, John
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Osamor, Kate
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Owen, Albert
 Paterson, Steven
 Pearce, Teresa
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Pound, Stephen
 Powell, Lucy
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rayner, Angela
 Reed, Mr Jamie
 Reed, Mr Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reynolds, Emma
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Rimmer, Marie

Robertson, rh Angus
 Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
 Rotheram, Steve
 Ryan, rh Joan
 Salmond, rh Alex
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Sherriff, Paula
 Shuker, Mr Gavin
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smeeth, Ruth
 Smith, rh Mr Andrew
 Smith, Angela
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Spellar, rh Mr John
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Mr Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick

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

Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Michelle
 Thornberry, Emily
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turley, Anna
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Umunna, Mr Chuka
 Vaz, rh Keith
 Vaz, Valerie
 Weir, Mike
 West, Catherine
 Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Wilson, Corri
 Wilson, Phil
 Winnick, Mr David
 Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
 Wishart, Pete
 Wright, Mr Iain
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Holly Lynch and
Jeff Smith

NOES

Cash, Sir William
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Chope, Mr Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
 Cleverly, James
 Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse
 Collins, Damian
 Colville, Oliver
 Costa, Alberto
 Cox, Mr Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crouch, Tracey
 Davies, Byron
 Davies, Chris
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Glyn
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Dinenage, Caroline
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
 Donaldson, rh Mr Jeffrey M.
 Donelan, Michelle
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, Oliver
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, James
 Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
 Dunne, Mr Philip
 Ellis, Michael
 Ellison, Jane
 Elphicke, Charlie
 Eustice, George
 Evans, Graham
 Evans, Mr Nigel
 Evennett, rh Mr David

Fabricant, Michael
 Fallon, rh Michael
 Fernandes, Suella
 Field, rh Mark
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Frazer, Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Marcus
 Garnier, rh Sir Edward
 Garnier, Mark
 Gauke, Mr David
 Ghani, Nusrat
 Gibb, Mr Nick
 Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
 Glen, John
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, Mr James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
 Griffiths, Andrew
 Gummer, Ben
 Gyimah, Mr Sam
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harrington, Richard
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hart, Simon
 Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
 Heald, Sir Oliver
 Heapey, James
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Heaton-Jones, Peter
 Henderson, Gordon
 Herbert, rh Nick
 Hinds, Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hollingbery, George
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Mr Adam
 Hopkins, Kris
 Howarth, Sir Gerald
 Howell, John
 Howlett, Ben
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
 Jackson, Mr Stewart
 James, Margot
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Mr Bernard
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, Robert
 Johnson, Boris
 Johnson, Gareth
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kennedy, Seema
 Kirby, Simon
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kwarteng, Kwasi

Latham, Pauline
 Leadsom, Andrea
 Lee, Dr Phillip
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leigh, Sir Edward
 Leslie, Charlotte
 Letwin, rh Mr Oliver
 Lewis, Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Lidington, rh Mr David
 Lilley, rh Mr Peter
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Lumley, Karen
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackintosh, David
 Main, Mrs Anne
 Mak, Mr Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mann, Scott
 Mathias, Dr Tania
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McLoughlin, rh Mr Patrick
 McPartland, Stephen
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Milling, Amanda
 Milton, rh Anne
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mordaunt, Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morton, Wendy
 Mowat, David
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, Dr Andrew
 Neill, Robert
 Newton, Sarah
 Nokes, Caroline
 Norman, Jesse
 Nuttall, Mr David
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Mike
 Penrose, John
 Perry, Claire
 Phillips, Stephen
 Philp, Chris
 Pickles, rh Sir Eric
 Pincher, Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Daniel
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, Mr Dominic
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Rutley, David

Sandbach, Antoinette
 Scully, Paul
 Selous, Andrew
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, Alok
 Shelbrooke, Alec
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stewart, Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stewart, Rory
 Streeter, Mr Gary
 Stride, Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swire, rh Mr Hugo
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael

Tracey, Craig
 Tredinnick, David
 Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Turner, Mr Andrew
 Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, Mr Ben
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watkinson, Dame Angela
 Wharton, James
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Heather
 White, Chris
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggins, Bill
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, Mr Rob
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, William
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
 Jackie Doyle-Price and
 Guy Opperman

Question accordingly negated.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 18(1)),

REGULATORY REFORM

That the draft Legislative Reform (Further Renewal of Radio Licences) Order 2015, which was laid before this House on 25 March, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—(*Sarah Newton.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITIONS

Treatment of Asylum Seekers

7.11 pm

Robert Ffello (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): The petition, which has in excess of 3,000 signatures, has been organised by the St Vincent de Paul Society.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that the petitioners are gravely concerned about the manner in which asylum seekers are currently treated in the UK; further that the 2015/16 Immigration Bill threatens to make those seeking sanctuary even more vulnerable; further that the Bill will leave more families homeless and further isolate an already marginalised group; further that recommendations made by the All-Party Parliamentary inquiry into the use of immigration detention have been excluded from the Bill; further that the petitioners have a moral responsibility as Christians to be a voice

for those who have no voice; further that Pope Francis has said that refugees and asylum seekers are our brothers and sisters; and further that a local petition on this matter was signed by 3,000 people.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to reconsider the findings of the All-Party Parliamentary inquiry into the use of immigration detention to adopt the inquiry's recommendations in order to improve the treatment of asylum seekers in the UK.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P001659]

Impact of Hinckley Connection Project on the Wells Constituency

7.13 pm

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): I rise to present a petition on behalf of the residents of Badgworth, Compton Bishop and Mark parishes. It has been signed by 905 residents, which represents half the electoral roll. Hinkley C will not need its grid connection until it is switched on in 2015, so there is time to reconsider before we blight such a beautiful part of Somerset. However, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change must make a decision by 19 January 2016.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Badgworth, Compton Bishop and Mark Parishes,

Declares that the electricity transmission line to be built between Hinkley C Power Station and Avonmouth will have a significant and adverse impact on the visual amenity of this area; further that it will cause significant disruption during construction; further that it will damage the local tourist industry; and further that it fails to employ the most recent technologies for transmitting electricity underground or under the sea.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to use the delay in construction of Hinkley C as an opportunity to re-evaluate the strategic options available for the Hinkley Connection project and to direct that an undersea solution in the Bristol Channel be used instead.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P001661]

Kellingley Colliery

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Sarah Newton.*)

7.15 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this Adjournment debate.

In just a few days' time, Kellingley colliery will close. It is Britain's last working pit. A hundred years ago, over 1 million men worked in the coal industry, and now the last 450 men are set to work their final shift. The coal that they cut through generations powered the industrial revolution, stoked the trains, lit the furnaces, and kept the home fires burning. In our area alone, Fryston, Glashoughton, Wheldale, Allerton Bywater, Sharlston, Prince of Wales and Selby were all once proud pits, now gone. Kellingley stands just inside the constituency of the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams), who is here tonight too.

I represent Knottingley, the town that always supported Kellingley, and grew in the '60s when Kellingley grew. Kellingley club is still in the heart of the town. In our area, most people have coal in their blood—family who worked in the local pits or further afield. I am the granddaughter of a miner, and my predecessors, Geoff Lofthouse, Bill O'Brien and Joe Harper, all worked in the pits. It is skilled work and tough work, and some gave their lives and others their health. The solidarity that they forged underground is the solidarity that has underpinned our communities too. That is why it is a sad day for us, because people who have worked together, lived together, marched together, been on strike together, and stood together through thick or thin are now watching the last pit close.

We have fought for two years to try to keep Kellingley open. We sought alternative investors. We campaigned for the EU state aid that could have opened new faces and accessed new and rich reserves, and yet the Government deliberately dragged their feet, pushed costs up, and let us down. Closing Kellingley will not cut Britain's carbon emissions; all it will do is make us more dependent on imported coal. We campaigned too for clean coal technology—carbon capture and storage at Drax—that could have not just supported Kellingley but security of supply here in Britain. It had the potential to cut carbon emissions, to be a great export all over the world, and to cut energy bills here at home, and yet the Government have pulled the plug. Ferrybridge, just down the road, also in my constituency, is set to close in a few months' time, again years before it needs to, so we will lose more skilled jobs. Experts are raising concern that that capacity has been cut so far that it is likely, in the short term, to be filled instead by smaller diesel energy plants, which are far dirtier than the big power stations that they replace.

However, my main purpose in securing this Adjournment debate was not to talk about the huge incoherence of the Government's energy policy, but to focus particularly on support for the Kellingley miners. These are the men who have kept the coal industry going until the very end—younger men who started as apprentices just a few years ago, but also many older men who worked in the coal industry for decades. While every other pit closed, they kept going—kept working, kept digging deeper, kept cutting coal. When Kellingley nearly went

[*Yvette Cooper*]

under, they pulled out all the stops and increased production. When we were fighting to keep Kellingley open, they were ready and willing to do a deal whereby the workforce took over the pit, putting their own money at risk in order to keep it open. When UK Coal nearly went bust, they were ready to accept changes to their pensions and working arrangements just to keep the pit open.

Think what would have happened if the miners had not done that. If they had walked away, as many were tempted to do, UK Coal would have gone bust, the Government would have lost the millions in tax that UK Coal owed, and, more importantly, the Government would have been landed with the bill for closing Kellingley pit—tens of millions of pounds of extra money that they would have had to fork out. It is the miners at Kellingley who have saved the Government from having to pick up the cost of closure and who have kept UK Coal going long enough for it to be able to pay off its bills and the taxes it owed. What have they got in return? Statutory redundancy—is that it?

At the end of decades of keeping our lights on, powering our factories and fuelling the nation, they have got the worst deal of any of the hundreds of thousands of miners who have left the industry over many decades. Frankly, these miners have been betrayed and let down by UK Coal and the Government.

At least the Kellingley miners who left in July got severance pay in lieu of notice—they got 12 weeks of average pay—but, as of today, UK Coal has not even said that it will guarantee the remaining workforce that severance pay. Miners have told me that they have been told that they will probably get it, but it all depends on whether they complete the final phase of work or whether the board decides on Thursday that they can have it. They have no certainty, just threats hanging over them to work even harder as the end draws near.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): I have been contacted by a member of the National Union of Mineworkers who works at Kellingley and has already lost plenty of their pension. When their father, who worked at Kellingley colliery, left the industry 27 years ago, he got three times more than what is on offer for the people who are leaving the industry now. Surely that cannot be the case and surely we need some sort of intervention to make sure that these people get justice.

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is exactly right. I have also been contacted by constituents. One man who has worked in the coal industry at Kellingley for 29 years told me that his dad, who left in 1988, got three times as much as he will get in redundancy pay. These miners will get only statutory redundancy pay, rather than the enhanced redundancy deal that even Margaret Thatcher and Michael Heseltine made sure that miners got when they left the coal industry. Such a deal is recognition not only of the difficult job they do, but of how skilled it is and how hard it is for them to find similar skilled work in our communities.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): It is even worse than that, because less than two years ago the coalition Government took £700 million out of the miners' pension

scheme. All they wanted was about £30 million or £40 million. They could have kept the pit going until all the reserves had been worked out.

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right. There is long-standing and deep concern about the miners' pension scheme. The guarantee may have looked sensible many decades ago, but if we consider how it has played out, we will see that it is deeply unfair to so many miners across our communities. Pensions and redundancy and severance pay are all issues, as is concessionary coal. Miners who are just short of their 50th birthday will lose out, and if others get a job that involves working more than 25 hours a week—even if it is temporary work—they will end up losing their concessionary coal for good. That is no use, because it is a disincentive for them to get another job. The concessionary coal deal, as well as redundancy and severance pay, should be revisited. The Government should work with UK Coal on getting a fairer deal for miners who have worked for Kellingley and the coal industry for so long.

Kellingley has not been given the same sorts of training opportunities that Selby got when it closed. Miners need more skills training, retraining courses and support to be able to get new jobs in an area where skilled work is still too scarce. Support also has to be made available for our communities, because the pit has been at the heart of the community for so long. Kellingley club is now at risk, and the communities that depend on the coal industry are also being undermined by the last pit closure. I ask the Minister to look seriously at what more support can be given to the Kellingley miners. They have worked so hard to save the Government money, to support UK Coal and Kellingley, and to keep the pit open, but they feel that all they are getting in return is a kick in the teeth.

When Margaret Thatcher closed the pits in the 1980s on a massive scale, even she made sure that the miners got full redundancy pay and pensions. When Michael Heseltine closed pits in the 1990s, he made sure that miners got full redundancy pay and pensions. When the Prince of Wales and Selby pits closed under the Labour Government, we made sure that the miners got not just redundancy pay and pension support, but retraining, the coalfield regeneration taskforce and support for communities as well.

What miners are getting now under this Tory Government is the worse deal of all, so I urge the Minister to look at it again—not to blame this on the market or on UK Coal, but for the Government and UK Coal together to provide the miners, who have worked so hard and helped both UK Coal and the Government, with the support and the recognition that they deserve. Another of my constituents contacted me to say that the miners give so much and take so many risks, as do their families, who would watch them go to work each day. Let us make sure that, as the miners walk out of their last shift, as they leave Kellingley for the last time, we show them the respect that they need.

I and many of my colleagues still feel that this is deeply sad. We deeply regret that we are watching the last pit close long before we need to, even though we could have clean coal technology and support both the coal industry and security of supply. We could cut our carbon emissions too. But if that pit is to close before

Christmas, in the next few days, let us at least do everything we can to get those miners some justice and the respect that they deserve.

7.26 pm

Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) for bringing this Adjournment debate to the House today. Kellingley colliery, as she says, is the last deep coalmine in the country and 18 December will be an incredibly sad day. Production began in 1965 and at its peak, I understand, 2,000 men and women were employed there at any one time. It was a significant employer in my constituency and the local area.

Many of those miners relocated from Scotland to work at the colliery, having lost their jobs at Scottish pits in the 1960s. Three members of my own family worked at Kellingley, which is affectionately known, as the right hon. Lady knows, as the Big K. My uncle Ray worked there for 39 years. He told me earlier today that he started as a dogsbody, worked his way up and ended up just before his retirement as an under-manager. He was incredibly proud of Kellingley, as were all the people who worked there. He told me earlier today on the phone that he thought it was the best pit in the country.

Mining communities are close communities. I remember my brother's wedding reception at the Kellingley miners welfare club in 1981. I was not old enough to go in and have a drink, sadly, but it was a great time. I recall my family spending many a Saturday at the miners welfare club at Kellingley, enjoying the friendship and camaraderie of the mining community.

I well remember the 1984 strike. As a youngster I used to drive past the colliery gates on my motorcycle. I had uncles and cousins involved in the strike on both sides of the dispute. Miners from Kellingley took part in the 1984 strike, but it is worth pointing out that there were a higher number opposed to that action than there were at most other pits across Yorkshire. It was a highly divisive strike and one that, in my view, lacked legitimacy because of the lack of a ballot.

Kellingley's current largest customer, Drax power station, is also in my constituency. It has been a longstanding customer of Kellingley, and the mine's closure will mark the end of the latest seven-year contractual agreement between the two parties. I made a phone call to the management at Drax so I know that its management would have supported the management deal, had that come off, to continue supplying coal. I know how appreciative Drax is of the efforts of the workforce to continue to deliver coal to the power station, which must be commended for continuing to source coal from Kellingley even though it could have sourced coal at a lower price in world markets.

The European Union's industrial emissions directive comes into effect on 1 January 2016. This imposes stricter emission limits on sulphur dioxide, nitrous oxide and particulates emitted by power stations in the UK. To be fully IED-compliant, Drax has no choice but to avoid using higher-NOx coal, such as that sourced from Kellingley colliery, after the end of this month. Regrettably, in these circumstances, there is no scope for Drax to take any additional deliveries above and beyond the

volumes already agreed. It is essential that the company's stockpile of coal on 1 January is compliant with the stricter emissions limits imposed by the EU under the IED.

It is now crucial that the 450 staff find alternative employment. I want briefly to praise the work of Jobcentre Plus. Its team need to be recognised for the effort they have put in during the past year, since the closure was announced. Last week, they were on site hosting an employers forum, similar to a jobs fair that I hosted in October, which was well attended by local employers seeking staff. Several leads from my jobs fair have been fed into Jobcentre Plus for follow-up. I have helped workers at Kellingley to get alternative employment, and I am very keen that that should continue as we move towards the closure. The team had another on-site event in October, and they were there in June and July as well. They provide help with writing CVs and training advice regarding grants and courses. The one thing we do not yet know is how many miners have secured jobs; such information might put their redundancy pay-offs at risk, so I understand the sensitivities about that.

I want briefly to mention the environmental concerns about tipping, especially at the Womersley site, which has been an ongoing issue for residents and, in particular, for the local parish council.

Ian Lavery: The hon. Gentleman is basically trying to say that coal is dead and finished. At a time when this Government are allowing the closure of the last deep mine and putting 450 people on the dole in his constituency, we as a country and as a nation are still importing more than 40 million tonnes of coal. What is this all about?

Nigel Adams: The hon. Gentleman should probably read some of my speeches about coal. I do not think coal should be dead. It is an outrage that we are tossing coal aside in favour of intermittent wind and solar. We cannot rely on them, but we can rely on coal. I have a long-standing passion for coal. However, we must remember that world markets mean people can import coal from around the world much more cheaply than we can mine it ourselves, which is a tragedy in itself. I have always supported coal, as I am sure he appreciates.

The mine closes on 18 December, but the tipping at the Womersley site will continue until May, because of the stockpile currently at the pithead. It may just be because it is winter and the roads are wet, but there have been many complaints about the slipperiness of the roads due to slurry wash from the vehicles. That matter has been taken up with the local highways department. At the moment, tipping is more intense than previously, which is a sign of the drive to get as much coal out of the ground as possible. There is also a suspicion that the Womersley tip site is over the planning limit on height contours, but there is no clarity about that and, in any case, enforcement can be ineffective.

The planning application to extend the tip site was withdrawn, because UK Coal considered that the previously permitted use of the tip site was sufficient. However, it is crucial that UK Coal and its sister company Harworth Estates have strict environmental obligations after the closure. The present planning permission does not detail the restoration of the site—that was to have been a condition, through a bond, in the new permit—so it is easy to see why the planning application was not pushed through by UK Coal.

[Nigel Adams]

The adjacent and nationally renowned diving centre, the Blue Lagoon, is now a stinking black pond due to polluted run-off from the UK Coal tip. A plan agreed between the Environment Agency and UK Coal has achieved nothing. The toe drain is still incomplete, and many of the sections already completed are full of silt or have a damaged liner and are therefore ineffective. The owner of the site of the Blue Lagoon, Martin Ainsworth, is suffering severe stress and struggling to run his business. After tipping is complete, the mineral content will continue to leach from the tip for many years to come. I urge the Minister to ensure that UK Coal and Harworth Estates take their environmental responsibilities seriously and ensure that restoration is completed fully.

Finally, let me refer to redundancy and compensation, which the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford rightly mentioned. I understand that in the past couple of years the Government have put in almost £20 million to UK Coal. I had a meeting with the Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise to discuss compensation and retraining packages, and she has promised to look carefully into that crucial issue. I see little distinction between coal miners from Kellingley colliery and steelworkers. I know that the steelworkers were thrown out of work rather quickly, but we must look after these people. Part of the £20 million was to ensure that staff received proper compensation, and I hope the Minister will ensure that that happens.

7.35 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) on securing this debate. I also recognise the long-standing efforts of my hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams) in representing the interests of the Kellingley mine, as well as those of my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy), whose constituents have formed part of the Kellingley workforce for many years. On behalf of myself and the Government, I acknowledge the enormous contribution to UK energy security made over many decades by the UK Coal miners. At both Kellingley and Thoresby, which completed its mining operations in July this year, they have shown professionalism and commitment over many decades, as well as a determination to ensure the safe delivery of UK Coal's managed closure plan.

Let me outline the support that both this Government and the previous Government have provided to UK Coal. Due to geological and performance issues at Kellingley, and a deterioration in global coal prices, UK Coal approached the Government in January 2014, seeking financial support to help it to deliver a managed closure plan. That original plan envisaged Kellingley and Thoresby closing in autumn 2014 and autumn 2015 respectively.

The right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford has been critical of the Government, alleging that we prevented UK Coal from applying for state aid, but that simply is not true. On the contrary, we have been very supportive of the company throughout

its difficulties. At the time of the original approach we were told that the company could last only "a matter of weeks" without an offer of support. The most pressing issue, therefore, was to provide financial support by the quickest means possible, and to deal with the immediate threat to the company and secure its short-term future. The state aid route was judged to be longer and riskier, which left a commercial solution as the best option. Structuring the solution in a commercial manner also had the benefit of not tying the company to a fixed closure date—something that a state aid solution would have done. Instead it would give the company flexibility and time to seek additional investment to extend the life of the mines.

Yvette Cooper: The fixed date that the Minister mentions under the EU state aid rules would have been 2018, which is in three years' time. That was not a reason not to go down the EU state aid route. The deal she mentions that was supposedly the quickest route to go down took more than six months to resolve. The briefing that she has received from her civil servants does not seem to stack up.

Andrea Leadsom: The view was that it was a matter of only a few short weeks, and at that time it was considered that a state aid route would take too long and not work within the timeframe needed.

In April 2014, the Government agreed in principle to provide the company with financial support. In delivering on that commitment there were many twists along the way, including a failed sales process by the company and the withdrawal of an offer of support from a mining competitor. That process concluded with the Government providing a total of £6.5 million of loan funding in September 2014.

By supporting the company's managed closure plan, we aimed to mitigate the worst impacts of closure on the workers, local communities and the supply chain. Without that support, UK Coal would have failed earlier in 2014 with the immediate loss of more than 1,900 jobs. UK Coal did subsequently present a state aid proposal in January 2015 to the Government. That sought state aid support of £338 million to prolong the working life of the mines by three years through to 2018. It is worth reminding the House that state aid approval represents the European Commission's permission for the Government to spend UK taxpayers' money, and consequently it has to be affordable and represent value for money. The state aid request did not pass the value-for-money hurdle, but we have continued to support the company.

Mr Skinner: There is another figure that the Minister is failing to mention. She is trying to argue that this Conservative Government have tried to save the pit. In truth, since 1984, 170 pits have closed, including Kellingley, and fewer than 10 of them were closed during the 13 years of the Labour Government. I think that tells a story: the Tories like closing pits.

Andrea Leadsom: As I said, the Government sought to support the managed closure of the pit. Following weak coal sales last winter and a deterioration in world coal prices, UK Coal approached the Government again in February 2015 requesting additional funding to keep

its closure plan on track. As a result, the Government committed in March 2015 to providing up to a further £10 million of financial support and the provision of concessionary coal entitlements for eligible miners, estimated at £18 million, subject to state aid approval.

The Government, as a further commitment to the miners, also agreed to the deferral of all repayments on the previous loans until after the miners had received their redundancy and other contractual entitlements at both Thoresby and Kellingley.

Yvette Cooper *rose—*

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry, but the right hon. Lady will appreciate that I want to respond—

Yvette Cooper: What about enhanced redundancy terms?

Andrea Leadsom: There have not been enhanced redundancy terms since 2012, as she will be aware.

The funding requirement was £10 million, but we were aware of the riskiness of the mining industry, which could have seen this requirement increase. Ensuring the company had sufficient funding to pay the miners' contractual rights was our key priority. We applied for and received permission to provide up to £20 million specifically for statutory redundancy and contractual notice pay, with £10 million to be available as a contingency in case of need.

Following state aid approval, £10 million was injected into UK Coal in August 2015. The right hon. Lady was concerned that the Kellingley miners were at risk of not receiving the same package as that received by the Thoresby miners. I would like to emphasise to her that, thanks to the excellent work of the miners and the £10 million cash injection, UK Coal has enough cash to pay the Kellingley miners being made redundant this month with the same severance package as the Thoresby miners received.

I would like to turn briefly to the non-financial support provided to the affected miners both at Thoresby and Kellingley. One of the many benefits of having a

managed closure, rather than one which is sudden and unplanned, is that it gives the time to develop a joined-up approach between Government and UK Coal. Department for Work and Pensions representatives have been proactively working with Kellingley for several months to provide a fully joined-up service. Several drop-in support sessions have been hosted, most recently last week, enabling the DWP to bring together local employers with vacancies, local colleges offering training and qualifications, financial advisers and local district council business advice teams offering support on business start-ups. On the back of those sessions, more than 140 training applications have been received for vocational training, such as HGV training, occupational health and safety, fibre optics, forklift truck operations and copper cabling maintenance and installation.

In conclusion, the successful delivery of the closure plan at Kellingley has been made possible because of the hard work of the men, Government support and the favourable fixed-price contract UK Coal has had with the power companies, as my hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty pointed out. That has enabled the company to be cash generative and have sufficient money to pay all employee entitlements. I acknowledge, however, that the closure of the Kellingley mine, being the last deep operational coalmine in the UK, represents the end of a long and proud era for the UK's coalmining industry.

I would like to finish as I started by reiterating my gratitude and that of the Government to all those who have served at Kellingley and elsewhere in the mining industry over the years. It has been a difficult job in a hostile and trying environment, and they can be proud of the part they played in heating and lighting our homes and powering our businesses and economy. Their professionalism and good humour in carrying out their job should be acknowledged by this House.

Question put and agreed to.

7.44 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 9 December 2015

[ALBERT OWEN *in the Chair*]

Exotic Pets Trade

9.30 am

Mr Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the exotic pets trade.

I pay tribute to a number of organisations that have been active on this agenda: the Born Free Foundation, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the Blue Cross and the British Veterinary Association. The other day I was fortunate enough to attend with a number of colleagues an excellent drop-in event in the House organised by Born Free as it launched its campaign to raise awareness of the problem of the trade in exotic pets. It also came up with some recommendations. I have several questions to ask. Is there a problem with the trade and the keeping of exotic pets? Is the current law adequate? What can be done?

An exotic pet is a rare or unusual animal that is generally thought of as a wild species and is not typically kept as a pet in a domestic context. According to the animal welfare charity OneKind, 1,000 different species of mammals, birds, invertebrates, reptiles and amphibians, and more than 150 different fish species, are kept as pets. There are many examples that colleagues will know about, including boa constrictors, numerous amphibians, primates, anacondas and African pygmy hedgehogs. The list goes on and on.

The Pet Food Manufacturers Association estimates that the exotic pet population in the UK, including fish, now totals 42 million, which is absolutely staggering; the number of reptiles and amphibians alone kept in this country is now anywhere between 2 million and 7 million. A lot of the huge increase in the numbers has been brought about by the phenomenon of internet sales, which I will come on to in a moment. First, I want to consider welfare concerns. Exotic animals have not undergone the same process of domestication that dogs, cats and many other conventional pets have.

Dame Angela Watkinson (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for allowing me to intervene so early in his remarks. Does he agree that a lot of people purchase exotic pets without proper research and with no understanding of their complex needs, and that those pets are then abandoned because people cannot cope with them?

Mr Bellingham: One of the problems is that the potential buyers' expectations are often completely unrealistic. They often buy small animals that become very big animals.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): There has been a staggering 24% increase in the number of abandoned pets in the past five years. Does my hon. Friend think that might be related to the buying of exotic pets online,

because people subsequently find that they are unsuitable for their homes and do not know how to look after them?

Mr Bellingham: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for that point. I am going to talk about abandoned pets in a moment, because that is one of the really big problems; I am also going to talk about biodiversity.

Two examples were brought to my attention by Born Free. A badly neglected African pygmy hedgehog was disposed like rubbish in a wet cardboard box somewhere in London and had to be rescued and taken to an animal hospital. There is also the case of the two bearded dragons found abandoned in a London cemetery. What often happens is that the pets—they are perhaps given for Christmas, and the children are very excited—become difficult to manage and are, inexcusably, abandoned. I ask the Minister what more can be done to ensure that officials in local authorities and other organisations are properly trained to deal with abandoned pets.

The welfare concerns need to be examined in more detail. We have to remember that the needs of such pets are challenging. Some of their needs are linked to certain environmental conditions that can be difficult to replicate in a domestic environment. Many animals need larger enclosures, a carefully controlled environment and specific levels of heat, light and ultraviolet light; otherwise, they might become ill. They also need to be allowed to exhibit natural behaviours such as burrowing, climbing and basking. Often, if they are not able to follow those natural instincts, they become aggressive and might even pick up diseases.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that some species, such as primates, have specific dietary requirements and can develop diseases such as diabetes and bone conditions if they are not fed the correct diet?

Mr Bellingham: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is very knowledgeable about primates; I understand that there is a reserve for abandoned primates in her constituency. I agree with her 100%. I will talk about primates, which often have small bodies but large brains, in a moment; they are, by definition, highly intelligent animals.

There has been a big increase in the number of complaints about welfare issues regarding exotic pets.

Rebecca Pow: I, too, went to the launch that my hon. Friend attended. We were told that some of the animals can pass on diseases to human beings—it is called zoonosis. That is a real danger, and it has all happened since the legislation was introduced in the 1950s. Everything has changed, and we are not covered for it. The situation presents something of a danger.

Mr Bellingham: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Some 70 pet-linked human diseases have been identified by various medical organisations, which is obviously a serious worry that I hope the Minister will comment on in his winding-up speech.

The ease of availability is closely linked to welfare concerns. Those of us who have children know that if someone goes to a pet shop such as Pets At Home—my son, who is now 16, used to go there to buy goldfish,

[Mr Bellingham]

hamsters and other things—they are given a great deal of advice about what to do. On occasion, my son was not allowed to go away with a goldfish or a hamster because the staff were not convinced that we had the right facilities at home. It is concerning that only 5% of the trade in puppies—I know that they are not exotic, but this is an indication of how the trade that goes through pet shops has declined—is now channelled through licensed pet shops.

If someone goes into a pet shop they can get all the advice they could possibly want, but buying on the internet is a very different matter. The Born Free Foundation carried out a survey called “One Click Away”, which looked at nearly 2,000 adverts from six different websites over a number of months. At any one moment, across those six websites, the total number of adverts selling exotic animals was thought to be about 25,000. The majority—about 52%—of the adverts were for reptiles, but 21% were for primates, many of which, as my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) pointed out, are not suitable for a home environment. And so it goes on.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate on a subject that has not received the attention it deserves. He has come to a crucial part of his discourse. He is talking about internet transactions, which are escalating exponentially. Does he agree that we need to track down the sources from which people can very quickly—one click away—get primates and other exotic animals with very little information about how to look after them if and when they are successful in purchasing them?

Mr Bellingham: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that excellent intervention. He is absolutely right. Rather than commenting myself, I ask the Minister to address those points.

I asked Born Free to look at my home county of Norfolk to see what might be available online, and it discovered an internet advert stating “bearded dragon no tank needed gone tonight”

with a price of £10. A bearded dragon is quite small, but down the road a female yellow anaconda was for sale with a “final reduction” price of £100. This anaconda is 7 feet long and would require a serious amount of space and care, and yet, as the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) points out, there is no screening or checking on the internet to see whether the buyer is first time or potentially unsuitable. Again in Norfolk, not very far away, a 6½-foot orange corn snake was for sale “in good health” and priced at £60 with a 4-foot fish tank. I do not know about the Minister, but I find that the idea of a 6½-foot corn snake living in a 4-foot tank is challenging. Perhaps he could comment on that. There are plenty of other examples of pets for sale—vast numbers.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Dame Angela Watkinson) pointed out, primates can be highly intelligent and have much larger brains than most animals of the same size. They have complex language skills, show advanced learning, numerical ability and planning, and perform tactical social interactions. They are much more likely to suffer severely, both physically and psychologically, if they are not properly looked after.

After all, they are used to social groups and having their natural needs attended to in the wild. In captivity, however, unless the owner has an exceptional amount of knowledge of the species, there can be many welfare issues, including, as my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall pointed out, bone disease, diabetes and psychological problems. I am not saying that we should put more emphasis on primates than other animals, but they must be considered carefully by the Minister, the shadow Minister and other colleagues.

Abandoned pets, as has already been mentioned in an intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), are another issue. People often make impulse purchases, particularly given the ease of buying on the internet, and have completely unrealistic expectations about how easy it will be to manage an animal. Animals often get bigger and may develop psychological problems and become more aggressive, and thus more dangerous.

I referred to two cases of animal abandonment a moment ago—the pygmy hedgehog and the two bearded dragons—but abandonment and animal welfare are not the only concerns: there is also the possible impact on the local habitat. Coming from a rural farming background, the Minister will be well aware of several invasive species, ranging from non-native crayfish to muntjac deer to the mandarin duck, that have caused big challenges in this country. According to the British Veterinary Association, there are at least 51 types of released reptiles and amphibians in the London area alone. Those species could easily harbour a whole suite of novel pathogens that could impact on livestock and pet health—or indeed on human health, as my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane mentioned. The BVA has already identified 70 pet-linked human diseases.

We should also consider the impact of such animals being traded and captured on the local wild populations in other countries, some of which may be poor, developing nations that do not have the capacity to control or regulate the trade. There are already several examples of species being depleted, and far more research needs to be done on the origin of exotic pets to find ways of following the supply chain as they leave their countries and are traded into the developed world.

Rebecca Pow: On that point, something else has come to light on which it would be interesting to get the Minister’s view. I do not believe that quarantine procedures are in place for many exotic species, so they can be brought in without controls by pet shops or internet providers to distribute here. They do not have to stay anywhere to be checked for diseases and all the rest of it.

Mr Bellingham: That neatly leads me on to my next point. Is the law adequate? Let us first look at what the law says now. The overarching legislation is the Animal Welfare Act 2006, which imposes a legal responsibility on all pet owners to provide for their animal’s basic needs. With the vast numbers of animals around, however, how can the Act be policed except through whistleblowing or an inspector’s concerns about a particular family, perhaps based on information from neighbours? It is a good Act, but it needs to be complemented by other legislation. The selling by pet shops of exotic animals is regulated by the Pet Animals Act 1951, and I believe that sufficient controls are in place for how animals are looked after in pet shops. Mortality during transportation is a big issue, however.

Most pet shops, particularly stores such as Pets at Home, really pride themselves on finding out all the details of where pets originate from. For pets traded on the internet, however, there are no such constraints—it is basically a complete free-for-all. The 1951 Act regulates and controls licensed premises, but there are no controls for those who set up online as individuals trading perhaps one or two animals. If they do it on a regular basis, they can be asked to go through the licensing process, but that does not happen often.

Rebecca Pow: What my hon. Friend is saying is very interesting and I thank him for giving way again. Many big stores such as Pets at Home have wonderful systems in place for licensing pets and giving advice, but many smaller ones have a different array of licences, so there is no evenness across the table. That needs to be looked at, as I think the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith), who is also on the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, would probably agree.

Mr Bellingham: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point.

We have the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and the Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976, which deal with a small percentage of the total number of animals that we are discussing. There is also the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, which gives protection to some native species that might once have been considered for keeping as exotic pets and prohibits the release of exotic species into the wild. The UK is also part of the Bern convention on the conservation of European wildlife and natural habitats and other similar EU statutes. A legislative framework is therefore in place, but are the Acts and conventions being properly implemented and adhered to? Will the Minister urgently review and update the Pet Animals Act 1951, which completely predates the large-scale sale of animals over the internet?

I understand that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has announced a review of all animal licensing to take place next year, so will the Minister consider the 1951 Act and the other legislation as part of that process? This is a big opportunity for the Government to get a grip on the matter, to seize the initiative and to get on the front foot and show that DEFRA, the lead Department, will work with other Departments to try to make a difference, because the law is out of date. I am certainly not part of the nanny-state tendency and do not want excessive regulation, but there is an argument for updating and making the existing legislation fit for purpose. I also ask the Minister to look at the training and capacity of local authority licensing officers to check whether they have the right processes in place.

We will be hearing from the spokesperson for the Scottish National party, the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), but will the Minister work with the devolved Administrations to ensure an overall look at the issue throughout the UK? If the same review that is to take place under DEFRA also took place in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, that would be helpful.

There is cross-party support for and the momentum to get behind a DEFRA initiative, but it has to be the right initiative. We have seen a steady increase in the trade

in exotic pets and a real decline in the standards of welfare in a minority of cases—the vast majority of pet and exotic pet owners look after their pets well and have high standards, but many do not. Given all the problems that flow from poor welfare, pet abandonment and everything to do with biodiversity and the impacts on habitats and human health, the time has come for the Government to act—and they would have the House's support.

9.51 am

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): As always, Mr Owen, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. May I apologise in advance for being slightly under the weather and say that I might not be as energetic or as enthusiastic as normal?

I congratulate the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (Mr Bellingham) on securing the debate. His knowledge of the topic is impressive and he gave us a tour de force this morning. He set out clearly the scale and nature of the trade in exotic pets. As he pointed out, more than 1,000 species of animal are involved in the pet trade, with the evidence suggesting that more than 50% of pet shops sell exotic species of some sort, with 25% selling exotic amphibians, 25% selling exotic birds, mainly parrots, and 17% selling exotic mammals, such as raccoons and hedgehogs, as has been pointed out. Even worse, some 42% of pet shops sell exotic reptiles such as alligators, cobras, chameleons or endangered tortoises. It is also estimated, however, that a staggering 20% of calls to the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals about reptiles are made because they are no longer wanted by their owner.

I want to provide some local context. In South Yorkshire we have 66 licensed pet shops. Recent research by Blue Cross and the Born Free Foundation shows that 25% of them sell reptiles of some sort, with many not even displaying information on what kind is being sold—which underlines perfectly the point made earlier. That is an important point, because if a shop does not know the species, it will not know how the pet should be looked after and will certainly not be able to tell the customer how to care for it.

Thirty per cent of pet shops in South Yorkshire also sell exotic birds, usually labelled simply as “parrots”. Even worse, one in five of the shops in South Yorkshire sells exotic mammals of some sort, with one even selling meerkats. Under no circumstances should meerkats ever be kept as pets, but that example typifies one of the major drivers at play in the trade, which is the role of fad and fashion in governing the decision to buy. To be frank, those individuals who want a meerkat should stick to collecting the stuffed toys on offer from Compare The Market and steer clear of the real thing.

What, in turn, drives buyers' trends in the pet market? I suggest that one of the drivers is that people far too often see exotics as cute and cuddly. Most people, however, do not have the knowledge of the specialist requirements attached to looking after such animals, and the animals suffer as a result.

Dame Angela Watkinson: Does the hon. Lady agree that any revised legislative framework should place responsibility not only on people selling pets, but on people buying them? People should be responsible enough to find out what an animal needs before they take it on.

Angela Smith: I have a lot of sympathy with the hon. Lady's point, and I will say something about the role of education later in my speech.

We need to remember that many animals could be suffering from the trade, far more than we estimate. We are uncertain about the scale of the trade, so it is not even easy to estimate the degree of the problem.

Another concern highlighted by research is how little some local authorities are aware of the issue. One authority in South Yorkshire stated that it had no pet shops licensed to sell exotics, yet Blue Cross and Born Free found at least three pet shops in its area selling exotic birds, amphibians and reptiles. Under-resourced local authorities clearly face a considerable challenge when enforcing legislation on exotic pets.

Licensed pet shops are only the tip of the iceberg—a point powerfully made by the hon. Member for North West Norfolk. In South Yorkshire, as in other areas, the online trade is the growing forum for selling a wide variety of exotic pets, often unlicensed and illegally. For example, one advertisement was seen to be selling cornflakes. *[Interruption.]* I mean corn snakes—sorry, I said I wasn't feeling well. Other ads were for royal pythons and, believe it or not, for a marmoset. Perhaps most shockingly, one advert in South Yorkshire was offering for sale two African grey parrots, exotic birds from the Congo region of central Africa that are designated as vulnerable by the IUCN—the International Union for Conservation of Nature—and should only be kept in captivity by experts and never as pets.

This debate is important and highlights an important and growing issue. If the Minister could address a few points in his response, that would be appreciated. First, does he agree that the Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976 should be extended to cover pet shops? A seller of an exotic animal needing a licence would then have to state such a requirement to any buyer. Secondly, will he consider—this is the principal point made by the hon. Member for North West Norfolk—conducting a full review of the exotic pet trade, similar to the one promised by the Scottish Government? I know that a general review of animal licensing is on the way, but I wonder whether it is worth separating out the issue of exotic pets for special attention. Furthermore, does the Minister agree, thirdly, that part of that full review should consider the outdated Pet Animals Act 1951?

Fourthly, as I have highlighted, local authorities do not have the time, resources or guidance necessary to curb the sale of exotic animals. This is a problem that goes all the way across the licensing of animals for breeding and sale, including dogs and cats. Does the Minister agree, therefore, that local authorities should be given the resources to properly license and inspect pet shops to ensure compliance with existing legislation? Fifthly, does he agree—this is another point made earlier—that more needs to be done to educate the public about the husbandry needs of such animals, which can be difficult and expensive to satisfy in a home environment?

Mr Gregory Campbell: On more being done to educate wider society, does the hon. Lady agree that part of the problem is the novelty factor, which parents often inculcate in their children? They do not want to have just a goldfish, dog or cat; they want an increasingly outrageously exotic animal as a pet, which might be discarded in a matter of weeks.

Angela Smith: I totally agree, and that is the point I made about the role of fad and fashion. I made the point about meerkats and tried to deal with it light-heartedly, but it is a serious point. Meerkats are not cuddly animals that can be kept easily in a home environment, but we see a growing trend for that kind of pet ownership, which is totally unacceptable. On a personal level—this is not a party political line—I think it is unacceptable that a wide range of exotic animals sold in pet shops should be sold to be kept in domestic environments. I do not understand why anyone would want to keep a pet snake or a pet spider.

Rebecca Pow: I want to back up what the hon. Lady is saying. Something like half of all pets sold through pet shops are venomous snakes, alligators and crocodiles. That is frightening, so I urge the Minister to look at the law.

Angela Smith: I totally agree. I am pleased that a review of legislation on the licensing of the breeding and sale of animals is on the way, but that aspect of the trade needs to be looked at carefully. Public safety ramifications that go beyond the Animal Welfare Act need to be looked at as well and given a bit of separate attention.

Pets are not a fashion accessory and should not be exposed to the throwaway culture of modern fashion. Some animals should not be kept as pets at all. Blue Cross and Born Free, in their “One Click Away” campaign, want to see a ban on keeping primates as pets. This is a bit of an old chestnut, but does the Minister agree that primates should not be kept as household pets?

Pet shops sell exotic animals to meet a demand and because of the high profits to be had by so doing. There is nothing wrong with making money, but we must be careful and make sure that animal welfare is not compromised in the process of making a living. In many cases, animals may not be dangerous or endangered. It is not illegal to own exotic pets, but even if it is not illegal, in some cases the trade drives habitat destruction and the extinction of animals in the wild. That cannot be right or good for the species involved, nor is it possible to meet the welfare needs of exotic pets in a domestic environment.

I thank Blue Cross and Born Free for their campaigning work, which has been invaluable and should be commended. I for one appreciate all they do in highlighting this and many other animal welfare issues. I know that the Minister is a reasonable man and he is very competent, so I look forward to a full and thorough response to the points raised in the debate.

10.2 am

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) on securing the debate. He is on urgent Council of Europe business this morning, but I will tell him that my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (Mr Bellingham) ably moved the motion in his place.

I do not mean to chastise my hon. Friend, but throughout my time in Parliament I have consistently raised issues concerning animal welfare. Therefore, if anyone has any time to spare, they will see in *Hansard* that everything that has been said this morning I have said before.

Indeed, in 2002, together with Ann Widdecombe—I am still a Member of this place; Ann Widdecombe is appearing in pantomime in Windsor and doing a good job, but she is here with me in spirit—I introduced a Bill to protect endangered species. Indeed, we got Brigitte Bardot involved in the campaign, but even that did not do any good.

I therefore say to the Minister that there is no point in having debates where we feel good at the end but nothing happens. I want a slightly better answer from him, in terms of how his civil servants brief him, than the one I got from my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon), who was the Minister in 2012 and doing a splendid job. I am very much in favour of Ministers saying, “Yes, we can do this,” and standing up to the advice they are given.

None of these issues is original. The dramatic change is the power of the internet. We have all just fought general election campaigns, where we go canvassing. When I knocked on one door, I saw a cat with spots and thought, “My goodness—now they are keeping leopards.” Over the years, the Amess household has kept all sorts of animals—we have drawn the line at giraffes because we do not have ceilings high enough for them—but my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) will be aware that, in September, I inaugurated the Westminster responsible pet ownership competition. The point of that was that owning a pet is a big responsibility. I understand how the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) feels on this issue.

We all know that small animals are cute. Puppies are cute and a little alligator, 6 inches long, looks cute, but then it grows. The level of irresponsibility of the people buying these pets is absolutely ridiculous. That is why, over the years and with other colleagues who have been consistently interested in animal welfare issues, I have tried to change things.

Dame Angela Watkinson: My hon. Friend will know better than anyone that the capacity of rehoming centres is at its limits, so the problem of exotic pet abandonment must be limited through legislation. Otherwise, it will continue and we will reach crisis point.

Sir David Amess: My hon. Friend is entirely right. My hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall and I recently returned from a trip to Cyprus, where my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrows) and I were presented with two common tortoises called Fama and Gusta. However, because of certain issues, those two tortoises, which we wanted to rescue, are still on the beautiful island of Cyprus and, under the arrangements in place, we would have had to get a mortgage out on the Palace of Westminster to bring them back. I have contacted the Minister for Tourism in Cyprus to see if some kind carrier could do us a favour, so that at least my hon. Friend could have a happy Christmas with his family by rescuing the two tortoises.

I have proposed and supported many early-day motions concerning animal welfare legislation. Indeed, the Protection against Cruel Tethering Act 1988, which was in my name, was on the statute book. I have tried to do something about the Pet Animals Act 1951, dogs Acts and other matters.

Recently, Southend Cats Protection came to my surgery and drew my attention to exotic cats. I was informed that over recent years ownership of new, exotic cats has become popular, including bengals, savannahs and chausie oicats, which have become widely available on the internet—I say to my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk that the power of the internet has changed things—and while many come from registered, reputable breeders, many others put profit before the animal’s welfare and, on the cat’s looks, sell them, with no checks made, to unsuspecting buyers who are unaware of the high maintenance involved.

Those breeds are demanding and require much human interaction. They need a lot of daily exercise and a large territory, including places for vertical climbing. I assume they do not just go up curtains—perhaps they try to walk on the ceiling. They often like to play with water, so they must be in their element at the moment. They have a high prey drive and, while many will get on well with dogs, they are often cat-aggressive and will actively seek out neighbouring cats to hurt to maintain their territory. My constituent explained how the cats can become destructive through boredom and can respond aggressively to being disciplined or handled. There are common reasons for those cats to be relinquished and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Dame Angela Watkinson) said, rescue charities are increasingly being asked to take them. Given the traits of these cats, however, charities cannot accept them, because they cannot meet their needs. These cats are very expensive to maintain.

Over the years, I have kept many birds—of the feathered variety. Many people keep birds—budgerigars, canaries and a number of common parrots—in captivity as companion animals, and I am very comfortable with that. However, the majority of birds imported through Heathrow airport come from places such as South Africa, South America, Singapore and the Czech Republic. It is absolutely ridiculous to bring back humming birds, given the cruelty involved in netting them. A large range of species, including macaws, lovebirds, toucans and birds of prey, are kept. The number of species is estimated to approach 1,000. Many of those species are now kept in the UK, and that is very cruel—these birds are taken out of their natural habitat, and they are not well looked after in captivity.

The RSPCA does a splendid job—I might be slightly critical of its ever-changing management, but its ordinary members do a splendid job. However, it certainly supports my concerns about the keeping of exotic birds. It recently reported that 80 dead exotic birds were found at the bottom of a cage they shared with a boa constrictor—a boa constrictor for goodness’ sake! Many of the other birds in the cage were on the verge of death. Of the 80 dead birds, two were zebra finches—I know they are fairly common—and one was a bronze-winged mannikin, which had died as a result of head trauma after attempting to escape from the snake. The snake was curled up in the water bowl, so the birds were traumatised because they could not get anything to drink. During the inspection, budgerigars were also found to be suffering from skin complaints and a mite infestation.

I have touched on the ten-minute rule Bill I sought leave to introduce in 2002. In 2012, I asked the then Minister what plans he had to amend legislation such as the Pet Animals Act 1951. I think the civil service told

[*Sir David Amess*]

him to say there was no requirement to change the legislation, but that is ridiculous—that is not a good enough answer. In 1983, when I was first elected to this place, and David Mellor was the lead Home Office Minister on this issue, we served on a Committee looking at a Bill—the first such Bill since 1911—to amend animal legislation. Furthermore, given what my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk said about the power of the internet in this regard, we need to get up to speed.

I welcome the debate, but it should not just be a talking shop; we should change the legislation and make sure that any new legislation is actually enforced. It is Christmas, with the nativity and all of that, and this should be a happy season for not just human beings, but animals as well.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Albert Owen (in the Chair): Order. Before I call Dr Lisa Cameron, I should remind those who are indicating that they want to speak that I will call the Front-Bench spokesmen at 10.30 am.

10.13 am

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is an absolute delight to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) on securing the debate. I also congratulate the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (Mr Bellingham) on his detailed and thorough speech.

It appears that exotic pets have been a feature in the UK since as early as the 13th century, with records from the time reportedly documenting that reptiles were kept in the Tower of London menagerie. However, over recent years the popularity of exotic pets has grown, and the range of species kept as pets has significantly increased. Animal charities have reported that the variety of exotic pets available outnumbers that of more traditional domesticated species, such as cats and dogs. Approximately 1,000 species of mammals, birds, invertebrates, reptiles and amphibians, and hundreds of fish species, are involved in the pet trade. The RSPCA has also highlighted the fact that trends in purchases of exotic pets are often associated with current crazes. For example, the increased demand for terrapins arose out of the popularity of the “Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles”.

Many animal charities and professional bodies, such as the British Veterinary Association, have highlighted a number of concerns regarding the ownership of, and trade in, exotic pets. That has led to calls at EU level for new approaches. In Scotland, the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Food and Environment, Richard Lochhead, has committed to a review of the trade in, and importation of, exotic animals for the pet trade in Scotland.

A key concern about the exotic pet trade relates to the animals’ welfare. These animals can be difficult to look after, and they can live for a long time and need extra, specialist care. Although many exotic pet owners are very experienced, knowledgeable and skilled in providing appropriate habitats and attending to their pets’ needs, animal charities highlight the fact that the increased

availability of these animals on the internet and in pet shops means it is now easy for inexperienced people with little knowledge of an animal’s specific needs to purchase one as a pet.

In fact, the “One Click Away” investigation by Blue Cross and the Born Free Foundation found that, when these animals are purchased on the internet, the seller often provides little or no welfare information at the point of sale. It is also reported that high-quality care information can be hard to find. That impacts on the animals’ welfare and can lead to serious health concerns or even death. The specialist care required by these animals also means that vets often do not have the skills to deal with them when they become ill.

The easy availability of exotic pets to inexperienced owners can result in animals being given up or abandoned when they become difficult to look after, and there have been several such cases in Scotland. In one case, bearded dragons were discovered in supermarket toilets; in another case, a snake found its way into a legal office in Clydebank. Animal charities such as the Blue Cross and the RSPCA report that they are receiving an increased number of exotic pets into their care. However, that creates issues, as those organisations do not have adequate facilities to deal with exotic animals’ specialist needs at the scale that is now required.

Concerns have been raised about the lack of responsible sourcing in relation to these animals, and issues have been highlighted regarding the trade in reptiles and amphibians from the wild. The British Veterinary Association and the British Veterinary Zoological Society have reported that sourcing these animals from the wild can lead to a decline in their population; negative impacts on the ecosystem; stress for the animals as a result of being captured; poor acclimatisation; and high numbers of animal deaths due to the processes used during transportation.

Once in the UK, exotic animals also pose a potential threat to native species, habitats and the public if they escape or are deliberately released by their owners. It is reported that a number of exotic reptiles and amphibians have become established in other countries as invasive species, which has had significant impacts on native species and ecosystems. In addition, trade in wild-caught amphibians has spread diseases around the world, with devastating effects on amphibian populations. It is also highlighted that exotic pets can carry diseases that can be passed to humans.

Among the wide variety of exotic species for sale online, the “One Click Away” study found a number of potentially dangerous or venomous animals. When I worked in community mental health services, I went to the houses of a number of patients who were deemed to lack capacity and who required daily support, and I found that they had purchased snakes, lizards or various other animals, without any apparent knowledge or understanding of the specialist care those animals required or the capacity to provide it. Our team therefore had to rehome many exotic animals when patients were detained back into hospital. I am speaking from personal experience in urging the Minister to consider legislating on licensing.

Many owners of exotic pets are experienced, knowledgeable and skilled, as I have said, providing their pets with appropriate habitats and attending to their needs. There are groups of exotic pet enthusiasts and owners, such as the Reptile and Exotic Pet Trade

Association and the Ornamental Aquatic Trade Association, which are concerned about the impact that reviews of the legislation could have on their hobby. They appear to be opposed to the introduction of bans. For those owners, the welfare of exotic animals is a paramount consideration. I accept that they are skilled in keeping exotic animals as pets.

It has been argued by members of the reptile industry that policies on the pet trade should be based on clear, robust science, and not on speculation, assumptions or prejudices; they have queried the reliability and quality of some research and views quoted by animal welfare groups and professional bodies. However, they have also quoted contradictory research such as undergraduate dissertations where there is not clarity as to the outcome, and where the views appear to be slanted or one-sided. Much more research—quantitative as well as qualitative—is needed, and the area in question would be a good starting point.

The legislation on the trade and importation of exotic animals as pets is currently being reviewed by the Scottish Government. It has been suggested that the UK Government's recent announcement that they will review all animal licensing provides a good opportunity to consider issues relating to exotic pets in the UK, and I urge the Minister to take that forward. In doing so, it may be useful to consult relevant animal welfare groups, professional bodies and owner groups to ensure that all issues are fully considered. It is important that the legislative framework should be fit for purpose and capable of providing the best protection to the animals that are being bred, traded, imported and kept in the UK.

I have some concerns about public safety, particularly in relation to venomous snakes or other dangerous exotic pets that may be left, or lost down toilets. There are potential public safety issues, so it is essential that the existing Act be implemented. However, new legislation should also deal directly with the online sale of exotic pets, pet advertising and business registration and licensing. The Pet Animals Act 1951 should be reviewed. It was not configured to reflect increased interest in keeping exotic pets domestically. Extension or amendment of the Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976 should also be considered. Owners of exotic pets should meet licensing criteria, which could be species-specific; work should be done on that.

I urge colleagues in the Scottish Government to ensure that their review is undertaken, and that stipulated guidelines will be enforced as a result. We want animal welfare provision across the UK. I would not like a situation in which legislation was implemented in one part of the UK but not in another, so that people who might not have animals' best interests at heart would take them across the border.

10.24 am

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): I thank the Backbench Business Committee and my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (Mr Bellingham) in particular for securing the debate. I have heard many good contributions on various topics, including from the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) and my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess). I do not want to repeat what they have said, so I will concentrate on the subject of primates.

In 2010 I adopted a monkey named Donkey from the Wild Futures monkey sanctuary near Looe in my constituency. Donkey lives in the monkey sanctuary with other Barbary macaques like him. Unfortunately, he spent the start of his life as a circus performer after being taken from his family in the wild, in Morocco. He has very poor social skills and is underdeveloped for his age. Luckily for Donkey, charities such as Wild Futures exist to rehome animals like him that are not fit for domestic life.

In January 2012 I introduced a Bill to the House under the ten-minute rule, to prohibit the keeping of primates as pets in the United Kingdom. In my speech, I told the stories of three different monkeys, Joey, King Julien and Mikey, who between them had suffered fractures, hypothermia and disabilities owing to lack of sunlight and nutrition. Wild Futures monkey sanctuary is currently appealing for funds to build a rescue facility for marmosets, with the hope of building a £60,000 facility that will include indoor and outdoor enclosures large enough to accommodate marmosets in social groups. The charity has recently brought two marmosets to the establishment. One of them, Speedy, was left in a small empty birdcage while his owner worked overseas. He had a scrap of cloth to sleep on and his only diet was banana custard, which led to him developing hyperglycaemia.

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals estimates that between 2,500 and 7,500 primates are kept as pets in the UK. Others suggest the number could be as high as 20,000. Because of the lack of registered breeders it is very difficult to come up with an exact figure. Sales of exotic animals on the internet are unregulated. Monkeys are being sold without any information on how to care for them and often with no information on the exact species. A person buying a pet without seeing it first is almost sure to put it up for sale or leave it abandoned. That is a huge strain on charities such as the Born Free Foundation and Blue Cross, which treat animals and species that some vets may never see, let alone treat. Veterinary help for monkeys is very hard to come by. They are more complex in their needs than domesticated animals such as cats and dogs, and require specialists. Often, the owners find the process too expensive or the monkeys do not make it to the arrival of the specialist—if a specialist is available.

Wild Futures monkey sanctuary currently houses 39 monkeys, most of which were purchased as exotic pets, but the number is growing constantly. Monkeys are quickly becoming a fashion accessory and we should not stand for that. I support the Born Free Foundation and Blue Cross in their call for a review of the Pet Animals Act 1951, but the legislation must take account of internet sales. I hope that the Act will be looked at during next year's review by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs of all mammal licensing.

The Minister visited Wild Futures with me in the summer and he knows that the feeling there is that a ban is the answer to the problem of keeping primates as pets. The Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs produced a report on primates as pets in the previous Parliament, and one thing that we accepted was that if people have primates as pets now, the introduction of an immediate ban could exacerbate the problem. Perhaps the Minister would kindly consider the introduction of a ban and a licensing system, with a

[Mrs Sheryll Murray]

sunset clause, so that someone who has been keeping a primate responsibly can continue to do so, but so that eventually we will put an end to a trade that leads to primates being kept in unsuitable conditions.

10.29 am

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen, and to speak on behalf of the Scottish National party. I thank the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (Mr Bellingham) for securing the debate.

We know that this might not seem such a big issue for some people, given what is going on in the wider world at the moment. Indeed, on a separate animal matter, I have been contacted by a constituent who was unhappy to read that Scottish soldiers and money were being utilised to protect elephants abroad, which illustrates that there is sometimes a bit of misunderstanding. Members have spoken powerfully today about the trade of exotic animals and the issue of keeping them as pets. For me, this subject feeds directly into the whole matter of protecting the earth and its inhabitants.

There is clearly cross-party support on this issue, certainly within the Chamber. I pay tribute to the contributions from my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), the hon. Members for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) and for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray), and the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), who made it clear he has long been an advocate on this issue. I pay tribute to the work he has done over the years.

Over the years, the world has become a smaller place, given that it is much cheaper to travel now. We have much greater linkage with various countries abroad. As we have heard, the internet allows greater connectivity and what is perceived to be an understanding of the wider world. Those two issues combined have allowed the growth of the exotic pet trade. Given those circumstances, it is logical to review existing legislation and the whole exotic pet trade.

As my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow said, it is good to see the Scottish Government taking a lead on this issue. The Environment Secretary, Richard Lochhead, commissioned a review in February this year into the import of exotic pets. As the hon. Member for North West Norfolk said, the devolved Administrations and the UK Government can work together on this issue. I certainly look forward to hearing the Minister's response to that and the other questions put to him.

I pay tribute to the people who campaign tirelessly on these matters and to organisations such as OneKind in Edinburgh. We heard about the Born Free Foundation and the Blue Cross, which are behind the "One Click Away" campaign. I agree with what some hon. Members said about the internet. One of the purposes of and problems with the internet is that people can make impulse purchases. We heard how films and fashion drive behaviours. Given what we have heard about horror purchases on the internet, there could also be a campaign called "Four Beers and One Click Away", because we know it is too easy for someone on a Saturday night to get an idea, go on the internet and—lo and behold—purchase almost anything they want.

On a more serious matter, the main issues with keeping exotic pets are welfare and environmental concerns. While many animals might be covered under the convention on international trade in endangered species of wild fauna and flora, any exotic animals taken from the wild can impact on conservation. Human behaviour often drives people to desire to be ever more exclusive, and to do that, they crave even more exotic animals. I think it is fair to say that even the legal exotic pet trade can help to drive the illegal trade, as people seek to go one better and become more exclusive. That, of course, further endangers at-risk species.

As my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow picked up on, we know that the removal of one species from the general food chain in the wild or their reduction within it has a direct impact on the environment they are native to, which leads to changes in the wider ecosystem of which those animals are a part. I recommend to hon. Members an excellent book I read over the summer, "Feral", which illustrates very well how one animal can massively change the entire ecosystem.

We heard of the risk of transfer of disease and pathogens in general posed by the import of exotic animals, as well as the risk that those animals might be released into the wild. There is legislation that deals with the abandonment or release of non-native species, but it is none the less clear that a thriving exotic pet trade increases the risk of either accidental escapes or deliberate abandonment. Any escape risks local conservation measures and obviously has a possible impact on native flora and fauna. There have certainly been plenty of examples over the years of both flora and fauna non-native invasive species bidding in the UK.

Abandonment poses potential dangers for the public, depending on which animal is abandoned. I would certainly not like to have been working in the legal office in Clydebank that a snake came into. It might also have put me off my shopping if I had gone to the shop's toilet and found a bearded dragon. Other examples of escape or abandonment highlighted by the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals include five corn snakes, a 6-foot boa constrictor and a Chinese water dragon—that is just in the past year alone.

Another spin-off of the exotic pet trade discovered in Scotland was someone breeding rats for sale to snake owners. That unscrupulous rat breeder was keeping hundreds of rats in what was effectively a rabbit hutch. The rats were discovered because they were allowed to escape—another example that illustrates the wider public health issues that derive from the exotic pet trade either directly or indirectly.

As we have heard, animal husbandry is another concern. We know that exotic pets need to be suitably looked after in terms of their living conditions and food. In terms of these purchases being one click away, people can be tempted to buy unsuitable pets without having the skills and knowledge to look after them, and they certainly might not provide the right living conditions, in terms of cages or other equipment, to give the animals the lifestyle they need. We know that unscrupulous dealers unfortunately might not provide the same specialist advice as responsible pet shops, and nor are they likely to check the suitability of prospective owners, meaning animals are sold to people who should not have them and are then not looked after. Animal welfare is a key

issue. When the prime motivation of the sale of animals is to make money, welfare might not be the No. 1 consideration, which leads to a spiral of decline in animal welfare.

In summary, we know that existing legislation can, in theory, cover many of the issues highlighted today. However, given that the Pet Animals Act in particular is more than 50 years old, as other Members have said, it is time for a review; I would like to hear the Minister's response to that. As the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Dame Angela Watkinson) said, we must ensure that buyers, as well as sellers, understand their responsibility.

10.38 am

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I start by congratulating the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (Mr Bellingham) on opening this important debate. With the Government announcing the review of all animal licensing to take place next year, this debate is certainly timely. We have heard some interesting points, and I hope to add a little value to the debate, in which consensus has certainly broken out.

The hon. Gentleman made a strong and persuasive case that I am sure will go some way to convincing the Minister that more can, should and must be done to regulate the sale and keeping of exotic pets here in the UK. Like others, I would welcome the Minister's confirmation that the Pet Animals Act 1951 will be included in the review, to bring the legislation into the 21st century.

As other Members have rightly highlighted, there is a growing trade in exotic animals, with traders knowing little, and buyers even less. My hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) told of the huge range of exotic pets on sale in south Yorkshire, where shopkeepers have no knowledge of or information about them. That example, in itself, surely makes the case for change. The hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) mentioned a number of horror stories. He made me jealous when he told us he had worked with Brigitte Bardot, but even she could not change things as far as legislation in this area is concerned. I am sure the Minister agrees that we do not need any more glamour to achieve change.

The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) talked about the pressures that can be put on families through such things as "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles", which can drive the demand for a particular species without people thinking about the animal's needs. Children would be horrified if they realised that the pet that they are keeping is suffering, when actually, it is an illustration of their heroes. It is important that children understand a little more about that.

The hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) said that the best way to have an interest in an exotic animal was by sponsoring one in a sanctuary. She also raised the issue of specialist vets not being available to deal with such animals when they become ill.

Regrettably, although the keeping of dangerous wild animals as pets is regulated by the Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976 and the selling by pet shops of exotic animals as pets is regulated by the Pet Animals Act 1951, there are no detailed controls on the keeping of non-dangerous exotic animals as pets. Partially as a result of that regulatory uncertainty, the range of exotic animals

and birds being kept as pets has expanded substantially in recent years, with increasing numbers of people choosing to buy lesser known species that are deemed more desirable, and maybe even more fashionable, which is a point that was raised earlier. Unfortunately, from a welfare perspective at least, that includes some species that are simply unsuitable for that purpose.

Reptiles are a case in point. The hon. Member for North West Norfolk told us of the Born Free and Blue Cross report, "One Click Away", which suggested that up to 7 million reptiles and amphibians are now being kept in the UK. We also heard of a sample studied by Born Free and Blue Cross, which discovered at least 53 different species of reptile, along with 37 types of exotic bird, 28 types of exotic mammal and seven types of amphibians advertised for sale over a three-month period and across several general selling websites.

Often, however, the decisions by the buyers are made on the hoof, perhaps at the behest of a child, with little consideration for the long-term implications of owning an exotic pet for which the novelty can soon wear off. At a recent Blue Cross event, I raised the need for education, which again, was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge. I was talking about the need for children to understand in school what owning an exotic pet actually means. Children really do care and I think that if they understood a little more, perhaps the demand for exotic pets would be that little bit lower.

With many of these species having not undergone the same process of domestication as more familiar companion animals, such as dogs and cats, meeting their highly specialised welfare needs in a domestic environment can be very difficult. That is an important point. Domesticated livestock and companion animals are fundamentally different from their wild predecessors. The welfare needs of many exotic animals are extremely complicated. They often have specific requirements in terms of space, diet and environment, and very often those are difficult and expensive to meet within a home environment. The same holds true for the complex social, physical and behavioural needs of many exotic animals.

We have heard this morning that the unfortunate result is that many such impulse purchases end up being kept in poor conditions, contrary to the duties imposed by the Animal Welfare Act 2006 on owners to provide for an animal's basic needs. I would welcome the Minister's thoughts on how those regulations can be better enforced.

It is important to recognise that, when an exotic animal's captive environment is unsuitable, a host of serious health problems can result, and we have heard many examples of those this morning. The 7 million reptiles that I mentioned just a moment ago, for instance, are known to suffer from a range of illnesses in captivity, including rickets, metabolic bone disease and digestive problems. With the advent—not to mention the rapid growth—of online selling, the internet has quickly become a hive of activity through which breeders, dealers and traders alike can advertise and sell a staggering array of pet animals with consummate ease.

Sadly, the ease of availability opens the door to many inexperienced owners, who can purchase exotic animals without being aware of their specific needs. That, ultimately, can feed into a cycle of maltreatment, and I look forward to hearing the Minister's plans to ensure that this marketplace is properly and thoroughly regulated to minimise any such instances.

[Alex Cunningham]

I am, indeed, aware that the Government have started to look at that area and have endorsed the Pet Advertising Advisory Group standards for online adverts. That move is certainly to be welcomed and represents an important step. There has been some success in improving online advertising standards among those signing up to the voluntary standards. However, critically, those standards are wholly voluntary and markedly less success has been had with the sites that are not signing up. Furthermore, compliance is, as a result, difficult to enforce.

The “One Click Away” report, which I referred to, illustrates that perfectly. By looking at a sample of almost 1,800 online classified adverts, animals considered particularly vulnerable to welfare problems in captivity, such as chameleons and iguanas, were found advertised for sale. The investigation also found that unsuitable animals, including potentially dangerous ones, were widely available for sale to the general public.

Worryingly, even primates featured on the list of species encountered. Between January 2008 and October 2012, monitoring by Born Free found 57 species of exotic mammals for sale, including 11 species of primates. The “One Click Away” report found 21 adverts selling primates, and I want to touch on that specific issue. Several animal welfare organisations are particularly concerned about that matter, and I share those worries. The RSPCA, for instance, has voiced its belief that primates are never suitable pets and tend to suffer disproportionately in a domestic environment. Blue Cross and Born Free would also support a ban on their keeping as pets.

Let us not forget that primates are highly intelligent mammals, with a range of complex needs. Many demonstrate complex language skills, use tools, show advanced learning, numerical ability and planning, as well as performing tactical social interactions. Some are also capable of human-like emotion, which adds another sensitive dimension to those considerations. However, that enhanced capacity for intelligence and awareness means that primates are also more disposed to suffer in captivity than many other animals. To maintain high welfare standards, both physical and psychological health must be safeguarded, entailing being kept in social groups in specially designed indoor and outdoor facilities, yet I understand that the RSPCA commonly finds primates kept as pets in birdcages, on their own, in people’s living rooms. Owners, worryingly, lack even the basic knowledge and understanding of the species that they own. Clearly, that can have serious welfare implications and can lead to such conditions as bone diseases and diabetes, not to mention psychological symptoms such as self-mutilation, depression and hair plucking.

Speakers this morning have given the Minister much to think about, and I look forward to his explaining to us how we can achieve higher standards and better enforcement.

10.47 am

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): May I begin by drawing Members’ attention to my declaration of ministerial interest, Mr Owen? The World Parrot Trust—a fabulous charity that does work in 40 countries around the world, particularly targeting the illegal pet trade and the illegal trapping of exotic birds—is based in my constituency, and I have always supported their work.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (Mr Bellingham) for introducing this debate on what is clearly an important topic. We have had many informed contributions to the debate.

I want to start by saying a bit about the scale of the issue. Although no precise figures are available and estimates vary, according to the Pet Food Manufacturers’ Association, about 1.3 million amphibians and reptiles are being kept as pets in the UK today. That is made up of about 400,000 lizards, 400,000 snakes, 300,000 tortoises and turtles, 100,000 frogs and toads and 100,000 newts and salamanders. There are other estimates, which some hon. Members have alluded to, that put the numbers of reptiles and amphibians in this country at up to 7 million. However, of those amphibians and reptiles, it is estimated that about 70% are made up of only six species: the bearded dragon, the crested gecko, the leopard gecko, the corn snake, the royal python and Hermann’s tortoise.

We can compare those numbers to those of more familiar pets: we have around 8.5 million cats and dogs, 40 million fish, 1 million rabbits and 1 million caged birds. Whether it is 1.3 million or 7 million, the issue is clearly important and I am aware of the many concerns that have been raised with me.

A number of hon. Members have pointed out that some of these animals can be dangerous to people and our native wildlife if not kept or controlled appropriately, and that they can carry diseases sometimes transmissible to humans.

An important element of this debate is responsible ownership. Responsible owners will take care to understand what is needed to look after their animals before they purchase them, and find out where best to source their animals and what restrictions may apply to their keeping. The veterinary profession is particularly well placed to educate owners. They see animals that might show signs that the environment or enclosure they are kept in are inappropriate. Vets can also help in educating owners about the best way of keeping their pets or rehoming them if they do not have the correct facilities. Pet shop owners also have a role in educating owners and advising on suitable pets for the buyer. Some exotic species need specialist care, as hon. Members have pointed out, and pet shop owners should ensure that such animals are sold only to those able to look after them properly.

We have made some progress. Just last week, with the assistance and support of DEFRA, the Companion Animal Sector Council—a group of organisations representing businesses and keepers—met other interested parties, including the veterinary profession and key NGOs, to discuss how to improve the sale and welfare standards of kept companion animals, including exotics. Among the recommendations from the meeting was the need to educate owners and prospective owners, as well as others, on the keeping of these animals, particularly exotic species. To help to address that, the meeting also agreed to formalise care sheets to be available on all the organisations’ websites.

Earlier this year, various trade associations and veterinary experts came together to produce new and up-to-date good practice guidelines for the welfare of privately kept reptiles and amphibians with advisory care sheets for the six most commonly kept reptile species. I will return to those care sheets and codes.

A number of hon. Members have referred to the internet, which is a vital issue. On one level, we could say that it is just a modern way of classifieds. We have always had classified ads in newspapers and we now have them online. However, the internet has made such issues far more challenging. That is why, a couple of years ago, we established a code with the Pet Advertising Advisory Group. I met the group just two weeks ago for an update on progress.

The code contains 18 requirements. There are automated checks for blacklisted words so if bad owners advertise dogs for dog fighting and so on the ads are automatically removed and banned. It requires a photo of the animal being sold. There is a three-strikes-and-you're-out rule, and if people put up inappropriate ads they are blocked altogether from advertising on those sites. When a licence is required, they must have it and print the details in the advert. There is a ban on the sale of invertebrates and advertising them for sale through the post. Believe it or not, although it was not mentioned today, that was happening. Specific to primates, there is an outright ban on advertising them under the code.

Mr Bellingham: I am grateful to the Minister for covering that point, and the oversight of people who sell on the internet. What will he do about welfare during transportation and delivery of exotic animals that have been sold online—anaconda, corn snake, and reptiles and so on—so that when they are sold and a contract is struck, transportation is safe and secure for the animal and meets high standards? What will be done to sort that out and to police it?

George Eustice: We must draw a distinction. Internet providers can deal only with the type of advert being posted and there is a ban on advertising transport through the post. A range of EU and domestic regulations are in place covering transportation and the Animal Welfare Act 2006 has a role in that.

I want to move on because of the time. The six organisations that have signed up are Epupz, Friday-Ad, Gumtree, Pets for Homes, Preloved and Vivastreet. Good progress has been made since we launched this initiative with the help of volunteers from NGOs, and 130,000 inappropriate adverts have been removed. At the meeting with some of the advertisers last week, Gumtree, for example, reported that the number of pets advertised on its website has gone down by 80% over three years. That is a significant change. When there are high-velocity sales with people advertising puppies and pets, they are automatically blocked and the advertiser's details are forwarded to the advisory group so that other enforcement action can be taken. Both Preloved and Gumtree now send people automatic notification—Gumtree by email and Preloved on its website—with information about responsible ownership and responsible buying. Some good progress has been made.

Licensing is crucial and a number of hon. Members alluded to that. There is a need to review all animal establishment licensing. We have a hotchpotch of different laws, most of which date from the 1950s and 1960s, covering a range of options. We are working on a review of that and I hope to go to consultation imminently. Many hon. Members asked whether it will include a review of the Pet Animals Act 1951. My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) said that I should

stand up to officials. I always feel sorry for officials because they do not have voice at the Dispatch Box, so let me say that I am ably supported in this by some very talented officials behind me. The review will include that Act because although it has stood the test of time, it was designed in an era when the internet did not exist and it is important to review it to make sure it is clear. The law is already clear in that anyone trading on the internet must have a pet shop licence whether or not they have a pet shop in the high street.

The areas we want to cover include enforcement. I am keen to see whether we can make greater use of the UK accreditation scheme so that people who are registered with, for example, the Kennel Club, do not necessarily need a separate local authority licence. We should let local authorities focus on those who are outside a system at the moment. I am also keen to look at resource sharing. It would be possible, for example, for one or two local authorities to develop a specialism in exotic pets and to provide help to other local authorities. There are greater prospects for joint working.

Specifically on exotics, we are considering making it a requirement of having a licence that care sheets and information sheets are provided to owners before they are allowed to purchase pets. That would be a big step forward because, through the licensing and legislative process, there would be a requirement for that information to be given. We are also considering whether we can have a more risk-based approach.

Next year, we will review the code for primates. I had a delightful visit to Wild Futures in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray). It does fantastic work. Our view is that it would already be a clear breach of the Animal Welfare Act 2006 for anyone to have a primate in a domestic setting. There are private keepers who can provide the needs of primates, and I am open to looking further into some of the points she made.

My final point relates to the legislation on importing and exporting. Exotic animals imported into the UK are subject to import controls to prevent the introduction of disease to this country. Imported reptiles and snakes do not need to be accompanied by a health certificate, but a certificate must be completed by the competent authority of the exporting country for exotic birds. What is crucial is that all animals imported to the UK from a third country must be presented at a border inspection post and subjected to a veterinary and documentary check by the Animal and Plant Health Agency. Additional controls for many exotic species are provided through CITES—the convention on international trade in endangered species—and include around 35,000 species.

In conclusion, we have had a very good debate. I hope that hon. Members with a clear interest in the matter will contribute to the consultation when we launch it, hopefully in the new year. The matter is vital. I am passionate about it and want to sort it out. I believe we can improve the licensing system both in the way we approach the laws of licensing and in the way they are enforced.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the exotic pets trade.

UK Tourism after the Paris Attacks

11 am

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered tourism in the UK after the Paris attacks.

I am very grateful for this chance to raise an issue of huge importance to my constituency and the United Kingdom. I am delighted that my good friend the Minister will respond to the debate. Everyone in the House will wish her and her family well and all peace and happiness for the future. Her forthcoming break from the political arena will be sad for the rest of us, but an absolute joy for her. I know, because I have three children, that it will also be an awful lot of hard work. If she ever fancies a change or a breath of fresh air, I can think of no better thing for her to do than to come down to Bridgwater and West Somerset and enjoy the delights of Exmoor—it is very good for young lungs.

Encouraging tourism is what this short debate is about. The industry is vital to the UK; tourism is growing faster than any other sector in the country. It employs well over 3 million people and, according to the latest figures, it earns £130 billion a year. That is 9% of the UK's GDP. It is possible that 10 years from now, tourism will be bringing in £300 billion-worth of dollars, euros and yen every year. However, I emphasise the word “possible”. British tourism has massively upped its game in recent times. I can speak only for Somerset, but I know that down there we offer the best these days. However, there are still unpredictable risks that can undermine consumer confidence and pull the plug on prosperity overnight, which is why the appalling carnage in Paris just over three weeks ago is very relevant to the debate.

By coincidence, I spent the weekend and a lot of last week in Paris as a delegate to the international climate change conference. That long planned event involving the leaders of 147 countries was always going to be a security headache. What happened in the city on the grim night of 13 November dramatically altered the landscape. It is a massive tribute to French resilience that the climate change conference went ahead and will, I think, achieve so much.

By contrast, France has suffered badly in the aftermath of the ghastly terrorist attacks. As you know, Mr Owen, Paris is a wonderful city, but terrorism has wreaked havoc on its tourist trade. It is estimated that cancelled bookings and reduced visitor numbers have already cost the French economy about £1.5 billion. When Brussels was locked down while the police searched for the Paris terrorists, it cost that city a hefty £35 million a day in lost trade.

Fear, as we know, can be a cruel weapon. It respects no laws and undermines confidence—and, as we have seen here, it feeds on itself. Fear can all too easily stop tourists in their tracks. That is perfectly understandable: no one will want to put themselves or their family at risk when they embark on a vacation anywhere in the world. I fully appreciate that the remedy for fear is extremely hard, if not impossible, to find and is well beyond the power of any ministerial brief. We cannot expel it. We cannot legislate against it, and we cannot at the moment control it. However, we can perhaps do a

little more to persuade the wider audience of potential visitors that, whatever they may have heard or read about the risks of terrorism, Britain remains open for business.

I have some relevant experience of the need to counter fear. Two years ago, a large part of my constituency began to sink under the most appalling floods for 200 years—given the events of recent days, I send my condolences to our friends in the north. The damage was horrendous. The human toll was also high: many people were forced to abandon their homes as the waters rose. It was shocking and desperately sad, so I greatly sympathise with those in Cumbria who have been similarly affected. Flooding on that scale is a nightmare. It has taken two years for those parts of Somerset to recover. It took an enormous push from Somerset's tourism industry to persuade visitors to stay with us or book to return.

The trouble with fear is that it is easily exaggerated. People saw aerial photographs of flooded homes and assumed that the whole county was underwater. In fact, if one drove down the M5, one would hardly notice anything. Most people were going to work, going to school and generally getting on with their lives. There was food in the shops and a welcome at the local pub. Somerset did not grind to a halt, and neither will Cumbria. However, we all have to work extremely hard to get that message across.

I admit that I was slightly apprehensive when travelling to Paris the other day. Like everyone else, I had been glued to the news and shocked by what I saw. To my relief, Paris was operating normally. There were more police on the streets, obviously, but the buzzing stylish city was there; its heart was beating strongly. Parisians are already learning how to come to terms with what happened, as we did some years ago. For potential visitors, that process takes much longer.

We all know that terrorism never has respected and never will respect national boundaries. America has just suffered the San Bernardino shootings, inspired by the same twisted beliefs as were behind the Paris attacks. There was also the knife attacker on the London tube a few days ago. Those events remind us all of the risks, but the bigger the atrocity, the greater the impact on tourism—that is now a genuine danger. It would be surprising if the Paris massacre had no adverse effect on American tourists in the future. I would hazard a guess that if someone who lives in Minnesota is thinking about “seeing Europe”, as Americans do, they might well pick Rome, London, Venice or Berlin, but they will probably not pick Paris at the moment.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on initiating this debate on a very important topic. Does he agree that the data and evidence on the time taken to recover from major terrorist attacks and events such as those that he mentioned in his constituency vary—there is some inconsistency? Data on the London attacks in 2005 suggest that London recovered very quickly; in fact, there was an increase in tourist numbers in 2006. Similarly, after the Madrid bombings, domestic and international tourism recovered quite quickly. Unfortunately, I am hearing evidence from UKinbound and others that—

Albert Owen (in the Chair): Order. I call Ian Liddell-Grainger.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) makes a very good point and his statistics are absolutely right. The problem is that we can never be complacent. Having been an MP for 15 years and dealt with flooding and other problems in my constituency, I know well what the effects can be. My hon. Friend was absolutely right to mention the attacks in London some years ago. They did affect the city; there was no way to get around that. However, we recovered very quickly. There was good leadership from the centre. That rippled out across London and the United Kingdom, and we were able to recover to the position where we were before. But it is right to say that that took time.

The problem with all this is that if we are complacent, we will miss the chance. We are in the middle of the Christmas period. In tourist terms—dare I say it?—spring and summer are already here, because holidays are being sold, so we must take this issue seriously. That is why it is timely that the Minister is here to respond to the debate and explain where we are going on this issue for the future. I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire is here and am very grateful for his input.

What should we do to protect our vital flow of visitors? Of course, there is a powerful domestic message for British holidaymakers who might be thinking of booking a foreign summer break. We should tell them to consider Britain first, to discover what we have at home and to spend—dare I say it?—pounds, not euros. A bit of national spirit would help us all.

I am pretty sure that the Minister will want to draw attention to the new Discover England fund, announced by our right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer in the autumn statement. That is a lot of money—£40 million—and it will be deliberately targeted to back up the Government's new five-point plan for tourism. Everyone I have spoken to in tourism is optimistic about the generous injection of money and the basic ideals of the tourism plan. If there is any anxiety, it is more about the difficulty of enabling a large and diverse industry to speak with one voice, which I think is probably what my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire was talking about.

I notice, for example, that a collaborative body called the Tourism Industry Council has been created to improve the relationship between the industry and Government. That has to be welcome; it is a good idea, but I did not realise quite how many people are involved. There appear to be—I know that the Minister will correct me immediately if this is wrong—25 different tourist organisations represented. I say gently to the Minister that that is bigger than the Prime Minister's Cabinet; the cost in coffee and biscuits alone must be positively frightening. So many strange-sounding organisations are involved, and the general public are probably not even aware that half of them exist.

We have probably all heard of VisitBritain and VisitEngland, the two big outfits that help to promote all our brands. I did not know, however, that there was a British Association of Leisure Parks, Piers and Attractions—I trust that that has nothing to do with Piers Morgan—nor was I familiar with the Association of Leading Visitor Attractions, let alone the Tourism Society, which is not to be confused with the Tourism Alliance, UKinbound or even the British Hospitality Association.

There is an association for pretty well every different discipline. Bed and breakfast? Yes, they have one. Travel agents? They have another one. Pubs? Naturally; they are a British institution. Those organisations are all different, with different memberships, different ideas and—guess what?—different leaders. I had come across People First, a training body for the catering industry, but did you know, Mr Owen, that there is even a National Coastal Tourism Academy? We must sign up immediately.

London seems to have at least two seats on the Tourism Industry Council, held by a promotional group called London First and the Association of Professional Tourist Guides, most of whom work in London. The other specific regional representative appears to be West Dorset Leisure Holidays, a company that runs holiday parks in west Dorset. Fine—not a problem, but it is an awful lot of people. I am sure that West Dorset Leisure Holidays does its job well, but I have to wonder how it came to sit on the national Tourism Industry Council in the first place. West Dorset is a lovely place, but so is West Somerset, and for the same reasons. I am slightly biased, but I think that West Somerset is much lovelier.

My point is this. How on earth can we expect a council with so many members from so many different corners of the tourism trade to come up with coherent ideas? I know that it was the Government's ambition to streamline the Tourism Industry Council; I accept that. I suspect that that is still a work in progress, and I am sure the Minister will wish to bring us up to date on it.

We are extremely fortunate in this country. We can offer a rich history, amazing scenery and an unrivalled welcome—and nowhere more so than in Somerset. It is no accident that tourists from faraway places have chosen to make the journey to this country in increasing numbers. Last year, 100,000 more visitors came to spend time with us. They dug deep into their pockets and helped the west country economy by more than £500,000. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will agree with me that the best way to ensure that our visitor numbers stay buoyant is to be buoyant. We need to talk up tourism and ensure that everyone everywhere gets the message that we are ready, willing and able—but much more importantly, we are open, so come over and enjoy.

We face a challenge over the Christmas period. The spending power of people in London—my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire was right to mention London—is enormous. Any change at Christmas hits the retail trade, and also the autumn and spring trade. I am not a great shopper, but I have noticed that there are sales going on in London already. When that happens, it tends to mean that there are problems in the retail trade. I know that the Minister is aware of that, and I am sure that she will respond.

Albert Owen (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, I, too, wish her all the best for the future and give season's greetings to you all.

11.13 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): Thank you for those kind words, Mr Owen. As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset

[Tracey Crouch]

(Mr Liddell-Grainger) for raising this important subject and giving me a chance to update the House on the state of the tourism sector following the tragic events in Paris last month. I thank you, Mr Owen, and my hon. Friend for your kind wishes for the future.

Let me start by extending my deepest condolences to those affected by the attacks, and to the city of Paris. In France, a state of emergency has been confirmed for three months, and we understand how worrying that must be, not only for all those who live and work in the city, but for the Parisian tourism sector. We live in extremely dangerous times, but we in this country, and particularly in London, have faced such threats before. Our experience demonstrates the resilience of the nation, its workers and, of course, the tourism sector, when we stand together, as we must, to manage those threats.

After the tragedy of the London bombings 10 years ago, the capital's attractions reported a 25% drop in visitor numbers. Just 12 months later, however, data showed that visitor numbers had bounced back and even outstripped the previous year's figures. To pick up on the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), I want to clarify the statistics and counsel caution. The statistics from UKinbound are anecdotal, and there will not be a proper survey until January. Although there has been a drop in the number of bookings from France, it was initially a consequence of the restrictions on travel, particularly for school groups—those restrictions were reciprocated, and our school groups did not visit France or Belgium—and those restrictions have now been lifted.

In the aftermath of 9/11, New York did not close to visitors; it reached out to them. I spoke to the Mayor of London yesterday, and he is confident—adamant, in fact—that the latest threats or incidents will not cause long-term damage to the tourism sector in our capital. As an avid shopper myself, let me reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset that sales do take place in the run-up to Christmas. That is nothing unusual, and it is in no way a response to recent events.

Confidence in safety and security measures is key, but so are the spirit and determination of our tourism industry to continue to attract and welcome the millions of visitors who are interested in exploring all that our country has to offer inside and outside London. We understand, however, that the growth of the sector will be reliant on our continued vigilance in the face of the threat of terrorism. As my hon. Friend will know from the Home Secretary's statement to the House on 16 November, strenuous efforts are being made to keep the public and visitors safe. The police have increased their presence in certain areas and locations, and they will be intensifying their approach at events in big cities. New funding has been made available for the security and intelligence agencies to help them to respond better to the threat we all face from international terrorism.

We are not complacent, however. We know that travellers remain cautious, and that there have been jitters in some markets. VisitBritain, the body charged with promoting Britain as a destination overseas, has asked its overseas offices to monitor consumer and trade sentiment following the Paris attacks and to feed back weekly. It regularly updates the tourism industry emergency

response group, a small group of industry and government players who plan for crises in the tourism sector and manage the sector's response to major events such as the Paris attacks.

If I may deviate for a second, Mr Owen, I would like to say that it is not just against terrorism that our industry needs to show resilience and determination. The devastating floods over the weekend hit one of our most beautiful destinations. I want to reassure the House that we will work with VisitEngland and VisitBritain to ensure that tourism to that region is supported and continues to deliver economic benefit. My hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset mentioned the flooding in his constituency. I hope that he, his local authority and all the tourism organisations in his area will share their experience with our friends in Cumbria.

We will continue to work here in the UK and with our overseas networks to communicate the steps that are being taken to keep the public and visitors safe, and to promote Britain as a great destination to visit. The UK has something to offer every type of traveller, and we want more people to visit and experience our way of life. As well as supporting jobs and growth, tourism is about connecting people and forging cultural links. The Government understand the vital role of tourism, which is why we launched a five-point plan for the sector during our first 100 days in power. That plan sets out the areas that we will prioritise to help the tourism sector to grow. Tourism is an engine of growth and a key industry, which supports almost one in 10 jobs in the UK.

When the Secretary of State and I were members of the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport, a key issue that struck us was how the fragmentation of the sector was holding it back. We seek to address that by strengthening the co-ordination of activity in support of the sector across Government and industry. The new inter-ministerial group on tourism, which has already met, and the refreshed Tourism Industry Council are key to that.

I want to address my hon. Friend's concerns about the Tourism Industry Council. As he has said, the council exists to improve the direct representation between Government and industry, to ensure that the voice of the industry can be heard in Whitehall clearly, and vice versa.

The diverse membership of the council is one of its strengths. It is the chair of the council's role to guide those disparate individuals and opinions to productive conclusions. I assure my hon. Friend that specific members of the council will be called on to address various concerns and topics. We have no intention of wasting busy people's time when agenda items do not need specialist expertise, so we will call on members' time in a proportionate way. An open, transparent and two-way dialogue is critical to making progress.

Across the world, the international trade in tourism has grown spectacularly over recent decades, with international tourism arrivals passing 1 billion for the first time in 2012 and set to reach 1.4 billion by 2020. The Government are determined to capitalise on these opportunities. We cannot and will not allow our industry to take a backseat to international competitors.

In my hon. Friend's constituency, attractions such as the Walled Gardens of Cannington have the potential to attract visitors from near and far. As Tourism Minister,

I am determined to ensure that the panoramic views of Somerset that those gardens provide are not only well promoted, but accessible and fully integrated into the local economy. Indeed, the aim of the £40 million Discover England fund announced in the spending review is to make it easier for all of us to explore England's hidden gems.

The benefits of tourism run much deeper than economics. By attracting tourists to the UK, we are able to showcase the best of our way of life—our national character as well as the splendour of our nation. Tourism enhances the quality of life of those who visit, as well as those who host. It is therefore having a central role in helping Paris to emerge from last month's atrocities. We stand shoulder to shoulder with her, as she does with us.

Question put and agreed to.

11.21 am

Sitting suspended.

The Shrewsbury 24

[MR GEORGE HOWARTH *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Steve Rotheram (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Home Office and the case of the Shrewsbury 24.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. As Members will know, this is not the first occasion on which the great injustice of Shrewsbury has been brought before Parliament. I make it clear from the outset that there is no doubt that the jailing of Dessie Warren, Ricky Tomlinson and four others, and the guilty verdicts against a further 18 Shrewsbury pickets, was a great injustice. Indeed, in 2014 there was a full debate in the main Chamber in which an overwhelming majority supported the motion to release Government documents pertaining to the case. Earlier this year, due to the perspicacity of my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson), we again debated the call for the release of Government documentation relating to the Shrewsbury 24.

It might be asked why we are here again to raise the matter with the Minister. The answer is quite simple: not only have the Government not kept their promise to release the documents kept secret from the public for 43 years because of a fallacious threat to national security, but there is now compelling evidence, to which my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) and I have had access, that undeniably proves that the whole saga is a conspiracy at the very heart of Government. We would like to bring that to the House's attention.

I will quickly recap the events of the national building workers' strike of 1972, its immediate aftermath and the new evidence that was recently brought to light. I will then highlight what campaigners are requesting and the process for release. From previous debates, I know that some Tory Members simply believe that workers should not be allowed to strike and that many who do are either agitators or criminals, but I remind the House that taking legitimate strike action was then an inalienable right—and it still is, despite the draconian restrictions of the Trade Union Bill.

In the previous debates on this matter, apart from some limited opposition relating to some of the minor issues surrounding the case, the material substance of the claims raised in Parliament has been largely accepted. As John Platts-Mills QC said:

“The trial of the Shrewsbury Pickets is the only case I know of where the government has ordered a prosecution in defiance of the advice of senior police and prosecution authorities.”

The campaign team's researcher, the redoubtable Eileen Turnbull, trawled through documentation archived at Kew and uncovered a letter dated 25 January 1973 from the then Attorney General, Peter Rawlinson—the highest legal adviser in the land—to the then Home Secretary, Robert Carr. Rawlinson advised the Home Secretary that, in his view, having discussed the case with Treasury counsel and the Director of Public Prosecutions, no less,

“proceedings should not be instituted.”

[Steve Rotheram]

There is a litany of major inconsistencies in due legal process but, for expediency, I will outline just a few. Despite the fact that the police never received any report of incidents of criminal behaviour, or even unacceptable behaviour, by pickets at the time of the industrial action, political interference led to a belated investigation of the Shrewsbury pickets. The unions did not receive any complaints from the police about the conduct of the pickets—in fact, there is photographic evidence showing that the police were mingling freely with the strikers.

There was political interference with the judicial process and a very dubious relationship between senior Tories and certain senior police officers. Convictions for conspiracy were the then Government's ultimate aim, as such convictions were seen as totemic in deterring other workers from taking industrial action. Despite no complaints, cautions or arrests, on 6 September 1972 a team of 24 detectives was deployed to north Wales to carry out a fishing exercise, gathering 800 statements, of which three quarters were discarded. Original statements that did not fit the investigators' viewpoint were shredded and new statements ordered. I am sure the shadow Home Secretary will examine that issue in further detail.

A practice direction from the then Lord Chancellor followed in which the legal system regarding the swearing in of juries was changed. That denied defence solicitors the right to know jurors' occupations, to which legal representatives had been privy for generations. The defendants' legal team expressed major concern about the lack of neutrality in the area in which the trial was held. The trial was presided over by Judge Mais, whose inexperience was matched only by his lack of impartiality; his expertise was mainly in rural and ecclesiastical matters.

Inexplicably, a television programme entitled "Red Under the Bed", which specifically made references to the ongoing trial, was allowed to be televised in the Shrewsbury area during the trial. In any other circumstance that would have been considered contempt of court and the trial would have been stopped. Scenes from the building workers' strike, the committal hearing at Shrewsbury and shots of Des Warren and some of the Shrewsbury pickets were screened, which was prejudicial to a fair hearing. Papers already released show that the then Government, right up to the Prime Minister, were involved in assisting the programme's production. The jury was misled. When the jury initially failed to agree a verdict, it was advised that, should it agree to convict, the accused would only be fined by the court. As we know, that did not happen.

In the Commons debate of January 2014, the motion requested that the Government release all documents relating to the prosecution of the Shrewsbury 24. At the end of the debate, the then Justice Minister, Simon Hughes, replied for the coalition:

"The Government are...committed to transparency."—[*Official Report*, 23 January 2014; Vol. 574, c. 515.]

He wanted as "much information as possible" to be put in the public domain, in line with the Freedom of Information Act enacted by the previous Labour Government.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I had the pleasure of replying to that debate for the Opposition; we were somewhat encouraged by what the then Minister,

Simon Hughes, said. I am delighted that my hon. Friend has secured this debate almost two years later, and I am particularly pleased that my right hon. Friend, the shadow Home Secretary, is here. The Government have since gone backwards, have they not? They are now bringing the shutters down. Is that not a disgrace?

Steve Rotheram: Hopefully, between us, we will be able to explain to the people here, and to the wider public watching and listening to this debate, exactly how the Government have backtracked on the promises that were made less than two years ago. If the Government are honest about transparent and open government, which we so often hear about from Government Members, the easy thing for them to do is to release the documents.

Two years ago, I said that I believed the course of natural justice had been denied because of arrests

"on trumped-up charges...a dodgy trial and...unsound convictions. That would not be allowed and would not be acceptable today, and it should not have been allowed and should not have been acceptable then. It was a legal process that would shame a third-world dictatorship."—[*Official Report*, 23 January 2014; Vol. 574, c. 492.]

Given the new evidence seen by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh and me, I now believe that to be the case even more than I did following the debate 23 months ago.

Frankly, it is bonkers that the documents we requested in that debate—a request that the House of Commons overwhelmingly supported in the vote—should remain under lock and key. The Minister at the time, Simon Hughes, said that just four documents relating to the Shrewsbury trial were being withheld by the Ministry of Justice, but he could not speak for other Departments. He also conceded that the Government were retaining 625 files from 1972. It is our belief that the process that led to the prosecution of the Shrewsbury pickets is germane to many of those files, which are therefore fundamental to the veracity of the campaigners' case. Only when those files are placed in the National Archives at Kew for public viewing will that become apparent.

The superficial justification for the Government's position is that an exemption from disclosure was signed by the Lord Chancellor of the day, Lord Hailsham, who at the time was a Cabinet member, a Law Lord, Speaker of the House of Lords and a member of the judiciary. By coincidence, he acquired a significant range of new responsibilities through the higher courts in England and Wales when the Courts Act 1971 came into force in 1972, and he used his power to suppress information under section 3(4) of the Public Records Act 1958.

Some might say that this happened a long time ago, and they would be correct. Indeed, other Home Secretaries have had the opportunity to overturn the original decision, but have failed to do so. The most recent instrument, signed in 2011, provides an explanation of the reason for withholding the documents, under section 5, which states:

"The special reason is that transfer of the records after that period to the Public Record Office or a place of deposit appointed by the Lord Chancellor under the Act will create a real risk of prejudice to national security."

Parliament has been discussing "national security" at length during the past few weeks, and I would never try to diminish the importance of our domestic resilience.

As many Members said during the Syria debate, there is no greater priority than the safety of the nation. But can anybody honestly argue that a strike by building workers who sought better pay and working conditions 43 years ago would in any way threaten our national security?

The Shrewsbury 24 campaign submitted an application to the Criminal Cases Review Commission on 3 April 2012. The Government have assured them that the CCRC has been given access to all documents relating to the trials, but how do we know this has actually happened? The CCRC is not the advocate for the applicants; it is the adjudicator, and it is there to consider the evidence from the applicants to decide whether or not there is a real possibility that the Court of Appeal would find the convictions unsafe. There are many files at the National Archives in Kew that have just one or two pages in them that relate to the trials. How can the Government expect the CCRC to go through dozens of files looking for individual documents when it simply does not have the staff for such a monumental task? Although the CCRC has statutory powers to obtain documents, it does not have the resources to conduct the detailed research that is necessary to show a conviction to be unsafe.

In the case of the Shrewsbury 24, the convictions were brought about by Government interference. The applicants have to establish that, and the CCRC cannot do that for them. However, the relevant Government Departments know exactly where their particular documents relating to the case lie, and they could provide them to the applicants to ensure that they can make a complete evidential submission to the CCRC, so that their application can be fully considered—if, of course, there was the genuine will within Government to be open and transparent; and that is why we are here today.

After the debate in 2014, the Minister met my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon, together with the campaign researcher, Eileen Turnbull, and the most well known of the pickets, Ricky Tomlinson. Afterwards, the Minister arranged for Stephen Jones, head of freedom of information and justice devolution at the Ministry of Justice, to send Eileen the references of files held at Kew that could relate to the Shrewsbury pickets. Mr Jones sent her 2,307 references. Eileen diligently and painstakingly went through the references and selected 51 of the files that she believed to include information about the Government's involvement in the prosecutions, even though they did not specifically refer to the Shrewsbury trials in their titles.

Eileen's research concluded that there was important material kept on file relating to the Shrewsbury pickets that was not specifically referenced using either the word "Shrewsbury" or the word "pickets". That was supported by an open document at Kew that stated that information regarding picketing was held under the reference "Security/Subversion". Staff at Kew acknowledged that the Cabinet Office uses this reference internally. This information establishes, therefore, that there are many files—at least four volumes—kept on pickets by the Government and referenced "Security/Subversion". When Eileen followed up her request for files with the words "Subversion in industry" in their titles, she was refused, as everything that fits that description—"Security/Subversion"—is classified.

The Government say that they have withheld only three letters and a security services report. We believe that there is much, much more than that on file and we would ask, in the first instance, for the following documents to be released. First, there is the report of West Mercia police and the report of Gwynedd police, which were sent to the Director of Public Prosecutions by Chief Constable John Williams on 18 December 1972. The campaign believes that these documents demonstrate that the police considered that there was no evidence to bring charges against the Shrewsbury pickets.

Second, there is the communication between the Home Secretary and other Departments, and West Mercia and Gwynedd police forces, including Assistant Chief Constable Alex Rennie, after 6 September 1972 about their large-scale investigations into picketing in north Wales and the Shropshire area during the strike. The campaign believes that these documents reveal the process of decision making that occurred at Cabinet and security services level to bring about charges against the building workers. As we all know, there were no complaints by the police or the public on 6 September 1972. No pickets were cautioned or arrested, even though there was a large-scale police presence at sites in Shropshire that day.

Thirdly, there are the communications between the Home Secretary and the Attorney General in December 1972 and January 1973 about the prosecution of the pickets. Campaigners have long believed that these documents will reveal who made the decision to proceed with charges against the building workers five months after the dispute ended.

Fourthly, there is the note of the phone call from a Government Department to Desmond Fennell, the junior prosecution counsel at Shrewsbury Crown court, that according to Maurice Drake QC, chief prosecuting counsel, was a request to inform the judge that they did not want him to pass custodial sentences. The campaign believes that this document further highlights evidence of the Government's direct interference with the trial.

Fifthly, there are the MI5 files held on Des Warren, Ricky Tomlinson and any of the other pickets. The relevance of this request is obvious, as campaigners believe that these files will reveal the monitoring of the pickets during the 1972 building workers strike by the security services, as well as the security services' activities in manipulating the Shrewsbury trials.

Sixthly, a full copy of a letter from Robert McAlpine and Sons Ltd dated 26 February 1973 to the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis should be released. Campaigners believe that this letter confirms the role of this construction company in intensifying pressure on the police to bring about charges against the pickets. Just for reference, I point out that the Brookside site in Telford was, by coincidence, a McAlpine site, and Sir Robert was, of course, a senior member of the Conservative party. That site was where the evidence was assembled by the police to bring about charges of conspiracy to intimidate, affray and unlawful assembly.

The Cabinet Office maintains that it would not be in the public interest for the files to be released. That is absolute nonsense, which most reasonable people would categorically reject as an argument. For the Government to resist requests to disclose documents actually brings about distrust and suspicion, which is not in the public interest. However, central to my request for the release of these files is the desire for justice for these men while

[*Steve Rotheram*]

they are still able to see justice being done. Many of the lives of the Shrewsbury 24 were blighted by the events 43 years ago. The youngest of the Shrewsbury 24 is 68 and the oldest is 90. At least five have passed away since the trials in 1973-74, so time is of the essence.

It is inconceivable that a building workers strike in 1972 could throw up issues of national security in 2015.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a very persuasive case. I start from the presumption that, where matters of justice are concerned, the hurdle for withholding information is much higher, so I start from a presumption in his favour. It has been reported in the newspapers today, or by the Press Association today, that the shadow Home Secretary is proposing to withhold support for the Investigatory Powers Bill if he does not, as it were, win his argument today. It seems to me that there are two arguments here: one, which is very powerful, that the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram) has just made; and another one, which again is powerful, against the Investigatory Powers Bill. It seems to me that both arguments are diminished by joining them. Can the hon. Gentleman tell us that what he is after today is to win by persuasion and not by coercion?

Steve Rotheram: I think the argument is persuasive. To tell the truth, I never speak for the shadow Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh; he can speak for himself. Given that he will wind up, he will address the points made by the right hon. Gentleman.

It has taken 43 years to get where we are today, and the argument that we are putting forward overwhelmingly demonstrates, I think, that there is no way that any of the documents that would be released could be a danger to national security. That is the nub of this: it is about the documentation being released, so that the CCRC can have the full picture, not a partial one, in deciding whether to refer to the Court of Appeal. That is what the debate is about; others can speak for themselves.

Andy Slaughter: I hesitate ever to disagree with the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), but we now have a Government who are attacking freedom of information and the Human Rights Act, including the right to freedom of assembly. We need to see these things in the round, because there is a sustained attack on individual freedom.

Steve Rotheram: It is sustained in as much as it has taken Governments of all persuasions—to tell the truth—more than 43 years to get to the position we are in today. I am no friend of the current Government, but we also had an opportunity. We were in government for 13 years and we should have done a lot more than we did. This is not just about the apportionment of blame; it is about trying to get to where we need to get. Let us get everything out there and give it to the CCRC, so that it can make an informed decision on whether the case should be referred back to the Court of Appeal.

Andy Slaughter: I am sure my hon. Friend will join me in thanking our right hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Sadiq Khan). As shadow Lord Chancellor, he made that change—I was simply his vehicle for announcing

it—to say for the first time that a future Labour Government will release all those documents, and that pledge is maintained.

Steve Rotheram: I could not agree with my hon. Friend more, and in fact—I think the shadow Home Secretary will come to this—we want to go further. We want to look at historic injustices in the round. There are direct links between an awful lot of them. There is a thread that goes from 1971, possibly through what happened with Wilson, through the miners' strike and possibly ending up with Hillsborough. I have been given a lot of information by Eileen Turnbull and others on this, and there are so many similarities, with the establishment deciding what was right for the country and covering things up.

This is a conspiracy that happened at the very highest level, so I look forward to a Labour Government, although what we are asking for is for the documents to be released, hopefully before a Labour Government, and we cannot get that until 2020. For some of the Shrewsbury pickets, four years is four years too long. They have waited long enough. The reason we want it is that information requested could prove crucial to the case that the campaigners are putting forward to the CCRC and to having those unsound convictions overturned by the Court of Appeal. It is time for the obfuscation to stop and for the Government to do what is right.

2.53 pm

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram) on his contribution and welcome this further debate. I welcome the work of those outside the House who are campaigning daily to try to get to the truth of what happened more than 40 years ago. It is clear that an injustice has taken place and that the convictions were wrong. It is clear that those convictions caused tremendous difficulty to people at the time, but many, including a number of my constituents, bear the cross of those convictions still.

My hon. Friend made a strong case, and I do not wish to repeat it; it speaks for itself. It is, however, important to remember that the strike was about pay and working conditions. In the three years before that strike took place, 571 people had been killed and 224,000 had been injured in the building industry. The strike was about trying to get fairness at work. Such issues will of course generate strong passions, but the key question is whether the strike generated criminal activity. I believe that the Government have information on that and that the ongoing criminal review will show that the strike was not a criminal act, but an argument about conditions at work.

My hon. Friend has covered the long history in detail, but I have taken an interest in this case and campaign for some time. I am a Member of Parliament for a north Wales constituency and I represent a large number of the people who were charged and convicted at that time—some are still alive and some have died.

Let me make a confession, Mr Howarth: I was a Minister at the Ministry of Justice in the latter part of the last Labour Government. I could not raise the issues as a Minister, but as a constituency MP I wrote to Jack Straw, the then Member for Blackburn, in 2008-09. I asked him on behalf of my constituents whether we

could release papers relating to the convictions, the trial and surrounding matters. My right hon. Friend, as he was then and still is now, agreed to look at those papers. After consideration, the Labour Government agreed to release the papers relating to the trial in 2012. Obviously, we lost the election in 2010.

I took it upon myself on 8 November 2010 to write to the then Justice Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke). I said that there was a commitment from my right hon. Friend, the then Member for Blackburn, to lift the blanket ban on those papers and to release them in 2012. I asked whether he would stick to that agreement. He wrote back saying that the blanket agreement was still in place and would be in place until 2012, but that he was reviewing the matter. I gave him the benefit of the doubt.

On 23 March 2011, I wrote to the then Justice Secretary again and asked him to make a decision. He wrote back and said that he was still considering the matter. I wrote to his successor, the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling), on 20 November 2012. He said, “Thanks very much, David. It is very nice of you to write, but on 19 December last year, unbeknown to you or the House and without any disclosure, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe signed a new instrument, giving his approval for the retention of the records.” The retained records include the information that my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton mentioned, but also—this has helpfully come to light—information relating to other matters. That is why a Minister from the Home Office is responding to the debate.

Why is that information important and why are those papers still being retained? As my hon. Friend said, we had a debate in January last year on a Back-Bench motion, in which the House overwhelmingly voted to support the release of the papers. The Justice Minister at that time indicated that he would review the matter further; presumably, he said that on behalf of the Government that the Minister here today was and is a member. The then Justice Minister said at the time that under existing public record legislation, papers would be retained past the 30 years only if they were

“retained for any other special reason”.—[*Official Report*, 24 March 2015; Vol. 594, c. 468WH.]

On 1 January 2013, the same Government began their move to transparency, deciding that 30-year documents would be released after 20 years because they wanted to be open and transparent. Yet in the case of the papers relating to the Shrewsbury trial and convictions, the Government do not want the 20-year rule to apply. They do not even want to stick at 30 years, which is the current figure, but prefer a situation in which my constituents, who face this issue every day of the week, have to wait until 2022 before they can find out what documents the Government choose to release, all because of some nefarious issue relating to “some other special reason”. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton has mentioned what the other special reason could be: the involvement of the security services.

Before I came to this debate, I googled the words “Falklands war”. We might think those words would elicit closure, secrecy and lack of transparency. I can find out anything I want about what was said in the Cabinet, what was undertaken in Cabinet and what was done at the time about the Falklands war, yet I cannot find information about what happened 10 years

before that during an industrial dispute, because the Government have undertaken some disclosure, but not full disclosure.

What is so secret, so damning, so damaging and so improbable that the Government, 40 years on, will not let people have full access to the history of their case?

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that we live in a very curious state given that Ricky Tomlinson is apparently seen as more of a threat to national security than General Galtieri?

Mr Hanson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for putting it that way. I will take that as a compliment to Mr Tomlinson, and also to my friends who live in my town in my constituency who face this issue daily. Where are the people who were working in the security services from 1972 to 1975? How old are they now? We are talking about 42 or 43 years ago. Were they in short trousers working for the security services? They will have retired. They will have gone. They will be off the face of the earth. They will have moved on. They are not there now in senior positions. If they are, let us hold them to account for what they have done.

This 42-year-old case matters to me and my constituents. I do not want to mention people by name—they know who they are—but I will provide one example. I will not put his name on the record; he knows who he is.

A colleague of mine is a town councillor in the town where I live. He is the mayor of the town. He will be putting on his red cloak and his chain in a week’s time for another civic event. He has served as a county councillor, been on the police authority, worked as a lecturer and is a citizen of the community in which I live. He is respected, well known, well loved and well liked, yet he cannot go to America on holiday with his friends and family because of an event 42 years ago: he got a conviction that, if the information was found, could be proved to be false. My constituent, the mayor, cannot get a visa, even today, to travel to the United States, because he is viewed as a threat to security. This person lives in my town, serves on a police committee and is the mayor of the town. He can walk down the street and hold his head high for what he tried to do at the time.

If disclosure is going to be unfair to somebody in the security services or Lord Hailsham or another Conservative Minister, so be it. Their reputations might deserve to be challenged at this stage. What is not fair is for my constituents—not only the one I have mentioned—to live in a community that knows they have been to jail or have convictions when those convictions are false. That is what the issue is about. This is not fun and games between the Government and Opposition Members; this is about real people’s lives and we want to see justice done. We should see the information and let the world judge whether there is something to hide.

I do not know what the documents contain. Let the world judge and not say what the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr Letwin), said to me in a parliamentary answer on the Floor of the House on 21 October. When I asked him about releasing the papers, he did not say, “I am reviewing it”, “I will look at it”, or “There may be a case”. He said:

“No. I have no intention of authorising the release of those papers, which relate to the security services.”—[*Official Report*, 21 October 2015; Vol. 600, c. 940.]

[Mr Hanson]

The Minister needs to justify that answer and not simply say there is no reason to release those papers. He needs to talk about transparency and explain what happened 43 years ago. I support my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton and the case he has made. The Minister must respond and I look forward to hearing what he says at the end of this debate.

3.6 pm

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. The debate is timely and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram), who for many years has been a stalwart in trying to get justice for the Shrewsbury 24. I will say this on the record: this case is a catastrophic and deliberate miscarriage of justice deliberately organised by the state. Of that there is no doubt. If they have nothing to hide, let us see the papers. It is simple. I can see the Minister staring at me. He is a former worker, which is highly unusual among the Conservatives. He has worked in the services with distinction, so I appeal to his good side. We are not asking for anything out of the ordinary other than to see some documents. According to the Conservative Government, there is not anything in them. If there is not anything in them, why can we not see them? That is fairly straightforward.

We have discussed this case on various occasions in the Commons. The Back-Bench debate in the Chamber was one of the best debates we have had. We were solid behind the motion that was tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson).

I am a former miner. I have been through many strikes. I have been a picket and have suffered the same as some of the representatives of the Shrewsbury 24. It is simply not right for an ordinary person, who has never had any problems and never been arrested before, to get arrested for trying to save their job and look after their family. It is just not right. It is an abuse of political power. It is an abuse of the judiciary system, an abuse of individual human rights, and an attack on the fact that someone is prepared to be part of a collective organisation in the trade union movement. That is what happened back then. This was not an industrial dispute, but a political dispute. The state wanted to show, by example, what would happen if people dared to stand up against the state.

We have seen legislation after legislation introduced since then. The recent Trade Union Bill, which should be the anti-trade union Bill, builds on what happened all those years ago in the early 1970s. These people were on strike; they were not raving, militant lunatics and revolutionaries. They were on strike because people were getting maimed and killed in the building industry. They were fighting for wages and, in the main, for health and safety on building sites. Is there any better cause for trade union members to fight for than the health and safety of the people they work with in the workplace? I think not.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): We hear much in this country about aspiration and about who represents those with aspiration. Surely, those involved in this dispute were an example of that—their aspiration was for a better life, better working conditions and better pay.

Ian Lavery: They had little in the way of aspiration other than to live the life of ordinary working people. If we think about it, this was about people being able to go to their workplace and do their job, to actually come home and see their families without having been maimed or lamed, and to put bread on the table at the end of the week. That is what these outrageous people were after. They have been targeted for years just for wanting to get on with their jobs in a safe environment and to create a decent life for their families.

When we had our debate nearly two years ago, the hon. Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth), in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Blyth Valley (Mr Campbell), shouted that it was nice to see

“old Labour is still alive and well and, in some respects, seeking both to justify and to romanticise mob rule and violence and intimidation.”

Who was romanticising? Where was the mob rule? Where was the intimidation? Nobody was arrested on the day. There was not a problem. The police were there, and they were talking to the pickets. It was a fine example of how things should be. There were no problems until months later, when people started to get the knocks on the door. My hon. Friend the former Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North said that the comments by the hon. Member for Aldershot

“reminded us exactly what the Tories are about”

in that

“workers should be...seen and not heard”.—[*Official Report*, 23 January 2014; Vol. 574, c. 485-501.]

I think he summed it up perfectly.

There has been new, compelling evidence, and I am sure my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) will explain exactly what it is and add to what has been said by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton. However, a documentary was shown, including in Shrewsbury, during the court hearing. It was called “Red Under the Bed”. It showed scenes involving the men who were up for trial. Good Lord, is that fair? Who saw it? Who did not see it? However, it is also compelling evidence, isn't it? Perhaps we could use it to show that there was no intimidation and mob rule, that people were not fighting and that bricks were not being thrown. There was none of that.

I want to put on record my support for, and my commitment to, every one of the Shrewsbury 24 pickets and their families. I give a guarantee that we will fight forever and a day to seek justice for them. However, we really should look for justice as soon as we can. As my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton mentioned, the youngest of these men is 68, while the oldest is 90, and five of them have died.

These principled people were offered a fine of £50 if they would walk away. The police officers said, “You can be home at 3 o'clock if you accept a guilty plea.” They would not be here now—we would not be here now—if they had accepted. However, out of principle, they said, “We are not guilty of any charges that have been placed on us.” That is principle.

It is about time that we—as a country and as politicians—ensured that these people got justice. Let us see who was behind the decisions that were made at the time in the police and the judiciary and, most of all, who was behind the political decisions made against these honourable, hard-working people.

3.14 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to be here and to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I thank the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram) for securing the debate. His speech was informative, persuasive and, above all, powerful.

As the SNP spokesperson on trade union and workers' rights, let me say it is a pleasure to speak in the debate. Before coming to this place, I was a Unison activist. Two years ago, in the hon. Gentleman's city of Liverpool, Ricky Tomlinson addressed the UK Unison conference to raise awareness of the Shrewsbury 24 Campaign. It was my pleasure, as the then treasurer of Glasgow City Unison, to sign a cheque to the campaign, and I would encourage all members of the public watching the debate to consider making a contribution to it.

I want to assure the campaign that all right hon. and hon. Members of the SNP support it. It is important that justice be done. I should add that the campaign resonates with me because the arrests and charges came one month before I was born. Throughout my whole lifetime, therefore, the Shrewsbury 24 Campaign has been waiting for justice.

We know from the campaign that the National Federation of Building Trades Employers compiled a dossier. At the time, the *Financial Times* dismissed the dossier, saying:

"This document is itself flawed since it suggests the existence of a sinister plot without being able to substantiate the allegations. Many of the incidents that have been listed seem to be little more than the ordinary spontaneous angry behaviour that might be expected on a building site at any time (and especially during an industrial dispute)...the publication reads more like a politically motivated pamphlet than a serious study."

That is a good way of putting it.

I want to praise the speeches we have heard so far. The hon. Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) referred to the previous debate, on the Floor of the House, in January 2014, and to the hon. Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth). When I read the report of the debate, I noticed that that hon. Gentleman bragged about his membership of the Freedom Association—what we would consider to be the Consulting Association's wee cousin.

The right hon. Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson) made a number of excellent points. I was surprised to hear that promises made in correspondence to him since 2010 have not been kept. I think he is due an explanation.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, beyond this huge injustice, something else is at stake—the reputation of this Parliament? Deceit upon deceit has been practised here, and the reputation of the word of Minister after Minister is now in the gutter. There is a deep-seated smell of corruption, which goes right to the heart of the Government, and it needs to be expunged.

Chris Stephens: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that. He makes the valid point that members of the public outside watching this debate will be very confused that promises about the release of information keep getting made but are not kept. That is why many of them do not trust parliamentarians and Parliament. The hon. Gentleman's point is well made.

In making his powerful address, the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton got to the nub of the issue for those involved in the campaign. The eldest of these men is 90, and the youngest is 68. They should not have to wait five years for the release of these documents.

The SNP supports the decision taken in the House in January 2014. I want to emphasise the result of the vote: there were 120 votes in favour of releasing the documents, and three against. Many of us are concerned that national security is being used as a reason not to release the documents. Len McCluskey, the general secretary of Unite, has said:

"It is time to end this 40-year conspiracy of silence and release all the government documents relating to the Shrewsbury 24. There is something deeply wrong in this country when a 21st century government uses national security to withhold documents about ordinary working people who tried to improve their working conditions four decades ago. We believe the Tories are desperately trying to hide the stench of a great miscarriage of justice and we urge fair minded MPs to back our campaign to release all the government papers on the Shrewsbury 24."

Alex Deane, a Conservative public affairs consultant, wrote on the ConservativeHome website in January 2014, "whilst deeply unsympathetic to their cause, I find it simply impossible to conjure up what the national security concerned might be in hiding the decisions taken by officials and elected persons relating to the prosecution of builders in Shropshire 40 years ago. What technique of surveillance or undercover work might possibly justify non-disclosure after this passage of time? Any technique will be outdated or universally known about. Any individual involved in undercover work can have his or her name redacted from the papers which might otherwise be released. Consideration of the wider disclosures rightly made in recent times of papers relating to Northern Ireland, where on any view those concerned were more dangerous, makes a mockery of any such claim to national security concerns."

We believe a great injustice has been done, and hope that the Minister will confirm today that he will release the papers relating to the Shrewsbury 24.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. I am about to call the shadow Home Secretary. Although I think there will be plenty of time for both Front-Bench spokesmen, I ask them to bear in mind the fact that Steve Rotheram has the right to a few minutes at the very end. I hope that they will make sure that he gets them.

3.21 pm

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): I want to congratulate my great friend: my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram) made a powerful and persuasive speech. I also thank my many Opposition colleagues for being here today and for their show of solidarity with the Shrewsbury 24. Given that it is nearly Christmas, I even thank the Scottish National party for being here to lend support to our campaign. It is good to have it.

The Government deserve credit for the willingness that they have shown in facing up to the historical injustices of Bloody Sunday, Hillsborough and child sexual exploitation. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton has said, something that many people consider an outrageous injustice—a case that goes to the heart of how we were governed and policed in the previous century—is still shrouded in secrecy today. In the previous Parliament, following a debate called by my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson), the House voted overwhelmingly for

[Andy Burnham]

the full truth about Shrewsbury finally to be told, but in October the Minister for the Cabinet Office ruled that the Government papers would continue to be withheld.

The purpose of today's debate is to challenge that decision, and I will do so by revealing a series of documents that shed new light on the whole issue. Before I do that, I want to pay tribute, as my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton did, to Eileen Turnbull, the researcher to the Shrewsbury 24 campaign, whose diligence and utter dedication to the cause has brought the documents to light. I have her dossier here today, and it reveals three things: first, how the trial was politically driven by the then Home Secretary, from the gathering of evidence to the commencement of proceedings; secondly, how there was an abuse of process by police in the taking of statements; and thirdly, how there was an attempt at the highest levels of Government, supported by the security services, to influence the outcome of the trial.

There is also a crucial piece of context, which other hon. Members have mentioned, and I ask that it be borne in mind at all times. On the day in question, 6 September 1972, no pickets were arrested, nor were any cautions issued. That brings me to the first document, a letter dated 20 September 1972—some two weeks later—from the press officer of the National Federation of Building Trades Employers to regional secretaries. It is headed "Intimidation Dossier" and it says:

"You will be aware that we are compiling a dossier on incidents of intimidation and violence during the recent wage dispute. The intention is to pass this document to the Home Secretary for his consideration with a view to tightening up the law on picketing in industrial disputes."

It calls for details of any incidents, statements from eyewitnesses and photographs. So at the outset that establishes that there was an evidence-gathering exercise on the strike involving the Home Office at the highest level.

Confirmation of the political interest in legal proceedings comes from the second document that I have: a page from the case file of the Director of Public Prosecutions on the Shrewsbury pickets. An entry on 29 December 1972 reads as follows:

"The Home Secretary is interested in this case. 2 counsel to be nominated."

That, by the way, was no passing interest from the Home Secretary, as the third document will show. I have here a letter dated 25 January 1973 about the Shrewsbury case from the then Attorney General Peter Rawlinson to the then Home Secretary Robert Carr. Its contents are extraordinary. It begins:

"The building worker's strike last summer produced instances of intimidation of varying degrees of seriousness...A number of instances consisted of threatening words and in which there was no evidence against any particular person of violence or damage to property. In these circumstances Treasury Counsel, took the view that the prospects—

of a conviction—

"were very uncertain, and in the result I agreed with him and the Director that proceedings should not be instituted."

That letter is talking about proceedings against the Shrewsbury pickets. It goes on to warn of the risks of jury trial, saying that

"juries tend to treat mere words more leniently than actual violence".

There it is—an admission that they were talking about "mere words". Two conclusions can be drawn. First, the Home Secretary of the day was advised by the Attorney General and the DPP that no proceedings should be brought against the Shrewsbury pickets. Secondly, it is made clear and explicit that there was no evidence of violence or damage to property. "Mere words" were the only things that were thrown.

We do not have documents revealing the subsequent decision-making process within Government, but we do have the first page of a confidential memo sent by the Home Secretary to the Prime Minister the week after the letter was sent. It reads:

"Thank you for your minute of 29 January about picketing. I have taken a close personal interest in this problem since I came to the Home Office and I have myself discussed it with the chief officers of those police forces which have had to deal with the most serious picketing. I believe that chief constables are now fully aware of the importance we attach to the matter".

From that there is no doubt at all that the Home Secretary was heavily interfering in operational police matters, and just over a week after his memo was sent to the Prime Minister the Shrewsbury pickets were picked up by police and charged—a full five months after the strike had ended. That series of documents puts beyond any reasonable doubt the fact that the Shrewsbury trial was politically driven by the Home Secretary of the day.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): I am sorry I have not been able to attend the debate so far, but I was attending to my staff in the run-up to the Christmas period. The shadow Home Secretary makes a big play of the fact that the Home Secretary was involved. The right hon. Gentleman was not around at the time, and I was. I recall the case and, indeed, had a letter about it published in *The Times*. If the right hon. Gentleman is suggesting that the Home Secretary should not have been concerned about the case, I think he is making a mistake. The Home Secretary should have been concerned.

At that time, the nation was bedevilled by strikes. We had not had the legislation that Margaret Thatcher introduced. If the case that the right hon. Gentleman is making is that the Home Secretary should not have been involved, that is a fundamental misreading of the situation that applied at the time. The Home Secretary was right to be concerned because the British people were concerned at the way trade unions were running rampant across the country.

Andy Burnham: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman should have been here at the start of the debate to hear the whole case. He has just revealed that it was a political campaign against the trade unions. That is what he just said, and that is the point. He has revealed his hand to this entire gathering. It was a political campaign that Mrs Thatcher sorted out. That is the point here. There was a campaign driven from the top of Government, as I have revealed. We do not live in a country where politicians can put people on trial. I do not want to live in a country like that. These should be independent matters for the police and the legal authorities. The hon. Gentleman has heard evidence today of politicians putting people on trial; if he is not concerned about that, well, I am, and that is why we are holding this debate.

The next document that I have shows that due process was not followed in the aftermath of the political pressure. On 17 September 1973, a conference between police investigating the case and the chief Crown prosecutor,

Mr Drake, was held at Mr Drake's home. I have here a note of that conference. Let me quote the key passage in paragraph 16, which records an explanation from police officers about the gathering of statements:

"So that Counsel would be aware it was mentioned that not all original hand-written statements were still in existence, some having been destroyed after a fresh statement had been obtained. In most cases the first statement was taken before photographs were available for witnesses and before the Officers taking the statements knew what we were trying to prove."

Let me read that again for the benefit of the hon. Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth), so that he can hear it without any confusion. [*Interruption.*]

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. Before the shadow Home Secretary does that, I should say that I understand that emotions are running high for those observing this case, particularly in the light of some of the things that have been said. However, the debate should be heard in silence.

Andy Burnham: Let me read from the note quietly and carefully so that no one is under any doubt. It says: "before the Officers"—the police officers—

"taking the statements knew what we were trying to prove."

I put it to the House that that document, which has not been made public before, is the smoking gun in the Shrewsbury case. It is clear that the police felt it incumbent on them to investigate propelled by a prosecutorial narrative, rather than by an even-handed investigation of events. I was led to believe that the Conservative party believed in the Peelian principles of policing, but they were not followed in this case. Transcripts of the trial reveal that the court and the jury were never informed of the destruction of those original witness statements. That fact alone raises major questions about the conduct of the trial and the safety of the convictions.

I turn to the trial itself and the Government attempts to influence it. "Red Under the Bed" was a television programme made by Woodrow Wyatt for Anglia Television. Its aim was to reveal communist infiltration of the trade unions and the Labour party, but it was also clearly intended to influence the trial. Wyatt's controversial commentary was interspersed with footage of John Carpenter and Des Warren and pictures of Shrewsbury Crown court. The programme was first broadcast across ITV regions on 13 November 1973, the day the prosecution closed its case. We know that the judge watched a video of the programme in his room just after it was broadcast. It is inconceivable that the programme did not influence the trial, and unthinkable in this day and age that a television programme prejudicial to a major trial could have been aired during that trial. But it was.

I will now reveal the full back story about how the programme was made. I have here a memo, headed "SECRET", to a senior Foreign and Commonwealth Office official from the head of the Information Research Department, a covert propaganda unit operating within the FCO. It says:

"Mr. Woodrow Wyatt's television programme, 'Red under the Bed', was shown nationally on commercial television on Tuesday, 13 November, at 10.30 p.m... We had a discreet but considerable hand in this programme... In February Mr. Wyatt approached us direct for help. We consulted the Department of Employment and the Security Service through Mr. Conrad Heron's group... With their agreement, Mr. Wyatt was given a large dossier of our own background material. It is clear from internal evidence in the programme that he drew extensively on this".

What an extraordinary thing for a Government official to be writing in a memo to a senior civil servant!

It gets worse. In the next paragraph, the head of the unit says this:

"In our estimation this was a hard-hitting, interesting and effective exposure of Communist and Trotskyist techniques of industrial subversion. But Mr. Wyatt's concluding message, that the CPBG's—

the Communist Party of Great Britain's—

"main aim is to take over the Labour Party by fair means or foul—an opinion which is almost incontrovertible—offended the Independent Broadcasting Authority's standards of objectivity, as they interpret the Statute... This difference of opinion held up the showing of the film".

This is senior civil servants talking about the infiltration of the Labour party—a spurious claim that they were trying to make through a television programme that they were directly involved in making. It is astonishing that it came to that.

Knowledge of what was going on went right to the very top. The Prime Minister's Principal Private Secretary put in a handwritten note to Mr Heath. It says:

"Prime Minister... You may like to glance through this transcript of Woodrow Wyatt's 'Red Under The Bed' TV programme."

The reply came back from the Prime Minister:

"We want as much as possible of this".

On the back of that, the PPS wrote a further confidential memo to Sir John Hunt, the Cabinet Secretary. It says:

"The Prime Minister has seen the transcript of Woodrow Wyatt's television programme... He has commented that we want as much as possible of this sort of thing. He hopes that the new Unit is now in being and actively producing."

The "new Unit".

Rob Marris: What new unit?

Andy Burnham: Yes, we can only wonder what that was. In a reply headed "Secret" and copied to the Prime Minister, Mr Hunt writes:

"I confirm that the new Unit is in being and is actively producing material. Use of the service"—

the Security Service—

"is being kept under continual review between the Lord Privy Seal and Mr Heron."

So there we have it: the security services were helping to make not only a television programme that was nakedly political in its aim of damaging the Labour party but, in the case of the Shrewsbury 24, a programme that was prejudicial to their trial and that went out in the middle of their trial. The Government were complicit in making that happen.

The documents that I have revealed today lead us to only one conclusion: the Shrewsbury 24 were the convenient scapegoats of a Government campaign to undermine the trade unions. They were the victims of a politically orchestrated show trial. These revelations cast serious doubt on the safety of their convictions. Let us remember: this was a domestic industrial dispute led by one of the less powerful trade unions of the day, involving industrial action in and around a number of small market towns in England and, on the day in question, no arrests were made.

How on earth, 43 years on, can material relating to it be withheld under national security provisions? I put it to the Minister that the continuing failure to disclose will lead people to conclude that the issue has less to do

[*Andy Burnham*]

with national security and more to do with the potential for political embarrassment if what was going on at the time were widely known.

We need from the Minister today a guarantee that all the papers identified as important by the Shrewsbury campaign are released to the National Archives. That is vital. As my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton said, the individuals concerned are not getting any younger. They have a right, even now, to a fair trial, and it is only when all the documents are released that we will know whether they received one.

But in the end, the issue is about more than 24 individuals. There is a modern-day relevance to today's debate, with a Trade Union Bill going through Parliament that requires police supervision of the activities of trade unions. In the light of what I have revealed today, perhaps the public will understand more why the trade union movement objects so much to that Bill, and why the Bill has sinister echoes of the past. It also comes at a time when the Government are asking for our support for an extension of the investigatory powers of the police and security services.

As I have said before, I am prepared to support them on that. But if the Government want to build trust, they must be honest about the past. It is only by learning from this country's past mistakes that we will be able to build the right safeguards into the new legislation and prevent future abuses by the state. I do not make my support conditional on that; I am asking the Government to help to build trust so that we can help them get the legislation right.

In the end, the Shrewsbury case is about how we were governed and policed in the second half of the last century. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton, I see clear parallels between Shrewsbury and Orgreave, where trumped-up charges against miners were thrown out of court—and, of course, with Hillsborough, where statements were altered to fit the narrative the authorities wanted. In all three cases, the establishment tried to demonise ordinary people.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the final, successful resolution of the Hillsborough case shows that it is never too late to overturn a miscarriage of justice?

Andy Burnham: I started by praising the Government for their work there, but they need to show the same openness and transparency here. In all three cases there was a pattern: the establishment tried to demonise ordinary people. Only when we know the full truth about the past century will we, as a new generation of lawmakers, be able to make this country fairer and more equal. This is the people's history, and I demand their right to know it.

3.40 pm

The Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice (Mike Penning): As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate the shadow Home Secretary on producing those documents today, which, frankly, I and, I would suggest, many of us in this room have never seen before. I also congratulate his hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram) on securing the debate.

I was 14 in 1972—two years before I joined the Army; I am not as young as the Scottish National party spokesman, the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens)—but I do remember this event, not least because later on in life my father desperately tried to get me to stay in the building industry. My father and I come from a family of small builders, so it was very much there. There was a lot of talk about how we could make sites safer and make sure people on sites were paying their tax—this was when we brought the 715s in and all that—so I do know a little about this.

As the hon. Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) indicated, I am a worker, still today, and I come from a trade union background—the Fire Brigades Union, which I understand has rejoined the Labour party. I was a member of a trade union when I was a lifeguard for the local authority, but I cannot remember which one it was—it would have ended up in Unison by now, but I think it went through several versions—so of all the Ministers who could have been standing here today, I have empathy, and I have always tried to have empathy, particularly when I work with the shadow Home Secretary and particularly on Hillsborough.

It is very easy for us to assume that the Chamber—either this one or the main Chamber—could be a court of appeal, but it is not. There is a process going on now with the CCRC—an independent body, set up by the Government of the day—as to whether, in its opinion, there has been a miscarriage of justice that could be referred to the courts. That is the legal system we have in this country, and it is not for right hon. and hon. Gentlemen here to come to a conclusion. Most of us would agree that we have that sort of judicial system.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Will the Home Secretary give way?

Mike Penning: I am the Minister for Policing; I would love to be the Home Secretary.

Debbie Abrahams: I am sorry that I promoted the Minister inadvertently. The evidence may be fresh to him and this Chamber may not be a court of appeal, but does he accept that, to shed some light on the matter, he needs to publish the documents that my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) spoke about, which will help us come to some sort of conclusion? Does he accept that and will he do all in his power to ensure that happens?

Mike Penning: I will come to where the documents should go, who should see them and what should happen, and ask the question, as general response, as to whether the CCRC has seen the documents and whether they have been submitted to it. If the right hon. Member for Leigh knows, perhaps he will let me know during the debate.

Andy Burnham: My understanding is that the CCRC has not seen the documents that the Shrewsbury campaign considers to be important. They are far more extensive than the small number of documents that the Ministry of Justice identified. The important thing is for the campaign to identify which documents it believes to be important. They should then be put into the archive at Kew and the relevant documents should be given to the CCRC. That is the process we are asking for.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. As far as I am aware, there are no criminal or appeal proceedings pending; in which case, no sub judice rule applies to this debate. It is a matter for debate. I want the Minister to understand that.

Mike Penning: I apologise if I inadvertently indicated that there was anything sub judice. Clearly there is not. The CCRC is there, before we get back into the courts, to independently look at what was going on.

Before I answer the question that the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) asked me, let me say that 1972 is a long time ago. There have been many Governments, of two different persuasions, in power during that time.

Rob Marris: Three.

Mike Penning: Yes, three if we count the last one. For this to be a Tory conspiracy, whenever we are in government, I just do not understand as to why—*[Interruption.]* Bear with me. I do not understand why this has not been addressed before now. That is the point I am trying to make. It is all too easy to say, “You nasty, horrible guys. You’ve been in government for a long time, and you’ve not done this.” As the right hon. Member for Leigh said, we have done an awful lot, particularly on Hillsborough.

Mr Hanson: I know that the Minister is a decent guy and that he is trying to do his best, but could he tell us why my ex-right hon. Friend, the then Member for Blackburn, agreed that the documents would be released in 2012, but the current Ministers took a decision not to release them when they were asked in 2012?

Mike Penning: The same question—why was it not done before?—could be put to the right hon. Member for Leigh, who was in the Home Office too. I do not know the answer to that question.

Mr Hanson: Well you should do.

Mike Penning: I do not. There was a decision made by Jack Straw at the time. Previous Labour Home Secretaries had not done it. I accept the evidence that I have not seen before today, but if we really want to get to the truth, Labour Members cannot just say, “We were in government for 13 years and did absolutely nothing about it, and it is now suddenly your fault because you happen to be in government today.” I just do not accept that.

Rob Marris: Will the Minister give way?

Mike Penning: No, I am going to try to answer the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth in as straight and honest a way as I possibly can.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr Letwin), looked at the documents carefully and said to the House that he will not reveal them, and that stands. He and the Cabinet Secretary—not a Tory politician—looked at the documents and

“both came to the firm conclusion that they do not relate in any way to the question of the safety of the conviction of the Shrewsbury 24”—*[Official Report, 21 October 2015; Vol. 54, c. 940.]*

Andy Burnham: I just want to pick up a point that the Minister made. He said, “You were in government, and you didn’t do it.” First, he is well aware, as an experienced Government Minister, that when one party is in government, there is a custom that it does not release papers relating to another party. He knows that, but the point is worth making. Secondly, to clear some of this up, why does he not meet some of the campaigners to discuss these issues? Let us try to move things forward, focus on what we are asking for today and see whether we can bring resolution to this whole issue.

Mike Penning: The right hon. Gentleman knows that I am generally very fair about these sorts of things, and I would have come to that point in my speech, but I just felt—perhaps wrongly—that there was something that one of the Labour Administrations since 1972 could have done to address the concerns of the Shrewsbury 24. I think that must be a fair assumption by any description.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): My right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) introduced some compelling information and evidence. Will the Minister make a judgment on what he has heard today?

Mike Penning: As the right hon. Member for Leigh said, I have been in many Departments, and I do not make instant judgments. I will look carefully at it.

On the shadow Home Secretary’s point, I am more than happy to meet the campaigners. I know that the Minister for Security—probably the more relevant person for the documents we are referring to—is also more than happy to do that. If there are other Ministers in Government who it would be pertinent for the campaigners to meet—I am probably putting my foot in it again, as usual—I cannot see any reason why they should not be able to do so. That is a way we can move forward.

Rob Marris: I welcome that statement. I say to the Minister, in all humility and as a lawyer, that my hon. and right hon. Friends and I are not saying that the Shrewsbury 24 were innocent of criminal offences. That is not for us to say. What we are saying is that, on the evidence, particularly that produced today, there appears to have been a major injustice done—that those individuals were denied a fair trial to decide whether they were guilty or not. We want the Government to address the injustice of the apparent suppression and destruction of documents that would have aided the defence of the Shrewsbury 24 to make their case in a fair trial. They did not get that fair trial. That is the injustice that we want addressed. We are not saying today that they are innocent; we cannot do so as legislators.

Mike Penning: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point. I am not a lawyer, and it is actually quite useful in the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice not to be a lawyer, because I can look at things in a slightly different way.

The Criminal Cases Review Commission did not exist in the ’70s—it was not put in place until 1997. It is absolutely imperative that the documents that the shadow Home Secretary has put before the House today are presented to the CCRC, so that it can do exactly what it says on the tin and impartially and independently look

[Mike Penning]

at the case. I know that other evidence has been submitted to the CCRC by the campaigners that we have not heard today, and it is imperative that we let the CCRC do its job.

Rob Marris: With the full documents.

Mike Penning: With the documents, as we are saying. The CCRC has had access to any documents of any description that it requires and has asked to see. Those are exactly its powers.

I want I give the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton an opportunity to respond. I want to be as helpful as I possibly can. If meetings need to take place, they should take place. We are examining documents within the Home Office now to see whether they are relevant and if they are, we will do everything that we possibly can. However, there has been a decision—not my decision, but a decision made by the Cabinet Secretary, who I would think is fairly independent on such things, and the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster—that the documents that they have withheld have no relevance to the case of the Shrewsbury 24, and the Government are standing by their decision not to release those documents on the basis of national security. I know that that is perhaps not the answer that Opposition Members wanted from me, but that is the position of Her Majesty's Government.

I will do everything that I can to assist the campaign as much as possible. If I was a constituency MP for the campaigners, I would be sitting there today, as hon. and right hon. Gentlemen and Ladies know, because that is the way I am. I passionately believe in the trade union movement. I was a member of it for long enough and have stood on picket lines myself. I believe in natural justice, which is what the CCRC is there for.

3.52 pm

Steve Rotheram: I first need to thank all hon. and right hon. Members who spoke in what I believe to be a particularly powerful debate. Most reasonable people watching today's proceedings will come to the conclusion that the case has been overwhelmingly made for the release of the documents. It is for the campaigners to decide what documents they believe to be relevant and for the Government to release them to be lodged at Kew. Those documents should then be referred to the CCRC. That would be a just and equitable outcome from this afternoon.

I have to say that I hope that the real face of the Tories is the Minister who wound up and responded to the points that we raised and not the hon. Member for

Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth), who, despite the rhetoric of compassionate Conservatism, proved beyond reasonable doubt that the nasty party is alive and kicking.

Sir Gerald Howarth: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I understand the passions that are aroused, but this country was seriously under threat at the time from trade unions that did not have the level of constraint that applies today. In 1979, 30 million days were lost to strike action—[*Interruption.*] It is no good shouting me down; this is the House of Commons. Last year, the number of days lost was 788,000. Industrial relations have been transformed since those unhappy days of which the hon. Gentleman speaks.

Steve Rotheram: I am just trying to get my head around what the hon. Gentleman just said. He believes that because there was industrial action that lost the country days, it was okay for the state to stitch up 24 people and imprison them. Is that the point that he was making? I think people will come to their own conclusions.

Sir Gerald Howarth *rose*—

Steve Rotheram: The hon. Gentleman has had two goes and I think he is digging himself a deeper and deeper hole.

The Minister, who is an honourable man, tried to defend his position, but I think he tried to defend the indefensible on this occasion. He tried to muddy the waters around the release of the documents, but this is about a miscarriage of justice. That is what is central to today's debate: a miscarriage of justice. The current Government have the opportunity—it is in their gift—to put right a wrong of 43 years. That is all that the campaigners have asked for over the decades. I hope that the Minister will listen to their concerns and to the arguments of Opposition Members. I hope that he will act with honesty and integrity and meet the campaigners and then go back and fight their cause to get the documents released.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the House has considered the Home Office and the case of the Shrewsbury 24.

[MRS ANNE MAIN *in the Chair*]

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): There is a Division in the House. If there is more than one Division, we will resume after 25 minutes or as soon as we all get back.

4 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

Anti-TNF Drugs

4.10 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered prescription of anti-TNF drugs.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak about NHS prescription of anti-tumour necrosis factor drugs, a subject on which I have become somewhat familiar since I was contacted more than two months ago by my constituent, Samara Ullmann.

Before I move on to why I requested the debate and to define what anti-TNF drugs are and their uses, it may be helpful to give you, Mrs Main, the Minister and other Members present the background as to why this specialist medication will make such a difference to my constituent and so many others.

Samara Ullmann, who is now 29 years old, was born in my constituency in 1986. At the early age of just two, her parents noticed that she was walking with a limp. Worried about her clear inability to walk without pain, her parents took her to her local GP, who referred her to Leeds general infirmary where she was diagnosed with a condition known as juvenile idiopathic arthritis. The terrible condition affected both of little Samara's legs, her wrists, her ankles and her knees. Her parents were told by the hospital that it was likely that she would have to be in a wheelchair by the time she reached the age of 10. From the age of two and until she was six, she had to wear splints on both her legs.

Professor Anne Chamberlain supervised Samara's treatment over the next few years. During Samara's visits to Leeds general infirmary every three to four weeks she was given hydrotherapy, physiotherapy and a cocktail of drugs. Her parents were told that little else could be done for her, which was confirmed by some of the country's top rheumatologists.

From the age of six, Samara started having problems with both her eyes, which developed uveitis, a common effect of JIA. By the time she was seven, a cataract had developed in her left eye and was removed, but it was left considerably weakened so that, by the time she reached the age of 11, she had completely lost the sight in that eye. Fortunately, her right eye continued to function normally, although when she reached the age of 14 she needed laser treatment on that good eye and was understandably frightened that she would be left completely blind.

The JIA improved considerably by the time Samara reached 17, but sadly her left eye had to be removed because it was both blind and painful. After three months, she was fitted with a prosthetic glass eye, which fortunately is able to move to a limited extent with her functioning eye. The Minister may be able to imagine the terrible effect that all of that had on a teenage girl growing up in the early part of this century. Her self-confidence was badly damaged, too.

As the arthritis gradually abated, Samara was left with a common consequence of the condition, refractory uveitis, which often causes blindness even with the best treatments currently available. Her right eye—her only eye—is now severely affected. So far, despite a paralysed

iris, a stuck-down pupil and a developing cataract in her remaining eye, her sight has been partially protected by the use of a drug called mycophenolate, which together with methotrexate is commonly used to treat uveitis.

Those drugs impair the white blood cells that promote the inflammation that causes uveitis. However, despite treatment with those drugs over the past eight years, the vision in Samara's only eye continues to deteriorate. That is why her eye specialist at Calderdale Royal hospital in Halifax, Mr Teifi James, believes that in order to save her sight, she needs to be prescribed an anti-TNF drug such as Humira—adalimumab.

An anti-TNF drug is a monoclonal antibody that specifically targets tumour necrosis factor alpha. Because of the way in which it is manufactured, it is called a biologic. TNF is involved in causing inflammation in a number of autoimmune and immune-mediated disorders. Those diseases probably cause too much TNF to be produced, modifying the body's immune response and causing inflammation. Anti-TNF drugs reduce the amount of TNF in the body. They are expensive and may have side effects that could be severe, but, with appropriate monitoring and care, such effects are rare. In fact, they are much less common than the many problematic side effects of corticosteroids.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing this issue to Westminster Hall. The Minister will be seeking to improve the success rate of anti-TNF drugs. Many universities across the United Kingdom are looking at how to improve medication for those with eye ailments. We have two in Northern Ireland, which are Queen's University Belfast and, in particular, Ulster University—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. Will the hon. Gentleman keep his intervention brief, please?

Jim Shannon: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is a good idea?

Fabian Hamilton: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. He is right. The more studies carried out across the country at university level, the better it will be for patients suffering from refractory uveitis.

The anti-TNF drugs switch off the molecule that creates the inflammation in the first place and are therefore far more effective than corticosteroids in cases such as Samara's. I am sure that Queen's University Belfast and many others can confirm that.

Last year, Samara married her fiancé, Ben, and the couple now want to start a family. However, it is not at all advisable for her to become pregnant while taking mycophenolate, because it may well cause a miscarriage or birth defects. An anti-TNF drug could allow her to retain her eyesight and probably to conceive safely and be able to see her child grow up.

Let me move on to why adalimumab or infliximab should be available immediately on NHS prescription for adults with sight-threatening uveitis. I am aware that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence is about to conduct a multiple-technology appraisal of adalimumab and infliximab and that responses to the draft must be received by 16 December—this time next week. From my conversations with Teifi James, one of the country's leading eye surgeons, and from my research

[*Fabian Hamilton*]

into that treatment it would seem that drugs such as Humira are highly effective in the treatment of uveitis, so much so that researchers in the Sycamore trial in Bristol, to which the Minister referred in his letter to me of 4 November, have stopped recruiting to it because the children being treated are doing so well on the drug. However, NHS England did not take that into account when it made its most recent decision on the use of adalimumab and infliximab for the treatment of adult uveitis alone.

According to Mr James, approximately 120 patients with sight-threatening uveitis are waiting for anti-TNF treatments in England, whereas patients in Scotland currently have access to adalimumab and infliximab. Treatment using Humira costs just under £10,000 a year per patient, which means that approval of the use of this drug for treating refractory uveitis alone would cost no more than £1.2 million a year.

Mr Andrew Smith (Oxford East) (Lab): I commend the argument that my hon. Friend is making on behalf of his constituents. I too have been contacted by a constituent about this issue, who points to the excellent work being done by the Olivia's Vision charity, which my hon. Friend may have heard of. My constituent says:

"My daughter currently suffers from Uveitis and is receiving Infliximab to treat the condition, so far successfully. I would like to live in the hope that this would be available to her in the future should her conditions change, and indeed others to whom this could be a sight saving drug."

Is it not important that patients such as my constituent's daughter have that assurance?

Fabian Hamilton: I agree with my right hon. Friend. In fact, the Olivia's Vision charity has been in touch with me and offered its full support for this debate and any future effects of it, which will hopefully include a decision from the Government that both infliximab and adalimumab will be available on the NHS. Those anti-TNF drugs are clearly completely effective in the treatment of refractory uveitis alone. I will talk a bit about the effects of anti-TNF drugs on other conditions.

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): I greatly appreciate the hon. Gentleman giving me time to speak. For information, I am an eye doctor. Does he agree that what is important with severe conditions such as refractory uveitis is the principle that it must be up to the senior clinician—no one else; not NHS England and not a Minister—to decide if and when these treatments should be prescribed, and that the clinician must not be prevented from doing so?

Fabian Hamilton: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her contribution, especially given her expert knowledge in the field. I agree 100% with her; it should be for clinicians to make such judgments and decisions, provided the drug is deemed safe. Enough testing and evaluation has so far been done to show that these drugs are not only safe but highly effective.

The point I was going to make, before those helpful interventions, was that it would cost no more than £1.2 million per year for all the patients in England to be treated with adalimumab or infliximab. To put that in context, I ask this question of the Minister: what would be the cost of paying benefits to all the young

adults—most of the sufferers are young, working adults—who will suffer from sight-threatening uveitis for the rest of their lives if they lost their remaining sight for lack of a sight-saving drug that has already proven highly effective, as the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) said? Surely the taxes that they pay now and will pay in the future would more than outweigh the cost of allowing the use of this medication, never mind the additional cost of paying benefits to blind people who can no longer be as economically productive.

Teifi James is one of about 50 eye surgeons in England who specialise in the management and treatment of uveitis, out of a total of around 1,200 eye consultants in the country. He and his colleagues know from their work and the clinical evidence that adalimumab and infliximab work well, yet they are being denied the opportunity to prescribe that sight-saving treatment. Members may be forgiven for assuming that the use of biologic drugs such as adalimumab is a novel step, but that is not so. Teifi James first used Campath, one of the original monoclonal antibody therapies, to treat ocular disease as long ago as 1997. Uveitis specialists had been effectively using infliximab and adalimumab in appropriate cases for over a decade since 2000, until the NHS reorganisations changed the commissioning regulations. English uveitis specialists are frustrated that the treatments they had been using have become inaccessible as a consequence of recent changes to NHS commissioning.

If Samara or any of the other 120 young adult sufferers of uveitis were suffering from another condition as well, such as Crohn's disease or arthritis, they could be prescribed these drugs, which would prevent the further development of uveitis. Sadly, however, without multiple conditions, uveitis alone cannot be treated with Humira or similar anti-TNF medication. I hope the Minister and anyone else listening to this debate will agree that that is highly unfair and just plain wrong.

As I have said, Samara's remaining vision in her right eye is now failing. Mr James can operate on her eye to remove the cataract and correct the problems she is currently experiencing, but he is reluctant to do so unless she is established on treatment with Humira. He feels that the risks are too great on her present medication.

I hope the Minister will answer the following questions when he responds. First, does he acknowledge that time is of the essence and that young adults in danger of losing their eye sight cannot wait for sight-saving treatment much longer? Secondly, will he use the points I have made today to persuade NICE to speed up its review? Thirdly, will he offer my constituent, Samara Ullmann, and the 120 other patients like her the hope that a treatment senior clinicians say is highly effective can be used for their benefit without further delay? Finally, does he agree that Samara should have the chance to have a family and to see her children grow up, just like every other parent in the country?

4.25 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Life Sciences (George Freeman): May I start by thanking and congratulating the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) on securing the debate? I am grateful to him for giving me advance notice of the issues he has raised. We serve our constituents best in debates such as this when there is a spirit of non-partisan co-operation, and he is the very embodiment of that.

The hon. Gentleman spoke incredibly fluently on behalf of his constituent, Samara Ullmann. He and I have discussed this issue, and he has raised it with the Department in recent months. I pay tribute to his work on his constituent's behalf and, most of all, to Samara and all of those who suffer with this condition. One of my privileges in this ministerial role is to see the extraordinary patience, fortitude, courage and force of life spirit with which so many people with ill-met or unmet conditions survive. It drives me on in my work to try to accelerate the landscape and get innovative medicines and treatments to those people more quickly.

I will say something about the condition and then try to address the points raised by the hon. Gentleman. As most Members here will perhaps know, uveitis, or inflammation of the uveal tract, is the term used to describe inflammation of any structure within the eye that, when very severe, may cause visual loss. It can lead to blindness through either direct damage to the light-sensitive retina or secondary complications such as glaucoma. Uveitis is uncommon. It is estimated that two to five in every 10,000 people will be affected by it in the UK every year. It usually affects people aged 20 to 59, but can also occur in children. Despite being uncommon, it is a leading cause of visual impairment in the UK.

Dr Mathias: Just for information, the other problem with uveitis, apart from blindness, is intense pain.

George Freeman: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Patients experience a whole range of associated conditions.

In severe cases, treatment to try to prevent sight loss requires drugs that suppress immune cells. The drugs in standard use across the world include prednisolone and immunosuppressant drugs, which work in over 60% of patients. For the remainder, the drugs do not work or the patients suffer serious side effects that prevent the drugs from being used to their full potential. The next step in treatment is the use of a group of drugs known as biologics. As the hon. Member for Leeds North East said, those drugs are very specialised and designed to focus on specific molecules released during inflammation from cells, suppressing the inflammation in doing so.

TNF inhibitors are biologic drugs that suppress the physiologic response to tumour necrosis factor, which is part of the inflammatory response. Humira and Remicade are two anti-TNF alpha treatments that are licensed and NICE-approved for the treatment of adults with a range of conditions, including rheumatoid and psoriatic arthritis, ankylosing spondylitis and inflammatory bowel diseases, including Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis. In terms of the latter, I understand that the hon. Gentleman has been supporting his constituents by raising awareness for those living with a debilitating bowel disease by supporting Crohn's and colitis awareness week, which has just ended. NICE has not yet appraised any anti-TNF drugs for the treatment of uveitis. I shall say more about that in a moment.

Decisions about funding for new treatments and drugs that are for rarer conditions, such as uveitis, and which have not been considered by NICE are made by NHS England as part of its specialised commissioning function. NHS England operates a horizon-scanning process to identify new treatments, and its clinical reference groups advise on the development of services for patients and

keep published evidence under review. When NICE is not considering a therapy, NHS England can examine the evidence base and may propose commissioning treatments through its commissioning policy development process.

Turning to clinical experts, my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) made a really important point. Much as I would like to be able to pull a lever and accelerate treatments in response to very eloquent advocacy in this House, it is completely appropriate—I can see the hon. Member for Leeds North East nodding—that such decisions are made by the patients, clinicians and clinical experts, advised by NICE on the basis of the very best evidence available. Sometimes the collection of that evidence and the processing of those appraisals can be frustratingly slow, not least for the patients, but it is important that the process is done well.

The clinical experts at NHS England have considered the use of Humira and Remicade as treatment options for adult patients with severe refractory uveitis. NHS England concluded that there was insufficient evidence to support the routine commissioning of those treatments. NHS England is, however, awaiting publication of the Visual clinical trial report in order to consider revising its commissioning policy in the light of the study's outcomes. The trial report is expected to be published in a peer review journal in early 2016, at which stage NHS England will consider submitting a revised policy as an in-year service development.

The use of Remicade for children with severe refractory uveitis has also been considered by NHS England. Again, NHS England concluded that there was, as yet, insufficient evidence to support its routine commissioning at this time. That decision will be reviewed in April 2017.

On 11 November, NHS England published an interim clinical commissioning policy on the use of Humira for children with severe refractory uveitis with onset in childhood. Its use is recommended in children aged two to 18 who meet the clinical criteria set out in the policy. The policy, which has been developed by NHS England's clinical reference group for specialised ophthalmology services with support from clinicians and patient representatives, will benefit children whose sight is threatened by the condition, and for whom other treatments have proven ineffective. That is on an interim basis pending further evidence from the Sycamore clinical trial. The interim policy will be reviewed in 2016, once the full Sycamore trial data have been published. Humira for severe refractory uveitis in children is being commissioned and funded by NHS England through specialist regional centres.

I want to mention individual funding requests, which are important in this context. All treatments for uveitis up to and including the use of immunosuppressants remain funded by clinical commissioning groups. As hon. Members know, the NHS is legally required to fund treatments recommended in NICE technology appraisal guidance. In the absence of such guidance, any funding decisions should be made by NHS commissioners, including NHS England in respect of specialised services, based on an assessment of all the available evidence and an individual patient's clinical circumstances.

Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): The Minister talks about need. In a similar vein to other Members, I would like to highlight the need of a constituent of mine—a

[*Oliver Dowden*]

young lady called Olivia, aged 15, who is totally reliant on self-funded anti-TNF treatments to retain her eyesight. She is very concerned that when she reaches adulthood, she may no longer have access to that, which is why her parents, also constituents, have created a charity called Olivia's Vision. Again, I ask—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. Interventions must be brief. I call the Minister.

George Freeman: My hon. Friend has eloquently raised his point. I am happy to look into that with him afterwards.

NHS England will consider individual funding requests for treatments not recommended by NICE to treat individuals whose clinician can demonstrate clinical exception. The NHS constitution states that patients have the right to expect local decisions on the funding of drugs and treatments

“to be made rationally following a proper consideration of the evidence.”

If an NHS commissioner decides not to fund a drug, it has a duty to explain that decision to the constituents of the hon. Member for Leeds North East and others.

I want to turn quickly to the hon. Gentleman's specific questions and then deal with a couple of questions that really sit under this whole debate. Let me respond to his four questions. I completely agree that time is of the essence to anyone in danger of losing their eyesight and, yes, people should have the chance to have a family and we need to make sure that we are supporting patients in the appropriate way. We are working to speed up the process, so that effective medicines get to patients much more quickly, but we need to know that they work and to make sure that the benefits they bring to patients are commensurate with their cost to the NHS, which is why we have NICE, a world-leading expert in health economics.

I must clarify that NICE is not currently appraising either adalimumab or infliximab for uveitis. However, it is consulting stakeholders on a proposal to include adalimumab within the scope of the technology appraisal guidance that it is developing on its two other drugs for the treatment of uveitis. A final decision on referral will be taken once NICE has concluded that consultation.

I am aware that evidence is emerging on the use of these drugs on the treatment of uveitis in adults. When the full evidence is available, both NICE and NHS England will be able to take that into account when considering whether anti-TNF treatments should be made routinely available on the NHS.

In the remaining moments, I want to touch on the underlying issues that this debate has helpfully flagged up. The pace of change in the biomedical space, the rate at which new drugs are being discovered and the power of genomics and informatics, giving us a new insight into diagnosis and treatment, is putting pressure on our traditional methods of assessing drugs. Traditionally, NICE has worked on a one-size-fits-all, health benefit, “yes or no”, quality-adjusted life-year basis. I have launched the accelerated access review partly to look at how we can better use the genomics and informatics in our health system and give NICE more freedoms to be able to fast-track treatments to the patients who we know will benefit.

That touches on the question of off-label use of drugs. When there is a proven benefit outside of an on-label indication, we need to be much better at getting that information to clinicians, so that they can prescribe drugs in an off-label indication more quickly. The burden of proof needs to be not only right, but appropriately set, so that where there is clear evidence, the system can respond more quickly.

The hon. Gentleman made an important point about the cost of benefits. The system at the moment is not great at measuring the full cost of a condition downstream, which is partly why we are putting such efforts into the digitalisation of the health service and into being able to measure the cost of treatment and a disease condition. When we have a benchmark of what the cost is to society after a diagnosis, we will have a much better benchmark for rewarding innovation.

I will happily deal with any other questions offline. We have had a very short amount of time, but I hope I have tackled the hon. Gentleman's specific questions. I am grateful to him for raising the issue, and I hope I have given some signal as to where in the coming weeks and months we may be able to expect some helpful progress.

Question put and agreed to.

Electoral Integrity and Absent Votes

4.38 pm

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered electoral integrity and absent votes.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main, and to welcome the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose), to his place.

In this country, we pride ourselves on having free, fair, open and honest elections, but we are wrong. In too many parts of the UK, electoral fraud means that honest people's votes are potentially invalidated by crooked votes. Our whole democratic system is being undermined and the votes of thousands of women of all ages are being regularly stolen by their menfolk. We are turning a blind eye, in effect, to regular breaches of section 115 of the Representation of the People Act 1983 in respect of undue influence.

In May's general election, 9,372,449 postal votes were sent via Royal Mail. These issues are not new, and the Electoral Commission and Government know about them, but so far we have had very little by way of concerted action to tackle them. This subject has been raised in the media, most notably and compellingly by Radio 4's "File on 4" investigation programme in March 2014, which focused on electoral fraud in Pendle, Woking and Derby. It was also brought up by my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson). With great courage and foresight, he raised the matter directly with Ministers on the Floor of the House three years ago during a debate on the Bill that became the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013.

Who can forget the words of the election commissioner and presiding judge Richard Mawrey, QC, after hearing the most well-known electoral fraud case in Birmingham in 2005—following events in 2004—which resulted in the conviction of five men? His written judgment referred to "evidence of electoral fraud that would disgrace a banana republic".

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Is my hon. Friend aware that of course there are the open, overt, straight-down-the-line fraudsters at work, collecting ballots that are not their own, but even where that does not happen, within the individual household the privacy of the ballot is lost where voting slips are sent to the household and no one can keep their voting intentions to themselves?

Mr Jackson: My right hon. Friend makes a very apposite point, which I will elucidate on and develop later in my remarks. I thank him for his intervention.

Have things really changed in the past 11 years? Mr Justice Mawrey was quoted last year as saying that our present procedures are "wide open to fraud" and that

"serious fraud is inevitably going to continue",

enabling the manufacture of votes on an industrial scale. He also stated just before this year's general election:

"The law must be applied fairly and equally to everyone. Otherwise we are lost."

We await the details of the review commissioned by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on electoral fraud in the light of the appalling scandals uncovered in Tower Hamlets following the failure particularly of the Metropolitan Police Service to take timely and robust action. That fell instead to a number of courageous and concerned citizens, including my old friend Councillor Peter Golds CBE, via a petition to the High Court. The long overdue review is being undertaken by my right hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Sir Eric Pickles). It was announced in August and, as I understand it, will be published in the new year in order that we can look at what further options are available to address this continuing and, as I will make clear later, endemic and institutionalised abuse and illegality. I will touch on Tower Hamlets in particular.

For the record, I have not called this debate in the light of the Oldham West and Royton by-election result, nor even of the comments of the leader of the UK Independence party, but in his media comments in the wake of the by-election he did touch on some issues that I will raise today.

Of the 1,086 cases of electoral fraud reported to police in England between 2008 and 2013, 58% originated in just 10 of England's 39 police areas. I speak as the Member of Parliament for Peterborough, a local authority that has featured for a number of years on the Electoral Commission's watch list of local council areas with a high risk of electoral fraud. Regrettably, Peterborough has a recent history of criminal convictions as a result of electoral malpractice and fraud. Most recently, in 2008, there was the conviction of six men—three Labour activists and three Conservatives—for postal vote fraud arising out of the June 2004 local elections. My local authority has also had problems with personation and, to an extent, voter intimidation.

I accept that there are other serious areas of concern, which will most likely be the subject of my right hon. Friend's review and report, that are of major import. One is the lack of a requirement for proper, valid voter identification when presenting oneself as a voter at a UK polling station. That is unprecedented and undoubtedly anomalous in a modern democracy, and there is clearly a major risk of personation. Another issue is the limit on the powers to challenge alleged personation in the confines of a polling place for presiding officers, even if they know that a person is not who they say they are. The other issue is the failure to put in place legislation to curtail voter intimidation in the environs of a polling station, which we have seen in many places across the country, including Peterborough, but which was systematic in Tower Hamlets.

I will not try the patience of the House, but Tower Hamlets was but the most egregious example of many troubling themes around abuses in our electoral system. They merely coalesced in one London borough as the most extreme and shocking example. In Tower Hamlets, supervision of the corrupt 2014 elections was led by Commander Graham McNulty, who previously had been the investigating officer on the Levy and Blair cash-for-peerages allegations and was later the officer harassed—that is the word—by the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Mr Watson) to investigate, erroneously, the late Lord Brittan. Despite Lutfur Rahman and his agent being found guilty of seven different counts of corrupt practice after the longest election

[Mr Jackson]

petition before a court in more than a century, nobody has been charged, including supporters of Rahman named and shamed for multiple election fraud. Why is that? Perhaps the Minister will touch on that.

For the avoidance of doubt, I think that it is incumbent on Ministers to respond in a timely way to the specific recommendations made recently by the Electoral Commission on the need for photo ID at polling stations on the Northern Ireland model—I see the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) in his place. To be fair, the Electoral Commission has raised these issues over a number of years and progress has been made, albeit slowly and by increment, on issues such as register stuffing with “ghost” voters, which individual electoral registration will mostly deal with, and the most egregious postal vote fraud methods, via the need for a signature and date of birth, but that will only half deal with the substantive issue to which I will refer later. I accept that there will always be a trade-off between accessibility to the voting system and electoral integrity. It will never be easy or simple to get that balance right.

The Electoral Commission has at least monitored trends and collected data on electoral fraud and has commissioned specialist academic research—more of that later—with an issues paper being published in 2013 and a further comprehensive and detailed report being issued in January 2014. It is a matter of regret and disappointment that the previous, coalition Government—I absolve the Minister of responsibility for this—failed adequately to address the recommendations in that report.

Where I part company with the Electoral Commission and, to an extent, Ministers is on what I see as a degree of complacency in their responses. Of course I commend the extra money for fraud prevention in high-risk areas, but I am disappointed by the blanket rejection of at least considering returning to the pre-2001 regime for postal votes and by the rather anodyne revised code of conduct for campaigners, which is frankly superfluous and lacks any real sanction in law for miscreants and those inclined to unethical or criminal behaviour—a point raised in the “File on 4” documentary.

There is much to be done to tackle electoral fraud in all its forms, but for the purposes of our debate, I will focus on absent or postal votes. It might be worth examining, by way of background, how we came to be where we are now. Postal voting was first used in 1918 for armed forces personnel serving overseas. It was reintroduced in 1945 in similar circumstances, and 1948 saw postal voting extended to certain groups of civilians including those who were physically incapacitated, those unable to vote without making a journey by sea or air or because of the nature of their occupation, and those who were no longer residing at their qualifying address.

Following recommendations made by the Select Committee on Home Affairs in 1983, the Government extended the right to apply for an absent vote in 1985, and the rules were further refined in 1989. The exception was Northern Ireland, where there was already widespread concern about electoral abuse. In 1999, a parliamentary working group chaired by the then Home Office Minister, the right hon. Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth), recommended that postal voting applications should be simplified and allowed on demand to all voters. The Government legislated in 2000 to implement those changes, which came into effect in 2001.

In its reports on the all-postal vote elections, the Electoral Commission drew back from its earlier recommendation for all-postal voting as standard. Its research showed that a large minority of people wanted to retain the option of voting at a polling station. The Commission, therefore—thankfully—recommended the development of a new model that involved multiple voting methods, including postal voting, rather than proceeding with elections run entirely by all-postal voting.

Suffice it to say that the process for exercising one’s right to vote by post or proxy is no less complex now than it was in 1999, and turnout for general elections has fallen from 71% in 1997 to 59%—a post-war low—in 2001, rising to 66% earlier this year. That serves to refute the idea, held by those who are worried about voter disengagement, of absent voting as a panacea. Our collective obsession with electoral turnout has, surely, for too long obscured the focus on clean, honest and fair elections as the absolute priority, and that is unacceptable.

The Electoral Commission’s response to the Pickles review is detailed, thought-provoking and helpful. It will allow Ministers to access important academic research supporting a key question—perhaps the most controversial aspect of my remarks—at the heart of this debate: the reasons for the growing evidence of criminal electoral malpractice, centred on postal vote fraud, in the British Bangladeshi and British Pakistani communities and diaspora. The debate is not party political; no party has a monopoly on virtue, and all major parties have been party to fraudulent electoral activities over the last 15 years or so. We are talking not about stigmatising a particular group or community, but about protecting our democracy and the precious faith and trust that people have in the voting system.

I am grateful for the work of academics such as Stuart Wilks-Heeg, who published a paper in 2008, on behalf of the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, on “Purity of Elections in the UK: Causes for Concern”; and Eleanor Hill, of the Bradford University school of historical studies, who published a paper in 2012 entitled “Ethnicity and Democracy: A Study into Biraderi”, which has laid the groundwork for more recent empirical studies.

The Electoral Commission commissioned research from the University of Liverpool and the Centre on Dynamics of Ethnicity at the University of Manchester, as well as from the social research centre NatCen. In January this year, they published two excellent, compelling and detailed qualitative studies entitled, respectively, “Understanding electoral fraud vulnerability in Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin communities in England” and “Elections, voting and electoral fraud: An exploratory study focusing on British Pakistanis and Bangladeshis”. The findings supported the Electoral Commission’s stated belief that, *inter alia*,

“electoral fraud is more likely to be committed by or in support of candidates standing for election in areas which are largely or predominately populated by...those with roots in parts of Pakistan or Bangladesh.”

The commissioned studies suggested that

“extended family and community networks may have been mobilised to secure the support of large numbers of electors in some areas, effectively constituting a ‘block vote’”

and that

“the wider availability of postal voting in Great Britain since 2001 may have increased the risk of electoral fraud associated with this approach, as the greater safeguards of secrecy provided by polling stations have been removed.”

The academic research focused on interviews with political activists and non-political local residents in those high-risk areas, and it pinpointed the following cultural and structural trends. The reciprocal, hierarchical and patriarchal nature of kinship networks may mean that pressure is put on people to vote for particular candidates or parties, especially within family groups, as my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) has made clear. Individuals may be made to feel as though they have no choice in the matter, or they may, in fact, have no choice. That applies particularly to young women and older women, many of whom are economically disadvantaged. In their 2014 study, academics from Manchester University found that, for instance, Pakistani women are more likely to have their registration forms filled in by the male head of the household than to fill in the forms themselves.

Other problems in those communities are: low levels of public awareness about what is acceptable campaigning and what constitutes fraud; low levels of awareness about how to report electoral fraud; low levels of literacy and lack of English skills, which exacerbate those problems; and reduced political activity, or complete lack of activity, by mainstream parties in too many areas, which gives so-called community leaders free rein to claim propriety over large numbers of families, whose votes they can marshal and direct as they think fit. That is the regrettable flipside of an understandable collective need for ethnic mobilisation and solidarity, but it gives rise to practices that are inimical to our democratic values.

In too many communities, it is regarded as quite normal for political activists to engage in “farming” of postal votes on the doorstep, or even to fill in the ballots at home once signatures and dates of birth have been added, before transporting them to the town hall or polling station. That is regarded as part of the process; it is well understood and not seen as irregular. The University of Manchester reported that the biraderi networks

“may undermine the principle of voters’ individual and free choice through a range of social pressures such as respect for the decision of the elders at its mildest extreme, through to undue influence where in some instances access to individual ballots of women and adult children can be refused by the elders.”

Mainstream tolerance of such block voting is nothing new, although that makes it no less reprehensible. Lord Hattersley wrote in his 2003 biography of his polling day experience in the February 1974 general election:

“I won with an increased majority...the well organised and invariably loyal Kashmiris had cast their disciplined vote early in the day.”

The reports produced for the Electoral Commission highlighted the insufficiency of safeguards for voting procedures. One report found that respondents believed that there was a

“lack of law enforcement around fraudulent applications for postal votes...undue influence and intimidation both when filling out the vote at home with others present, and during the handling of the vote by party activists, community members and candidates themselves”.

Much more research must be done into those issues by the Electoral Commission and others. We cannot know for certain the scale of the problem and how it impacts on elections in our country at every level.

In the interim, I suggest the following measures. Ministers must, as a matter of urgency, consider and respond to the Electoral Commission’s 2014 report and to the findings of the Pickles review. Existing polling

station voting vulnerabilities around ID, personation, intimidation and the flaws in the Representation of the People Act 1983 must be addressed soon. There must be a proper review of individual electoral registration to ensure its efficacy in respect of electoral register stuffing. Funds must be set aside for local authorities in high-risk areas to bid for money to work with their local police to investigate properly allegations of electoral fraud, which are often time consuming and costly to investigate. Guidance must be issued to the Crown Prosecution Service and the police to ensure that they take a much more proactive and robust approach to investigating electoral fraud, and that they are seen to be doing so. Finally, new legislative sanctions must be established by means of criminal law in respect of compulsion and intimidation of someone to apply for a postal or proxy vote, alteration of another person’s postal vote application form and the transit of another person’s postal vote documentation. It should be a criminal offence for anyone other than an authorised person to open or alter a completed postal ballot pack—either the ballot paper or the postal voting statement—before it has been received by the proper returning officer.

Ultimately, I believe that none of those measures alone will substantially reduce electoral fraud in our postal votes regime, and that serious thought must be given to returning to the tried and tested system of application in the case of illness, infirmity, military service or work commitments. That system gave us, with the universal franchise, a turnout of 84% in the 1950 general election, and 78% as recently as 1992. Our present system has been summed up perfectly: voting, once a “private act in public”, is now, owing to postal vote fraud, a “public act in private.”

We are currently condoning the theft of thousands of votes of our fellow citizens, many of whom are women—a situation that would shame Emmeline Pankhurst and make a third-world despot blush. We need to ask: what price honesty and fair play, and what price our reputation at home and abroad as the beacon of parliamentary democracy?

5 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Peterborough (Mr Jackson) for setting the scene on the subject of electoral registration. He mentioned Northern Ireland a couple of times and I want to add some of my thoughts. I expected more people to contribute to the debate. None the less, it is always a pleasure to do so.

The issue is important in Northern Ireland, and we have taken some substantial steps forward. The shadow Minister and particularly the Minister will probably give some detailed information about what is happening in Northern Ireland. If I were to put forward just one thought in this debate, it would be this: look to Northern Ireland, the changes we have made and the steps that we have taken. That should be the precedent for the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in addressing the issue.

In this day and age, surely we should have a flawless electoral system and elections that are completely free of any fraud or deceit. Following the recent by-election—this is an observation and nothing more—according to *The Daily Telegraph*:

“Police could be called in to investigate alleged fraud at the...Oldham by-election after council staff said some voters in polling booths ‘had no idea what they were doing there’”.

[*Jim Shannon*]

I do not know how true that is but it is a quotation from the paper, and it puts a question mark over how the system works. An unprecedented 100% of postal votes went to one party and, although it cannot be confirmed that there were any anomalies, eyebrows must surely be raised at such a staggering statistic. Many ask that question. It is not a reflection on those who vote, because they vote in the way that they wish to, but it strikes a question mark in many minds. I do not seek to make any accusations, but the fact that there is even the possibility of electoral fraud or deceit in this day and age should ring alarm bells for all of us.

In Northern Ireland in 2010, a parliamentary constituency—Fermanagh and South Tyrone—was decided by four votes. The decision was taken to court so that the honesty of the system could be looked at and verified. Three of the votes were removed, as the Minister, who is nodding his head, knows. The reality is that, technically speaking, that election was won by one vote. I am not saying that there was any fraud—people can make their minds up—but a court decision was taken, which changed the voting margin. It was a truly exceptional example.

With elections being run so tight, we need a flawless system to ensure that those who take their time to inform themselves and vote are doing so as equals with an equal weight to their vote, confident that the rest of the electorate will vote honestly and fairly. *The Daily Telegraph* also uncovered that a number of complaints were filed, with the police alleging electoral fraud at the general election in May and in the European and council elections in the previous May.

The professionals at the Electoral Commission do their very best to ensure electoral integrity, but there are still examples of the system not working and being open to deceit and fraud. More needs to be done, as the hon. Member for Peterborough said. We have the resources and the technology to make voter fraud a thing of the past, and we should be taking steps as a matter of urgency. The former Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the right hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Sir Eric Pickles), said:

“Within Whitehall as a minister, I found a complete reluctance by officials to take action on the warnings from local councillors and journalists of systematic corruption in the mayoral administration in Tower Hamlets. I would argue that state officialdom is in denial over the real state of electoral fraud in 21st-century Britain. The new Conservative government is no longer prepared to turn a blind eye to Britain’s modern-day rotten boroughs.”

As the Minister is nodding, I would expect that the steps to change that will be made. We should look to such examples of people who have opened their eyes to electoral fraud and are getting on with the business of eradicating it as a matter of urgency.

In Northern Ireland, we have taken steps forward on the electoral system, the regulations and the registration. One of the first things that happens in an individual registration is that someone calls to check who lives in the house; that means that we can confirm that there are so many people in the house. Those people are checked individually. Physical inability to attend polling stations in person is confirmed by doctors. If people go on holiday, they have to provide travel documentation to prove that they are away. There are real meaty conditions to ensure that those things happen.

Many years ago, it is rumoured—although many would say that it is factual—that there were those who voted from beyond the grave, which is quite a talent: quite impossible, if we are truthful. Changes were put in place to ensure that that did not happen. There were also houses from which a number of people were able to vote, but the only “people” who could access those houses had four legs and a tail. It was quite obvious that no human being could vote from those houses, so significant and direct measures and systems were put in place to ensure that that did not happen.

When it comes to addressing these issues, I suggest that we look to Northern Ireland—at how the electoral commissioner has addressed the issue there, and how we have taken the steps to ensure that electoral fraud is a thing of the past and that postal votes are registered and used by the person they are given to. I believe we have the system of a fair, equal, honest and integral vote, in whatever election it may be. Everybody who votes—and they expect their vote to be the one that will change things—has the ability to change the person and the party. We have set that precedent. I urge the House, the Minister and the shadow Minister to reply accordingly.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Before I call Mr Lord, I remind Members that the wind-ups will start no later than 5.20 pm.

5.7 pm

Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Mr Jackson) on securing this important debate. I wish to expand on just a couple of points in the time allowed. First, I congratulate the Government on holding firm on individual electoral registration and the timescales in which that is to be introduced. That is an important step forward in combating potential fraud.

Secondly, I listened with great interest to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) who spoke about the steps that have been taken over time to secure the sanctity of the ballot in Northern Ireland. Yet we have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough that there are troubles now in England, particularly in some of our major cities. It is time that the Government took seriously the fraud issues that are, unfortunately, taking place in some of our towns and cities and considered very carefully whether we should not be introducing some of the safeguards that were introduced in Northern Ireland some time ago.

I am personally coming around to the idea of showing some form of ID at the polling station. My hon. Friend talked at length about the postal ballot and I am interested in the Minister’s reply. In respect of potential impersonation at the polling station, nothing can be more frustrating for a resident citizen of our country than to turn up at the polling station and be told, as happens in a few cases in every election, “I’m sorry—supposedly you’ve already voted.” Requiring no form of ID to be shown at a polling station remains a loophole for those who want to commit fraud.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): What is the hon. Gentleman’s assessment of the level of impersonation at polling stations that would necessitate people’s bringing ID with them when they go to vote?

Jonathan Lord: We need to gather more data. After elections there is always anecdotal talk of people turning up at polling stations and being told that their vote has already been cast. We need to know the scale of that problem to know whether the remedy is worse than the disease.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough that British democracy should be sacrosanct. People should know that the result of a ballot, whether it be in local, national or European elections—or indeed in elections to our devolved Parliaments—is absolutely correct. That becomes even more important on those occasions when the margin is four votes or one vote. Any fraud can change the result of our elections under a first-past-the-post system.

Jim Shannon: This intervention will be swift. We took those steps on identification in Northern Ireland, and the steps were sometimes hard. There are many forms of identification—driving licences, bus passes, passports, firearms certificates and benefits cards—and so long as they contain a photograph, they prove who people are. Yes, it might sometimes be an inconvenience, but it is a good idea because it works.

Jonathan Lord: The hon. Gentleman makes that point extremely powerfully. All that someone needs to commit electoral fraud under our system is a really good telling regime at the polling station; to knock out the postal voters; then, in the dying hours of polling, they can send people along to impersonate those people who the system shows have not already voted. That is exactly what used to happen in too many towns in Northern Ireland, I am afraid. We do not know for sure to what extent it might be happening here.

Nick Smith: The hon. Gentleman is making a serious accusation that vote rigging might be taking place in some parts of the country. Does he have any concrete examples to back up his case?

Jonathan Lord: As I said earlier, after every single election, whether it is a nationwide election or a large set of local elections, there are always people who go to their local paper—the hon. Gentleman can look through the cuttings—or who complain to the returning officer, “I went to the polling station to vote, but I was told that my vote had already been cast.”

The evidence is not strong in the way that perhaps it was in Northern Ireland, but it is a loophole in our system. As the hon. Member for Strangford says, it does not have to be a passport or driving licence, but requiring any picture ID, at the very least, would make it incredibly difficult to perpetrate a major fraud, because people who wanted to do so would have to forge lots of bus passes or similar items. I would be interested if the Minister gave us some feedback on that issue, as well as on postal voting, which was comprehensively covered by my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough.

5.14 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): It is interesting that we are having this debate as we begin to celebrate international Human Rights Day, because article 25 of the 1948 declaration of human rights called on nation states to provide free and fair elections on the basis of universal and equal suffrage. I do not mean to suggest

complacency or to get into self-congratulatory backslapping but, from a global perspective, we have reason to be proud of the systems that we have in this country and of the level of respect that we have for the democratic process. That is not to say that there are not concerns or that there should not be changes. I will talk about some of those in a minute, but overall our democracy, and our electoral democracy, is in reasonable shape.

As I have previously suggested in similar Westminster Hall debates, the Scottish referendum last year was an exemplar of how to do things right, but I remind Members that probably the greatest compromised election in recent times also happened in Scotland. At the 2007 Scottish general election, fully 7% of the votes cast were rejected. That happened for two reasons, neither of which has to do with deliberate fraud or mal-intent. The first was that, because the local council elections took place on the same day as the Scottish Parliament elections—the latter of which involved two different ballot papers—there was an unprecedented degree of confusion among the electorate, and an awful lot of people simply did not know how to exercise their right to vote. The second reason, which I am glad to say we have dispensed with, was that the then Scottish Government invested rather too much public money in a number of electronic counting machines that simply were not fit for purpose and seemed unable to do the job for which they were bought.

I am pleased to say that we have won the argument with the Government, because they did not rule out holding the EU referendum on the day of another election until the House clearly and explicitly decided that that should not happen. One of the procedures that we should use to protect our democratic process is to make sure that, each and every time a question is asked, it is a specific question that cannot be confused with anything else.

I was unaware of what the hon. Member for Peterborough (Mr Jackson) was going to say in this debate, but I note his concerns, which fall into two parts. One is the question of deliberate electoral fraud, in which people, either individually or by conspiring with others, deliberately abuse the process to cheat. We are in a good position because, in a competitive, multi-party democracy, there is an opportunity for parties to keep tabs on each other and to monitor the process. There is also a degree of good will and sincerity among our electoral registration officers, who are very vigilant and aware of the possibility of fraud and the need to do something about it. In my experience, the police, and others with responsibility for taking action, take electoral fraud very seriously. Again, that is a healthy development.

The hon. Gentleman also raised the problem of familial pressure being applied in some communities, particularly to influence women's votes. I do not deny that that happens, but I am unsure of what action the state or the public authorities can take to prevent it from happening, apart from some of the things that we are doing through individual electoral registration and, of course, the education campaign to encourage everyone to recognise that their vote is a precious thing that relates to them, and to them alone, and that they should not be influenced by anyone else.

Mr Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is a good idea that we should make it more difficult to obtain a postal vote?

Tommy Sheppard: I know Members are concerned about the dramatic increase in postal votes, and we are clearly now in a situation where the ability to vote by post is a choice—people do not have to fulfil many criteria to exercise a postal vote. I see that as a positive development because it encourages people to participate in the election process. There are lots of people for whom it is more convenient to exercise their vote by post. If we are going to look at restricting that by putting hurdles in the way of people who seek to vote by post, we need to be careful not to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

We are talking about electoral integrity, and I will finish by putting the issue in a slightly wider context. There are things that we can do. The Scottish referendum was an exemplar, with 97% of the people who were entitled to register being registered to vote and 85% of them turning out to vote. There were a number of reasons for that. One was that we widened the franchise and included 16 and 17-year-olds. I know that the House has rejected that model for the EU referendum, but plenty has been said about it by all parties and we will have to consider it again before this Parliament is over.

I will finish with this point. We also need to consider making voting easier, simpler and more contemporary. We really need to consider electronic voting in our processes. People trust the ability of the internet—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. I should point out to the hon. Gentleman that this debate is about electoral integrity and absent votes, not alternative forms of voting, so I hope he will just close his remarks.

Tommy Sheppard: I am sorry, Mrs Main. I just wanted to say that if we looked at increasing ways for people to participate and vote, that would do a lot to improve the integrity of the system and the regard in which it is held by the public.

5.20 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Mrs Main.

I offer my congratulations to the hon. Member for Peterborough (Mr Jackson) on securing this important debate. All of us who are democrats and who believe in the efficacy of elections also believe that those elections must be above board and entirely fair, and that all the participants in those elections must respect their integrity. That is important in itself, but it is also important that elections are seen widely in a democracy to be fair and beyond reproach.

The various issues that the hon. Member for Peterborough has brought to our attention have to be taken very seriously. He mentioned the Electoral Commission. Indeed, the Electoral Commission, among other bodies, has taken the allegations and examples of corruption and fraud very seriously, and it has presented to the Government's anti-corruption champion—the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General, the right hon. Member for West Suffolk (Matthew Hancock)—detailed measures about how the electoral system can be tightened up. Those are very positive measures.

The Electoral Commission has suggested four measures, and I would like the Minister to respond to those recommendations. Before that, however, it is worth noting that it is not simply what we have in terms of

regulations and electoral law that matters. A fact that needs to be highlighted is that a lot depends on the political parties themselves to make sure that they police their own candidates, to ensure that those candidates and their supporters are aware of the law and fully respect it. That is very important. Responsibility rests not only with the Government, the Electoral Commission and others, but with the political parties themselves and the individuals concerned.

As has been mentioned, we are seeing the introduction of individual electoral registration. It is to be welcomed in principle, because one of the key aspects underlying IER is the new emphasis placed on individuals rather than the head of a household, which accurately reflects society's changing nature. IER is more modern and also puts greater responsibility on the individual in recognising the importance of the electoral process as a whole and their role within it, although we all regret—at least, Labour Members certainly regret—that its introduction has been rushed. We have our own reasons to believe why that was the case.

The essential point I want to make is that although all of us are united in total condemnation of electoral fraud, it is important to keep such fraud in perspective. The perception among many sections of the electorate is that electoral fraud is quite widespread, which is damaging to democracy. However, it is important to make the point that that perception is not based on concrete fact. As the Electoral Commission said in the evidence it submitted to the Government's anti-corruption champion:

“The evidence currently available to us does not support the conclusion that electoral fraud is widespread in the UK.”

Mr Jackson: The hon. Gentleman is making his remarks in a typically eloquent way, but is it not a matter of regret that the chief executive of Woking Borough Council and the electoral returning officer for the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Woking (Jonathan Lord) said on “File on 4”, the programme I referred to in my remarks, that in 12 years he had never presided over a wholly clean election in that borough? I agree with what the hon. Gentleman has said, but surely that is a lamentable state of affairs.

Wayne David: Elections have to be clean, of course, but quite often there is a fine dividing line between the rough and tumble of electoral politics and actual electoral fraud. When we talk about fraudulent activity, we have to rely on evidence and hard facts being presented. If in that programme and elsewhere there have been actual examples of fraud and clear evidence of it, then it is right that an investigation is made and action taken. However, I return to my central point. Yes, there is plenty of tittle-tattle, plenty of suggestions and plenty of accusations, but all too often there is very little hard and fast evidence, and we have to go on evidence.

It is important to keep our debate in perspective. Of course that must not be used as an excuse not to do anything, and of course the system must be tightened up, but at the same time let us recognise that our democracy is one of the finest in the world, and we must do everything to defend it, while at the same time making sure that it is as watertight as possible.

Finally, as we move to a system of IER, it is important that we have, above all else, the desire to encourage and to make as easy as possible the participation of our

voters in the electoral system. There is a fine dividing line, but we have a system that is open and fair, and that encourages people to vote and facilitates their involvement in the democratic process, and at the same time our system must be monitored and policed effectively.

Surely none of us would want to see a system in place that was as onerous as some Members have perhaps suggested, which would be a disincentive to people to go along and cast their vote. If we made the system too cumbersome, that would undermine the democratic process itself. Therefore, in the interests of democracy and democratic participation, we always have to strike a balance between what is reasonable to do in order to encourage as many people as possible to engage, while at the same time having a system that is above reproach and that is based on fairness and integrity.

5.27 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (John Penrose): It is a pleasure to have you looking after us this afternoon, Mrs Main; it is good to see you in the Chair.

Let me start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Mr Jackson) on securing this debate on a tremendously important issue, which is perhaps slightly more topical than when he originally tried to secure it. However, that just shows his foresight and that he has his finger on the pulse of the popular mood. I think all of us here agree that this is a very important issue, but we tend to blithely assume that things are all right because historically this country has had a democracy to be proud of. Of course, it is up to us as the current incumbents in that democracy to ensure that we continue to be alive to any threat to it, and therefore it is important that we continue to address this issue regularly.

May I also remind all present and anybody who analyses this debate in future that the right way to deal with allegations of electoral fraud of any kind is to take them to the police? That is absolutely essential. The police are the investigating authority, and they are the people who have the skills and the resources to investigate properly. It is essential for the health of our democracy that any concerns are reported properly, so that the police can get to work and get their teeth into anything that looks suspicious.

During the last four years, we have had a steady flow—not a huge rush, but a steady flow—of electoral fraud cases. There were 268 in 2011, 408 in 2012, 178 in 2013 and 272 in 2014. That is not a deluge, but it is not zero either, and there is some concern that there may be other cases that are not being properly reported and may be going under the radar, which I think is one of the reasons why my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough secured this debate.

If anyone present or anyone looking at this debate afterwards has any concerns and, specifically, any detailed recommendations about how the system could be improved—we have heard a number of suggestions from all quarters during the debate—I would encourage them to mention them without delay to my right hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Sir Eric Pickles), who was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough. My right hon. Friend is in the process of finalising his report and has collected recommendations on how to deal with electoral fraud.

The Government will be waiting for that report to come to us. We will react to it once it is in our hands and we have had a chance to study it and consider its implications. It is an opportunity for anyone with concerns and, in particular, specific recommendations about how the system can be improved—goodness knows, no system is ever perfect—to strike now. The iron is, if not yet hot, then certainly getting pretty warm, and it will be hot shortly. Now is the moment.

My hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough also rightly mentioned that 9 million postal votes were cast. Concerns are regularly voiced—albeit not always necessarily evidenced beyond the 200 to 300 or so cases each year—about undue influence when postal votes are in the hands of the voter, particularly within families with a strong tradition of patriarchy. It is hard to prove whether that is happening, but the suspicions none the less persist. All of us in this room will no doubt have heard those suspicions voiced to us by colleagues in Parliament and by constituents.

It is absolutely right—I hope all of us here would sign up to this principle—that we should not assume that there is a necessary contradiction or choice between having an electoral system that allows any eligible elector who wants to cast their vote to do so cleanly, conveniently and easily, so that turnout is maximised to the greatest possible extent, and the notion that there should be reasonable checks to ensure that the person casting the vote is eligible, is the person they say they are and is not subject to unfair pressure or influence in any way. Those two principles are equally vital. If we start saying that one is subservient to the other, we are on an extremely slippery slope, democratically speaking. Both principles apply and are important, and anyone who tries to pretend that we need to compromise one at the expense of the other is on dangerous ground indeed.

One of the only points on which I respectfully disagree with my hon. Friend was where he mentioned some turnout figures for successive general elections. He is absolutely right that general election turnouts have been higher in the past. I fear that factors other than the availability of postal votes may be involved in that. I suspect those factors are particularly to do with public attitudes to politics, public attitudes to politicians, dare I say it, and general levels of societal democratic engagement. There are probably more things going on than just the availability of postal votes, although I am sure he is absolutely right to point out that that is a factor.

My hon. Friend the Member for Woking (Jonathan Lord) expressed some concerns about voting in person and impersonation. He asked whether there should be polling station checks. Again, that will be covered by the report of my right hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar. I mention in passing that some recent photos appeared in the press of President Obama turning up to cast his vote in the American presidential elections—no prizes for guessing who he was voting for—and I was struck by the fact that he had to sign for his ballot paper when he got there. That is a different system from the one that applies in Northern Ireland that was referenced by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). None the less, there are models elsewhere in the world that we could look at, always with an eye to the fact that we do not want to discourage legitimate voters from turning out.

Jonathan Lord: The Minister makes a good point about another way of doing things. Of course, we sign for our postal votes, and that is checked. There are 9 million postal voters, with 15% to 20% of the electorate now choosing to vote by post. If that 20% is being checked, why should the signature and validity of the ballot at the polling station not be checked?

John Penrose: We should take that as a further submission to the proposals of my right hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar.

Nick Smith: Will the Minister give way?

John Penrose: Very briefly, but then I must try to finish.

Nick Smith: The hon. Member for Peterborough (Mr Jackson) has rightly outlined examples of voter fraud that, if true, should be addressed with the full force of the law. Does the Minister agree that any future electoral law should have the right mix of safeguards and things to encourage voter participation? Will he please look into the possibility of credit reference agencies providing extra data to boost voter registration?

John Penrose: The hon. Gentleman mentioned this issue to me in oral questions earlier today. I encouraged him then and encourage him now to provide me with further details of his proposal. I am very interested at looking into that matter. It is potentially useful. There are many other sources of data that can be used to verify registrations, and we want to look at them all if we can. In the modern digital world, it seems a sensible avenue to explore.

At the root of the debate, we have a contradiction. We have modest levels of electoral fraud cases—I have already given everyone the figures for the past three or four years—but we can all see that, in principle, our processes and controls are pretty light-touch. We can all think of theoretical ways in which someone might be able to indulge in electoral fraud, were they so minded. In all our minds, there will always be a nagging concern that even though there may not be that many electoral fraud cases, there could be a cohort of people that we are not aware of taking advantage of this relatively trust-based system. That is the concern behind this debate and the ongoing public debate. To summarise it in a sentence, absence of evidence is not necessarily evidence of absence. That is our concern.

I therefore want to reassure everyone that there is no complacency in the Government on this tremendously important issue. A number of people have mentioned in the course of the debate that there is some self-policing, because political rivals will naturally keep an eye on each other. That is good, but we have also heard examples of loopholes or potential flaws in the process that would allow some things to go unremarked, even where there is a strong political culture of rivalry. We should clearly consider applying the precautionary principle here, provided that we can do so with the satisfactory light touch.

What have we done so far? There has been the introduction of individual elector registration. ID is therefore verified and it makes inventing people a great deal harder. It also makes family influence and patriarchy less important. We have also made postal votes a great deal more controlled. People now have to put a signature on a postal vote, and every single signature is matched up when that postal vote is opened. There was an initial problem in Scotland, which the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) mentioned, but the system is now running much more smoothly. There is much greater security around polling stations too, which is essential, particularly when one reads some of the judgments about what was happening in Tower Hamlets.

Finally, I want to back up the point that a number of colleagues made about voter education. One of the most fundamental ways of guarding against undue influence, whether spiritual, familial or any other form, is to educate people from the earliest moment that their vote is genuinely secret and that they are absolutely entitled to tell anyone, whether they are a family member, religious leader or politician, to take a hike if they want to find out how someone voted or to influence the way they are planning to vote. That is an attitude of robust independence that we need to inculcate in all our young people and, if necessary, all adults too. With that, I will sit down to let my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough have a final word. I reiterate that if anyone wants to make any further comments to my right hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar, his door is open.

5.38 pm

Mr Jackson: I thank the Minister for that helpful reply. I support the direction of travel. The Cabinet Office and the Electoral Commission are going in the right direction, but I do not think light-touch will do any more. We need more academic research and more legal sanctions. In particular, we need a proper response to the Electoral Commission's report from last year.

I have two extra things to say. First, we perhaps need to think about disaggregating ward results in general elections. In the United States, that allows people to see obvious examples of electoral fraud. We have never done that in this country, but there has never been a reason not to, because we have ward results in local elections. Secondly, I would like an undertaking from the Minister that when the Pickles review is produced for the Prime Minister, we will have, if not a debate, then at least a statement in the House, so that we can ventilate all these important issues that we are all committed to tackling. With that, I appreciate the opportunity to raise such vital issues.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered electoral integrity and absent votes.

5.39 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 9 December 2015

TREASURY

Annual European Union Finances Statement

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): I am today laying before Parliament, “European Union Finances 2015: statement on the 2015 EU budget and measures to counter fraud and financial mismanagement” (Cm 9167). This is a routine annual publication. It is the 35th in the series. The statement gives details of revenue and expenditure in the 2015 European Union (EU) budget, recent developments in EU financial management and measures to counter fraud against the EU budget. It also includes an annex on the use of EU funds in the UK.

[HCWS375]

Draft Finance Bill 2016

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): The Government have consulted on a number of tax policies following announcement at summer Budget and previously. Today, the Government are publishing responses to these consultations alongside draft legislation to be included in Finance Bill 2016. This fulfils our objective to consult, where possible, on draft clauses for the Finance Bill, at least three months in advance of the introduction of the Bill.

The Government are publishing draft legislation on policies announced at autumn statement 2015 and earlier, including:

A new personal savings allowance to remove tax on up to £1,000 of savings income for basic rate taxpayers and up to £500 for higher rate taxpayers;

Reforms to dividend taxation by replacing the dividend tax credit with a tax-free dividend allowance of £5,000 and setting new dividends tax rates;

Establishing the office of tax simplification on a statutory basis;

A new tax relief for orchestras at a rate of 25% on qualifying expenditure.

New measures for those who persistently enter into tax avoidance schemes that are defeated by HMRC, such as a special reporting requirement and a surcharge on those whose latest return is inaccurate due to use of a defeated scheme;

A new penalty of 60% tax due to be charged in all cases successfully tackled by the general anti-abuse rule.

Detail of the clauses published today can be found in the overview of legislation in draft, which includes tax information and impact notes for each measure. All publications will be available online at: <https://www.gov.uk>.

[HCWS374]

Office of Tax Simplification

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): The Chancellor has appointed Angela Knight CBE to chair the Office of Tax Simplification (OTS).

She succeeds The right hon. Michael Jack CBE who having served a full Parliament has stood down with the Chancellor’s thanks.

The OTS was established as a temporary office of the Treasury in 2010 to advise the Chancellor on options for addressing complexity in the tax system. As announced at summer Budget 2015 it will be made permanent and put on a statutory basis in Finance Bill 2016.

[HCWS373]

DEFENCE

UN Operations in Cyprus: Call-out Order

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Penny Mordaunt): A new call-out order has been made under section 56(1B) of the Reserve Forces Act 1996 to enable reservists to continue to be called into permanent service in support of the United Kingdom’s contribution to the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP).

Over 100 reservists have been called out for UN operations in Cyprus over the last 12 months. Over the period this new order will be in force we anticipate calling out around 150 reservists, who will be fully integrated with their regular colleagues. The use of reserves in Cyprus is now considered routine business and is fully in line with our policy of having more capable, usable, integrated and relevant reserve forces. It provides reservists with an excellent opportunity to fully integrate with their paired regular unit, providing a worthwhile, rewarding and valuable contribution to the UN peacekeeping effort.

Currently, we plan on calling out only willing and available reservists who have the support of their employer.

The order takes effect from 11 December 2015 and ceases to have effect on 10 December 2016.

[HCWS371]

War Pensions Scheme Up-rating 2016

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): The new rates of pensions and allowances payable under the war pensions scheme proposed from April 2016 are set out in the following tables. The annual up-rating of awards and allowances for 2016 will take place from the week beginning 11 April. Rates for 2016 are unchanged in line with the September 2015 consumer prices index of negative (at -0.1%).

War Pensions Rates

	Rates (£)	Rates (£)
(Weekly rates unless otherwise shown)	2015	2016

WAR PENSIONS

Disablement Pension (100% rates)

officer (£ per annum)	9,298.00	9 298.00
other ranks (weekly amount)	178.20	178.20

Age allowances payable from age 65

40%-50%	11.95	11.95
Over 50% but not over 70%	18.35	18.35

<i>War Pensions Rates</i>		
	<i>Rates</i>	<i>Rates</i>
	<i>(£)</i>	<i>(£)</i>
<i>(Weekly rates unless otherwise shown)</i>	<i>2015</i>	<i>2016</i>
Over 70% but not over 90%	26.10	26.10
Over 90%	36.70	36.70
<i>Disablement gratuity (one-off payment)</i>		
Specific minor injury (min.)	1,136.00	1,136.00
Specified minor injury (max.)	8,474.00	8,474.00
1-5% gratuity	2,834.00	2,834.00
6-14% gratuity	6,300.00	6,300.00
15-19% gratuity	11,018.00	11,018.00
<i>SUPPLEMENTARY ALLOWANCES</i>		
<i>(WEEKLY)</i>		
<i>Unemployability Allowance</i>		
Personal	110.10	110.10
adult dependency increase	61.20	61.20
increase for first child	14.20	14.20
increase for subsequent children	16.75	16.75
<i>Invalidity Allowance</i>		
higher rate	21.80	21.80
middle rate	14.20	14.20
lower rate	7.10	7.10
<i>Constant Attendance Allowance</i>		
exceptional rate	134.40	134.40
intermediate rate	100.80	100.80
full day rate	67.20	67.20
part-day rate	33.60	33.60
<i>Comforts Allowance</i>		
higher rate	28.90	28.90
lower rate	14.45	14.45
Mobility Supplement	64.15	64.15
Allowance for lowered standard of occupation (maximum)	67.20	67.20
Therapeutic Earnings Limit (annual rate)	5,408.00	5,408.00
Exceptionally Severe Disablement Allowance	67.20	67.20
Severe Disablement Occupational Allowance	33.60	33.60
Clothing Allowance (annual rate)	230.00	230.00
Education Allowance (annual rate) (max)	120.00	120.00
<i>WIDOW(ER)S BENEFITS</i>		
Widow(ers)—other ranks (basic with children) (weekly amount)	135.15	135.15
Widow(er)—Officer higher rate both wars (basic with children) (£ per annum)	7,187.00	7,187.00
Childless widow(er)s' u-40 (other ranks) (weekly amount)	32.37	32.37
Widow(er)—Officer lower rate both wars (£ per annum)	2,496.00	2,496.00
Supplementary Pension	90.41	90.41
<i>Age Allowance</i>		
(a) age 65 to 69	15.40	15.40
(b) age 70 to 79	29.60	29.60
(c) age 80 and over	43.90	43.90

<i>War Pensions Rates</i>		
	<i>Rates</i>	<i>Rates</i>
	<i>(£)</i>	<i>(£)</i>
<i>(Weekly rates unless otherwise shown)</i>	<i>2015</i>	<i>2016</i>
<i>Children's Allowance</i>		
Increase for first child	21.20	21.20
Increase for subsequent children	23.75	23.75
<i>Orphan's pension</i>		
Increase for first child	24.25	24.25
Increase for subsequent children	26.55	26.55
Unmarried dependant living as spouse (max)	132.80	132.80
Rent Allowance (maximum)	50.90	50.90
Adult orphan's pension (maximum)	103.85	103.85

[HCWS372]

TRANSPORT

EU Transport Council

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Robert Goodwill): I will attend the final Transport Council under the Luxembourg presidency (the presidency), taking place in Brussels, on Thursday 10 December.

The presidency is planning a policy debate on social aspects of road transport ahead of the EU road initiatives that we expect to be published by the Commission in 2016. The debate is likely to focus on whether existing legislation should be clarified in order to reach a uniform interpretation of the rules in all member states, and the challenges in the enforcement of existing rules.

There will be a lunchtime debate on road safety at the request of the presidency. I welcome the opportunity to share expertise and best practice on road safety in the light of the UK's excellent track record in this area. I look forward to hearing about the work done by EU colleagues to improve road safety among vulnerable road users in other member states.

Under any other business, there will be presentations on:

- The state of the energy union by the Commission;
- The MH17 crash following a report from the Dutch accident and investigation branch;
- An aviation strategy for Europe by the Commission following publication of its aviation package on 7 December;
- State of ratification of the Luxembourg protocol to the rail rolling stock convention, which Luxembourg will encourage other member states to ratify;
- Nominations to the ICAO Council; and
- The Netherlands' priorities for their presidency which begins on 1 January 2016.

[HCWS370]

Rail Franchising

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Patrick McLoughlin): I am pleased to inform the House of the award of two new passenger rail franchises. Following separate, rigorous competitions I intend to award the Northern franchise to Arriva, and the TransPennine

Express (TPE) franchise to First. These awards will be confirmed subject to successful completion of a standstill period of at least 10 days.

Both franchises are due to start on 1 April 2016. The Northern franchise will run for nine years, until 31 March 2025, with an extension of one year callable at my discretion. The TPE franchise will run for seven years, until 31 March 2023, with an extension of two years callable at my discretion.

My Department set out ambitious plans for the new franchises in our invitations to tender earlier this year and both Arriva and First have gone well beyond them, exceeding our requirements. This means that these franchises will oversee the biggest transformation of rail journeys in the north of England in decades, with an unprecedented package of improvements for passengers.

Together, these operators will oversee a massive £1.2 billion boost to rail services with brand-new modern trains, more seats, more services and a host of improvements to deliver a modern, 21st century passenger experience. This one nation Government is committed to closing the economic gap between north and south, and these new franchises will help to bring the northern powerhouse to life. They will play key roles in rebalancing the economy, creating jobs, opportunity and growth, and will provide significantly better journeys across the region. Crucially, in a key step towards full devolution, these contracts will be managed in Leeds by a joint team from the Department for Transport and Rail North, which represents the region's 29 local transport authorities.

Across both franchises, Arriva and First will provide much needed new-build trains, with the introduction of more than 500 brand-new carriages. They will also

remove the outdated and unpopular Pacer trains from across the north. These plans will create space for more than 40,000 extra passengers at the busiest times across the north and bring in thousands of extra services a week for passengers. Alongside these investments the franchises performance will be improved to meet challenging targets to reduce cancellations and short-formations.

There will also be significant improvements for passengers' experience, with the roll out of free Wi-Fi on trains and at stations and the installation of on-board media servers providing on-train entertainment and real-time passenger information to smartphones and tablets. Automatic delay compensation for season and advance purchase ticket-holders will be introduced across the region. First and Arriva will also invest more than £55 million in improving stations and bring them into the 21st century.

The new franchises will also mean significant returns to the Government and better value for the taxpayer. On TransPennine Express, First will pay premium to the Government of around £400 million over the life of the new franchise, taking the franchise out of subsidy for the first time. On the Northern franchise, Arriva will reduce the amount of annual Government subsidy required by around £140 million over nine years.

The award of these franchises is a hugely positive story for rail in the north of England. They are further proof that private sector competition is good for passengers, local communities and taxpayers. This Government promised passengers we would give them the premium-quality rail services that a northern powerhouse deserves. I am delighted that these awards will deliver exactly that.

[HCWS369]

Petition

Wednesday 9 December 2015

OBSERVATIONS

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Greenbelt land in Morecambe and Lunesdale

The petition of residents of Morecambe and Lunesdale,

Declares that the petitioners believe that there should not be any building allowed by Lancaster City Council's Local Plan on the Greenbelt in Bolton Le Sands and Hest Bank.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage Lancaster City Council to take steps to support the residents in Morecambe and Lunesdale and to ensure that plans to ring-fence the Greenbelt marked GB4 are scrapped and that places to build homes are sought in other areas.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by David Morris, *Official Report*, 25 November 2015; Vol. 602, c. 1458.]

[P001573]

Observations from the Minister of State for Housing and Planning (Brandon Lewis):

Green Belts are created by local authorities, who are required to protect them in line with national policy set

out in the national planning policy framework. The framework states that, to preserve the openness of the Green Belt, inappropriate development, including most forms of house-building, should not be approved there except in very special circumstances. It also makes clear that a Green Belt boundary can be altered only in exceptional circumstances, using the local plan. Local authorities, working with their communities, have to determine the best location for new homes. Guidance was issued last year to remind local authorities that they must have due regard to national policies, such as Green Belt policy, which indicate that development should be restricted and which may restrain an authority's ability to meet its housing need.

We want local communities to be in charge of planning their areas. Only in very exceptional circumstances would the Secretary of State intervene in the plan-making process, and I see no reason to do so in this instance. When any Green Belt review has been completed and the local plan revised, the draft plan is submitted for formal examination by a planning inspector. The inspector, who exercises independent judgement in the name of the Secretary of State, will consider the plan in the light of legal requirements and whatever policy requirements in the framework are material. If the petitioners have fresh evidence at that stage, this may be taken into account if relevant. The inspector then provides a report to the local authority, indicating whether its draft plan has met the legal tests and is sound, or else making recommendations. A plan will be found sound only if it is properly prepared, justified, effective and consistent with national policy in the framework.

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